Factors Affecting Saudi Female Efl Students' Interpretation of Proverbs At Ar-Rass Girls Collge of Arts and Sciences

Prepare

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ABSTRACT

Proverbs are figurative expressions that frequently occur in the English language, given the pervasiveness of these expressions, it is important that EFL learners can understand their meanings. This paper sought to: (a) provide a tentative assessment of the accuracy with which a sample of Saudi female EFL learners interpret the English proverbs.(b) identify the factors that affect Saudi female EFL learners' interpretation of English proverbs, namely, familiarity (the amount of previous exposure), concreteness, and metaphor.

The current study used a combined design, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. The first quantitative phase of the study collected data from 50 Saudi female EFL learners of the fourth year in The Department of English at Arass College of Science and Arts by using The Proverb Familiarity and Interpretation Tasks, where these participants rated their familiarity with a set of English proverbs and paraphrased them, as well as a background information questionnaire. In the second qualitative phase, a structured interview revealing attitudes towards proverbs was conducted with all participants.

Descriptive statistics were used to provide a report of the participants' proverb familiarity and interpretation. In addition, Wilcoxon signed rank test was used in order to find if there were significant differences between familiarity and accuracy scores.

The results revealed that there was a highly significant difference between familiarity ratings and accuracy scores which indicated that familiarity played a minor role in proverb comprehension for EFL learners. Other factors such as semantic analysis, and metaphors play substantial roles in proverb comprehension. Moreover, the analysis of the interview data revealed that metaphorical proverbs required more time and cognitive effort and posed more difficulty than the non-metaphorical ones.

The qualitative analysis of the interviews added more insights for the participants' learning of English proverbs. The participants, in the present study, acquire their English proverbs by

exposure to daily language. Findings supports the meta-semantic approach which suggests that the speaker is required to analyze the words semantically in a given proverb. Findings suggest that strategies for introducing both cultural literacy and idiomatic language into EFL classrooms and text books should be implemented. The study recommends studying other factors that might affect proverb comprehension such as the semantic factors.

1. Introduction

"All that glitters is not gold"
"After a storm comes a calm"
"Don't judge the book by the cover"
"Look before you leap"

Sometimes with a few words we communicate a large amount of information. Such expressions are proverbs that have been used to spread knowledge, wisdom and truth about life from ancient times up until now. Proverbs are concise, easy to remember and useful in every situation in life due to their content of everyday experiences (Mieder, 2004).The traditional function of proverbs didactic, as they contain "wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views" (Mieder,2004:3; Abadi, 2000; Obelkevich, 1994). Proverbs are basically conversational, but occur commonly in both spoken and written communication, e.g. lectures, newspapers, speeches, fables and poetry. Proverbs are used in a wide range of situations and according to Mieder (1993) there are no limits to the use of proverbs. They can be used to:
"advise, console, inspire, comment on events, interpret behaviour and foster
attitudes, such as optimism, pessimism and humility" (Nippold *et al*., 2001).
Obviously, the scope of this study will not permit the inclusion of all the difficulties that arise in describing a proverb nor will it allow a focus on the ongoing discussions about reaching an ultimate proverb definition. However, for the purpose of the

present study it is necessary to note that it may be helpful to look at some definitions of proverbs to get a glimpse of their polymorphous nature.

A proverb is a "short well-known saying that states a general truth or gives advice"
(Hornby, 1989,p. 1005).

A proverb is a "short" generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorizable form and which is handed down from generation to generation" (Mieder, 1993, p.119).

Taylor (1931) in his discussion on the difficulty of proverb definition claims that "the definition of a proverb is too difficult to repay the undertaking; and should we fortunately combine in a single definition all the essential elements and give each proper emphasis, we should not even then have a touchstone…no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial" (p.3). Yet, there are some basic characteristics that are emphasized in above definitions. In attempt to give a brief description of proverb, many researchers have chosen to itemize the characteristics of proverbs (Harnish, 1993; Charteris-Black, 1995). Using the same method and key terms from the above definitions, the scheme below can distinguish the following aspects to identify the elements that contribute to the understanding of what a proverb is:

Syntactic Aspect: Proverbs have short fixed sentential forms.

Figurative Aspect: They are examples of familiar (standardized) figurative language.

Functional Aspect: They serve to give advice, explain something, warn somebody or state an attitude.

Semantic Aspect: Proverbs refer to a general truth or folk wisdom, accepted by many people in a given society.
Cultural Aspect: Being traditional, proverbs have cultural value (folk wisdom).

