

Original Article

Metaphorical Competence among EFL Learners: An Analytical Review of Writing and Reading at University Level

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ABSTRACT: *Metaphoric competence has become a core construct in applied linguistics, enabling English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to recognise, produce, and interpret metaphors in interaction. In the EFL context, this competence is essential for improved comprehension and expression. Despite this, research remains scattered, especially regarding writing and reading skills. Hence, the current study aims to provide an analytical review of metaphoric competence at the university level among EFL learners. The focus of the study is on (i) metaphor production in writing and (ii) metaphor identification in reading. The aims of the study are (i) to clarify the role of metaphoric competence in academic literacy and (ii) to highlight the importance of metaphoric competence and its pedagogical implications. The findings reveal that in writing, metaphoric production enhances coherence, rhetorical expression, and creativity. Meanwhile, in reading, its identification helps EFL learners interpret, understand, and culturally assimilate texts. The study emphasises the need for a clearer framework, consistent methodology, and pedagogical practices that can foster metaphoric awareness in both reading and writing instruction.*

KEYWORDS: *Metaphoric Competence, Writing Skill, EFL Learners, Reading Skill, Metaphor Identification, Metaphor Production.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the publication of *Metaphors We Live by* by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the concept of metaphor, metaphorical competence, and its relation to cognition and language has taken a new tone. In this book, the authors argue that metaphors are not merely figurative or rhetorical devices; rather, they are fundamental components of human cognition. According to the concept presented by Lakoff and Johnson, a non-linguistic conceptual mechanism manages and controls human deeds and perceptions, and it is fundamental to human comprehension of reality. Metaphor acts as a bridge between concepts and the conceptual system. Metaphor acts as an experience or exposure of a thing in place of yet another thing. They call this process experimentalism, which indicates that human perception, actions and comprehension determine the structure and nature of reality. Another key idea is that metaphors are used not only by literary scholars or intellectuals; rather, common people use them in everyday life. Certain universal concepts, such as time, quantity and state, are understood when they are related metaphorically. Such ideas are deeply rooted in concrete, observable and abstract concepts, as well as human knowledge about the universal in general.

In the views presented by Gibbs (2006) and Barsalou (2008), language presents more than itself. It bridges human perception and the socio-cultural world they construct. Among the key features of language that are utilised to exhibit thought patterns is the use and comprehension of metaphor. Various studies (Reddy, 1979; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1987) also assert that metaphor and metaphorical competence facilitate the link between human actions and thought in reasoning and conceptual structure, largely through abstract notions. Hence, these studies suggest that metaphorical ability reflects human perceptions, thought processes and ideologies shared across cultures, especially in L2 or EFL contexts. Later, Low's (1988) publication and ideas paved the way for understanding the role of metaphor and metaphorical competence in foreign language instruction. Studies conducted by researchers like (Ungerer, 2001; Queller, 2001; Dirven, 2001; Hussain et al., 2024; MacArthur & Piquer Píriz, 2007; Tyler, 2008; Piquer Píriz, 2008a), (b; Hussain et al., 2025;) have emphasized the essentiality of cognitive theory and conceptual metaphor theory as an assistive tool as far as foreign language learning and teaching is concerned and it is more relevant in case of EFL.

Metaphors have strong effects and influence on the diverse dynamics of language in use. Metaphors are also used by people at different levels and stages of language learning, especially in EFL. They have a deep influence on vocabulary knowledge and semantic schema of competence among EFL learners. And semantic competence has been defined by CEFR (2001) as an ability to "exploit a comprehensive and reliable mastery of a very wide range of language to formulate thoughts precisely, give emphasis, differentiate and eliminate ambiguity with no signs of having to restrict what he/she wants to say" (p. 112). Various

studies also underline that metaphorical competence plays a vital role in enhancing learners' abilities, perceptions and communication, particularly in their expressions in the target language. It enables EFL learners to develop native-like assimilation of the cultural and textual tone of the target language without presenting themselves as native-like speakers. They will be able to formulate appropriate target-language forms and associations in terms of cultural and ideological assimilation.

