



Differences in EFL Student's Simile and Metaphor Comprehension: Influence of Gender and Age

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ABSTRAK

Pemahaman simile dan metafora bahasa Inggris oleh siswa EFL di Indonesia sebagai fungsi imajinatif memainkan peran penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa holistik. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis tingkat pemahaman simile dan metafora bahasa Inggris di kalangan mahasiswa dan menganalisis apakah majas tersebut berbeda menurut jenis kelamin, usia, lama studi, dan latar belakang akademis yang berbeda. Pesertanya adalah 124 mahasiswa berusia 19 hingga 22 tahun. Data dikumpulkan dengan menggunakan 16 soal tes keberhasilan simile dan metafora bahasa Inggris. Jawabannya dievaluasi oleh dua orang ahli. Statistik deskriptif dan serangkaian tes Mann-Whitney U diterapkan. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa konsepsi siswa terhadap simile dan metafora bahasa Inggris masih rendah dalam skala luas. Sebanyak 29,11% peserta menjawab pertanyaan simile dengan benar, sedangkan 60,89% peserta menjawab pertanyaan dengan salah. Sementara itu, dari delapan soal metafora bahasa Inggris, 38,31% siswa dapat menjawab soal dengan benar, namun 61,69% siswa tidak dapat menjawab soal. Selain itu, ditemukan bahwa pemahaman simile dan metafora peserta tidak berbeda berdasarkan jenis kelamin, melainkan berbeda berdasarkan usia, lama studi, dan latar belakang akademis. Studi ini menganjurkan agar pelajar EFL harus mengembangkan kompetensi mereka dalam figuratif dari perspektif linguistik kognitif.

ABSTRACT

English simile and metaphor comprehension by EFL students in Indonesia as an imaginative function plays a crucial role in holistic language learning. Therefore, this study aimed to analyze the level of English simile and metaphor comprehension among university students and analyze whether the figure of speech differs according to gender, age, length of study, and different academic backgrounds. The participants were 124 university students in aged 19 to 22 years. Data were collected using 16 English simile and metaphor success test items. The answers were evaluated by two experts. Descriptive statistics and a sequence of Mann-Whitney U tests were applied. This study revealed that students' conception of English similes and metaphors is low on a broad scale. Participants answered 29.11% of the simile questions correctly, while 60.89% of the participants answered the questions incorrectly. Meanwhile, out of eight questions on English metaphors, 38.31% of the students could answer the questions correctly, but 61.69% of the students could not answer the questions. In addition, it was found that the simile and metaphor comprehension of the participants did not differ according to gender but differed based on age, length of study, and academic background. This study advocates that EFL learners should develop their competence in figurative from a cognitive linguistics perspective.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English learning at all levels of education in Bali ignores the use of figurative language in both oral and written discourse. Learning has so far only focused on the structural form of language with standard rules, so the core of language competence as a means of communication is not holistic. Previous study confirm that the inability to understand similes and metaphors can prevent students from following the academic content of a lecture and understanding the lecturer's attitude towards the material presented (Mali & Lim, 2021). Many university students fail to realize that figurative language is part of the cognitive-linguistic process that involves categorization, schematization, and analogy (Bin & Mandal, 2019; Ota, 2018). Cognitive linguistics tries to explain how language works, how language explains thoughts, how language structures are built, and how language is realized (Bosica et al., 2021; Weninger et al., 2020). In expressing the meaning of language, speakers can represent meaning using different forms of language. According to previous study the language form contains a literal or denotative meaning and a nonliteral or connotative meaning (Nassar, 2021). It is simply explained that the literal meaning refers to something real, i.e. something that has a form in the universe, while the figurative meaning refers to something that is not real. In addition, diverse cultural phenomena due to