This study is concerned with proverbs as "complete thoughts that can stand by themselves" (Mieder, 2004: 13). Nevertheless, there is a range of proverbial subgenres that often are referred to as proverbs. The difference is that these subgenres have to be integrated in sentences and cannot stand by themselves. These subgenres are proverbial expressions: *to cry over spilled milk;* proverbial comparison: *as busy as a bee;* proverbial exaggerations: "He's such a tightwad that he will not even give you a greeting", and twin formulas: *short and sweet; live and learn* (Mieder 2004:12-14).Another group of expressions which sometimes is mixed up with proverbs are idioms. Idioms can be defined as "a combination of words with a special meaning that cannot be inferred from its separate parts" (Gulland & Hinds-Howell, 1994:v).

The current study is essentially motivated by the question of how familiar with English proverbs are advanced Saudi EFL students. The study aims to investigate the factors that play a role in the interpretation of these cultural linguistic forms

2.Statement of the Problem

Figurative language, which includes proverbs, is a pert of everyday language (Palmer & Brooks, 2004). Figurative language causes problems for FL learners due to its underlying metaphorical character (Lennon, 1998).Proverbs are generally considered to be more difficult to understand than other types of figurative expressions such as metaphors and idioms (Billow, 1975; Nippold, 1998; Nippold, Allen, & Kirsch, 2000; Perrine, 1971). While most proverbial expressions are metaphorical in nature *e.g. The fish rots from the head first,* some of them may be based on personification

e.g. Misery loves company , hyperbole *,* paradox, the presence of meter, assonance, and parallelism ..etc. A lack in understanding figurative language may lead to misunderstanding and miscommunication for learners of English in their interaction with native speakers.

Reference to the factors that may influence the comprehension of proverbs in L2 or EFL settings is made in a rather copious amount of research (see Nippold and Haq ,1995; Taylor, 1931; Charteris-Block, 1995). Such factors are the context in which the figurative expression is embedded (Nippold & Martin, 1989), familiarity (Giora & Fein, 1999; Nippold & Haq, 1996; Nippold & Pudzinski,1993; Nippold & Taylor,1995; Qualls & Harris, 1999), cultural and historical knowledge (Blasko, 1999; Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen, 1998; Nippold, Martin, & Schwarz,2001; Qualls& Harris, 1999), and factors related to reading (Nippold, Allen, & Kirsch, 2001).

Moreover, the familiarity of proverbs is an important variable to consider for proverb comprehension and processing. However, little is known about EFL learners' familiarity with proverbs. Bulut and Celik-Yazici (2004, p. 106) quote and explain Irujo's statement related to EFL learners' idiom familiarity which can be applied to EFL learners' proverb familiarity as well :

'many second-language materials either ignore idioms entirely or
relegate them to the "other expressions" section of vocabulary
lists. Without providing exercises or other aids to learning' (Irujo,
1986a, p. 237) . That is to say, we rarely introduce our students
to L2 idioms despite the fact that mastery of these is difficult since

idiomatic expressions contain such forms in which words are not
often used with their usual meanings'.

What Bulut and Celik-Yazici note about the negligence of idioms by EFL textbooks seems to apply to EFL textbooks adopted in some Arab countries. Thus, theoretically speaking, speakers meaningful exposure to proverbs and figurative language will enable them to be competent in mentioned language items (Nippold & Haq, 1996). However, focusing on how familiar are EFL students with such expressions, this study will try to explore the realms of proverb interpretation in reference to the other mechanisms that might affect the interpretation process of English proverbs.

3.Significance of the Study:

Akmajian, Demers, Farmer, and Harnish point out that "proverbs offer an interesting challenge to theories of language use" (1997, p. 367). It will not be surprising to find out that proverbs provide data for study in many different disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, psycholinguistics, pragmatics, folklore and anthropology. Pragmatics is interested in investigating how speakers and hearers communicate successfully with proverbs, analyzing their non-literal and indirect nature with specific reference to speech acts (e.g., Lawal, Ajayi, & Raji, 1997); whereas, psychology is concerned with proverb comprehension as an example of figurative language processing (e.g., Everaert, Linden, Schreuder,1995).Also, there is another area of study, paremiology, focusing on a workable definition and classifications of proverbs; paremiological investigations try to establish a universal proverb type (Taylor, 1931; Kuusi, 1972; Permjakov, 1973 & 1989).

