

Mind, Language and Experience: Improving the Understanding of Figurative Language in EFL

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Abstract The aim of the present chapter is to present a working technique for improving the metaphorical understanding of EFL learners. The main technique recommended in this chapter is *particularisation*, which is based on four strands of thought: the role of intentions in the meaning of language; theory of mind; the theory of the social ontogeny of predication; and embodied experience as a basis for the meaning of language. The principle of the particularisation technique has been defined as a presentation of a particularised focus, an imaginary character who is consistently presented to a learner through descriptions of his/her mental states, and with whom a learner can engage in an interaction through the means of narratives. The assumption is that through such interactions learners will be able to perceive the intentions of the speaker/writer better and as a result their comprehension of non-literal language will improve. A particularised focus is meant to become for the learners a link between the language and the user. Its explicitly presented mind can help EFL learners to view a foreign language not just from the perspective of a purely structural entity, but as a tool for expressing one's own mind. Non-literal language is a particular example of discourse that depends on intentions, the assumption being that the technique strongly affects learners' comprehension of metaphors, metonymy, similes, jokes, and irony.

Keywords Theory of mind • Figurative language • EFL • Intentions • Non-literal language • Intentionality

1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to present a technique for improving the non-literal-language understanding of EFL learners based on theoretical considerations concerning the possible sources of the difficulties that students encounter.

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Effective communication in everyday discourse consists of such abilities as manipulating and influencing each other's behaviour, explaining or clarifying, creating an interesting and imaginative ambience in conversations, structuring and organising discourses, or expressing emotions. In all these instances, non-literal language in the form of metaphors, metonymies, similes, jokes, irony, and sarcasm, has an important role (Arnaud & Savignon, 1997; Besemeres, 2006; Charteris-Black, 2002; Cooper, 1999; Danesi, 1995; Littlemore & Low, 2006a, b; Littlemore, Chen, Koester, & Barnden, 2011; Wierzbicka, 1999). Unfortunately, EFL learners find this part of language knowledge particularly troublesome, and, as a result, lose many of the valuable tools in successful interactions. Danesi (1995) suggests that the problems with producing and understanding non-literal language account for learners' foreign discourses' being unnatural, overtly literal on the surface, and lacking depth in describing reality.

2 The Difficulties Learners Face with Non-literal Language

As important as non-literal discourse is, its acquisition and mastery remains a difficulty for L2 learners. The lack of any systematic rules and categorisation for idioms and fixed phrases, because of their proliferation in every language, has become one of the most-basic reasons for L2 learners' avoidance of this type of lexical devices and the resulting artificiality of the learners' language, pragmatic failures, and misunderstanding. The study by Boers (2000) attempted to remedy this apparent lexical chaos by making students aware of the conceptual metaphors that underpin a range idioms and can serve as frameworks for their categorisation. However, even Boers concedes that such treatment cannot be applied to all phrases. An additional problem is connected with processing capacities. In most studies on fixed phrases such as idioms (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008; Cooper, 1999) it has been confirmed that native speakers process the metaphorical meaning of fixed phrases faster than the literal meaning of their constituents, findings also confirmed by the studies conducted by Glucksberg (2001). This advantage seems to be possessed by proficient non-native speakers (Conklin & Schmitt, 2008) though the study by Cooper (1999) indicates that the average student, who does not have such an expansive knowledge of vocabulary as native speakers or advanced students, has to rely on a number of facilitating strategies, such as guessing from the context or using their first language or background knowledge, which makes the processing of non-literal language more difficult. Additionally, L2 learners cannot rely on pragmatic knowledge or familiarity with the culture of the target language as much as native speakers can. The user of a non-literal discourse makes certain assumptions about a common sociolinguistic background with the addressee of their utterances but the lack of such background knowledge can lead to misinterpretation (Littlemore & Low, 2006a, b).

