

Reflections on Developing a Model for Teaching Metaphor

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In this reflection paper, I describe how and why I have developed a model for teaching metaphor in my own context. The process of developing the model has been an iterative one with continual refinement over the cycles of teaching the material. Hopefully, this iterative process can be instructive for teachers in other contexts and help to illustrate how teaching ideas can be transformed from theory into practice.

Introduction

When I began work at my current university, I was asked to teach four *koma* per week courses to groups of 15-25 freshmen, using a process-based syllabus. The important thing about this process-based syllabus was that students got ample practice with each process/task, such as discussions, problem-solving and communication strategies. In our university, this was implemented by teaching three topic units per semester, with each having materials designed to cover the six designated processes of the syllabus.

There was a lot of freedom to adapt existing materials and even create new ones, but this meant that I needed to assemble two semesters' worth of materials. This seemed like a daunting prospect at first, but luckily, I had experience in developing materials and working without textbooks. As such, once I had digested the undertaking, it became a challenge to relish. It would offer the chance to develop materials that drew on all the experience I had gained as an ALT, *Senmon Gakko* instructor and university lecturer.

Initially, I needed to decide on the themes and so my first question was this: what would be interesting for 18–19-year-olds? I usually had positive results when using music-based topics in activities and it was something I enjoyed using in the classroom. Thus, it made sense to use this as one of the unit topics. Once this was decided, I wanted to stretch the students beyond just giving descriptions of their favourite artists or genres. In my experience, the students who pursued an interest or hobby in English outside of the classroom tended to be

among the most proficient in any cohort. I therefore wanted to use activities that would be instructive and enjoyable in the classroom but which might also stimulate or facilitate interest outside the classroom. As such, I decided that song analysis should form a part of the unit, but in a form that would allow students to work with their own choices. I hoped this would encourage an interest in understanding the language of their favourite songs that could stretch beyond the classroom.

Theoretical Foundations

When considering what would be needed for students to grasp the meanings of songs, I realised that as well as linguistic devices, such as rhyme, repetition and alliteration, there was one more component of song language that students needed to understand. If they were to go beyond formulaic interpretations of predetermined lines, they would need to be able to interpret metaphors. I then realised I could draw on an aspect of my studies that I had particularly enjoyed. Previously, I took a module on psycholinguistics while studying for a master's degree, and I became very interested in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). This theory postulates that metaphors are not just particular turns of phrase, but expressions of the fundamental way humans store and process non-literal information. According to the theory, the storage of this type of information is systemic and so when expressed in metaphor, there are observable, patterned categories to these utterances. The categories are called *conceptual metaphors*.

Each conceptual metaphor is formalised as X IS Y for instance, UP IS GOOD. These overarching metaphors form containers into which the metaphors observable in daily communications, known as *linguistic metaphors*, are grouped. The following are some examples adapted from Lakoff and Johnson (1980, p. 15):

UP IS GOOD

- I am floating on air
- I was on a high
- I am on cloud 9

DOWN IS BAD

- She was so down
- My heart sank
- The stocks went through the floor

The theory also indicates that these metaphors are far more pervasive in everyday language than many people realise. Indeed, according to Steen et al. (2008), metaphor accounts for 7.7% of general conversation, 11.7% of fiction and 18.5% of academic texts. This figure could sound unfeasibly high but consider how unthinkingly people tend to use words and phrases such as the following: *goal, target, aim, connection (between us), feeling down/low, rising in the ranks, tackle an issue, out of our depth, conflict/fight (as argument or dispute)*. 'Just something we say', one might conclude. However, if these examples are carefully examined, the metaphoric quality emerges. Take a sentence such as 'There is a great connection between everyone in the class.' There is no *literal* connection; it is a perceived, figurative expression of an emotional understanding. Some might object that this is just another meaning of the word 'connection', but this merely confirms the broader point: this is one common way in which words obtain their many related meanings and nuances of context.

I was lucky enough to study under Jeanette Littlemore, who is not only one of the leading metaphor scholars but also someone who really believes in the importance of metaphor in the language learning classroom. As a point of reference, Chapters 5 and 6 of *Applying Cognitive Linguistics to Second Language Learning and Teaching* (Littlemore, 2009) provide an excellent initiation into the importance of metaphor, and the closely related concept of metonymy, for the classroom.