Charteris-Black (1995) notes that proverbs offer a similar challenge to applied linguistics, specifically second language research. Carteris-Block points out that "proverbs can provide a source of data on the following aspects of communication:
the use of figurative language, politeness strategies, and the organization of spoken discourse;" thus, "they can provide an excellent avenue for the introduction of pragmatics and cross-cultural awareness in the second language classroom" (p.259)

This study is based on the idea that proverbs and sayings exist as separate entries in the lexicon of native speakers. The Russian linguist and folklorist Grigorii L'vovich Permjakov has described a collection of such entities as a "paremiological minimum" which is a base stock of proverbs and other forms of clichés that are known by average adult speakers (1973 & 1989). Permjakov proposes a list of 800 entities that are known by an adult Russian speaker as a paremiological minimum of modern Russian. He states that in order to be culturally literate, speakers of a particular language should have familiarity with such expressions. In describing the Russian paremiological minimum and urging that similar kinds of collections be developed for other languages as well, Permjakov has emphasized the importance of introducing these forms into foreign language instruction and dictionaries. It is assumed, in this study, that second or foreign language learners will find it necessary to acquire such expressions in order to be culturally literate.

The current study is motivated by Permjakov's (1973 & 1989) ideas, beliving that culture is partly expressed through language. Thus, the major purpose of the study is to examine how Saudi EFL students will respond to such cultural linguistic expressions, especially focusing on the familiarity and interpretations of a specific instance of figurative language : the proverb.

The significance of this study emerges from the significance of figurative language in general and proverbs in particular.

The study is of important significance for both theoretical and practical reasons. First, from a theoretical point of view, the findings of this study should contribute directly to the role of semantic analysis in comprehension . It provides empirical evidence reflecting the connection between proverb familiarity and proverb interpretation. Moreover, the results obtained from this study will enrich cross-cultural research on figurative language comprehension as it is conducted in a context that, to the extent of my knowledge, has not previously been examined in this area of inquiry.

As for the practical significance for this study for the field of EFL/ESL education. The study of the learners' understanding of figurative language in the context of familiarity can provide language teachers, educators and curriculum designers with a better understanding of how figurative language learning occurs. The pragmatic implications of studying the factors that affect proverb understanding include pedagogical intervention. When we manage to identify the more effective factors, we should be able to identify what methods should be followed to enhance learners' understanding of proverbs and, therefore, be able to modify learners' progress positively.

The purpose of this study is to focus on the question of how familiar EFL learners are with proverbs. Moreover, this study aims to investigate the factors that play a role in interpretation of these cultural linguistic forms by Saudi EFL students.

4. Review of Related Literature:

This view aims to shed light on some of the theoretical models and empirical studies conducted on proverb comprehension that attempt to identify the factors that affect proverb comprehension and interpretation. Although research on native speakers' processing of idioms has been a "tradition", as Liontas (2002, p.155) describes it, research on L2 learners' processing of idioms has not received the same interest from applied linguistics researchers. Some of the research studies emphasize the role of contextual information in proverb comprehension, such as Nippold, Martin and Erskine (1988). There have been few studies that discussed the pragmatics of proverbs, such as Harnish (1993), and Arora (1984). Moreover, only a handful of studies have investigated the effect of familiarity on proverb comprehension, such as those by M A Nippold , M M Allen, D I Krsch (1999), M A Nippold, E S Haq (1996). M A Nippold, M Rudzinski (1996).

Theories of figurative language comprehension have generally centered on whether an expression is analyzed at some level before it is comprehended, or if it is accessed directly and comprehended as a single unit. The standard pragmatic model of figurative language processing was originally proposed by Searle (1979). Searle used the metaphor to develop this model of comprehension in which the listener realizes that a metaphor violates a literal interpretation and then must derive a non-literal interpretation. According to this theory, the processing demands of metaphor interpretation are qualitatively different from literal interpretations, in that pragmatic information is required and is more difficult to access than literal, semantic processing (Gibbs, 2001). The standard pragmatic model predicts that processing a figurative expression is presumed to take more time than processing a literal expression (Gibbs, 2002).

Honeck and Temple (1994) proposed a model of proverb comprehension based upon the extended conceptual base theory. According to the conceptual base theory, the comprehension of a proverb in context is essentially a problem-solving task. The listener initially recognizes that there is a discrepancy between context of the situation and the literal interpretation of the proverb. The next phase, the literal transformation phase, involves the elaboration and reorganization of the literal information, in which the listener is aware that there are at least two contrasting concepts contained in the communicative situation. The third phase, the figurative phase, results in the creation of an analogical relationship that is abstract and general. The final phase, the instantiation phase, occurs when the conceptual base is extended to the properties of the topics.

