

Teaching English Figurative Expressions to Young Learners

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2024

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Učiteljski fakultet**

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2025-01-07**

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1. Introduction	1
2. Teaching vocabulary in English as a foreign language	2
2.1. <i>Teaching vocabulary in a foreign language</i>	2
2.2. <i>Teaching vocabulary to young EFL learners</i>	2
2.3. <i>Vocabulary tasks in EFL textbooks (Grades 1-4) used in Croatia</i>	5
3. The Cognitive Linguistic approach to teaching figurative language	6
3.1. <i>Conceptual motivation of figurative expressions</i>	6
3.2. <i>The main tendencies in teaching figurative language using the Cognitive Linguistic approach</i>	7
3.3. <i>Figurative expressions and young EFL learners</i>	8
4. Activities for teaching figurative expressions to young learners	10
5. Discussion	22
6. Conclusion	24
Sources	25
References	26
Izjava o izvornosti rada	28

Summary

The aim of this paper is to explore how to teach English figurative expressions to young learners. Based on contemporary vocabulary teaching methods and the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language, a lesson plan was created which provides research-based activities that serve as an introduction to figurative language for fourth-graders. Six idioms are included in the lesson plan, which describe people's personalities and behaviour through animals.

The paper gives an overview of vocabulary teaching in L2 and teaching methods that could be used with young learners. Figurative language has not yet been explicitly included in the young learner classroom as it is believed to be too difficult for children. EFL textbooks for young learners include a small number of figurative expressions, all of which are taught implicitly. Only advanced learners get to learn figurative language explicitly. However, research has shown that children can understand figurative expressions in L2 from an early age. The Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language has been proved to be efficient for teaching figurative expressions to foreign language learners.

It was concluded that, in figurative language teaching, teachers should raise young learners' metaphor awareness. The connection between literal and figurative meanings should be made explicit. The expressions taught should be transparent and based on young learners' age and conceptual knowledge. Figurative expressions should have simple vocabulary and structure, and high frequency of use. It is important to select appropriate teaching methods to aid comprehension, such as contextual clues, verbal explanations, TPR, elicitation, translation, and peer-teaching.

Key words: figurative expressions, idioms, young learners, EFL, Cognitive Linguistics

Sažetak

Cilj je ovog rada istražiti kako poučavati figurativne izraze učenicima mlađe školske dobi. Na temelju suvremenih metoda poučavanja vokabulara i kognitivnolingvističkog pristupa figurativnom jeziku izrađena je priprema za sat koja nudi aktivnosti temeljene na istraživanjima i koje služe kao uvod u figurativni jezik za učenike četvrtog razreda. Šest frazema uključeno je u pripremu za sat. Oni opisuju ljudske osobine i ponašanja koristeći životinje.

U radu se daje pregled poučavanja vokabulara u stranome jeziku i metoda poučavanja koje se mogu koristiti s učenicima mlađe školske dobi. Figurativni jezik još nije izravno uključen u nastavu za učenike mlađe školske dobi jer se smatra da je prezahtjevan za djecu. Udžbenici engleskoga kao stranog jezika za niže razrede sadrže mali broj figurativnih izraza koji se poučavaju implicitno. Figurativni jezik eksplicitno se poučava samo naprednim učenicima. Međutim, istraživanja pokazuju da djeca mogu razumjeti figurativne izraze u stranom jeziku od rane dobi. Kognitivnolingvistički pristup figurativnom jeziku dokazano je učinkovit za poučavanje figurativnih izraza učenicima stranog jezika mlađe školske dobi.

Zaključeno je da, pri poučavanju figurativnog jezika, učitelji trebaju osvijestiti učenike mlađe školske dobi o postojanju metafore. Doslovna i figurativna značenja trebaju se izravno povezivati. Izrazi koji se poučavaju trebali bi biti transparentni i prilagođeni dobi i konceptualnom znanju učenika mlađe školske dobi. Figurativni izrazi trebaju imati jednostavan vokabular i strukturu te visoku čestotu upotrebe. Bitno je odabrati odgovarajuće metode poučavanja za bolje razumijevanje, kao što su kontekstualne naznake, usmena objašnjenja, metoda poučavanja pokretom, ilustracije koje traže usmeni odgovor od učenika, prevođenje i vršnjačko poučavanje.

Ključne riječi: figurativni izrazi, frazemi, učenici mlađe školske dobi, engleski kao strani jezik, kognitivna lingvistika

1. Introduction

Figurative language has been considered to be too difficult for young foreign language learners. The first time they might experience explicit instruction of figurative expressions in the foreign language classroom is when they become advanced learners. The only experience young learners have of figurative expressions in L2 is implicit.

Until the 1980s figurative language in L2 had not been taught at all. In fact, vocabulary was ignored while teaching grammar prevailed. Vocabulary was reduced to incidental learning. However, recent studies at that time showed that vocabulary is necessary in teaching a foreign language, both explicitly and implicitly. Students who had better vocabulary knowledge found it easier to learn grammar and to communicate in a foreign language. Nowadays, young learners have access to foreign language mainly through vocabulary, which is why teachers have to select appropriate methods to teach it, such as translation, TPR (Total Physical Response), visual aids, elicitation and personalisation of words (Thornbury 2002).