Another aspect to the use of metaphoric language that is pertinent to the classroom is the confusion it can cause for students. According to a study by Littlemore et al. (2011), 42% of language learners' comprehension problems in lectures resulted from metaphoric language. Similar findings have been replicated multiple times (Littlemore,

2001; Littlemore et al., 2006; Low et al., 2008). Indeed, in my own metaphor study, even L2 students of applied linguistics had more difficulty understanding complex metaphors than their anglophone classmates, even though they understood all the component words in the phrases (Beirne, 2017, pp. 7-8).

Thus, persuaded of the importance of metaphor for the classroom, and for this music unit specifically, I searched for examples of systematic implementations of this kind of metaphoric view of vocabulary learning, but this yielded no satisfactory results. I then decided to develop my own approach based on my studies and experiences in the classroom.

Developing the Materials

Initially, I decided to try and keep the unit relatively simple, both in terms of the volume of materials and concepts. Therefore, this first version of the lessons was limited to an explanation with examples, practice activities, and an assessment to demonstrate understanding.

As the literature highlighted the struggles learners had with metaphors, even when the vocabulary was familiar, it was logical to assume that the confusion lay in how these phrases are formulated. Therefore, to help students understand these mystifying expressions, I believed it was necessary to raise learners' awareness of how metaphors work. Thus, to begin, students were given a written definition of metaphor, as shown in Figure 1.

The graphic is a rectangular box with a white background and a thin black border. At the top center, the title "Metaphor Definition" is written in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below the title, there are several lines of text. The first line defines a metaphor as "non-literal" and a "description" of something. The second line defines "Literal" as a real reported fact or event or description, with the example "E.g., he is tall." The third line defines "Non-literal" as something that didn't happen or is not true in the basic meaning of the words, with the example "She is hot (attractive). He is cool (attractive)." Below these definitions, there is a red heading: "A metaphor uses the features of one thing to describe another." Underneath this heading, there are three examples of metaphors, each starting with "Metaphor:" followed by a sentence and a parenthetical explanation of the feature being used. The examples are: "He is a giant (uses the main feature of the giant - height).", "She is a monster (uses the feature of bad behaviour).", and "she is a rose (uses the feature of the flower's beauty)." The graphic is decorated with small corner brackets: top-left and top-right are L-shaped, and bottom-left and bottom-right are inverted L-shaped.

Figure 1. Metaphor Definition

Next, there was a group activity where each team chose four metaphors cards (Figure 2) from a hat, and were asked to decipher the meanings within 15 minutes.

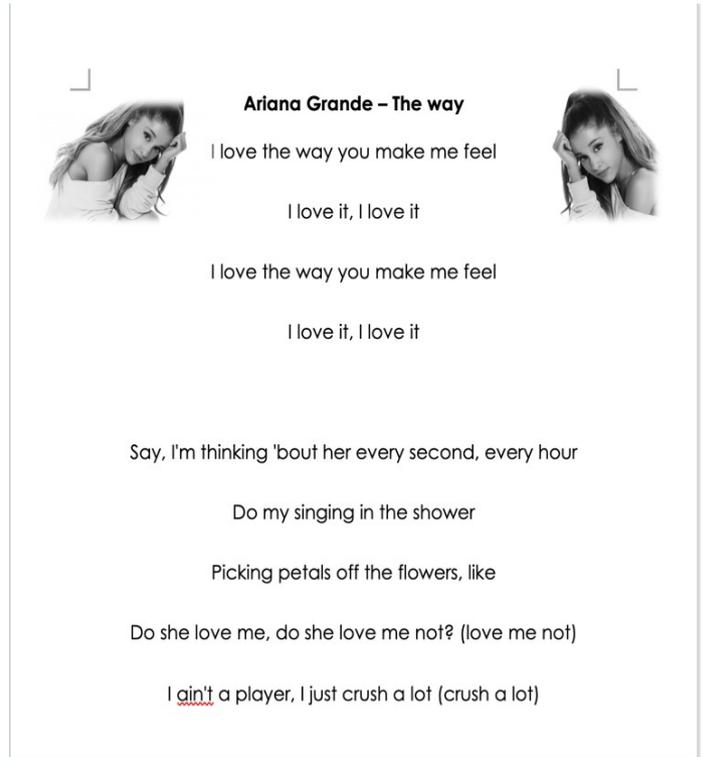
The school was a zoo	America is a melting pot	Her voice was music to his ears	Life is a roller coaster
Their home was a prison	He is a peacock	Time is money	My teacher is a dragon
The world is a stage	My kid's room is a disaster area	His words were sugar candy	He is a dinosaur
Her eyes were fireflies	I am so blue today	His mood turned black	Barcelona destroyed Real Madrid

Figure 2. Example Metaphor Cards

The groups completed the activity by taking turns to explain the meanings of their metaphors using the classroom whiteboard. The aim was not for a complete comprehension of all the metaphors but for students to gain structured exposure and practice applying the metaphor definition they had just learned.