Gibbs (Gibbs, 1994, 2001; Gibbs, Colston & Johnson, 1996) challenged the multistage model of figurative language understanding based upon empirical evidence that showed figurative language processing does not necessarily require more time than literal language processing. Gibbs proposed a direct access view, in which figurative meaning can be accessed directly, particularly when the expressions occur in appropriate social contexts (Gibbs, 2002, 1994). Consistent conceptual metaphors, which underlie much of figurative language, are automatically activated on-line in deriving meaning for metaphors, idioms and proverbs (gibbs, 1994, 2001; Gibbs et al., 1996). According to the direct access view, a person does not necessarily consider the literal interpretation before determining the non-literal communicative intent of the message.

Research on figurative language comprehension, including proverbs, reveals that development is a gradual process, undergoes age-related improvements, and continues well into adulthood (Douglas & Peel, 1979); Nippold, Martin,

& Erskine, 1988; Nippold, Uhden & Schwarz, 1997; Resnick, 1982). Studies show that factors such as background knowledge, familiarity with expressions, the context in which the figurative expression is encountered and academic skills may influence figurative language development.

4.1. <u>Pragmatics of Proverbs</u>

In his comprehensive study of pragmatics of proverbs, **Harnish** (1993) analyzes the mechanisms for inferring the proverb's message from what is uttered plus context, i.e. explaining how proverbs work. Describing "common truth" as an accepted knowledge to which speakers and hearers allude in their communication with proverbs, Harnish proposes two-step inference model. In this model, Harnish describes several strategies for both the speaker and the hearer in order to accomplish successful communication with proverbs. If a speaker utters a proverb and means to communicate with it, s/he:

1. intends to allude to common truth (general cultural truth).
2. intends to offer that common truth as a reason for the situation (explanation),

or for the hearer's action (guiding action), or the reason to hold a certain attitude (including an attitude).

3. intends the hearer to apply the recovered common truth to the situation at hand, and determine either: what the purported explanation of the situation is or what action in the situation is being counseled and why or what attitude towards the situation the hearer is intended to adopt, and why.

If a hearer hears a proverb and knows it, then the hearer will understand the speaker, if s/he:

1. recognizes the common truth allude to,
2. grasps the explanation, or what course of action or attitude the common truth is being used to prove a reason for,
3. applies it to the situation at hand and determines: what the purported explanation of the situation is, what action in the situation is being counseled and why, or what attitude

towards the situation the hearer is intended to adopt. (Harnish, 1993, p. 273)

In short, he concludes that "communication with proverbs is successful if the speaker has intentions 1-3, and the hearer recognizes them" (Harnish, 1993, p. 273).

Although this model gives an account of what's going on between a speaker and a hearer in communicating with proverbs, it poses an important problem for the second language researcher. Obviously, the cultural element, which is realized in "common truth" as a component of proverbs, plays a significant role in interpretation process. Moreover, Harnish (1993) mentions that it is necessary for the hearer to know an uttered proverb to understand and communicate with it.

Arora, too, describes a two-step perception by the listener in communication with proverbs: "the listener's identification of a proverb as proverbial is a two-fold process, involving first the abstract notion of 'proverb' as it is culturally conceived, and secondly a means of assigning individual utterances to the genre" (Arora, 1984, p.2).

4.2. <u>Proverb Comprehension Studies</u>

Proverb comprehension studies, such as Nippold, Martain, and Erskine (1988) examine the factors that play a role in the development of proverb comprehension in children and adolescents. These studies have shown that proverb comprehension develops during childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Different from previous developmental research, these studies focus on the role of context in processing of proverbs. Previous studies have presented subjects with lists of proverbs out of context and asked them to give their explanations of the proverbs (Billow, 1975; Holden 1978).

The Role of Context in Proverb Comprehension

Emphasizing the role of contextual information, **Nippold** and her colleagues conducted several studies, in which they have overcome the methodological shortcomings of the aforementioned studies. Nippold,Martin, and Erskine (1988) have argued that children and adolescents perform better when proverbs are presented in linguistic contexts that support their interpretations. Although previous studies have shown that proverb comprehension remains literal in pre-adolescent youngsters, Nippold et al.'s results suggest a contrary situation. "The results were that the youngest group of subjects, the fifth graders, performed surprisingly well in comprehending the proverbs and that performance on the task steadily improved at least through the eight grade" (p.22).Similarly a number of studies have reported that children and adolescents can perform better in the understanding of idioms when these language chunks are presented in linguistic contexts that support their figurative interpretations (Ackerman, 1982;Gibbs, 1987; Nippold & Martin, 1989).The results of Nippold et al.'s study also indicated that individual proverbs varied in ease of understanding for the subjects.

