An Empirical Study of Figurative Competence of Chinese EFL Learners

Fushou Xiao[*]

Shanghai University, China
*Corresponding author: fsxiao@shu.edu.cn

Abstract Figurative language, which has drawn increasing attention from applied linguists over the decade, plays an indispensable role in language learning and proves particularly challenging for language learners. However, few attempts have been made to thoroughly investigate learners' difficulties with figurative language so far. This paper aims to investigate, through an exploratory study involving a cohort of 63 subjects, Chinese EFL learners' knowledge of figurative language, their difficulties as well as the sources of their difficulties. The learners took an in-class quiz on figurative expressions motivated by three different cognitive mechanisms (i.e., metaphor, metonymy and world knowledge). All the data were analyzed in order to explore the overall patterns of the learners' figurative competence, the differences between good and poor learners and the relationships between figurative competence and overall English proficiency. It is found that the learners had the least difficulty with figurative expressions based on metonymy, but the greatest difficulty with those based on world knowledge, that huge differences existed between good and poor learners in their figurative competence, that metonymy-motivated figurative competence was positively correlated with overall language proficiency, almost at the .05 significance level.

Keywords: figurative language, metaphor, metonymy, world knowledge

Cite This Article: Fushou Xiao, "An Empirical Study of Figurative Competence of Chinese EFL Learners." *American Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 4, no. 11 (2016): 806-810. doi: 10.12691/education-4-11-5.

1. Introduction

Over the years, there has been an increasing interest in figurative language among applied linguists [3,5,6,7,9,10,17,24]. Many factors may help account for this phenomenon, one of which is the emergence of figurative language as a respectable topic that has led to a convergence of many fields, such as computer science, experimental cognitive psychology, linguistics, literary analyses, neuroscience, and philosophy. Such a convergence has no doubt shed new light on our understanding of the relationship between language and thought. In addition, figurative language, which is an important part of writing and is also widely used in speech, has turned out to be very frequent in everyday situations of language use and very interesting in that it prompts the reader to look for a meaning that is different from the obvious [1,20,21]. It is no exaggeration to say that a myriad of the vocabulary items we encounter in daily communication involve figurative extensions of word meaning and that a good mastery of figurative language is conducive to the improvement in one's overall linguistic proficiency. Additionally, figurative language, which is often difficult to approach systematically in classroom instruction, invariably constitutes a hard nut to crack for ESL learners and teachers alike. The difficulty lies in the fact that figurative meaning normally arises not from the sum of the grammatical and lexical parts of phrases but from the role of phrases in discourse.

However, it is unfortunate that figurative language, though important in human communication and challenging in classroom instruction, has all along remained a basically neglected area in language teaching and research. Despite some work on the brain mechanism for processing figurative language [12], a cognitive interpretation of figurative meaning [4], the computational approaches to figurative language [1,18] and figurative speech and linguistics [22,23], virtually little research has been done on the figurative competence of ESL students. To address this situation, the present study is undertaken in hopes of providing insight into the essence of figurative language and enhancing the quality of ESL teaching and learning.

2. Theoretical Background

Traditionally, there has been a time-honored distinction between literal (normal or standard) language and figurative (nonnormal or nonstandard) language. This distinction may be traced to traditional semantic perspectives and is largely due to a tension between the denotations of words and their connotations in particular discourse contexts; in other words, literal meanings are usually referential (e.g., "I've got a big mouth to eat you with"), while figurative meanings are typically expressive (e.g., "He who is big-mouthed has a loose tongue"). According to Lakoff [13], the classical assumptions underlying our understanding of language can be elaborated as "All everyday conventional language is

literal, and none is metaphorical; all subject matter can be comprehended literally, without metaphor; only literal language can be contingently true or false; all definitions given in the lexicon of a language are literal, not metaphorical; the concepts used in the grammar of a language are all literal; none are metaphorical" (p. 203).

