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Using Figurative Language in American English: Challenges and Successes of Adult English Learners

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In

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Abstract

English language learners (ELLs) face many challenges when learning English. One of those challenges is the figurative language that is used in every day conversations. Often the lack of understanding or misunderstanding, can result in awkward conversations for English learners. This study aimed to identify what interpretations adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language and how do those interpretations differ or correspond to native speakers' interpretations. This case study looks specifically at five adult learners from three different countries. The learners met once a week during the summer of 2016 to listen and interpret native speakers' conversations. Data was collected in multiple ways. Each session was recorded so the sessions could be reviewed afterwards. The participants also filled out dialogue sheets that asked them to identify and define figurative language that was used in the conversations. Notes and informal interviews were also used. What this study found was that there are multiple factors that are important to an English language learners interpretations and understanding of American figurative language. The two critical factors were that participants' vocabulary and their use of cognates from their native language. Another important factor was their ability to use and understand context clues.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

While native speakers can, for the most part, easily use figurative language to illustrate various discourse events, English language learners experience challenges in understanding, interpreting, and correctly using that form of expression. English language learners (ELLs) often come to the United States with little to no experience with figurative language in English. This discursive form is a part of language that most native English speakers do not think twice about using. However, figurative language is a part of language that is used in everyday life. In everyday conversations, consciously or not, native speakers make, among others, use of metaphors, similes, idioms, and hyperboles. When learning a new language, much of the emphasis is placed on "grammatical competence rather than metaphorical competence" (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011, p. 274). Due to this emphasis on grammar, ELLs often find themselves in situations that they are unable to interpret the meaning of what is being said or what they are being read. It can also result in ELLs attempting to construct figurative language in a way that does not make much sense to native speakers (Palmer & Brooks, 2004). While understanding the grammar of a language is important, it is almost impossible to achieve native like fluency if a learner cannot navigate the figurative aspect of the language.

Importance of the Problem and Rationale for the Study

In order for English language learners to integrate into society, they need to need to develop full communicative competence in many areas of expression, including figurative speech. Multiple researchers have noted that adult English learners will use their native

language as a way to navigate figurative language, as they have developed these forms in their first language (L1).

Adams and Bruce (1982) contend that language is learned in the context of previous lessons. When those lessons are learned in different cultures, the "straightforward images in one culture" may not be as straight forward in another (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). Boers and Demecheleer (2001), quoting, Fernando (1996) use the idiom, *"she broke my heart"*, as an example to illustrate this point. Both articles note that unless the culture believes the heart is where emotions are kept, this phrase would not make sense to the learner (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001; Fernando, 1996). Boers and Demecheleer (2001) also discuss the lack of understanding that could occur only when 'distant' cultures come together. The distant cultures in this context is presumed to mean cultures that are very different, such as Eastern and Western societies. Cultures that have similar traditions will most likely not have the same misunderstandings.

The prospect of speaking English to native speakers can be very daunting to English language learners. Often their language learning has focused on grammar and not on conversational language (Kathpalia & Carmel, Metaphorical competence in ESL student writing, 2011). The lack of instruction in regards to American figurative language can result in lack of confidence and understanding when entering the workforce, shopping, and with native speakers of English (NSE).

Learning all the idiosyncrasies of the English language is not feasibly possible for most learners, however it is possible to generally learn about the world native speakers are coming from. For ELLs, processing "metaphors from scratch" is very difficult when they do not have the cultural context for the figurative language and if they don't have "equivalent expressions in

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their mother tongues" (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011, p. 274). Language learning needs to find a balance between grammar and figurative language.

The reason that this problem is becoming more relevant is that the world is becoming a smaller place. As companies become global and wars rage on, more and more people are relocating to different countries in search for new lives. Some of these countries, especially from the Middle East and the Far East, come from very different cultures. When learners are able to understand figurative language in both readings and in conversations, they develop a much deeper and meaningful understanding of English (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclere, 2007). This deeper understanding can be used to help them navigate the world outside of their home and to become integrated more with native speakers.

Background of the Problem

Researching regarding figurative language and English language has only been surfacing in recent history. Van Der Meer (1997) investigated four English learner's dictionaries. He notes that the order of the definitions often occur in the "most frequent sense first" (Van Der Meer, 1997, p. 559). It was around this time that the researchers began to investigate how figurative language directly effects English language learners.

According to Adams and Bruce (1982), language is learned in terms of what is already known. New words are learned in the terms of words that a learner already knows. If phrases are unfamiliar then, they can only be decoded by "comparing and contrasting them with familiar concepts" (Adams & Bertram, 1982). Jafari and Mirzaeean (2014) cite Keeskes and Papp (2000) in their argument that English learners are able to acquire grammatical and communicative language but not the conceptual knowledge in a new language, that their use of the new language will be significantly different than the native users.

According to Adams and Bruce (1982), cited by Palmer and Brooks (2004), there are three categories in language that learners need in order to be successful in learning a new language effectively. Those three categories are:

1. Knowledge of the world and its conventions

2. Knowledge about the various text structures

3. Knowledge of the subject matter being discussed (Palmer & Brooks, 2004; Adams & Bertram, 1982).

This is where the challenges lie for English language learners. They do not have the background knowledge that is needed to communicate naturally using and understanding figurative language in the way native speakers do.