The Role of Familiarity and Concreteness in Proverb Comprehension

Nippold and her colleague designed another study to explore the factors that might explain why certain proverbs tend to be more difficult to comprehend. Classifying proverbs into "concrete" versus "abstract" and "familiar" versus "unfamiliar," **Nippold and Haq** (1996) administered two tasks of proverb comprehension. "Proverbs are classified as 'concrete' when all of the nouns contained in them refer to tangible objects that are easily visualized", whereas 'abstract' proverbs are those "when all of their nouns refer to intangible entities that are difficult to visualize" (p.167). In this aspect, "Even a monkey falls from a tree" is considered as a concrete

proverb; while, "Envy is destroyed by the true friendship" is an abstract one.

Similarly, due to the fact that some proverbs occur in language more frequently than others, Nippold and Haq (1996) classified them into two groups: familiar and un familiar. In order to categorize proverbs into familiar and unfamiliar groups, Nippold and Haq presented native speakers of standard American English with a list of proverbs. Native speakers rated proverbs on a 5-point scale, estimating their degree of exposure, in other words, how often they heard or read these sentences before. (five indicates high familiarity and one shows unfamiliarity). The results of Nippold and Haq's study showed that familiar proverbs were easier to understand for native speakers than unfamiliar ones, and concrete proverbs were easier to understand than abstract proverbs. In this present study, Nippold and Haq's familiar proverbs will be referred to as native speaker familiar (NS- familiar) and unfamiliar ones will be referred to as native speaker unfamiliar (NS- unfamiliar).

These results were consistent with the findings of Cunningham, Ridley, and Campbell (1987) and Penn, Jacob, and Brown (1988), who examined the role of familiarity in proverb comprehension in adulthood. Obviously, these studies demonstrate that familiarity is an important factor in proverb comprehension for native-speakers of wide age-range.

Levorato and Cacciari's study (1992), on the other hand, found that familiarity was important for younger children but did not play an important role in idiom comprehension in older children. So far it is argued that contextual information and concreteness play an important role in idiom and proverb comprehension in native speaker children and adolescents, and familiarity in proverb comprehension in different age groups. It is reasoned that in order to develop an acute understanding

of the implications of the aforementioned findings, it is necessary to explore how people process non-literal language.

Typically achieving students who were 12, 15, and 18 years old (n = 150) participated in the investigation by (Nippold, Allen, and Kirsch). The goal was to determine the extent to which students' prior knowledge of the nouns in unfamiliar proverbs would be associated with their ability to comprehend the expressions and how the relationship between word knowledge and proverb comprehension might change during the developmental period from the late childhood to late adolescence.

4.3. Studies of the Processing of Non-literal Language

For the last twenty-five years, there have been two competing approaches to the analysis of the processing of non-literal language: a pragmatic approach and a schematic approach.

Pragmatic Approach

Based on the work of Grice (1975), it is suggested that linguistic communication is governed by the "Cooperative Principle"; that is there is a tacit agreement between the speaker and the hearer to act cooperatively to contribute to a conversation. On the other hand, Grice proposes that sometimes speakers violate this agreement in order to communicate more than what they say. Examples of this sort of violation can be found in indirect speech. Searle (1979) suggests that metaphors present a similar case. According to Searle, in both metaphors and indirect speech, what the speaker means is not identical with what the utterance means. Therefore, he proposes that "where the utterance is defective if taken literally, look for an utterance meaning that differs from sentence meaning" (p. 532). This entails that first the hearer seeks for the literal meaning, and only if the literal meaning is not contextually appropriate, the hearer recognizes the

figurative sense. For example, imagine that two friends are talking about their common friends.

A: I saw Adam and Barbara.

B: Barbara is a cool cat.

Hearing B's utterance, A understands that talking about a cat is not contextually appropriate and assumes a figurative meaning.

Harnish (1993), in his inferential model for communication with proverbs, also makes the same assumption.

Schematic Approach

The schematic approach, on the other hand, argues that "figurative language is processed in much the same way as is literal language. What determines the difficulty of processing is not nonliteralness but relatedness to context. Relatedness to context can be high or low for both literal and non-literal uses of language" (Ortony, Schallert, Reynols, & Antos, 1978, p.475). If the relatedness is high, in other words if the context activates sufficient schemata, non-literal language can be processed as easily as the literal language is processed. Thus, there is no unconditional priority for processing literal language. Context activates an interpretive schema in which information is comprehended (Gildea & Glucksberg, 1983).

Yet, a recent study suggests a third possibility: the automatic activation of conventional meaning. In this study familiar and unfamiliar proverbs are used in contexts that favor their literal or figurative meaning (Turner & Katz, 1991).

