



Metaphorical Competence in EFL: An Integrative Review from Awareness to Application

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ABSTRACT

Metaphor serves as a fundamental aspect of language use, communication, shaping thoughts, and overall learning. Within English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the concept of metaphoric competence has gained significant attention as a key component of communicative competence. However, research in this area remains fragmented. This review aims to provide an integrative analysis of existing literature on metaphoric competence, its function as a tool, metaphoric awareness, and ultimately, metaphoric competence itself. The study aims to unify both theoretical and pedagogical insights, moving from awareness to classroom application. To achieve this, an integrative approach has been adopted, enabling a comprehensive understanding of metaphoric competence, including how it has been conceptualized, operationalized, and utilized within the EFL context. The findings indicate that metaphoric competence extends beyond mere linguistic ability, encompassing cultural, communicative, and cognitive dimensions. Its role in EFL has demonstrated its capacity to enhance comprehension, foster intercultural contact, and improve expression. The study advocates for the development of a coherent framework and pedagogical strategies to extend the concept from mere awareness to effective communicative practice.

1. Concept of Metaphor – an Introduction

Metaphors are used and utilized everywhere in human life. It is not merely limited to as a figurative language or figure of speech for embellishment purpose or to draw a comparison in literary studies, rather it is an imperative part of natural language process through the forms of signs, gestures, symbols and drawing to present and project an idea. It is also useful in conveying implied meanings or to pass a message (MacArthur, 2012). Metaphors are consumed in both written and spoken expressions of daily life. Though the flow and consumption of metaphor in both written and verbal is enormous but mostly people don't bother even to notice their utilization. These are just taken as a part of language and nothing else to them. But there is no denying the fact that human beings are surrounded and embedded in the use of metaphors as is claimed by Punter (2007) in these words that metaphors are embedded "at every point of our social lives, and which we are dealing with in one way or another at every moment." (p. 56)

Punter (2007) even goes on to assert the very fact that "There are barely any words that can be uttered which will not carry and invoke a metaphorical dimension" (p. 74). In addition, though metaphors have a basic and fundamental role as far as our language is concerned yet it is mostly neglected as far as EFL is concerned. In written or spoken articulation of words there is

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a derivation between what is articulated and what does it mean to convey as a part of human language as well as expression. Therefore, for such purposes metaphors are essential tools which are embedded in the very basic of human language to act as “a vehicle for conveying what is meant” (Carston, 2002, p. 6). Though metaphors are utilized to project and convey something other than being articulated or written yet it is one of the best tools for fascinating expression of thoughts.

Cardoso & Vieira (2006) are of the view that often utilization of metaphors act as an assistive tool to express and comprehend the ideas and concepts which are otherwise difficult in literal way. Ritchie (2006) projected the idea in much clearer words as “Metaphors often allow us to express subtle nuances of thought and feeling that would otherwise be inexpressible” (p. 2). Metaphors not only enrich and embellish our language and natural flow of expression but also enable human beings to play with the context, words and their meanings as in the words of Ritchie (2006) “Playfulness is apparent in our approach to language from the beginning” (p. 5). Mostly the metaphors being consumed in daily affairs are understood and implied by the native speakers of that language as a part of expression which is otherwise not easy to express in literal way.

Mostly, these metaphoric expressions have different meanings as compare to the meaning derived by common or second language people. Even, during foreign or second language learning what is the most difficult domain is the learning and interpretation of metaphors. Even how combination of words meant to convey vary according to language variation other than social and cultural variations. And in the view of Anne Golden (2005) most of the times metaphors are difficult to make sense to most of people merely because they have limited vocabulary and language exposure of both their native or mother language as well as second or foreign language. Because the miracle of language is very deep and far reaching as stated by (Frege, 1923/77) and cited by Carston “It is astonishing what a language can do. With a few syllables it can express an incalculable number of thoughts, so that even a thought grasped by a terrestrial being for the very first time can be put into a form of words which will be understood by someone to whom the thought is entirely new” (p. 15).

2. Metaphoric Role as Tool

Hermerén, (1999) deemed metaphors as a tool of relating new information and ideas to familiar or already existing information and meaning as meaning and association does exist the only thing is how they are being getting related in new ideas, situations and contexts to make use of (p. 145). Semino, (2008) is of the view that metaphoric use enables people or readers to have familiarity with those ideas, concepts and things of which they either have very little or no earlier exposure and familiarity (p. 41). Beard, (1998) deems the use of metaphor as a basic and key tool for the expression and interpretation of the writer or the speaker point of view (p. 106). Charteris-Black (2004) defined the concept of metaphor as a tool which is “a communicative resource by which language users may enhance the expressiveness of their message through the most economical means available to them” (p. 17).

