MORE THAN WORDS: INVESTIGATING THE CHALLENGES IN INTERPRETING FIGURATIVE EXPRESSIONS ACROSS LANGUAGES

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Abstract. Figurative expressions such as proverbs play a crucial role in conveying cultural values, shared wisdom, and metaphorical meaning across languages. However, interpreting these expressions across linguistically and culturally distinct systems presents significant challenges for language learners. This study investigates the difficulties faced by Malaysian undergraduate students when comparing English and Malay proverbs through a contrastive analysis task. Using reflective writing as the primary data source, the study explores the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural barriers students encountered in understanding and translating figurative meaning. Thematic analysis revealed key challenges related to cultural embeddedness, non-equivalence, grammatical differences, and figurative ambiguity. Despite these difficulties, students demonstrated increased intercultural awareness and metalinguistic insight, highlighting the pedagogical value of contrastive tasks in language education. The findings support the integration of culturally responsive teaching strategies that emphasize metaphorical competence and cross-cultural understanding. This study contributes to the growing body of research on figurative language learning in multilingual contexts and offers practical recommendations for enhancing figurative language instruction in Malaysian classrooms.
Keywords: *figurative language, proverbs, contrastive analysis, Malay, English, language learning*

Introduction

Proverbs play a central role in both Malay and English-speaking cultures, offering insights into communal values, historical experiences, and daily life (Nugraha, 2023). In Malay culture, proverbs such as "Bagai aur dengan tebing" or "Seperti melepaskan batuk di tangga" are commonly used to reflect cooperation and inefficacy respectively. Their English counterparts may carry similar meanings but differ in imagery and structure. Understanding these differences is crucial for language learners and translators who seek to preserve meaning. Language functions, on the other hand not only as a medium for communication but also as a repository of cultural values, beliefs, and shared experiences (Babazade, 2024). Figurative expressions, particularly proverbs, serve as concise carriers of wisdom and moral lessons within a linguistic community. However, when such expressions are interpreted or translated into another language, Ye (2024) believed that challenges often arise due to differences in cultural context, linguistic structure, and metaphorical imagery. This is rooted in the need to bridge this linguistic gap and to promote cultural literacy through figurative language analysis. In conjunction to this, this paper aims to investigate the challenges faced by English as secondary language learners in interpreting figurative expressions between Malay and English by focusing on selected proverbs and their contrastive elements.

Literature review

Mammadova (2024) describes proverbs as fixed, metaphorical expressions rooted in cultural traditions. They encapsulate cultural identity and worldview, often employing metaphor and analogy to convey deeper meanings. Proverbs are not only linguistically rich but are also shaped by historical, social, and environmental influences unique to each culture. Agbenyo (2023) highlights that proverbs are integral to oral traditions, aiding in memory retention and language fluency, while also being reflective of communal thinking. Contrastive analysis, as originally conceptualized by Chesterman (1998), involves the systematic comparison of linguistic structures between two languages to identify both convergences and divergences. When applied to figurative expressions, contrastive analysis sheds light on how cultural values influence linguistic construction. Gachanja (2021) emphasizes the relationship between metaphor and ideology, suggesting that proverbs serve as tools for perpetuating culturally specific perspectives. Musolff (2021) argues that metaphorical understanding is deeply rooted in embodied experience, which varies significantly across cultures. Therefore, identical proverbs in form may still convey subtly different meanings in use, depending on cultural norms and expectations.

Translation of figurative expressions is one of the most demanding areas of language transfer. Hajiyeva (2025) identifies idioms and figurative language as particularly resistant to literal translation due to their reliance on contextual and cultural knowledge. The imagery used in Malay proverbs often centered on natural elements, familial roles, or community behavior and may not directly align with English metaphors, which can focus more on individualistic or abstract concepts. Furthermore, the syntax and semantic structure in the source language might not be easily mirrored in the target language, increasing the likelihood of misinterpretation. Alharbi (2023) recommends that translators focus on conveying the pragmatic function of the proverb rather than preserving its literal form. Figurative language plays a vital role in both spoken and written discourse. It is used to enrich communication, express abstract ideas, and convey emotions. However, as Luwiti (2024) emphasizes, idiomatic and metaphorical expressions are typically non-compositional, which means that their meanings cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of their components. For instance, the English idiom "kick the bucket" is meaningless when translated word for word. Similarly, Malay idioms such as "bagai aur dengan tebing" (like the bamboo and the riverbank) require cultural and environmental familiarity for proper interpretation.