Traditionally, metaphor has been regarded as a matter that is associated with language. It is linked with figurative or non-literal linguistic expressions whose meanings are determined by a set of literal expressions. But in the last few decades, researchers have investigated metaphor and metaphorical competence more deeply, such as Lakoff and Johnson. In their view, metaphor is both a form of expression and a medium of thought and hence has a fundamental epistemological feature. It has now attained a tool not only for describing but also for elaborative and evaluative functions, as far as the communicative and conceptual structure of frameworks is concerned. The significance of metaphor and metaphorical competence has recently entered cognitive linguistics and, in turn, has influenced instruction and pedagogical practices. Some scholars deem it a mere figure of speech and a poetic device. They see it as a connecting tool that links one idea to another (Kövecses, 2002). The traditional notion of metaphor has been challenged by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) in these words: "metaphor is not a matter of words rather than thought or action ... [and that] our ordinary conceptual system is basically metaphorical in nature" (p. 3). They elaborated metaphorical expressions as "provide ways of comprehending experience; they give order to our lives ... and are necessary for making sense of what goes on around us" (p. 185-186).

2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The current study aims to analyse EFL learners' metaphorical competence in reading and writing. It investigates university-level learners. There is a great need for an empirical study that not only analyses the production, identification and use of metaphor in real contexts but also highlights the positive influence that this metaphorical competence, attained by EFL learners at the university level, has brought about. Although numerous studies have examined metaphor and metaphorical competence, an empirical and comprehensive study in a university context was lacking, and this study is unique in its kind. The study is not only concerned with the comprehension, identification and production of metaphor but also with the empirical use of metaphor in real contexts. So, this study is a significant contribution to language teaching, particularly in inculcating metaphorical competence among EFL learners in general and EFL learners in particular.

3. WHY METAPHORIC COMPETENCE?

The idea of metaphor and metaphorical competence appears to be a rather unessential component of communicative competence at first appearance, as very little or no significant effort has been paid by EFL instructors in the recent past. However, comprehending and using metaphor in the target language gains prominence in thought, cognition and language in the communicative process, even though metaphor is not yet essential for self-expression. As Danesi (1994) notes, an emerging issue in second- or foreign-language learning is that learners must express their thoughts and ideas while keeping in mind the culturally and societally accepted and suitable form or expression of figurative language. Metaphorical competence has diverse layers and interpretations. However, Nacey (2010) presents metaphorical competence in the simplest and most comprehensive terms as "the ability to understand and produce metaphor" (p.32). In simple terms, a person who can identify and comprehend metaphors used by others and use metaphor in their communication is metaphorically competent; this ability is metaphorical competence.

The ability of an EFL learner to comprehend and utilise metaphor is considered a quality of metaphorical competence, and it is among emerging trends or issues in the communicative process, especially in EFL. Metaphor or metaphorical ability is a tool of persuasive expression and is the most neglected in the first or native language. Numerous tools and models are deemed essential for communicative competence, and in recent years metaphorical competence has gained an essential role alongside other communicative competences such as organisational, textual, grammatical, sociolinguistic, cultural and pragmatic competence in second- or foreign-language learning. In light of these emerging trends, diverse models of communicative competence have been proposed, and all emphasise the need to place greater emphasis on metaphorical competence to achieve communicative competence in EFL. It has been employed in those studies that metaphorical competence is an essential tool in attaining communicative competence; hence, there is a dare need to conduct studies like the study under review in order to underline not only the significance of this aspect but also to raise awareness of the contribution of metaphorical competence in writing and reading as a part of overall competence among EFL learners.

Most EFL learners are not aware of the metaphorical concept of L2 and utilise the same conceptual system that is very frequent in their L1. They convey only the literal sense or translate words or sentences without considering the figurative or metaphorical meanings attached to them. The obvious consequences of this practice or unawareness on the part of L2 or EFL learners are misinterpretation or misconception of the expressions as well as words. This is further reflected in EFL learners' conceptual and communicative competence, particularly in textual and linguistic competence. That is why, mostly in the case of EFL, it is found in the writing and reading of the learners that there is a lack of conceptual coherence and accuracy because, though they are consuming the structure of the English language, they are thinking in their native or L1, which creates a major problem as far as their other level of linguistic competence is concerned (Norafkan, 2013). On a larger scale, failing to

understand metaphors and figurative language, and being unaware of cultural background, results in communication failure. Lakoff (1993) also proposes a solution: comprehend abstract ideas and use them; EFL learners need to understand metaphor and develop metaphorical competence.

