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STYLISTIC DEVICES AS A KEY FACTOR IN PROMOTING THE LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE OF EFL LEARNERS

Ergasheva Aziza Erkin qizi

Master student of Gulistan State University

Dushayeva Sohiba Joniqulovna

Scientific supervisor, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Pedagogy

Abstract

English language teaching has long leaned on grammatical accuracy and vocabulary lists, often at the expense of how language expresses and interprets meaning. Yet linguistic competence in a fuller sense involves more than building correct sentences. Learners also need to understand and produce language that suits its context, carries feeling and persuades its audience. This article argues that stylistic devices such as metaphor, simile, personification, irony, hyperbole and repetition remain an underused resource for developing that competence in EFL learners. Drawing on published work in language pedagogy and applied linguistics, it considers how engaging with these devices can support vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, critical thinking and the productive skills. It then turns to classroom practice and suggests that building stylistics into EFL curricula may help to narrow the gap between accuracy and communicative ability.

Keywords

stylistic devices, stylistics, linguistic competence, communicative competence, EFL, figurative language

Introduction. Visit a typical EFL classroom and you will probably meet learners who conjugate verbs correctly, name the past perfect without a pause and write tidy, error-free paragraphs. Ask the same learners why an author calls time “a thief”, or why a politician repeats one phrase three times running, and the room often goes quiet. The distance between knowing how language is built and understanding how it works on a reader is exactly where stylistic devices can help.

Stylistics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the expressive resources of a language and with the way form contributes to meaning in particular contexts (Leech & Short, 2007; Simpson, 2004). Stylistic devices are deliberate patterns of language chosen for a communicative or aesthetic effect. The best known are metaphor, simile, personification, irony, hyperbole and repetition, along with alliteration and the rhetorical question. For EFL learners, working with them is worth more than literary enjoyment. It builds language awareness, widens vocabulary and, over time, makes communication feel less risky. The idea is not new, since Widdowson (1975) argued decades ago that the study of literature and the study of language should inform one another, but it still has not found a settled place in everyday EFL teaching.

Beyond Grammar: What Linguistic Competence Involves. "Linguistic competence" is often used in a narrow sense, meaning knowledge of grammar and syntax, a usage that goes back to Chomsky's (1965) distinction between competence and performance. Hymes (1972) objected that this leaves out the knowledge of what is appropriate in a given situation, and the communicative models that followed built that knowledge into their definitions (Canale & Swain, 1980). Teaching practice has moved in the same direction. The aim is no longer only accurate sentences but the ability to interpret and produce meaningful discourse in real settings, and the Companion Volume to the Common European Framework even lists responding to and analysing creative texts among the things learners should be able to do (Council of Europe, 2020).

Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) give discourse competence a central place in their model, alongside linguistic, actional, sociocultural and strategic competence. A learner who can use a well-judged metaphor, or spot irony in a newspaper column, is doing more than decorating speech. She is drawing on pragmatic and cultural knowledge that belongs to advanced proficiency. Littlemore and Low (2006b) go a step further and argue that metaphoric competence contributes to grammatical, textual, illocutionary, sociolinguistic and strategic competence alike. Seen this way, stylistic devices are part of how meaning is made and negotiated, not something layered over language once the real learning has finished.

How Stylistic Devices Support Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension. Vocabulary is the most visible gain. Figurative language shows words in use, stretched beyond their dictionary meanings. A learner who reads that a character "drowned in a sea of paperwork" learns more than the verb drown. She sees how it can express being overwhelmed, and the word becomes linked to a wider network of associations. Experimental evidence points the same way: in a series of EFL experiments, Boers (2000) found that grouping figurative expressions by a shared metaphorical theme helped learners to retain them. Picken (2007) and Littlemore and Low (2006a) examine at length how metaphor and other figurative thinking operate for foreign language learners, and what teachers can do with them.

Reading comprehension stands to gain as well. Paran's (2008) survey of research on literature in foreign language teaching reports that evidence for its benefits is emerging, and that literary texts are useful because they combine attention to meaning with attention to form. Learners themselves, when asked about literature lessons in EFL, point to real benefits (Bloemert et al., 2019). When students analyse personification in a short story or exaggeration in an advertisement, they practise what reading tests ask of them: finding main ideas, drawing inferences and judging an author's purpose and tone. These skills carry over to the material learners actually meet outside class, such as news articles, speeches, social media posts and film dialogue.

The Cognitive Dimension: Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills. There is a cognitive side too. Suppose a student is asked why a speaker says "We must build our future together, we must protect our independence, we must strengthen our unity", or why a writer gives a natural force human traits. Answering requires interpretation. The student has to gather evidence from the text, think about the intended audience and defend a reading. Lazar (1993) treats questions of this kind as central to the use of literary texts with language learners.

Thinking and talking about how language works, usually called metalinguistic reflection, is also associated with deeper processing and better retention of the additional language (Roehr-Brackin, 2018), and it fits with Schmidt's (1990) argument that noticing is a precondition for learning. Students who analyse style are therefore learning through

English as well as about it, using the language as a tool for inquiry rather than only a subject to master. For learners stuck on an intermediate plateau, the move from passive reception to active investigation can be genuinely motivating.

From Reception to Production: Speaking and Writing. The benefits do not stop at reading and listening. Once learners know the common rhetorical figures, they have tools for making their own speech and writing more expressive, persuasive and memorable. A student who understands parallelism can build an argument more cleanly. One who has practised metaphor can find a vivid way to explain an abstract idea. One who recognises irony can begin to experiment with tone in a composition. Hall (2015) reviews the ways in which work with literary texts can feed into learners' own use of the language.

These devices also do several jobs at once. They create imagery, stir emotion, help memory and support persuasion (Littlemore & Low, 2006a), which makes them useful to anyone who wants to communicate with impact. Many EFL learners now need English for professional presentations, academic writing and cross-cultural negotiation, and for them expressive precision is a practical requirement rather than a refinement.

Practical Considerations for the Classroom. None of this means that stylistic devices should replace grammar instruction, or that every lesson has to turn into a poetry seminar. The argument is for integration: stylistic analysis as a way of approaching any text, not as an extra unit kept for literature majors (Carter & Long, 1991; Paran, 2008). Authentic materials such as short stories, speeches, advertisements and opinion columns offer plenty to work with (Hall, 2015). Contextualised teaching, task-based learning and collaborative activities are the approaches most often recommended for this kind of work (Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008).

Teachers do not need to be stylistics specialists to start. A few simple questions can open up productive discussion. Why did the writer choose this word and not a simpler one? What does the repetition do? How would the sentence feel without the metaphor? None of this calls for elaborate materials, only a willingness to slow down and treat language as more than a carrier of information.

Conclusion. Promoting linguistic competence in EFL learners means moving past the familiar ground of grammar drills and vocabulary lists. Stylistic devices open a way into

the livelier side of English, where words carry emotional weight, sentence structure shapes persuasion and meaning is seldom purely literal. By teaching learners to notice, analyse and eventually produce figurative and rhetorical language, teachers can help them become not only accurate users of English but effective and confident communicators. The research reviewed here suggests that stylistic devices are no distraction from serious language learning. They belong at its centre, although more classroom-based studies of stylistic instruction would help to show how far and under what conditions the benefits hold.

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