Despite the fact that vocabulary is an integral part of the young learner classroom, figurative expressions have not yet been included in EFL textbooks which are used in Croatia. In textbooks for Grades 1-4 figurative expressions are scarce and are taught only implicitly. On the other hand, research has shown that children can understand figurative language in L2 from an early age. However, there has to be careful selection of figurative expressions that are taught to young learners and teaching methods.

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways to teach figurative expressions to young EFL learners. A lesson plan was created based on contemporary vocabulary teaching methods and the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language. The lesson plan is aimed at fourth-graders (aged 9-10) and serves as an introduction to figurative language in L2. Six idioms are included in the lesson plan, which are motivated by the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS conceptual metaphor.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of vocabulary teaching methods in L2. Section 3 gives an overview of the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language and teaching methods based on it. Section 4 is a lesson plan with detailed activities. Section 5 is a discussion and the final section is the conclusion.

2. Teaching vocabulary in English as a foreign language

2.1. Teaching vocabulary in a foreign language

Vocabulary is an important aspect of foreign language teaching (Schmitt 2000; Cameron 2001; Nation 2001; Pavičić Takač 2008). That does not include only intermediate learners, but also beginners, as early vocabulary knowledge provides a basis for future learning (Schmitt 2000). Despite its significance, it had been ignored until the 1980s. The attention had been, until that point, on grammar (Carter and McCarthy 2013). Many intermediate foreign language learners at the time indicated a striking gap in their foreign language knowledge because of a lack of vocabulary acquisition (Meara 1980). According to Carter and McCarthy (2013), although teaching vocabulary had become more popular, it still did not reach the level of importance that it deserved, leaving grammar as the dominant aspect of foreign language teaching (Carter and McCarthy 2013). As Cameron (2001, 72) argues, “if we give a high priority to vocabulary development, we are not thereby abandoning grammar”. Vocabulary is a great tool for enhancing grammar knowledge (Schmitt 2000). Wilkins (1972) argues that “without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins 1972, as cited in Carter and McCarthy 2013).

Vocabulary acquisition in a foreign language is not only about knowing meanings of words. It is practice and “constant recycling of vocabulary learning strategies in different contexts” that make a difference between recognising and truly understanding a word (Pavičić Takač 2008, 150). Furthermore, constant practice does not only include individual words, but collections of words or phrases, as well as how they are pronounced or written, and when to use them. In fact, a lack of regular use and recollection of vocabulary could result in poor vocabulary knowledge (Cameron 2001). Learning phrases would be more beneficial than learning separate words. Phrases tend to be more memorable, as they go beyond the lexical meaning. Teaching phrases goes hand in hand with teaching when to use them. If taught, they can result in advanced speaking and writing in a foreign language, as students learn their social purpose and focus more on the whole text, or conversation, rather than single words (Carter and McCarthy 2013, 77).

2.2. Teaching vocabulary to young EFL learners

After acknowledging the importance of vocabulary teaching, it has to be decided how much vocabulary should be taught to young learners. Cameron (2001) suggests that, in one year, it would be acceptable for young learners to be taught 500 words. Those 500 words have to be properly selected. Considering the fact that there are only 2,000 word families in English that are being used most in texts, it would be beneficial to choose from that list (Cameron 2001; Nation 2001). On the other hand, many words listed in foreign language textbooks do not interest young learners, or are too easy for them, because of easy access to technology, which results in poor learning quality (Cameron 2001). That is why teachers should go beyond textbook usage and consider teaching words that are a part of students' lives and that "interest or excite young learners at that age" (Cameron 2001, 94).

The most frequent way of teaching vocabulary to young learners in the 20th century used to be through implicit instruction, also known as incidental learning (Sökmen 1997, 237). However, that is not enough to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Explicit teaching of vocabulary is necessary and should be a part of the foreign language classroom (Pavičić Takač 2008). Appropriate teaching methods are therefore crucial as they enable the explicit way of learning, which includes a wide range of factors, such as deliberate and controlled selection of vocabulary to be taught, and endeavour towards deeper vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, such way of teaching enables a large number of vocabulary items / words to be continuously recycled, which results in successful vocabulary acquisition (Ellis 1994, as cited in Pavičić Takač 2008). Nevertheless, vocabulary teaching nowadays is considered to be successful if implicit and explicit approaches are intertwined (Pavičić Takač 2008, 19).

There are many beneficial vocabulary teaching methods. However, the best one does not exist. It is instead suggested to use several different methods. That means it is up to teachers to carefully choose them according to content, time, their students' needs and other factors. The methods should encourage students to be active in class, and they should introduce vocabulary in an entertaining manner, which results in students' invested effort and further use of vocabulary. It is the teacher's job to make learning more interesting and to include students' opinions, as well as promote teamwork (Pavičić Takač 2008).

