

# The Effectiveness of Teachers' Use of Non-literal Language in the Classroom

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## Aim

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To raise teachers' awareness of their use of non-literal language such as simile, metaphor and idiom, and to develop their ability to ensure pupils' understanding of it.

## Dimensions of this Case Study

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The research involved recording, interviews and discussions with three teachers and an inservice training (INSET) session with Middle School staff.

## Summary of Findings for this Case Study

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- The teachers unconsciously used non-literal language, in particular idiomatic language, to a considerable extent.
- Some children's lack of awareness of the intended meaning of some expressions used was observed to affect their comprehension negatively.
- Teachers thought that visual observation of children's responses to language, including non-literal language, was important in ascertaining whether children had understood expressions. Visual observation appeared to be used more frequently than oral communication to ascertain whether children wanted further help.
- Teachers acquainted with their unconscious use of non-literal language through research data and INSET identified a need for a more conscious balance between using non-literal language, explaining it briefly in context and teaching pupils how to use it.

## Non-literal language – a definition

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Non-literal language is language which consists of words or expressions which intentionally convey a significance additional to their primary meaning.

## Background

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This research was carried out in a first and middle school which includes a language unit, a resource funded by the LEA. Unit pupils are described as having a severe difficulty in the area of speech and/or language. All unit pupils are included in mainstream classes for some or all of their lessons. The research was undertaken by a language unit teacher but was concerned exclusively with teachers' use of language in mainstream classrooms.

The Teacher Training Agency's Teacher Research Grant Scheme provided the opportunity to gather examples of teachers' use of non-literal language through tape-recording lessons, analysing transcriptions, and discussing findings with colleagues.

## Examples of non-literal language which occurred in this project

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### Simile

"Josh can you open a window or something? *It's like an oven in here!*" (request made during a Year 7 History lesson).

### Metaphor

"That's right, *butterflies in your tummy* when you feel nervous" (example given during a Year 6 English lesson on 'creating atmosphere' when story writing).

### Idiom

"*push on*"; "*keep plugging away*"; "*put a bit of speed on*" (phrases intended to encourage children to complete their recording during a Year 7 Geography lesson) and "*rounded off*"; "*work out*"; "*take away*"; "*set out your work*" (phrases associated with the teaching and learning of Maths in Year 5).

### Indirect request

"*Ben, can I ask you to share?*" (remark addressed to a Year 5 pupil during a History lesson).

## Why is teachers' use of language important?

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There has been a growing awareness among educationalists of the central importance of language across the curriculum (SCAA, 1997). Success in educational achievement depends heavily upon adequate comprehension of teachers' language. Since spoken language is an important precursor of literacy, it is also important for children to experience a rich variety of language features, including non-literal aspects in spoken language, if they are to develop as competent speakers, readers and writers as described in the Introduction to the National Literacy Strategy (1998). Children have to understand what teachers are saying but this does not mean that teachers should only use simple, literal language.

## Explanation of the main findings

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Teachers found the experience of listening to the recordings of their lessons 'illuminating'. They commented on many aspects of their own language including: accent; rate; use of 'fillers' such as 'you know', 'um', 'right', 'OK'.

The teachers had not been made aware of the specific purpose of the recordings prior to the lessons. They were asked to select lessons likely to produce a substantial amount of 'teacher-talk'. When they were made aware of the purpose, i.e. the collection of examples of non-literal language, they were able to name children for whom the use of such expressions could be confusing.

The teachers were 'surprised' by the extent of their use of non-literal language and indicated that their experiences during the project would have a positive effect on their use of language in the classroom. During the project it became apparent that teachers rely heavily on observing children's *responses* to language in order to ascertain their understanding of it. They also rely on the children themselves to indicate problems. This would suggest that children should be encouraged from an early age to take responsibility for their listening and comprehension.

Lesson No.	Teacher 1 Hist	Teacher A 2 Geog	Teacher 3 Eng	Teacher B 4 Maths	Teacher 5 Hist	Teacher C 6 Mental Arith	Totals
Total no. of examples of non-literal language	22	17	11	4	38	24	116
Simile	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Metaphor	3	1	5	0	8	1	18
Irony	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Idiom	17	16	6	4	27	19	89
Indirect request	1	0	0	0	3	4	8

Table: Incidence of teachers' use of types of non-literal language

The final stage of the project included an INSET session. Eight teachers, including the three teachers who had recorded their lessons, were invited to comment on the data arising from the research. Their responses were then analysed.

## Responses during INSET

- Teachers agreed unanimously that some children do not know that some expressions are non-literal. They were able to give examples of when this had been a problem in the classroom.
- Two of the teachers indicated that this was the first time they had considered their own use of non-literal expressions. All agreed that teachers use non-literal expressions without realising it.
- The majority of the teachers involved at this stage agreed that teachers assume children understand when they use a non-literal expression.
- Teachers agreed that children have different levels of language understanding which affect their interpretation of non-literal language. Even teachers who had not previously considered children's interpretation of non-literal language were aware of children's different levels of language understanding.
- There was general agreement that additional clues which make use of other senses (pictures,

videos, tape-recordings, artefacts) can aid understanding.

- A senior member of staff commented on the value of this form of INSET which gave teachers "a chance to stop and think".

On the whole, teachers recognised that non-literal language has a place in their classrooms. They agreed that it should be *used* and that some children would assimilate it. There was general agreement that it should be *taught* as part of the English curriculum. Teachers of Year 7 pupils expressed concern about giving explanations as non-literal language occurred, as this may slow down the pace of the lesson.

## Recommendations for teacher action arising from these findings

- To adapt their use of language effectively teachers should monitor their own use of language. Periodically the tape-recording of lessons may be useful.
- When planning lessons teachers should include specific consideration of the language they are going to use.
- Children should be helped and encouraged to

take responsibility for their listening and comprehension from an early age.

- Teachers need to strike a balance between using, teaching and explaining non-literal language as it arises.

## National Literacy Strategy

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A further issue emerging from this involves the National Literacy Strategy 'Framework for teaching' which introduces similes in Year 4 and metaphors in Year 5. This may not be soon enough if pupils are to have 'assimilated a rich variety of language features' (QCA 1998) by the end of Key Stage 2.

## Notes about Methods

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The research was carried out in four stages:

- identification of three teachers who were willing to record lessons;
- recording and transcription of lessons;
- analysis of transcriptions by
  - a) the researcher
  - b) the three teachers;
- a discussion-based interview involving the researcher and the three teachers and an INSET session with middle school staff.

The methodology required all the teachers involved to reflect on their practice. This process raised sensitive issues as the teachers became more aware of their own use of language.

## Further Reading

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## Contact

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