

# Bridging two worlds: Reading comprehension, figurative language instruction, and the English-language learner

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English learners struggle with phrases such as “raining cats and dogs” or “go out on a limb.” Here are approaches for scaffolding students’ comprehension beyond literal interpretation.

“What is an example of figurative language that you remember from Spanish?” I asked Alejandro during a one-on-one instructional session.

“*El libro so me cayo de las manos*,” he said with confidence, fully aware that he was now the expert.

“Translate, please.”

“The book fell from my hands,” he replied, offering me no hint as he waited patiently for me to decipher its meaning. He was obviously enjoying the role reversal that was taking place.

“The book is boring,” I guessed after a moment of thought.

“Yes,” he quietly answered with a smile.

**Aiding this transformation** in Alejandro’s (names are pseudonyms) ability to comprehend figurative language, in particular the use of idioms, was an arduous task. As an English-language learner (ELL), he struggled to acquire the necessary English vocabulary to be academically and socially successful as well as the crucial schema that was different from his own cultural background.

Undoubtedly, as he further develops his ability to read and understand English, he will continue to encounter challenging figures of speech in the classroom and in everyday life.

Alejandro is not alone in making sense of the complex world of English figurative language; in fact, as a Spanish-speaking high school student, Alejandro represents the fastest growing demographic in American schools (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2004; Slavin &

Cheung, 2004). In 1999, Waggoner reported that one in six U.S. adolescents aged 14 to 19 either spoke a language other than English at home, was born in a foreign country, or both. In many schools, there is an unrealistic expectation that these students learn to speak English quickly with no interruption to the flow of their education. But the language the ELL students are learning is rich in words and phrases that, at times, may seem confusing because of the disparity between the literal and figurative meanings. These words and phrases, understood by proficient native English-speakers as part of everyday discourse, lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding for ELLs.

Lazar, Warr-Leeper, Nicholson, and Johnson (1989) reported that 11.5% of classroom lectures contain figurative language and that teachers use idiomatic expressions in roughly 1 out of every

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10 words when addressing the class. Because idioms do not translate well from language to language, the ELL student has difficulty decoding social and academic phrases that include figurative language. For example, in looking at a simple word such as *hot* (which has multiple literal and figurative meanings), one can begin to understand the perplexity that arises for ELL students when they are exposed to the English language. A *hot* oven gives off heat and may cause a burn if one touches it. A *hot* rod is not a burning stick but a *cool* car. A *hot-headed* person is one who angers easily, but to “*hotfoot* it” connotes speed. Meanwhile, to have a *hot* hand refers to having a mix of playing cards that almost ensures a win in a card game.

In addition to these multiple meanings, *hot* is also used in figurative phrases. If someone is said to be *hot under the collar*, he or she is angry. In media terminology, *hot off the press* refers to a newspaper that has just been printed. Considering these examples, one can see that figurative language is a necessary component of instruction for ELL students. Without proper instruction, it is difficult for these students to weave through the complexity of language as they work to become proficient English-language speakers, readers, and writers.

Palmer and Brooks (2004), referencing the work of Nippold (1998) on later-language development, noted that the “inability to interpret figurative language leads to a breakdown in text comprehension, which in turn can frustrate readers and discourage them from continuing the reading task” (p. 370). A breakdown in listening comprehension also occurs when students cannot understand conversational phrases that include figurative language expressions. Thus, developing figurative language comprehension is essential for student social and academic success (Qualls & Harris, 1999). To scaffold these students, it is imperative that teachers design and implement instruction for figurative language interpretation to increase student comprehension. This complex task can be particularly challenging for teachers of ELL students who must consider a wide range

of background experiences when designing instruction for culturally and linguistically diverse populations.

In this article, we propose and discuss specific figurative language interpretation strategies for teachers to apply in today’s classroom to scaffold ELL students as they acquire the essentials necessary for academic and social understanding.

## Alejandro: A classroom observation

To escape civil strife in Central America, the Alvarez family settled in Los Angeles, in an area where speaking English was not necessary for survival. Alejandro, the middle child of five and the youngest boy, was born in that Los Angeles community. According to Alejandro, he did not have a pressing need to speak English until he entered the public school system at the age of 6. Like his older brothers, Alejandro became a “language broker” for his non-English-speaking parents. Child “language brokering” is a phrase introduced by McQuillan and Tse (1995), who focused on linguistic minority communities and related the effects on cultural interaction, cognition, and literacy. According to MacGillivray and Rueda (2001), language brokers “help monolingual family members interact with the English-dominant environment” (p. 98). Simply stated, these youngsters act as interpreters for their parents, assisting them with issues related to medicine, education, and everyday encounters with native-English speakers.