Thornbury (2002) mentions several vocabulary teaching methods: translation, the direct method, TPR (Total Physical Response), visual aids, verbal explanation, situational presentation, providing examples and definitions, elicitation, personalisation of words, peer teaching, and others. Translation can be useful in the classroom because it provides a quick way

to learn vocabulary, especially if it is “incidental vocabulary that may crop up in a lesson” (Thornbury 2002, 77). However, through the translation method students do not have to put effort into thinking about a word, which is why translation can aid understanding of the word, but not its memorisation. The direct method includes usage of pictures, objects (realia) and mime (Thornbury 2002). Pinter (2017) suggests using realia from the classroom, such as furniture, or bringing more realia to the classroom. TPR is a method in which students have a physical response to the teacher’s actions or commands (Asher 1977, as cited in Nunan 1991). “Perception and action are basic processes that affect language acquisition” (Tulving and Thomson 1973, as cited in Carter and McCarthy 2013, 67). Visual aids include flashcards, drawing on the classroom board and usage of the projector. While verbally explaining the new vocabulary it is important to use words that students are familiar with (Thornbury 2002). The advantage of verbal explanation is the cognitive involvement of students. They are required to go through the thinking process in order to understand the unknown word (Thornbury 2002, 81).

Presenting vocabulary through context is desirable. “Learners can learn lexical items if they are exposed to sufficient amounts of comprehensible input” (Pavičić Takač 2008, 17). Students can try to understand a word by reading, listening, or describing a particular situation. Such a method is called situational presentation. The situation can be described by the teacher or the students (Thornbury 2002). Vocabulary could be explained through examples or definitions. Sometimes it is useful to show several sentences for a word, “each one being a typical instance of the target word in context”, or show several sentences whose goal is defining the word (Thornbury 2002, 82). Elicitation is a technique that expects students to look at a picture that represents a word and give its verbal equivalent. However, it is advised that it not to be used too much. To make the vocabulary class more interesting, personalisation of words is advised. It includes students using vocabulary words and setting them in their own personal context (Thornbury 2002). Students being an active part of the foreign language class is not only welcome, but highly recommended (Stevick 1976, as cited in Nunan 1991). That is why peer teaching would result in successful vocabulary acquisition. Such a method puts students in teacher roles. Groups of students receive unique information texts about specific words, which they can later share with their peers (Thornbury 2002, 89).

Teachers can use gestures and photographs (Nation 1990). In addition, Pinter (2017) suggests including stories, games, and repetition. Rhymes and music are other efficient ways of teaching vocabulary (Coyle and Gómez Gracia 2014). Nation (1990) recommends role-playing.

To successfully integrate words and phrases into the vocabulary of individuals it is important to have numerous sessions where words and phrases are “being taken apart and put back together again, being compared, combined, matched, sorted, visualised and re-shuffled, as well as being repeatedly filed away and recalled” (Thornbury 2002, 93). It is suggested to use activities that enable students’ active thought process while learning new vocabulary, which helps its long-term memorisation (Cameron 2001). Nunan (1991, 133) mentions Stevick’s (1976) research which has proved that constant recycling of vocabulary has higher quality if done gradually over time, rather than revising a massive amount of words in a short amount of time.

2.3. Vocabulary tasks in EFL textbooks (Grades 1-4) used in Croatia

Some common topics in EFL textbooks for young learners used in Croatia through which vocabulary is introduced are colours, feelings, emotions, body parts, numbers, farm, forest or wild animals, directions, and description of people, their activities, appearances, and personalities (e.g. Mardešić 2021; Ban and Blažić 2022; Džeba and Mardešić 2022; Džeba and Živković 2022). The textbooks in question follow recommendations for vocabulary topics listed in the *Subject curriculum English as a Foreign Language* (2019), e.g. colours, animals, body and numbers. The subject curriculum does not mention figurative expressions. Figurative expressions featured in the textbooks are phrasal verbs, e.g. *stand up*, *sit down*, *get up*, *watch out*, and expressions such as *up and down* (feelings) and *have a crush on someone*. This shows that figurative expressions in textbooks for young learners are scarce.

As has been mentioned, vocabulary should be taught both implicitly and explicitly (Pavičić Takač 2008, 19). However, figurative expressions in textbooks are taught only implicitly. The only places where they are mentioned explicitly are content pages. Thus, it is evident that figurative language in textbooks for young learners is either taught implicitly or not taught at all.

3. The Cognitive Linguistic approach to teaching figurative language

3.1. Conceptual motivation of figurative expressions

Kövecses (2010) argues that the key point of the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative expressions is that they are a product of the human conceptual system. Most figurative expressions are motivated. The motivation of figurative expressions emerges from cognitive mechanisms which connect their literal and figurative meanings. “In other words, idioms (or, at least, the majority of them) are conceptual, and not linguistic, in nature” (Kövecses 2010, 233).