3 The Creative Use of Figurative Language

What Irujo facetiously calls “idiomophobia” (Irujo, 1986, p. 300) in second-language learning involves not only an amassed sum of particularly difficult lexical items, but rather a dynamic system that is in constant flux—a mechanism for the generative and creative use of non-literal language to produce novel vehicles for expressing thoughts, even at the level of conceptual metaphors (Kovecses, 2010). The possibility of modifying and varying the use of even relatively fixed expressions such as idioms (Glucksberg, 2001) raises the question about the very possibility of delineating and charting the exact limits of the accumulation of all figurative phrases, especially since many of them sprout not only with variations of the already existing ones, but with each new advertising slogan, internet meme or catchphrase coined in a film or on television (e.g., Alexander (1984) categorises catchphrases and slogans as fixed phrases). Metaphors, even those that become popular and are locked into the language as fixed phrases, originate in discourse at the level of particular conversations, e.g., when a person coins a new and unusual alignment of words (Cameron & Deignan, 2006; Gibbs & Cameron, 2008). An example is the metaphor ‘emotional baggage’ analysed by Cameron and Deignan (2006), who show that these two words have not always been associated with each other and only recently have become a metaphoric expression. Thus, interlocutors become active meaning artificers in the process of negotiating the significance of words and phrases.

The assumption that figurative language is dynamic and fluid rather than static and fixed thus has important ramifications for learners, as the possible meanings of even fixed expressions are now burgeoning into almost innumerable interpretative alternatives, depending mainly on the intentions of the speaker/writer. This assumption about non-literal language moves beyond the domain of a limited list of fixed phrases and precipitates its intractable non-transparency for L2 learners. However, finding the solution to the problem of figurative-language understanding requires not just imparting to the students a particular kind of knowledge, like a list of idioms or a pragmatic script, but also equipping learners with a set of general skills in metaphor comprehension. For example, Littlemore and Low (2006a, b) suggest such a set of competences and skills that a language learner should have in order to successfully interpret metaphorical language. Their main aim is to develop in learners not a native-like proficiency in understanding metaphors, but rather to train them in the procedures for interpreting their meanings through querying, guessing and other strategies that are rather uncommon for the average native speaker, who on encountering a metaphor either processes it automatically, as in the case of idioms, or relies strongly on pragmatic knowledge.

Similarly to Littlemore and Low’s (2006a, b) suggestion, the technique described in the present chapter does not focus on improving understanding through providing any particular pool of non-literal vocabulary items. Rather, in recognition of the fact that the meaning of metaphors, similes, idioms, irony, and jokes is

dynamic, and changes together with the intentions of the speaker/writer, the present chapter suggests a technique for improving the general skills of learners in understanding the intentions of the language user. This in turn is hypothesised to improve their non-literal language comprehension.

4 Intentions in Figurative-Language Understanding

Grice (1957) treats the intentions of the user of the language as crucial for understanding meaning. For Grice (1957) meaning is not dependent on the reactions that the sign induces in the recipient, but on what the speaker intends. The decisive function of intentions does not, however, diminish the role of the audience to or the addressee of a particular sign, because for one to intend to mean something is at the same time to desire the interlocutor to recognise the sign. Thus, it is impossible to claim that one means something unless he/she employs such ways of communicating one's intentions that would enable the other party to recognise their desires.

Similarly, Bakhtin's philosophy of language (Bakhtin, 1986; Johnson, 2004) assumes the inclusion of the other party to the communicative act as an essential structural component of meaning. In Bakhtin's theory, the basic unit of communication and meaning is utterance. Utterance is a piece of language that has an addressee inscribed in it, so the recipient of the message can be clearly recognised. Bakhtin states that every utterance, every meaningful piece of language, has a recipient that is a target in the very utterance itself. People, according to Bakhtin, cannot mean something without having in mind a particular person to whom one is speaking or writing. Depending on which person one has in mind, the style of language that one uses, what Bakhtin calls the voice, changes.

