

The Comprehension of Metaphorical Expressions in Academic Texts by Iraqi EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Metaphor is so pervasive in language use that we hardly come across a language situation that does not utilise metaphors. Previous studies revealed that EFL learners face certain difficulties in identifying and understanding metaphors in English comprehension texts in the academic setting. Since the true nature and magnitude of this problem have not been studied thoroughly yet among Iraqi EFL learners, this paper aims to find out their ability to comprehend metaphors in academic reading. The analysis is based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The researcher conducted several reading sessions for 30 Iraqi EFL university learners to collect data for the study. The reading sessions included the use of six comprehension texts, selected from the learners' textbook specified for the reading comprehension class. Through the use of a questionnaire, students were required to explain how they selected and understood metaphors. The participants' responses were varied; therefore, they were schemed into four categories: *successful understanding*, *misunderstanding*, *non-understanding*, and *literal understanding*. The findings revealed that students who *understood metaphorical* (successful understanding) expressions scored the highest percentage followed by *misunderstanding*, *non-understanding*, and *literal understanding* respectively. The findings also showed that there are social, cultural, linguistic and semantic factors, as well as personal views, that influence the metaphor identification and comprehension abilities among the subjects.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor; academic reading texts; metaphor comprehension; metaphoric expressions; Iraqi EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The use of metaphors in the discourse of academic texts has been one of the subject matters examined by many scholars with interest in the fields of cognitive semantics and language learning. The common theory used by researchers for examining academic texts is that of Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) which explains the mapping of a metaphor by way of source and target domains. This theory has been commonly adopted in the analysis of metaphorical expressions at various levels such as learning (Berendt, 2008; Abdullah, 2008).

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At learning level, metaphor comprehension has preoccupied linguists for a long time. Linguists believe that metaphor comprehension in second language learning mastery can be regarded as a gap that needs to be bridged and requires more research. L2 metaphoric competence has been a problematic and challenging issue that has recurrently been investigated in many studies (e.g., Cunha, 1991; Hoang, 2014). Numerous scholars have argued about the difficult nature of metaphor learning in relation to language learning (Matsevich et al., 2020, Boers, 2000; Charteris Black, 2000; Danesi, 1992, 1995; Deignan, Gabrys & Solska, 1997; Littlemore, 2001, 2002, 2004; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Low, 1988). Low et al. (2008) mentioned that metaphors in education found that 10-13% of lecturers used metaphors; however, the lecturers rarely explained the metaphorical terms to the students, which led to metaphorical ambiguity.

Littlemore (2001) found that interpreting metaphor is among the many other problems faced by EFL learners while learning a foreign language. The same research confirmed that misinterpretation of metaphors during a lecture has led learners to misunderstand or experience partial or complete non-understanding of the main concepts of the academic texts. The poor understanding of metaphors resulted in knowledge loss for the students due to misunderstanding or miscommunication. The terms ‘misunderstanding’, and ‘non-understanding’ were first used by Littlemore (2001) in the methodological analysis of metaphorical expressions.

As stated, metaphor has been shown to pose difficulties for EFL learners who found metaphor usage problematic as they fail to recognize or use them due mainly to the inability to explicate the source domain and the target domain in the mapping of a metaphor. Littlemore and Low (2001) found that the use of metaphor is highly dominant in three academic lectures, and they identified the difficulties non-native speakers of English faced in understanding the central points of the lectures. Among the problems, the students were found to be unable to make their stance clearly. This is attributed to the high occurrence of metaphorical expressions used. This difficulty was explained in another article by Littlemore and Low (2006, p. 46) in which they mentioned that “foreign language learners probably need to understand metaphor more often than they need to produce it”.