In light of Lakoff's (1993) solution, EFL teaching must focus on developing learners' cognitive and conceptual systems, as producing conceptually, communicatively, and pragmatically correct expressions for successful communication matters more than producing merely correct formal and grammatical structures. Past studies have repeatedly indicated that L2 or EFL learners face a major challenge in metaphorical competence. Even short passages or chunks of discourse, written or spoken, contain many metaphors that most L2 or EFL learners are unaware of, as outsiders in terms of societal and cultural context. All these aspects, on the one hand, highlight the need to create metaphorical awareness among L2 or EFL learners and, on the other hand, pinpoint the need to conduct studies that measure the metaphorical competence of EFL learners. This idea is supported by Hwang (2008), who argues that if instructors try to create pragmatic awareness among L2 or EFL learners, they can reduce cultural distance among learners on the one hand and between L1 and L2 on the other. This is further supported by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who assert that metaphor or metaphorical competence, is not secondary but imperative in every aspect of everyday life.

Most previous studies confirm that EFL instructors have focused on developing linguistics and grammatical construction, but a major gap remains between grammatical and communicative competence, as indicated by Danesi (1992). Another major issue is that, despite high levels of fluency and accuracy, EFL or L2 learners cannot match the conceptual competence of native speakers or writers. The concept of figurative language or metaphor becomes even more complex for EFL learners and instructors in the case of L2, as EFL learners may not be able to match the metaphorical competence of native speakers, as they are not even equal to their grammatical, lexical, textual and sociolinguistic competence. To fill the gap between L1, L2 and EFL, Danesi (1992) deems metaphorical competence an essential communicative and linguistic tool, as it is directly linked to cultural and societal competence. Communication is also an idea that is conceptual in nature; hence, it is directly linked to conceptual competence and metaphor, and metaphorical competence is a vital tool for native or native-like learners in EFL settings.

4. METAPHORIC COMPETENCE IN WRITING AND READING

Researchers have largely agreed that metaphoric competence has a positive and enriching influence across all domains of language learning, especially writing and reading. It will enhance the identification and pointing out of metaphor, which is relevant to metaphoric competence in reading, as it indicates that the reading comprehension of the learners has attained a considerable level. In contrast, production and usage of metaphor in real and actual contexts indicate that metaphoric competence about writing and speaking has been reached at a good level. It also indicates that proficiency and flow of the learners in the target language have also increased to certain degrees, as far as L2 or EFL learners and learning are concerned, as far as metaphoric competence is deemed essential.

4.1. PRODUCTION OF METAPHOR- METAPHORIC COMPETENCE IN WRITING

Littlemore et al. (2014) examined more than two hundred essay-style writing scripts written by English learners for the TESOL examination held for Cambridge as part of their study. Their study found that learners who were more proficient in L2 used a greater diversity of metaphors in their exam-style essay writing than those who were less competent in L2. In addition, the study asserted that learners' use of metaphor has a unique and sophisticated impact that adds colour to their writing. Nacey (2013), in the study conducted, indicates that challenges and hurdles faced by non-native speakers or students in their utilisation of novel metaphor mostly result in language errors or communication gaps. Kathpalia & Carmel (2011) highlight that cross-cultural awareness and interaction have a paramount influence on the comprehension, use, identification and production of Metaphor for L2 or EFL learners.

However, if there is a gap in intercultural communication, there will be issues in interpreting metaphor, which will hinder metaphoric competence in reading and writing in particular, and overall metaphoric competence in general. MacArthur (2010) proposed steps to enhance the writing process for instruction to help learners attain metaphoric competence in the writing skillset, especially for L2 or EFL learners. The researcher proposed that learners should be given abstract topics to write about, revise and take into account source-language knowledge and use it in the target language. This affects both reading and writing, as readers must revise and take metaphors from the source language related to reading competence, and using them in the target culture or domain is associated with writing competence and metaphoric awareness.