The importance of the intentions of the language user when expressing meaning is even more essential in the case of non-literal language. The search for and interpretation of authorial intentions is indicated as one of the most intuitive and basic, though not infallible, strategies in metaphor comprehension, even for native speakers (Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, & Mills, 2007). In a discussion of various models of metaphor comprehension, Glucksberg (2001) provides a very strong support for the idea that communicative intentions play a crucial role in metaphor comprehension. The principle of informativeness and the topic-comment format that the vehicle of a metaphor follows in giving new information about the topic of that metaphor are the essential elements enabling the users of a particular language to distinguish between metaphorical and the literal discourse. Such quality of intentions has been pinpointed in two comparison models of metaphoric-language comprehension that Glucksberg analyses—Ortony's (Ortony, 1979 in Glucksberg, 2001) and Gentner and Wolff's (Gentner & Wolff, 1997 in Glucksberg, 2001). His own model of metaphorical understanding is based on the

assumption that the intentions of the speaker/writer are recognised, and the expression is informative, before the proper process of metaphor interpretation can take place at all. The intentions behind the metaphor can take various different shapes, not only informative, but also manipulative, as Littlemore and Low (2006a, b) point out in the case of political discourse.

5 The Representation of the Intending Mind

Having recognised the possible importance of intentions for non-literal-language understanding, one has to give a particular shape to the very concept of intentions in order to be able to introduce it into the language classroom. One way of achieving this is to define intentions as one of a whole set of mental states that a person can have. Therefore, to say that intentions are behind the meaning of language is to suggest that the mind of the language user, the sender of the message, is directly involved in language understanding, not in its actual form, but as being represented in the mind of the recipient, who incorporates that representation in the process of decoding the meaning of the message. In other words, understanding language involves seeing the mind of another person, its mental states being the mechanism for interpreting the message in one way or another. The important question is how it happens that one is able to “see” the mind of another person, and how L2 learners might possibly be “blind” in this respect when trying to understand the mind of other persons behind their foreign utterances.

6 Intentions as Theory of Mind

Grice (1957) himself does not determine how, in actual communication, inferencing and intending takes place, providing only a logical elaboration of how we understand meaning in terms of the intentions of another person. Indubitably, in real communication speakers rarely formulate any explicit descriptions of their plans before they speak, so it seems that intention is implicit or unconscious. Sperber and Wilson (2002) point out that Grice’s proposal can be realised simply in terms of a specialised unconscious cognitive mechanism, as we are able to understand intentions and language instantly, without any conscious deliberation. In fact, a large number of neurological studies and experiments (Bibby & McDonald, 2005; Gavilan & Garcia-Albea, 2011; Kasher, Batori, Soroker, Graves, & Zaidel, 1999; Monetta, Grinrod, & Pell, 2009; Poletti, Enrici, & Adenzato, 2012; Surian & Siegal, 2001; Weed, McGregor, Nielsen, Roepstorff, & Frith, 2010; Winner, Brownell, Happe, Blum, & Pincus, 1998) suggest that there are areas of the brain that are responsible for understanding the beliefs, intentions and emotions of another person. Interestingly, such studies equate the deficits of autistic, Parkinson’s disease, schizophrenic and RHD (right-hemisphere damaged) patients in the comprehension of

irony, lies, sarcasm and metaphor with lesions, disturbances and other neurological malfunctions of particular regions in the brain. These studies use the concept of theory of mind to denote all kinds of cognitive operations requiring ascribing emotions, intentions and beliefs to others, distinguishing one's thoughts and mental states from the state of reality and taking into account another person's point of view. Theory of mind, or ToM, is a comprehensive term denoting the ability of human beings to take the representation of the mind of another person into account while making sense of the world (Gopnik & Wellman, 1992). ToM is credited with explanatory power in such fields as psychology, neurology, philosophy, sociology and even religion (Boyd, 2008) and its sweeping influence is corroborated by the amount of research conducted within this conceptual framework.

