Arab World English Journal
INTERNATIONAL PEER REVIEWED JOURNAL ISSN: 2229-9327

Arab World English Journal (AWEJ) Volume 15. Number 2, June 2024 Pp.305-320
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no2.19

Factors Influencing Comprehension of Metaphors in Academic Reading Texts among Iraqi EFL Learners

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Received:02/19/2024 Accepted:06/20/2024 Published: 06/28/2024

Abstract

Metaphor is recognized as a valuable tool for analysis and as a means to effectively convey meaning. Although metaphor is supposed to be used to effectively convey meaning, learners of English, particularly those in the foreign language context, often have difficulty comprehending metaphors in academic text. The current study aims to contribute to understand deeply of the influencing factors on metaphor comprehension among Iraqi EFL learners when they read academic texts. The study draws on Steen's (2010) MIPVU model and Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory to identify and analyze the metaphorical expressions. The data for the study were collected from two academic reading comprehension texts. Five Iraqi EFL university learners participated in determining the metaphors contained in the texts. The findings revealed that authors of academic texts often incorporate a wide range of metaphorical expressions. These expressions can vary in their familiarity, ranging from very familiar to less familiar and even unfamiliar, to engage readers' cognitive processes and facilitate the conceptualization of the metaphor. The findings revealed that the factors influencing metaphor comprehension are varied and that they are of two broad types: external factors related to cultural and social considerations, and internal factors related to linguistic and educational settings. The findings could enable practitioners to devise more effective approaches for teaching metaphor comprehension to EFL learners.

Keywords: academic reading texts, conceptual metaphors, Iraqi EFL learners, metaphor comprehension

Cite as: Al-Mashhadani, O. A. B., Vengadasamy, R., & Salehuddin, K. (2024). Factors Influencing Comprehension of Metaphors in Academic Reading Texts among Iraqi EFL Learners. *Arab World English Journal, 15*(2), 305-320. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol15no2.19

Introduction

Metaphors, in cognitive linguistics, are reflected upon as a matter of abstract thought (Ungere & Schmid, 2013). It is also viewed as a mental phenomenon, as one set of phenomena is understood in terms of another. The metaphorical relationship manifests itself linguistically; the same word or words describe a specific phenomenon, although the meaning could belong to different domains. In other words, a metaphor can be seen as an extension that helps language users express the idea of one phenomenon to cover another (Cameron, 2003; Hussein & Abdullah, 2016; Hung, 2017). This extension is motivated by a cognitive relation in terms of cross-domain mapping. From a cognitive semantics perspective, metaphor is viewed as a means whereby abstract and intangible experiences are synthesized and conceptualized in terms of more familiar and concrete experiences to give meaning. In other words, to understand the use of metaphorical expressions, one must be motivated to search for abstract understanding (Pedersen, 1999).

Research investigating the use of metaphor as a tool for analysis has shown its significance in academic discourse. Statistical analysis conducted by Steen et al. (2010) reveals that metaphorical words constitute 18.5% of academic texts, compared to 16.4% in news texts, 11.7% in fiction texts, and 7.7% in conversation. Metaphor is essentialy an instrument of human cognition since metaphorical expressions are pervasively used in everyday spoken and written discourses. By using metaphor, one can we can talk and understand abstract and complex concepts through salient and concrete ones. The concreteness and imageability aspects of metaphors can make them an appropriate vehicle for assigning complex or abstract meanings.

Metaphors play a significant role in lectures within the classroom setting; they represent a subset of genuinely communicative uses of metaphor in education. Littlemore et al. (2013) conducted a study focusing on various metaphors used by university lecturers in their lectures. Their analysis revealed that the metaphors used in the lectures served meta-discursive functions, such as summarizing, restating, and evaluating the material. Moreover, these metaphors facilitated the progression and coherence of the lectures by effectively connecting different parts of the lecture topic. In spite of the pervassivness and importance of metaphor in various types of text and discpourse, metaphorical competence is still a marginal issue in foreign language learning contexts. This is an alarming issue as textbooks, for language learners, are one of the essential foundations of information related to the target language.