Though, there are diverse levels of metaphors but two of them are most commonly known and utilized such as conventional metaphor and other is novel metaphor. While conceptual metaphor theory or perception is one of the best approach that has been widely known and consumed as far as analysis of metaphorical competence as a research domain. Conventional metaphor can be defined as being words or phrases that are linked or associated with being socially and culturally acknowledged and known and found their expressions in dictionaries and lexical books. Their appearance as well as meanings are mostly considered as basic and non-metaphorical (Semino, 2005, p. 227). While on the other hand there is a novel metaphor that are used to denote the expressions associated with unconventional mind mapping of the ideas through which these are linked or tied up (Deignan, 2005, p. 35).

In additional, conceptual metaphor has been defined by Semino (2008) as “as sets of mappings across different concepts, where one can understand conceptual domains in terms of other domains” (p. 226). As regard the consumption and utilization of conceptual metaphor is concerned Deignan (2005) came up the view that such metaphors hardly appear in general or common speech or writing rather these are the type of metaphors that do exist at the level of thought and as a mean to metaphoric expression that is linked with linguistic form of metaphor. While, the concept of linguistics metaphor is a type of metaphor, that is tied up with the realization or actualization of conceptual domain of metaphor. Their meanings are derived at two levels. One is at topic and the other is at vehicle (Deignan, 2005, p. 14). Topic is the literal while vehicle is the linguistic or metaphoric expression. Conventional metaphor consists of a word or phrase that is socially accepted and credited and it is loaded with one or more than one metaphoric meanings. These are usually found in dictionaries with non-metaphoric connotation.

While Steen, (2007) is of the notion that conventional metaphor adopts or denotes more novel forms of metaphor. On the other hand, novel metaphor of linguistics nature can be used in both diverse ways. One is that it can be used as non-conventional outside the conceptual mapping in which it is associated or linked with and second, it is tied up with others conceptual metaphors. Aitchison (2007) defined the concept of novel metaphor in these words in an elaborative way “novel metaphors do not automatically become set in place once uttered or written. In order for novel metaphors to gain foothold and become accepted, they need to resonate enough on a level that captures the feeling of the current cultural climate. If

not, creative metaphors run the risk of being too clichéd and repetitive for people to even bother about them.” However, the nature can be determined the choice the writer or speaker make in choosing a metaphor, whether he or she is tended to conventional or novel way of metaphor which will determine whether metaphor is conventional or less conventional is use and meaning in certain context.

3. Metaphoric Awareness

The ultimate goal of studying metaphor is to utilize and identify metaphor in reading and writing on the part of learners especially EFL's learners and for that there is a dare need to attain a metaphoric competence. And in order to attain metaphoric competence there is essential to attain metaphoric awareness. Metaphoric awareness is with regard to attain knowledge and know how about the concept and utilization of metaphor. Boers (2004), has discussed about the role and benefits that the learners will be able to accomplish after attaining metaphoric awareness. To him, metaphoric awareness is essential to comprehend the need and essentiality of metaphor in daily life. It will also assist in source as well as target dynamic of conceptual based metaphors. It will also enhance cultural awareness and diversity which will result in intercultural awareness and comprehension.

Lastly, metaphoric awareness will enable the learners to achieve linguistic competence as well as linguistic variation as awareness of metaphoric is highly dependent on the fact how metaphors are produced in a source language and culture, how these are incorporated in target culture and the way they are interpreted. In the view of Boers (2000) the concept of metaphor is much deeper and basic than mere as a stylistics and linguistic device. He has talked about the cognitive linguistic layer of metaphor taken place in daily life with clear cut identification and production of source domain. In order to attain metaphoric awareness there is a dare need to enhance cultural awareness on the part of learners. They have to raise the level of their cross cultural values and linguistic variation in order to attain awareness with regard to both linguistic as well as conceptual metaphor.

Boers (2000), has talked about the inculcation of numerous activities in order to enhance the metaphoric awareness among EFL learners. To him, such activities can be initiated from asking theoretical questions from students with regard to metaphor, concepts, definitions which will enable students to achieve linguistic awareness and competence as well as attaining mastery of idiomatic expressions. Kalyuga & M. Kalyuga (2008) have talked about the significance of conceptual metaphor as it has boosting impact as far as the idiomatic expression in L2 or EFL learners is concerned. To them, metaphoric awareness has a role in problem solving skills attainment. Last but not the least; metaphoric awareness has an imperative role in comprehending metaphor at one hand, identification and production of metaphoric expression in L2 or EFL on the other hand. This has a great role in attaining metaphoric competence on the part of learners.