In the Malaysian context, Razali and Saifullah (2023) believed that figurative language is further complicated by the nation's diverse linguistic backgrounds. English, while widely used as a second language and medium of instruction, is not the first language for the majority of Malaysians. As a result, learners may struggle with idioms and metaphors that are culturally foreign or that lack direct equivalents in their mother tongue (Tergui, 2024). Cognitive linguistic theories, particularly Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff, 2006), provide a useful framework for understanding figurative language. This theory posits that metaphors are not merely stylistic devices but reflect how people conceptualize abstract domains using more concrete experiences. For example, the metaphor "argument is war" underpins expressions like "defending a position" or "attacking an idea."

However, such conceptual mappings are not universal. Ferdossifard (2023) found that figurative competence understanding and using figurative expressions depends heavily on exposure and familiarity. In Malaysia, students may lack sufficient exposure

to English figurative forms outside of classroom instruction, especially in rural or non English speaking environments (Zainuddin and Yunus, 2022). This lack of real-world engagement with figurative language contributes to comprehension difficulties. Cross-linguistic differences often lead to misinterpretations of figurative expressions. Purba (2022) noted that bilingual learners tend to transfer idioms from their first language, resulting in errors when no equivalent exists in the second language. In the Malaysian context, this is evident when learners attempt to directly translate Malay idioms into English or misinterpret English idioms based on literal meanings. Suseno and Nguyen (2023) emphasized that metaphors are shaped by culture specific experiences and value systems. For instance, the English metaphor "time is money" aligns with capitalist ideals, whereas Malay idioms frequently draw on nature and community life. These cultural differences can hinder understanding when learners are not explicitly taught the underlying cultural concepts.

Figurative language is often overlooked in English language instruction in Malaysia, where the focus tends to be on grammar and vocabulary accuracy. Mohammadi and Masoumi (2021) found that learners frequently avoid idioms out of fear of misuse. This trend has also been observed in Malaysian classrooms, where both teachers and learners may lack confidence in using figurative expressions. Technological tools such as language corpora and translation software offer some assistance, but they have limitations. As Zhou (2021) pointed out, many translation systems rely on literal parsing and often fail to accurately process idiomatic meaning. In Malaysia, access to digital tools and training remains inconsistent, particularly in rural schools, further exacerbating disparities in figurative language exposure. Effective instruction in figurative language should incorporate cultural context, metaphor explanation, and contrastive analysis. Smith (2023) advocated for teaching the conceptual origins of idioms to aid learner comprehension. In Malaysia, this can be achieved by drawing parallels between local and English expressions, for example, comparing "melepaskan batuk di tangga" (doing something half-heartedly) with the English idiom "cutting corners." In Malaysia, where students regularly navigate multiple cultures and languages, enhancing this competence can improve their ability to interpret figurative expressions. Integrating cultural studies with language instruction can provide learners with the tools to interpret and use figurative language more confidently.

The interpretation of figurative expressions across languages is influenced by cognitive structures, cultural values, and linguistic familiarity (Tobbi, 2024). In multilingual societies such as Malaysia, these challenges are intensified by the coexistence of diverse languages and worldviews. Addressing these issues requires more than linguistic instruction; it calls for culturally responsive teaching strategies, exposure to authentic language use, and support through technology and pedagogy. As Malaysia continues to emphasize English proficiency for global communication, further research should explore effective methods for teaching and interpreting figurative language in culturally and linguistically diverse settings.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the challenges faced by university students when interpreting figurative expressions across languages, with a particular focus on English and Malay proverbs. This design was chosen to capture rich, contextual insights into learners' cognitive and interpretative processes, as well as their

metalinguistic awareness when navigating culturally embedded language features. The participants comprised 21 undergraduate students enrolled in a Bachelor of English Language Studies program at a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. All participants were either bilingual or multilingual, possessing functional proficiency in both English and Malay. Convenience sampling was employed, with participants drawn from a course module on intercultural communication and language contrast, which aligned with the study's thematic focus. The group was composed of students with diverse linguistic backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural and multilingual nature of the Malaysian context. The study was conducted over a four-week period during the second half of the academic semester. All instructional and data collection activities took place in a blended learning format, combining physical classes and online submissions via the university's learning management system (LMS). The research procedure was structured into three key phases, designed to scaffold learners' understanding of figurative language and facilitate meaningful engagement with proverbs across languages.