Metaphors in learning are significant since “metaphors both contribute to and limit understanding, and thus play a gate-keeping role in learning” (Cameron 2003, p. vii). Understanding the metaphors enables the learners to gain valuable insights into the writer’s thoughts (Vengadasamy, 2011). Educators use metaphors to conceptualize abstract notions found in learning and teaching. The choice in the manner of conceptualizations affects the way learners understand and comprehend the reality of teaching and learning. Learners encounter various types of metaphors. Metaphors, consciously or unconsciously, play a dynamic role in shaping the learning context, including in university lectures. The use of metaphors in language teaching and learning has shown significant contributions in increasing the learners’ communicative

competence. Learning the use of metaphors, especially in learning English as a Foreign Language, (henceforth, EFL) helps learners to achieve native-like competency.

The Statement of Problem

One of the most critical issues in studies related to the concept of embodied conceptual metaphor is the role it plays in academic texts (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 2003b). Because speakers of different speech communities do not similarly see a particular concept (Salehuddin, 2022), learners in the EFL context often face difficulty in comprehending metaphors, however the metaphor is supposed to be used as an effective means to convey meaning. There appears to be a general lack of attention paid to the learning of metaphorical expressions and their underlying concepts in learning materials, such as those found in textbooks and other learning resources of EFL. While there is a considerable body of research recognizing the role of metaphor in learning, there is a lack of focus on such studies within the Iraqi context and specifically in the field of EFL education. Most of the past studies on metaphor in academic texts tend to focus on other contexts, such as native English-speaking countries (Littlemore, 2001; Cameron, 2003; Littlemore & Low, 2006) or in English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts (Danesi, 1992, 1995; Low & Littlemore, 2009; Lantolof & Bobrova, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for research that specifically investigates factors influencing the comprehension of metaphors in Iraqi EFL academic reading texts. There was one recent study conducted by Abdulqahar and Hussein (2023) that revealed that Iraqi EFL learners faced difficulties in comprehending conceptual metaphors in academic literary texts. The study concluded that varying levels of comprehension among the participants might be attributed to and affected by some factors that may lead to non-understanding or misunderstanding. Some of these factors proposed are related to cultural and background knowledge, social and ethnic context, emotional states, cognitive biases, lack of exposure to literary devices, teaching and learning style, critical thinking skills, and interest and motivation.

To the research gap identified above and to complement the study by Abdulqahar and Hussein (2023), the current study aims to contribute to a deeper and more precise understanding of the factors that may influence metaphor comprehension among Iraqi EFL learners when they read academic texts. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following question: What are the factors influencing the comprehension of metaphors in academic reading texts among Iraqi EFL Learners? The findings are expected to enable practitioners to devise more effective approaches for teaching metaphor comprehension to EFL learners.

Literature Review

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) forms the groundwork for the theoretical framework of this paper. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state that metaphor is chiefly a matter of thought and the practice of comprehending metaphors is conceptual in nature. This means that the linguistic production of metaphors is headed and influenced by

thought constructions known as conceptual metaphors. The understanding that metaphor is equivalent means that it occurs as a set of communications between two concepts in two different knowledge domains, namely, a source domain and a target domain.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980) "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (p. 50). In extending this understanding to a literary analysis of metaphors, Stockwell (2002) states that the cognitive and contextual dimensions are necessary for this approach as "our minds are embodied, not just literally, but figuratively" (p. 4). According to the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the human conceptual system is structured and defined metaphorically, and largely the processes of human thought are metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; EL-Kanash & Hamdan, 2023). In this sense, thought structures identified as 'conceptual metaphors' precedes the linguistic production of metaphors.

