



TEACHING FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE TO EFL LEARNERS: METHODS AND CONSTRAINTS

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ABSTRACT -

Teaching foreign literary works by the university teacher and analyzing them by EFL learners, focusing mainly on rhetorical language, is not an easy task. The difficulty is related to two factors. First, the learners have insufficient stock of the EFL vocabulary and they cannot translate the text successfully. Second, the author's social standards (which shape the target language structures) differ from that of the reader who needs to be familiar with them in order to be able to decode the text. The art of decorating a text with metaphor, symbolism, imagery and other literary techniques are affected directly by the writer's own vision of the world that vary from one language to another; and from one social/geographical situation to another. Figures of speech are full of messages before being a painter of the text image. This message is derived from the author's traces of his/her community and expressed implicitly via that figurative language. A foreign literary text reflects various messages that are embedded within the beauty of language and the author's diction. The learner with incomplete background about the FL grammar and vocabulary may rely frequently on the dictionary, and this can slow his/her

competence of reading intuitively between the lines. In the light of this, how could an EFL reader interpret successfully figures of speech? Is vocabulary knowledge alone enough for this analysis? What are the different methods/techniques of teaching figures of speech analysis?

KEYWORDS -

EFL learners, figures of speech, literary texts, vocabulary

ملخص-

إن تدريس الأعمال الأدبية الأجنبية من قبل الأستاذ الجامعي وتحليلها من طرف متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية، بالتركيز أساسا على الأساليب البلاغية، ليس بالأمر السهل. و تتعلق هذه الصعوبة بعاملين. أولا، يمتلك المتعلمون مخزونا ضئيلا من مفردات اللغة الانجليزية فلا يستطيعون ترجمة النص بنجاح. ثانيا، تختلف المعايير الاجتماعية للكاتب (والتي تشكل هيكل اللغة المستهدفة) عنها للقارئ والذي يحتاج الى أن يكون على اطلاع عليها كي يفك رموز النص. يتأثر فن تزيين النص من خلال الاستعارة، الترميز، الصور البيانية و تقنيات أخرى بنظرة الكاتب الخاصة للعالم و التي تختلف من لغة الى أخرى و من حالة اجتماعية، جغرافية الى غيرها. ان الصور البيانية ملئ بالرسائل المبطنة قبل أن تكون راسمة لصورة النص حيث أن رسالة الكاتب مشتقة من مجتمعه و التي يعبر عنها بشكل ضمني من خلال جمالية اللغة. يعكس النص الأدبي الأجنبي عدة رسائل ضمنية عبر الأسلوب البلاغي للكاتب و كذا اختياره للألفاظ المناسبة. ان ضعف مخزون الطالب من مفردات وقواعد النحو للغة الانجليزية يمكن أن يؤدي الى اعتماده المكرر على القاموس مما يبطئ قدرته على قراءة ما بين السطور بسلاسة. وعلى ضوء هذا، كيف يمكن للقارئ باللغة الانجليزية أن يترجم ويحلل بنجاح الصور البيانية؟ هل يمكن أن تكون معلوماته حول مفردات اللغة لوحدها كافية لهذا التحليل؟ ماهي مختلف المناهج و التقنيات اللازمة لتدريس أساليب تحليل الصور البيانية؟

كلمات دالة-

متعلمي اللغة الانجليزية، الصور البيانية، النصوص الأدبية، المفردات

1. Introduction:

Teaching literature in the EFL classroom requires continuous and double efforts by the teacher because the texts' nature differs deeply from the student's way of thinking in their mother tongue. The students may encounter the difficulties of understanding the new vocabulary and translating the terms into their L1. They are also required to understand the author's mentality and to be familiar with his/her social context which is closely related to his/her style of presenting figurative language. More importantly, figures of speech as metaphor, simile, and symbolism need the learner's literary competence to be able to interpret them successfully.

The difficulty of interpreting these expressions is caused by the new concepts, in the target language, that cannot be understood by the students. Also, since the social norms of any community play a main role in forming its language structures, the reader in that FL must have enough background about these social features. In this case, the teachers have to vary their teaching methods to enable their students to easily analyze literary texts especially that this kind of works contains various implicit messages conveyed by the author.