MacArthur (2010) added that learners were often unable to come up with a metaphorical sentence in terms of focusing on the use of a single metaphor. As a result, the students themselves were unsatisfied with their efforts, and upon their own review, they were noticeably deleted. This appears as an apparent problem for learners aiming to use metaphorical terms fluently. In native-like language, metaphorical language often occurs in clusters, several of which are based on a single root metaphor (Cameron and Stelma, 2004; Shongwe, et al., 2019; Corts and Meyers, 2002; Corts and Pollio, 1999; Jaber and Vengadasamy, 2016). Lack of knowledge of appropriate word clusters could have contributed to the disfluency. In relation to textual competence, Kathpalia and Carmel’s results presented that 62% of textual metaphors were used incorrectly by the learners. Twenty three percent of the learners’ texts had made no attempt to use metaphor as a textual coherence device (2011, p. 284). In a study on illocutionary capability, Kathpalia and Carmel extrapolated that when learners tried to use metaphor for persuasive, evaluative and entertaining purposes, they had incomplete success due to unidiomatic use of metaphorical expressions. Nineteen of the learners were found to have poor control in the use of conceptual metaphors in writing a speech for an international audience. Kathpalia and Carmel (2011) assigned the phenomenon to the inability to attend to cultural nuances that include religious reference that led to the difficulty of using the correct culturally-loaded metaphors for a formal speech. The researchers remarked that fluent language production in general requires correct use of metaphorical language that is founded on conceptual metaphors that are shared across cultures.

Research conducted by MacArthur (2010) emphasized the status of metaphor in EFL teaching. He noted that metaphors are commonly used in the academic writing by advanced Spanish learners of English. He found that all learners were able to use metaphor, though they vary in quantity and type of metaphorical expressions used. Some learners, for instance, rely on conventional English metaphors, while others use more novel ones. He cautioned that teachers will have to take note of student variability which could impact the teaching of metaphors.

Nacey (2013) compared ESL learners' texts to those of native speakers with a control on the level of language proficiency (quoted in Littlemore et al., 2014). The researchers focused on explicit improvement of metaphorical language and the metaphors were also analyzed qualitatively to examine the metaphorical functions. They concluded that the use of metaphors increased as learners developed through different stages of learning. As learners progressed, metaphor use increased and the quality of use also improved in terms of greater sophistication in functional use. Error rate involving metaphors was found to be considerably higher than the general error rate even at the higher levels of learning. Among the errors, L1 transfer had a noticeable effect on metaphor use.

Most of the studies reviewed above are connected to metaphor use in textbooks or pedagogy. However, few studies have been conducted specifically in the domain of university level academic reading texts for learners (Littlemore and Low, 2006; MacArthur, 2010, Ahlin's 2022). To reiterate, Almohammadi and Rundblad (2016), found metaphor comprehension of Arabic speakers in the EFL context of research to be very much still in its infancy. This is in line with a study by Arif and Abdullah (2017) on metaphor competence, who stated that "no study has tackled the effect of the L1 on L2 in the Iraqi context" (p. 1). Against this backdrop, the current study seeks to analyse academic reading texts used by Iraqi EFL learners in terms of how they comprehend conceptual metaphors in academic texts at the university level. This study will add on to lessen the paucity in metaphorical knowledge in this field of study. Possibly, the findings can provide necessary insights for the EFL teachers and curriculum developers to incorporate discerning metaphorical expressions into the teaching and learning of English among Arabic speakers. In the main, it provides some empirical evidence about metaphor processing of academic reading texts. We noted from the aforementioned literature that most studies focused on processing metaphorical expressions for general use, and little attention has been paid to the domain of academic reading comprehension. Therefore, this study focused on the comprehension of metaphorical expressions in academic reading texts by Iraqi EFL learners. To this end, the current study attempts to answer the following research question: How do Iraqi EFL learners comprehend conceptual metaphors in academic reading texts at the university level?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section includes two main topics; the first topic is an overview of CMT, the theoretical framework of the study in terms of which conceptual metaphor understanding by Iraqi EFL learners at the university level is analyzed, and the relationship between conceptual metaphor comprehension and language learning.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY

The conceptual metaphor is used for understanding complex thoughts and putting them in a simplified way. It is used for giving insights and views to abstract models. The conceptual metaphor defines concepts in terms of viewing two sides which are the structure of the source domain and the structure of the target domain. The configuration of these two domains results in a common understanding.

Theoretically, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) underlies the study, and invariably deserves a detailed explanation to provide the context. Published by Gorge Lakoff and Mark Johnson in 1980, it has become a seminal work that presents a systematic perspective of metaphor which functions centrally as a cognitive affect. Earlier studies on cognitive science and cognitive psychology in the late 20th century had accentuated that our mind is not a mirror of objective reality, rather there are informational structures that mediate perception and the reality of the outside world (Thagard, 2005). Cognitive linguistics specifically focuses on metaphor function as an instrument for classifying reality in the human mind. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) stated, metaphors are pervasive in daily life and the human conceptual system is basically metaphorical. This unconscious metaphorical system enables humans to generate metaphorical expressions in language.