The cognitive mechanisms that connect literal and figurative meanings are metaphor, metonymy, and conventional knowledge. For instance, the reason why animals (source domain) are used to describe humans (target domain) in figurative expressions is because of the metaphorical connection between them (Kövecses 2010). The metaphorical connection is there because of the conceptual connection between the two domains. PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS is a conceptual metaphor motivating expressions describing people’s personalities, for example, *eat like a horse* or *quiet as a mouse* (Parizoska 2022, 151). When it comes to metonymy, the idiomatic expression *hold one’s hand* meaning ‘to wait’ shows the static position of hands, which signifies that there is no activity (Kövecses 2010, 244). “The basis for this conceptual metonymy is that many prototypical human activities are performed with the hands” (Kövecses 2010, 244). Hands in idioms may be used because they are motivated by conventional knowledge, which is defined as socially and culturally accepted knowledge. Hands could be used to signify their use or possible gestures. For example, the idiom *with an open hand* shows the generosity of an individual, as an open hand offers more comfort than a closed one (Kövecses 2010, 243).

According to Kövecses (2010), figurative expressions should be taught explicitly in the foreign language classroom. Teachers should prepare activities that increase metaphor awareness. Making learners aware of the connection between literal and figurative meanings of idioms greatly helps easier retention and long-term memorisation. In order to make the connection explicit, teachers can use dual coding. Furthermore, metaphor awareness facilitates deeper comprehension of figurative expressions. Figurative expressions have to include words that are familiar to learners in order for them to be able to understand their meanings. “If we

raise students' awareness of metaphor, we can accelerate their vocabulary uptake" (Kövecses 2010, 239).

3.2. The main tendencies in teaching figurative language using the Cognitive Linguistic approach

Irujo (1986, 237) claims that the lack of quality in the approach to teaching idioms is one of the reasons why they are difficult to learn in a foreign language. The other reasons are that they do not have literal meanings and are often excluded in second-language conversation. In order for learners to grasp the meanings of figurative expressions, it is crucial to explain them in a way that is the easy to understand. That is why it is important to show learners the connection between their literal and figurative meanings. In other words, if the teacher explains why a specific source domain is mapped onto a target domain, the expression would become more memorable. Learners' metaphor awareness should be raised, which helps them to link literal and figurative meanings themselves, resulting in better comprehension (Parizoska 2022). Metaphor awareness includes learners knowing about the existence of metaphors in everyday speech and in figurative expressions, about the conceptual nature of figurative expressions, different metaphors in different cultures, and similarities or differences between figurative expressions in different languages (Boers 2000, 566). It has been proven that conceptual metaphors shape the way learners perceive the environment and offer not only understanding of figurative expressions, but deep processing and their long-term memorisation. That even includes learners with vision difficulties (Geld et. al. 2014). "The participants who had received the vocabulary notes organized along metaphoric topics were more likely (...) to reproduce the lexis studied" (Boers 2000, 557). However, "metaphor awareness is not meant to be used by the learner as a 'generator' of the conventional figurative expressions", but "as a channelling device for learners to organize the steady stream of figurative language they are exposed to" (Boers 2000, 564).

Another way to aid comprehension of figurative expressions could be through etymology (Boers, Eyckmans and Stengers 2007). Illustrations and pictures showing the literal meanings of figurative expressions can help understand their figurative meanings, as well as learners drawing them themselves (Vasiljević 2012). Verbal explanations accompanying illustrations facilitate better comprehension of figurative meanings (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008). Although they help learners understand meanings of figurative expressions, illustrations do not aid remembering their forms (Boers et. al. 2009). Boers and Lindstromberg (2008, 11-

12) mention three theories that could improve long-term memorisation of figurative expressions. Trace theory involves continual usage of the already learned expressions. Levels-of-processing theory encourages activities with a lot of effort required from learners, which provides deep mental activity. Dual coding includes showing the illustration along with the written form of a figurative expression.

Before teaching idioms, it has to be decided which ones to choose. It would be desirable to choose idioms that are transparent, frequently used, or easy to understand, and the ones similar to the first language of the learner (Irujo 1986, 238). It is easiest for learners to understand expressions that are conceptually similar to those in their first language (Charteris-Black 2002). However, if the teacher chooses to use the first language while teaching, it is important to let learners know that there may not be an equivalent for every expression (Parizoska, 2022, 152). Furthermore, one should be wary of “false friends”, which are idioms that are similar in form, but in fact have different meanings. Furthermore, it is crucial to choose figurative expressions based on their form as simpler forms are easier to learn. Idioms should be grouped based on a common element. Grouping expressions based on a topic, source domain or an idiomatic component is possible, although it is flawed. Expressions grouped in such ways may not be similar in meaning conceptually linked (Parizoska 2022). That is why it is advisable to group figurative expressions based on conceptual metaphor and/or target domain (Parizoska 2022, 150). For example, the CONTAINER source domain could be used for target domains such as THE HUMAN MIND, (e.g. *keep something in mind, have an open mind*), or SECRETS (*keep something under your hat, let the cat out of the bag*) (Parizoska 2022, 149–150).