However, the methods and the techniques of teaching literary texts can be classified under the term 'literature pedagogy.' This last was established by many scholars who dealt with students whose EFL skills are typically not all developed. The overall aim of their project was to study the needs of the students to undergo a successful learning process. Literature teachers are interested in fictional texts (short story, poem, youth novel, and comic strip) that the class works within various ways (analysis activities, letters to the main characters, poems, etc).

Various teaching methods of literature have been focusing on reading comprehension, discourse analysis, and literary theory on the way in which the teaching of literary texts can be integrated into a

general approach to the teaching of language as a social discourse. Teachers need to create an environment of communication in the classroom. Here, discussions of literary texts via breaking up the students into groups of interaction, supported by oral communication activities, may increase their individual abilities of learning independence. Teachers have to direct their interest towards the ways of sensitizing students to the negotiation of the meaning of a literary text in a group situation. This challenge can involve them realizing two principles: the first is creating a reception among the readers, and the second deals with constructing a dialogue between the text and its reader.

In the light of this, this article focuses on highlighting the nature of foreign language aesthetics; the difficulties of understanding them; and the different methods of teaching them successfully to the EFL learners (the case of analyzing metaphorical expressions is treated here). Moreover, the concept 'schemata' will be presented in this article because it is the main factor that affects the readers' way of treating the text. The term 'schemata' is referred to the individuals stock of knowledge of the world that is stored in their minds and shapes their way of thinking and speaking in their mother tongue. Thus, the learners' schemata can play a role in interpreting the different expressions (among them figures of speech) of the FL in which the literary text is written. However, the reader must also develop his/her literary competence that requires him/her to be able to read between the lines. The latter cannot be realized without ensuring enough background about literary criticism. So, all these points will be clarified in detail in the sections below.

2. The Relationship between Schemata and Reading Literary Texts:

Researchers working in the domain of reading highlighted two factors that may affect readers' ability of reading – in their L1 or FL – literary and non-literary texts. The first one has relation with the readers' variables present whilst the reading process, and the second

focuses on the nature of the text to be read. In addition, many scholars have been introduced to investigate the interaction between the reader and text variables with their effects on the success of reading

Concerning the readers variables, they can be divided into six elements: the state of the readers' knowledge they have already gathered throughout their life; the readers' motivation to read; the reasons of reading a text; the strategies that readers use when processing a text; the skills useful for efficient reading; and the characteristics of readers sex, age, personality and their physical aspects including eye movements, speed of word recognition, and automaticity of processing¹.

In the 1930s, Bartlett (date unknown) had been interested in studying the theory which claimed that the nature of the readers' knowledge influences their understanding of the text and the way they process it. Here, the concept 'schemata' appeared as an area of study. It is defined as '*Interlocking mental structures representing readers' knowledge*'.² In other words, when reading a text, the readers integrate the new information from the text into their pre-existing schemata (background knowledge) which affect their way of recognizing and storing information. So, '*The state of the reader's knowledge influences his process, product, and recall*'.³ The term introduced by Bartlett explains how the information carried in stories is rearranged in the memories of the readers or listeners to fit with their expectations. In his experiments, British students re-interpreted Apache folk-tales in the way they fitted in with their own schemata, or prior knowledge structures, based on their European folk-tale experiences⁴. Schemata have equivalent terms preferred by some scholars as 'scripts' and 'frames.'

Carrell (1983) distinguishes 'formal schemata' from 'content schemata.' The former refers to the knowledge of language and linguistic conventions that cover knowledge of organizing texts and features of different genres. The latter encompasses knowledge of the world including that of the text subject. Hence, content schemata can

be divided into ‘background knowledge’ (knowledge which may or may not be linked to the content of the text in question) and ‘subject-matter knowledge’ which is relevant to the topic of the text. Moreover, the author emphasizes the importance of studying the interaction of the two types of schemata especially in cross-linguistic contexts⁵.

In this regard, educationalists, applied linguists, and psychologists, among them Rumelhart (1980, 1985) and Bransford *et al.*, (1984), have been interested in analyzing content schemata. These scholars agree on the view that readers need knowledge about the content of the text (subject-matter knowledge) to be able to understand it: the more familiar the readers are with the passage content, the better understanding can be achieved. In the same area, Alderson and Urquhart (1985) were able to prove that tests on reading texts in subject disciplines, studied by the students, were sometimes easier to process than those were not⁶.