When Alejandro was 10 years old, his parents decided to return to their homeland of El Salvador rather than have their children live in their gang-infested Los Angeles neighborhood. According to his parents, the lack of safety on the streets and in the schools in Los Angeles seemed more dangerous than the homeland they remembered in the semitropics at the foot of the San Salvador volcano.

The Alvarez children, ranging from infancy to 14 years of age, returned with their parents to San Salvador in the hope of recapturing the rich culture of extended family, church, and community. As was the custom in this Central American country, the Alvarazes lived close to other family members in their large, urban neighborhood. Mrs. Alvarez, according to tradition, remained at home to care for the children, while Mr. Alvarez, as head of the family, worked as an upholsterer.

School attendance in El Salvador is compulsory through the age of 12, and parents have the option of enrolling their children for an additional three years of school beyond the mandatory six. The Alvarazes enrolled all of their school-age children in school, including the oldest boy, who was 14. According to Alejandro, however, college was never a dream of or a consideration for any of the Alvarez children. Whether the family remained in El Salvador or returned to the United States, the expectation was that the boys would go to technical school to learn a trade and contribute to the family income until each boy married and moved out of the family home. While in El Salvador, the children's use of English was abandoned; Spanish was reinforced. Alejandro's ability to speak limited English was waning.

Unfortunately, the circumstances in San Salvador mirrored the gangs and dangers the family had wanted to leave behind in Los Angeles. Still searching for a safe place to raise their children, the Alvarazes relocated to the Florida panhandle after spending 14 months in El Salvador. They relinquished the linguistic security of living in the Spanish-speaking communities in El Salvador and Los Angeles for a safe environment where their children could be educated and become productive citizens.

On his return to the United States at the age of 11, Alejandro felt inadequate in his ability to communicate in an English-dominant environment. He had spoken Spanish almost exclusively during the 14 months he was in El Salvador. Consequently, he had forgotten a substantial amount of the limited English he had learned to

speak, read, and write while in Los Angeles. While the speaking, listening, and sight vocabularies of his native-English-speaking classmates had increased, Alejandro's had decreased significantly, creating a wider gap between social and academic communication.

Alejandro felt as though he were living in two worlds with different languages, cultures, values, and belief systems: an English-speaking world by day and the Spanish-speaking world of his family by night. According to MacGillivray and Rueda (2001), "language brokers learn to be sensitive to cultural and contextual norms when moving between two languages" (p. 98). Alejandro compared this stressful movement to that of being an observer on the fringe of society, while everyone else seemed to be connected to one of the systems. In addition, his role as language broker for his parents resulted in chronic absenteeism. Family needs, including serving as translator and also being expected to work and contribute to the family income, took precedence over Alejandro's formal education.

Drawing on weekly observations over a five-month period, the reading teacher described Alejandro as a quiet young man who was hesitant to speak during one-on-one instructional sessions. Alejandro's heavily accented speech, at first barely audible, was halting and tentative as he translated the Spanish in his head to the English he vocalized. He expressed his dislike of reading and writing and his lack of confidence in performing both tasks. Alejandro's comments—"I don't read as fast as the others" or "It is hard to see so many questions about what I read and try to find the answers"—offer insight into his self-doubts. Alejandro believed everyone was judging him on his outward performance. Therefore, to dissuade his teachers and classmates from asking him further questions, he learned to give barely audible responses when called upon by teachers or when working in small groups with peers. This tactic worked for him in class on a daily basis.

During the instructional sessions, Alejandro's highly developed literal listening skills

became evident. He loved listening to stories and was able to process literal narrative material; this was confirmed by his ability to retell and discuss what was read to him and to respond successfully to most questions asked. He did, however, have difficulty answering comprehension questions that required figurative language interpretation. When the same text was given to him to read silently himself (prior to having it read aloud), Alejandro appeared to become frustrated with the activity and the questions that followed. He had difficulty retelling the story and could not answer the majority of the questions asked. It became clear to his reading teacher that Alejandro's inability to read on grade level was augmented by his lack of academic second-language acquisition, especially in the area of figurative language.