For Lakoff and Johnson (1980), conceptual metaphors are mapped from a concrete source domain to a more abstract target domain. The source domain as a structured whole, helps to form an experiential gestalt in metaphor contact. In this sense, the source domain is the embodied meaning that arises from bodily experience and becomes more salient than its abstract equivalence in the target domain. In sum, metaphor is analogous in nature that involves a set of correspondences between the two different knowledge domains (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 2003). Therefore, many concrete and abstract concepts are systematized in terms of each other in the human mind. For instance, the metaphorical expression like ‘time is money’ is both concrete and abstract.

As a useful typology, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provided three categories of metaphors, namely, structural metaphor, orientational metaphor, and ontological metaphor. However, in the second edition of their book, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) clarified that these distinctions are artificial in the sense that all metaphors may be said to be structural and ontological in nature, while only some are also orientational.

STRUCTURAL METAPHORS

In structural metaphors, a concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 2003). Thus, structural metaphors show the richest relation between two concepts that pervasively organize a target domain with reference to a source domain. A conceptual metaphor like TIME IS MONEY is an example of a structural metaphor. In this type of metaphor, the source domain which is MONEY provides the target concept which is TIME within a relatively bound knowledge structure with reference to the use of the lexis, ‘money’. This means that speakers can understand target ‘Y’ by means of the structure of source ‘X’ in the cognitive meta-function of this metaphor.

ONTOLOGICAL METAPHORS

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) refer to ontological metaphors as metaphorical structures that make a target domain more tangible. To shed light on this point, Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 25) explain that we could express or convey our experiences in terms of “physical objects and substances and this allow us to pick out a part of our experience and treat (it) as a discrete (entity) or (substance) of a uniform kind”. In other words, when an abstract idea such as an event, a state or an activity is represented as a concrete entity or substance, an object, a container or a person, an ontological metaphor will be constructed for example; I need to clear my head, as THE HEAD IS A CONTAINER. However, ontological metaphors are confined to our physical experiences with physical objects since they arise out of our experiences with objects as discrete entities or substance.

ORIENTATIONAL METAPHORS

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) remarked that orientational metaphors could include spatial orientations like “up-down”, “in-out”, “on-off” and “front-back”. The occurrence of orientational metaphors can also show that there is a comprehensible conceptual scheme in the mind between all concepts that are characterized under a specific spatial direction and can be related to other common concepts, such as MORE, HAPPY, HEALTHY, ALIVE and CONTROL.

This theory has come about as a reaction to the need to contextualize the problems faced by the learners of a second language in comprehending the metaphor. The theory also explains the need to understand cognitive processing of comprehending metaphors with specific reference to the notions of source domain and target domain. The target domain is more abstract, and it is expected to be made clearer via cognitive processing of the source domain. Being more tangible, the source domain enables the mind to understand the metaphor used. The mapping process, in this regard, involves a transition point between these two domains. In this sense, the process of understanding is examined by CMT through cross-domain mappings, and correspondences between both the source and target domains. In addition to CMT, this study will also utilize the Metaphor Identification Procedures Vrije University (MIPVU), which is used to identify the linguistic metaphors used in the selected data or texts.

METAPHOR COMPREHENSION AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) considered metaphor as an instrument that helps to simplify and convey ideas through a systematic and intelligent way. They considered metaphor as playing a major role in all languages and is a primary facilitator in communication in terms of conceptualizing abstract and complex phenomena into more concrete and easier constituents to aid better understanding. Metaphorical content could be conveyed in a few words that carry maximum meaning, and a competent learner will be able to appreciate such use in contributing to the ease of understanding complex ideas. Additionally, Knowles & Moon (2006) considered metaphor as a tool that functionally explain, clarify, describe, evaluate, express, and even entertain as a way of communicating intellectually, as well as make problematic concepts more effectually learnt over and above literal language.