Concerning literature, background knowledge (knowledge of how the world works) has also its influence on the readers’ processing of texts. This can be explained through Rumelhart’s (1985) classic example: *‘The policeman held up his hand and the car stops;’*⁷ here, the sentence can be easily understood by ordinary readers. However, they can only do so via having the common knowledge that the car has a driver and that a policeman holding up his hand is a sign of stopping the car. These meanings are not explicitly stated, but they are part of the individuals’ knowledge about the world. In this operation, the readers refer to their schemata and activate fast and automatically the stored knowledge in their minds. Consequently, *‘... without such processes, language comprehension would be slow and laborious, if it could take place at all. Thus, world knowledge is essential to reading’*⁸.

Background knowledge may include knowledge that an individual acquires from childhood and that has a direct effect on his/her understanding of texts. So, this knowledge may be limited and specific

as other people's world may work differently, i.e. these people share the same social knowledge that may affect their understanding of texts especially when reading in FL that bears social criteria itself. However, as this type of knowledge may be conventional and linked to a particular group, it can be idiosyncratic, resulting from individuals' personal history and experiences.

Working in this field, Bartlett's (1932) research explored the way tested British informants read a North American Indian folk tale; the results showed that they tried to alter it to conform to their own assumptions about the world. Steffensen *et al.*, (1984) also analyzed differences in social knowledge between Indians from the Subcontinent and North Americans, giving them an account of weddings – one in a cultural setting familiar to them, and one in unfamiliar context – to read. Comparing the two groups, the scholars noticed that readers were able to recall subjects more accurately from the familiar social setting than the unfamiliar one. Therefore, scholars, in doing this kind of research, focus on studying those differences among groups of readers as religious beliefs, black vs. white, urban development vs. rural, natives vs. foreigners, members of different dialect groups, etc. These variations have a direct influence on interpreting texts and they increase with age because social knowledge develops via the individual progress from child to adult⁹.

Hence, the learners' interpretation of language aesthetics is affected by their schemata which could be compared with that of the author.

3. Literary Competence and Literary Criticism for Analyzing Literary Texts:

A lot of studies have been presented on the difficulties that encounter the EFL students of English literature. This problem may result from basic literary inadequacies and their poor knowledge of the target language with all its linguistic and social implications. This is why many university teachers feel the need of helping students develop study strategies to improve their literary competence.

The aim of study strategies is to increase the readers' awareness of approaching the process of reading a literary text. Study strategies with this aim is seen by Bressler (2007) as a useful integration into the syllabus even by teachers in countries where traditions advocate a historical view to the study of literature¹⁰.

'Literary competence,' introduced by the structuralist Jonathan Culler, is an internalized set of rules that govern a reader's interpretation of a text¹¹. Culler believes that all readers possess literary competence or the ability to make sense of a text, and the process of interpreting the meaning of a literary text is learned over time through a learner's exposure of an experience with a variety of texts¹². However, 'literary competence' does not work alone, but it goes with the reader's linguistic competence (about the language of the text). That is to say, the readers must be familiar with the author's language that reflects his/her literary tools, nuances, vision of the world, and figures of thought. Linguistic competence, introduced by Noam Chomsky in 1965, refers to the system of rules that governs an individual's tacit understanding of what is acceptable and what is not in the language they speak. According to Littlewood:

The linguistic structures are, of course, the gate way or barrier to other levels, and it is fruitless to expect pupils to appreciate literary works for which they are not linguistically ready¹³.