3.3. *Figurative expressions and young EFL learners*

In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, figurative expressions are considered to be a requirement only for advanced learners of a foreign language. However, children begin using figurative language very early in life in L1, which means that they are also able to understand second-language figurative expressions (Piquer-Píriz 2020). That is why it would be wrong to assume that figurative language can only be comprehended by adults or experienced learners (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008, 222). Furthermore, metaphoric competence in a foreign language does not relate to language proficiency but to cognitive factors (Littlemore 2001; Littlemore and Low 2006). Second language learners’ cognitive strategies reflect general cognitive processes (Geld 2006). As Vosniadou (1987) argues, “even small children use and understand metaphor, albeit in ways different from adults”

(Vosniadou 1987, as cited in MacArthur and Piquer-Píriz 2007). Although some researchers believe that teaching figurative expressions by using conceptual metaphor is not suitable for young learners (Deignan, Gabryś and Solska 1997), others claim that young learners benefit from linking literal and figurative meanings of expressions, and that conceptual metaphor indeed helps comprehension (Piquer-Píriz 2020). Nevertheless, figurative expressions taught to young learners have to be simple enough and relate to young learners' lives (Parizoska 2022, 153).

Littlemore's (2004) research has shown that young learners are able to make sense of the meanings of figurative expressions with the help of context and contextual clues. More contextual clues equal better understanding. Mimes, gestures and voice imitations helped to reach conclusions as well, not only for the learners performing them but for the ones watching. In fact, learners should be encouraged to pay attention and learn from each other, and to speak their minds during class discussions. The context the researcher used in the exercises was adapted to young learners' most recent foreign language knowledge.

According to MacArthur and Piquer-Píriz (2007), young learners aged between five and eleven were able to understand English figurative expressions presented to them, more specifically, expressions with body parts as source domains. Furthermore, during discussions they indicated the possible meanings of the given expressions by reasoning figuratively. The authors suggest that if certain figurative expressions are not presented to young learners, they might have issues with understanding them later in life (MacArthur and Piquer-Píriz 2007, 132). As Piquer-Píriz (2020) argues, "it would seem reasonable to think that [young learners] would (...) benefit from an instructional approach that relies on fostering metaphorical competence or, more generally, enhances figurative thought" (Piquer-Píriz 2020, 60).

The decision about which idioms should be chosen for the young learner classroom depends on their transparency and how frequently they are used in speech or writing. In the past, teachers selected idioms based on their own assessment of frequency (Irujo 1986). However, nowadays teachers have access to corpora and are able to easily explore idioms and choose them for their classroom.¹ Furthermore, young learners should be able to easily link the literal and figurative meanings of idioms taught to them. The lexis and structure of idioms has to be simple (Irujo 1986). Idioms have to be adjusted to learners' age and their conceptual knowledge (Boers and Lindstromberg 2008, 236).

¹ E.g. SKELL (Sketch Engine for Language Learning); <https://skell.sketchengine.eu/#home?lang=en>

4. Activities for teaching figurative expressions to young learners

The lesson plan in this paper has been designed for fourth-graders (aged 9-10). The figurative expressions chosen for the lesson plan are *a wolf in sheep's clothing*, *a snake in the grass*, *a lone wolf*, *an early bird*, *a fish out of water* and *a busy bee* (Seidl and McMordie 1988). All the idioms are motivated by the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS conceptual metaphor. They are all noun phrases and the words in the idioms are familiar to students. The idioms are related to the topic, which is people's personalities and behaviour.

Topic & lesson type Figurative expressions (idioms) with animals: <i>a wolf in sheep's clothing</i> , <i>a snake in the grass</i> , <i>a lone wolf</i> , <i>an early bird</i> , <i>a fish out of water</i> , <i>a busy bee</i>
Aims (overall) A) Linguistic <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Introducing figurative expressions with animals that describe people- Practising figurative expressions through listening, writing and speech B) Functional (communicative) <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Inventing examples for each figurative expression- Using figurative expressions in conversation C) Educational <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developing a positive attitude towards figurative expressions- Motivating students to use figurative expressions
Outcomes Students will be able to describe their own feelings or other people's behaviour through figurative expressions with animals (a wolf, a snake, a bird, a fish, and a bee), to use figurative expressions in conversation and through writing, and explain the meaning of each figurative expression.
Interaction patterns T-Ss, Ss-T, T-S, S-T, Ss-Ss, group work, individual work, frontal work, lockstep
Teaching aids and media computer, PowerPoint, smartboard, projector
Teaching material worksheet, group-work sheets, picture cards

Notes /

Lesson structure

Activity 1: “What animal are you?”

Activity objective: introducing the topic

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S, S-T, frontal work

Teaching methods / techniques: playing a game, heuristic conversation

Estimated time: 3 minutes

Description / TT:

Students play a game in which they have to say which animal they would be and how that animal fits their personality or their current mood. Students conclude that animals can be used to describe humans.

T: Think about animals. Which animal do you think describes you best?

S1: I think that a lion describes me best.

T: Why?