In brief, the basic argument of Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 4) is that our “conceptual system... is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” because human reason is embodied in our sensorimotor system. Since human beings are able to sense objects moving through space, our sensorimotor experiences are expressed in terms of concepts relating to particular notions, such as

location, movement, and interaction with objects and forces. Therefore, the embodiment of reason necessarily employs metaphors that are derived from the aforementioned concepts. As Lakoff and Johnson say, the “very structure of reason itself comes from details of our embodiment”.

Metaphor in the domain of learning is a significant language feature, particularly for people involved in the educational process since “metaphors both contribute to and limit understanding, and thus play a gate-keeping role in learning” (Cameron, 2003, p. vii). People use metaphors to conceptualize abstract notions found in learning and teaching, and the choice in the manner of conceptualizations affects the way people understand and comprehend the reality of teaching and learning. Largely, people encounter various types of metaphors in learning. Metaphors of learning whether consciously used or not, play a dynamic role in shaping learning. In fact, the use of metaphors shapes learning philosophies. The use of metaphors in language teaching and learning has significantly contributed to the increase of learners’ communicative competence. Learning the use of metaphors, especially in the learning of foreign languages, enhances language competency towards native-like ability. However, metaphorical expressions are not easy to learn and it is quite usual for language learners to face difficulties in this aspect of learning. This notion is well supported by numerous scholars; (Littlemore 2001, 2004, 2005; Littlemore and Low, 2006; Low and Littlemore, 2009; Sandgren, 2014; Hussein and Abdullah, 2016) emphasised that non-native speakers of English are likely to face problems in the understanding and using of metaphors as they learn the language.

Efficient use of metaphors would reflect a level of sophistication in language use, which marks a high level of competency in language attainment. Its significance is also driven by the ubiquitous presence of metaphor use in our daily life, as it shapes our language, thoughts, and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Thus, metaphors are important in exerting their contributions towards effective communication of ideas. Generally, difficulties are varied in relation to the understanding of metaphorical expressions (Cooper, 1999). In particular, EFL learners’ speeches tend to be unnatural when their conceptual comprehension and knowledge do not tap on metaphorical expressions as used by fluent native or near native speakers. Thus, their speech becomes too literal and tilted, and as a result, communicative fluency is affected (Danesi, 1994). Worse still, the non-native speakers can completely fail to understand the nuances of the language due to lack of mastery of metaphorical expressions.

Mastery of metaphorical expressions is a definite help to achieve easier and more comprehensive communication, and, more importantly, it makes abstract ideas and notions more easily accessible among interlocutors. In fact, both metaphor comprehension and production are equally important as they impact the efficient understanding of received material context (Littlemore & Low, 2006), especially with regard to educated discourse. The entrenchment of metaphorical usage has left an indelible mark on human discourse, and failure in use could become a weighty barrier when second language users have to contend with words and expressions used in discourses such as, those in politics, media and education (Littlemore, 2001; Krennmayr, 2011; and Dorst, 2011). Undoubtedly, metaphor use is “an instrument of language learning” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, mastery of metaphors goes beyond general proficiency in that it is also closely associated with other efficient use of cognitive skills, such as evaluative perception and logical reasoning. Given the predominance of metaphors in language use, Caillies and Declercq (2011) believed strongly that it is important to investigate the root of the problem in learning metaphors amongst EFL learners. Thus, it is an urgent matter that needs attention among educators, especially language educators.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper explores the understanding of metaphorical expressions in academic reading texts by EFL learners through a qualitative design. The analysis of metaphorical expressions is based on Lakoff & Johnson's (1980) CMT. In obtaining the data, the first step involved the purposive selection of six academic comprehension texts which were sourced from a current reading textbook used by Iraqi EFL learners. The academic textbook is *Developing Skills* written by G. L. Alexander and published by Oxford University Press.

In addition to CMT, the current study utilized the Metaphor Identification Procedures Vrije University (MIPVU), which is used to identify the linguistic metaphors used in the selected data or reading texts. The Metaphor Identification Procedures Vrije University or popularly known as MIPVU is a more advanced and refined procedure in identifying metaphors compared to its predecessor, simply known as the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP). The MIP was devised in 2007 by several cognitive metaphor scholars, who became known as the Pragglez group. Later the procedure was revised by Steen, et al. (2010) to examine whether a lexical unit in a given discourse could be identified as a “metaphor” or a “metaphor-related word”. Steen et al. (2010) postulated that the MIPVU is more reliable than the MIP in showing the extent to which word meaning is affected by a main metaphor.

