

# METAPHORICAL COMPETENCE IN ITALIAN EFL STUDENTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

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## 1. Introduction

Due to their creative nature, metaphors enrich languages. However, metaphorical expressions may differ from one language/culture to another. Developing in a certain cultural environment, languages acquire a specificity that is usually conveyed by figurative expressions. A major difficulty in learning metaphors is therefore their cultural dependence, leading to different expressions for the same concept.

When teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the cultural specificity of the language is as much essential as the grammatical system. Although culture cannot be taught, it is possible for students to observe it through culture-bound idioms. Yet, since it is difficult to find their equivalents in other languages, students lack confidence in using them correctly. Consequently, while their autonomous discourse is grammatically appropriate, it usually sounds unnatural, over-literal (Danesi, 1993, p. 490).

Due to their illusory arbitrariness, metaphorical expressions are commonly presented as exceptions to be learnt by heart. In fact, most idioms are motivated by conceptual metaphors (CMs). Far from being mere rhetorical devices, metaphors are a process of the mind by which we conceive abstract concepts through concrete, physical ones (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, p. 454-5). For instance, the expression “I cannot *digest* those *claims*” is motivated by the conceptual metaphor IDEAS ARE FOOD: the concrete concept (FOOD) -a physical experience we are familiar with- is used to understand the abstract one (IDEAS).

Being a systematic production of our brain, pervasive in everyday language and life, CMs are applied constantly and automatically. If metaphors are a means of cognition, we can presume that focusing on metaphors can help students to think in terms of the new culture.

## 2. Collecting the data

During their learning path, students are confronted with ubiquitous metaphors. In view of these claims, Danesi (1993, p. 489) points out that metaphorical competence, namely the ability to

comprehend and produce metaphors in a language, should be included in the teaching/learning process. In order to verify this necessity, I examined the receptive metaphorical competence (in terms of only comprehension) of 230 Italian EFL learners at the University of Palermo. The sample consisted of 184 first-year undergraduate students and 46 second-year Master students of the modern languages degree courses.

The questionnaire I designed for my research involved phrasal verbs, idioms and collocations based on conventional CMs that have a literal and a figurative meaning, the latter coming from the former. For instance, I used the expression *to regain ground* that has both a literal meaning (to advance toward a location) and a metaphorical one (to make progress, to become more successful). Being so deep-rooted in language and applied unconsciously, they are perceived as mere literal expressions (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 454-5). The metaphors used primarily concerned the semantic field of the BODY which is the most frequent one in figurative reasoning, providing the physical basis for abstract concepts (e.g. *to get on someone's nerves*; *to get out of hand*; *to catch someone red-handed*; *to get cold feet*).

In order to test the ability of the participants to understand the metaphorical nature of the expressions, three possible answers were provided for each question: two were metaphorical, one right (**a**) and one wrong (**b**), and one was a literal paraphrase of the expression questioned (**c**) (cf. Danesi 1993, p. 495). The latter may be triggered if the students translate the expression in their native tongue, Italian. To understand how conventional metaphors may mislead the participants, let us have a look at this example:

**“After the last game, the Indian team seems determined to regain ground” means that:**

- a) the Indian team wants *to become more successful than the other teams it is competing with*
- b) the Indian team wants to be prepared for other matches
- c) the Indian team is determined to go faster and pass the other team.

If the students do not understand the metaphorical nature of *to regain ground*, they may interpret it as a literal expression (**c**). Indeed, the context of a football game may suggest the idea of advancing or moving toward a location.

Furthermore, in order not to let the respondents understand that the literal alternative was always wrong, they were asked to answer items concerning basic lexical elements (*to give lectures*; *to lead to*), like in the following example involving the false friend *unlikely*:

**“It’s unlikely that the thieves will be caught” means that:**

- a) The fact that the thieves will be caught is *scarcely possible*
- b) People don’t like the fact that the thieves will be caught
- c) The fact that the thieves will be caught is highly probable

### 3. Results and discussion

The results of the study showed that, although students were able to understand the metaphorical nature of the expressions, only a minority of the sample possessed an adequate metaphorical competence<sup>1</sup>: 35, 8% of the undergraduate students and 39, 1% of the Master students (Table 1).

**Table 1. Students with an adequate metaphorical competence**

Degree Course	Adequate metaphorical competence	
Undergraduate students	N.	66/184
	%	<b>35,8%</b>
Master students	N.	18/46
	%	<b>39,1%</b>

Surprisingly, the results of the two test groups were analogous, suggesting that they did not have the opportunity to access the metaphorical structure of the TL during their studies.

This lack of awareness of metaphorical reasoning shows that whilst native speakers possess an innate metaphorical competence, EFL learners do not naturally achieve it. Therefore, it should be developed through a specific syllabus consisting of noticing activities that focus on frequent idioms that have a metaphorical motivation, like the ones relying on concepts like BODY, FOOD, ANIMALS, MONEY, and so on (Pedrazzini, 2016, p. 113-21).

Since organizing lexis acquisition facilitates the recalling and retention of words, it is helpful to raise awareness of the metaphorical motivations that underlie many figurative expressions. More practically, we can plan vocabulary-learning activities giving emphasis to the concrete concepts used to express and think about an abstract domain (Andreou and Galantomos, 2008). For instance, we can arrange the idioms concerning ANGER according to the conceptual metaphor that motivate them: ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. This is expressed linguistically in expressions like *to hit the ceiling*, *to blow one's stack*, *smoke coming out of one's ears*, and so on. In such metaphors, the body is conceived as a container and the emotions as fluids held in that container. When the intensity of emotion increases, if the internal pressure is too high, the level of

<sup>1</sup> I calculated the score of the metaphorical questions and the score of the non-metaphorical ones separately. The maximum score that a student could achieve for the first ones was 130, whilst the maximum score for the second ones was 20. The overall score achievable in a single test was 150. I therefore considered 70/130 as a sufficient metaphorical score.

the fluid in the container rises, the fluid overflows the container or the container explodes (Kövecses, 2010, p.123-124).

Simply put, drawing the students' attention to the non-arbitrary characteristics, make idioms more memorable. They may also benefit from noticing activities about the phonetical repetitive features of figurative expressions: alliteration (*it takes two to tango, to play a part*), assonance (*hit and miss*), or rhyme (*wear and tear*) (Pedrazzini, 2016, p. 113-21).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Speakers use languages appropriately from the grammatical point of view and creatively to express feelings, thoughts and culture-related reality. Solely linguistic and communicative competences do not ensure a high level of proficiency. Consequently, metaphorical competence should be enhanced by means of specific awareness-raising activities, as they are likely to facilitate the learning of TL figurative language. Since English is rich in idioms, mastering them constitutes an important aspect of the language.

Although further research is required, it seems plausible that raising students' awareness of the CMs that motivate idioms may bring culture into EFL classrooms and sensitize learners to the way the TL conceptualizes reality.

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