Next, students were asked to work in groups of four to interpret the metaphors (along with other linguistic elements, such as rhyme) in a pre-selected song. Once again, it was not expected that any single group would have a complete understanding. The plan was to review each group's insights on the whiteboard and build a more complete picture of the overall meaning gradually. As the teams were all working on the same song it would be possible for students to see the different layers of meaning accessible to peers of equivalent ability. I believed that this approach would be more rewarding and motivating.

The groups were given a lyric sheet (Figure 3), worksheet (Figure 4), the opportunity to listen to the song on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com>) and a link to *Urban Dictionary* (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/>) to help them understand slang/non-standard terms.

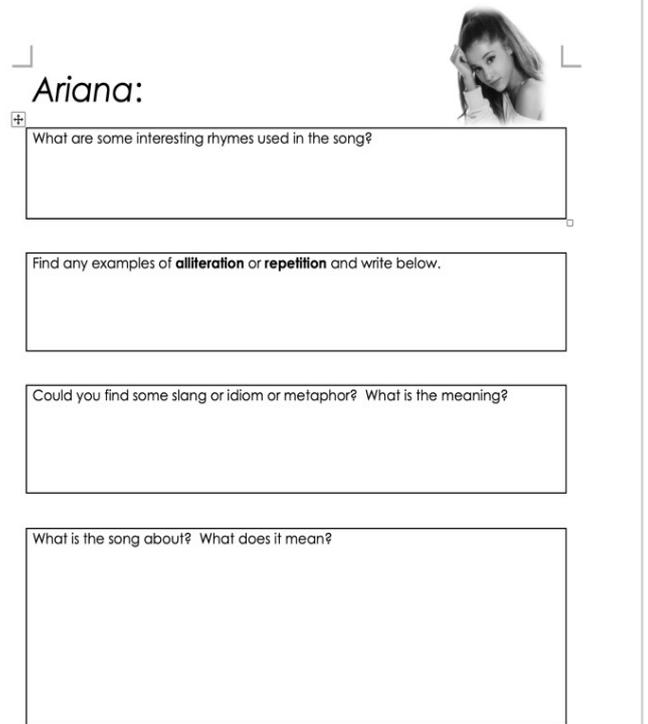


Ariana Grande – The way

I love the way you make me feel
I love it, I love it
I love the way you make me feel
I love it, I love it

Say, I'm thinking 'bout her every second, every hour
Do my singing in the shower
Picking petals off the flowers, like
Do she love me, do she love me not? (love me not)
I ain't a player, I just crush a lot (crush a lot)

Figure 3. Lyric Sheet for the Pre-Selected Song



Ariana:

What are some interesting rhymes used in the song?

Find any examples of **alliteration** or **repetition** and write below.

Could you find some slang or idiom or metaphor? What is the meaning?

What is the song about? What does it mean?

Figure 4. Worksheet to Analyse the Pre-Selected Song

Next, in groups of four, students were asked to freely choose a song to analyse, using the worksheet shown in Figure 5. The idea was to stretch students by giving them a less structured analysis phase while increasing motivation by allowing student choice. I felt it was necessary to do this with the support of a group in the first instance, as this could be a challenging activity. However, ultimately, it was necessary to determine whether students had individually acquired the skills necessary to decode metaphors and songs for themselves. Therefore, the students repeated this activity individually and presented their songs to the class. This final presentation was assessed.

Your Song:

What are some interesting rhymes used in the song?

Find any examples of **alliteration** or **assonance** and write below.

Could you find some slang or idiom or metaphor? What is the meaning?

What is the song about? What does it mean?

Figure 5. Worksheet to Analyse Student-Selected Songs

The whole song analysis and metaphor section of the music unit took about five *koma*. It seemed relatively successful overall and most of the students produced interesting and insightful presentations that went beyond what they had produced up until that point on the course. However, I felt there was room for improvement; student feedback told me that they found the process rewarding but it was still sometimes difficult to identify metaphors and then consistently interpret their meanings. Indeed, most of the *koma* allotted for individual analysis of students' songs was spent assisting learners with understanding their songs' metaphors and general

meanings. I worried about whether these lessons were worthwhile overall, and if they were, how I could clarify the resources to improve students' learning experiences.

