

Mental Imagery in English Proverbs for EFL Learners of Different Ages

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ABSTRACT

To date very little research has been done on the relationship between mental imagery and the comprehension of figurative speech. Duthie, Nippold, Billow, and Mansfield (2008) found that mental imagery is associated with proverb comprehension in young adults and that mental images become more metaphorical with increasing age. This author has also found that mental imagery elicitation in English proverb instruction has been found to contribute to the learning of proverbs in second language learning. The present research seeks to discover whether the results of the Duthie et al. (2008) study with native English speakers may be similar for Korean EFL learners, thereby impacting instructional techniques. Results indicate evident differences for native and non-native speakers of English, suggesting a need for incorporating scaffolding into second-language teaching techniques for English proverbs and other figurative speech. Key words: mental imagery, English proverb comprehension

I. Introduction

Figurative expressions that convey the beliefs, social norms, or moral concerns of a society are proverbs (Gibbs, Strom, & Spivey-Knowlton, 1997). Examples include: *A barking dog seldom bites*, *Truth is stranger than fiction*, *To err is human, to forgive is divine*. Proverb comprehension gradually improves during childhood and adolescence, and even into adulthood (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold, Uhden, & Schwarz, 1997), and expressions containing concrete nouns are often easier to comprehend than those containing abstract nouns (Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold et al., 1997). It has been suggested that the difference in difficulty between concrete and abstract proverbs might in part be the result of the higher imagery values of concrete proverbs, which is consistent with dual coding theory. Gibbs et al. (1997) suggest a link between mental imagery and proverb comprehension and reported mental images for individual proverbs as often being consistent across participants and metaphorical, reflecting the ability to grasp figurative meanings. However, the investigation of mental imagery did not include systematic scoring. Duthie, Nippold, Billow, and Mansfield (2008) found that mental imagery and proverb comprehension are associated in young adults and that mental images become more metaphorical with increasing age. The elicitation of mental imagery in proverb instruction has been found to contribute to the learning of proverbs (Shaffer 2005, 2006).

The purpose of this study is to discover whether such differences as those in the Duthie et al. (2008) study with native English speakers also occur in Korean EFL learners, thereby impacting instructional techniques. The research question it seeks to answer is: Is there a relationship between mental imagery for proverbs and comprehension for the same expressions, i.e., do more easily comprehended proverbs evoke more metaphorical images than do more difficult ones? To answer these questions, two tasks from Duthie et al. were

administered to the participants: (1) a mental imagery task, which was administered to determine the degree to which participants' mental images, expressed literal versus figurative concepts and (2) a proverb comprehension task, which examined the participants' understanding of each proverb's figurative meaning.

II. Method

A. Participants

The participants included a group of university undergraduate students and a group of graduate students whose respective mean ages were 24 years, 2 months (24; 2) and 27 years, 0 months (27; 0). There were 14 participants in the former group and 29 in the latter. All the participants in each group spoke Korean as their L1 and all were learners of English. The undergraduate group (Group U) consisted of 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year students majoring in English Education as their primary or secondary major at a university in Gwangju. The graduate group (Group G) consisted of 1st-, 2nd-, and 3rd-year students enrolled in the Graduate School of Education at the same university in Gwangju.

B. Procedures

All the participants were tested in group fashion in their university classrooms. Lexical items contained in the proverbs tested that the investigator thought the participants may not fully understand were pre-taught. Each participant was then given a booklet that contained a brief written description of the directions along with the experimental tasks. The participants were asked to read the directions silently before proceeding with the tasks.

C. Tasks

The mental imagery task was always administered first, followed by the proverb comprehension task. This order was employed because it was thought that the story contexts contained in the comprehension task might influence the participants' images of the proverbs. This sequence helped to elicit unbiased responses on the imagery task.

Each task contained the same 20 proverbs that were presented in the Duthie et al. (2008) mental imagery task. Each proverb consisted of an independent clause that contained two nouns, both of which were concrete (e.g., a good *sailor* likes a rough *sea*; the restless *sleeper* blames the *bed*; one bad *apple* spoils the *barrel*). The concreteness of the nouns had been verified in a previous study (Nippold & Haq, 1996). Concrete proverbs were employed because they were likely to evoke stronger mental images than abstract proverbs. In the Nippold and Haq study, each expression had been rated for familiarity by asking adolescents and adults to indicate how often they had heard or read the proverb before, using the following rating system: 1 = *never*, 2 = *once*, 3 = *a few times*, 4 = *several times*, 5 = *many times*. The proverbs used in the present study had a mean familiarity rating of 2.50 (moderate; range = <2 to >3). The tasks were introduced in written form on the first page of the booklets for the participants to read. They were then asked to provide their name and date of birth on the booklets. After this activity was completed, they turned the page and the experimental tasks were presented.