The region of the brain which is usually associated with ToM is located in the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) and the temporal lobes, areas which show consistent activation patterns in the tasks involving the use of ToM understanding (Brune & Brune-Cohrs, 2006; Freedman & Stuss, 2011; Kobayashi, Glover, & Temple, 2008; Martin & McDonald, 2003; Sebastian et al., 2012; Thoma & Daum, 2006; for a detailed description see also Gallagher & Frith, 2003). Though it would be interesting to investigate the neurological activation of the ToM regions in the brains of second-language learners while comprehending L2 figurative meaning, no such study has yet been conducted. However, an illuminating study by Kobayashi, Glover and Temple (2008) of bilingual Japanese children who acquired second language early in their lives, and Japanese adults living in the USA, who became bilingual later in life, underscores the idea that in the adult bilinguals' brains there might be a specific L2 ToM region that develops parallel to L1 ToM. In bilingual children, no such distinct ToM region has been found in brain scans, which might suggest that only learning a second language later in life is conducive to creating an alternative version of the mind that is characteristic and corresponds to the second language. The finding of the study echoes the recollections of bilinguals analysed in Pavlenko (2006), who mostly confirmed that switching languages "can create different, and sometimes incommensurable, worlds for their speakers who feel that their selves change with a shift in language" (Pavlenko, 2006, p. 37) an experience close to the predicament of schizophrenic patients with multiple personalities.

7 Theory of Mind and L2 Learners

Do all the L2 learners who acquire language later in their lives develop a specific L2 ToM that enables them to understand that a foreign language is an expression of a person's thoughts and intentions? Though Kobayashi et al. (2008) conclude that the differences between adults and children in the study might stem from the greater reliance of adults on declarative learning in L2 acquisition, one should bear in mind the fact that the adult participants in the study learned the language, and honed their proficiency, in a community of native speakers rather than in an EFL classroom. This might mean that EFL students miss much more than just opportunities for

interaction from not participating in the community and using L2 in everyday communication, as they have no opportunity to develop L2 specific understanding of the mind of the language user. The present chapter postulates that this might be the case, and the lack of a clear connection between L2 and the representation of the mind of the language user, the same as in brain-damaged patients, but to a much lesser extent and severity, blurs and distorts the meaning of non-literal language.

If the problems of L2 learners, and especially EFL learners, in understanding the intentions behind language stem from the fact that their L2 ToM is underdeveloped or missing altogether, if they are to improve their non-literal language understanding, the very first step should be to study the models of ToM development in children and to draw conclusions regarding the possibility of creating the conditions favourable for ToM development in the classroom. There are three key elements that are recognised as necessary for a child to acquire ToM propensity. The first is linguistic input (de Rosnay & Hughes, 2006; De Villiers, 2005a, b; Hale & Tager-Flusberg, 2003; Hutto, 2011; Lohmann, Tomasello, & Meyer, 2005; Newton & De Villiers, 2007; Olson, 1988; Ruffman, Slade, & Crowe, 2002; Schick, De Villiers, De Villiers, & Hoffmeister, 2007), which either through semantic cues (descriptions of the mental states of a child introduced by the caretakers) or syntactic cues (the embedded complementation of sentences such as “*I think that...*” or “*he believes that*”) enables a child to distinguish between the reality and the mental states of a person. The second is the quality of the relationship (Baldwin & Saylor, 2005; Dunn & Brophy, 2005), as interactions with people to whom a child feels closely attached are more likely to elicit language that abounds in the descriptions of mental states, such as past experience of negative feelings, and enhances the recognition of intentions. And finally the introduction of varying points of view and multiple perspectives (Harris, 2005; Jacques & Zelazo, 2005; Perner, Zauner, & Sprung, 2005).

Taking into account the three requirements presented above, the technique of improving non-literal language understanding through enhancing L2-ToM capacities should provide learners with linguistic input rich in descriptions of mental states, enable them to explore language within the context of meaningful relationships, and create in learners the sense that every utterance is an expression of somebody else’s point of view, rather than an objective description of the state of affairs. The latter requirement is especially important as taking a perspective introduces into the discussion of ToM development a new significant dimension: that the capacity to ascribe to another person intentions, beliefs, and representations of reality depends on the very awareness that this can be done, that mental states and language belong to somebody, and have an indelible mark of ownership. This might explain why the learners might possibly not develop ToM for a second language, as having experienced L2 only as arbitrary and instructed abstract knowledge which represents objective reality, and not the reality of a particular person, makes the concept of the ownership of linguistic expressions absent. And, as a result, there is only one perspective in understanding and one version of reality—the objective reality of arbitrary meanings.