While native speakers may use naturally figurative language, ELLs need to constantly and consciously process and utilize those linguistic forms. Without proper instruction figurative language is hard to learn. Palmer, Bilgili, Gungor, Taylor, and Leclere (2008) created a case study around a Turkish English learner who was struggling with American figurative language. What the researchers note is that metaphoric language is present in all languages and often times ELLs will try to directly translate phrases in to their first language. This will sometimes result in associating "the idiom with a similarly phrased expression in their native language that has a different meaning" (Palmer, Bilgili, Gungor, Taylor, & Leclere, 2008. p. 278). In order to help the student involved in their case study, the researchers used the research of Palmer and Brooks (2004) to create scaffolded lessons that used the student's schemata to teach figurative langauge. Pamer, Bilgili, Gungor, Taylor, and Leclere use the three step approach explained by Simmons and Palmer (1994) to focus on a problem solving approach when their student came across figurative language in text. At the end of their study, the researchers emphasized that the direct

instruction in figurative language, increased the student's understand of the language (Palmer, Bilgili, Gungor, Taylor, & Leclere, 2008). This study contri butes to earlier research that figurative language instruction is necessary for ELLs due the their lack of knowledge of American culture.

Statement of Purpose

This study investigates ways advanced adult English language learners understand and use American figurative language. Each week the participants were asked to interpret conversations of native speakers that uses figurative language. Several of the participants come from the vastly different cultures that Boers and Demecheleer (2001) address in their research. The results of this study will add to the current research about ELLs and figurative language.

Research Questions

The research questions that this studies examines are:

1. What interpretations do adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language?

2. How do the interpretations of adult English learners at the advanced level differ or correspond to native speakers' usages of American English figurative language?

Research Design

The study took place during the months of June and July of 2016. The study took place in a community education center of a local school district. It is a case study focusing on five specific advanced Adult English learners. I was a participant observer in the study. Before beginning the study, the participants took the first part of the Smith/Palmer Figurative Language Interpretation Test (FLIT), (Smith & Palmer, 1979). The test asks the subjects to choose the meaning of the figurative language (Smith & Palmer, 1979). Only the first part of the test was

given at the beginning of the study due to time and also the participants' English ability. The FLIT will give data regarding the learners' understanding of selected idioms and figurative language. Once a week I met with the participants to discuss different types of figurative language and the way it is used in native speakers' conversations. Native speaker conversations were recorded in public areas before each meeting were provided to learners. I will then transcribe the conversations for the ELLs. I asked the students what they thought the conversation was about. The students also responded to open ended questions regarding their understanding of the conversations and phrases. Each of the sessions were recorded using multiple voice recorders in order to be able to review the subjects' answers and conversations during the sessions.

There were English language learners in each session that would be considered anywhere from beginner to advance. The levels were predetermined by the CASAS test that was given to ELLs when they began the adult ESL program in the district in September 2015. The subjects were invited to participate based on their English levels. They voluntarily chose to join the study. The data that I specifically looked at is the data from the advanced students. The reasoning of this is due to the lack of English ability from the beginners and intermediates and also due the abstract concept of figurative language, that the advanced students will be the ones more likely to be able to offer interpretations of the language in the conversations of the native speakers.

After each session, I analyzed the data in multiple ways. I compared how the students interpreted the figurative language presented during the session. This will be done by reviewing the recordings of the session and coding the data. The codes I will use will be based on that session's conversations. I will also try and determine how the learners were able to navigate figurative language.

The population identified for the study are adult English language learners. They are students that were enrolled in a night class from September to May in a local community education program. There will be a mixture of students that are at intermediate and advance levels in regards to their English abilities.

Definition of Terms

ELL – English Language Learner. An English language learner is someone who does not speak English as a first language and is learning the language.

Native speaker of English– Someone whose first language is English

Figurative language –I use the definition given by Palmer and Brooks (2004) in which they state that figurative language is "figures of speech is the expressive, non-literal use of language for special effects, usually through images" (Palmer & Brooks, 2004, p. 370). Palmer and Brooks (2004) also note that figurative language provides a "connotative rather than a denotative meaning" (Palmer & Brooks, 2004, p. 370).

Delimitations of the Study

This thesis focuses on how adult English language learners interpret figurative language. It will compare how the interpretations of the ELLs compare to how the native speakers are using the words and phrases.

The study will not be able to be generalized to all English learners, due to several factors. One is the fact that beginning and intermediate learners will not be included in the study. This is because they do not have enough English language to be considered in the study. Another factor is the sampling of the subjects is limited to availability of English learners in the area.

Limitations of Study

There are several limitations to this study. One is the size of the group. It is assumed that all of the participants will not attend each session or some sessions will have more participants than the others. This could directly impact the amount of data that is able to be collected. Another potential limitation will be the background of the participants, including language and past educational experiences. The primary language of many of the participants will be Arabic. Some of the students have higher education degrees from their home countries and a background with English, others will have little education. Both of these factors could have a direct effect on their understanding or lack of understanding of American figurative language.

A limitation of the study design is that some of the subjects may have heard or used the particular figurative language discussion for the session. If a participant(s) have already had experience with the language, it could skew some results. The participants will also only be given the first part of the FLIT test, which deals specifically with meaning and not putting the language into context. Another factor that could potentially skew the results of the study is the use of the subjects' first language. I do not speak all the languages in the room, so it is possible for students to communicate with each other in their first language to clarify meaning of words.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis will be organized in the following way: chapter two provides a review of the current literature regarding English language learners, figurative language and the importance of learning figurative language to English language learners; the third chapter will discuss the specific steps used to collect data regarding how adult English language learners interpret American figurative language; chapter four will detail the results of the study and; chapter five will summarize the findings of the research study.