Phase 1: Introduction and training

Students participated in an interactive workshop introducing the concept of figurative language, including metaphors, idioms, and proverbs. The session emphasized cross-cultural variation in figurative meaning, focusing on how cultural references, imagery, and metaphorical logic influence interpretation. English and Malay proverbs were used as comparative anchors to highlight differences in cultural symbolism and metaphorical structure.

Phase 2: Contrastive analysis task

Working in pairs, students were tasked with selecting five English and five Malay proverbs for detailed contrastive analysis. The task required them to: (1) provide literal and figurative interpretations for each proverb; (2) identify and explain culturally embedded elements (e.g., imagery, historical context, values); (3) attempt interlingual translation, noting issues of semantic equivalence or loss; (4) discuss interpretative challenges and justify their analytical choices. This phase aimed to develop students' awareness of conceptual metaphor theory and pragmatic equivalence, encouraging metalinguistic reflection on how meaning is shaped by culture.

Phase 3: Individual reflection and submission

Upon completing the contrastive analysis, each student submitted an individual written reflection (500-800 words). These reflections required students to articulate the difficulties encountered, insights gained, and their evolving understanding of figurative meaning across languages. These reflections served as the primary qualitative data for the study. Data from the written reflections were subjected to thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework proposed by the past studies. This involved: (1) Familiarization with the data; (2) Initial coding of semantic and pragmatic challenges; (3) Searching for patterns and themes, particularly related to metaphorical reasoning, translation difficulty, and cultural interpretation; (4) Reviewing and refining themes for internal coherence and distinctiveness; (5) Defining and naming themes that best captured the essence of students' experiences; (6) Producing a narrative account of the themes, supported by illustrative quotations from participants. To enhance

trustworthiness, coding was conducted manually and cross-checked by a second coder familiar with discourse and figurative language analysis. Triangulation was achieved by comparing themes across participants and integrating observations from the instructional phases. The study received approval from the university's ethics review committee. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, assured of their confidentiality and anonymity, and provided informed consent prior to participation. Participation was voluntary and had no bearing on course grades or assessments.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings derived from the thematic analysis of students' reflections on the challenges encountered when comparing English and Malay proverbs. The analysis yielded five major themes: Cultural Context and Symbolism, Figurative versus Literal Meaning, Linguistic Structure and Grammatical Awareness, Non-Equivalence and Expressive Differences, and Time Constraints.

Cultural context and symbolism

A dominant theme emerging from students' reflections was the difficulty of accessing the cultural depth embedded in Malay proverbs, particularly when attempting to explain them in English. Malay proverbs often draw upon nature, traditional practices, familial structures, and agrarian life, which do not always translate directly into English idiomatic equivalents.

"*Most Malay proverbs use nature or traditional life as symbols, which are not always easy to match with English sayings.*" (Student 19)

"*Some proverbs… are hard to decipher… I had to understand it based on cultural context.*" (Student 5)

This observation affirms what has been mentioned by Mammadova (2024) that the proverbs function as culturally bound repositories of communal knowledge. Students' difficulty in interpretation arose not merely from language proficiency gaps but from insufficient cultural grounding, a challenge echoed in Agbenyo (2023) and Gachanja (2021) work on cross-cultural figurative interpretation. The culturally specific imagery in Malay expressions often clashed with the more abstract or individualistic metaphors commonly found in English proverbs (Suseno and Nguyen, 2023), highlighting the embodied nature of metaphor as discussed by Musolff (2021).

Figurative versus literal meaning

Another obvious challenge was the tendency to interpret proverbs literally, particularly during initial exposure to unfamiliar expressions. Students often misread idiomatic phrases due to their surface-level composition.