8 Intentionality

ToM answers just part of the question, as even if learners are able to understand a message in terms of the mental states of another person, these mental states can still remain incomprehensible, empty, and unintelligible. This is because, apart from L2 ToM, learners can miss an important feature which enables mental states to be about anything in the first place—intentionality. Intentionality is the most characteristic feature of all human mental states that captures the quality of their being about something, evidently directed at and pointing at some object, idea, person, event, proposition, and anything else that at a particular moment constitutes the content of the mind (Sokolowski, 2000). Radu Bogdan, in his theory of the social origins of predication (Bogdan, 2009); states that intentionality of mental states develops in the context of a close interaction between an adult and a child, involving their shared attentional focus on some object in the external world.

Early infancy is a crucial and very-basic period that lays the foundation for any further interactional intentionality (Bogdan, 2009). The initial attempts of an adult to regulate the behaviour of an infant at a distance by expressing affect and emotions through verbalisations, gestures and mimicry turns into the first communicative exchange that a child participates in, which is called bilateral communication. Although the child does not understand the caretaker's intent, she/he is already a player and a participant in the game of communication and intent recognition. The child reciprocates the adult's intents by the expression of affect. Affects and emotions are important here because they serve as carriers and 'smugglers' of communicative purposes and intents; the inborn sensitivity to the expression of emotions enables the child to respond to them accordingly. The child not only responds, but also recognises that his/her own response has a certain evocative force that influences the adult, as the adult takes the child's response as a recognition of his/her intent and responds in turn, making the responses of the child significant, meaningful. In this quasi-conversation, which becomes a template for all the other interactions of the child, he/she begins to share with the adult the recognition of intent and becomes accustomed to the alternating rhythm of interaction, in which one person expresses something, and the other responds accordingly and expects the first person to recognise the response as an answer.

Later on, the child, now predisposed in the inherent ability to discern the attentional focus of others and the target of their attention, the components of which Bogdan calls 'naive psychology', notices that the adult focuses attention not only on the child, but also on the object that has been targeted in order to gain his/her interest. What is more, being accustomed to bilateral communication from the earlier stages of his/her interaction with the caretaker and to the recognition of communicative intents, the child recognises that the adult wants her/him to direct attention at the object too. Then, the pattern of bilateral communication is activated and the child reciprocates the intent of the adult by focusing on the object and recognising that, like the reciprocation of the affect, this has a particular evocative effect and significance for the adult. Thus, reference to some external object in the form of an

intentional focus becomes a shared intentional focus when it combines with the patterns of intent recognition and reciprocation developed in the bilateral stage.

In compliance with the assumption made in the present chapter that the reconstruction of the original conditions favourable for developing certain mental capacities in childhood will enhance the development of these capacities in the EFL classroom, Bogdan's theory is complementary with the previous considerations on the development of ToM. Thus, being aware of the importance of a relationship between an adult and a child in which a shared intentionality develops becomes an essential factor in devising a technique for improving learners' non-literal-language understanding.

Through including shared intentionality in the technique, the second language of the learners will become meaningful to the students in a new, more genuine way, a way that does not lead to the capture of the L2's meaning in the "prison" of the student's mind, as some logical, arbitrary set of rules and lists of words relating to an objective reality. But the L2 becomes transferred into the outside of the mind to the mind of the significant other, creating a connection between 'me' and 'you', between the inside world and the outside world that originally exists and underlies the meaning of language as a mechanism of shared intentionality developed through the interaction of a child with others. Without such a connection, the meaning of language becomes a depersonalised calculus and a text is just a set of related elements that the students have to match against some objective reality of the arbitrary meanings of words. The author of a text cannot share anything, any intentional focus or communicative intent, with learners, because their minds are incapable of and unprepared for noticing or perceiving shared intentionality transmitted through the foreign language in the first place. It is as if the world in L2 were for learners some sterile, de-subjectivised collection of words, and the objects to which they arbitrarily correspond, but no state of affairs, no description, no predicate of this sterile reality were possible, making L2 resemble more a mathematical equation than a genuine way of sharing thoughts with other people.