<center>**Chapter Two: Literature Review**</center>

Introduction

Nonnative speakers can struggle with comprehending figurative language for multiple

reasons. One of the significant reasons behind that struggle is the fact that often times foreign or

second language learning focusses on grammar (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011). The fact that

foreign and second language teachers do not focus so much on figurative language puts their

learners at a disadvantage in genuine conversation settings. This chapter deals with the literature

review. It particularly examines the theoretical framework behind figurative language and idioms

and then delves in to the literature regarding ELLs' awareness of figurative language and the

importance of culture understanding that form of language. At the end of the chapter there will

be a summary of the literature review as well as conclusions drawn from it.

Theoretical Framework

There are several different theories that revolve around idioms and how they are

recognized. These theories are important to consider when understanding an ELL's ability to

learn and recognize figurative language.

There are three major theories surrounding figurative language and the ability to

comprehend figurative language. These theories are: lexical representation hypothesis (LRH),

idiom decomposition hypothesis (IDH), and configuration hypothesis (CH) (Tabossi, Fanari, &

Wolf, 2009). Each of these theories offers an explanation of how idioms and other figurative

language is comprehended.

The lexical representation hypothesis posits that idioms are recognized through the same

process that words are recognized (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). This means that instead of

viewing an idiom as a group of individual words, the idiom itself is viewed as a word. The

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meaning of the idiom can be recognized faster than trying to decipher each individual word. The hypothesis goes on to argue that the process is initiated as soon as the first word is said or read.

The idiom decomposition hypothesis has the view that idioms are "represented and processed differently" and that the process is dependent on whether the idiom is considered decomposable or nondecomposable (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). The composability of an idiom is determined by the identifiable parts of the idiom and its meaning. Tabossi, Fanari, and Wolf (2009) use the example *pop the question* to demonstrate the decomposability of an idiom. In "pop the question" there is a direct correlation with the semantics of the statement and the idiomatic meaning. Decomposable idioms are able to be recognized quickly compared to non-decomposable idioms. Non-decomposable idioms "involve the same mechanisms of lexical retrieval" (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009, p. 530). These are idioms that are not related to the meaning of the words used. Tabossi, Fanari, and Wolf (2009) use *kick the bucket* as an example of a non-decomposable idiom. None of the words in the idiom have a direct connection the actual meaning. Non-decomposable idioms pose more challenges to a nonnative English speaker.

Finally the configuration hypothesis contends that "both decomposable and non-decomposable idioms are represented in the lexicon as configurations of words" (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). What this means is that the words in an idiom are processed literally until the speaker is able to build up the necessary vocabulary and experience to recognize the idiom as a phrase, not individual words. Unlike the decomposition hypothesis, the configuration hypothesis does not believe that idioms are inherently fast to recognize.

Chen and Lai (2013) note a theory that Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1993) discuss called the contemporary metaphor theory (CMT). In this theory, a metaphor is "considered as a conceptual mechanism that uses one domain of experience to explain and to

structure another domain of a different kind, and that maps thoughts across different conceptual domains" (Chen & Lai, 2012, pg. 235-236 What Chen and Lai state is that Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1993) note is that a person's understanding of figurative language, a metaphor in this case, is dependent on their culture and life experiences. These life experiences and understandings can be common across the board, such as love and life. Other forms, such as anger, manifest in different ways across the board. CMT, unlike the hypotheses explained previously, focuses directly on the learner's experience and culture when it comes to understanding figurative language.

While the CMT theory offers a practical insight to how English language learners comprehend and process figurative language hypotheses explained by Tabossi, Fanari, and Wolf (2009) offer a more thorough insight to how ELLs learn figurative language.

Synthesis of research

The review of the literature regarding figurative language and English language learners will begin with ELL awareness of figurative language and how culture affects the understanding of figurative language.

ELL Awareness of Figurative Language

Figurative language is one way that people use to communicate with each other. Even though it is language that is used in everyday conversation, many people find it difficult to comprehend and use. English language learners often struggle with that language in conversation as well as in reading (Palmer & Brooks, 2004). Students who have not developed native like proficiency not in English find different ways to compensate lack of understanding spoken speech. Some use their social English to offset for their inability to manipulate that form of language. Others avoid using more than basic academic English during class (Carrol & Hasson,

2004). Not to be conversant in figurative language puts the students at a significant disadvantage as they progress through school (Palmer & Brooks, 2004).