MacArthur (2010) also proposes other activities to enhance metaphoric competence and awareness. These activities are as follows:

- Discussing the inculcation and transfer of Metaphor from L1 when they are involved in writing.
- Practising the utilisation of metalinguistic terms which are user-friendly as far as reading and writing are concerned
- Consulting electronic corpora which are large enough but are not entirely dependent on dictionaries of bilingual nature.

Littlemore and Low (2006a), in their study, came up with the view that students or learners of L2 or EFL must be made familiar with the concept of how to “use figurative language creatively, appropriately and, at times, persuasively” (p. 203) as far as their writing is concerned. The researchers argued that using metaphorical expressions will enrich learners' writing level and proficiency. In addition, correct, timely and accurate use of metaphor will make their written expression impressive and persuasive. They concluded that ESL or EFL learners must grasp metaphors in their reading of the source domain and use them in their writing in the target domain. Other studies also confirmed that, despite learners facing numerous challenges in identifying metaphor in reading and producing metaphor in writing, metaphoric awareness and expression strongly influence their writing, reading and speaking abilities.

Enhancing metaphoric competence in writing helps EFL or L2 learners formulate their thoughts and ideas. Littlemore et al. (2014) studied 200 EFL learners at various levels by analysing their essays to assess metaphoric comprehension and competence. The study was based on EFL learners from Greece and Germany, and it was found that the production of most of the metaphoric expressions at lower levels is closed-class specific and is indicated as “consisting mainly of prepositions, but at B2 level and beyond, the majority of the metaphoric items are open class” (p. 117). The study also found that B1 learners from Sweden were more likely to use metaphoric expressions. They utilised such expressions more significantly in their writing: “They start to use metaphor to present their own personal perspective and to highlight the fact that they are providing their own point of view” (Littlemore et al., 2014, p.131).

That is why teachers and content developers introduced metaphors, especially for L2 or EFL learners. Writing and reading are two imperative tools or domains for linguistic proficiency or mastery. Danesi (1986) and Low (1988) deemed metaphoric competence and linguistic competence equally significant for L2 or EFL learners. In recent years, researchers have deemed metaphorical competence an essential part of linguistics and learners' communicative competence. Low and Littlemore (2006) stressed the importance of metaphorical competence as an integral part that contributes to both linguistic and communicative competence. But the question is whether they reside side by side.

Researchers such as Kecskes and Papp (2000); Danesi (1992); Hussain et al. (2024); Hashemian & Nezhad (2007); and Littlemore (2010, 2011) have argued that L2 and EFL learners' metaphorical competence and awareness are low, despite their awareness and proficiency in the target language. This is observed when researchers examine the metaphorical competence of such learners during L2 and EFL instruction in empirical contexts. Yuanlian Su (2012) and Fengshi Yuan (2012), both Chinese scholars, found the same: learners' metaphorical competence is still not up to the mark even after studying English as a second or foreign language for more than a decade. Yuan (2012) cites this as “language proficiency is not significantly related to metaphorical comprehension ability” (p. 256), based on an empirical study of more than 251 Chinese English majors.

However, Trosborg (1985) found the opposite, asserting that learners' comprehension of unfamiliar metaphorical expressions is directly linked to their efficiency and proficiency in the target language. Studies by Rezaei (2013) and Aleshtar (2014) also examined the relationship between metaphorical competence and target-language proficiency. Other scholars have concluded that a significant and enriching link exists between metaphorical and linguistic competence, based on empirical studies. Such researchers include Jinfang Shi (2012); Hussain et al. (2025); Dong (2006); and Zhao (2002).

4.2. IDENTIFICATION OF METAPHOR-METAPHORIC COMPETENCE IN READING

Regarding the identification of metaphor or metaphoric expressions related to the user's or learner's comprehension level in reading, Grips (2000) divided it into two levels. The first level, which he termed Level 1 or Theory Level, is what is meant in metaphoric analysis as “the level at which theoretical analysis and categorisation of metaphor take place” (Cameron, 1999a, p. 6). The opposite of this level is level 2, or the processing level, which is concerned with individuals' online processing of metaphorical language” (Cameron, 1999a, p. 6). In this way, Cameron (1990) distinguishes linguistic metaphor from process metaphor.