The understanding that metaphor is analogous means that a correspondence between two concepts in two different knowledge domains is known as the Source and Target Domains. In the conceptual metaphor, LIFE IS A JOURNEY, for example, LIFE is the target domain, and JOURNEY is the source domain. To interpret the meaning of LIFE, the ontological structure of the source domain is moved to the target domain. However, comprehending metaphors effectively is based on conventional knowledge. This relates knowledge about the source domain that is both currently and culturally accurate. This means that to understand a target domain in terms of a source domain, one must have appropriate knowledge of the source domain. Regardless of possessing conventional knowledge of the source domain, the context of the metaphor occurrence is another factor that we have to consider when identifying properties mapped from the source domain to the target domain. Only those properties of the source domain that relate the target domain within the context of occurrence selected for interpretation.

Studies on Metaphor Comprehension in EFL and L2 contexts

Many researchers have argued that metaphor plays a vital role in EFL context (Charteris-Black, 2000; Boers, 2000; Deignan, Gabrys & Solska, 1997; Danesi, 1992, 1995; Littlemore, 2001, 2002, 2004; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Low, 1988; Abdulqahar and Hussein, 2023). Some scholars have also argued that EFL learners must have the ability to acquire, produce, and interpret metaphors (Cameron & Low, 1999; Littlemore, 2001). Thus, this recognition of the role of metaphors in language learning research stresses the general lack of attention to metaphors in the EFL and English as a Second Language (L2) classroom (Lantolof & Bobrova, 2014; Littlemore, 2009; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Danesi, 1992, 1995). Danesi (1995) states that the seeming lack of metaphorical competence in the L2 classroom is a major factor that impacts the L2 learners having native-like fluency, arguing that L2 learners do not reach such a fluency until they know "how that language reflects or encodes concepts based on metaphorical reasoning" (p. 5). Emotive metaphorical expressions reflect the necessary role of metaphor in our understanding our emotional state with linguistic differences (Fatemeh et al., 2014). However, being native-like is not a purpose for all language learners, for metaphor appears to be a general difficulty for EFL

learners and generally lacking consideration in the EFL academic settings. The studies listed above challenge the notion that metaphor is primarily used in artistic contexts such as poetry and fiction as it demonstrates that metaphor is present in all registers, with the highest frequency observed in academic texts, followed by fiction and conversation.

As metaphors are pervasive in language, Steen et al. (2010) provide valuable insights into the occurrence of metaphors across different registers in native language texts. Their findings contribute to the understanding of metaphor usage in native language texts and highlight the ubiquity of metaphor across various linguistic registers. In addition, the study conducted by Littlemore et al. (2014) builds upon using the Metaphor Identification Procedures Vrije University (MIPVU) method to investigate the use of metaphors in English texts written by Greek and German speakers at different proficiency levels. The study focused on learners from different L1 backgrounds (Greek and German) and their L2 acquisition of English. The findings of the study indicate that there is a clear relationship between L2 proficiency level and metaphoric density. As the proficiency level of the L2 speakers increased, the metaphoric density in their written texts also increased. This suggests that as learners become more proficient in English, they are more likely to use metaphorical expressions in their writing. The study also highlights that the use of metaphors becomes more sophisticated and creative at higher proficiency levels, with L2 speakers utilizing more creative metaphors and personification metaphors.

Additionally, Littlemore's study reveals that L2 speakers at higher proficiency levels employ metaphors for more advanced functions, such as evaluation and discourse organization. This suggests that as learners progress in their language proficiency, they develop a greater ability to use metaphor strategically and effectively for rhetorical purposes. These findings support the notion that there is a qualitative difference in the use of metaphors since learners develop more proficiency in the target language. The study has shown how metaphor evolves and develops with increasing language proficiency, highlighting the importance of metaphorical competence in advanced language use. Further research incorporating learners from diverse language backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between L2 proficiency, metaphor use, and the role of language background in metaphorical expression.