Chen and Lai (2012) conducted a study to measure college English learners' ability to recognize figurative statements. The researchers had them identify different figurative language forms. They noticed that most of the students identified the extremes, either figurative language or not. The sentences that were scored in the middle were the ones that the students did not understand (Chen & Lai, 2012). Boers and Demecheleer (2001) conducted a similar study with French university students using English figurative language. When the students encountered phrases that they were unfamiliar with they strived to associate the unfamiliar phrases with phrases they knew (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). What would happen is that the initial meaning would be lost on the students and a new meaning would occur. Among the challenging phrases that the French students struggled with was "*to hang up one's hat*." As many of the students did not understand the English, they associated the saying with a French saying that meant *"congratulating someone"* (Boers & Demecheleer, 2001). In the Boers and Demecheleer (2001) study, the idiom that the students struggled with was non-decomposable. This result is consistent with what Tabossi, Fanari, and Wolf (2009) indicate in their research regarding the ease that nonnative speakers are able to understand figurative language.. What happens when these miss associations occur is that the learners will use the wrong register which can result in awkward translations and/or conversations (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011). For English learners it is important to try and avoid these potentially awkward situations when speaking with native speakers and build confidence in the speakers. These studies illustrate that nonnative speakers are able to recognize figurative language when they encounter it in conversations and readings.

Dong (2004) notes that "metaphorical language is seldom taught in the beginning stage" of language acquisition. Many teachers fear that teaching figurative language will overwhelm language students. Teachers often believe that language learners will understand metaphorical language as they start to have conversations with native speakers. However when these students begin to speak with native speakers. Dong quoting Pollio (1977) states that an "average native English speakers uses about five metaphors per minute, 300 per hour, and more than 1,000 per day at the rate of a 4-hour speaking day (Dong, 2004). When a nonnative speaker encounters figurative language on a scale such as that, they quickly become lost in every day conversations with native speakers.

Culture and Figurative Language

While there can be similarities between cultures, it is important to note the difference when using figurative language with second language learners. Dong notes that English teachers and native speakers cannot assume that ELLs share the same cultural conventions (Dong, 2004). She also notes that due to the cultural differences substitutions in figurative language that do not make sense to native speakers can occur. An eleventh-grade English teacher stated that her ELL students wanted to use the figurative language that their classmates were using but lacked the "culturally specific background knowledge" to do so (Dong, 2004). When these students tried to use figurative language they used nonnative traits, such as "pull your arm" instead of "pull your leg" (Dong, 2004).

Cultural background is important when using and interpreting figurative language. Palmer, Shakelford, Miller, and Leclere conducted a case study involving an ESL student. This student expressed that he was a language broker in his house. The authors quote Macgillivray and Rueda (2001) to describe how language brokers have to learn the cultural and contextual

norms when acting as translator for multiple cultures. This can be draining on the English learner.

Often times when encountering figurative language, an English learner will use their first language to try and translate unknown phrases. Chen and Lai (2014) found that "EFL learners were capable of utilizing" their first language to "comprehend English figurative expressions that shared the same figurative meanings" in Chinese. When their participants encountered phrases that did not have the same meanings as their first language they relied on "clues in words and sentences" to help with the interpretations (Chen & Lai, 2014). The results of their study indicate that unfamiliar terms should be taugh explicity and that instruction is needed when conceptual metaphors are different from the students' first language (Chen & Lai, 2014).

Summary

The use of figurative language is something that every nonnative English speaker must overcome. It can be very daunting for learners that are spanning multiple cultures, such as Parmer, Shackelford, Miller, and Leclere (2001) infer. Not only are the learners learning a new language, they are also learning new culture norms.

Another important finding from the research is that English language learners are able to identify figurative language. Chen and Lai (2012) found that most English learners are able to recognize figurative language, although mostly in the extreme form. However, Chen and Lai (2014) note that it is important that unfamiliar terms and conceptual metaphors should be taught explicitly when there are significant difference between cultures.

Conclusion

The understanding of idiomatic and figurative language phrases are something that every English language learner needs to do. Like Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, and Leclere (2001) point

out, idiomatic expressions are used regularly in conversations. Due to the fact that most language instruction focuses on grammar verse metaphorical language results in ELLs struggling to navigate conversations with native speakers. These struggles can lead to a lack of confidence to interact with native English speakers.

Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the understanding and interpretation of American English figurative language by advanced adult English language learners in a community based literacy program in Walled Lake, Michigan. Two major questions were formulated to further explain the aim of the study. The first question that was explored was: What interpretations do adult English learners at the advanced level give to American Figurative language? The second question I sought to answer was: How do the interpretations of adult English learners at the advanced level differ or correspond to native speakers' usages of American English figurative language? This chapter begins with a description of the participants, followed by descriptions of the instrumentation, the data collection, and the data analysis. It will end with a short summary of the research design.

Participants and Sampling

This section describes the population of this study, sampling, and how sampling criteria were used in the selection of the population.

Participant selection process and criteria

A survey was given out to students that were enrolled in night time English as a second language (ESL) classes at Walled Lake Community Education Center, Michigan. The survey invited students to participate in the study. All of the levels of ESL students were invited to participate in the class. However, for the purpose of this study, I focused specifically on the advanced students. This is because the students with less than advanced level in English would need more explanation on basic vocabulary. Students with advanced knowledge of English would be able process the vocabulary and be able to focus on the idiosyncrasies of the figurative

language. Two additional criteria, in addition to the proficiency level, guided the selection of the population for this study: 1) accessibility, and 2) availability.

Participants were considered advanced learners of English based on their score on the Comprehensible Adult Assessment Systems (CASAS) test, which is an assessment tool used by adult literacy programs to determine the proficiency level of English language learners and place them in the correct English class. According to the CASAS skill level descriptors, ELLs at the advanced level can understand and communicate, read authentic and non-authentic materials in English. In addition they can write short personal notes and letters (CASAS, 2017). So, as figurative language requires comprehension of linguistic forms beyond the decoding aspect, these learners met that basic language proficiency criterion.