4. Metaphoric Competence

Due to the fact that metaphors are deemed as an essential communicative as well as persuasive tool hence the need and essentiality of metaphoric competence has attained influential position in the last few decades. There are numerous scholars who are conducting studies with regard to analyzing metaphoric competence across languages using conceptual metaphor theory which is the theoretical framework that the researchers has utilized in the current study as well to analyze the metaphorical competence of EFL learners in their writing and reading. Other key studies and researches conducted with regard to analysis of metaphoric competence are Boars (2000) conducted study in French and Dutch; Yu, (1995, 2015) did it in Chinese; Kövecses & Szabó, (1996) conducted in Hungarian; Deignan, Gabyrs, & Solska in 1997 taken into account in Polish, Cameron & Deignan (2006); Charteris-Black, (2001) did studies in Spanish language; Gibbs & Matlock, (2008); El Refaie, (2015) did the same in Hungarian and last but not the least study quoted here is conducted by Zibin & Hamdan (2014).

This concept was propagated by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) through cognitive approach. Others scholars too have talked about the concept of metaphorical competence in modern era. Jeannette Littlemore (2001a) has elaborated the four keys aspect of metaphorical competence and these are as under:

- Originality with regard to the production of the concept metaphorical competence
- Fluency with regard to the interpretation and elaboration of metaphoric expressions
- The ability to extract meanings out of metaphor
- The speed as well as flow of meanings in metaphor

Azuma (2005) have talked about with regard to the generalization of the concept of metaphorical competence and in his view it is the composition of two factors which are essential as well as key to this concept. These are:

- “receptive metaphoric competence” (R-MC)

- “productive metaphoric competence” (P-MC)

Though there is a rich amount of attention being devoted with regard to the concept of metaphor and metaphoric awareness and competence as far as theoretical consideration and research is concerned but very little attention has been paid with regard to the implication and adaptability of metaphoric competence in L2 or EFL. The reason behind this is being lack of practical resources and low level accessibility with regard to target language. In addition, much attention has not been paid to this practical aspect of metaphorical competence in language classroom. However, as in current time metaphor has attained a significance position in written as well as spoken discourse so the need to attain metaphoric awareness and competence is increased manifold. The ability to understand, identify and utilize metaphor on the part of learners is termed as metaphoric competence by Gardner & Winner (1997). With the increasing influence of metaphor the notion and practical aspect of the notion in the shape of metaphoric competence has attained an elaborative tool among researchers and scholars. Gardner & Winner (1997) defined metaphoric competence as “The capacity to paraphrase a metaphor, to explain the rationale for the metaphor’s effectiveness, to produce a metaphor appropriate to a given context, to evaluate the appropriateness of several metaphoric expressions.”

Pollio & Smith (1980) defined metaphoric competence in these words “originality of metaphor production, fluency of metaphor interpretation and ability to find meaning in metaphor” (p. 33). Kovecses (2015) defined the concept of metaphoric competence as “the by now dominant view of metaphor—conceptual metaphor theory—still suffers, in general, from a lack of integrating context into its modal of metaphorical meaning making” (p. 143). Jie Tang talked about metaphoric competence in these words “originality of metaphor production, fluency of metaphor interpretation, and ability of identifying and interpreting metaphors in context” (p. 38). Masumi 2005; Iijima & Murrow 2006 deemed metaphoric competence as a mean to identify, interpret, comprehend and produce metaphors in real context while dealing in target language.

In this regard recently efforts have been directed to pinpoint the role of metaphoric comprehension as a mean to metaphoric competence and in this regard the role of culture, social and lingual background and context are key features (Musolff 2004; Hussain et al., 2024; Schmid 2012 & Semino 2008; Hussain & Mansoo, 2017). Since then there are studies that have been conducted with regard to various aspects of metaphoric competence among researchers. A similar study was conducted by Ortony (1980a, 1980b) with regard to the embellishment of metaphorical competence among learners. The study indicates that there is an equal level of interest being observed among children, young and old alike with regard to their attention towards comparison. In addition, old people showed more inclination towards literal while children and young showed preference towards metaphoric comparison. Marcel Danesi (1992) conducted a similar study with regard to the comprehension of metaphoric utilization of language at elementary and intermediate level in Italian context.