cultural, geographic, and linguistic differences make it difficult for students in Bali to understand English figurative expressions. For example, the assumption that *seputih kapas* literally means as white as cotton is more acceptable in Indonesia since cotton can grow well geographically in Indonesia. Meanwhile, English speakers express the same idea as white as snow because snow is found in their area. That is, the comparison of objects is not always the same from one language to another due to the various factors mentioned above. Although many studies have examined students' understanding of forms of imagery (Huertas-Abril, 2021; Rao, 2016), the figure of speech must be measured based on cultural context, linguistic analysis, and ontological awareness. Research examining cognitive linguistics in analogical and metaphorical aspects has not received much attention. Researchers are aware of the condition that the acquisition and learning of imagery is a scientific process similar to that of structural language. Furthermore, other study claims that English idioms can shed light on speakers' cognitive intelligence and maintain relationships in social interactions (Kecskes, 2021).

These figurative expressions can convey an imaginative feeling, increase the sensitivity of a high sense of language, and make the message more touching to the listener. The use of similes and metaphors brings the language to life without being traditional (Burrell & Beard, 2023; Džanić & Pejić, 2016). From a vocabulary enrichment perspective, the idiom helps students develop linguistic reasoning and vocabulary, so the moral messages of a poem, phrase, or song lyrics allow them to understand the culture of native English speakers, as the language reflects the culture and civilization of a nation (Alisha et al., 2019; Pratiwi, 2016). The main problem with bilingual figurative expressions is the shift from the first level of meaning in Indonesian to the second level of meaning in English. There are two distinct processes in which students are taught the semantic structure and figurative qualities of Indonesian and then need to understand the meaning structure of the English expression. This present study reviews and synthesizes previous studies of English similes and metaphors. According to previous study the basic concept of the idiom is the semantic category, the literal meaning of which refers to something real, namely something that has a form in the universe, while the non-literal meaning refers to something that does not is real (Fuadi & Anwar, 2018; Padilah et al., 2018). This opinion is still naive because there are abstract things like air and welfare. On the other hand, not all metaphorical meanings refer to something abstract, as in Indonesian expressions: the shoreline of *Bibir Pantai* 'lips of the beach', *Mata Hati* 'the eye of the heart', *Ekor Mata* 'the tail of the eye', etc., which are derived from literal words. According to other study this experience is not individual but an experience related to the sociocultural and historical experience of a community (Csapó, 2022; Tennyson, 2020).

Previous study confirm that concepts can form the basis for the development of conceptual metaphor theory with a cognitive-linguistic approach (Windiani & Soetjningsih, 2016). Semantics examines two theories, namely feature theory and knowledge-based theory. This means that each word has a certain meaning area, which consists of several meaning components, namely the smallest meaning unit. According to other study the concept of literacy is traditionally stable and not taxa (Washbrooke, 2023). So the literal meaning is clear. However, linguistic expressions become lexical ambiguity because words do not stand alone and can refer to more than one meaning, so students need context. The finding of an investigation argues that metaphor meaning is related to connotation, meaning moving from one meaning to another, which is part of the speaker's experiential cognition (Certo, 2017; Sulaiman, M. M., & Bello, 2022). In the idiom, the implied form is denotative and the form it replaces is connotative. Other study states that implicit meaning or emotive meaning arises as a result of associating one's feelings with what is said and heard (Podina et al., 2020). Based on the above synthesis of the theoretical and empirical views, this research believes in students' ability to understand English similes and metaphorical expressions based on lexical understanding and context in written discourse. The infrequent use or discussion of English figurative language can impact the lack of understanding of similes and metaphors. The novelty of this study focus on the cognitive-linguistic process by analogy can be a vehicle for holistic English language mastery. Therefore, this study aims to describe the level of students' understanding of English similes and metaphors and to analyze whether students' idioms differ due to non-linguistic factors such as age, gender differences, length of study, and different academic disciplines.