- “Process metaphors: identified through work within the processing level, as processed metaphorically by a discourse participant on a particular occasion.”
- “Linguistic metaphors: identified through work within the theory level, as stretches of language having metaphoric potential.”(Cameron, 1999b: 108)

In this way, most previous studies have identified metaphoric expressions whenever they appear, without detailing which category they belong to, because EFL learners are not proficient enough to comprehend and identify metaphor despite having considerable proficiency in the linguistic domain. In this way, it is easier for learners to identify the metaphoric expressions used in the text than to understand what is going on in the users' minds. This is why Steen (2002) limited the concept of metaphoric identification to mere open word classes such as verbs, nouns, adverbs and adjectives in his study. Steen (2002) explains that, at the identification level, it is easier to draw out complexities and ambiguities rather than jump to a conclusion. Moreover, learners at that stage are not proficient enough to distinguish between literal and linguistic metaphor, so they need to keep things simple (Cameron, 1999b, p. 123).

More specifically, Cameron (1999, 2003, and 2006) has developed a metaphoric identification mechanism via the vehicle term known as MIV. Through this vehicle metaphor, the linguistic context can be identified. It also makes clear how to distinguish linguistic from non-linguistic metaphor. It relies on manually searching for metaphor in a particular text to identify metaphors. In this mechanism, the first key step is to identify a possible vehicle term for metaphor identification, which can be done “through transfer of meaning” from vehicle to topic. The second key step is to determine whether a connection can be made between the vehicle-based meaning and the topic domain. Cameron (2006) illustrates how MIV operates in metaphor identification through examples such as “I’ve been an active republican,” where “active” is identified as the Vehicle term. It has a meaning of being physically active that is metaphorical when used to mean politically engaged.

Then there is a metaphor identification procedure MIP that was proposed by Pragglejaz Group (2007). It is much simpler and more flexible for identifying metaphor in a specific context. It consists of two steps, and researchers can adapt it based on the research questions and objectives of their study. It is reliable mainly because it goes beyond intuitive judgment, which is deemed to be a part of metaphorical analysis in a given text. It relies heavily on external resources for identification, such as dictionaries, and Pragglejaz Group (2007) describes this MIP “as a frame of reference to check individual intuitions” (p. 25). As an external source for the identification procedure, the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners is proposed by Pragglejaz Group (2007), which consists of a large amount of data from recent English corpora. The four steps included in this procedure by Pragglejaz Group 2007, p. 3 are as follows:

1. Read the text for an overall general comprehension of the given text, which is meant for identification of metaphor.
2. Determine and pinpoint the lexical units in the given text.
3. Try to establish the meaning of the lexical units in a given context.
 - Try to determine whether the meaning of that expression is different from the basic context to the context in which it is used or otherwise.
 - Basic meanings are always more solid for identifying meanings.
 - However, basic meanings are not always the most commonly used meanings of that expression.
 - If the given meanings differ from the contextual meaning, decide whether a comparative study will help.
4. If the answer is yes, to determine the contrasting meaning, then mark that expression as metaphorical.

5. CONCLUSION

This analytical review demonstrates that metaphoric competence is more than an ornamental skill; it is a vital communicative and cognitive tool that enhances EFL learners’ ability to construct discourse, interpret texts, and engage in meaningful communication. The study concludes that awareness of metaphors is fundamental for learners to recognise and utilise them in reading and writing, respectively. A review of previous literature confirms the pedagogical value of metaphoric competence. However, inconsistent definitions, diverse assessment tools, and limited integration into curricula remain significant challenges (Hussain, 2026). The study concludes that metaphoric competence is an essential domain in academic literacy, especially within the EFL context. The ability to produce and identify metaphors fosters deeper understanding, enriches expression, and promotes intercultural contact. It recommends that future research reframe theoretical perspectives, develop consistent evaluation mechanisms, and implement pedagogical strategies to enhance this competence among university-level EFL learners.

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