'Literary competence' includes a number of skills and strategies that an effective reader needs to master in order to be able to convert the words of a literary work into literary meanings: it refers to the ability to recognize and to decode figures of speech (metaphor, simile, personification, etc), narrative and poetic devices (plot, characters, point of view, setting, etc.), specific text features (theme, style, etc), literary trends (Classicism, Romanticism, Realism, Modernism, etc), literary forms (the diary, the epigram, the heroic poem, etc), and literary genres (a novel, a play, a short story, a poem, etc.); the ability to use literary notions to interpret the text; and the ability to produce a

personal response to the text¹⁴. So, even the acquisition of these skills is related to the readers' background knowledge of the social manifestations, carried by the FL used in the literary work. To be clear, the ability of decoding figures of speech, for example, requires the reader's experience with the various conventional social rules of the author's native language, and which govern the implicit meanings conveyed via metaphors, similes, and so on. In addition, the reader's ability to respond to the text cannot be achieved without his/her familiarity with the author's world view that may reveal part of his intentions.

Culler (date unknown) refers to the process of making sense of literary experience as 'naturalization'. It allows readers to achieve a deeper understanding of a text. Naturalization, according to him, is based on the reader's knowledge of conventions of language and literature. Here, he followed Semiotic Linguistics of Saussure to explain the reading experience: Saussure used the term *la langue* to define the individual's linguistic system, stored in his/her mind, that includes lexical, grammatical, phonological, and syntactic knowledge, and *la parole* to refer to the way of using *la langue* in a particular situation, including diction, tone, and style. The study of *langue* and *parole* reveals the existence of a language system, consisting of relations, opposites, and differences. Hence, these elements represent a part of the system of conventions dealt with in literature.

Readers approach different literary texts and genres through applying different conventions. Culler (ibid) had been interested in two of five common types of conventions, delineated by Barthes (date unknown). One of them is the 'semic code' which helps the readers to gain insight to the personalities of characters through physical description, i.e. in the semic code, the type of the characters' personality can be indicated via a description of their behavior and physical characteristics. In this sense, Culler uses the concept 'complexion' as an example: outside of a literary context, it is not believed, to some extent, that perfect or blemished complexions correlate with perfect or blemished moral characters, but in some

literary genres this kind of assumptions structures the text and covers its meaning.

The other convention is called the ‘symbolic code.’ Some symbols, as wedding ring, are widely known and traditional within some communities, and others are more limited to a particular text based on the author’s specific culture and vision of the world. For example, the color ‘white’ can symbolize many views as purity, death, coldness, and light. Referring to Barthes (ibid), Culler (date unknown) claims that recognizing the word’s symbolic significance is related to noting its place in the ‘oppositional structure’ of a text (it is a series of ‘binary oppositions’ or opposing images which create the overall meaning of a text, for example, black vs. white, light vs. dark, and good vs. evil)¹⁵. Hence, decoding symbols in literary texts involves the reader’s ability to analyze different expressions according to their social and cultural contexts. Here, Lodge (1992) posits:

Anything that stands for something else is a symbol, but the process operates in many different ways. A cross may symbolize Christianity in one context, by association with the Crucifixion, and a road intersection in another, by dramatic resemblance. Literary symbolism is less easily decoded than these examples because it tries to be original and tends towards a rich plurality, even ambiguity, of meaning¹⁶.

‘Literary criticism’ also involves the learners’ ability to decode social aspects within a literary text. It can be described as ‘a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.’¹⁷ It means that literary criticism is a disciplined activity that attempts to describe, study, analyze, justify, interpret, and evaluate works of art: this discipline tries to formulate aesthetic and methodological principles on which the critic can evaluate a text. Thus, anyone who evaluates texts in this way is a ‘literary critic.’ The latter is a term derived from the two Greek words, *krino* (to judge) and *krités* (a judge or jury person). A literary critic or

kritikos, coined by the 4th BC century teacher Philitas, is a 'judge of literature.'¹⁸ Critics like Norman Holland and David Bleich were interested in studying ways in which readers respond to texts. They tried to explore the ways in which such responses can be related to those individuals' identity, themes, and to their personal psychic disposition, i.e. the character of their desires, needs, experiences, and so on¹⁹.

In the light of this, acquiring knowledge of 'literary criticism' enables the readers to train themselves to decode figures of speech successfully and to treat the text through their eyes.

4. Tips about the Interpretation of Metaphor: Teaching Techniques:

To explain deeply the nature of figures of speech in the literature classroom, metaphor has been chosen as an example. In this section, the meaning of metaphor and its types are studied. Thus, the students can recognize the tips of analyzing them especially that they are written in English as a FL.