Metaphor is identified by MIPVU, while it is analyzed by CMT. The metaphorical expressions were underlined as a cue to draw the attention of the learners to the task in question. Next, an open-ended questionnaire was designed to assist Iraqi EFL university learners to examine the underlined metaphorical expressions. The questionnaire required the EFL learners to explain how they comprehended the conceptual metaphors that had been identified in the texts. In the final stage of the data collection, the semi-structured interview was used as a method of inquiry. The interview included a pre-determined set of open questions by the interviewer that prompted discussions to explore themes or responses further. This would help the researchers to gather more insights into the students' cognitive processing of the use and understanding of the metaphors, thus complementing the earlier metaphor explanation task.

Thirty EFL learners from a governmental Iraqi university were selected for this study. The participants were recruited during one of their academic lectures based on voluntarism. The volunteers were then asked to sign a consent form. Creswell (2012) stated that 30 participants is an adequate sampling in a qualitative study. To minimize the variation that could be found among the participants, in addition to the fact that they were all Iraqi EFL learners, it was ensured that they had similar educational backgrounds, and they were all third-year learners of an EFL proficiency course. The learners had all passed the university placement test in the first year at the university before joining the English classes. The test evaluated their level of English language proficiency.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having presented the theoretical framework to the study, this section provides an answer to the research question proposed above: How do Iraqi EFL learners comprehend conceptual metaphors in academic reading texts at the university level?

The terms ‘misunderstanding’, and ‘non-understanding’ were first used by Littlemore (2001) in the methodological analysis of metaphorical expressions. In addition to that, this study added the categories ‘successful understanding’ and ‘literal understanding’ based on the EFL learners' comprehension. The learners' answers were varied; therefore, we scheme coded the

themes that emerged into four categories: *successful understanding*, *misunderstanding*, *non-understanding*, and *literal understanding* for a more focused discussion. These four categories represented the levels of the EFL learners' cognition ability to conceptualize the metaphors involved in the selected data. Table 1 below displays the number of incidents when the learners understood or failed to understand the metaphorical expressions:

TABLE 1. Frequency of comprehension of metaphorical expressions among Iraqi EFL learners

No.	Metaphorical Expressions	Successful Understanding.	Misunderstanding	Non-Understanding	Literal understanding
1	Our vicar is always raising money for one cause	10	13	6	1
2	Armed with a torch, the victor..	13	5	5	9
3	.. Boxing was very crude , for there were no ...	18	5	3	2
4	One of the most colorful fighters in boxing history	20	5	3	2
5	... Mendoza rose to fame swiftly after a boxing ...	14	10	2	4
6	The two men quarreled bitterly and it was clear ...	12	10	4	4
7	... This is unfortunate for the poor actors who are required ...	9	12	5	4
8	Even he still lives under the illusion that country life	16	9	2	3
9	... The could be save so much misery and expense ...	17	8	4	1
10	... Which can only be dimly understood.	15	3	4	8
	Total (300)	144	80	38	38

The table presents the overall findings of the recruited participants' linguistic cognition as they responded to the use of metaphors in the academic texts. In particular, findings showed how the learners underwent cognitive processing of the identified metaphorical expressions and how they deployed their cognition to understand and determine the meaning of those expressions. The findings showed that the total number of incidents that the metaphorical expressions were successfully identified and understood were 144 times. The number of incidents when the learners were deemed as having misunderstood the conceptual metaphors were 80. Other instances when learners whose cognition were categorized as 'Non-understanding' and 'Literal understanding' posted an identical frequency of 38 times. The following section is an analysis of some of the learners' responses to the understanding of conceptual metaphor based on the four categories mentioned above:

SUCCESSFUL UNDERSTANDING

Based on the findings above, 144 learners had successfully understood and comprehended the conceptual metaphor in the data obtained. Below are some of responses given by the successful learners. The metaphor 'raising money' elicited the following responses:

