

Teaching figurative language in EFL: traditional and modern approaches

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SVEUČILIŠTE U ZAGREBU
UČITELJSKI FAKULTET
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Tomislav Uršić

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TRADITIONAL AND MODERN APPROACHES**

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Mentor rada:

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SUMMARY

This thesis deals with the traditional and modern approaches to teaching figurative language in EFL. The aim is to determine how figurative language is presented in EFL textbooks for primary schools and to show how English idioms can be taught to EFL learners using the cognitive linguistic approach. 21 textbooks used in Croatia were analysed. The analysis shows that figurative language is underrepresented and, if present, it is not dealt with in ways that best showcase it and help students learn and understand figurative expressions. As cognitive linguistic studies have shown, EFL learners are able to comprehend figurative language at a young age if provided with a themed structural approach. The emphasis is on the teacher to choose figurative expressions that are conceptually linked and to create activities which help learners understand them. Another factor that needs to be adjusted to the needs and capabilities of young learners are textbooks that are provided to them, as they rarely include figurative expressions or, if they do, representation lacks structure. The vocabulary tasks included in this paper involve English idioms referring to happiness. To teach idioms in the EFL classroom successfully, the teacher needs to teach idioms which have similar meanings and/or conceptual motivation. The teaching activities proposed in this paper show how that can be done and incorporated in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: figurative language, EFL, idioms, textbooks, cognitive linguistics

SAŽETAK

Ovaj diplomski bavi se tradicionalnim i modernim pristupom poučavanja figurativnog jezika u nastavi engleskog kao stranog jezika. Cilj je utvrditi kako se figurativni jezik predstavlja u udžbenicima koji su namijenjeni učenicima osnovnih škola te pokazati kako se figurativni jezik može poučavati primjenom kognitivnolingvističkog pristupa. Analiziran je 21 udžbenik koji se koristi u Hrvatskoj. Analiza je pokazala da figurativni jezik u većini slučajeva nije uključen, a ako i jest, onda nije predstavljen na odgovarajući način koji pomaže učenicima razumjeti i naučiti figurativni jezik. Kognitivnolingvistička istraživanja su pokazala da učenici engleskog kao stranog jezika mogu razumjeti figurativni jezik u mlađoj dobi ukoliko im se on predstavi tematski i strukturirano. Naglasak je na učitelju koji treba izabrati figurativne izraze koji su konceptualno povezani i osmisliti aktivnosti koje će pomoći učenicima razumjeti ih. Da bi se učitelj bolje i lakše pripremio, potreban mu je nastavni materijal koji je također prilagođen potrebama i sposobnostima učenika s obzirom na to da udžbenici koji se sada koriste rijetko obrađuju figurativni jezik, a ako je on i prisutan, onda je to bez strukture, što dodatno otežava učenje. Zadatci koje sam pripremio u ovome radu uključuju frazeme koji se odnose na sreću i prikazuju kako se figurativni jezik može poučavati koristeći se spoznajama kognitivne lingvistike te na koji način se ti zadatci mogu primijeniti na nastavi.

Ključne riječi: figurativni jezik, engleski kao strani jezik, frazemi, udžbenici, kognitivna lingvistika

1. INTRODUCTION

Figurative expressions such as idioms are considered difficult for foreign language learners. This is due to the fact that idioms are traditionally defined as expressions whose meanings cannot be understood from the meanings of their components. Moreover, idioms are typically taught at higher levels (e.g. CEFR levels C1 and C2). On the other hand, in the cognitive linguistic approach the figurative meanings of many idioms can be understood based on their literal meanings. For example, the idioms *walk on air* and *on cloud nine* can easily be understood by students. Firstly, the vocabulary making up the expressions is easy for the students to understand and is taught at the beginner level of learning English as a foreign language. Secondly, students are able to understand the figurative meanings of the idioms based on their knowledge that a person feels as if they are above ground or in a higher position, literally speaking, when feeling happy. In those examples students can relate happiness to being physically up or off the ground. In contrast to the traditional approach, the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language involves connecting literal and figurative meanings and grouping idioms that share a common element such as conceptual motivation. As one of the main sources and usually the only source for examples of any kind of figurative language, teachers use textbooks. As they are the main source material used in the classroom, it is very important to take into consideration how they represent and teach figurative language. When dealing with idioms, textbooks should group them according to meaning in order to make them easier to be comprehended and taught. In that way, learning a language is easier because it is categorised and connected, which is important for the student who can then learn in a faster and more meaningful manner. Another important factor is the appropriateness of the selected idiomatic expressions. In addition to being categorised, they need to be selected in a way that the vocabulary that makes them up is easily comprehended by the learner. The most important factor is the teacher who uses the textbook to teach idioms and the activities that the teacher chooses is what determines the quality of the class and level of acquisition. The activities chosen by the teacher need to be structured. When choosing which idioms to teach, the teacher needs to take into account the grouping of idioms and the fact that the words making up the idioms can be understood by the students as well as their figurative meanings.

The aim of this paper is twofold. First, to determine how figurative language is presented and taught in EFL textbooks. In order to do that, I will analyse 21 EFL textbooks used in Croatia for grades 1-8. I will look at whether figurative language is included in the textbooks, in what

grades, whether figurative expressions are explicitly taught and if so, if there is any structure behind it. The aim is also to showcase the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language by using idioms referring to happiness. The selected idioms are grouped according to meaning so as to make it easier for learners to understand them. The teaching activities shown in this paper are aimed at the students attending grade 4 of primary school and the selected idioms refer to happiness which is conceptualized as being up or off the ground.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 gives an overview of the cognitive linguistic approach to figurative language. Section 3 is the textbook analysis. Section 4 gives examples of how figurative language can be taught using the cognitive linguistic approach through different activities. The final section is the conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. *Figurative language in cognitive linguistics*

Figurative language is a wide term that covers a variety of different types of expressions, such as metaphors, similes, idioms, phrasal verbs, etc. The traditional approach states that the meaning of an idiom cannot be understood from the literal meaning of the words that make up the expression. In contrast, the cognitive linguistic approach claims that the figurative meaning of an idiom can be understood from the meanings of its components. When figurative language is studied in the traditional approach, the words that make up the idioms and their individual meanings are disregarded for the overall meaning of the idiom, while the cognitive linguistic approach takes the individual meanings of the words as important for making up the figurative meaning. In this approach, it is through the words themselves and how they connect with one another that we get to the overall meaning that is different from the literal meanings of the individual words combined. Cognitive linguistics argues that the majority of figurative expressions are motivated by cognitive mechanisms and one of those mechanisms is conceptual metaphor.