Despite his shyness in instructional sessions, Alejandro was often observed on campus talking and laughing with other students, particularly those in his close circle of Spanish-speaking friends. Alejandro reported that when native-English-speaking students talked to him, he often had no idea what they were saying. Dialogue with Alejandro revealed that he was metacognitively aware of what he did not know. He had difficulty understanding figurative expressions considered to be part of everyday language in the U.S., such as the phrase *raining cats and dogs*. Native English speakers know that animals do not fall from the sky; most children learn through experience and inference that the phrase means heavy rain. Alejandro reported that when he encountered such phrases in conversation he compensated by smiling, nodding his head, and changing the subject. However, these evasive tactics did not work in an academic setting. He was aware that he did not understand, but he did not know what to do about it. He did not have a bank of fix-up strategies from which to draw, as strategic readers do. As a result, both his listening and reading comprehension suffered. As a learner, he felt constant frustration.

Based on these observations of and conversations with Alejandro, it was hypothesized that a

lack of knowledge of figurative language contributed to his problems with comprehension both academically and socially in the U.S. school setting. The Figurative Language Interpretation Test, or FLIT (Palmer, 1991; Palmer, Zirps, & Martin, 1992), was administered to assess his figurative language comprehension. The FLIT is an untimed multiple-choice, standardized test consisting of two equivalent 50-item forms that can be used to pre- and posttest student progress. It can be administered in groups or individually during a regular 50-minute class period.

Alejandro's performance on the FLIT confirmed a weakness in interpreting figurative language; further analysis indicated that he had the most difficulty with idioms. Alejandro did not have the background experience necessary for inferring the meanings of figurative language expressions that are taken for granted by those who are native English speakers. Based on this evidence and informal observations, an instructional plan was designed to fill this void in his comprehension. The plan included explicit instruction and scaffolding to assist Alejandro in learning how to interpret figurative language within the context in which it is embedded.

Explicit instruction began with an explanation of the figurative language instructional goals. Next, the teacher modeled the thinking process involved in interpreting figurative language words or phrases as well as the processes involved when determining the meaning from context. Teacher modeling was repeated using various texts and materials as a guide for Alejandro. Opportunities were provided throughout instruction for Alejandro to practice the strategies he was learning. At first, he and his reading teacher practiced the process together with the teacher providing the questions Alejandro would need so he could begin asking himself similar questions. Then, Alejandro, with his teacher's assistance, practiced the steps that had been modeled. Thus, a gradual transition from teacher-assisted performance to self-assisted performance took place.

As set forth in chapter 4 of *Reading by Doing: An Introduction to Effective Reading* (Simmons & Palmer, 1994), the reading teacher followed the three-step problem-solving process for interpreting figurative language:

1. Find the figurative language.
2. Try its literal meaning.
3. Find its intended meaning. (p. 157)

To enhance understanding for Alejandro as an ELL student, a fourth step was added to the process—that is, finding the significance of the phrase related to Alejandro’s life. An example used during the course of instruction was *Alejandro went out on a limb to help his friend*. The first step was to find the figurative phrase, which in this case was *out on a limb*. Second, Alejandro and his reading teacher discussed what the phrase meant in a literal sense. What were the various meanings of the word *limb*? Which one applied? Why? What might happen if Alejandro were actually on a tree limb? How could this be dangerous? How might Alejandro apply knowledge of this danger to the phrase *out on a limb* and find its intended meaning? What was Alejandro actually doing for his friend? Going a step further, how does that affect Alejandro’s life?

Alejandro saw the connection between the figurative phrase *going out on a limb* and its literal meaning of going beyond expectations to help someone. He recognized that, if someone had used this term to describe him in the past, his response might have been to smile, nod, and change the subject because he did not understand the phrase. He realized he may have missed an important opportunity if a teacher, administrator, or someone in the community used this phrase as an indication of a willingness to help. Thus, the understanding of the importance of figurative language in the English-speaking world became clear to him and he became eager to learn more. An extension of the problem-solving process was to have Alejandro draw side-by-side illustrations of the literal meaning, the intended

meaning, and the life application. This visual representation assisted him with comprehension of the figurative language.

Following two months of daily 45-minute intervention, an alternate form of the FLIT was used to monitor Alejandro’s progress, providing the teacher with ongoing data to use for modifying the intervention as needed. In addition, Alejandro’s perception of his progress was gauged. In a conference with his teacher, Alejandro was encouraged to self-evaluate his progress. He expressed that the newly acquired strategies were assisting him as he built a better understanding of his new language. He reported that he was becoming more metacognitively aware, and was more able to discern when people were using figurative language in social conversation, teaching situations, and the printed word.