Indeed, cognitive linguists [11,14,15,16,19] whose primary interest is in underlying cognitive motivations for language have recently challenged any clear-cut distinction between literal and figurative language. Just as Gibbs [8] put it, "There is only a remote chance that any principled distinction can be drawn between figurative and literal language" (p. 78). It can be argued that most language exists somewhere between the truly literal and truly figurative.

Despite the seeming absence of a clear-cut distinction between literal and figurative language, the present study strongly argues that figurative language not only exists but also makes a difference in human communication and that to lose the distinction between literal and figurative language is to lose a primary source of data on cognition. Then what on earth constitutes figurative language? Some people tend to treat it as a way of using description to create a special image and bring out one's emotions, whereas others may consider it to be a word or phrase that departs from everyday literal language for the sake of comparison, emphasis, clarity, or freshness. Still others may look upon it as language capable of evoking images in readers' minds or language that uses fresh and vivid ways to convey one's ideas.

In this study, "figurative language" is defined as words, phrases or sentences whose meanings depart from those of straightforward, literal language, frequently used and crafted for the sake of emphasis, clarity, vividness, or freshness of expression; "figurative competence" refers to one's practical ability to comprehend and/or generate figurative language. It is believed that figurative competence is part and parcel of linguistic proficiency and that acquisition of figurative language contributes much to sociolinguistic, illocutionary, textual, grammatical, and strategic competence, as well as vocabulary learning.

3. The Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the figurative competence of Chinese EFL learners by answering three research questions. An exploratory empirical study was conducted in this regard.

3.1. Research Questions

The present stud aims at answering the following three research questions:
1. What are the overall patterns of Chinese ESL learners' figurative competence?
2. What are the differences between good and poor learners in figurative competence?
3. What are the relationships between figurative competence and overall English proficiency?

3.2. Subjects

Participants of this study came from two intact classes of sophomore non-English majors in Shanghai University,

and all of them were undergraduates. One class had 29 students, including 10 females and 19 males; the other class had 34 students, including 14 females and 20 males. There were 63 students in all.

Of these 63 students, their ages ranged from 20 to 22 years. Despite the fact they came from different parts of China and had different family backgrounds, most of them had learned English for at least six years and scored satisfactorily on the English test in the national college entrance exams.

3.3. Instrument

The instrument used in this study was an in-class quiz which consisted of 30 questions divided into three sets. Each question was followed by four choices (A), (B), (C) and (D), and the students were supposed to choose the best answer that fits the meaning of the chunk of figurative language in the question.

Specifically, Set 1 dealt with 10 chunks of figurative language motivated by metaphor (i.e., "to fall into sb's hands", "to give sb a free hand", "to have the situation well in hand", "to be bound hand and foot", "He's in good hands", "to get the boy under hand", "to get sth off one's hands", "the matter at hand", "to have a large family on one's hands", "to hold one's temper in hand").

Set 2 dealt with 10 chunks of figurative language motivated by metonymy (i.e., "to go through sb's hands", "to die by one's own hand", "to to live by one's own hands", "to give sb a glad hand", "to give sb a big hand", "to hold one's hand", "to play a lone hand", "an old hand", "to marry with the left hand", "We are short of hands").

Set 3 dealt with 10 chunks of figurative language motivated by world knowledge (i.e., "to have one's hands full", "to have open hands", "to shake hands with sb", "to put one's hands up", "to give one's hand on a bargain", "to go down on one's hands and knees", "to lift a hand against sb", "to lift one's hand to do sth", "to put one's hand in one's pocket", "to work with the left hand").