In the same context, Hoang and Boers (2018) investigated whether there is a relationship between L2 proficiency levels and the production of metaphorical expressions. Hoang and Boers analyzed a large sample of 257 English essays written by undergraduate students of English at different year levels in a university in Vietnam. They designed their study to address the limitations identified in Littlemore et al.'s (2014) study by controlling independent variables. The essays were on the same topic and were of similar length, with year levels serving as an indicator of proficiency level. By controlling factors such as essay topics and length, the study aimed to provide a more focused examination of the relationship between metaphor use and proficiency level. Though different studies have been conducted on metaphor comprehension in both ESL and EFL contexts, the EFL setting seems to require more research data, hence the current study involving Iraqi EFL learners.

Methodology

The present study explores through a qualitative design the potential factors influencing the comprehension of metaphors in Iraqi EFL academic reading text. The analysis was based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory. The corpus consisted of two academic texts selected from a reading textbook used at the departments of the English Language in Iraqi public and private universities entitled *Developing Skills* written by G. L. Alexander (1967) and published by Oxford University Press. The two academic reading texts selected from this book were *Puma at Large* and *Illusion of Pastoral Peace.* Nine metaphorical expressions were systematically identified from these texts using MIPVU. Then, a semi-structured interview was conducted as a method of inquiry for five learners from a governmental Iraqi university. The interview encompassed two pre-determined open questions that focused on what the EFL learners understood from the various metaphorical expressions, and how they came to such types of understandings.

Participants

Five EFL learners from a governmental Iraqi university were selected for this study. The participants were enlisted during one of their academic lectures based on voluntary participation. To minimize the variation between the participants' learning backgrounds, the researcher ensured that they had similar educational backgrounds and were all from the same level of study (third-year learners). They had all passed the university placement test in their first year at the university before joining the English classes. The test evaluated their level of English language proficiency.

Data Validation and Raters

Nine metaphorical expressions were systematically identified using MIPVU, three in *Puma at Large*, and six in *Illusion of Pastoral Peace*. The selected metaphors were validated by two specialist raters whose area of specialization is linguistics. The second rater was from the University of Anbar, College of Education for Humanities, Department of English, while the second rater was from the University of Baghdad, College of Arts, Department of English, in Iraq. These raters were highly experienced in linguistics studies and specifically in qualitative analysis.

Instruments

To identify the factors that influence the EFL learners' comprehension of metaphors, the metaphors were selected using Steen et al's (2010) Metaphor Identification Procedure Vrije University (MIPVU) model, which is a more advanced and refined procedure to identify metaphorical expressions compared to the previously used model known as Metaphor Identification Process or MIP (Steen, 2007). Unlike MIP, which focuses on metaphorically used words, MIPVU focuses on the identification of all metaphor-related words; these words include all lexical units in the discourse related to cross-domain mappings in conceptual metaphors. Then, a semi-structured interview was conducted as a method of inquiry for five learners from a governmental Iraqi university. The interview encompassed two pre-determined open questions

that prompted discussions to explore themes or responses further. These questions focused on what the EFL learners understood from the various metaphorical expressions, and how they came to such types of understandings. The function of the first question was to let the learners clarify what they understood from the metaphorical expressions, while the second question was to have the learners justify their understandings, i.e. how they understood the metaphorical expressions. This allowed the researcher to gather more insights into the learner's cognitive processing of the use and comprehension of metaphors.

Findings

Having presented the theoretical framework for the study, the next section presents the findings of the study which provide some answers to the research question proposed earlier: What are the factors influencing comprehension of metaphors in academic reading texts among Iraqi EFL Learners?

Analysis of the first text*: Puma at large*

The first passage included three metaphorical expressions identified based on the MIPUV and confirmed by the raters. These metaphorical expressions were extracted as given below from their linguistic context. As these metaphorical expressions are connected in one unified and coherent text, they will be analyzed together as one contextual unit. The following excerpts contain the metaphorical expressions identified:

Excerpt1. "It immediately ran away when she saw it and experts confirmed that a puma will not attack a human being unless **it is cornered**." (Alexander 1967, P. 12).

Excerpt 2. "Wherever it went, it left behind it a **trail of dead deer** and small animals like rabbits**.**" (Alexander 1967, P. 12).