The second criterion for selecting this population related to accessibility. These students attended an adult literacy class of which I was the instructor on record. So they were easily accessible to me. I did not need prior approval beyond their consent in order for them to partake in this study.

Finally, they were also available and regularly attended the literacy classes. Adult literacy class are not always well attended, as the students tend to prioritize employment. These learners seldom missed classes and seemed enthusiastic about learning American figurative language.

Sampling

The participants were selected out of ten students that attended the class. These are the students that met the criteria of advanced ELL that is described in the descriptors of the CASAS. Cluster sampling was therefore used to select the participants, since they attended a class, which, I, the researcher could not modify. Shensul, Shensul, and LeCompte, (1999) state that cluster sampling is used when the population involved in the study is in its natural setting and that the

researcher has no control over their setting. They further claim that cluster samples deal with schools, children in classrooms. As aforementioned, the present population attended a school that I could not change or had no control over. Of the ten students that attended the sessions, five of the students were not included in the study due to the fact that they still lagged behind English proficiency level of advanced English learners based on the CASAS. The five remaining students attended each of the sessions consistently and were used when compiling data. It was important to have participants attend many of the sessions where figurative language was the focus of learning. Those who did not attend regularly oftentimes felt lost or did not comprehend fully what was being discussed.

Instrumentation

Seven data gathering instruments were used:

1. Figurative Language Interpretation Test (FLIT) test

    a. In general to investigate the understanding and interpretation of figurative language, researchers often use assessments to determine the students' ability to interpret figurative language. For example, Smith and Palmer (1979) created an assessment title *Figurative Language Interpretation Test* (FLIT). I used portions of the FLIT test as it had already been field tested and proven to be trustworthy and reliable.

2. Audio recorded conversations between two native speakers that students listened to identify the meaning of figurative language?

    a. In the development of listening skills, teachers often bring native speaker conversations into the classroom. This process allows the students to hear conversations and words in a natural context of usage. Krashen and Terrel

(1998) state that when natural language samples in context are given to
learners, they are able to comprehend it and identify language markers. The
selection of audio recorded conversations is important because those are the
people that ESL students are likely to communicate with.

3. audio recording of class sessions

   a. In order to define patterns it is best to record conversations that can be later
   transcribed and analyzed. According to Schensul, Lecompte, Nastasi, and
   Borgatti (1997), audio recordings of interviews and discussions can be very
   beneficial. The recordings capture verbatim the words, emotions, and
   exchanges among respondents. The recordings can also allow the researcher
   to review and obtain additional information and the sequence of questioning
   occurring in the session (Schensul, Lecompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1997).

4. informal interviews

   a. Informal interviews are defined as semistructured interviews that often
   resemble casual conversations (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012).

5. Standardized open-ended interview

   a. The exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance. All
   interviewees are asked the same basic questions in the same order. Questions
   are worded in a completely open-ended format (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun,
   2012).

6. dialogue sheets that the participants identified figurative language

a. Chen and Lai (2012) conducted a study that studied that studied metonymy and metaphors. In their study participants received a test that asked them to judge on a scale, which was adopted from Littlemore's (2001) study.

7. journaling and reflection after the sessions

a. At the end of each class I reflected on the usage and interpretation of the figurative language practice in class.

Data Collection

Data was collected during the summer of 2016. Once a week I would meet with my participants and discuss conversations that contained figurative language. Sessions took place at the Community Education Center in Walled Lake, Michigan. This is where ESL classes take place during the regular school year, so the participants knew where the building was and were comfortable with the area. The sessions took place in the evening from 5:30 to 7:00. Each session was recorded using multiple voice recorders. I also collected written work from the participants. Each session focused on two or three different conversations that included figurative language. The participants first would listen to the conversation two times. They were then asked three questions regarding the conversation that they listened to: What do you think the two people in the conversation are talking about? Why do you think that? What part of the conversation didn't you understand? These questions were meant to help facilitate conversation about what the conversation could mean. The participants identified the figurative language in the conversation. After that, the researcher revealed the figurative language and discussed it with the group. I would then have the students practice making their own conversations using the language from the figurative language that was used in the conversation. My role as the

researcher during this case study was an active participant and active observer. I led each of the sessions.

The objectives for the first research question were: identify figurative language in American English and explain what the usage of figurative language of figurative language in American English means. The second question used the following objective; identify if the interpretations of adult ESLs five to American figurative language is different that of native speakers. The methods of data collection were determined by the objectives for the research questions. Table 1, below, outlines the research questions that I sought to answer in this study. It organizes the methods that I used to collect data and the objectives that I used when collecting data.

Table *1*

Research Questions, Methods, and Objectives.

Research Question	Methods Used to Collect Data	Objective
What interpretations do adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language?	Figurative Language Interpretation Tests (FLIT) Standardized open-ended interview Dialogue sheets	Identify figurative language in American English Explain what the usage of figurative language in American English means.
How do the interpretations of adult English learners at the advanced level differ or correspond to native speakers' usage of American English figurative language?	Audio recorded conversations between two native speakers Informal Interviews Standardized open-ended interview Dialogue sheets	Identify if the interpretations of adult ESLs give to American figurative language is different than that of native speakers.

