my’s ninth-grade students, especially the English language learners, had difficulty understanding a passage by Jesse Stuart. The passage begins by reminiscing about his childhood experience with his dad’s alarm clock but shifts to an abstract and metaphorical discussion of the significance of time in one’s life.

Time was something to me, when I was a child, like wind and water. Time was flowing and eternal, like an invisible river. We could divide it into seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years, but that didn’t bring us any closer to it. There were yesterdays, and time was with us now, and there would be tomorrows. (124)

Although Amy tried to explain the message to the students, she concluded from their blank stares that they did not understand. “But how can you teach someone who has not grown up in this culture to think at this deep level?” Amy asked.

Megan, a tenth-grade English teacher who referred to herself as one big cliché, was surprised to find that many of her newly mainstreamed second-language learners often took her witty and idiomatic sayings literally. She had to reduce her use of these sayings to avoid confusion. Megan wondered, “Why don’t my students know any basic metaphorical language, such as ‘The honeymoon is over’ when what I mean is that the fun and games are over and it is time for serious work?”

Amy, Megan, and other graduate students shared these concerns while reading Pugh, Hicks, and Davis’s Metaphorical Ways of Knowing. A phrase is buried in the literature, waiting for the teacher and students to dig it out. Reading and discussing Metaphorical Ways of Knowing challenged the students’ existing knowledge about metaphors. According to the authors, metaphor is more than a rhetorical device used in literature. It is an integral part of language, which shapes thinking and helps us construct knowledge.

To demonstrate that our language is metaphorical, I distributed a list of conventional metaphors using the word bread and asked students to identify the contexts and cultural significance of these metaphors.

Give us this day our daily bread.
My landlord wants his bread now.
Man cannot live by bread alone.
His curve ball is his bread-and-butter pitch.
This is the bread of life.
He knows which side his bread’s buttered on.
Cast your bread upon the water.
His invention will take bread out of many mouths.
We found him standing in a bread line.
Please stay and break bread with us.

Students discussed how bread in American culture signifies power and authority and how the word is entrenched in social, historical, religious, and cultural contexts. Nonnative English-speaking students who have not been exposed to bread’s use in these
Metaphorical language is often problematic in second-language acquisition and learning and in English literacy instruction. L1 learners who grow up in the mainstream American culture, immersed in oral language and schooling, acquire cultural and linguistic competence in metaphorical language. However, L2 learners are asked in their adolescence to acquire a new language for which they have no cultural references or natural oral immersion. Two or three years of ESL education can prepare them only for the surface features of English, providing basic reading and writing skills, but that is hardly adequate for meeting challenging language and literacy demands.

Metaphorical language is seldom taught in the beginning stage of second-language acquisition for fear of overwhelming L2 students with the complexity of understanding multiple layers of meaning. Thus, students acquire one meaning of a word, often the meaning associated with concrete, sensory referents, without knowledge of other meanings or abstract and metaphorical referents. When second-language learners are mainstreamed into the English classroom, teachers often find that limited experience with metaphorical language severely affects students' reading comprehension and writing performance.

Metaphors are tools for insight—poetic, conceptual, and cultural—and without acquiring knowledge about them, nonnative English-speaking students will always be cultural and language outsiders, despite advanced language and cognitive skills. Conventional metaphors are those that have become part of everyday English. According to Lakoff, even imaginative or poetic metaphors are governed by cultural conventions and our beliefs and values. We use these cultural conventions and conceptual systems to create and understand the imaginative or poetic metaphors. Therefore, metaphorical-language acquisition must involve both conventional and imaginative metaphors, which offer insights into the culture and provide rich, authentic opportunities for learning creative and critical reading and writing skills.