S1: Because I am very loud.

T: Good job, that is a nice example. Anyone else?

S2: I think that I am a dog because I get excited sometimes.

T: Excellent! Let's hear others.

S3: I feel like an owl because I am tired.

...

T: Good job everyone. Do you sometimes use animals to describe people outside this class? Think about it.

S: Yes! When someone is slow we call them a snail (spor kao puž), when someone is very tired we call them a dog (umoran kao pas).

T: If we call someone an animal, does that mean that they are really an animal?

S: No, it just means they act like that animal.

T: Can we use all animals for everyone? If you think someone is good, would you call them a wolf?

S: No because wolves are scary and dangerous.

T: If you thought someone was bad, would you call them a mouse?

S: No because mice are not scary.

T: Excellent! Just the way we have phrases like *umoran kao pas*, in English you also use phrases with animals to describe people. Today we are going to learn some of them. Write the title *Animals and People* in your notebooks.

Activity 2: Literal meanings

Activity objective: introducing the literal meanings of idioms

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S, S-T, frontal work, lockstep

Teaching methods / techniques: heuristic conversation, repetition

Estimated time: 5 minutes

Description / TT:

The teacher shows all the idioms with pictures in a PowerPoint presentation. In a heuristic conversation students find out more about the literal meanings of idioms. The teacher asks the pupils if they understand all the words (e.g. *lone*, *sheep's clothing*). Students memorise idioms through repetition.

T: Take a look at the presentation. This is the first phrase to learn today, and what it looks like. Who can read the phrase?

S1: A wolf in sheep's clothing.

T: What kind of animals are wolves?

S3: They are scary, they eat sheep.

T: What kind of animals are sheep?

S4: They are not scary, they eat grass.

T: Why is the wolf wearing a sheep's skin?

S5: Maybe because it wants to pretend so that he can eat other sheep.

T: Good job. Let's move on to the next phrase. Who can read the phrase?

S6: A snake in the grass.

T: What kind of animals are snakes?

S7: They are dangerous.

T: So how do you feel when you see this snake?

S8: I want to escape.

T: Who can read the next phrase?

S9: A lone wolf.

T: *Lone wolf* means *vuk samotnjak*. Do wolves usually live alone or together?

S10: They live together.

T: Yes, they live in packs. Is this wolf in a pack?

S11: No, it is alone.

T: Good job. Who is going to read the next phrase?

S3: An early bird.

T: How does this bird look like to you?

S4: It looks sleepy.

T: What does that mean?

S5: It means that it just woke up.

T: When do birds usually wake up?

S6: They wake up very early.

T: Good job. Who can read the next phrase?

S7: A fish out of water.

T: What do fish need to survive?

S8: They need to be in water.

T: So how does this fish feel?

S9: It feels bad because it cannot survive out of water for too long. It has to go back into the water.

T: Good job. Who can read the next phrase?

S10: A busy bee.

T: What kind of animals are bees?

S12: They always work.

T: Good job. Now repeat after me. A wolf in sheep's clothing.

Ss: A wolf in sheep's clothing.

T: Now quietly, a wolf in sheep's clothing.

Ss: A wolf in sheep's clothing.

T: Now loudly, a snake in the grass.

Ss: A snake in the grass.

...

Activity 3: Creating a drama performance

Activity objective: learning the figurative meanings behind the expressions

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S, S-T, Ss-Ss, group work

Teaching methods / techniques: conversation, cooperation, reading, translation

Estimated time: 12 minutes

Description / TT:

Students are divided into six groups (3 to 4). Each group gets one idiom (*a wolf in sheep's clothing, a snake in the grass, a lone wolf, an early bird, a fish out of water, a busy bee*) together with a picture from the previous activity. Next to the picture, students get a few examples and a short explanation. Their task is to create a dramatic performance which will help the rest of the class understand the meanings of idioms.

T: What did we say about animals and people?

S: We can use animals to describe people.

T: Correct! Can we use these animals to describe people, too?

S: Yes.

T: That's right. Your next task is to form six groups. Take a look at the PowerPoint presentation. All groups are getting paper sheets. Your task is to read them together and find out what kind of a person your phrase describes. When you do that, create a drama performance that will explain that phrase to the rest of the class. Remember that your performance has to be short. It has to last one minute. Does everyone understand? Who can repeat the task?

S3: We have to look at the phrase and make a drama performance that helps others understand that phrase.

T: Good job. Remember, do not make your drama about animals. The only animal I want to hear is the one in your phrase. You have ten minutes to prepare. If you need help, raise your hand.

Activity 4: Drama performances

Activity objective: explanation of each idiom, using idioms in conversation

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S, S-T, Ss-Ss, group work, frontal work, lockstep

Teaching methods / techniques: drama activity, situational presentation, conversation, peer-teaching

Estimated time: 13 minutes

Description / TT:

Students present their short drama performances. During each performance there is a picture of an idiom and a phrase in the PowerPoint presentation. After each performance the teacher and the students have a short conversation about idioms. The teacher answers possible questions.

