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A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

Kristin Lems

About This Column

What is figurative language, why does it matter, and how can teachers best share it with English language learners (ELLs)? In this column, I hope to remind you of the power and charm of figurative language, to explore its rightful place in the curriculum, and to share some pedagogical tips for teaching it effectively to ELLs.

Figurative Language: Are English Language Learners Falling Through the Cracks?

Figurative language can be defined in a wide range of ways depending on the grade level, content area, and purpose for which it is being used. You can be sure it always includes idioms, but it also may include metaphor, alliteration, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, and sometimes irony or other devices. What all the definitions have in common is the idea that the word or phrase should be understood on a non-literal, symbolic level. (In fact, the best antonym for figurative is probably “literal.”) Figurative language enables readers and listeners to move beyond the concrete realism of words to enter into their abstract realm and that greatly enlarges the ability of words to enhance meaning.

Figurative language features prominently in the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), in both the K-5 and 6-12 Reading Anchor Standards for Craft and Structure as well as for Vocabulary Acquisition and Use (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers [NGA Center & CCSSO], 2010). In

the 6-12 standards, it is noteworthy that it is found in standards for both literary and informational texts. Figurative language also appears in the WIDA English Language Development (ELD) standards (*English Language Development Standards*, 2012), both in the Can Do descriptors for Grades 3-5 in Listening and in the summative framework for Grades 9-12 Language Arts standards in Writing. Interestingly, both of the WIDA ones focus on productive language skills. Because figurative language appears in several places in both of these sets of standards, teachers are likely to approach teaching it with greater intentionality than in the past. However, some extra planning and attention is warranted when it comes to teaching figurative language to ELLs.

How much is added to a sentence by using figurative language? Here are a few examples:

1. “I *fished* my glasses out of my purse.” Although it means “I got my glasses out of my purse,” the wonderful nuances from choosing the word “fished” makes the sentence a lot more interesting (the glasses were not found right away; they were pretty far down in the purse; it took a while, etc.).
2. “A storm was *brewing*.” Brewing gives the sense of coffee heating up, possible witchcraft, and more, which is much more evocative than a storm “coming” or “approaching.”

3. “They *unveiled* the plan.” The word choice is more ceremonious than merely saying “They revealed the plan.”
4. “In the last quarter, the home team *gained the upper hand*.” The word “won” does not provide the same sense of struggle and physical exertion.
5. “They *flocked* to the concert.” We can picture the concertgoers as a big group in close proximity, all going in the same direction, just another species clustering together.

I show you these examples because these simple word choices, whether they are in spoken form, read in a text, or written by a writer, give English more power, more nuance, more *zing*. These are the qualities we want young writers and readers to embrace—and to help them do so, we have to spend time introducing and practicing these kinds of words. For many ELL students, that opportunity does not arise because of a narrowing of curriculum due to time constraints.

BICS and CALP

Before situating figurative language in ESL teaching, we might take a look at a key concept in second language acquisition: BICS and CALP. These are the names given to two broad registers of language, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), in the 1970s by Canadian educator Jim Cummins (1979a, 1979b, 1981). Cummins tried to figure out why native English speakers learning French in Canada’s bilingual programs reached comparable levels of oral proficiency with their French-speaking counterparts but not in the school subjects offered in French. Cummins came to realize that the language demands of school were far greater than the requirements of (mostly oral) social language. He grouped these language skills into the broad BICS and CALP categories.

CALP language, also referred to as *academic language* or *discipline-specific language*, has both linguistic and academic characteristics. It requires a large vocabulary, use of many tenses and modals, fast and proficient reading to keep pace with increasingly challenging texts, and an ability to engage in the complex skills of expository writing, among other features. Researchers estimate that it takes from 4 to 7 years for language learners to reach native speaker levels in academic language skills, even when they are in academic programs (Cook, Boals, & Lundberg, 2011). CALP growth occurs mainly in school settings since an immersion environment will not in itself result in CALP skills. Also, first language literacy plays an important role in these programs.

BICS language, on the other hand, sometimes called *playground language* or even *survival language*, takes less time, more like 3 to 5 years (Cook et al., 2011). It can be acquired informally, at least in part, through social interactions or in social media. Some characteristics of BICS and CALP are found in Table 1.