2. METHOD

The study, which aims to analyze students' level of comparative and metaphorical English comprehension, uses a quantitative approach with a survey model (Darko, 2022). This model provides a mechanism for the characteristics of a group. Phenomenology-based research is also applied to find out if there are differences in English understanding of similes and metaphors based on gender, age, length of study, and different academic backgrounds. Data were collected through comparison and metaphor comprehension tests. The test was designed to measure students' English Comprehension (SC) and Metaphor Comprehension (MC). Each test item was arranged according to the rules for writing final tests and based on the student's level of proficiency in interpreting the meaning of an idiom. For this reason, when writing comparison and metaphor comprehension tests, the context was inevitably provided. Thus, the test item did not trap the students by

directing the students to answer incorrectly or directing the students to the predictable answers. To avoid face-to-face interaction, the test was prepared using a Google Form, and the question link was emailed to participants, with the stipulation that students must answer based on their understanding. To design the test items used in this study, 20 similes and metaphorical phrases were developed, and checked by linguists, and two English teachers. A consensus was reached among the experts on 16 items, consisting of 8 items for the English simile test and 8 items for the metaphor test, however, 4 items were excluded. The tests were created based on the rules for writing test tasks. To recognize that the above items were adequately used as data collection tools, a further calculation regarding the Difficulty Index and Discrimination Index of items called Test Item Analysis can be seen in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Test Item Analysis

Item	Difficulty	Discrimination
1	0.298	0.371
2	0.403	0.323
3	0.371	0.323
4	0.339	0.258
5	0.532	0.290
6	0.419	0.355
7	0.452	0.419
8	0.315	0.403
9	0.315	0.371
10	0.452	0.290
11	0.306	0.258
12	0.403	0.484
13	0.339	0.452
14	0.540	0.403
15	0.427	0.306
16	0.282	0.242

Base on [Table 1](#), test item analysis revealed that the item difficulty index ranged from 0.282 to 0.540 and the discrimination index ranged from 0.242 to 0.484. The majority of the items were difficult (item difficulty indices ranging from 0.00 to 0.40), as in items no. 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 13, and 16. Item nos. 2, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, and 15 were moderately difficult (item difficulty indices ranging from 0.40-0.60). There was no item in the test that needed to be deleted due to item discrimination values of 0.20. There was a need for revision and improvement on items 4, 11, and 16 which must be from 0.20 to 0.29. The remaining items were in the categories of fairly good from 0.30 to 0.39 and very good from 0.40 and more. Some tasks were considered tough by the participants due to the topic. Because figurative language is not particularly taught during English learning, it may be unrealistic to expect adult English learners to be capable of identifying it. However, given the purpose of the study was to see how well university students can use the test, all of the items were kept.

The primary data were collected from comparison and metaphor comprehension tests. The test was written in Google Forms with strict instructions not to duplicate other work, to copy the answers from internet sources, and to pass them on as their work. Using online test distribution is related to avoiding face-to-face interactions in a pandemic situation. The results of the test were then sent to two experts to review and categorize the results. The appropriate judgments apply not only to the correct form of language but also to the appropriate meaning of the expression. When calculating the proportion of agreements, the ratio of expert agreements to the number of agreements and disagreements was taken into account. The data was compiled and entered into statistical software (SPSS). Because the data were not normally distributed, non-parametric descriptive statistics were generated based on the research objectives, and the data were subjected to a series of Mann-Whitney U tests.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The data from the main objective of the study revealed the extent to which university students understand English similes and metaphors. It shows the frequency of right and wrong answers for each tested item. The results of these frequencies were then calculated in the form of percentages. Total scores were then analyzed by SPSS using a series of Mann-Whitney U tests to examine whether or not students' simile and metaphor understanding scores were influenced by alternative non-linguistic factors

Simile and Metaphor comprehension

The most important aspect of figurative language is its form, function, and meaning. The forms of similes and metaphorical expressions are characterized by comparing words with other dissimilar words with a similar concept. Parable uses the word *than* and wants to compare while metaphor does not use the word comparison. Parable and metaphors show the imaginative and aesthetic function of language. Meanwhile, the meaning conveyed in similes and metaphors is denotative and connotative. Based on the analysis of the test results, the frequency and percentage of students' understanding of English similes and metaphors are presented in [Table 2](#).