Excerpt 3. "**Paw prints were seen** in several places and puma fur was found clinging to bushes." (Alexander 1967, P. 12).

Puma at large starts with the metaphorical expression *at large*, which is not explained explicitly. Based on Lakoff and Johnson's (2003a) image schemas, we know that the Puma is a dangerous animal it is out of the zoo (which serves as the container in an image schema), and '*at large*' implies the metaphorical thought structure that DANGER IS NEAR, a signal that the Puma may be anywhere and near anyone. That is, the conceptual metaphor is derived from the cognition that *at large* means space. More clearly, this animal can move freely so human life can be in danger.

Consequently, all metaphorical expressions identified yield this conceptual reference (metaphor) which is DANGER IS NEARBY and one should be careful. It is assumed that the focus word is *puma*. The selection of *puma* as the focus word for a possible metaphorical concept stems from the fact that the writer mentioned it indirectly. The metaphorical thought that DANGER IS NEARBY is also expressed indirectly by using another metaphorical expression '*it is cornered*.' The context implies that *puma* is not dangerous to humans unless *it is cornered.*

ISSN: 2229-9327

The next metaphorical expression '*paw prints were seen'* implicates a possible conceptual interpretation that there is a risk in the area where those *paw prints* were seen. Thus, such structure can be attributed and mapped to DANGER IS NEARBY. Overall, the first metaphorical expression *Puma at large,* and the second one *paw prints,* indicate that the danger of the puma has become evident. Finally, the text ends with the repetition of the first metaphorical expression *at large* to emphasize the presence of imminent danger.

Each metaphorically expressed idea is construed as one of the representational forms of a metaphorical thought structure. Therefore, two metaphorical thought structures emerge from the first selected text. The first metaphorical expression conveys the conceptual thought structure that PUMA IS A DANGEROUS ANIMAL. The second conceptual thought structure is that DANGEROUS ANIMAL SHOULD BE IN A SECURED SPACE. Based on this cognitive analysis, it can be reasonably inferred that such thought structures may not be overtly clear to the Iraqi EFL learners due to their unfamiliarity with an animal such as a puma, for it is from a completely different habitat from the wild and natural habitats that can be found in Iraq, or for that matter, in any Arab nation. Therefore, the learners' ability to comprehend such metaphorical expressions would be impaired based on Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) argument that for a metaphorical expression to be comprehended successfully, it must be experienced and familiar to the human mind; in general, people or foreign language learners should be aware and be experienced in using such expressions or at least be aware of such metaphorical expressions. Certain concrete things need not be conceptualized metaphorically, such as rocks, trees, body parts, etc., but are conceptualized in terms of their physical experience. Likewise, certain abstract things, such as days, nights, heat, cold, etc., that do not require conceptual metaphors to reveal their physical properties. However, objects and ideas that are not manifested in a physical sense can be conveyed through metaphorical expressions which can be captured or understood in terms of individuals' experiences. Nonetheless, conceptualization based on physical and social traits does not mean there are no conceptual elements, still, in Kovecses's view (1999), people's perception of experiences and phenomena differs from one culture to another.

Analysis of the second text: *illusion of pastoral peace*

The second passage included seven metaphorical expressions identified based on MIPVU and confirmed by the raters. To be analyzed and discussed properly, these metaphorical expressions were extracted along with their linguistic contexts (see below). As these metaphorical expressions appear in one unified and coherent text, they were analyzed together as one contextual unit:

Excerpt 4. "Illusion of pastoral peace"

Excerpt 5. "Even he still **lives under the illusion** that country life is somehow superior to town life." (Alexander 1967, P. 106).

Excerpt 6. "My friend fails to mention the long and **friendless winter** evenings in front of the TV -- virtually the only form of entertainment." (Alexander 1967, P. 106).

Excerpt 7. "They could be **saved so much misery** and expense if they chose to live in the city where they rightly belong." (Alexander 1967, P. 106).