To ensure the trustworthiness data were collected in multiple ways, including interviews, audio recordings, and participants' written responses. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), Stake (1995), and Yin(1989) triangulating multiple sources of data enhances trustworthiness. The data collected were crosschecked against each of the collection methods used. Using a researched based and field tested test enhanced the reliability of the study.

Data Analysis

A deductive framework was used during this case study. By using this type of framework, I explored the current research surrounding speakers of other languages ability to interpret American English figurative language. What studies showed was that often nonnative English speakers were able to identify extreme figurative language. Chen and Lai (2012) specifically noted that figurative language that did not qualify as one of the extremes, where particular difficult for students to identify. The more subtle the figurative language is, the more difficult it is for nonnative speakers to identify it.

Through inductive categorization methods, patterns or codes emerged from participants' world views. Themes that emerged constituted the categories around which subcategories were build. Whether data concerned classroom observations of the analyses of interviews, inductive coding was used to sort out pertinent or salient findings. When analyzing the data, conversations that the participants had among themselves as well as with me, I coded the data into several different categories. I looked for when participants used context clues to help them understand the figurative language. I also looked for when wrong definitions were used to interpret the figurative language.

Summary

This study utilized a case-study design. The research questions were investigated by using case-study research methods along with qualititative research methods. Once a week for two months, participants and I met to discuss American English figurative language. During each session, I used a variety of researched based methods to collect data show to nonnative speakers understanding or figurative language. The data collected by the methods was then triangulated to help ensure the reliability and validity of the data collected.

Chapter 4: Results

Context

The purpose of this study was to discover how adult English language learners interpret and give meaning to English figurative language. In this chapter the findings of the case study are discussed. The context of the case study is also reviewed. The research site, classroom, and participants are explained

Research Site

The research site was located in Walled Lake, Michigan. The building is currently owned by the consolidated school district and houses the Community Education programs, in which this study occurred. Students that attend programs range from preschool age to adults. The building houses the preschool program, the transition program for students with special needs, the GED program, and the adult ESL program. Basketball, twirling, and other community education programs are offered in the building throughout the school year as well. The program that the students that were included in my study are all students that participate in the adult ESL program. All the participants were students who participated in the night classes on Tuesday and Thursday nights.

Context of classroom

My classroom was comprised of all adult learners. The ages of the adults varied from early 20s to their 60s. All of the students were learning English as a second language. The length of time that each of the participants have been in the United States also varied. Each of the students had their own reasons for learning English. Some were trying to improve their English to get better jobs, others wanted to be able to communicate better with their child's teacher, and others used the class as a social gathering to meet with people.

Participants

      I passed out interest surveys to the three night adult ESL classes. The survey simply asked the best time and day would be most convenient for people interested in participating in the study during the summer of 2016. The following outlines participants who met the guidelines (advanced English learners based on the CASAS and routinely attended the sessions). Cluster sampling was used to identify participants who I felt would be most beneficial to the study. A total of 10 participants attended the sessions during the summer of 2016. Of the ten, five participants met the criteria. Participant one and Participant two provided the most data, as they both regularly attended the classes. The other participants listed provided interesting data, but not regular attendees.

      Participant one is a woman from Italy. Her first language is Italian. She indicated on the informational survey that her highest level of education is a high school education from her home country. She is not a United States citizen. At the time of the study, she had been in the country for six months. She planned on attending a local community college in the fall of 2016. Her sister in law is participant two and they often came to class together.

      Participant two is a woman from Albania. Her first language is Albanian. She indicated on the informational survey that her highest level of education is a middle school education. She has been in the United States for four years and is a United States citizen. In the fall she planned on beginning GED courses.

      Participant three is a woman from Japan. Her first language is Japanese. She indicated on the informational survey that she had received a four year degree from a university in Japan. She has been in the United States for a year and half and is not a U.S. citizen.

Participant four is a man from Albania. His first language Albanian. On the informational survey he indicated that he has a four year degree. He has lived in the United States for six years with his wife, who is Participant five. Both of them recently received their U.S. citizenship.

Participant five is a woman from Albania. Her first language is Albanian. On the informational survey she indicated that he has a four year degree. She has lived in the United States for six years with her husband, who is Participant six. Both of them recently received their U.S. citizenship.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the case study. It is organized by research questions.

Research Question One: What interpretations do adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language?

Figurative language Interpretation Test

Due to Participants one and two attending the sessions more often I have used their scores from the FLIT. The Figurative Language Interpretation Test (FLIT) was given to the participants twice during the summer session, the first session and the last session. The FLIT has two different sections; the first section asked the students to identify the meaning of figurative language without a context and the second part required that the students identify the meaning within the context of a scenario. The first time the students took the FLIT they were given one hour to complete the test. The time limit was set in order to keep the students on pace. The purpose of only having the participants take the first portion was time and taking their ability into consideration. Due to the case study being volunteer based, if they had taken the test in its entirety, I ran the risk of the students not return the following week. The first part of the test also allowed me to gauge the participants' ability to offer interpretations of figurative language.

Without a context for the language, it allowed me to assess if the students used the literal meaning of the word. This analysis was useful in answering my first research question.

On the last day the students were given ninety minutes to complete both sections of the test. The extended time was given because the second part of the test had more reading involved. The two participants also completed the complete test, which was given at the end of the summer session. At the beginning of the summer only the first section of the test was given.