Table 2. Frequency Regarding SC and MC Test

N	Items SC	F	%	N	Items MC	F	%		
1	From traveling, Tony says: "Lisa's lost so much weight. She's as light as a feather."	F T Tot	87 37 124	70 30 100	9	While my grandmother loved all of us very much, my younger brother was the apple of her eye	F T Tot	85 39 124	69 31 100
2	Alice never cries when she watches sad films. She's as hard as nails	F T Tot	78 46 124	63 37 100	10	Joey can answer any questions his friends ask for. He is a walking encyclopedia	F T Tot	68 56 124	55 45 100
3	The participant told me he was nervous in the meeting, but he looked as cool as a cucumber	F T Tot	74 50 124	60 40 100	11	The boy finds the courage to say that he misses me. His smile is my sunshine	F T Tot	86 38 124	69 31 100
4	When I had to attend a company dinner, the conversation was as dull as ditchwater	F T Tot	82 42 124	66 34 100	12	I have been waiting for John's confession. His voice is music to my ears	F T Tot	74 50 124	60 40 100
5	I'm getting as daft as a brush. I managed to lose my glasses twice today	F T Tot	58 66 124	47 53 100	13	Every doctor must know that laughter is the best medicine	F T Tot	82 42 124	66 34 100
6	The teachers think that Her son is as sharp as a tack. They've moved him up a class at school	F T Tot	72 52 124	58 42 100	14	He was a cheetah in the race	F T Tot	57 67 124	46 54 100
7	There's John again, walking his dog. He's as regular as clockwork	F T Tot	68 56 124	55 45 100	15	Your words cut deeper than a knife.	F T Tot	71 53 124	57 43 100
8	The kids came back from the festival as high as a kite	F T Tot	85 39 124	69 31 100	16	Her heart melts when she sees him.	F T Tot	89 35 124	72 28 100

The total correct answer for SC was 388 and for MC 380. As can be seen in [Table 2](#), of the 8 English SC questions, participants answered 29.11% of the questions correctly, while 60.89% of participants answered the questions incorrectly. In the expert evaluation, the smallest score of all the answers was 0, and the highest score of all correct answers for the students was 8. Meanwhile, out of eight questions on MC, 38.31% of the students could answer the questions correctly, but 61.69% of the students could not answer the questions. The lowest score the students could achieve was 0 and the highest correct answer was 7. From this description, the analysis moves to another question of whether gender differences had an impact on the English SC and MC. The differences in SC and MC scores are presented in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. The Difference in SC and MC Scores Based on Gender

	Gender	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
SC	male	69	60.29	4160.00	1745.000	0.433
	female	55	65.27	3590.00		
	Total	124				
MC	male	69	57.25	3950.00	1535.000	0.063
	female	55	69.09	3800.00		
	Total	124				

Base on [Table 3](#), female students are likely to understand English similes and metaphors better than male students. However, the above statement is refuted in this study as the results showed that both male and female students had the same difficulty understanding these idioms. This can be seen from the SC test results where U is 1745,000 and the MC test results where U is 1535,000; $p > 0.05$. This means that students' better or worse understanding of similes and metaphors is not influenced by gender differences. As for the second sub-problem, the difference in simile and metaphor scores based on age is in [Table 4](#).

Table 4. The Difference in SC/MC Scores based on Age

	Age	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
SC	19-20	56	51.41	2879.00	1283.000	.001
	21-22	68	71.63	4871.00		
	Total	124				
MC	19-20	56	43.26	2422.50	826.500	.000
	21-22	68	78.35	5327.50		
	Total	124				

Base on [Table 4](#), although some opinions suggest that the ability to understand similes and metaphors is not affected by age differences, this study confirms that age differences can affect students' understanding of similes in English. The U-test of SC was 1283.000 and MC was 826.500, the p-value was less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). This value showed a significant difference based on age group. Students aged 20 and 22 have a higher understanding of parables than students aged 19 and 21. Regarding study duration, the U test provided information on whether the second-year students were more successful than third-year students. Therefore, regarding the third sub-problem, the difference in the simile scores based on study duration can be shown in [Table 5](#).