It is almost impossible to avoid metaphors in daily life. According to Pollio and his colleagues, an average native English speaker uses about 5 metaphors per minute, 300 per hour, and more than 1,000 metaphors per day at the rate of a 4-hour speaking day (8). To raise awareness of metaphorical language, I asked these graduate students, who were at the time public school English teachers, to compile a list of metaphors that they encountered in one day and write a reflection on their findings based on a paraphrase of Lakoff and Johnson: We cannot live one day without metaphors (3). Students were surprised to find a sea of metaphors. Some had to limit their counts to one conversation, song, or TV program. Three teachers wrote:

Before I began this reflection I did not think this statement was correct. For me, metaphors were things found in poetry, textbooks, and great literature. I didn’t think people “spoke” in metaphors in everyday language. Once I began recording all of the metaphors I used in a day, I realized that metaphors are ingrained in our everyday language and conceptual system. Before I began recording I thought “Can I live a day without metaphors? Sure I can.” On the contrary, I found that I could not finish a day without metaphors. (a seventh-grade English teacher)

Looking at the list of metaphors that I collected over the period of a day, I realized how many metaphors I use on a daily basis. For most of the day, it was even difficult to distinguish the difference between sentences that used metaphors for descriptive purposes and sentences that didn’t use metaphors at all. Using semiotics in our language is so common, that we unconsciously do it to convey meaning. It is interesting to take a look at where some of our language comes from and you need to have an awareness of history and the culture to fully understand some of the language develops. It must be extremely complicated for second language learners to be able to decipher meanings of sentences that use metaphors. (a ninth-grade English teacher)

Ignoring the fact that everyday I encounter literature packed full of metaphors I was never really aware of how frequently I used metaphors in conversation, lesson planning, scolding, and instructing. To not use a metaphor in my daily life would be like omitting vowels from my writing; it’s just impossible. (an eleventh-grade English teacher)

**How Do We Teach Metaphorical Language to Nonnative English Speakers?**

Research on L1 acquisition and learning has revealed that children learn metaphorical language through immersion in early-childhood language and literacy
experiences (Geller; Nippold; Nippold and Martin). By adolescence, native English-speaking students have acquired the basic and appropriate cultural customs that form the basis of conventional metaphors and are able to use prior knowledge to comprehend and create imaginative or poetic metaphors. However, increased language and cognitive abilities do not necessarily guarantee metaphorical language acquisition in L1, let alone in L2 (Brinton, et al.; Cooper, "Processing" and "Teaching"; Olson). Teachers’ inclusion of metaphorical language in classroom discussion by scaffolding and providing meaningful situations for such language use plays an important part in L1 students’ metaphorical-language acquisition and learning (Vygotsky). Therefore, English teachers of second-language learners who are bilingual or nonnative English speaking should incorporate both conventional metaphors and imaginative or poetic metaphors in instruction to develop second-language and literacy skills. The following strategies show how this could be done.

Cross-Cultural Comparisons of Metaphorical Language

Research in transfer and contrastive analysis in second-language acquisition has suggested the benefit of activating adolescents’ metaphorical knowledge in their native language through comparison and contrast to help them transfer knowledge into English (Cooper, “Processing” and “Teaching”; Irujo). This can raise students’ general language awareness and crystallize key issues related to language, thought, and culture in both languages, thus accelerating their second-language acquisition. The teacher does not need to know all the native languages that students speak. Only the talk about metaphorical language and the cultural conventions behind the metaphors is important.

Sally, a ninth-grade English teacher in the class I taught, learned firsthand from her two newly mainstreamed Chinese students that they struggled with metaphorical language in reading assignments as well as in school interactions. Inspired by our class discussions, Sally assigned her students to go on a hunting trip for metaphors. She asked them to collect all the metaphors that they saw, heard, and used in a day and then to create a collage of these found metaphors. She also asked them to explain the meaning of the metaphors in captions. Sally encouraged her second-language students to hunt for metaphors in their native language as well. A class presentation afterwards gave her students a chance to share their metaphors and to compare and contrast the metaphors in English and in another language. Because she cultivated an environment for learning about cross-cultural metaphors, her second-language learners no longer feared metaphors or felt inferior about their language skills. They also felt that they had something important to share with the class.