3.4. Data Collection

The two classes of students took a quiz on figurative language in class on the same day, but at different times: one in the morning, and the other in the afternoon. However, none of the participants were notified in advance that they would take a quiz in class. When class began, the instructor told the students that they would have a quiz today and then distributed the quiz papers. The students were required to finish the quiz within twenty minutes without notes or dictionaries in proctored classrooms in the presence of the English teacher and the researcher. All the quiz papers were collected on the spot at the end of twenty minutes and then taken away for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data from the above-mentioned instrument were processed in the following ways:

1. All the quiz papers were marked by two raters respectively to ensure greater scoring accuracy;

2. "Good Learners" and "Poor Learners" were defined. In this study, "Good Learners" were defined as students whose English proficiency scores ranked among the top

one-third of the class in the final examination and there were 21 "good learners" altogether who were coded as G1 through G21 respectively, whereas "Poor Learners" were defined as students whose English proficiency scores ranked among the bottom one-third of the class in the final examination and there were 21 "poor learners" altogether who were coded as P1 through P21 respectively.

3. Three levels of statistical analyses were performed via SPSS13.0, in which descriptive statistics were figured out to uncover the overall patterns of ESL learners' figurative competence, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to explore the differences between good and poor learners, and correlation analysis was carried out to explore the relationships between figurative competence and overall English proficiency.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Overall Patterns of ESL Learners' Figurative Competence

To explore the overall patterns of ESL learners' figurative competence, statistical analysis was performed via SPSS13.0. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics in this regard.

Table 1. Overall patterns of Chinese ESL learners' figurative competence

Variable	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Max	Min
Metaphor	63	3.05	1.52	7	1
Metonymy	63	4.97	1.56	8	1
World Knowledge	63	3.27	1.65	7	0
Overall	63	11.25	2.86	16	4

From this table, several findings can be detected: (1) Students were basically weak at figurative language; (2) Students had the greatest difficulty with idioms motivated by conceptual metaphors; (3) Students had the least difficulty with idioms motivated by metonymies; and (4) Most students were deficient at world knowledge.

As anticipated, students had great trouble understanding figurative language as a whole. The total score was 30, but their average score amounted only to 11.25. For example, some students misinterpreted "to fall into sb's hand" as "to fall into the hands of a thief", "to give sb a free hand" as "to offer free assistance", "to have the situation well in hand" as "to be sure to win", "to go through sb's hands" as "with the help of other people", "to die by one's own hand" as "to reap what one sows", "to live by one's own hands" as "to show kindness toward sb", "to have one's hands full" as "to come home loaded with honors or riches", "to have open hands" as "to pour out one's feelings". This difficulty is probably due to the lack of adequate attention from students and teachers alike in classroom instruction. Usually, emphasis is placed on new words and their usage rather than their figurative meaning. It is all too easy for a student to fall into the habit of misinterpreting words through taking them too literally.

Contrary to our expectations, the students had the greatest difficulty understanding metaphor-motivated figurative language. Their average score was just 3.05 out of a total score of 10. For example, some students misinterpreted "to be bound hand and foot" as "to be gregarious and well-connected", "He's in good hands" as "He's a highly capable man", "to get sth off one's hands" as "to escape from the clutches of someone", "the matter at hand" as "a difficulty which is being handled", "to have a large family on one's hands" as "to take the helm of a huge family", and "to hold one's temper" as "to understand sb's temper". Such mistakes are due to the students' failure to grasp the metaphorical meaning of "hand". Metaphorical thinking, though important, remains a hard nut to crack for many a student.

It comes as no surprise that students had the least difficulty understanding metonymy-motivated figurative language. Their average score amounted to 4.97 out of a total score of 10. For example, many students correctly interpreted "to go through sb's hands" as "to be handled by sb", "to live by one's own hands" as "to earn one's own living", "to play a lone hand" as "to act alone", "an old hand" as "an expert", "to give sb a big hand" as "to applaud sb", and "We are short of hands" as "We are understaffed". This finding can be justified by the fact that metonymy is more frequently used than metaphor in daily life, as far as the students are concerned. Higher frequency can be translated into greater familiarity.