Table 5. The Difference in SC/MC Scores based on the length of the Study

	Length of the study	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
SC	Year 2	56	45.28	2535.50	939.500	.000
	Year 3	68	76.68	5214.50		
	Total	124				
MC	Year 2	56	50.15	2808.50	1212.500	.000
	Year 3	68	72.67	4941.50		
	Total	124				

Base on [Table 5](#), length of study may or may not affect the student's understanding of English similes. If the use of figurative language is ignored and language learning focuses only on Standard and Structural English, it is easy to predict that students' simile comprehension is not based on length of study. However, this study confirms that length of study can affect students' ability to understand English SC and MC. This can be seen from the Mann-Whitney U-test result for SC, which was 939.500 and the p-value was less than 0.05 ($U=713.00$, $p < 0.05$), the U-test for MC was 1212.500 and the p-value was less than 0.05 ($U=713.00$, $p < 0.05$). The result showed that students SC and MC differed according to the length of English study. 3rd-grade students performed better in English similes and metaphors than 2nd-grade students. The fourth sub-problem relates to the extent to which SC and MC differed due to different course backgrounds. The 66 students in the Faculty of Education study English as a major, while 56 students in the Faculty of Economics study English as a compulsory subject. In order to make it clearer whether simile understanding differs according to faculty background, the result of the U-test on the difference in SC and MC scores of students in different faculty backgrounds can be presented in [Table 6](#).

Table 6. The Difference in SC and MC Scores on Different Faculty Backgrounds

	Faculty	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	U	P
SC	Economics	58	48.68	2823.50	1112.500	.000
	Education	66	74.64	4926.50		
	Total	124				
MC	Economics	58	49.63	2878.50	1167.500	.000
	Education	66	73.81	4871.50		
	Total	124				

Base on [Table 6](#), although all students have been taught English since elementary school, there is a strong assumption that students who major in English are better at understanding similes and metaphors than students who are not specifically studying English. This statement is supported by statistical results of the study, in which SC's U-test showed that the p-value was less than 0.05 (U=1112.500, $p < 0.05$) and U-test of MC 1167,500, $p < 0.05$, where this value showed a significant difference based on the different faculty backgrounds. Students in the Faculty of Education have gained a better understanding of SC and MC than students in the Faculty of Economics.

Discussion

The findings of the observations revealed that students' knowledge of similes and metaphors differed significantly. It is easier for students to understand similes as metaphors, making it easy to determine the context when comparing different words with the concepts of the words being compared ([Birello & Pujolà, 2023](#); [Kumar & Nanda, 2019](#)). Unlike metaphors, students lose their way of determining the meaning. The findings of this study revealed that students' grasp of English similes and metaphors is low on a broad scale; that there is no difference in the understanding of similes and metaphors between female and male students. This means that female students have the same ability or difficulty expressing English similes and metaphors as male students. However, students' understanding of English similes and metaphors differed according to age, length of study, and academic background. In short, the older students performed better than the younger students. Second-grade students recognized fewer English similes and metaphors than third-grade students ([Boulton et al., 2017](#); [Kumandaş et al., 2018](#)). Although all students had the same problems understanding these idioms, students in the faculty of education performed slightly better than those in the faculty of economics.