- (1) *The vicar gains a good amount of money for some reasons but it is not enough to fix the clock of the church. Learner No: 15*
- (2) *He collects the money. Learner No :22*
Similarly, "lives under the illusion" was comprehended successfully as in:
- (3) *Illusion, he thinks or imagines town life better than country life Learner No:7*
- (4) *He is living in fantasy, have day dreams. His mind is far from the real life. Learner No:21*

In examples (1) and (2) we have two different ideas 'raising money' and 'collect money', for the same conceptual metaphor. The interviews confirmed that the interpretation was influenced by the learners' sociocultural background. In Iraq, as collectivistic community, the clergymen (one who is in charge of the mosque) often collect money for making repairs in the mosque. Language and culture are interwoven, and one will influence the other. It is impossible for one to teach a first language without teaching its culture because culture has a continuous influence on first language (Shongwe et al, 2019). This is due to the idea that language learning and culture have a kind of profound and yet typical relationship. Culture is symbolized through language and is inextricably connected with social traits, religions, and philosophical outlooks of a specific country which includes the social communities.

In examples (3) and (4), the learners had succeeded in comprehending the conceptual metaphor which is "life in the countryside is illusionary". Thus, "living in fantasy" and "is far from the real life" imply the meaning of unreal life in the countryside. Based on the answers elicited by the interview, we can say that this was a successful understanding which could come from either the cultural background or personal experiences of the learners.

MISUNDERSTANDING

In terms of *misunderstanding*, 80 of the participants misunderstood metaphors as illustrated in the selected expressions below. Learners misunderstood (*raising money*) and (*armed*) as in:

- (1) *Collect the money to get benefit Learner No: 13*
- (2) *He raises money for things is less important than the church clock which he should repaired it. Learner No: 12*
- (3) *Money is important to get what you want and also to help people. Learner No: 24*
- (4) *He use armed to see what was going on to safe himself or maybe the place itself. Learner No: 24*
- (5) *It means that there was a battle and there is army vicar. Learner No: 14*

Misunderstanding refers to the deviation from the implied meaning showing a lack of ability to grasp the conceptual metaphor. Thus, "collect the money to get benefit" could be assigned to the cultural and social background knowledge of people who raise money for their own interest. This argument can also be compatible with "raise money for things is less important than the church clock". As for "armed", the context of situation requires the vicar to have something with

him like a torch. The learners comprehended it as something being carried by a person, such as a fire arm or a gun. The other response inferred is that there might be a battle, learner No: 14. These two interpretations are examples of misunderstanding; in other words, the learners did not understand the context of situation of the passage and they lack the pragmatic competence to conceptualize the metaphor accurately.

NON-UNDERSTANDING

In terms of *non-understanding* 38 learners gave irrelevant and vague expressions; an issue that requires a deeper mining of the operant reasoning. Non-understanding occurs when the learners were incapable of understanding one domain in terms of another. In other words, they were unaware of the predetermined points mapping between the source and the target domains. Examples can be found in the “*raising money*” and “*bitterly*” metaphors:

- (1) *It means the vicar is not truthful with the people. Learner No: 6*
- (2) *He was greedy man. Learner No: 17*
- (3) *From the up we see the whole. Learner No: 5*

Our results were compatible with Danesi’s work (1992) which noted the seemingly lack of metaphorical competence in the L2 classroom. This lack is a major factor that prevents L2 learners from achieving native-like fluency. He argued that L2 learners will not be able to reach such fluency unless they have knowledge of “how that language reflects or encodes concepts on the basis of metaphorical reasoning” (p. 5). Being native-like is of course not the main purpose for all ESL language learners, but in reality, the sophisticated structures of metaphors do require a complex interpretation that somewhat borders to the level of near native use if success is to be attained in the area. As such, it is not surprising that mastery of metaphors is generally difficult for EFL learners. Given this lack and the need to understand the difficulties that could then lead to more successful approaches in the related teaching, this area has much to offer in terms of research, especially in an academic setting.