Apart from the development of the very mechanism of intentionality, learners' will have to know what the foreign language users' thoughts are directed at. In this respect, the theory of Johnson (1987) seems to offer the most-beneficial suggestions for L2 learners, as it emphasises the role of human experience and imagination for meaning. These two elements, like communication in the context of a unique relationship, a description of mental states and the awareness that language is a representation of a subjective, not objective reality, could be missing from the language classroom, as learners do not have the opportunity to fuse their linguistic knowledge with their experience of the world outside the classroom, and the only way to do that is through imagination. Unlike Radu Bogdan, and such philosophers as Searle (Searle, 1983), Johnson suggests that the mind is not directed at the propositions reflecting the state of the world, but rather at the schematic structures stemming from embodied experiences (Johnson, 1987). This kind of empirical knowledge, stemming from embodiment, has a particular form that models those subterranean regions of the mind which are the source of meaning in all kinds of diverse cognitive endeavours. Experience, however, cannot be mistaken for

representational mental images or a set of pictures displayed in the head. Experience is the way human beings are in the world and in this way becomes objective, because one cannot be differently in the world. Human bodies are invariably similar, and exist in the same way. Johnson (1987) states that this existence becomes the basis of any kind of meaning, be it linguistic meaning, or be it equation in mathematics. Fused with higher cognitive functions and language through the means of imagination, embodied experience becomes a receptacle of meaning and the content of intentionality.

9 The Technique of Particularisation—Theory and Practice

The intentions of the speaker/writer, which in the present chapter are hypothesised to play a crucial role in understanding non-literal language, are not just a set of propositions corresponding to the beliefs of that person. In real communication, various mechanisms operate that make these intentions real factors shaping language comprehension. Theory of mind, the theory of the social origins of predication by Radu Bogdan, with its focus on shared intentionality, and finally the role of experience and imagination as expounded by Mark Johnson, all have their place in determining what it means to apprehend communicative intentions. On this theoretical basis the technique of improving the metaphorical language understanding of L2 learners—*particularisation*—can be proposed. The main principle behind the technique, in compliance with Bogdan's theory and the conclusions of the previous sections regarding ToM mechanisms, is that in order to improve and enhance the understanding of intent-driven language like metaphors, similes, jokes, irony or sarcasm, second-language learners need to be exposed to the linguistic input introduced in the form of an interaction between the learner and the significant other, the context of this interaction being shared attention to the external world, which would lead, as in the case of first-language development in children, to the inclusion or formation of shared intentionality mechanisms in the understanding of language, and the formation of a specific L2 ToM mechanism responsible for attributing intents to the meaning of second language of the learners. What's more, in order to make the intentionality of the language users' intents meaningful, in compliance with Johnson's theory, the technique has to actively involve the learners' imagination. This would enable the connection between the embodied experience of the learner and the foreign language.

In order to meet all these requirements, communicative activity has to be structured in a special way which cannot be achieved in communication between teacher and student, or between the students themselves, or even might be lacking in the genuine interactions between students and native speakers outside the classroom. What is proposed as being effective is an imaginative interaction within the student's mind with a particularised focus, a realistic imaginary character that is

presented through narratives, descriptions or pictures, and which is particularised, or made realistic, through the presentation of his/her coherent biography, emotions, mental states, and experiences in the world. The imaginary interaction of a student with a character particularised in such a way would be achieved through writing/reading narratives, describing the emotions, mental states, thoughts of the particularised focus and the learner, exposure to the repeated expressions of a particularised focus's thoughts and emotions and shared naming of the imaginary world in which the interaction with the particularised focus would take place.