Comparing and contrasting metaphor use across languages is important for helping second-language students not only acquire metaphors but also concepts in English. One example is the metaphorical concept of argument. Lakoff and Johnson maintain that arguments are a healthy and welcoming activity in American culture and people tend to treat arguments like a war (4). However, in Chinese culture, arguments are not viewed as war but as a sign of failure or ignorance, or a detriment to social harmony and, therefore, should be avoided (see fig. 1).

The comparison in the figure reveals differences in attitudes resulting from cultural beliefs and values. Students who speak a language other than English can use this comparison to gain cultural insights and greater understanding of reading and writing in a second language.

ARGUMENT IN AMERICA | ARGUMENT IN CHINA
--- | ---
Your claims are indefensible | Truth is in the open, and you don’t need to argue.
He attacked every weak point in my argument | Because of his wrongdoing, he has to argue his way out.
Her criticism was right on target | No matter how good your argument is, away from the truth is not right.
I’ve never won an argument against him | Due to lack of intelligence, he has to use argument.
She shot down all of my arguments | You should give in to the argument to maintain harmony.

(Lakoff and Johnson 4)
Etymological Study of Metaphorical Language

When teaching a class of linguistically and culturally diverse students, English teachers cannot take for granted that students have acquired English metaphorical language and share the teacher’s cultural conventions. An explicit study of the evolution of conventional metaphors can be productive for English language learners to learn language and culture simultaneously. For example, “pull your leg” was originally thought to be used to shorten the suffering of a person who was being hanged. In the early twentieth century, O. Henry used the expression to mean to tease or fool someone when he wrote “A Little Local Color” (Ammer 312). Tracing the origin of a metaphorical expression such as “pull your leg,” students, especially second-language learners, acquire not only the language but also the culture and interrelatedness of conventional metaphors and imaginative or poetic metaphors.

Sharon, an eleventh-grade English teacher, had noticed that her ELL students often felt frustrated about repeated use of conventional metaphors and idioms in class discussions and readings. These high school students wanted to use the same expressions their native peers did; however, because of their limited English proficiency and culturally specific background knowledge, the metaphors that they used had nonnative traits, such as “pull your arm” and “You cannot teach an old bird new tricks.” In preparing her students for the upcoming English Regents exam, Sharon was keenly aware of how a lack of understanding of metaphorical language could put her nonnative English-speaking students at a disadvantage. Sharon assigned an etymological study of the conventional metaphors that students collected in their reading. Using Gregory Titelman’s Random House Dictionary of America’s Popular Proverbs and Sayings, Daphne M. Gulland and David Hinds-Howell’s The Penguin Dictionary of English Idioms, and Christine Ammer’s The Facts on File Dictionary of Clichés, the students demonstrated their understanding of the metaphor by drawing pictures of the evolution of the metaphor. Sharon expected this activity might help only her second-language learners; to her surprise, the native English-speaking students reported that they learned from and enjoyed tracing the roots of the metaphor as well.

Theme-Based Metaphorical-Language Learning

Lakoff and Johnson argue that a metaphor is an abstraction derived from human conceptual systems. Metaphors are not a random collection of words but a deliberate reflection of the conceptual systems of a culture (3). These reflections are often centered on a theme. For example, the concept of love as a journey is “a fixed part of our conceptual system” (208). This “explains why new and imaginative uses of the mapping can be understood instantly, given the ontological correspondences and other knowledge about journeys” (210). To demonstrate this idea, a teacher could pair imaginative or poetic metaphors in literature with metaphors used in daily life to highlight the conceptual system. For instance, “The course of true love never did run smooth” in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream can be explored by inviting students to discuss the theme of love as a journey and how this theme governs our view of talking and writing about love. Lakoff offers several examples demonstrating how this theme is reflected in conventional metaphors.