T: Alright, time is up. The group that has *the wolf in sheep's clothing* should come and perform now.

T: Good job, group 1! Who can tell me what kind of person *a wolf in sheep's clothing* describes?

S1: It describes a person that wants others to see him as good, but the person is actually evil.

T: Good job. Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

T: Raise your hand if you do not understand this phrase.

T: Group 2, it is your turn to perform using the phrase *a snake in the grass*.

...

T: Very good. What kind of person is *a snake in the grass*?

S2: It describes a person that we can't trust.

T: Excellent! Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

...

T: Group 3 it is your turn to perform.

...

T: Who is *a lone wolf*?

S3: A lone wolf is a person who likes to be alone.

T: Excellent! Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

...

T: Group 4, it is your turn to perform.

...

T: Who is *an early bird*?

S4: It is a person who likes to wake up early.

T: Good job. Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

...

T: Who is *a fish out of water*?

S5: It is a person who is in a place which makes them feel uncomfortable.

T: Does it have to be a place?

S5: It can also be people.

T: Does everyone know what uncomfortable means?

S6: It means neugodno.

T: Good job. Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

...

T: Who is *a busy bee*?

S7: It is a busy person.

T: Excellent. Raise your hand if you understand this phrase.

...

Activity 5: A writing task

Activity objective: practising the written forms of idioms

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, T-S, S-T, individual work

Teaching methods / techniques: writing, reading, listening

Estimated time: 7 minutes

Description / TT:

The pupils get an individual task of putting idioms in sentences. The worksheet is later glued into their notebooks.

T: Here is a worksheet. Read the tasks carefully and ask if you need help. You have five minutes.

...

T: Who can read the first sentence?

...

Activity 6: Lifting the cards

Activity objective: checking students' understanding of idioms

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, Ss-T, Ss-Ss, frontal work, group work

Teaching methods / techniques: TPR, elicitation

Estimated time: 5 minutes

Description / TT:

The teacher does not explain the task but shows it through TPR. All students are given pictures of idioms. The teacher says a few sentences that fit the meaning of one idiom. The students have to lift up the illustration of the correct idiom. After the teacher, another student acts out the same while the others lift their cards up.

T: Each of you has got six cards. This card presents (teacher lifts up an illustration of *a busy bee*)...

S: A busy bee!

T: (the teacher lifts *a fish out of water*)

S: A fish out of water!

...

T: A wolf in sheep's clothing! (the teacher does not lift up any cards)

S: (students lift up the correct card)

T: A lone wolf!

S: (students lift up the correct card)

...

T: I like spending time by myself. Who am I? (the teacher gestures at the cards, but also gestures for pupils to be silent)

S: (Students lift up the correct card)

T: I do not like Ashley because she tells my secrets to everyone! (the teacher gestures at the cards again)

S: (Students lift up the correct card)

...

T: Group 1, come to the board! We are now playing the same game. The rest of the class, give us one example. Group 1 has to lift up the correct phrase.

...

Additional activities:

Activity 7: Drawing an idiom

Activity objective: connecting literal and figurative meanings of idioms

Interaction pattern: T-Ss, S-T, T-S, individual work

Teaching methods / techniques: drawing

Estimated time: 3 minutes

Description / TT:

Students get a task to choose one phrase they like the most and draw the literal and figurative meaning of the idiom. This activity is done if students finish the worksheet before the rest of the class.

T: When you are done with the tasks, you can draw until the others finish. Draw the phrase you like the most, but try to connect the animal and the meaning of the phrase.

Board plan:

Animals and People



a wolf in sheep's clothing



a snake in the grass



a lone wolf



an early bird



a fish out of water



a busy bee



a wolf in sheep's clothing



a snake in the grass



a lone wolf



an early bird



a fish out of water



a busy bee

- In groups, **read** the paper sheets.
- **Find out** what kind of a person your phrase describes (the meaning behind the phrase).
- Your group has to **create** a performance that **explains** the phrase to the rest of the class.
- Your performance has to last **one minute**.

Handouts:

Group-work sheets



A wolf in sheep's clothing is a person who looks friendly. The person is actually bad.

Examples:

Clara says that she likes to help people. She doesn't really. She does it to get something in return. She is **a wolf in sheep's clothing**.

The witch turns into a pretty woman to hide that she is evil. She is **a wolf in sheep's clothing**.



A snake in the grass is a bad person. It wants to hide that. Don't trust that person.

Examples:

Don't share my secrets. If you do, you are **a snake in the grass**.

I don't trust Darla. She gossips about me when I am not there. She is **a snake in the grass**.



A lone wolf likes to be alone. They don't talk a lot to other people.

Examples:

Jack is **a lone wolf**. He likes to play alone.

I don't like talking to people that I don't know. I am **a lone wolf**.



An early bird is a person who likes to wake up very early or do things very early in the morning.

Examples:

My friends wake up at 6 o'clock. I wake up at 5 o'clock. I am **an early bird**.

Danny is **an early bird**. He loves to come to school before anyone else.