"*At first, I thought it just meant that it's a small glove but the meaning was different...*" (Student 4)

"*It was challenging to compare… explaining their meanings was tricky.*"

(Student 18)

Such misunderstandings illustrate Luwiti (2024) point that idiomatic expressions are inherently non-compositional, requiring cultural and contextual awareness for accurate interpretation. The case of the misunderstood "kid gloves" metaphor exemplifies this: without prior cultural exposure, students defaulted to literal logic, a phenomenon similarly noted by Hajiyeva (2025) in translation studies. The findings support Lakoff (2006) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which posits that figurative language reflects systematic conceptual mappings between source and target domains. Students unfamiliar with these mappings in English were often unable to intuit the intended meanings, underscoring Ferdossifard (2023) claim that figurative competence is exposure-dependent and not easily transferable across linguistic contexts.

Linguistic structure and grammatical awareness

While students displayed intuitive understanding of proverbs' meanings, many struggled with the metalanguage required to express their analyses effectively. Some noted discrepancies in syntactic structures between English and Malay that impeded direct comparison.

"*I knew the rules, but I didn't always know what they were called.*" (Student 3)

"*Malay proverbs tend to use abstract or implied meanings… English proverbs are written directly.*" (Student 9)

This theme suggests a pedagogical gap: although learners may possess implicit grammatical knowledge, they often lack the terminological precision needed for academic contrastive analysis. The reflections align with Chesterman (1998) model of contrastive rhetoric, which emphasizes the need for explicit instruction in syntactic, lexical, and stylistic variation between languages. Moreover, the indirect, poetic constructions found in Malay proverbs frequently contrasted with the concise, linear style of English expressions, revealing typological and stylistic tensions. These contrasts risk negative transfer, where students erroneously apply structures from their first language to a second, a difficulty well-documented by Purba (2022).

Non-equivalence and expressive differences

Students repeatedly cited the expressive disparity between proverbs as a major challenge, particularly when attempting to determine semantic or stylistic equivalence. Even when underlying meanings were similar, tone, imagery, and rhetorical impact often diverged significantly.

"*It was quite challenging to decide whether they were equivalent or if one carried a slightly different tone.*"(Student 12)

"*Even if both proverbs share the same message, the way they express it is very different.*" (Student 6)

This difficulty underscores Mammadova (2024) distinction between overt and covert translation, where cultural nuance may be lost despite semantic alignment. The example comparison of "Sediakan payung sebelum hujan" and "Dig the well before you are thirsty" illustrates that both expressions promote preparedness, yet differ in metaphorical schema and cultural values-one rooted in local weather-related imagery, the other in water scarcity. These findings support Smith (2023) argument that teaching figurative language should include functional and cultural equivalence, not just lexical substitution. Students must be taught to identify when expressions are functionally similar but culturally distinct, a skill crucial for cross-linguistic and intercultural competence.

Time constraints

A final theme concerned the pragmatic barriers students faced during the task, such as encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, limited resources, and time management issues.

"*Malay proverbs tend to use words that are quite uncommon… it's a bit complicated there.*" (Student 16)

"*It was a rush too… my fault for my poor time management.*" (Student 8)

These reflections highlight the need for scaffolded support, including guided examples, glossaries of culturally specific terms, and structured research timelines. The issue of unfamiliarity with deeper etymological or contextual knowledge also reflects systemic gaps in the Malaysian curriculum, where figurative language is often under-taught (Mohammadi and Masoumi, 2021). Additionally, while translation software may assist with vocabulary, students noted its inability to process idiomatic and metaphorical meaning, a limitation also reported by Zhou (2021). These observations further emphasize that figurative interpretation requires human insight, particularly in navigating nuanced emotional, cultural, and contextual dimensions. Based on the themes emerged above, findings have proven that students frequently reported difficulty interpreting Malay proverbs when translating them into English, primarily due to the culturally specific imagery and metaphors embedded within the expressions. This challenge aligns with Agbenyo (2023) and Gachanja (2021) findings that proverbs serve as vessels for cultural ideologies and collective thinking. The use of nature, familial roles, or agricultural life in Malay proverbs contrasted with the more individualistic or abstract conceptualizations found in English idioms (Suseno and Nguyen, 2023), reinforcing the idea that metaphorical meaning is culturally constructed. This underscores Musolff (2021) argument that metaphorical understanding is rooted in embodied and cultural experience. Consequently, learners often struggled with non equivalence not in surface meaning, but in tone, cultural resonance, and contextual usage. The task of comparing "Sediakan payung sebelum hujan" with "Dig the well before you are thirsty," as one student noted, highlights how both proverbs convey preparedness but differ in metaphorical framing and implied values.