Before educators understood the difference between BICS and CALP language, many students were exited from programs before they were ready as this dual language teacher describes happened to her:

I myself was one of those students who spoke really well English and barely had an accent but I struggled in school. Every year I acquired a little bit more than the year before but nobody told me that there is a reason why I was struggling. I also thought that because I was able to communicate in English and have monolingual friends that spoke only in English, why could I not achieve the level of success in tests and homework if I spoke just like my friends? Later I found out that I had not achieved academic language yet. At the time my teachers thought that I could survive in all English because I could speak it very well, but that was not true. I struggled in my English classes in college, I would get

Table 1. Some Characteristics of BICS and CALP (Lems, Miller, & Soto, 2017)

BICS (Context-Rich, Social, Survival) Language Has Some or All of These Characteristics	CALP (Academic, Expository) Language Has Some or All of These Characteristics
Utterances are in fragments or memorized chunks.	Utterances and sentences are long and often contain embedded clauses; word order is varied.
Vocabulary consists of high-frequency words with general meanings.	Vocabulary consists of abstract, subject-related content words, often with specialized meanings.
Verb forms are in present tense or progressive aspect.	Verb forms include modal auxiliaries, perfect tenses, and passive voice.
Negative is indicated by the word <i>no</i> .	Correct syntax is developed or developing.
Conversation topics are related to the here and now and are context embedded.	Topics focus on subject content and may be context reduced.
Understanding relies on background knowledge.	Understanding depends on language in addition to background knowledge.
Language tends to be conversational, personal, and egalitarian.	Language tends to be distanced, impersonal, and authoritative.

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extra support so that I could understand the literature that I had to read. At the end of the day I did well for myself but I also had a lot of support. Not many of my students get support at home or they do not want to seek for support. It is very important to incorporate BICS and CALP in the classroom. (Writing assignment, 2014)

A lot of effort has been put into mapping English academic vocabulary (see Arias & Faltis, 2013; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010). The research, when heeded, greatly improves dual, bilingual, and ESL programs around the country as well as instruction of native English speakers; however, idioms and other figurative language which are sewn into the fabric of academic language may be missing.

Figurative Language in Both BICS and CALP

All of that being said, figurative language somewhat confounds the paradigm of BICS and CALP. It is easy enough to identify BICS language—describing things, answering information questions, taking part in friendly exchanges, etc. It is also easy to recognize CALP

language in content-specific vocabulary such as words to describe rock formations (*sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic*) or in sentences that use multiple verb tenses or embedding. However, figurative language is harder to pin down because it can be found in both BICS and CALP contexts. It is just as likely to be oral as written, but the fact that it is oral does not mean it is “merely” social language which is easily understood (Flores & Rosa, 2015).

Figurative language can be found not only in poetry, where we expect to find it, but in the language of science and math (think of key physics terms such as *big bang* or *string theory*). Figurative language is common in newspaper headlines, magazine articles, and in political discourse, as well as on television, radio, and in podcasts (think of phrases like the prediction of a Democratic *blue wave* or reports of former staffers *thrown under the bus*). It abounds in the newly minted language of technology (think of *the cloud, trolls, and even the lowly mouse*). Figurative language is employed purposefully by highly educated speakers and is considered a strong asset in public speaking and debate. It is preponderant in all areas of language use,

both formal and informal, and deserves to be an indispensable part of the language education curriculum.

“MIA” from the Curriculum

When I ask teachers about how they teach figurative language with ELL learners, I hear several answers. Many teachers mention that idioms are included in their curriculum, but they do not spend much time on them because they are not likely to be found in high stakes test passages. Also, most students, including ELLs, learn common literary motifs once they start to read literature, and figurative language will play a role. A few teachers find time to teach about proverbs from books of folk tales. Grammar-based texts used in ESL classrooms also teach about two-word verbs, such as *look up to*, which of course is figurative language meaning *admire*, but these verbs are usually taught by rote rather than explored as representations of human activity (*look up to* implies the person is above the speaker, which adds an interesting nuance not found in the Latin-derived words *respect* or *admire*). However, these many facets of figurative language are not consistently covered in every classroom, and many words that could supercharge ELL vocabulary growth are instead glossed over or disregarded. When the meanings of these words are unpacked verbally, students will discover many nuances that accompany the word choice, and their understanding will deepen.

Why is figurative language underrepresented in teaching ELLs?

- Educators may believe figurative language is the province of the language arts teacher only and “not their problem,” allowing words and phrases in other content areas to pass unnoticed. Also, because colorful words and phrases may look like conversational language, they may be left out of the academic canon on the wrong assumption that learners will pick up the meanings on their own in social settings. This is

especially a problem when students are not likely to engage in conversational exchanges in English for some time.