2.1.1. *Conceptual metaphor*

In the cognitive linguistic view, metaphor is defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of another conceptual domain. (Kövecses 2010: 4). In conceptual metaphor there are two domains of knowledge, the source domain and the target domain. Kövecses shows this on various examples, one of which are feelings of heat and cold that we experience as a domain through which we can talk about our attitudes and feelings towards people and things. Here is an example:

(1) I was burning with love.

This is an expression in which we describe our feelings towards someone through the domain of FIRE. In this case, FIRE is the source domain and LOVE is the target domain. Here is an example of a figurative expression from the domain of sports:

(2) He plays by the rules.

In this example the source domain is sports and the target domain is somebody's behaviour. There is a set of mappings between the source and the target domain. According to Kövecses (2010: 4), the source domain refers to the domain of knowledge from which the constituents of an expression originate, while the target domain is the domain that we try to understand through the use of the source domain. For example, the expression *down the road* has more than one meaning. The literal meaning is to be close to someone or something that is located on the same road. The figurative meaning is 'in the future' and in this case the conceptual metaphor motivating the expression is LIFE IS A JOURNEY.

For example:

(3) Who knows what awaits us down the road.

In this sentence we can differentiate the source domain of journey and the target domain of life. A long road represents the timeline and anything further down that road stands for something in the future. In this sense, everything further away from the standpoint of the person is taken as something later in life. The road represents the future and thus the connection is formed for the meaning of the idiom that life can be viewed as a journey. The meaning of the sentence can be understood as 'who knows what awaits us in the future'. Conceptual metaphors help people think about the world by making connections between things that do not seem connectable on the surface. Kövecses (2010: 37–42) distinguishes three types of conceptual metaphors: structural, ontological and orientational. We will look at each type in turn.

2.1.1.1. Structural metaphors

In these metaphors, the information gained from the source domain is abundant and thus connections are made easily in a clear way.

For example:

(4) Time is flying by.

In this example time is motion. The observer is fixed, and time has its direction of motion which moves with respect to the observer.

2.1.1.2. *Ontological metaphors*

The knowledge acquired for the target domain is less structured than in structural metaphors. The best example of such a metaphor is personification, where certain human qualities are given to nonhuman entities.

Here is an example:

(5) The computer went dead on me.

In this example the computer is understood as something that is alive and can die, even though it is an inanimate object. However, when describing it by using personification we add human features to the computer to talk about it not working properly.

2.1.1.3. *Oriental metaphors*

These metaphors make a set of target concepts coherent in our conceptual system (Kövecses 2010: 40). The name orientational for these metaphors is derived from the fact that most of them deal with basic human spatial orientation like up-down, where being up refers to being better off in comparison with down, which stands for being in a more negative state.

In addition, when viewed through the cognitive linguistic perspective, metaphors correlate with experience which can be perceptual, biological or cultural. As suggested by their names, they are grounded in either common perception of the same expression, are biologically influenced by what is known or through the cultural context associated with them.

Phrasal verbs are linguistic expressions which are motivated by these types of metaphors. A phrasal verb is a combination of either a verb and a preposition or a verb and an adverb. When used together, they take on a different meaning from the original meaning of the verb. The meaning of the added particle partially determines the meaning of the phrasal verb. For example, phrasal verbs that contain the particles *in* and *out* are understood as being in a container and leaving a container, respectively. Here are two examples:

(5) I'm not sure how much of his explanation she took in.

(6) There was a huge public outcry when the news got out.

When we conceptualize the mind as a container that holds information and emotions, phrasal verbs are defined as conceptual because we can imagine information, emotions etc. being inside or leaving the container. For example, *take in* refers to going into the container and *get out* to leaving the container. This is shown in Figure 1.