Based on the results of several experiments, researchers suggest that "literal meaning is processed automatically for both familiar and unfamiliar proverbs, while figurative

meaning is processed automatically only when the proverb is familiar" (Turner & Katz, 1991, p.3)

Given the findings of proverb comprehension studies (Nippold et al., 1988; Nippold & Haq, 1996 etc.), it is predicted that familiar proverbs appearing in linguistic context will be easier for non-native speakers to comprehend than unfamiliar proverbs. Furthermore, based on the arguments and findings of non-literal language processing atudies (Searle, 1979; Ortony et al., 1978), it is reasoned that non-native speakers will process familiar and unfamiliar provrerbs figuratively in contexts.

4.4. Cross-Linguistic Studies of Proverbs

Analyzing Hungarian proverbs and comparing them with English proverbs, **Harnish** (1993) proposes four groups.
1. Some are virtually word for word equivalents of English proverbs.
2. Others express the same message, but in a different way from English.
3. Word and message are somewhat related to English, but the common truth is expressed in a different way.
4. Wording is different and a distinctive message is expressed.

Harnish (1993) provides these groups with examples. Some proverbs have verbatim equivalents whereas others lexicalize the same common truth in a similar way. Still, others make use of similar common truths with different words. Obviously, this parallelism can be explained in different ways, one of which can be that languages borrow proverbs from each other when language groups interact with each other. However, it is believed that the existence of such parallelism cannot be explained through translations only.

One major cross-linguistic study of proverbs argues that there might exist a universal type of proverbial system**. Kuusi** (1972) proposes a type system for proverbs from different languages. In this type system, Kuusi describes a proverb type and illustrates this type with proverbs from different languages. Similarly, he describes several more types. However, it should be noted that such systemization does not cover all proverbs that exist, nor does it claim that every proverb in a language has equivalents from other languages or belong to a certain type. On the other hand, such a system could provide answers to the following questions: What are the proverb-making mechanisms? How do proverbs work? And in relation to such questions, how does a non-native speaker become able to communicate with proverbs?

Having reviewed most of the literature available on proverb comprehension and processing, it has become evident that this study is of significance to fill a gap in cross-cultural studies. The present research is important because it aims at investigating the factors affecting proverb comprehension by Saudi students of English as a foreign language, an area that has not been adequately explored or documented in this area of inquiry.

With these contentions in mind, the following study is designed to explore and describe the factors that affect proverb interpretation by Saudi learners of English and to see in qualitative and quantitative terms how these factors are affecting the comprehension of proverbs.

5. Research Questions:

This study will attempt to address the following questions in order to derive conclusions about proverb comprehension by Saudi EFL students in Ar-rass Girls College of Education.
1. How familiar with English proverbs are Saudi EFL students?

2. what are the factors that affect the degree of difficulty in comprehension? And can they addressed in terms of non-literal language processing in general?
3. Is comprehension of some proverbs easier for Saudi EFL students?
   - Are concrete proverbs easier to interpret?
   - Are metaphorical proverbs easier to interpret?

6. Research Hypotheses.

The current study proposes the following hypothesis:

1- Proverbs with high familiarity scores will also have high accuracy scores in comprehension.

2- There are certain semantic factors that affect the degree of difficulty in proverb comprehension by Saudi EFL students, such as: concreteness, abstractness. Other factors, such as: metaphors, previous exposure to proverb.

3- Concrete proverbs will be easier to understand than abstract ones.

4- Metaphorical proverbs will be more difficult to understand than the non-metaphorical proverbs.

7. Methodology.

7.1. Subjects

The participants of this study will be EFL Saudi female learners. They are all the fourth year students at the English Language Department at Ar-rass Girls College of Arts and Sciences during the academic year 1430 H (2009). Fifty subjects will participate in the study. This study will attempt to target advanced learners to obtain a clear understanding of the relation between students' familiarity and interpretation of proverbs. The study population is expected to be homogenous in terms of age (22-23), educational level (formal interaction at the university level, in addition to six years of studying English before they go to college), and native language (Arabic).

7.2. Materials:

Although there were several lists of English proverbs that have been developed and used by various researchers for different purposes, a widely accepted list like the one which has been developed by Permjakov for Russian language, unfortunately, is not available for English. Some of the lists (Albig, 1931; Bain, 1939; Collins, 1959; Whiting, 1968) date back to 1930s and 1950s, which makes them questionable in terms of currency. A more recent list proposed by Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil (1988) has not been tested with human subjects. Therefore, instead of choosing items from several dictionaries of proverbs, this study will adopt the **Nippold** and **Haq** (1996) list of proverbs, since this list was tested with human subjects in terms of familiarity and concreteness. All subjects who took place in this aforementioned study were native speakers of standard American English. Still all the proverbs that are included in the present study have been located in several recent reference books (*Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings* (Titelman, 1996); A *dictionary of American Proverbs* (Mieder, Kinsbury, & Harder, 1992); *The Penguin Dictionary of Proverbs* (Fergusson, 1983)). Explanation of each item have also been collected from these books in order to check if interpretations of the subjects are acceptable.