We’re at a crossroads.
We’ll just have to go our separate ways.
We can’t turn back now.
I don’t think this relationship is going anywhere.
We’re stuck.
It’s been a long, bumpy road.
This relationship is a dead-end street.
Our marriage is on the rocks.
We’ve gotten off the track. (206)

Ethnographic Study of Metaphorical Language

Both native and nonnative English-speaking students are curious about authentic metaphorical language use but may not realize the connection to teen slang. One way to capitalize on students’ excitement is through an ethnographic study. An English teacher can invite students to select an area of interest, such as sports, popular music, computer games, TV com-

Don’t Keep Them in the Dark! Teaching Metaphors to English Language Learners

An explicit study of the evolution of conventional metaphors can be productive for English language learners to learn language and culture simultaneously.
mercials, cartoons, and so forth, or a place they like to visit, such as a firehouse, a doctor’s office, a car dealership, a restaurant, and so forth; immerse themselves in the surrounding spoken language; and collect metaphors. Students note not only the meaning of the metaphor but also the context in which the metaphor was used. Because students are studying metaphors onsite, they learn and use metaphorical language in a meaningful and authentic context. Pursuing an area of interest engages and empowers students. Student-generated reports offer a rich resource for the teacher to use in helping other students with comprehension and interpretation.

Using Metaphorical Language in Context

Learning metaphorical language in a meaningful and authentic context also serves as an invitation for students’ metaphoric creation (Geller). Process writing that emphasizes use of metaphorical language offers students opportunities to think critically and creatively as they elaborate and synthesize. Sean, a middle school English teacher, guided three Korean students to create metaphors describing their journeys to America. After their first drafts, Sean encouraged them to focus on one telling moment by circling or highlighting it. Then, Sean nudged them to use an analogy to show their strong feelings about that moment. Sean showed what he had written about his childhood and a list of words about nature that Sharon L. Pugh and her colleagues used to help create imagery and metaphors (86). He told his students that if they got stuck at any point in trying to think of a metaphor, they could use some of these terms to make comparisons. Sue’s first draft was about how she hated reading, and her revised paper transformed her view using metaphors like these:

Reading is an onion. Each time I get stuck on a word, I only keep staring at it and end up in tears. My teacher thinks reading is a miner looking for treasure. Each time she picks out a book, she finds interest in it.

Myoung included many details about her journey to America in her first draft; however, the details revealed little about her feelings. In the revision, she expressed her feelings of isolation and fear when a woman sent her to gym class on her first day of school in America.

The woman with the cold voice left with the sound of the door closing like a heavy prison door, leaving me alone in the dark with 30 other prisoners with a bear-headed [sic] old man guarding us.

Kim’s first draft was skimpy and lacked support. Following Sean’s lead, she added more details and images, creating a sense of anxious anticipation before she learned that she was accepted into an advanced class.

All of a sudden, the phone rang, which sounded like [a] fire alarm ringing. I felt like a century past [sic] when [the teacher] hung up the phone and told me to go down to the Guide Counselor’s Office. My heart bumped as fast as a rocket. I walked so slowly like a turtle because I thought I was in trouble.

Class Discussions of Metaphorical Language

Research has shown that class discussion of metaphorical language can cultivate critical and creative thinking and language skills (Ortony, et al.; Thompson). Anna, a tenth-grade English teacher in my class, tried to raise students’ awareness of the power of metaphors while teaching *The Catcher in the Rye*. Before the class, Anna was concerned about an explicit discussion on the conventional metaphors, wondering about their value and whether high school students would be interested in them. After reading *Metaphorical Ways of Knowing*, she decided to give conventional metaphors a try.