The word 'metaphor' is derived from the Greek verb '*metaphora*': '*meta*' means 'over', and '*phora*' is 'to carry' or 'to transfer.' It refers to a particular linguistic process whereby aspects of one item are transferred to another item. So, metaphor and meaning transference are seen as synonymous in the etymological sense.

For Vygotsky (date unknown), cognitive development is shaped by the socially organized concepts appropriated through the activity of living, and the appropriation of models available in a new social group is complex and does not happen easily²⁰. So, metaphors are a feature of communicative interaction. Some linguists believe that metaphor is not at the margins of language. However, Harris (1981) disagrees with this claim arguing that it '*is at the very heart of everyday mental and linguistic activity*.'²¹ The students must distinguish between two types of metaphor that are deeply explained below.

‘Conceptual metaphors’ are different from ‘linguistic metaphors.’ An expression, such as, *our marriage is on the rocks* (it is going to fail soon) is a ‘linguistic metaphor’ that manifests different underlying concepts through which one can understand one domain (the target domain here is the ‘rocks’) in terms of another domain (the source domain that is ‘marriage’ in this example). Scholars also classify conceptual metaphors into primary and secondary metaphors. Primary conceptual metaphors include bodily metaphors in which the body is a container of the emotions (for example, *she is filled with hatred; don’t keep your anger inside*), and meanings as *more is up; less is down; good is up; bad is down*.

Secondary conceptual metaphors contain examples as *theories are buildings* (the theory has a solid foundation), *abstract competition is racing* (running for office, for example). This type of metaphors is said to be culturally influenced, and varies according to each social group cultural conventions²². However, ‘bodily conceptual metaphors’ have witnessed a debate concerning this view where Lakoff and Johnson (1999) claim that bodily metaphors are universals because people appear to have similar physical experiences of the world through their bodies.²³

So, ‘conceptual metaphors’ and literal representations derived from individuals’ experiences are implicated in their social models. However, there are two opposite views concerning social concepts. One of them is the weak view which is based on the claim that people have distinct literal and non-metaphorical representations for abstract concepts. However, they are connected to metaphorical concepts. The other strong view, borne by Lakoff and Johnson (date unknown), suggests that concepts are not understood through their own representations but by their connections to metaphorical senses that cover knowledge in different domains. To be clear, scholars agree on the fact that conceptual meaning characterizes human thinking, but they disagree on whether conceptual meaning, as seen by Lakoff and Johnson (ibid), is grounded in conceptual metaphors themselves, has already been stored in individuals’ schemata that have a literal basis

with metaphors serving as a means of clarifying rather than organizing the relevant concept²⁴.

Among the examples of social influence on ‘primary metaphors’ is the different appearance of ‘conceptual metaphors’ for ‘anger’ based on the body as a container for the emotions. In Arabs context, as the Algerian situation, for example, the conceptual metaphor ‘anger’ is *a hot fluid in a container* that has led to the appearance of the expression *my blood is boiling*. In addition to this expression, others have risen in Anglo varieties of English where ‘anger’ is represented via such expressions as *he is blowing off steam* and *smoke is coming out of his ears*. On the other hand, in Chinese context, ‘anger’ is represented by the concept *qi* (energy) not ‘heat’. Thus, this led to the rise of such expressions as *anger is qi in one’s heart* and *to keep one’s spleen qi*²⁵.

However, Trim (2001) thinks that some metaphorical models are typical of languages in general and others seem to be more language-specific. Here, he refers to the universal physiological models proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (ibid), such as, *up = positive* and *down = negative*. This also appears to be true for basic colors as ‘black’ and ‘white’ which represent a physiological representation related to ‘dark’ and ‘light’. He adds that visual perceptions of the colors ‘yellow’ and ‘green’, for example, have different images among languages: the Dutch expression *hij lacht groen* (he laughs greenly) is used to express a forced laugh; however, the Algerian and French *un rire jaune* (a yellow laugh) is uttered to refer to the same sense²⁶.