LITERAL UNDERSTANDING

The *literal understanding* scored 38 in which learners depended on the surface structure of the expression to get to the underlying meaning. As revealed by the statistics, both literal and non-understanding categories had the smallest percentages compared with the other. Both categories were noted in *Raising money* that had not been understood in terms of metaphorical comprehension. *Armed* was conceptualized literally by participants because this word was already conceptualized as being connected with a type of weapon; therefore, the literal meaning comes first to the mind of participants as in:

- (1) *He has a gun. Learner No: 10*
- (2) *Has weapon. Learner No: 2*
- (3) *Carrying a weapon or arm. Learner No: 22*
Similarly, “*bitterly*” and “*colorful fighters*” were comprehended literally as in:
- (4) *Things are not sweet. Learner No: 8*
- (5) *In the boxing the man should get dressed colors costume everyone get dressed colors costumes. Learner No: 8*

- (6) *Rich in colors. Learner No: 30*
- (7) *It means he has different colors in hair, clothes and skin or maybe it's a philosophe meaning to optimistic. Learner No: 5*
- (8) *A person who have a dark skin. Learner No: 9*

One would inarguably be confused when trying to provide justification for literal understanding. Theoretically explained, literal understanding is caused by an absence of predetermined points in the processing of the relationship between the source and the target domains. The intended message was 'lost' in the transitory movement from the source domain to that of the target domain that functions as the final conveyer of the real message destination behind the conceptual metaphorical use. Thus, in the examples encountered in literal understanding, the learners had focused on the surface level of understanding. However, literal understanding can be labeled as 'beneficial' due to it reflecting a process in temporary comprehension. This temporary comprehension can be evaluated by their tutors who can then guide the learners further to achieve successful understanding. This fact has already been noted by numerous scholars (Littlemore 2001, 2004, 2005; Littlemore and Low, 2006; Low and Littlemore, 2009; Sandgren, 2014; Hussein and Abdullah, 2016), that learners usually face difficulties in comprehending metaphorical expressions in the learning context, and non-native speakers are no exception.

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW RESULTS

This part of the analysis focuses on the qualitative data yielded by the semi-structured interview obtained after establishing base-line data for overall performance in the understanding of metaphorical expressions. It focuses on the overall perception of the learners in the understanding of conceptual metaphors. More specifically, we seek to ascertain the factors that affected their understanding, misunderstanding, literal and non-understanding of the metaphorical expressions. Overall, findings on the comprehension of metaphorical expressions fluctuated within different stages of understanding and interpretation due to the participants' differences in their competence. Through a careful examination of the process of metaphorical cognition, we were able to identify certain factors that affected the learners' reading comprehension, which are sociocultural, personal, and semantic/linguistic.

SOCIOCULTURAL FACTORS

Firstly, sociocultural factors include lifestyle, religion, politics and values. The participants were largely affected by their Iraqi customs and values, which characterize the nature of Iraqi society. It is apparent that the participants were influenced by sociocultural factors which are fundamentally linked to the Arabic culture. The selected metaphors may not necessarily be strongly associated with the source domain of the learners' language. Rather, they can be rooted deeply to the target language culture which embodies references to the foreign culture of English speakers. The Iraqi academic textbooks are written using British English language. Nonetheless, some learners recruited in this study showed successful understanding of the highlighted conceptual metaphors found in the texts. For example, the following elaborations from the interviews revealed logical reasoning in their cognitive processing of the target cultural norms and values as shown by the questions that were directed to the participants.

- ✓ **Answer 1:** It means stick fire for lighting dark places in the tower to see what happened up. Learner No: 4
- ✓ **Answer 2:** ammm Means cruel rigorous without role. Learner No: 4
- ✓ **Learners 1:** Actually, I'm always watching the free wrestling on YouTube, its so bad and without any bit or mercy. Learner No: 4

PERSONAL FACTORS

Some answers appeared to be attributed to personal views in the interpretation of some metaphorical expressions. A case in point is the learner's creation of his personal identity that is influenced by a myriad of personal experiences. Thus, in reconstructing the comprehension of the metaphors, the learners may be coloured by their personal orientations in their responses. That being the case, their responses cannot be generalized to the whole Iraqi culture as they are shaped by subjectivity. Personal factors can be entrenched and this can exert specific metaphysical or I conceptions of reality as learners process the language. The EFL Iraqi speakers who have strikingly different language backgrounds could portray different conceptual and personal images even when faced with similar states of affairs. Thus, comprehension of metaphor use based on personal views would result in different framings of the readers' perception and thought. Languages cannot constrict our capability to identify the world or to consider about the reality of the world we live in, but they can serve to emphasize our views, thoughtfulness, and ideas on specific aspects of the world. Below are some examples attributed to the reliance on personal views in the interpretations of some of the metaphorical expressions.

