

Exploring metaphors in the classroom

Gillian Lazar, Senior Lecturer, Middlesex University, London

When our students listen to pop songs in English, browse web sites in English or watch movies in English they frequently meet language rich in its use of metaphors. Yet metaphors are often rather neglected in the classroom. So what kinds of metaphors should we teach, why should we teach them and how can we do so effectively?

Kinds of metaphors

Our students may meet many different kinds of metaphors in English. We usually think of metaphor as being a comparison between two things which are not usually connected with each other, so that the characteristics of the one are carried over to the other. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, Romeo famously compares Juliet to the sun, so that the qualities of the sun (radiance and warmth) are carried over to Juliet. Not only literary English, but everyday English is full of these kinds of metaphors. For example, there are many fixed expressions found in dictionaries which can only be understood metaphorically, such as:

- 'a step in the right direction' or
- to 'sell like hot cakes'

There are also many words which can have both literal and metaphorical meanings:

- verbs such as to 'hammer' or 'to stream'
- adjectives such as 'infectious' or 'lukewarm'
- nouns such as 'ingredients' and 'foundation'.

Increasing student vocabulary

Metaphors provide a handy and memorable way of organising new vocabulary to be learned. Most teachers are familiar with the notion of a lexical set, where vocabulary is grouped according to a topic area, such as 'food' or 'transport'. This idea can be extended to create 'metaphorical sets', where we group together the words and expressions that have a metaphorical, rather than a literal, meaning. Here are some examples:

- **Body vocabulary**
 - the heart of the city
 - the foot of the mountain/bed/stairs
 - to give a hand
 - to break somebody's heart
- **Weather vocabulary**
 - a warm welcome
 - to freeze somebody out
 - to be snowed under
 - to storm out
 - a hail of abuse
- **Colour vocabulary**
 - to see red
 - a grey area

- a white lie
- to give somebody the green light.

Two activities

In the classroom, there are different ways we can incorporate this idea of metaphorical sets.

- One way is to ask students in groups to research and design a poster related to a particular topic. Take the body, for example.
 - Students could be asked to draw an outline of a human body on a large sheet of paper, and to include a heart, feet, hand, eye, nose, etc.
 - Using English dictionaries, they could then research any metaphorical uses of language connected with the different parts of the body and write them in the appropriate place on the poster.
 - The same activity can be done for weather vocabulary (using little sketches of different types of weather) or for colours (using sheets of paper of different colours).
- Another way is to ask students to brainstorm the words in a particular lexical area, such as plants. They may come up with words such as: roots, branches, seed, to blossom, to bloom, to plant.
 - Once you have checked that students have understood the literal meaning of all the words involved, ask them to guess what the metaphorical meaning of these words might be.
 - And once you have established the metaphorical meanings for these words (such as the roots of a problem or to plant an idea in somebody's mind) ask students to write a story using as many of these words as they can.
 - I find the stories are always very inventive, and reveal the real pleasure that students take in using another language creatively!

Improving knowledge of 'chunks'

Many metaphors occur not as isolated words, but in 'chunks' of language. Some of these 'chunks' are idioms that cannot really be varied. Some examples are:

- to be **'down in the dumps'**
- to **'fight like cats and dogs'**

Other 'chunks' can be varied, but generally occur as collocations in fairly limited combinations. Some examples are:

- a **'fatal mistake / decision'**
- to **'waste time / money'**

When teaching metaphors we should encourage students to note them down and learn them as 'chunks' - this will help students to remember them better and use them appropriately.

- We can revise students' knowledge of these chunks by writing a list of chunks on the board with important words missing, e.g. fatal in fatal decision, or cat in

to fight like cat and dog. Working in teams, students should then fill in the missing words and write sentences using the chunks.

Using English creatively

As we have seen, many metaphors in English form part of the ordinary repertoire of the native speaker. We can help students to learn some of these fixed metaphors while simultaneously encouraging them to play creatively with language. One way is to ask students to write short poems with one of the following titles:

- **Weather metaphors**
 - A sunny smile
 - An icy look
 - A stormy relationship
- **People metaphors**
 - A chip off the old block
 - A rough diamond
 - A shoulder to cry on
 - An ugly duckling
 - A fairy godmother
- **Parts of proverbs**
 - A new broom
 - Early birds
 - Birds of a feather
 - Silver linings
 - A rolling stone

Developing student autonomy

Finally, we can develop students' awareness of metaphors by encouraging students to 'collect' metaphors - by noting them down when they encounter them on the Internet, in pop songs, etc. These metaphors can then be explained and discussed in the classroom. You may even want to keep a record of these on a wall poster....and at the end of the term ask students to vote on the most useful metaphor, the most surprising metaphor, their favourite metaphor, etc.!

Further reading

- Cameron, L. and Low, G (1999) **Metaphor**, Language Teaching, Volume 32, No 2. Cambridge University Press.
- Deignan, A. (1995) **English Guides 7: Metaphor**. Harper Collins.
- Lakoff, G and Johnson, M (1980) **Metaphors We Live By**. University of Chicago Press.
- Lazar, G. (2003) **Meanings and Metaphors** (Activities to practise figurative language). Cambridge University Press.
- **Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners** (2002). Macmillan.