Excerpt 8. "Country people **run wild** when they go shopping in the city and stagger home loaded with as many of the exotic items as they can carry." (Alexander 1967, P. 106).

The title of the second passage, ILLUSION OF PASTORAL PEACE, is by itself the main metaphorical expression that other metaphorical expressions of the passage center around conceptually. This metaphor is used to denote the illusionary nature of life as being idyllic, that is, life as being peaceful and calm in the countryside. This means that someone who decides to lead his life in the countryside is actually '***under the illusion'*** that there is real peace and calmness in the countryside when there is none. Here the phrase ***'under the illusion'*** stems from the metaphoric notions of CONTROL IS 'UP', and LACK OF CONTROL IS 'DOWN'(Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

Although life in the countryside seems to be quiet, there are some drawbacks and problems, as the writer believes. The metaphorical expression ***illusion of pastoral peace*** denotes that peace and quiet in the countryside are just deceptions. When we talk about the countryside, one is invariably concerned with the idea of beautiful nature. This referential coherence or the similarity between living in the countryside and its features mentioned above, like '***pastoral peace***' seems congruent. However, the phrase *'**live under the illusion**'* disrupts this idea. This could pose a problem to some EFL learners who are not accustomed to metaphoric phrases or words that convey the notions of UP to mean something good, and UNDER or DOWN to mean something not good or bad.

Other metaphorical expressions that reinforce or support the idea that life in the countryside is not what it is made out to be are like, ***'the dubious privilege of living in the countryside', 'friendless winter',*** and ***'run wild'***, all of which support the main conceptual metaphorical idea that LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE IS ILLUSIONARY. If we closely examine these metaphorical expressions, we find that they all contain adjectives that give negative meanings.

It is worth noting here that a cultural interpretation of metaphoric expressions is a crucial element in understanding metaphoric ideas in cognitive linguistics. The writing style in this passage *ILLUSION OF PASTORAL PEACE* and the metaphorical expressions used are neither universal nor specific. Thus, the image of the countryside with all its attributes can only be accessible to someone familiar with life in the countryside mentioned in the text. To a person living in a city who is either completely or partially unfamiliar with the countryside, the metaphor would be useless in its effect to a degree compatible with his experience. However, people who are intimately familiar with life in such countryside and the nature of life there, they will be able to understand the metaphoric significance of the text.

Discussion

Based on the cognitive analyses of the two reading passages above in terms of conceptual metaphor theory, different assumptions related to the factors influencing metaphor comprehension

might be inferred. It seems that comprehending a textual metaphor would be more difficult than comprehending a single metaphor as a textual metaphor requires other supporting metaphors in the text to be comprehended appropriately. The fictional and narrative approach of *PUMA AT LARGE*, for example, requires different stylistic procedures or more supportive metaphorical expressions to convince the reader of the main controlling idea. These related metaphors may not be all comprehensive for the Iraqi EFL learners due to their unfamiliarity with an animal like *Puma* as it is not available in the Iraqi environment. Therefore, learners' ability to comprehend such metaphorical expressions is based on the familiarity of metaphorical expressions to the human mind, as argued by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Nonetheless, experiences and phenomena differ from one culture to another, as (Kovecses, 1999; Khajeh and Abdullah, 2012) argued, as in the case of the second passage, *ILLUSION OF PASTORAL PEACE*.

In the case of ILLUSION OF PASTORAL PEACE, the use of the metaphor and a cultural interpretation of the metaphor, cognitively speaking, are significant elements in understanding the metaphorical expression. Some metaphorical expressions are culture-specific and can only be accessible to someone familiar with them as in the case of life in the countryside. This metaphor would be useless in its effect if it is not compatible with the reader's experience of a person living in a city as they are either completely or partially unfamiliar with the countryside. In contrast, the metaphor could be easily understood by those intimately familiar with life in the countryside.