Another instance of metaphorical variation from one language to another can be noticed in animal images where a ‘horse’ is a sign of strength in English; it symbolizes health and diligence in French. Also, the notion of ‘dryness’ is a shared concept in the European languages that creates various metaphorical expressions varied due to diachronic and cross-language factors. In the European societies, the concept *dryness is deficiency* had given rise to a common image of dryness in European context that water was a ‘life-giving’. So, apart

from areas in danger of flooding, the presence of water was a positive element in life, and the lack of it, moisture, or other liquid elements as blood represented deficiency in some human or physical characteristics²⁷.

Trim (2001) analyzed the variants of these images and classified them into four generalized groups: cluster A (lack of liquid), cluster B (lack of feeling and emotion), cluster C (lack of physical/mental well-being or life), and Cluster D (lack of completeness involving such senses as abrupt, direct, uncreative, and uninteresting). These kinds of lack of completeness convey the feeling that a more correct and perfect form is desirable and may highlight the realization that certain elements are missing, e.g. *our subtle schoolmen are weak, dry, obscure*, i.e. they are uninteresting.

The variation of metaphorical meanings from one language to another has urged many scholars to carry out researches on metaphors as social models in FL learning. In the same sense, Kecskes and Papp (2000) posit that learners' use of language will be significantly different from that of the native speakers if they acquire grammatical and communicative knowledge with failure to develop conceptual knowledge in a new language²⁸.

Moreover, even if students reach high levels of communicative proficiency but still think in terms of native conceptual system using FL words and structures to carry their own L1 concepts, they may be understood, but their discourse may be inappropriate. Consequently, Littlemore (2001) states: *'The ability to interpret metaphors quickly in conversation can be a crucial element for interaction.'*²⁹

Therefore, teachers need to develop their learners' metaphorical awareness to be able to interpret and generate metaphors in FL. Here, researchers have raised the point of the possibility of learning and teaching a FL metaphorically organized conceptual system (i.e. learnability and teachability of FL metaphors). Valeva (1996) believes that there is a little value in trying to develop a pedagogical programme for teaching metaphorically organized conceptual

knowledge if such knowledge in a FL is unlearnable in the L1 context³⁰. By contrast, others think that conceptual knowledge can be effectively taught in the classroom setting if teachers are able to integrate appropriate materials and pedagogical practices.

In the step of expressing and interpreting meanings, the activities can be organized to build a common universe of discourse between the reader and the text on the explicit, lexical and syntactic levels (the surface structure of the utterance), and on the implicit referential level (the deep structure or the meaning of the utterance). Part of them can be done in class as a pre-reading activity (they are accompanied to the individual reading assignment at home).

Background and schemata building could be done either in small groups or individually. However, in the second step of negotiating meanings, reflection is conducted exclusively as a whole group activity in the class. So, this step also creates an explosive area of discussion because the activities here are in part context-specific and explore not only the values and beliefs expressed in the text but also those of the students. Hence, in the interpretation of the text meaning, the differences of the students' values are not corrected, but only pointed out, and discussed.

In this regard, teachers have to encourage the learners to develop their reading skills to be familiar with the famous expressions of figurative language. Also, they have to make them listen to recorded short stories either in a specific session in the classroom or at home during their free time. In addition, they can exploit assessment in presenting them different expressions of figures of speech to be translated and interpreted later by the students.

5. Conclusion:

Teaching literature requires the teachers' ability to vary his/her methods and techniques. Also, the students have to develop their linguistic and cognitive abilities in order to understand and interpret figures of speech correctly. Language aesthetics do not represent only

the beauty of the text's language, but they also reveal the authors' way of thinking and his/her own style of transmitting messages.

Researchers have been interested in studying reading comprehension, discourse analysis, and literary theory in the way in which the teaching of literary texts can be integrated into a general approach to the teaching of language as a social discourse. The teacher can analyze the students' process of bringing their originally outside perspective into the proximity of an inside one induced by experiencing the text.

Literary competence is one of the main elements that students need to analyze figures of speech. A reader of a literary text must be a literary critic not a passive one in order to read between the lines. The teacher can encourage the learners to compare the foreign text's rhetorical language with that of their L1.

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- ³⁰ Valeva, (1996) in Lantolf, J. P. and Thorne, S. (2006) Sociocultural Theory and the Genesis of Second Language Development. Oxford: Oxford University Press (p. 118)