

The Use of Figures of Speech in English Language Development: A Tool Based Approach

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Abstract

It is obvious that English has become the most widespread language in the world. In Sri Lanka, English is taught as a Second Language (ESL) in schools, colleges, and universities. As far as ESL is concerned, it is developed in many ways. One of the good approaches to develop English is to expand its vocabulary, which can be mostly strengthened by learning figures of speech like simile, metaphor, etc. Learning figures of speech helps the learners improve their understanding of language. When it is developed, an enhanced understanding of the subtlety of English is seen in students. Further, the appropriate usage of figures of speech in communicative situations not only makes the students improve English, but also realizes the aesthetic nature of it. The apt realization of a situation in and outside of a classroom plays a vital role in language development which is largely brought to the students by the usage of figures of speech. Based on this concept, this paper suggests an innovative method, i.e. a simple but effective student-friendly computational tool 'Figures of Speech: Learner and Tester', for developing the ESL students' language ability to great extent.

Keywords: ESL, vocabulary, figures of speech, language ability, computational tool

Introduction

The simplest definition of a figure of speech is 'an intended deviation from ordinary usage' (Quinn, 1982). Figures of speech (also known as stylistic or rhetorical device or figurative language) are words or phrases that are used for special effect and that do not have their usual or literal meaning (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). Naturally we use literal language, i.e. actual language, more than we do figurative language, to express ourselves clearly and directly. However, when we wish to colour up our ideas and add interesting depth to our views, then figures of speech help us; and they create a vivid image in the readers' mind. For example, if you say 'His lawyer is a shark', you don't mean to say that he's being represented by a cartilaginous fish with hundreds of rows of teeth. But, what you're trying to say is that the lawyer is ruthless. Wren and Martin (1981) state that a figure of speech is a departure from the ordinary form of expression or the ordinary course of ideas in order to produce a greater effect. It means that the figures of speech relate to what we call connotative meaning which is also observed by Kennedy (1991) who says that 'a figure of speech may be said to occur whenever a speaker or writer, for the sake of freshness or emphasis, departs from the usual denotations of words'. Further, the figure of speech is a way of expressing thoughts or feelings in spoken or written form

by using figurative words; thus, it can show the soul and personality of the author and produce a clear understanding of interest to the reader. Peters (2004) also asserts that 'figures of speech remain the powerful communicative devices when used occasionally..... Like any kind of ornament, figures of speech work best when integrated with the meaning and purpose of the discourse'.

Figures of Speech and English Language Development

As far as the English language development with the help of the figures of speech is concerned, Quinn (1982) states that the apparently limitless plasticity of language itself is revealed to us; and the real potentialities within us and our language are also reflected by figures of speech which mould our language. A figure of speech can be useful for explaining a new or complex idea in English by relating it to something familiar. It can help a student make his writing more memorable and impactful. Further, figurative language creates a special effect, clarifies an idea, and makes writing more colourful and forceful. It adds an extra dimension to writing, especially giving plain writing richness and depth. Moreover, figurative language has the essence of style and beauty. Leech and Short (2007) describe that the proper usage of figures of speech gives our language a style, as style is a way in which language is used. Thus,

English is embellished with the style used in written or spoken form like literary works, speeches, etc. By learning stylistics, the students can find out the relation between language and its artistic functions. Further, Verdonk (2002) implicitly states that stylistics is a linguistic description on a language-style study; under stylistics, a figure of speech is one of the aspects of language style. Furthermore, the main purpose of stylistics is to explore the language and creativity in language use (Simpson, 2004). What is more, while looking at more functions of the figures of speech in English language development, they impart the beauty to the language by stimulating the visual, aural, and sensory appeal of the verses; the student is made to use his imagination to create rich mental pictures; they provide freshness of expression and clarity of meaning; they can be used in poetic as well as in everyday language; language of speeches and debates can also be enriched with the use of figures of speech; and in short, figures of speech make English language more elegant, descriptive, and interesting.

Therefore, as figures of speech play a pivotal role in language development, it is inevitable for a student of ESL to learn about them for mastering his language. There are more than 200 types of figures of speech in English (Bullinger, 1898) and every figure of speech is created in a different way; it has its own unique appearance, and is used for special purposes. In this paper, ten different types of figures of speech are investigated for the betterment of a student's language development.