Factors Influencing Metaphor Comprehension

This section offers an answer to the research question proposed above: What are the factors influencing the comprehension of metaphors in academic reading texts among Iraqi EFL Learners? That is, this section discusses the qualitative data yielded by the semi-structured interview obtained after establishing baseline data for overall comprehension of the metaphor. In particular, this section ascertains the factors influencing metaphor comprehension of academic texts among Iraqi EFL learners. The overall findings on the comprehension of metaphorical expressions fluctuated among learners due to the participants' differences in their competence. Through a careful examination of the process of metaphorical cognition, certain factors were found to have affected the learners' reading comprehension, sociocultural, personal, and semantic/linguistic.

Sociocultural Factors

Firstly, sociocultural factors include lifestyle, religion, politics, and values. The participants were largely affected by their Iraqi customs and values, which characterize the nature of Iraqi society. The participants were influenced by sociocultural factors fundamentally linked to the Arabic culture. The selected metaphors may not necessarily be strongly associated with the source domain of the learners' language. Rather, they can be rooted deeply in the target language culture which embodies references to the foreign culture of English speakers. The Iraqi academic textbooks are written using the British English language. It was not surprising, therefore, that some

learners recruited in this study showed a misunderstanding of the highlighted metaphoric expressions found in the texts.

For example, in responding to *excerpt 3*: "**Paw prints were seen** in several places and puma fur was found clinging to bushes", the following elaborations from the interviews revealed logical reasoning in their cognitive processing of the target cultural norms and values as shown by the questions that were directed to the participants. Learner 3's response to excerpt 3: *"Well, the prints of the cat after he walks everywhere."* It seems that the participant misunderstood this metaphorical expression when they interpreted *the cat* based on their cultural background. This is justified by the learner's response to the second question: "*Because it's a cat but I think the male cat is called Puma in America."* In line with learner 3, learner 4 provides the same response to the second question: *"Actually, I always see the prints of cats on my car in the morning especially when it's dusty weather*."

Personal Factors

Some answers appeared to be attributed to personal views in the interpretation of some metaphorical expressions. A case in point is the learner's creation of his identity that is influenced by a myriad of personal experiences. Thus, in reconstructing the comprehension of the metaphors, the learners may be colored by their orientations in their responses. That being the case, their responses cannot be generalized to Iraqi culture as they are shaped by subjectivity. Personal factors can be entrenched and exert specific metaphysical or *I* conceptions of reality as learners process the language. The EFL Iraqi speakers with strikingly different language backgrounds could portray different conceptual and personal images even when faced with similar states of affairs. Thus, comprehension of metaphor use based on personal views would result in different framings of the readers' perception and thought. Languages cannot constrict our capability to identify the world or to consider the reality of the world we live in,still, they can serve to emphasize our views, thoughtfulness, and ideas on specific aspects of the world.

Therefore, responding to Excerpt 11 "Country people **run wild** when they go shopping in the city and stagger home loaded with as many of the exotic items as they can carry.", the participants attributed to their reliance on personal views in the non-understanding of the metaphorical expressions as in Learner 4's response: "*Run like animals in the forest."* It seems the participant did not understand the metaphorical expression as they depended on personal views. This is justified by the learner's response to the second question of this excerpt: "*Wild animals - I always hear this term on YouTube for lion, tiger, snake*."

The examples above are not attributed to cultural or linguistic factors in the verbalized understanding of the metaphoric expressions; instead, the justifications are linked to personal subjectivity to a certain extent.

Semantic/Linguistic Impact

Thirdly, some responses have been affected by semantic cognition in terms of lexical dependency. This means the learner resorted to lexical meaning with no regard for the context of the situation in which the metaphorical expressions are uttered. This rarity of linguistic dependency confirmed the learners' interpretative behavior of resorting more to sociocultural and personal views when trying to comprehend the metaphors as part of the academic text reconstruction.

For example, in responding to Excerpt 1 "It immediately ran away when she saw it and experts confirmed that a puma will not attack a human being unless **it is cornered**", participants relied on their semantic/linguistic views in the literal understanding of the metaphorical expressions. For example, Learner 1's response, "*Well it means two walls and there is a corner*", reveals that they depend on the lexical meaning rather than the metaphorical expression of the academic text. This is justified by the same participant's response to the second question, "*I know the meaning, it's clear that it's a corner*."