- Figurative language is so embedded in our daily language use that we often do not notice it, especially if we are native English speakers. We have been exposed to figures of speech from listening and reading over many years of exposure to English. Therefore, when we say “Don’t jump the gun” to a student in class, for example, we may not even realize that the student has no idea what a gun, or jumping, has to do with the activity that is about to begin unless our body language carries the message. Yet, if we took the time to show a video clip or even a still image of runners waiting for the starting gun, it would be more likely that the phrase would enter the students’ vocabulary. Of course, a teacher can say the more literal, “Wait until I tell you to start,” but the figurative verb phrase is more evocative, humorous, and rich.
- Figurative language suffers from the stigma of being “fun” language and may be overlooked in favor of drier, more esoteric vocabulary in preparing students for standardized tests. There may even be some unacknowledged middle class bias in that many of the words may be encountered in enriched middle class settings but not in the daily lives of children of color or children who speak a language other than English at home.

If you think figurative language is not common among educated elites, you will find that is not the case once you tune your ears to it. Here are the terms I heard this morning while watching a political talk show for about 15 minutes: *backstop*, *firewall*, *geysers of concern*, *carrying water for*, *break down the structures*, *think outside the box*, *getting pushback*, *come back and bite you*, *bad actors*, *help to back up*, and *throw under the bus*. Think how quickly a listener has to

decode these phrases to keep up with the topics discussed!

Figurative Language Is Not Only About Nouns

Figurative language takes many forms, and idioms are only one of them. I have noticed that the examples used for teaching metaphors are invariably nouns, such as “the *curtain* of night” or “the place was a *zoo*,” but important metaphors are often verbs. A few examples might be “expectations *rose*” (as if they were a physical object that increased in height) or “the class *chimed* in” (their sound reminded the speaker of big bells ringing). Because such verbs are often a single word rather than a phrase, verbs using figurative language may not call attention to themselves.

At the same time, common phrases using figurative language may contain unspoken cultural assumptions or background knowledge which are taken for granted. Americans use an extraordinary number of baseball idioms when talking about politics, and the more you understand baseball, the easier it will be to understand the discussion. Since baseball is not very popular outside the United States (and Japan, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic), it is quite possible the immigrant student will be completely unfamiliar with the way baseball works and all of the meanings the words carry. It is well worth the time to unpack and practice baseball idioms. (To hear a song I wrote for my ELL students which packs in many baseball idioms, search for “Ain’t Baseball Great” under my name in YouTube!)

Figurative language abounds at meetings and helps keep them lively and dynamic. Look at these ten examples from a faculty meeting I recently attended, and try to classify them. How many are adjectives or adjective phrases? How many are verbs or verb phrases? How many are nouns or noun phrases? Which ones do you consider to be idioms?

1. New information has surfaced.
2. Another burning question
3. The gold standard is. . . .
4. The issue snowballed.
5. They put two and two together.
6. It was way out of line.
7. He was rotten to the core.
8. The tweets were unhinged.
9. It helped explain another piece of the puzzle.
10. The data helped us to correct course.

This is how I would classify them:

Idioms: 3, 5, 9 & 10

Verbs/verb phrases: 1 & 4

Adjectives/adjective phrases: 2, 6, 7 & 8

Nouns/noun phrases: 9

A Few Suggestions for Teaching

Rather than having a rigid list of what idioms or metaphors will or will not be taught, you can set up some general guiding principles. Become conscious of your own language use and the language use that you and your students hear in media, from guests, and that you use among yourselves. Put up an idiom wall and add to it regularly. Award extra points when students try daring and creative word choices in their compositions rather than safe, dull ones. Look up unknown etymologies together and relish them. Tap into figurative language, including idioms and proverbs, in students’ home languages. Choose read-alouds that help train students to listen for idioms and other figures of speech. Use Internet sources but avoid long lists of idioms—make them come to life to animate the topic at hand.

Good writing uses figurative language! I hope this article passes the test. Can you find all of the figurative language I have used in this article beyond the lists and examples? Highlight it, and then check your list against the one I have provided on the next page. After that, pepper your own writing with figurative words, and you will find that they will spice up your writing!

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Figurative Language Answer Key

zing, grouped, keep pace with, exited, mapping, sewn into the fabric, pin down, newly minted, supercharge, glossed over, deepen, unpacked, embedded, drier, tune your ears, call attention to, unspoken, rigid, tap into, passes the test, come to life, pepper, spice up