The FLIT consisted of fifty questions, twenty-five questions for each part. The first twenty-five questions the offer only the figurative language. The second set of twenty-five questions use different figurative language in context of several sentences. Participants one and two answered all fifty questions at the end of the session. The result of their final test can be found on the matrix below.

The table below outlines the results of the FLIT by the two participants that attended the most classes (participants one and two.) Participant two was able to correctly identify figurative language over 50% of the time on the test. Participant one was only able to correctly identify 32% of the figurative language on the FLIT.

Table 1

Results of FLIT From Participants One and Two

Participant Number	Number of times figurative language was correctly identified	Number of times figurative language was incorrectly identified.
Participant 1	16	34
Participant 2	28	22

Procedures

For the first three sessions, the participants were given the transcribed conversations that were recorded. They then listened to the recorded conversation while following along. I made this decision to help the students become more comfortable with the process of the sessions. After the first three sessions, I then started to play the audio before giving the students the transcribed conversation. By waiting to give the students the transcribed conversations, I was able to first find out their initial understanding of the conversations by just listening to the native speakers. The students were then given the transcribed conversations to read while listening to the conversation again.

Native Language and Figurative Language

The participants' native language played a role in the interpretations that English language learners give to figurative language. Participants whose first language is similar to English seemed to have an easier time identifying words than those that have first language that is very different from English. This became evident during one of the sessions. The conversation that the participants listened a conversation that used the phrases "..such a long face" and "foggiest idea." The Japanese participant had a more difficult time understanding the sentences and struggled finding words that they could use to help understand the meaning. Participant four, whose first language Albanian, was able to quickly identify the figurative language in the conversation. He was also able to understand that long face meant that the person in the conversation was sad.

When reviewing my notes of previous sessions. I noticed a similar pattern. The participants who were Albanian and Italian speakers, seemed to fair better at recognizing unfamiliar vocabulary when they heard the words versus reading. This is due to the fact that

most Albanian and English cognates sound the same but look different. An example that participant one gave me during a session was the English word victory and the Albanian word fitore. When said aloud, these words sound very similar, so the Albanian speakers are able to guess at the meaning correctly. This can help them understand the overall meaning of a conversation or sentence, without knowing every single word. This can however work to the determinate of a learner that has learned to rely on the cognates when trying to understand meanings of conversations.

When talking with Participant one, whose first language is Italian, she described a humorous situation that she found herself in when she had just come to the United States. There was a mix up over the word libreria. With all of cognates between Italian and English, she assumed that when a friend asked to meet her at the library, she interpreted that as bookstore. She was waiting at the local bookstore while her friend was waiting for her at the library. She told me that library is a word she will never misinterpret again.

Vocabulary and Figurative Language

When the participants encountered figurative language, they would immediately use their prior knowledge of the English language. However as Van Der Meer (1997) notes, often the initial definitions that ELLs assign is the most popular definition because that is what is in dictionaries and what is taught. This held true for the participants of my case study.

An example of this occurred when the participants came across the phrase "knock it out of the park." Native speakers generally interpret park in this case as a baseball park. Participant three did not interpret "park" as a baseball park however. She interpreted park as a park as something akin to a city park where you play. Many of the other participants interpreted park as the place that you "take the kids to play and walk dogs."

With the phrase "knocked it out of the park" Participant one knew that in the context of the conversation that "knocked it out of the park" meant that "they did good. Participant one pointed out that in the same sentence the speaker used the phrase "it went well," she then said she used that phrase to assume that the phrase means "it went well."

The interpretations of English language learners is reliant on several factors. One of those factors is the vocabulary that the learner has. The more American English vocabulary that the learner knows the more likely they were to interpret the figurative language correctly. Due to most language dictionaries assigning the most popular definition, English learners, can sometimes miss the different meanings of words when it used in other ways.

Research Question 2: How do the interpretations of adult English learners at the advanced level differ or correspond to native speakers usages of American English figurative language?

When understanding figurative language, many of the participants used context clues to help them. They would rely on their own knowledge of American English to make up for the words they were not sure on. There were times that the participants were able to use context clues to help them interpret the figurative language correctly, despite misunderstanding or mistranslating the language in the conversations they heard. The phrase "knock it out of the park" was a phrase that many of the participants were able to use context clues to interpret correctly, almost all of the participants misunderstood the word "park." Native speakers use the phrase "knock it out of the park" referring to a baseball park and a player hit a home run. It means that something was done very well. When my participants heard the phrase "knock it out of the park" they immediately thought of a park as somewhere where they could walk their dogs or take their children. This led to some confusion as to how it could mean something done well.

The phrase short fuse was another phrase that participants struggled with. It was used in the following sentence: *"I can't stand him anymore! He has such a short fuse that even a little piece of friendly advice sets him off."* Using similar strategies that they used with "knock it out of the park," they were able to gain meaning of the conversation, but did not correctly define the phrase "short fuse." Within the context of the conversation, Participant 4 knew that the person speaking in the conversation was not accepting advice from someone. While his definition of the figurative language short fuse was incorrect (he defined it as confused) he was able to gain the meaning of the conversation. Other participants had similar definitions. They seemed to gravitate towards the ending "fuse" and to associate that with the word confuse. The definition of fuse had to be directly taught in order to show the participants that "fuse" was its own word, not the suffix of the word "short."