The study indicates that non-native speakers were less competent as compare to native speakers with regard to comprehending and interpreting metaphors in Italian language. Low (1988) was the pioneer among those who had conducted study with regard to the measurement of metaphoric competence and came up with the view that metaphoric competence can be segmented into elements such as “the ability to construct plausible meanings, to differentiate between new metaphors, conventional metaphors and idiosyncratic extensions of old ones”. There are two types of researches that have been conducted with regard to metaphoric competence. One is about the awareness of metaphor such as the research conducted by Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997; Hussain et al., 2024 and Boers, 2000.

Other sort of research is with regard to the competence itself such types of studies are conducted by Low, 1988; Johnson & Rosano, 1993; Littlemore, 2001b. Awareness and survey based studies in this regard are interconnected as both of these types of studies are conducted to examine metaphoric competence. Most of such studies are conducted with regard to children such as the studies of Gardener, 1974; Cameron, 2003. Littlemore (2001b) conducted the similar study on ESL learners while he was the one who has developed and projected statistical data on metaphoric competence. There are other researchers who were of the views that learners of English as a foreign or second language have to attain at least some level of metaphoric skills. Such skills include comprehension, knowledge, identification, production and utilization of metaphor in real context to attain a metaphoric competence and researchers who hold such views include Deignan, Gabrys, & Solska, 1997 and Cameron and Low, 1999.

Harmer (2003) argued that as a part of receptive skill one aspect is with regard to the proficiency of reading skill as it’s involve decoding of both language symbols and interpretation. Researchers such as Cai 2005; Su 2012; Kecskes 2000; Yi-chen Chen 2014; Hussain et al., 2025; Aleshtar 2014 who conducted studies in various context with regard to the relation of metaphoric competence and linguistic competence have concluded the findings that there exists a very intimate and close relation between the two. To them, metaphors play an essential role as far as the linguistic behavior of human beings is concerned especially in L2, ESL and EFL context. Lakoff & Johnson (1980) also asserted the same notion when they say “people understand the world using metaphors” (p. 78). While Winner (1982) came up the conclusion that individual beings are highly restricted to “literal language, communication would be severely curtailed, if not terminated” (p. 55).

Littlemore (2001a) in this regard asserted the role of metaphor in non-native speakers in spoken expressions as essential as “It is a topic of considerable relevance to virtually all foreign or second language learners” while regard to the role of gender in metaphoric competence has been enlisted by Littlemore (2010) in these words “metaphorical competence must not be seen as a homogeneous trait. Rather, it is, to some extent, a multifaceted entity” (p. 46). Teekens 2003; Myers 2002; Walsh 2001; Wong, Lam & Ho 2002; Geiger & Litwiller 2005; Ballew 2003; Anderson 2001; Hussain et al., 2024; Chavez 2001; Lowe, Mayfield & Reynolds 2003; Hussain et al., 2023; Kathleen Ahrens 2009 & Mahmood Hashemian 2012 have also conducted studies with regard to the analysis of metaphoric comprehension, awareness and competence and its relation with linguistic and communicative proficiency in L2 and EFL context and highlighted various dynamics that are related with these domains of metaphoric Studies.

They have highlighted the culture, social and linguistic competence in order to achieve metaphoric competence while dealing in target language. The role of gender too has played a key role in developing or otherwise the metaphoric awareness and competence with regard to the various contexts in which these studies are conducted and their findings irrespective of their regions and limitations of the study have come up with identification of findings in various factors that affect the level of metaphoric competence. Subsequent are the key features that contribute towards attaining a considerable amount of metaphoric competence as far as EFL learners are concerned:

- Knowledge of words used
- Semantics awareness such as awareness and association of words
- Cognitive aspects such as image and mental caliber
- Cultural and social dynamics

5. Metaphoric Competence and EFL

The importance of metaphor in English language is asserted by the fact that metaphorical competence has a key role as far as the communicative competence is concerned. Since the advent of Rhetoric by Aristotle some two thousand year ago, the concept of metaphor has attained a significance role as regard to communicative persona is concerned and this concept has developed through numerous phases and stages to reach its present concept of metaphorical competence. However, there is a distinctive difference between classic and modern concept of metaphor. Classic view is held by Aristotle and it was based on the fact that metaphor is something that is related with literal sense and it is related with words but the modern view as is held by Lakoff & Johnson (1980) that metaphor is a matter of thought and it is embedded in daily life, its thoughts and actions. Noam Chomsky put forth the idea of linguistics competence; Hymes highlighted the concept of communicative competence while Pollio & Smith (1980) put forth the idea of metaphoric competence for the first time.