1. Mental Imagery Task

The mental imagery task employed in the present study was identical to that used in Duthie et al. (2008). Participants were asked to write down a brief description of their images for each proverb. Before they began the experimental task, they were given examples of images that a person might have for two proverbs that were not part of the task. The purpose of the examples was to ensure that all participants understood that they were expected to describe their mental images, not to explain the proverbs' meanings. The examples offered literal images rather than figurative to avoid confusion. It was expected that if participants understood the proverbs, their images would include figurative elements or be entirely figurative despite the literal examples. Each of the twenty proverbs was presented and the participants were asked to write what they *see, feel, or hear* when someone uses the expression.

To evaluate each response, the four-point scoring system used by Duthie et al. (2008) was employed. The system is described below with all examples pertaining to the expression *The tongue is sharper than the sword*:

0 = *Irrelevant*. The response is unrelated, vague, incomplete, or incorrect. This includes responses such as "I don't know" and "You have a long tongue," and leaving the answer space blank.

1 = *Literal-concrete-relevant*. The response describes a relevant image using words from the proverb, but does not express the psychological (metaphorical) meaning of the proverb, for example, "A tongue darting out of a person's mouth with a pointy end."

2 = *Literal-metaphorical-relevant*. The response describes a relevant image using words from the proverb, and expresses the psychological (metaphorical) meaning by describing an emotion, thought, or feeling, for example, "A tongue hurting someone with mean words."

3 = *Figurative-metaphorical-relevant*. Using different words from the proverb, the response describes a situation where the proverb could be spoken, expressing the psychological (metaphorical) meaning, for example, "I hear a witty, cutting comment during a verbal debate." (Duthie et al., 2008, pp. 158-159)

Images that were entirely figurative received the highest score because they reflected an ability to go beyond the proverb's literal meaning. Images that contained both literal and figurative elements received the next highest score, followed by those that were entirely literal. Using this system, the twenty images produced by the 43 participants (20 x 43 = 860) were scored by this investigator.

2. Proverb Comprehension Task

The proverb comprehension task was identical to that administered in Duthie et al. (2008) and developed over ten years of research. It was selected for use in their study because of its efficiency and objectivity in administration and scoring. The task contained 20 multiple-choice questions that examined the participants' understanding of each proverb's figurative meaning. Each question consisted of a short paragraph with a concluding proverb. Four answer choices followed each paragraph. Participants were asked to circle the letter of the choice that best expressed the proverb's meaning. An example of a question on the experimental task was as follows:

Barb and Kay were assigned to plan their school picnic together but could never agree on

anything. One day they got into a huge argument over the decorations, food, and music, and Barb called Kay a horrible name. Later, Kay told her mom what Barb had said. Mom said, “The tongue is sharper than the sword.”

What does it mean to say *the tongue is sharper than the sword*?

- A. A compliment is better than a criticism
- B. People should always use good manners
- C. Words can hurt more than hitting
- D. Most people like to be praised

III. Results

Each participant earned a total raw score on each task, Mental Imagery (20 x 3 = 60 possible points) and Proverb Comprehension (20 x 1 = 20 possible points). Performance on the two tasks is reported in Table 1 for Groups U and G with the Duthie et al. age-23 group of native English speakers (Group D) included for comparison. In terms of the percentage of total possible points, the following mean scores were obtained by Groups U, G, and D, respectively: imagery = 38, 46, and 49%; comprehension = 92, 84, and 93%.

[Table 1] Performance on the tasks for the two groups

	Group U	Group G	Group D
Mental Imagery (60)			
M	22.50	27.07	29.14
Range	14-35	2-50	18-59
Proverb Comp (20)			
M	18.35	16.76	18.53
Range	16-20	13-20	12-20

The twenty proverbs are listed with their mean scores on imagery and comprehension, respectively, in Tables 2 and 3, with the results shown for Group U and Group G separately, and with the Duthie et. al. (2008) results for their age-23 group (D) also listed for comparison.