Of the observed comparison responses, up to 39.11% of students answered the comparison questions correctly, while 60.89% of student responses were incorrect. Of the 8 questions, 3 questions were easily answered with a percentage of 53.2%, 45.2%, and 41.9%. This percentage shows that the questions on this item are the most difficult to reach for almost half of the participants. In addition, the other three items were answered incorrectly by 70.2%, 68.5%, and 66.1%. of the students. This figure shows that these items are easy for students to answer and indicate success in understanding parables. That means half of the students from all groups can understand the English simile. Meanwhile, according to the observation of understanding of English metaphors, 38.31% of students answered correctly and 61.69% answered incorrectly. Of the 8 questions about the metaphor, the majority of the three items could not be answered by the students at 71.8%, 69.3%, and 68.5%. of the students. Meanwhile, 3 items of metaphor questions students could answer with proportions up to 54.00%, 45.2%, and 42.7%. This proportion proves that almost all students cannot answer this metaphor item correctly. These findings suggest that the questions that are most difficult for students to respond to, should be compared to the items that are easiest to grasp ([Park, 2020](#)). From the comparison, the factors that frustrate the students can be identified. The common factors leading to students being unable to answer the question are (1) direct translation, (2) limited context, (3) limited vocabulary, and (4) cultural misunderstanding. Students' inability to process the concepts of meaning in context, causes them to respond with controversial conclusions. It is believed that the participants had difficulty deciphering the linguistic structure of the items because difficult-to-understand concepts were presented in long and detailed explanations. Learning and using similes and metaphors tends to be more appropriate for adult learners because the level of maturity of the English language can affect the ability to build meaning with context. However, introducing, learning, and using idioms play a large role in mastering similes and metaphors ([Birello & Pujolà, 2023](#); [Dewi, 2021](#)). Students' inability to process the concepts of meaning in context, causes them to respond with controversial conclusions. It is believed that the participants had difficulty deciphering the linguistic structure of the items because difficult-to-understand concepts were presented in long and detailed explanations. Learning and using the idiom tends to be more appropriate for adult learners because the level of maturity of the English language can affect the ability to build meaning with context. However, introducing, learning, and using idioms play a large role in mastering similes and metaphors ([Gupta et al., 2022](#); [Su et al., 2021](#)). According to some facts, female students become more independent, have a stronger competitive spirit, and express themselves better than male students.

Regarding the duration of the training, the students in the 6th semester had a higher overall score for comparative and metaphorical understanding than students in the 4th semester. Furthermore, as reported by other study adult education has an important impact on foreign language acquisition and effective language skills (Chevrier et al., 2022; Onopriienko et al., 2021). That is, the experience of presenting a new language context has a positive effect on the ability to understand similes and metaphors. The final result of this study is that students in the English Faculty of Education were more successful at correctly answering 16 questions than students in the Economics Faculty on the same campus. This is because students can understand the context of the language even though they have never used the expression in a functional language environment. This can be traced back to previous study who emphasize that adult learners have experienced the process of developing L1 in their environment and adapting to L2 in other speakers' environments (Hashim et al., 2018; Kolawole & Pusoetsile, 2022). Therefore, experiencing the structure of expression at different individual levels promotes language development. In contrast, economics students who do not focus their learning on English encounter difficulties in interpreting English similes and metaphors. They mostly translate and interpret it according to its original form and meaning. It can therefore be said that students of the Faculty of English have a slightly better command of English similes and metaphors than students of the Faculty of Economics based on previous learning experiences.

4. CONCLUSION

Contains conclusions and suggestions. conclusions include answers to research questions. suggestions refer to the results of the study and take the form of practical actions, mentioning to whom and for what advice is intended. written in essay form, not numerical form. the research shows that students' understanding of english similes and metaphors is rated as low. items that can be easily answered by students are similes because the phrase being compared has identical characters with the intended literal meaning. the metaphor items, on the other hand, are more difficult for students to answer because the comparison between one language form and another expression not only affects other language forms but also characterizes other concepts within the forms. Therefore, the context of conceptual semantics and the context of culture are considered crucial to understanding the english metaphor. non-linguistic factors such as age, gender, length of education, and academic major can affect students' ability to demonstrate better english idioms. In light of the above two findings, this study suggests that lectures should support students with the use of similes and metaphors for holistic english language proficiency. linguists and educators are also encouraged to study the mental process of figurative language development in bilingual learning from a cognitive linguistics perspective.

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