The findings revealed that the process of comprehending metaphorical expressions was determined by certain factors: social, semantic/ linguistic, and personal. The interview data confirm a varying degree of influence ranging from social, and political to linguistic factors as the learners cognitively processed the metaphorical expressions. Overall, metaphor in reading texts remains one of the problems that EFL learners face they need a considerable level of awareness of metaphorical realizations to improve their grasp of language use. Thus, the failure to comprehend the metaphor is caused by the lack of cultural or linguistic awareness of the target language. Therefore, an EFL learner needs to develop their cultural awareness of the target language to be able to successfully understand the academic texts. Pedagogically speaking, the textbook designers and authors should take into account the cultural background of the target language. For example, some input in the form of a glossary of unfamiliar terms and illustrations on the culture of the target language should be presented to the learners in advance in the earlier stages of learning. In this way, one might use certain metaphorical expressions that could even contribute to teaching vocabulary to students (Matsevich., et al 2020). Caillies and Declercq (2011) are convinced that it is important to investigate the root of the problem in the teaching and learning of metaphors among EFL learners. Besides, researchers such as Kasim, et al. (2019) show that using metaphors provides a way of understanding a subjective and complex experience in terms of another more familiar experience. The narrative approach that the author adopts in this passage is closer to that of a fictional narrative rather than an academic narrative, which could potentially result in misinterpretation or misunderstanding. This result is in line with Abdulqahar and Hussein's (2023) study that Iraqi EFL learners faced various difficulties in comprehending conceptual metaphors in academic literary texts; these factors may lead to non-understanding or misunderstanding, namely lack of exposure to literary devices, teaching and learning style, and critical thinking skills. In the same way (Littlemore, 2001, 2002, 2004; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Low, 1988; Abdulqahar and Hussein, 2023) stated it is not surprising that mastery of metaphors is generally difficult for EFL learners. Given this lack and the need to understand the difficulties that could then lead to more

successful approaches in related teaching, this area has much to offer in terms of research, especially in an academic setting.

Conclusion

This study has shown that the use of metaphorical expressions is a major aspect of the reading component of the Iraqi EFL academic context. This study examined two academic texts used in the learning of English as a foreign language: *PUMA AT LARGE* and *ILLUSION OF PASTORAL PEACE*. The majority of the metaphorical expressions found in these two texts were generally characterized as being unfamiliar by the learners while a few others were described as being only slightly less familiar from the Iraqi cultural view. The study investigated how the metaphorical expressions used in academic texts were processed by the EFL learners to determine their understanding of the expressions, and in doing so, identify the factors that influenced their comprehension. It was found that the use of metaphorical expressions in academic texts is in general, culture-specific, and it is different from one culture to another. All in all, factors affecting understanding metaphorical expressions can be classified broadly into two categories: external factors related to cultural and social considerations, and internal factors related to linguistic and educational settings.

In addition to the above, mastery of metaphors goes beyond proficiency because they are closely associated with other cognitive skills, such as evaluative perception and logical reasoning. Thus, it is an urgent matter that needs attention among educators. Incorporating metaphorical expressions in textbooks is a serious reading issue that should be taken into account by decision-makers in the EFL learning context, and the Iraqi EFL context is no exception. In light of the findings and the results arrived at, we can conclude that including specialized training on the comprehension of metaphorical expressions for EFL learners is of paramount significance. Therefore, it is hoped that the findings from this study and other similar ones can be utilized by curriculum developers and teaching practitioners to devise more effective approaches for the teaching of metaphor comprehension to EFL learners in Iraq and elsewhere.

Funding: This research is not funded
Acknowledgments: Not applicable.
Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
Authenticity: This manuscript is an original work.
Artificial Intelligence Statement: AI and AI-assisted technologies were not used.

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