5. Discussion

In order to teach young learners figurative expressions, it is important to include specific methods and strategies to make them understandable and to motivate students to use them. A number of such carefully selected strategies are used in the lesson plan of this work. Although figurative expressions require numerous lessons, and not just one, this lesson is thought out to be the introduction of figurative language to the young learners.

Before idioms are introduced to students, they are made aware of the existence of figurative expressions (metaphor awareness). That is done through students creating their own metaphors about themselves by using an animal of choice. In this way, they understand that they use such metaphors every day in their own language. The second activity begins with dual coding. Through heuristic conversation students deduce the literal meanings of the idioms. The activity ends with repetition of each of the six idioms.

In the following activity students are divided into six groups. Instead of acquiring information about the idioms from the teacher, students must help each other to understand their figurative meanings (peer-teaching). Each group gets an informative sheet for one idiom which they have to read together. The sheet includes dual coding, a short definition of an idiom, and two examples. The context on the sheets is adapted to the language knowledge of the learners, as suggested by the Croatian textbook meant for the fourth graders (Ban and Blažić 2022). *A fish out of water* sheet uses translation of the incidental unknown word *uncomfortable*. In order to be able to explain their idiom to the others, students have to understand the idiom themselves. That is done through conversation and cooperation with the teacher's help. The students have to explain idioms through short drama performances (situational presentations). They have to create a typical situation where a given idiom could be used. The other students can, through the context of the performances, try to understand idioms' figurative meanings. That is done in the fourth activity.

During the performances students are actively using idioms through conversation, while the others are listening. After each performance the teacher has a short conversation with students to determine the level of comprehension, and asks them to confirm they understood the idioms by raising their hands. That way shy students can easily express their confusion by not raising their hands.

The goal of the fifth activity is to practice the written forms of idioms. Students get worksheets which have to be solved individually. An extra activity is included for students that solve the tasks faster than the others. It is a drawing activity which encourages students to

connect the literal and figurative meaning of their favourite idiom. Afterwards, students check answers with the teacher.

The purpose of the final activity is to check how much was learned and to motivate students to use idioms. The TPR (elicitation) activity involves students recognising idioms based on the context of the sentences read by the teacher. By lifting up the corresponding picture cards, students give feedback to the teacher, which is proof of a successful lesson.

The lesson plan applies the results of studies of figurative language conducted within the framework of Cognitive Linguistics. It includes various strategies and methods employed in the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language, such as teaching idioms explicitly, connecting a phrase with an illustration, raising awareness of metaphor, using drawings of literal meanings and conceptual motivation of figurative expressions. The lesson plan includes carefully selected vocabulary teaching methods, such as situational presentation, translation, visual aids, TPR, elicitation, etc. To motivate usage of figurative expressions, the lesson plan has been designed to be entertaining and offers self-research and self-expression. I believe that the specific way of teaching figurative expressions described in this work would be beneficial in the EFL classroom.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore methods which could aid figurative language learning in the young learner classroom. Those methods were used to create a lesson plan with activities that could be used to teach English idioms with animals. The lesson plan is based on contemporary vocabulary teaching methods and the Cognitive Linguistic approach to figurative language. It is best suited for fourth-graders and serves as an introduction to figurative language in EFL. Figurative expressions used in the lesson plan are motivated by the PEOPLE ARE ANIMALS conceptual metaphor.

Figurative language has only recently begun to get attention in the young learner classroom. Until now it has been taught to advanced learners with more foreign language experience, while young learners get to experience it only implicitly. Figurative expressions taught to young learners should have simple vocabulary and structure, their meanings should be transparent and easy to explain. They should be grouped according to conceptual metaphor, have similar structure, and refer to the same target domain. Teachers should choose expressions with high frequency of use, which can be checked in a corpus.

The Cognitive Linguistic approach has been proved to be efficient for figurative language learning. In order to teach figurative expressions successfully, teachers should raise young learners' awareness of metaphor. Literal and figurative meanings of expressions should be connected explicitly. Teachers should offer context, contextual clues, verbal explanations and illustrations. Young learners should be able to express their opinion and have discussions. When teaching figurative language to young learners, teachers should select appropriate vocabulary teaching methods, such as TPR, elicitation, translation and peer-teaching.

Figurative language should be taught to young learners explicitly. Although it may be argued that they are too difficult for children, research has shown that young learners can understand figurative expressions in L2 at an early age. That does not mean that children can be taught any figurative expressions. They should be adapted to learners' conceptual knowledge, interests and age. In fact, some figurative expressions can be comprehended better if taught early. The lesson plan in this paper should serve as for a stimulus to teachers to begin implementing figurative expressions in their foreign language classes. Although the lesson plan was not used in practice, it would be interesting to see how other teachers would adapt it to their foreign language classroom.

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Izjava o izvornosti rada

Izjavljujem da je moj diplomski rad izvorni rezultat mojeg rada te da se u izradi istoga nisam koristila drugim izvorima osim onih koji su u njemu navedeni.

Petra Šaban