The important thing to achieve in particularisation is to create a make-believe in which the learner has the impression of dealing with a real person. Only in this way is the desire to understand that person's mind created and this person becomes a significant other for the learner, thus the prototype of a second-language parental figure. Additionally, through specifying the exact emotional/mental/biographical/behavioural and spatial-temporal outline of the focus with whom the learner is going to interact, i.e., through particularisation, the meaning of language becomes ascribed and grounded in a manifestly singular character. This manifest singularity is necessary for exposing the 'ownership' of the linguistic reality and showing students that the meaning of L2 depends on the perspective of the utterer/writer. The particularised focus has to be realistic in order to make an indelible mark on the learner's cognition and make the social sharing of the meaning possible, but it cannot be real—otherwise it would not have access to the innermost region of the learner's mind, which is his/her imagination.

The role of a particularised focus is not only to be a prototype of "otherness" in second language, with whom the learners will create a bond of shared intentionality. A particularised focus is also a teacher for the learner who tutors him/her in the acts of intelligible experience. As Johnson points out, experience is not the basis of meaning because it provides mental images or sensual material, but because it is the result of one's existence in the world. Meaning, understanding and knowledge begin at the level of simply being in the world. A particularised focus is for a learner an experiencer, someone who is and exists in the imagination and mediates between the second language and the image schemata of experience elaborated into linguistic meaning through acts of metaphorical projections (Johnson, 1987). Various strands have to be linked with each other in order to make language truly meaningful. A particularised focus is the strand of otherness, shared intentionality and existence, who stands for these elements of our mind that are responsible for meaning making mechanisms. The second language can be connected with the strand of intentionality mechanisms and meaning through maintaining the world of a particularised focus and his/her acts of intelligible experience. But the merger would never be completed without the imagination of the student, which is tapped into and linked to a particularised focus and the second language by making the learner interact and imagine his/her interactions with the particularised focus.

This is one of the reasons why real communicative activities have been excluded as capable of bringing about the change in the understanding of the L2 that has been described. This does not mean that the ability of the students will not be transferred to the social domain of language use. The suggestion is that having developed the

vestigial, prototypical 'other' in the mind through imaginative interactions, the learner will be able to participate in the interactions with L2 users, both spoken and written, that require the demanding task of inferencing intentions behind the language and attributing beliefs to the speaker/writer. This is the final role of the particularised focus: transforming into 'the mind behind the text', a real sense of some other person's being behind each utterance, text and message in second language which enables the learners to correctly interpret metaphors and other forms of indirect language.

The technique can be applied on all age levels of education. In the primary classroom, a particularised focus can take the form of a puppet or a toy. At the beginning of the course/school year, the teacher introduces a particularised focus to the students by means of storytelling or a simple short activity in which the students have to greet the character in turns by introducing themselves. Specifically for the sake of building up the feeling of a particular being embedded in the presence of the focus in the classroom, the teacher should make sure that the puppet/toy used remains the same throughout the course and is not associated with any other character. The presence of the character within the classroom should be established on a regular basis and many references to the previous occurrences of the character in the class should be made so as to create a consistent biography of the character. Also, the biography of the character must be created outside of the context of the classroom, in an imaginary world like Kingdom or Magical Forest, and the teacher must make sure that the world created is clearly presented to the students via storytelling and that the students have an opportunity to interact with a particularised focus in the context of that world through a role-play or a game. The activities in which the character appears may vary, e.g., one day a teacher can tell a story from the world of a particularised focus in which the character and the students together with the teacher appear. Another day the story may not involve the students, but just the adventures of the character in the imaginary world alone. Then, however, the narrator of the story should be the focus itself, role-played by the teacher. During the activity the focus may come into various interactions with the students, joking or answering their questions. In general, all kinds of activities involving the focus must also involve the students. A particularised focus presented alone in a story or a picture may be perceived by the students as just another imaginary character, too remote from the immediacy of their own mind.