It is only to be expected that students also had much trouble understanding figurative language motivated by world knowledge. Their average score was only 3.27 out of a total score of 10. For example, many students misinterpreted "to put one's hands up" as "to raise one's objection", "to lift a hand against sb" as "to raise one's hand in protest", "to lift one's hand to do sth" as "to free one's hand to do sth", and "to work with the left hand" as "to be beset with difficulties". This difficulty is probably due to their lack of common sense regarding the uses of the human hands. One solution can be to encourage students to see more of the world and to read more English books in the original in order to broaden their horizons and enhance their world knowledge.

4.2. Differences between Good and poor Learners in Figurative Competence

To explore the differences between good and poor learners in figurative competence, independent-samples t-tests were performed via SPSS13.0. Table 2 presents the findings in this regard.

Table 2. Differences between good and poor learners in figurative competence

Variable	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Mean Difference	T	Sig.
Overall	Good Ls	21	11.62 10.24	2.78	.61	1.38	3.19	.06
	Poor Ls	21		3.01	.66			
Metaphor	Good Ls	21	2.95 2.76	1.40	.31	.19	1.12	.34
	Poor Ls	21		1.58	.34			
Metonymy	Good Ls	21	5.19 4.43	1.44	.31	.76	1.77	.07
	Poor Ls	21		1.78	.39			
World Knowledge	Good Ls	21	3.48 3.05	1.57	.34	.42	1.53	.22
	Poor Ls	21		1.94	.42			

From this table, several findings can be detected: (1) Good learners outperformed poor learners in figurative language, almost at the .05 significance level; (2) Good learners outperformed poor learners in understanding idioms motivated by conceptual metaphors and world knowledge; and (3) Good learners were much better than poor learners at understanding idioms motivated by metonymies, almost at the 0.05 significance level.

As anticipated, good learners outperformed poor learners in figurative competence (Sig.= .06) and in metonymy-motivated figurative language. Take Student G21 and Student P6 for example. G21 as a good learner scored 81 out of 100 on the final exam and 14 out of 30 on the quiz on figurative language, while P6 as a poor learner scored 58 on the final exam and 8 on the quiz on figurative language. In Set 1 concerning metaphor-motivated figurative language, the good learner correctly interpreted "to have the situation well in hand", "to be bound hand and foot", "to get the boy under hand", and "the matter at hand", but the poor student only understood "to get the boy under hand"; in Set 2 concerning metonymy-motivated figurative language, the good learner correctly interpreted "to live by one's own hands", "to give sb a big hand", "to play a lone hand", "an old hand", "to marry with the left hand" and "We are short of hands", but the poor student only understood "to live by one's own hands" and "an old hand"; in Set 3 concerning figurative language motivated by world knowledge, the good learner correctly interpreted "to have one's hands full", "to give one's hand on a bargain", "to go down on one's hands and knees" and "to lift one's hand to do sth", but the poor student unexpectedly outperformed the good learner by correctly interpreting "to have one's hands full", "to have open hands", "to shake hands with sb", "to give one's hand on a bargain" and "to lift one's hand to do sth". This finding seems to suggest that figurative competence can be closely linked to language proficiency and learning a foreign language involves its figurative language. Metonymy, which is more cognitively sophisticated, can better differentiate good and poor learners than metaphor and world knowledge.

Somewhat contrary to what was expected, there were no significant differences between good and poor learners in understanding figurative language motivated by metaphor (Sig.=.34) and world knowledge (Sig.=.22). Take Student G8 and Student P12 for example. G8 as a good learner scored 83 out of 100 on the final exam and 14 out of 30 on the quiz on figurative language, while P12 as a poor learner scored 51 on the final exam and 12 on the quiz on figurative language. For metaphor-motivated figurative language, both students understood "to be bound hand and foot" and "to get the boy under hand". In addition, the good learner understood "the matter at hand" and "to hold one's temper in hand", but the poor learner performed better and could understand "to fall into sb's hands", "to give sb a free hand" and "He's in good hands". For the figurative language motivated by world knowledge, both students understood "to have one's hands full", "to have open hands", "to shake hands with" and "to give one's hand on a bargain". In addition, the good learner understood "to go down on one's hands and knees", "to lift one's hand to do sth" and "to work with the left hand", but the poor learner could understand "to put one's hand in one's pocket" only. This finding seems

to suggest that both good and poor learners resemble each other in metaphorical thinking and their world knowledge. It is because they grow up and get educated in the same cultural environment.