Refining the Materials

I decided to persevere, as I had learned in my previous experience that teaching materials were seldom perfect when first conceived; therefore, this would need to be an iterative process of continual improvement. Thus, during the first update, I resolved to streamline the activities to make them more straightforward. I did add a new warm-up activity, though, to contextualise and introduce the concept. In the activity, students were presented with pairs of sentences of equivalent meaning. One sentence was written as a metaphor and the other as a literal statement. Students were then asked which they preferred and why? Some examples are shown in Figure 6.

Which do you like best?

1. The stars are sparkling diamonds.
 2. The stars are shining very brightly.
1. Those two best friends are peas in a pod.
 2. Those two best friends are very similar.
1. He is a walking dictionary.
 2. He knows a lot of words.
1. He is always hungry. He must have hollow legs
 2. He is always hungry. He must have a lot of space in his stomach.

Figure 6. Literal and Metaphoric Sentence Pairs

After completing this activity several times now, the results have been quite consistent: almost unanimously, the students prefer the metaphoric versions of the sentences. Many students comment that the metaphors conjure images in their minds, making them richer and more interesting. The one exception to this rule is in the fourth pair of sentences. While the metaphor is still generally preferred, some students opt for the literal version, saying that the metaphoric sentence and its use of 'hollow legs' is too difficult to follow. This activity has facilitated some valuable insights: firstly, students are naturally drawn to metaphoric language; and secondly, more complex, or unusual metaphors can

As for the rest of the materials, the song worksheets were simplified to focus on the metaphor process, while poetic language elements such as assonance and alliteration were removed. I also steered students away from complex songs with deep and layered metaphoric meaning when they chose songs to analyse.

Another aspect that I believed could help improve learning was to exploit more of the available technology, so accordingly, all the worksheets were remade as *Google Docs*, rather than using *MS Word*, and were distributed via *Google Classroom*. *Google Docs* are good for collaborative working and enable a class to all work on the same document at the same time and see each other's answers in real-time. These changes made all the materials smoother to distribute, work on and review; moreover, the students were better able to access and reflect on the activities and materials. be jarring. This first insight certainly gave me the confidence to continue refining these materials. The second chimed with the research findings: complex metaphors can frustrate learners if they have not had time to develop their interpretive skills in English. Therefore, complex metaphors should probably be avoided in this foundational phase.

These changes improved the flow of lessons and eased the confusion some students felt when analysing metaphors; however, some needed support to understand their songs. I felt that students still needed a better understanding of the mechanics of metaphors to be more able to interpret the meanings by themselves. Therefore, I decided to consult the literature again to give students a simplified framework for understanding metaphors. It seemed like they needed a more structured approach with more examples and illustrations but one which still needed to emphasise simplicity and ease of understanding. Over the course of several iterations of teaching the materials, a more structured model has been developed iteratively to include the following six stages.

Stage 1: Define

More focus was needed on this section of the materials to add impact to the definitions. Therefore, more extensive but illustrative slides, with less text, were created. Some examples are shown in Figure 7.