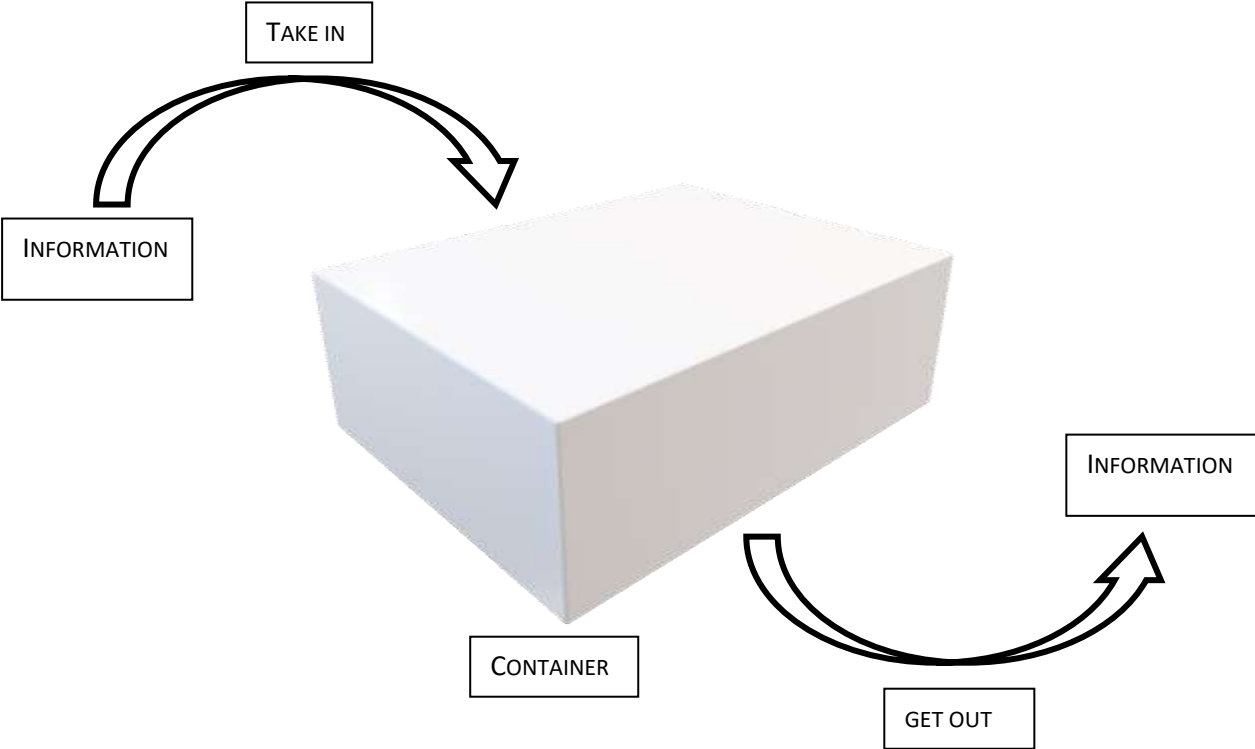


Figure 1. The mind conceptualized as a container in the phrasal verbs *take in* and *get out*

In the following section the cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language will be discussed.

2.2. The cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language

This approach is based on the findings in cognitive linguistics, which defines various processes and strategies that help learners acquire new knowledge. As Kövecses (2010: 79) states, “the cognitive linguistic view maintains that conceptual metaphors are based on a variety of human experience.” The same can be applied to teaching and learning figurative language and therefore needs to be considered in order to better prepare teaching activities. Studies have shown that young learners are able to comprehend figurative language if the strategies are used appropriately for their level (e.g. De Knop, Boers and De Rycker 2010; Geld and Stanojević 2018; Piquer-Píriz and Alejo-González 2020). The same strategies are used with older learners and work efficiently, making the learning of figurative language easier (Geld, Tadić and Stanojević 2014; Parizoska 2019). Learners on all levels use these strategies when making associations and mental pictures that enable them to understand the figurative meanings of phrases. In this way learners tend to rely on conceptual metaphor in order to connect the literal and figurative meaning (e.g. Boers 2000, 2011). Learners can form different connections or in this case mental pictures but they are in a way similar. Using mental pictures to connect the source domains with the target domains is how they form connections between a linguistic unit and its meaning. The cognitive linguistic approach to teaching figurative language is different from the traditional approach because it has structure. Figurative expressions are grouped conceptually in order to better convey their meanings to learners, making it easier for them to form connections between literal and figurative meanings. In this approach, figurative language is taught explicitly and the strategies to teach it are based on studies and adjusted to the age of the learner, taking into consideration the learner’s cognitive development and the ability to understand abstract meanings as the learner grows older.

2.3. Teaching foreign language to young learners

Paradigmatic and syntagmatic knowledge are two terms that refer to fundamental semantic relations in knowledge organization systems based on how they bond the terms together. According to Peters and Weller (2008), paradigmatic relations are fixed concept relations applied to controlled vocabularies. An example is the hierarchical relation between ‘vehicle’ and ‘bicycle’ formalized within a classification scheme. Syntagmatic relations originate merely in the actual co-occurrence of terms within a certain setting (Peters and Weller 2008). The first term deals with how words categorize within one another (as shown in the example above)

while the other term deals with making connections between words through context and not categorisation.

There are several factors that influence the acquisition of a language as a child matures. These maturational factors can be found when looking into the acquisition of the first language and they can therefore help learning another language. Miller and Johnson-Laird (1976) single out the syntagmatic-paradigmatic shift as one of the factors that occur between the ages of five and ten. This shift refers to the types of associations that children make between words and ideas. Children in word-association experiments are given a word and asked what the word brings to mind; as they get older, the types of words that come to mind seem to change (Miller and Johnson-Laird, cited in Cameron 2001: 78–79).

Based on the findings of those studies, when teaching figurative language, the focus should be on creating categories that can be used as a theme. Making thematic links between words and idiomatic expressions can help children to create links between the two domains of knowledge. Cameron (2001: 81) argues that those developments are also applicable to foreign language learning because children can handle words with less concrete meanings. The principles for teaching take into consideration children's age and the appropriateness of the given structures. According to Cameron (2001: 81), five-year-olds learning a foreign language need concrete vocabulary that has a connection with objects they can see, while older learners can deal with words that are more abstract. In order to approach the learning process properly, learners' vocabulary has to continually be expanded and deepened through context and experiencing the already familiar terms again. The taught structures need to be linked thematically according to their meaning, which will in turn provide more contextual knowledge when dealing with new vocabulary from the same thematically linked category. For example, psycholinguistic experiments show that almost any kind of grouping leads to better memorisation than no grouping at all (Skoufaki 2008: 33). As children grow older and progress, the process will become easier for them and knowledge of figurative language will fall into place more easily. In her study Skoufaki (2008) had 64 participants that were native speakers of Greek and exposed them to 24 idioms both in and out of context. Idioms were selected based on previous research in regard to their transparency, that is whether they are low, moderate, or high in terms of transparency. The results show some correlation between idiom transparency and its interpretation, which can influence the easiness to connect meanings. Cameron suggests different strategies that teachers can use to encourage learners:

Guessing meanings by using all the information available in a picture or text, noticing grammatical information about words and the way they were used, their links to similar words in the first language and remembering where the word has been encountered before and how that can help them with its form and meaning (Cameron 2001: 93).

Idioms that are used frequently in everyday speech, that have simple vocabulary structure and meanings which are closely related to their figurative meaning should be easily comprehended by learners (Irujo 1986). For example, studies conducted by MacArthur and Piquer Píriz (2007: 126) showed that children at ages 5, 7, 9 and 11 could understand the figurative meanings of body part terms they were exposed to. Moreover, those children reasoned figuratively when explaining the motivation of semantic extensions. If young learners were able to connect and explain the meanings of idioms that were connected with body parts, then they should be able to do the same with other categories providing that those categories are familiar to them and within their immediate area of understanding. Each learner connects the two domains in their own way. This means that there can be as many connections as there are learners of a particular idiomatic expression.