4.3. Relationships between Figurative Competence and Overall Language Proficiency

To explore the relationships between figurative competence and overall language proficiency, correlation analysis was performed via SPSS13.0. Table 3 presents the findings in this regard.

Table 3. Relationships between figurative competence and overall language proficiency

Variable	N	Person Correlation	Sig.
Overall	63	.14	.13
Metaphor	63	-.03	.41
Metonymy	63	.20	.06
World Knowledge	63	.08	.26

From this table, several findings can be detected: (1) Figurative competence was positively correlated with overall language proficiency, but not at the .05 significance level; (2) Proficiency with figurative language motivated by metonymies was positively correlated with overall language proficiency, but still not at the .05 significance level; (3) Surprisingly, proficiency with figurative language motivated by conceptual metaphors was slightly negatively correlated with overall language proficiency; and (4) Proficiency with figurative language motivated by world knowledge was positively correlated with overall language proficiency, but not at the .05 significance level.

As anticipated, proficiency with figurative language motivated by metonymy and world knowledge were positively correlated with overall language proficiency. This finding suggests that figurative competence and world knowledge do play a great role in overall language proficiency and that knowledge about metonymy seems to be a reliable predictor of language proficiency due to its cognitive sophistication. Take Student G6 and Student P19 for example. G6 as a good learner scored 80 out of 100 on the final exam and 11 out of 30 on the quiz on figurative language, while P19 as a poor learner scored 58 on the final exam and 8 on the quiz on figurative language. The good learner scored 2 in Set 1, 4 in Set 2 and 5 in Set 3, while the poor learner scored 1 in Set 1, 2 in Set 2 and 5 in Set 3; that is to say, the good learner seemed to outperform the poor learner slightly in each set of questions. For metonymy-motivated figurative language, the good learner understood "to live by one's own hands", "to give sb a big hand", "an old hand" and "We are short of hands", but the poor learner could only understand "to live by one's own hands" and "an old hand". This partly accounts for the fact that metonymy-motivated figurative language is almost significantly positively correlated with language proficiency (Sig=.06).

Contrary to our expectations, metaphorical knowledge seems to play a lesser role in language proficiency, because it is not so cognitively sophisticated. Take Student G15 and Student P10 for example. G15 as a good learner scored 79 out of 100 on the final exam and 12 out of 30 on the quiz on figurative language, while P10 as a

poor learner scored 54 on the final exam and 10 on the quiz on figurative language. However, both students scored 2 out of 10 in Set 1 questions concerning metaphor-motivated figurative language. Both understood "to get the boy under hand"; the good learner knew "to be bound hand and foot", while the poor student understood "to have the situation well in hand." This finding seems to suggest that metaphor-motivated figurative plays a negligible role in language proficiency. It might be assumed that good learners are not necessarily good at understanding metaphor-motivated figurative language. This is because "metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature" ([14], p. 3).

5. Conclusion

The present study has illustrated the overall patterns of figurative competence of Chinese ESL learners, the differences between good and poor learners in figurative competence, and the relationships between figurative competence and language proficiency. There is solid evidence that figurative language remains an Achilles' heel for our students and deserves a more systematic pedagogic treatment, that good learners are generally better at understanding figurative language than poor learners and both groups of students should be treated differently in class, and that figurative competence plays a positive role in the students' language proficiency, and improving language proficiency involves improving figurative competence. Given such evidence, a combination of contrastive and cognitive linguistic approaches to ESL teaching is advisable so as to better help improve students' figurative competence.