One phrase that the participants were able to identify correctly by using vocabulary was "foggiest idea." When they came across this phrase, Particpants two and four had a conversation about the meaning while the other participants were working. Both understood and knew what "fog" meant. They defined fog as a cloud on the ground. From that definition, they were able to understand that "I don't have the foggiest idea" to mean that that the speaker wasn't clear or didn't know. While it wasn't an exact definition, it was close enough that they were able to understand the conversation between the two speakers.

Summary

What this case study found was that this case study found was that the interpretations and understanding of figurative language depends on a variety of factors. One of those factors is the understanding of American English vocabulary that the English learner already has. If the learner defines a word in context that is incorrect, their interpretations and/or understanding of

conversation could completely change. For the most part, the advanced English language learner

was able to navigate a conversation successfully with figurative language. There may have been

some meaning loss, however the participants used context clues and their knowledge of

American English vocabulary to derive the main message.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary

Figurative language is used in conversations every day. Native speakers understand the context of the language and the meanings behind it. English language learners however can struggle with this aspect of learning American English. This can result in misunderstandings or awkwardness for the ELL.

Palmer, Shakelford, Miller, and Leclere (2006) state that teachers "use idiomatic expressions in roughly one out of every ten words in the classroom." Due to these ratios being similar to everyday conversations, nonnative English speakers can struggle in everyday conversations with native English speakers.

This case study sought to find out what interpretations adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language and how are those interpretations differ or correspond to native speakers' usages of American English figurative language. The following questions were questions the study aimed to answer:

1. What interpretations do adult English learners at the advanced level give to American English figurative language?

2. How do the interpretations of adult English learners at the advanced level differ or correspond to native speakers' usages of American English figurative language?

In order to answer these questions a case study was done that involved five advanced nonnative American English speakers. The participants met with me once a week during the months of June in July of 2016. During each sessions the participants listened to figurative language used in native English speakers' conversations. These conversations were recorded in public places. After each session the data was analyzed in multiple ways. Deductive framework was the

guiding framework in this study. I located themes and created categories around emerging themes.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore interpretations that nonnative advanced English language learners give to American English figurative language and how do those interpretations differ from native speakers.

Discussion

The results from this study mirror the results from Chen and Lai (2012) and Boers and Demecheleer (2001). In both of these studies the researchers found that the nonnative English speakers were able to identify figurative language in different forms. Specifically Boers and Demecheleer (2001) found that ELLs were able to identify the extremes of the spectrum of figurative language i.e. if the figurative language was clearly figurative or clearly not, the learners were more likely to identify it correctly. If the sentences were somewhere in the middle they had a harder time identifying the language.

When English language learners are interpreting figurative language there are several different factors that play a role. Their vocabulary in English is very important as well as their native language. When the participants encountered language they were unsure of, they would replace that word with a word that sounded similar in their native language. The word replacement can result in speakers of languages that are similar to English (Spanish, Albanian, Italian, etc.) finding cognates that may or may not make sense. Due to false cognates, sometimes mistranslations occur. For speakers that speak languages that are very different from English (Arabic, Chinese, Russian etc.) they often are completely in the dark when trying to find words that are cognates.

The results of the study seem to support the lexical representation hypothesis (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). This hypothesis states that due to "their lack of semantic compositionality idioms are mentally represented as long, morphologically complex words" (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). The participants of the study almost always treated and defined the figurative language as one word instead of multiple individual words. Even when asked what the language means they did not define the words individually, they gave meaning to the group of words.

The study also supports the contemporary metaphor theory (CMT). Chen and Lai (2013) reference Lakaff and Johnson (1980) and Lakoff (1993) in that a person's understanding of figurative language is dependent on their culture and life experiences. This can be seen in the example of "knock it out the park." Many of the participants did not interpret park as a baseball park but a park in the city. A learner's culture is something that is frequently brought up in the literature regarding ELLs and figurative language. Palmer, Shakelford, Miller, and Leclere quote Macgillivray who describes often times translators in families can become drained when they are going between multiple cultures.

Recommendations

All over the world people are becoming students of English. Many of these English programs follow a prescribed program that is focused on grammar and not on conversational language (Kathpalia & Carmel, 2011). Due to this lack of instruction in conversational language, figurative language is often skipped over completely. This can result in English learners not understanding much of the conversational language that they will hear day to day. English programs should explicitly teach commonly heard figurative language phrases. At the K-12 level, teachers should pay attention to the meaning of the vocabulary that they teach English

learners. If the teacher only teaches the most common definition there may be confusion when the student is conversing with their peers. Curriculum developers for ELLs should offer multiple definitions for words that are commonly found in figurative language. Adult ELL teachers should also be aware of the definitions that they are teaching to learners. Being aware of potential false cognates that exist in languages is important as well.

This study was a case-study and only used advanced English language learners according to CASAS and WIDA. This did not look at beginner or intermediate learners. Future studies should investigate how figurative language is interpreted at the beginner and intermediate levels. This study also used convenience sampling, so it offers a snapshot of what the ELL population of the study area is like. This by no means an accurate representation of the entire ELL population in the state of Michigan. Opening up a study that offers a better representation of the state could provide interesting and valuable results. Future studies should also focus on more languages than the three that this study used. There are several questions that could guide future research. One of those questions could be how the challenges and success of English language learners affect their interactions with native speakers. Another question that needs further study is what strategies do English language learners use when they encounter figurative language that they are unsure of the meaning.

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