The cognitive linguistic approach to teaching vocabulary highlights learners' capacity to think figuratively from an early age and focuses on encouraging learners to use analogical reasoning when trying to understand the meanings of figurative expressions. At the same time, "one needs to be aware of the age of the child when choosing particular expressions to be related to the domains of knowledge that the child is becoming aware of" (Littlemore and Low 2006: 81). Since learners of a foreign language lack the natural environment for learning the targeted foreign language, they are not as exposed to it. Therefore, their understanding of this aspect of the language largely depends on the input provided by teachers and teaching materials and activities (MacArthur and Piquer Píriz 2007: 126). It is precisely for this reason that textbooks provided to teachers need to include figurative expressions to help learners acquire all the aspects of a foreign language. This will in turn make language learning better connected and more substantial and generally provide them with a richer register. For example, Deignan, Gabryś and Solska (1997) show that raising learners' awareness of the motivations behind meaning extensions helps them to remember polysemous words such as *hold* and *keep* better than if they only memorize the words via L1 translations. In her three studies Piquer Píriz (2008) exposed learners to an idiom through a situation in which the idiom could be correctly applied, with two short stories ending with the idiom and with four photographs that represented

elements referred to by the figurative uses of the idiom. In the studies she utilised group work when trying to solve the problem at hand. In that way the participants within the group could engage in discussion about figurative meanings and by doing so share and enrich their knowledge about the problem. The results of the studies suggest that a capacity to think figuratively about L2 forms is available to children from a very early age and that it develops during childhood along with linguistic and conceptual knowledge, and social skills (Piquer Píriz 2008: 235). Furthermore, young learners have been proven to be able to cope with references between literal and figurative meaning of the language if properly helped. With that in mind, pedagogical implications of figurative language should not only be reserved for older learners, but for younger learners as well provided that the course material expand on the content and vocabulary past their literal meaning where possible and within the extent of context familiar to younger learners.

2.4. Guidelines for teaching idioms

Unlike other parts of the language, idioms are hard to learn in the sense that they never have the same meaning as the individual words that make them up or even the cumulative meaning of those words together, but rather they have abstract meanings. According to Irujo (1986: 236), idioms are frequently omitted when second-language learners are being addressed and native speakers tend to use simple vocabulary, while the use of idioms is avoided. Moreover, even if learners do master the meanings of idioms, it is still very difficult for them to use them correctly. In order to better incorporate figurative language into teaching, idioms need to be carefully selected.

2.4.1. Criteria

As proposed by Irujo (1986), before deciding on what idioms to choose, teachers need to take into consideration their frequency of use, transparency, appropriateness, simplicity of form and vocabulary, and similarity to first-language idioms.

a) Frequency of use

To determine the frequency of an idiom there needs to be subjective judgement in choosing them because the frequency list does not exist. Most of the choosing is done by feeling and is usually logical in terms of being more present within your own cultural environment which does not have to be the case for everyone.

b) Transparency

In terms of transparency, some idioms are figured out more easily than others. A phrase may be easier to link to the figurative meaning unlike idioms that are not so transparent when we do not know their figurative meaning. Irujo shows this using the following examples:

The coast is clear – transparent

To have a green thumb – not so transparent

c) Appropriateness

Idioms should not be taken from colloquial or slang expressions when intended to be taught in class because they are not as likely to be used by all of the students.

d) Simplicity of form and vocabulary

When choosing idioms, the teacher needs to keep in mind the language used, i.e. whether an idiom consists of words that are not as frequently used and therefore not as familiar to learners.

e) Similarity to first-language idioms

Idioms are unique in each language, but many of them have the same or similar structure and meaning in different languages. This fact can be used as an advantage when teaching them because if the learner has the idiom present in their first language, then learning will be easier.

2.4.2. Proposed activities

In addition to the proposed criteria, Irujo (1986) lists and describes specific activities which can help students understand and produce idioms in English.

a) Teaching comprehension

Learners are introduced with the idiom in context, and they have to understand its meaning based on the text through which it was introduced.

b) Comparing literal and figurative meanings

All of the activities that fall under this category require the teacher to discuss the idiom beforehand. Once the idiom is discussed, learners observe the links created between idioms and their meanings in order to notice the absurdity of the connection. These activities help learners with comprehension and production.

c) Teaching production

As done in the previous set of activities, idioms need to be discussed beforehand. Idioms are then categorised thematically in order to make it easier to comprehend them. By understanding those relations and how different idioms are connected, students learn their meanings.

d) Integrating idioms into the programme

As a general rule, idioms should be incorporated throughout regardless of their level. The level of language learning would then only impact how the idiom is learned, whether it is integrated with the rest of language learning activities or as a special lesson on its own for advanced levels of language learning.

The latter takes into consideration the discussed criteria referring to figurative language. When teaching figurative language, the selected figurative expressions need to be thematically linked in accordance with the level of language familiarity of the student age group. In this

sense, the thematic groups of the selected figurative expressions need to consist of the vocabulary that is familiar to students or that is easily learned by students at a particular level. Activities that are formed around those thematic groups of figurative expressions need to be structured in a way that young learners are able to progressively expand their understanding of idioms. Young learners have a capacity to think figuratively if the criteria are met and if they are presented with figurative language through engaging and level-appropriate activities. For this reason, it is important that teaching materials which are available to the students and to the teacher introduce figurative language in accordance with the previously mentioned criteria.

In the following section I will analyse the contents of EFL textbooks that are used in primary schools in Croatia. The aim is to determine how those teaching materials deal with figurative language and how exactly figurative language is taught in the textbooks aimed at primary school students.