In my afternoon class, we discussed the novel *Catcher in the Rye* and one of the students, Maria, commented that Stradlater is “the big cheese” at Pencey Prep. He always makes Holden feel like “small potatoes.” (It was lunchtime so I suppose we were all a bit hungry!) We spoke about the fact that Stradlater seems to have “a big head.” After this went on a bit longer, I finally started making a list on the board of all of these expressions. I asked the class, “Why did you guys use these expressions?” They looked puzzled. I asked Maria, “Why did you call Stradlater the ‘big cheese’?” “Because he is,” Maria replied. “He is what?” I asked, pressing her to explain the expression. “Stradlater is like, the leader,” another student, Tom, commented, “the
guy who is like a big shot. The other guys look up to him.” “So why didn’t you say that? Why did you call him the ‘big cheese’ instead?” Maria didn’t have a chance to respond. Joe jumped into the discussion. “It’s shorter. If she says ‘big cheese,’ right away, everyone knows what that means. Instead of explaining everything, ‘big cheese’ gets their [the students’] attention and describes exactly what she means.” “Exactly!” I was struck by how perfectly Joe summed it up. “Metaphors are fun and interesting. They ‘get people’s attention’ as Joe put it. But, not only do they add color to our writing (to use another metaphor), but they help us to say a whole lot in just a few words.”

To Anna’s surprise, her students were more engaged in the discussion. She reflected, “By pointing out all of the metaphors that they are already using, the students came to understand that metaphors are not some fancy literary device reserved for poets but a fun and interesting way to help them communicate more effectively.”

Guided Metaphorical-Language Acquisition

Thompson suggested explicitly teaching metaphorical meaning-making skills to help students with reading comprehension and interpretation (106). According to him, teachers can make a comparison chart for the key metaphor under study and encourage students to brainstorm the associative characteristics of the words used in the metaphor. For example, in teaching metaphors about time, as in Jesse Stuart’s story at the beginning of this article, Amy could first ask her students to brainstorm ideas and to make associations with a child’s understanding of time. Then, she could ask her students to do the same about an adult’s understanding of time. Afterwards, students could compare their lists. Amy could then help students build bridges between the child’s and adult’s perceptions of time, focus on those that reflect cultural conventions, and assist the class in better understanding the concept of time depicted in the reading (see fig. 2 for a sample comparison).

When students begin to think metaphorically, they are on their way to developing their language, thinking, and literacy skills. English teachers’ responsibilities are greater when teaching second-language learners; they must facilitate students’ acquisition of language and literacy skills and cultural conventions. Therefore, a mere identification of metaphor or simile is not sufficient. Instead of keeping students in the dark, English teachers should provide them with opportunities and resources to gain this language and thinking power.

Works Cited


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### Call for Manuscripts

**Authors: Students and Professionals on the Same Page**

For a book-length study of this concept, we invite you to submit an article for publication. Topics you might consider from the point of view of a professional author include:

- How do we help students to make a personal connection to authors?
- How do we help students to hear an author’s voice?
- How does an author exert his or her personal force, through the text to the reader, though sometimes separated by cultures and centuries?
- What author(s) do we recognize as an indispensable part of our teaching?
- How do we bring in the authorial voices of minorities, underrepresented groups, and writers from outside of the Western canon?

Regarding student authorship, you might consider some of the following topics:

- How do we help students to see themselves as authors?
- How do we help students to develop a voice?
- How do our student authors develop forceful confidence as they develop texts for their readers?
- What author(s) do students look to for inspiration and emulation?
- How do we help to develop the authorial voices of our students who are from minorities, underrepresented groups, and from a diversity of cultures?

Manuscripts related to one or both of these topics will be carefully considered for publication. Approaches to the topic could include research, case studies, theory, reflections, or pedagogical investigations. Manuscript length should be 8–25 double-spaced pages. Manuscript deadline: May 1, 2004, for a publication date of September 2004. Send manuscripts to: John Harmon, Editor, New York State English Council, 49 East Elizabeth Street, Skaneateles, NY 13152.