- ✓ *I know that because people are always fighting after each in their discussion.* Learner No: 4
- ✓ *Because I'm always see how people are discussing and of course will fight after that.* Learner No: 6
- ✓ *.....we are Iraqi and we always getting angry fast so no doubt will be fight hhhhhhh....*Learner No: 16
- ✓ *Well, he is not like the outside life and he regard it hardly mmmm we can say he is just imagining.* Learner No: 5
- ✓ *Well, we studied this last year, aaaa I remember that time I was discussing with my best friends and we here really enjoying the stories while we are thinking about these texts.* Learner No: 10

The examples above are not attributed to either cultural or linguistic factors in the verbalized understandings of the conceptual metaphors; instead, the justifications are linked to personal subjectivity to a certain extent.

SEMANTIC/LINGUISTIC IMPACT

Thirdly, most responses have been affected by semantic cognition in terms of lexical dependency. This means the learner resorted to lexical meaning with no regard for the context of situation in which metaphorical expressions are uttered. The lexical meaning to be recalled, is "the meaning of a word in relation to the physical world or to abstract concepts, without reference to any sentence in which the word may occur" (The free dictionary.com). For successful understanding, we have

only one evidence of a learner depending on linguistic context to determine the conceptual metaphor for the item “armed” as in:

✓ *Well, it is clear from the text no need to think about it.* Learner No: 12

This rarity of linguistic dependency confirmed the learners’ interpretative behavior of resorting more to sociocultural and personal views in the comprehending of metaphors as part of academic text reconstruction. As such, there were more of such cases in evidence, especially among those learners classified as exhibiting non-understanding and literal understanding of metaphorical expressions. Thus, understanding a metaphorical expression requires more than just the semantics or linguistic features; it inevitably also involves the writer’s pragmatics that influence the understanding of his intended message among the message recipients. For this reason, the participants recruited in our study exhibited a pragmatic failure in recognizing the aims of the author of the academic text. In other words, they have often over depended on lexical meaning and became isolated from the contextual meaning of the utterance.

The findings revealed that the process of comprehending metaphorical expressions was determined by certain factors: social, semantic/ linguistic and personal. It means that a foreign language learner needs to develop his/ her cultural awareness of the target language to be able to make a successful understanding for the academic texts. Thus, the failure in comprehending the metaphor is caused by either the cultural or linguistic awareness of the target language.

Pedagogically, the textbook designers and authors should take into account the focus on the cultural background of the target language. For example, reviews and illustrations on the target language should be presented for the learners in advance in the early stages of learning. Thus, using conceptual metaphors could even contribute to teaching vocabulary to students (Matsevich., et al 2020).

CONCLUSION

In the light of the findings and the results arrived at, we can conclude that the inclusion of metaphorical expression training in the Iraqi EFL curriculum is of paramount significance. Overall, metaphor in reading texts remains one of the problems that foreign language learners face and they need a considerable level of awareness of metaphorical realizations to improve their grasp of language use. The interview data confirm a varying degree of influence ranging from social, political to linguistic factors as the learners cognitively processed the metaphorical expressions.

The findings showed variations in participants’ responses based on different levels of understanding: *successful understanding, misunderstanding, non-understanding* and *literal understanding*. This process seems to be common and speaks of a natural order of learning. This is in line with Ahlin's (2022) study that metaphor is universal and it is important to improve foreign language learners' use of metaphors. Understanding linguistic and cultural backgrounds and traits help successful comprehension of metaphoric expressions. For example, Shongwe et al. (2019) concluded in their study that there was a detectable relationship between the first language and culture, whereby, the relationship between siSwati (a native South African language) as a first language and its culture was definitely mutual as one couldn’t function without the other.

The results of this study have pedagogical implications. The pervasiveness of metaphorical expressions in language and thought means it is crucial for language learning programs to integrate metaphorical expressions systematically into EFL materials in academic settings. In other words,

for English learners to be considered proficient in English, they are required to improve their metaphorical competence as the metaphor represents a challenging aspect in language skills development.

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