3. RESEARCH

In order to determine how figurative expressions are taught in EFL, I analysed 21 textbooks for primary school which are used in Croatia. Of the 21 textbooks, there are three textbooks for grade 1, two textbooks for grade 2, three textbooks for grade 3, four textbooks for grade 4, three textbooks for grade 5, two textbooks for grade 6, three textbooks for grade 7 and one textbook for grade 8. The following textbooks were analysed: *Happy House 1, Dip in 1, Smiles, Dip in 2, New Building Blocks 2, Happy Street 2, Dip in 3, New Building blocks 3, Building Blocks 4, Way to go 1, Project, Dip in 4, Super 2, Way to go 2, Dip in 5, Building Bridges 6, Dip in 6, Building Bridges 7, Way to go 4, Dip in 7, Dip in 8.*

3.1. Textbook analysis

In the textbooks that learners use in primary school in Croatia there is little or no mention of figurative language. As for young learners, figurative language is avoided altogether, while with older learners its usage is scarce. Even if it is mentioned, there is no structure to teaching figurative language. Furthermore, the lack of structure suggests an approach to teaching figurative language without taking into consideration how to better convey the meaning in order for learners to understand it.

3.1.1. Grades 1 – 4

In the textbooks by different publishers aimed at students attending grades 1–4 there is no mention of figurative language in any form, whether it is through an example, as a unit on its own or even as part of a text within the book.

3.1.2. Grade 5

In the textbooks for the fifth grade of primary school, one out of three does not mention figurative language in any form. The other two textbooks mention one and two examples, respectively. One of those includes a figurative expression as a part of a text and as an answer to the question about the text, but without focusing on the expression itself. As for the other textbook, figurative expressions are offered as an extra part of the lesson for those who want to know more. The meaning is left to be understood by those who decide to take the time to do so.

Overall, some of the textbooks for grade 5 mention figurative language, but content is scarce and hardly dealt with in the lesson. Here are the tasks in the two textbooks which include figurative language:

Way to go 2 plus

One example of figurative language is given as information at the end of the lesson for those who want to know more.

- a couch potato: a lazy person spending his/her time in front of the TV.

Dip in 5

Two examples of figurative language are mentioned in the texts without any particular elaboration on the expressions.

- the early bird catches the worm: a person that is active in the early hours and for that is probably going to be successful.
- a piece of cake: when something is a piece of cake it means that it is easy to do or that it is easily achieved.

3.1.3. Grade 6

Textbooks for grade 6 include more figurative language, either through the use of phrasal verbs or by mentioning idioms. However, the representation of figurative language in the textbooks is hardly present. If there is mention of figurative language, there is little structure to it, but rather the expressions are grouped without any clear criteria. Here are the tasks which include figurative language.

Dip in 6

In this textbook, students are introduced to different phrasal verbs. In one task phrasal verbs are explicitly mentioned and grouped together, but there is no explanation as to what these expressions are, even though they are listed by type. Idioms are not mentioned in the textbook. Figure 2 shows an exercise including phrasal verbs.

Vocabulary

PHRASAL VERBS

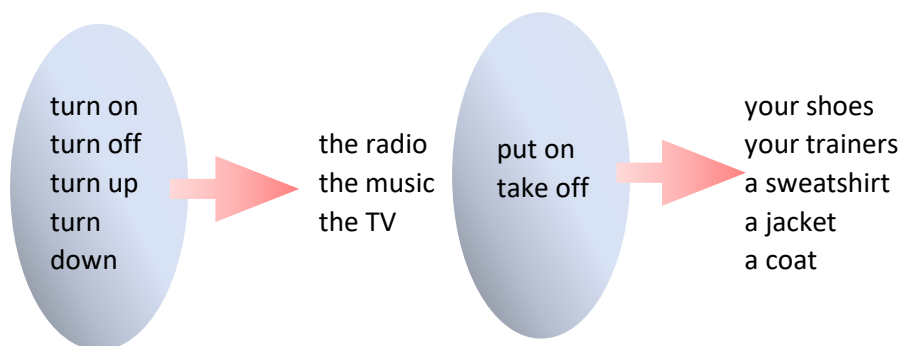


Figure 2. A vocabulary task with phrasal verbs in the textbook *Dip in 6*

Building Bridges 6

Phrasal verbs are occasionally mentioned throughout the textbook, but not explicitly as to what they are. They are introduced as part of a text. There are a few mentions of idioms following the same pattern as phrasal verbs. The fact that those are figurative expressions is not stated explicitly, either through a task or vocabulary exercise. They are mentioned in texts, but are not highlighted in any of the tasks or explicitly taught as figurative language. Phrasal verbs are found at the end of the book in the dictionary. Listed below are phrasal verbs and an idiom which appear in the textbook.

– fall in, fed up, turn on/off

– a piece of cake: when something is a piece of cake it means that it is easy to do or that it is easily achieved.

3.1.4. Grade 7

All of the three analysed textbooks include figurative language. They use several examples or mention them in a text and introduce students to phrasal verbs. Although figurative language is included, it is not dealt with or introduced explicitly, but rather just mentioned. Only one of the textbooks mentions figurative language directly, either in a task or by including it as a vocabulary exercise. Listed below are tasks which include figurative expressions.

Building Bridges 7

The following phrasal verbs are listed in the dictionary at the end of the textbook and are mentioned throughout the text within the textbook:

– stick out, take off, pick on, turn off

As for idioms, a few of them are listed at the end of the book in the dictionary, but they are not explicitly taught or explained. Instead, they appear as part of a text contained within a picture in the book.

– it will give you the creeps: something that will make you feel uncomfortable, nervous, or afraid.

Way to go 4 plus, 2nd edition

In this textbook there are many examples of phrasal verbs and several idioms. Figurative expressions are not grouped together based on a common element, apart from one example in which figurative language is introduced explicitly. There are four tasks including expressions that may point to figurative language in some of the examples where idioms are listed. However, there is no explicit mention of that type of language even though in one of the tasks explanations of the meanings of figurative expressions are given to match. In another task, phrasal verbs are directly mentioned as part of the new vocabulary. However, they are not organised in any way, but rather just listed together. No extra explanation is given for those expressions. Listed below are examples of phrasal verbs found in the dictionary at the end of the textbook, idioms and the tasks from the textbook which include them.

- fall apart, fall down, fall in, give in, give up, lock up, look around, pick out, pick up
- catch a cold: to contract a common cold virus
- to have a heart of gold: to be very good and kind
- a pain in the neck: an especially irritating, aggravating, or obnoxious person, thing, or situation.
- pour oil on troubled waters: to soothe or calm down something or someone
- through hell and high water: through a great number of troubles, difficulties, or obstacles.