The findings of this study argue in favor of further research into figurative language, and they add to a slowly growing body of research supporting the view that figurative language learning is part and parcel of ESL learning. However, this study is constrained by its relatively sample size, its limited number of research instruments and its overly emphasis on quantitative analysis. To address these deficiencies, future researchers are well advised to investigate a greater number of participants, employ more research instruments like questionnaires, classroom observation or oral reports, and integrate quantitative research with qualitative research. They will also find it rewarding to explore such issues as the figurative nature of figurative language, the intricate relationships between literal language and figurative language, the students' acquisition of figurative language, and the cognitive mechanisms behind the use of figurative language. It is safe to conclude that future inquiry into figurative language is not only imperative but also intellectually rewarding.

References

[1] Aldahesh, A. (2013). On idiomaticity in English and Arabic: A cross-linguistic study. *Journal of Language and Culture.* 4(2), 23-29.

[2] Aljabri, S. (2013). EFL students' judgments of English idiom familiarity and transparency. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research,* 4(4), 662-69.

[3] Blasko, D. G., & Connine, C. M. (1993). Effects of familiarity and aptness on metaphor processing. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory and Cognition*, 19(2), 295-308.

[4] Boers, F. (2011). Cognitive semantic ways of teaching figurative phrases: An assessment. *Review of Cognitive Linguistics,* 9(1), 227-61.

[5] Charteris-Black, J. (2000). Metaphor and vocabulary teaching in ESP economics. *English for Specific Purposes*, 19(2), 149-65.

[6] Erman, B., & Warren, B. (2000). The idiom principle and the open choice principle. *Text*, 20(1), 29-62.

[7] Gao, L., & Meng, G. (2010). A study on the effect of metaphor awareness raising on Chinese EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition and retention. *Canadian Social Science,* 6(2), 110-24.

[8] Gibbs, R. (1994). *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[9] Glucksberg, S. (1998). Understanding metaphors. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 7(2), 39-43.

[10] Howarth, P. (1998). Phraseology and second language proficiency. *Applied Linguistics*, 19(1), 24-44.

[11] Johnson, M. (1987). *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[12] Kalyuga, M., & Kalyuga, S. (2008). Metaphor awareness in teaching vocabulary. *The Language Learning Journal,* 36(2), 249-57.

[13] Lakoff, G. (1993). The contemporary theory of metaphor. In A. Ortony (Ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 202-51). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[14] Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

[15] Langacker, R. W. (1987). *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar (Vol. 1): Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

[16] Littlemore, J., Chen, P., Koester, A., & Barnden, J. (2011). Difficulties in metaphor comprehension faced by international students whose first language is not English. *Applied Linguistics*, 32(4), 208-429.

[17] MacArthur, F. (2010). Metaphorical competence in EFL: Where are we and where should we be going? A view from the language classroom. *AILA Review,* 23(1), 155-73.

[18] Martin, J. (1996). Computational approaches to figurative language. *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity*, 11(1), 85-100.

[19] Ortony, A. (Ed.). (1993). *Metaphor and Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[20] Pollio, H. R., Smith, M. K., & Pollio, M. R. (1990). Figurative language and cognitive psychology. *Language and Cognitive Processes*, 5(2), 141-67.

[21] Roberts, R. M., & Kreuz, R. J. (1994). Why do people use figurative language? *Psychological Science*, 5(3), 159-63.

[22] Saddock, J. M. (1993). Figurative speech and linguistics. In A. Ortony (ed.), *Metaphor and Thought* (pp. 58-70). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[23] Yağiz, O., & Izadpanah, S. (2013). Language, culture, idioms, and their relationship with the foreign language. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 4(5), 953-57.

[24] Zyzik, E. (2011). Second language idiom learning: The effects of lexical knowledge and pedagogical sequencing. *Language Teaching Research*, 15(4), 413-33.