Alejandro also reported that he was beginning to recognize words and phrases that were used most frequently by friends and teachers. To help himself remember the phrases, their literal and figurative meanings, and how they applied to his life, Alejandro began keeping a notebook of figurative phrases that he heard his friends or teachers say to him or to others. When in doubt as to the phrases’ meanings, he would consult his reading teacher and together they would go through the previously established process to scaffold him as he constructed meaning for English figurative language. Alejandro said that being able to recognize words and phrases opened a door to comprehension in his social and academic life that otherwise would have left him “smiling and nodding”—and missing opportunities.

Throughout the instructional sessions, Alejandro and his reading teacher discussed the difficulties he experienced when expressing his thoughts and feelings in English. His teacher encouraged him to write down those thoughts and feelings in Spanish and then attempt to express in English those same feelings. As a result, Alejandro felt more at ease with his reading teacher.

A bridge had been built, allowing Alejandro to traverse meaningfully between the two worlds that make up his life. This vehicle of understanding the complex world of figurative language in English was reinforced as trust was fostered. In fact, Alejandro felt comfortable enough to bring his mother, cousins, and sister to meet his reading teacher in order to discuss his academic schedule for the new school year. During this meeting, Alejandro served as the language broker, providing a model for his younger relatives as they attempted to do the same for Mrs. Alvarez. He was now acting as the link, offering guidance as his relatives began to make sense of the Spanish- and English-speaking worlds and their hidden meanings. Alejandro's eyes, once downcast out of feelings of insecurity and frustration, now met his reading teacher's gaze. He was now able to engage in audible conversation that had previously been one-sided. He had found the bridge needed to travel between his two worlds.

## Strategies for figurative language instruction

Several instructional strategies are linked to this teacher's success as she scaffolded Alejandro's access to English figurative language. These strategies are interrelated and include explicit instruction, connections to the real world, dialogue in context, modeling and independent practice, visualization, and use of the native language.

### *Explicit instruction*

According to Palmer and Brooks (2004), "figurative language interpretation is based on students' schemata; therefore, direct, or explicit, instruction is often needed to provide the knowledge necessary to understand not only the figurative language expressions but the context surrounding them as well" (p. 375). The authors contended that direct and explicit instruction aids those students who are not aware of the presence of figurative language in the text, especially ELL

students who often lack the background knowledge to distinguish figurative language. In addition to providing instruction in the different types of figurative language, Simmons and Palmer (1994) recommended a three-step process for finding meaning in figurative language:

1. Identify the figurative language in written text.
2. Determine if literal meaning in the text makes sense.
3. Find the intended meaning of the figurative language expression. (p. 377)

### *Connections to the real world*

This fourth step was important for Alejandro. Qualls and Harris (1999) argued that figurative language may be better understood in more natural settings. Students can capture and remember figurative language more easily in natural language settings as they relate the figurative language to their real life; according to Devet (1988), figurative language is the language used in students' "real" world. Tompkins (2002) reported that many children, especially those who are learning English as a second language, have difficulty learning figurative sayings. Therefore, she recommended teachers use student-created and concrete tools, such as figurative language posters that illustrate the literal and figurative meanings of the sayings. A sample format for such posters is shown in Table 1.

### *Dialogue in context*

Palmer and Brooks (2004) also suggested teachers discuss with students when and why figurative language is used and instruct students in different types of figurative language. Using this strategy, teachers would define the various forms of figurative language and provide examples of each in the context of a sentence or paragraph. Suleiman and Moore (1995) emphasized the importance of teaching figurative language in context by saying teachers must "contextualize" what they teach

**Table 1**  
**Sample entry on a figurative language poster**

Figurative language	Literal meaning	Intended meaning	Connection to real life
Beeline	Bees fly in a certain way when returning to their hive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a straight line</li> <li>• hurry from one place to another</li> <li>• go rapidly or directly toward</li> </ul>	The “Beeline Expressway” in Orlando, Florida, is a highway that connects Orlando to the East Coast.

through the use of context clues. In addition, Levorato and Cacciari (1995) viewed “the ability to use contextual information in order to construct a coherent semantic representation of the ongoing information that must also integrate the lexical and semantic information carried by the figurative expression” (p. 264) as one of the important stages in figurative competence development.

### **Modeling and independent practice**

Qualls and Harris (1999) showed that the ability to understand figurative language depends on exposure and experience. Bush (1993) advocated increased practice of figurative language skills to bring about a greater awareness and command of those skills. For this reason, a learning log was incorporated into Alejandro’s figurative language instructional plan to allow ample practice with identifying figurative expressions in oral and written language. According to Bush, “modeling by the teacher and practice of a skill by the student will ultimately produce a stronger ability in the student” (p. 7). Therefore, teacher modeling of figurative language interpretation through daily interactions with a variety of oral and written language should be followed by opportunities for independent practice by students.