[Table 2] Mean imagery scores for each proverb

Proverb	Group U	Group G	Group D
1. Scalded cats fear even cold water. 1.16	0.57	1.45	
2. A caged bird longs for the clouds. 1.63	1.00	1.00	

3. Every horse thinks its own pack heaviest. 1.51	0.57	1.00	
4. Two captains will sink a ship.	1.57	1.66	1.70
5. The restless sleeper blames the bed.	0.93	1.38	1.50
6. A good sailor likes a rough sea.	1.93	1.62	1.46
7. Every bird must hatch its own eggs.	0.29	0.97	1.29
8. The pretty shoe often pinches the foot. 1.33	0.71	1.31	1.13
9. A mouse may help a lion.	1.64	1.66	
10. Every bird likes its own nest best.	1.57	1.48	1.84
11. Sleeping foxes catch no poultry. 1.41	0.93	1.45	
12. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.	1.29	0.93	1.49
13. The early bird catches the worm. 1.63	1.07	1.66	
14. One rotten apple spoils the barrel.	1.43	1.59	1.34
15. Every cloud has a silver lining. 1.29	0.21	0.93	
16. Too many cooks spoil the broth. 1.51	1.36	1.69	
17. The bait hides the hook. 1.21	1.29	0.97	
18. The tongue is sharper than the sword. 1.93	2.07	1.86	
19. The pot calls the kettle black.	1.07	1.55	1.43
20. A leopard can't change its stripes.	1.07	0.93	1.36

[Table 3] Mean comprehension scores (percentage) for each proverb

Proverb	Group U	Group G	Group D
1. Scalded cats fear even cold water. 93	100	89.7	
2. A caged bird longs for the clouds. 89	92.9	86.2	
3. Every horse thinks its own pack heaviest. 100	71.4	41.4	
4. Two captains will sink a ship.	78.6	48.3	73
5. The restless sleeper blames the bed.	92.9	86.2	90
6. A good sailor likes a rough sea.	71.4	79.3	89
7. Every bird must hatch its own eggs.	64.3	62.1	79
8. The pretty shoe often pinches the foot.	100	86.2	86
9. A mouse may help a lion. 99	100	89.7	
10. Every bird likes its own nest best.	100	86.2	96
11. Sleeping foxes catch no poultry.	100	100	

100			
12. The squeaky wheel gets the grease.	85.7	89.7	99
13. The early bird catches the worm.	100	100	
100			
14. One rotten apple spoils the barrel.	92.9	74.9	99
15. Every cloud has a silver lining.	92.9	93.1	
99			
16. Too many cooks spoil the broth.	100	93.1	
97			
17. The bait hides the hook.	92.9	72.4	
89			
18. The tongue is sharper than the sword.	100	96.6	
97			
19. The pot calls the kettle black.	100	96.6	91
20. A leopard can't change its stripes.	100	100	91

IV. Discussion and Conclusions

It was found in Duthie et al. (2008) that there were similar patterns in mental imagery and proverb comprehension across groups and that there was an association between mental imagery and proverb comprehension in adults (Group D). In the present study, however, similar patterns are not found between Groups U and G. The mean mental imagery score for Group G (27.07) was considerably higher than that of Group U (22.50) and close to that of Group D, while the range for Group D (2-50) was much wider than for either Group U (14-35) or Group D (18-59). On the other hand, Group U (18.35) performed similar to Group D on the proverb comprehension task, while Group G performed lower (16.76). Ranges were similar for Groups G and D (13-20, 12-20), but higher for Group U.

In a comparison of individual proverbs, a similar lack of patterns is observed. Although all three groups scored 100 for Proverbs 11 and 13 on the comprehension task, Group U (0.93, 1.07) scored much lower than Group G (1.45, 1.66) on the imagery task. Group G's scores were very close to those of Group D (1.41, 1.63). On Proverb 3, the differences were even more evident. Though Group D had a mean score of 100 on the comprehension task, Group U had only 71.4, and Group G had the lowest mean score (41.4) for all proverbs for all groups. On the corresponding imagery scores, Group U had the lowest score (0.57), while Group G's score was considerably higher (1.00) but still considerably lower than Group D (151). In addition, on Proverb 15, where the three groups performed similarly on comprehension (U = 92.9, G = 93.1, D = 99), their imagery scores differed the greatest (U = 0.21, G = 0.93, D = 1.29).

Findings by Duthie et al. revealed that native English speaking children as well as adults were able to generate relevant images of concrete English proverbs and that their mental images of proverbs were associated with their own comprehension. It has not been found, however, that L2 speakers of English whose L1 is Korean demonstrate a similar ability. This indicates that significant scaffolding is required in the instruction of English proverbs to L2 English learners. Duthie et al. suggest that students might benefit from explicit attention to the

relationship of literal to figurative elements. Shaffer (2005, 2006) suggest that student-generated mental and visual imagery are both beneficial in proverb learning. In light of the low mental imagery production in the present study, instructor-generated visual images may be of high instructional value, for which further research would be required to determine.

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About the Presenter

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