7.3. Procedures:

In light of the research questions the following methods will be utilized:

 -*The proverb familiarity and interpretation task.*
Sixteen Proverbs, divided into four groups of concrete, abstract, NS-familiar and NS-unfamiliar, will be selected to measure proverb familiarity and interpretation. Each item will be followed by a 5-point scale ranging from high familiarity (5 = I

have heard or read it many times before) to low familiarity (1 = I have never heard or read it before) and a question "what does 'this sentence' mean to you?". Subjects will be asked to write their interpretations very briefly. Written report is preferred to multiple-choice in order to reduce the risk of typical response behavior and guessing. The proverb familiarity and interpretation task aims to explore the realms of proverb interpretation in reference to familiarity and other factors that might affect the interpretation process.

-Questionnaire.

Turkol (2003) had developed the (Attitude Towards Proverbs Questionnaire) in his study. The questionnaire will be utilized in order to evaluate the subjects' familiarity and use of proverbs in English. Furthermore, this questionnaire aims to determine the attitude of subjects towards proverbs in general, both of their native language (Arabic) and English, and the familiarity and use of English proverbs in specific.

Task and Questionnaire Administration.

First, the Proverb Familiarity and Interpretation Task will be administered in one session. Before embarking on the task, the subjects will do one item as a warm-up example intended to familiarize them with the task. In the task the subjects will not be told that they are given a list of proverbs. Instead of "proverb," the word "sentence" is preferred, because this study also aims to explore whether such expressions will be interpreted literally or non-literally when students are exposed to them for the first time. However, the subjects will be told that these items are meaningful sentences that occurred in everyday language.

Before proceeding with the questionnaire, the researcher will give a brief introduction about the definition of a proverb. This session will be in an interview fashion where subjects explore their ideas in writing about the familiarity and usage about English proverbs, under the questions directly by the researcher. The researcher will take notes during the interview. The following are examples of the questions that will be directed by the researcher:

1- How often do you think you use proverbs?

2- When do you use proverbs? Give some examples.

3- Which proverb do you often use? a. in Arabic   b. in English

4- In the task, how did you interpret the proverbs that you encountered for the first   time? (this question aims to explore the techniques and processes that are used by the subjects in their interpretation of English proverbs).

7.4. Statistical Analysis.

The sources of data will provide the researcher with both quantitative and descriptive data. Statistical analysis will be performed using the following: -For quantitative data, mean familiarity scores for each proverb will be measured. Similarly, accuracy scores for the Proverb Interpretation Task will be calculated.

-Correlation Coefficient will be used to determine the relationship between students' scores in the Proverb Familiarity Task and the accuracy scores of the Proverb Interpretation Task.

8. Results and Discussion.

The Proverb Familiarity Task Results

In the following section, the findings of the Proverb Familiarity Task are presented according to the research questions. Descriptive statistics are presented with the aid of tables. As previously mentioned, scores were determined via a Likert scale

ranging from 1 to 5 (never = 1, many times = 5). Each proverb was rated by the subjects on a 5-point familiarity scale. The mean familiarity score for each proverb was measured by adding 50 ratings given by the subjects and dividing the total by 50. Table 4.2, page 76, shows the mean familiarity scores for the proverbs. Five indicates that the participant has read or heard the given proverb many times before while 1 shows that the participant has never read or heard the proverb. (2 = I have heard or read it once before; 3 = I have heard or read it a few times before; 4 = I have heard or read it several times before).

Participants' responses to the Proverb Familiarity Task were analyzed in order to give a report of their familiarity with English proverbs, and thus, to answer the first and second research questions. The means with ranges were tallied for each of the four groups of proverbs: concrete, abstract, NS-familiar, and NS-unfamiliar. These are reported in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1 shows the results of the Proverb Familiarity Task and the mean familiarity scores given by the participants for four different groups of proverbs with ranges and the mean familiarity score for a total of 16 proverbs (Note: M = mean; n = number of proverbs).The mean familiarity score for concrete proverbs was obtained by adding 8 individual concrete proverbs' mean familiarity scores and dividing it by 8. Similar measurements were done for abstract, NS-familiar, and NS-unfamiliar proverbs. The mean familiarity for the total of 16 proverbs was calculated by adding each proverb's mean familiarity score and dividing the total by 16.