The above rules apply to the older students as well. At this level, however, the teacher can individualise a particularised focus so that each student can have their own, e.g., the students can look for interesting characters in books, films, or music, and then particularise them through describing their thoughts, emotions, actions, consistent biography and imaginary world in which they live and interact with the student. A shared classroom focus, however, may also be necessary, as not all of the students may be willing to develop their interactions with a character at a level in which the make-belief of dealing with a real person is achieved. Depending on the proficiency level, the students may engage in the world of the focus either through the narratives prepared by the teacher or the narratives written by themselves. In most cases both will be necessary, the first type to show the students how such an

imaginary interaction and the world of the focus look like (this is also an opportunity to include in the text some non-literal language to further enhance the effect of the focus) and the second one so as to maximize the involvement of the students' imagination. An important thing in the case of narratives is to keep in mind that they should be created with the student as one of the characters of the story, most naturally by using first person narration, e.g., "I talked with [the name of a particularised focus]" instead of "John talked with [the name of a particularised focus]". In this way, even in the case of the narratives prepared by the teacher, the immediacy of the imagination of the students is engaged. Other types of activities involving a particularised focus include role-plays, in which one of the learners takes the role of a focus particularised early on; writing letters to a particularised focus, in which another student responds pretending to be the focus; creating stories collectively; expressing the thoughts of a particularised focus through pictures, poems, or works of art; creating a newspaper article about the interactions of a learner with a particularised focus, and so on.

Apart from the very interactions with the focus, additional form of improving metaphorical language understanding may be explicit non-literal language practice within the context of such interactions. The student may, e.g., ask a particularised focus role-played by the teacher what a non-literal phrase means and the teacher may provide the explanation through the agency of the character. Another type of such activity may be exposure to the non-literal language in the context of the narratives involving the focus and the student.

The possible application of the technique described in the present chapter is limited only by the creativity of the teacher himself/herself. What is the most important is that particularisation should be applied in a consistent manner. If a character is particularised in some way, this character should remain separate from all the other particularised characters: his/her actions, thoughts and emotions should be consistently built up throughout the course of events into a consistent biography and not a motley array of descriptions. The important thing to achieve in particularisation is to create a make-belief in which the learners have the impression of dealing with a real person and to let the students frequently interact and share the space of their imagination with a particularised focus.

10 Conclusions

The aim of the chapter is to present a technique for improving the non-literal language understanding of EFL learners, an area which many students find particularly troublesome, riddled with misunderstandings and difficulties. The assumption made in the chapter is that figurative language is not simply a set of various lexical items, but rather employs the utterer's/writer's intentions as a guiding principle in shaping the meaning, so EFL learners face the challenge of not only processing the language itself, but also incorporating into their interpretation the mind of another person. Taking these considerations into account, the technique

described in the present chapter develops the deepened understanding of non-literal language through students' interaction with a particularised focus, an imaginary character whose mind is presented explicitly to learners through particularising him/her with biographical details, describing mental states, and defining spatial-temporal experiences. In this way, learners create in their imagination a coherent world in which the outside is linked with the inside, the reality is linked with the representation of that reality, and the mind is connected to the second language, creating a whole which yields the speaker's meaning, what is intended to be said, rather than what is said alone. This blend is hypothesised to give students an awareness of language not just as a descriptive calculus, but as a tool that serves the purpose of expressing one's thoughts, which eventually leads to improved metaphorical-language comprehension, as the intentions of the speaker/writer, his/her mind, are essential elements in the meaning of all figurative expressions.

The technique presented above is obviously theoretical and in need of empirical validation. Due to the nature of the technique most reliable studies should be conducted on a longitudinal basis, as interactions with a particularised focus should be consistent throughout the course of events and not just occasional. However, it is conceivable that an improvement might occur in understanding through simply presenting the non-literal language in the context of the imaginary interactions of the learners with particularised focus. All these assumptions, however, are yet to be tested. The most-valuable confirmation, apart from the research data, will of course be the opinions of the learners and the teachers on the effectiveness, practicability and usefulness of the technique.

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