Simile

Simile is an expression in which something is compared to something else by the use of a function word such as 'like' or 'as' (Richards and Schmidt, 2010). For example, in the sentence The dew glittered like jewels, the words 'dew' and 'jewels' are two different things, but the idea is that 'dew' sparkles with flashes of many colours just as 'jewels' do. Similes are always explicit. For instances:

1. He looked after his elder sister as a mother.
2. She sings like an angel.

Metaphor

Metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing is compared with another by saying that one is the other (Kovecses, 2010), as in Sri Lanka is the pearl of the Indian Ocean. McArthur (1996) also describes that a metaphor

directly compares two subjects, i.e. it concisely compares two things by saying that the one is the other. Unlike similes which are explicit, metaphorical comparisons are implicit. Skillful use of metaphor is one of the highest attainments of writing. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) affirm that metaphors are deeply ingrained in our thoughts, actions, and everyday language. For example:

1. My lover is a treasure.
2. She has a heart of flower.

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is an exaggeration or over statement, such as I'm so hungry, I could eat a horse (Richards and Schmidt, 2010; Perrine, 1969). This example is a hyperbole or overstatement because it is impossible that a person cannot eat a horse even though he is very hungry, or even starving. That's why, it is stated that a hyperbole is usually deliberate and not meant to be taken literally. Further, hyperbole functions to make effects such as humorous or important, imaginary or retrained, and convincing or unconvincing. The statement itself is not expected to be believed by people. For example:

1. She rushed out of the room in floods of tears.
2. Many water pumps were used to pump out the floods of her tears.

Personification

Personification is a type of figure of speech in which inanimate entities, concrete and abstract, are treated as though they were human (Brown and Miller, 2013). That is, in personification, human qualities or activities are attributed to animals, non-living things or abstract ideas. For example, in the sentence The hunger is shivering on the road side, the word 'hunger' is an abstract noun; but it is endowed with a human quality to bring the reality of the particular situation in front of us. Through personification, writers and poets offer a fresh perspective to the readers. Readers are also able to relate to the inanimate objects as they would relate to humans. For example:

1. The flowers are dancing in the garden.
2. The smell enters my nose.

Metonym

Metonym is a figure of speech whereby entities are referred to by means of expressions denoting something closely associated with them (Brown and Miller, 2013).

That is, in metonymy, the name of one thing is used for another because of their close association or recurrent relationship with each other. For example, in *The flute* late again, 'the flute' refers to the person who plays the flute; and in *The court* has issued a summon, 'the court' is the metonym for the judge. Another two examples are:

1. Europe has opened its doors to the immigrants.
2. The pen is mightier than the sword.

Irony

The word 'irony' comes from the Greek *eironeia*, meaning 'pretense, dissimulation'. In the traditional definition, irony is seen as saying the opposite of what one means (Strazny, 2005). That is, in this mode of speech, the real meanings of the words used are different from the intended meanings. For example, *The child of cobbler* has no shoes, which means 'cobbler' is a person who repairs shoes, but his child has no shoes to wear. Another two examples are:

1. The country is very rich. It has many beggars around the streets.
2. Her name was Ganga, but she died with no water to drink.

Alliteration

Writers frequently harness sounds for any of several effects. When they repeat sounds in nearby words, the result is called alliteration (Garner, 2016). Alliteration is the repetition of a consonantal sound, usually at the beginning of a word or syllable. For example:

1. Susie suddenly sounds serious on system.
2. Peter picked a pint of Pepsi.

In the first example above, the consonant sound /s/ is repeated for a pleasing effect; and the consonant sound /p/ is repeated for a palatable effect in the second one.

Euphemism

Euphemism is the use of a polite, indirect expression instead of a direct, offensive one (Brown and Miller, 2013). That is, in euphemism, an offensive or a harsh word is substituted with a milder and a less egregious expression. For example, a euphemism for 'garbage collector' might be 'sanitation engineer'. Some automobile dealers use euphemism in their advertisement, i.e. they advertise 'pre-owned' or 'experienced' cars, instead of 'used' cars. By using a euphemism, the writer or the poet makes the unpleasant sound poetic and polite. For example:

The John's dog was put to sleep because it was in a lot of pain.

The football legend, Diego Maradona, passed away at his 60.