### **Visualization**

By using art to support his interpretation of figurative language text, Alejandro gained insight into

the meanings of more complex figurative expressions. A strategy in which Alejandro created drawings of literal and figurative interpretations of specific figurative expressions was particularly successful. For example, his literal interpretation of *raining cats and dogs* was a sketch of cats and dogs falling from the sky, while his drawing of the figurative interpretation displayed numerous raindrops falling. Fu (2003) argued for the importance of drawing for English-language learners (especially beginners) as a means to express their understanding of what they are learning. Moreover, Evans and Gamble (1988) found that children relate more to visual imagery in figurative language than do adults, who are much more aware of structure, function, and causal relationships.

### **Use of the native language**

For years, bilingual education researchers have substantiated the critical connection between primary language skills and academic success. For example, the theory of common underlying proficiency purports that the knowledge and skills that are learned in the mother tongue form the basis for a positive transfer of skills (Cummins, 1981). According to Cummins (1986, 1989), students’ learning in two languages is interdependent. In the 1990s, the research findings of Ramirez, Pasta, Yuen, Ramey, and Billings (1991), Collier (1992), and Thomas and Collier (1995) continued to support primary language program models. “Second language students with a solid

primary language foundation established in bilingual programs consistently outperform second language students in non-bilingual programs—in both their primary language and in English” (Cary, 1997, p. 16). And, in 2004, Rubinstein-Ávila continued to assert that scaffolding students’ first-language skills enables ELL students to perform more successfully. According to Temple, Ogle, Crawford, and Freppon (2005), children learn to read and write only once, transferring reading and writing skills to their new second language.

Alejandro was encouraged to use his native language as needed to enhance his understanding of English. Also, throughout his figurative language instruction sessions, the admonition of Suleiman and Moore (1995) was heeded; specifically, “they point out that transferring the students’ first language into figurative speech may result in language confusion and miscommunication when teaching in a multiple-language setting” (Suleiman & Moore, in Palmer & Brooks, 2004, p. 374). Alejandro’s instructional plan was designed to scaffold his success; he was encouraged to use the figurative expressions from his native language to increase his comprehension of English figurative language. As he developed more ownership for this meaning-making process, Alejandro demonstrated an increasing ability to monitor his own understanding of figurative language within different contexts.

Teachers must assume that all students are capable of learning English given the proper support, appropriate instruction, and adequate time. Teachers are also challenged by the reality that students learning English are at different levels of acquisition of the second language. Some students are just beginning to speak the language, while others might only need help with academic language in content areas. Kendall and Khuon (2005) pointed out that instruction must be coordinated for all these different language levels. Given that “teaching everyone the same thing, all at the same time, all day long, just doesn’t work” (Kendall & Khuon, p. 2), small-group strategy

sessions are a necessity. The reflective teacher might ask, “How will I provide strategy instruction in figurative language interpretation for my students with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who are at different levels of English acquisition?”

## Future directions for research

The information presented in this article illustrates the importance of figurative language instruction for ELLs. The pedestrian use of figurative language deceives us of its reach within our culture (Boers, 2000), and we assume that the mental structures are in place for understanding its usage. Figurative language interpretation is based on a person’s schemata; therefore, explicit instruction is often needed for an ELL student to understand not only the figurative expressions, but also their cultural context. Students who develop the ability to interpret figurative language not only expand their capabilities for creative thought and communication, but also acquire insight to expressive forms of language, allowing them to comprehend both text and speech on a deeper and more meaningful level (Palmer & Brooks, 2004).

Further research is needed in the area of figurative language and reading comprehension with ELL populations. Areas of interest for researchers to consider include

- assessment of figurative language understanding for ELLs in both languages,
- best teaching practices for language minority learners to acquire both L1 and L2 figurative language,
- small-group strategy instruction and differentiated instruction,
- methodologies to successfully include figurative language interpretation instruction with the curriculum for ELLs,
- strategies for overcoming language and cultural barriers,

- age-related issues related to the development of figurative language and thought, and
- preservice and inservice teacher-training needs related to figurative language interpretation and reading comprehension.

As the United States education system embraces the challenge of offering equal educational opportunities to a culturally and linguistically diverse population, the issue of figurative language interpretation and comprehension must also be given more consideration by both researchers and practitioners. It is imperative that decisions about curriculum and best teaching practices be based on a solid foundation of reading research.

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