Many students found it challenging to move beyond literal interpretations, echoing Luwiti (2024) point that idiomatic expressions are typically non-compositional and require contextual and cultural awareness. The example of misinterpreting "kid gloves" illustrates the risk of defaulting to literal translation without understanding the metaphor's origin, a difficulty also identified by Hajiyeva (2025) in her analysis of

translation challenges. These findings align with Lakoff (2006) Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which posits that metaphors are not arbitrary but reflect systematic mappings between conceptual domains. However, students unfamiliar with these mappings in English were often confused by their implicit cultural logic, particularly when such metaphors had no parallel in Malay. This supports Ferdossifard (2023) observation that figurative competence depends heavily on exposure and familiarity, both of which may be limited in Malaysian learning environments, especially outside urban and English-speaking contexts (Zainuddin and Yunus, 2022). Several students expressed difficulty in comparing the grammatical and syntactic structures of proverbs. While Chesterman (1998) framework on contrastive analysis provides a systematic approach to identifying structural similarities and differences, the reflections reveal that students often lacked the metalinguistic vocabulary or awareness to effectively articulate those distinctions. This suggests a gap in explicit instruction on grammatical comparison, which may hinder learners' ability to fully engage in contrastive figurative analysis. Moreover, students noted that Malay proverbs often rely on poetic, indirect constructions, while English expressions tend to be more direct, a contrast that adds another layer of complexity to the comparison. This observation mirrors Purba (2022) findings on negative transfer, where learners attempt to apply first language structures and meanings to second language idioms, leading to misinterpretation.

The data also suggest that figurative language remains underemphasized in English language instruction in Malaysia, a concern raised by Mohammadi and Masoumi (2021). Students admitted to feeling uncertain, underprepared, or reluctant to engage deeply with idioms and metaphors. This reluctance may stem from a lack of explicit teaching, limited authentic exposure, or overemphasis on grammar and vocabulary accuracy. The findings support Smith (2023) recommendation to teach the conceptual origins and cultural functions of figurative language. Drawing parallels between local and English idioms, for instance, comparing "melepaskan batuk di tangga" with "cutting corners" can aid comprehension by anchoring unfamiliar expressions in known contexts. The integration of cultural studies and contrastive analysis into curriculum design could significantly enhance students' metaphorical competence and intercultural communication skills. Students' challenges were further compounded by inconsistent access to resources and insufficient research time, reflecting systemic issues in the Malaysian educational landscape. Razali and Saifullah (2023) highlight how Malaysia's multilingual society, while rich in cultural diversity, also presents additional barriers to mastering figurative language, especially in English, which is not the first language for most learners. Additionally, while translation software can support learning, its limitations in processing idiomatic meaning (Zhou, 2021) necessitate deeper human interpretation and cultural insight.

Conclusion

This study explored the challenges faced by Malaysian undergraduate students in interpreting and comparing figurative expressions, specifically proverbs, across English and Malay. Through a contrastive analysis task and reflective writing, students revealed a range of linguistic, cognitive, and cultural difficulties that mirror broader issues highlighted in figurative language and translation studies. Key findings indicate that the core challenges stem from the cultural specificity of proverbs, the non-compositional nature of idioms and metaphors, and structural differences between English and Malay.

Students frequently encountered non-equivalent expressions and struggled to convey cultural nuance in translation. These findings affirm past literature that emphasize the culturally embedded and cognitively demanding nature of figurative language. Despite these challenges, students demonstrated increased metalinguistic awareness, intercultural sensitivity, and critical thinking, suggesting that contrastive analysis of figurative expressions can be a powerful pedagogical tool. However, the success of such activities depends on adequate scaffolding, cultural instruction, and time for research and reflection. The insights gained point to the need for culturally responsive teaching approaches that integrate figurative language more systematically into English language education, especially in multilingual and multicultural contexts like Malaysia. Ultimately, as Malaysia continues to promote English language proficiency for global engagement, the ability to interpret and use figurative expressions effectively remains a vital yet underexplored aspect of communicative competence.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involved with any parties in this research study.

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