Figure 3 shows that the selected phrasal verbs have different particles and meanings, and they are not grouped based on a common element.

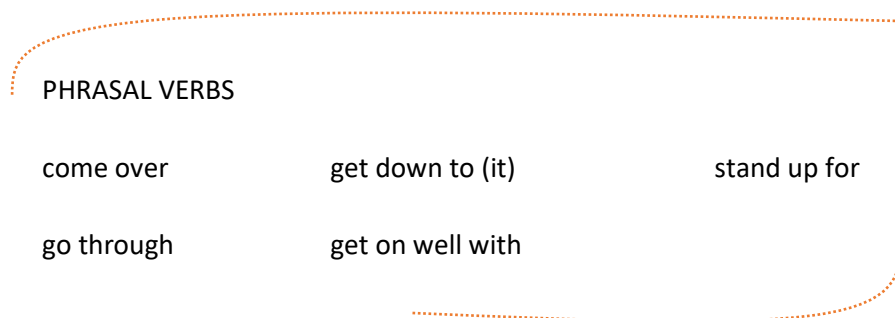


Figure 3. An exercise with phrasal verbs in the textbook *Way to go 4 plus*

An example of a vocabulary exercise including idioms is shown in Figure 4.

Match the expressions to their paraphrases.

1. FOOTBALL FAN
2. HEALTH FREAK
3. CLOSE FRIEND
4. COMPUTER WIZARD
5. COUCH POTATO
6. VEGETARIAN
7. GOSSIP
8. CHATTERBOX

- Someone who spends a lot of time sitting and watching television
- someone who would do anything to be fit and healthy
- someone who knows everything about computers
- someone who talks all the time
- someone who can't live without football
- someone you trust
- someone who doesn't eat meat
- someone who likes to talk about other people's private lives

Figure 4. An exercise with idioms in the textbook *Way to go 4 plus*

The task in Figure 4 also includes pictures to match in addition to meanings. In this case, the idioms *couch potato* and *chatterbox* are explicitly taught through pictures that refer to their figurative meanings.

Figure 5 shows an exercise in which the idiom *get on somebody's nerves* is mentioned, but is not explicitly taught.

A CHAT SHOW

A Work in groups. Look at the words/expressions below. What do they mean? Use the mini-dictionary or ask your teacher for help.

Stubborn	violent	trust	support
caring	understanding	argue	talk back
get in trouble	keep a promise	get on (somebody's) nerves	embarrassing

B Discuss the words/expressions and put them in two groups: good and bad.

C Now you are going to hear a chat show. Listen to the host and answer the questions.

1 Who is the show about?

- a) teachers b) teachers and pupils c) parents and children

2 Who is taking part in the show? Circle the right letters.

- a) some parents b) a doctor c) a psychologist d) some children
- e) a social worker f) a policeman g) some teachers h) a writer

D Listen to part 1. Correct the sentences.

- 1 Mr Alistair is the right person to talk about parents and children because he is a social worker.
- 2 Billy isn't happy with his parents because they don't get on well.
- 3 He can't talk about his grades with them.

Figure 5. An exercise with an idiom in the textbook *Way to go 4 plus*

Figure 5 shows a task in which an idiom is listed without being explicitly termed as such. Instead, it is referred to as an expression. However, the task points the students towards using a dictionary or asking their teacher for help, but does not focus on elaborating further on the idiom. After being mentioned in part A of the exercise, the idiom is not mentioned again in parts B, C and D. In part D the idiom could have been used instead of its explanation ('don't get on well').

Dip in 7

Phrasal verbs are mentioned throughout the textbook in various texts. They are not explicitly taught or grouped according to a common element. Idioms are mentioned in the same way without being explicitly taught as figurative language or grouped according to meaning. Listed below are examples of phrasal verbs and idioms found in the dictionary at the end of the textbook.

- fall off, fall in, fit in, take off, set off, mix up, give up, hold on

- black sheep: to stick out of the group by being so different in comparison to the others belonging to the group
- get on someone’s nerves: to be an annoyance to someone making them irritated or annoyed
- leave someone breathless: to greatly impress someone
- a matter of life and death: to describe something as being very crucial and serious
- to put it in a nutshell: to sum something up, shorten it

3.1.5. Grade 8

In the textbooks for grade 8 there are several examples of phrasal verbs and idioms, but they are not taught explicitly. Figurative expressions are not directly mentioned in any of the tasks or vocabulary exercises, but are present in several tasks where the learner is given their meanings. Here are the examples including phrasal verbs and idioms that are listed in the dictionary at the end of the textbook and that are mentioned in the texts throughout the book.

Dip in 8

Examples of phrasal verbs in the dictionary at the end of the textbook:

- add up, ask out, beat up, call back, fill in, find out, take up

Examples of idioms in the dictionary at the end of the textbook:

- be a drag: to be annoying
- fresh as daisy: very clean and tidy, well-kept
- twist around one's finger: to gain complete control or dominance over someone, to make someone do whatever one wishes.
- a white lie: a lie thought to be insignificant and justified, especially one told to avoid hurting someone's feelings or giving offense.

Figure 6 shows a vocabulary exercise with figurative language.

I Match the expressions to their meanings.

1 It's an eye opener.

2 ... is our motto.

3 Give me a hand.

4 It's no laughing matter.

5 Our mission is ...

6 ... people take action.

- It's something you have to do.
- I need your help.
- It's a situation or event from which you learn something surprising or that you didn't know before.
- It shouldn't be joked about.
- They do something.
- It's the aims or the beliefs of a group of people or an organisation.

Figure 6. A vocabulary task with idioms in the textbook *Dip in 8*

Figure 6 shows that idioms are not grouped according to meaning and are not explicitly taught as figurative language. In another task figurative language is mentioned, but is not explicitly defined as figurative language. This is shown in Figure 7.

I Choose the correct definition.