In sentence (1) above, the term 'put to sleep' is a less offensive term used instead of 'killed' or 'euthanised'. Further, the term 'passed away' in (2) is the euphemistic term for 'died'.

Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a more inclusive term is used for a less inclusive one or vice versa, as a whole for a part (Burchfield, 1998). McArthur (1992) also defines that synecdoche is a figure of speech concerned with parts and wholes. For example:

1. Two heads are better than one.
2. The family has many mouths to feed.

In sentence (1) above, the word 'heads' represents 'people' whereas the word 'mouths' in (2) represents 'members' of the family.

Oxymoron

Oxymoron is a figure of speech where two contrasting words are conjoined. This conjoining of contrasting words may seem ridiculous if literally interpreted, but it may be meaningful if it is figuratively understood. For example, *She is pretty ugly*. Burchfield (1998) defines that oxymoron is a figure of speech in which apparently contradictory terms appear in conjunction. For example:

1. He was seriously joking.
2. The taste of the fruit is bittersweet.

In sentence (1) above, the words 'seriously' and 'joking' contradict one another, but they are brought together to mean that someone was actually joking. In sentence (2), the word 'bittersweet' is made of two contrasting adjectives 'bitter' and 'sweet'; and they are conjoined to refer to a taste which is both bitter and sweet.

Methodology

The tool, *Figures of Speech: Learner and Tester*, is a student-friendly computer programme. It has been developed with the help of the computer language, Visual Basic 6. The tool has two options: Learning and Testing. Learning part imparts the knowledge of figures of speech to the students of ESL. For this, ten buttons with different figures of speech have been included in the tool. The

student can click the buttons of figures of speech and get the knowledge in them. As far as the testing part is concerned, it helps the students test their knowledge in the figures of speech. For this purpose, 100 multiple choice questions have been carefully formed from many relevant sources like books, reliable materials, etc; and all the questions and their answers have been cautiously fed into the programme. First, a student has to click the Question button to get the question. The tool, here, has been programmed to display the question randomly. Then, he can see the question and its four answers. Now the student has to read the question carefully and click the suitable answer. If he likes to see his results immediately, he can click the Check button to see it. Otherwise, he can check the answers of the questions at any time in the testing process or after attending all the questions completely. In the results grid, the student can see the question number, question, the correct answer of the question, his attempt, the status whether his attempt is right or wrong or NA (Not Attempted), and finally the marks. One mark is given for the correct answer and zero, for the wrong one. This is the mechanism of the tool.

Sample Visual of the Developed Tool



Results and Discussion

Forty (40) first year students from Higher National Diploma in English (HNDE) at Advanced Technological Institute in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka were selected not only to test their gained knowledge in the figures of speech but also to develop further knowledge in them with the tool. The participants utilized the tool enthusiastically and it was noted that their results were quite positive, i.e. nearly 74 percentage of the students (i.e. nearly 30 students out of 40) were successful in their first attempt of answering the questions. In the discussion with the students regarding the

usage of the tool, mostly all the students said something, but nearly same. First of all, they stated that they felt comfortable when they had worked with such a computer-based tool. Further stating, the immediate feedback of the testing part at their every attempt was a special for them; and also all said in one voice that this type of innovative tool or activity had given them the confidence and also motivated them to learn the English language, especially the figures of speech, eagerly.

Conclusion

Learning figures of speech is one of the ways through which English language can be effectively developed. From the ancient times to the present, the students of ESL extensively employ the figures of speech to strengthen their vocabulary and embellish their styles of speech and composition. Figurative language plays a primary role for the development of English language skills. In the process of writing, figures of speech are used to convey the ideas almost with the reality. The appropriate use of the figurative language gives a piece of writing the effect of aesthetics. While concerning the reading skill, the figures of speech encourage the readers to think anew and grasp the inexplicable ideas. Further, now-a-days, the teaching and learning process almost does not complete without the digital interference, especially the computer technology. It is evident that the computer based learning and testing activities stimulate the students' interest in their language development; and it is also very helpful for teachers to observe the students' performance and motivate them towards the development of their English language proficiency. Having understood these facts, a computational tool namely Figures of Speech: Learner and Tester, was developed by using VB 6 to boost the ESL students' language power; and it was proved that the participants had got an affluent knowledge in figures of speech with the help of the developed tool.

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