The use of metaphor on the part of EFL learners in a multicultural context is beneficial for their metaphoric competence but it is challenging at the same time. As they are from diverse context so they are unaware of the metaphoric meanings rather they only look into the literal meanings of words and phrases. This aspect highlights the fact that foreign language learners have to be proficient in attaining, understanding and using metaphors to be proficient enough in a foreign language. Though metaphor has always been considered as a significant tool of expression but it is not so easy to catch the meaning and sense it carries in a specific metaphoric expression and context. Keeping aside diverse perspectives with regard to the production, usage and implications of metaphor Ungerer & Schmid (2006) have projected metaphor as “powerful tools for our conceptualization of the world” (p. 114). To understand metaphor more comprehensively the readers have to go beyond the words into the context. For that learners have to be well versed with figurative language, semantic transformation other than the context (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2006). For better understanding, production and usage of metaphor to attain metaphorical competence conceptual metaphor theory is proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) which have numerous benefits for L2 or EFL learners with regard to attaining metaphorical competence.

Most of these studies have assisted the EFL learners in attaining grip and competence as far as metaphoric comprehension and utilization in target language is concerned. The focus of these researches is mainly on the fact how to comprehend and retain the figurative language on the part of EFL learners and there is very little that has been focused as far as production of metaphors on the part of EFL learners in target language is concerned. This neglected aspect on the part of these researchers is further elaborated and enlightened by Littlemore and Low (2006a) who have done the longest and the most illustrious work on metaphor and figurative thinking in ELT. They acknowledged their failure in putting emphasis on how to produce metaphor in foreign language on the part of learners in these words “foreign language learners probably need to understand metaphor more often than they need to produce it” (2006a, p. 46). However, this acknowledgement at one hand asserted the need to comprehend the metaphor on the part of EFL learners produced by the native speakers and on the other hand asserted the essentiality of producing metaphor on the part of EFL learners in target language. The need of metaphoric production in target language can be under communicative pressure.

There are numerous studies that have been conducted by researchers such as (Low, 1988; Ponterotto, 1994; Littlemore & Low, 2006 a & b) that have highlighted the need and significance of inculcating metaphorical competence in EFL classroom. It is also asserted in other studies that metaphor as well as metaphorical competence as a part of figurative or elaborative form of language has a key role as far as language system and its usage is concerned (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1998; Paprotte & Dirven, 1985; Gibbs, 1994). Likewise, there are studies that have highlighted the benefits of fostering metaphor as a part of metaphorical awareness as well as motivation among EFL learners. They have extended their conceptual framework towards diverse aspects of language such as phrasal verb, idiomatic expressions, lexical tools, etymological devices, elaboration, pictorial support, semantic techniques and total physical response tool (Kövecses & Szabo, 1996; Boers, 2001; Verspoor & Lowie, 2003; Boers et al., 2004a; Lindstromberg & Boers, 2005; MacArthur & Littlemore, 2008; Boers et al., 2008, 2009; Condon, 2008). But amid these very little attention has been diverted on how metaphor based activities be integrated into teaching programs and other instructional activities taken place in a language classroom especially in case of EFL.

It is unsure how these short scale studies as compare to long term academic years are effective for the teachers to inculcate their EFL classroom. It is also not clear how far these techniques assist in EFL in their fluency and competence in a foreign or target language being learnt. As there are several studies that have been conducted in order to pinpoint the fact that learning a language especially a foreign language is a complex as well as a dynamic process which takes into account many aspects such as social, cultural and cognitive domain of learners. These studies also assert the fact that inter-language system is not a constant rather always in a flux as alternation is one aspect that may have a far reaching impacts on the others contributing factors. When diverse properties are in an interconnected link new properties of that very system are sure to emerge and encompass in the process being involved (Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Elis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; de Bot et al., 2007; Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). This is also projected by Larsen-Freeman & Cameron (2008) as “learning is not the taking in of linguistic forms by learners, but the constant adaptation of their linguistic resources in the service of meaning-making in response to the affordances that emerge in the communicative situation, which is, in turn, affected by learners’ adaptability” (p. 135).

6. Conclusion

Through an integrative review, the study concludes that metaphor is not merely a linguistic or stylistic device but has evolved into a vital cognitive and communicative tool, designed to influence thinking, control and steer meanings, and augment intercultural interaction. While metaphoric awareness is an essential component, the concept of metaphoric competence has expanded beyond it. It has been shown to improve comprehension, facilitate intercultural contact, and enhance communication. Its role in pedagogy underscores its value as an enriching language learning resource, transforming creativity, deepening learners’ engagement, and promoting authentic communicative practices. The study highlights the importance of clarity, methodological consistency, and integration within curricula. Furthermore, it identifies key areas for future research, including refining theoretical frameworks, developing reliable methods to measure metaphoric competence, and devising practical strategies to embed metaphoric competence in EFL contexts.

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