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 You look a bit down | a You look sad | b You're tired and exhausted. |
| 2 How come? | a Who did it happen to? | b Why did it happen? |
| 3 I'm off now. | a let's change the subject. | b I'm leaving. |
| 4 It was awesome! | a Nothing special. | b It was great. |
| 5 I'm in seventh heaven. | a I'm confused | b I'm extremely happy. |
| 6 Don't be silly. | a You are childish. | b You are stupid. |

Figure 7. A vocabulary task with idioms in the textbook *Dip in 8*

The following two exercises mention figurative language, but they are termed *expressions*. The tasks provide meanings, but do not deal with the language explicitly and the idioms are not grouped in accordance with a common element or meaning.

1 Match the parts of these expressions.	
1. It will be a ...	<input type="checkbox"/> daisy.
2. You need a ...	<input type="checkbox"/> time.
3. I'm running out of ...	<input type="checkbox"/> flop.
4. I'll be the laughing ...	<input type="checkbox"/> break.
5. You'll be as fresh as a ...	<input type="checkbox"/> stock.

2 Which of the expressions in task 1 mean:
<input type="checkbox"/> There is no more time?
<input type="checkbox"/> It'll do you good to do something else for a change?
<input type="checkbox"/> You won't be tired but will be ready to do things?
<input type="checkbox"/> I won't make it? I won't succeed?
<input type="checkbox"/> Everybody will tease me?

Figure 8. Two connected exercises from the textbook *Dip in 8*

The results of the textbook analysis show that there are no mentions of figurative language in any form in grades 1–4. The first examples of figurative expressions occur in grade 5 and higher, but figurative language is rarely explicitly mentioned. Literal and figurative meanings are occasionally connected and there are no clear criteria used for grouping figurative expressions. In the analysed textbooks the grouping of idioms is not based on the similarities between their figurative meanings, but rather idioms that are opposite in meaning or with no semantic/conceptual relation to one another are grouped together, which does not aid their comprehension. The occasional mention of figurative expressions does not deal with that type of language in a way that would benefit students the most. The lack of intent to purposely introduce figurative language means that it was integrated or mentioned without any aim and consideration for the learner. In the following section I will show how English idioms can be taught using the cognitive linguistic approach to figurative language.

4. TEACHING ENGLISH IDIOMS USING THE COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC

APPROACH

In this section I will show how English idioms can be taught in the EFL classroom in primary school. The tasks and activities are aimed for the 4th grade of primary school in Croatia, and they can be adjusted for younger or older learners. When creating the activities, I grouped the idioms according to their meanings: all of them refer to the same feeling, happiness. Furthermore, I selected the idioms that contain vocabulary which is expected to be familiar to the students in the fourth grade or easily teachable if there are any unknown words. Some of the selected idioms have equivalents in Croatian, which can make it easier for students to comprehend and use them. The selected idioms refer to being happy as being high up or moving upwards. In these idioms the source domain is UP or BEING OFF THE GROUND and the target domain is HAPPY. The selected idioms are the following:

walking on air

over the moon

on top of the world

in seventh heaven

as high as a kite

jump for joy

4.1. Introducing learners to idioms and their components

Before teaching of the idioms start, students need to be familiarised with the vocabulary items that make up the selected expressions referring to happiness. The assumption is that most of the words are already known to 4th grade students. The analysis of the textbooks has shown that most of those words are taught until the 4th grade. The word that may not be known to students is *seventh*, but it can be easily explained due to the fact that students learn cardinal numbers in the first grade, and they learn about ordinal numbers in other classes, too.

4.2. Structured activities to integrate the learning of figurative language in the EFL classroom

Activity 1: Introducing idioms through total physical response

Students are provided with different materials which they can use to describe their understanding of the meanings of idioms. The teacher gives the students different objects that represent nouns which are found in the idioms. Those materials include: a model of the moon and the Earth, clouds with gates representing heaven, toy people or any kind of toys that can represent people such as toy soldiers etc. and a small kite. All of the materials are easily made, and students can even make them themselves if time permits it in accordance with other school subjects. The items can be made from any material that is safe to use.

For their first task, the students are given a list of idioms referring to happiness and are asked to match the items with the given expression and to try and show the literal meaning of the expression by using the materials. For example, students that get the idiom *over the moon* take the model of the moon and a toy person and move the toy over the moon.

This activity is important because it uses several senses at once and provides the students with a fun learning experience that will make the comprehension of the idioms easier later on.

After the students have finished studying the relations between the objects that refer to the words making up the idioms, they are asked how they think the toy person may feel when they do those movements. They need to write down their answers on a sheet of paper provided by the teacher that is then going to be used in one of the activities which is introduced later for comparison.

Activity 2: An idiom in a sentence and its substitution

As the next step, students are asked to listen to a text that the teacher reads. In this text only idioms are used to describe how the characters are feeling. Learners are asked to describe how the characters feel and why they feel the way they feel through a discussion that follows. Here is a sample text:

My dad buys flowers for my mom every day. Mom feels as if she is walking on air. Dad feels over the moon to make her jump for joy. I think mom and dad are both in seventh heaven. They look like they are on top of the world. Surprises can make you feel as high as a kite.

After the discussion, the students are given the text on a piece of paper and are asked to underline the words which they think show how dad, mom and the person writing the text is feeling. When they are done, a short discussion follows regarding the words that they have underlined and why they have chosen them. As a follow-up, the students are given the same text with blanks in places where the idioms were written and with words provided below. The words are to be used in any combination or any number of times to fill in the blanks. Here is a sample text:

Answer the questions. Circle one answer.

How does mom feel?

Mom feels as if she is walking on air.

a) sad b) angry c) happy d) scared

How does dad feel?

Dad feels over the moon to make her jump for joy.

a) happy b) angry c) scared d) sad

How do mom and dad feel?

I think mom and dad are both in seventh heaven.

a) angry b) sad c) happy d) scared

How do they feel?

They look like they are on top of the world.

a) scared b) sad c) happy d) angry

How can surprises make you feel?

Surprises can make you feel as high as a kite.

a) happy b) scared c) sad d) angry

After this activity, the class discusses the students' answers and compares them. The students are asked to orally elaborate on why they chose the particular answer over the other three options for each question. At this point, the teacher asks the students about the words that were replaced in the previous task. The aim is to get the students to make a conclusion about

idioms, i.e. that the idiomatic meaning is not the same as the words may suggest and why they think those expressions behave in that way.