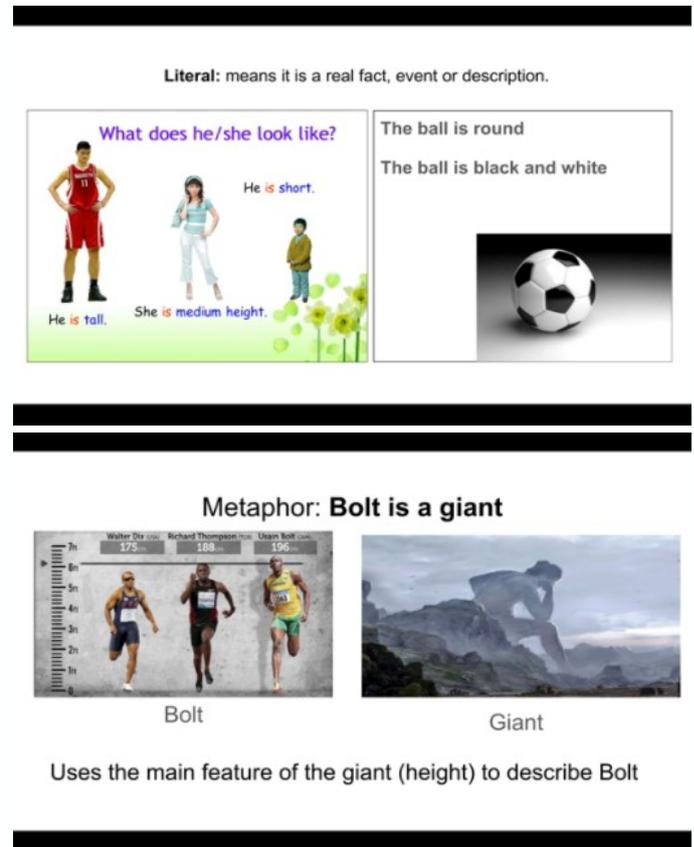


Figure 7. Example Slides to Define and Explain Metaphor

Stage 2: Model

This is an extension of the metaphor card activity, but now groups are asked to clearly explain the salient feature that is borrowed from one item to describe the other (in the metaphor). In CMT, there are technical terms for these parts of the metaphor, but I have found that a simple example such as the one shown in Figure 8 is enough to help the students explain their metaphors clearly, without the need for technical language.

	Metaphor	Explanation (what feature of the subject is used to describe the object?)	Meaning
Eg	The school was a zoo	A zoo (object) is full of wild animals. Can't be controlled. Lots of noise and no rules.	The school (subject) is noisy and full of wildness, like a zoo.
1	America is a melting pot		
2	Her voice was music to his ears		
3	Life is a roller coaster		
4	Their home was a prison		

Figure 8. Example Explanation of a Metaphor

Stage 3: Conceptualise

Students are now shown examples of conceptual metaphors in this phase, with related linguistic metaphors like those previously discussed in the theoretical framework section of this paper, such as up is good (I'm floating on air; I was on a high; I'm on cloud 9).

Stage 4: Analyse

There is now just one structured group analysis, which uses the worksheets shown in Figure 3 and Figure 4, plus one individual (student-chosen) song analysis. The number of activities in this stage could be reduced as the clearer, more structured definitions helped students comprehend the concept more quickly. In both these activities, like in stage 2, there is now also an explicit requirement to explain the salient feature used for the description in the metaphor.

Stage 5: Create

Students are asked to output what they have learned in this stage by creating an original song in groups that must contain at least one original metaphor. These are recited to the class and the students use a Google Form to vote for their favourite.

Stage 6: Practice

This final stage consists of ongoing practice. Over the course of this learning process, students have built up a range of practices that can become a toolkit to understand metaphors and songs in increased detail. Thus, they should be able to use popular songs as a virtually limitless self-study resource. Moreover, it is also possible that these tools could help learners make more sense of the often confusing, metaphorical mutterings of English speakers more generally.

Conclusion

This can be quite a challenging activity for first-year students, but this difficulty has been mitigated by giving students clear examples, structured activities and supported practice. When these materials were first implemented, the resources were not as thoroughly developed, so students struggled with some tasks. In response, I refined the slides and worksheets after each use, aiming to find the right balance between simplicity and detail. The use of

visual images has helped enormously cement the concept in students' minds, as have the worked examples provided in the worksheets.

Technology has also been immensely valuable for managing the process of developing and conducting the lessons. The collaborative nature of *Google Classroom*, *Docs* and *Forms* has been effective in creating, sharing and reviewing materials. Moreover, these tools have also allowed the resources to be used in a remote/online setting and face-to-face situations. However, in essence, the materials consist of slides and worksheets; even the voting forms could be replicated with a show of hands or a ballot. Thus, while technology is useful, a lack of it should not be an obstacle.

This approach has been iteratively developed to become a process that genuinely seems to open students' eyes to the layers of meaning in metaphors and songs as well as English communication more generally. My experience has been that it is then possible to see the influence of this increased understanding in students' writing, speaking and questioning. However, this claim ultimately needs to be tested empirically, and that is the next step for the model laid out in this paper. I hope that by sharing these experiences here, I have put forward a persuasive argument for the importance of teaching metaphor and that some of the approaches outlined will encourage others to incorporate some of this learning into their classes. Furthermore, on a more general note, it is my wish that this iterative approach of continual improvement has demonstrated one accessible way in which individual educators can move from linguistic theory to classroom practice.

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