Activity 3: Sentence production and discussion

In order to practice using idioms, the students need to produce sentences in which the idioms are used in context. Each student needs to prepare at least one sentence per idiom on their own before moving to the next part of the activity.

Next, the students are divided into groups that can vary in size depending on the situation, and even pair work is possible. For example, working in groups of four, the students' task is to compare the sentences they came up with and to discuss them as a group. The focus should be on whether all of the students used the idiom in the right context and if not, they need to correct each other on how they could have. Afterwards, they need to share their corrections and sentences with the other groups.

Activity 4: Role-play and a guessing game

To help the newly learned content settle in, the students are asked to play a role-playing game. In groups, they are given one idiom that they need to mime to the other groups without using any words. The other groups need to anonymously write down on a piece of paper the idiom that they individually think is being shown. At that point each group needs to collect the votes of its members, which will represent the general consensus of the group and this will be their final answer. Students are not to discuss their answers or influence the answers of any member, whether the member belongs to their group or any other. The reason for pacing it like this is because in this example I chose six idioms and all of the students should get a chance to have a say in order to check the comprehension and thought process of each student. If the same activity is done with more idioms, the pacing can be changed. After each student votes and the group has reached a consensus, all the groups show their final answer at the same time. Those who guessed the idiom get a point. The group with the most points at the end wins.

Activity 5: Evaluation of the connection between the literal and figurative meaning

Once the students have finished all the activities, it is important to evaluate their thought process. The importance of this lies in the fact that everyone forms at least slightly different connections between the literal and figurative meanings of idioms. By getting a better insight into how the students formed the connections on their own and what helped them to remember figurative meanings, the teacher gains knowledge that can help them better prepare future activities. The same activities can then be modelled according to the needs of the students. Furthermore, acquiring metalinguistic knowledge can promote faster and more durable learning and retention of elements that make up a language, including figurative expressions.

In order to demonstrate how to evaluate the mind mapping that the students used, I will focus on the languages that are used in the classroom. In my example they are English and Croatian, but this can be adjusted depending on the classroom it is done in and the individual needs of the students. The reason for this is that idioms are often understood through an individual's lexical and cultural knowledge which can therefore be used to make a connection between languages that the learner uses. This is especially the case when English idioms do not have formal correspondents in another language. Therefore, they can be approached and understood through many different angles and connections. Here is a sample of the evaluation:

This evaluation can and should be written in English and Croatian.

(Ova provjera se može i treba pisati na engleskom i hrvatskom.)

What helped you understand the meaning of the expression *walking on air*? Explain your answer. (Što ti je pomoglo shvatiti značenje izraza *walking on air*? Objasni svoj odgovor.)

What did you connect the meaning with when imagining the expression? Write and/or draw. (S čime si povezo/la značenje kad si zamislio/la taj izraz? Napiši i/ili nacrtaj.)

Extra activity ideas

Students are provided with a list of idioms referring to happiness and are divided into groups. Each group gets photographs that can be connected to each of the idioms, and their task is to make the connection and explain it afterwards. Once the students explain how they connected each picture with their idiom, their task is to elaborate on the thought process that they used to decide.

The teacher uses the idiom in front of the students in context. Students need to guess what the teacher meant by saying it. The same is done again, but this time with movements and facial expressions and the students are asked again to explain what they think the idiom could mean and why. This activity can also be done with students showing the idioms.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to determine how figurative language is presented in EFL textbooks for primary schools. In order to do that, I analysed 21 EFL textbooks used in primary schools in Croatia. The aim was also to show how idioms can be taught in EFL using the cognitive linguistic approach. Idioms referring to happiness were used as illustrative examples.

The textbook analysis showed that in most cases figurative language is not explicitly taught. Idioms and phrasal verbs are almost always indirectly used or mentioned throughout the texts and exercises found in the textbooks. Although there are a few instances in which figurative language is dealt with more explicitly, in most of the analysed textbooks this is not the case. In the majority of tasks including phrasal verbs and idioms there is no common element used as a connection between the expressions. Instead, figurative expressions are grouped without any structure at all, even though there are plenty age-appropriate expressions that could be grouped and taught together based on a common element. The textbook analysis showed that figurative language is not even mentioned before the fifth grade. Of the 21 textbooks analysed, those aimed at grades 5-8 include tasks containing figurative language. Of those textbooks, grades 5 and 6 have few tasks including figurative language, while textbooks for grades 7 and 8 have more, but overall, not that many mentions of figurative expressions.

Using idioms of happiness as an illustrative example, I showed how figurative expressions can be taught in the 4th grade of primary school by applying the cognitive linguistic approach. Figurative expressions need to be grouped together according to a common element that they share, which is the figurative meaning. By choosing idioms made up of individual words that are level appropriate for fourth grade learners and that are conceptually linked (e.g. being happy is like being up or off the ground), students can comprehend their figurative meanings.

Overall, the question that arises is at what age it would be most appropriate to teach figurative language to EFL learners and how to select idioms so that learners can better understand them. As cognitive linguistic studies have shown that young children have the capacity to understand figurative expressions in a foreign language, there is room for research on how students would fare with learning idioms in lower grades. A good place to start would be the 4th grade since in the Croatian educational system students are introduced to figurative language at the very end of their primary school education, and typically without any structure. Young learners could and should be introduced to figurative language in EFL, which in turn would enrich their whole language learning experience and thus help them achieve higher levels of using English. To prove this, studies with speakers need to be conducted and they should

include different ways of investigating how learners understand figurative expressions and create mind maps to remember their meanings.

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IZJAVA O SAMOSTALNOJ IZRADI RADA

Ovom izjavom, ja, Tomislav Uršić, student Učiteljskog fakulteta u Zagrebu, izjavljujem I svojim potpisom jamčim da sam samostalno istražio literaturu, proveo istraživanje i napisao diplomski rad na temu: Teaching figurative language in EFL – traditional and modern approaches. Izjavljujem da nijedan dio diplomskog rada nije napisan na nedozvoljen način ni prepisan iz kojega necitiranog rada.

Zagreb, rujan 2021.

Potpis studenta: _____