Table 4.1

Mean Familiarity Scores for Proverbs in the Proverb Familiarity Task

Concrete (n = 8)		NS-Familiar (n = 8)	
M	1.49	M	1.84
Range	1.18 – 2.48	Range	1.26 – 3.14
Abstract (n = 8)		NS-Unfamiliar	
M	1.86	M	1.51
Range	1.24 – 3.14	Range	1.18 – 2.48
Total (n = 16)			
M	1.67		
Range	1.18 – 3.14		

The data suggest that the participants are not as familiar with the proverbs as might be expected. A mean familiarity score such as 1.86 falls between the range "heard once" or "a few times". However, as expected, the mean familiarity scores for four different proverb groups indicate that abstract proverbs are the most familiar to the EFL learners (M = 1.86) and concrete proverbs are the least familiar to the EFL learners (M = 1.49) out of the four groups. On the other hand, there is little difference suggested between NS-familiar proverbs (M = 1.84) and NS-unfamiliar proverbs (M = 1.51) in terms of familiarity for non-native speakers.

Table 4.2 lists mean familiarity scores for single proverbs that were obtained in this study and compares these familiarity scores with Nippold and Haq's (1996) familiarity scores given by the native speakers.

Table 4.2

A comparison of Mean Familiarity Scores: Non-native Speakers to Nippold and Haq's Native Speakers (1996)

PROVERB	Mean Familiarity scores by Non-Native speakers (EFL learners)	Nippold and Haq's Mean Familiarity Scores by Native Speakers
1. The truth is better than a lie.	3.14	3.73
2. Two captains will sink a ship.	2.48	1.54
3. There is no glory without sacrifice.	2.30	2.84
4. The end justifies the means.	2.02	4.06
5. Envy is destroyed by true friendship.	1.98	1.59
6.The early bird catches the worm.	1.70	4.80
7. Every cloud has a silver lining.	1.54	4.43
8. Two wrongs don't make a right.	1.52	4.96
9. A forced kindness deserves no thanks.	1.46	1.44
10-11. The pot calls the kettle black.	1.30	3.61
10-11. The restless sleeper blames the bed.	1.30	1.38
12-13. A leopard can't change its spots.	1.26	3.69
12-13. A wonder lasts but nine days.	1.26	1.19
14. Of idleness comes no goodness.	1.24	1.69
15. A caged bird longs for the clouds.	1.20	1.43
16. Sleeping foxes catch no poultry.	1.18	1.51

Note. Proverbs in current study are classified as NS-familiar / NS-unfamiliar according to Nippold and Haq's familiarity scores.

Present familiarity scores tend to be lower than native speakers' scores; twelve proverbs have lower familiarity ratings. Some scores for NS-unfamiliar proverbs are higher in the present study than native speaker's results (proverbs 14, 6, 12, and 5). Three of these proverbs are NS-unfamiliar.

The Proverb Interpretation Task Results

In order to answer the second and third research questions, the participants were asked to respond to the Proverb Interpretation Task after they completed the Proverb Familiarity Task. Following the same procedures of data analysis of the familiarity task, in order to give a report of the participants' interpretations of English proverbs, descriptive statistics were utilized. The means with

average were tallied for each of the four groups of proverbs: concrete, abstract, NS-familiar, and NS-unfamiliar.

The next two tables, Tables 4.3 and 4.4 focus on mean accuracy scores. Each proverb interpretation, total of 800, was rated by the researcher and another teacher. A single proverb's mean accuracy score was measured by adding 50 interpretations' evaluation ratings (which the two raters agreed upon in advance) and dividing the total by 50. Each participant's accuracy score was computed and the average was taken.

Table 4.3 compares the mean accuracy scores of proverbs in four different groups with ranges. Mean accuracy score for concrete NS-familiar proverbs was obtained by adding 4 single proverbs' accuracy scores and dividing the total by 4. Similarly, each mean score was measured for other groups.

Table 4.3

Accuracy Scores for Proverbs in the Proverb Interpretation Task

	NS-familiar	NS-Unfamiliar	Total
Concrete	**n = 4**	**n = 4**	**n = 8**
M	**2.83**	**3.04**	**2.93**
Range	**1 – 4.75**	**1 – 5**	**1 -5**
Abstract	**n = 4**	**n = 4**	**n = 8**
M	**3.4**	**2.85**	**3.12**
Range	**1 – 4.25**	**1.25 – 5**	**1 -5**
Total	**n = 8**	**n = 8**	**n = 16**
M	**3.11**	**2.94**	**3.02**
Range	**1 – 4.75**	**1 -5**	**1 -5**

Interestingly, a comparison of the mean accuracy scores of the four groups revealed that there was no striking difference between concrete (M: 2.93) and abstract proverbs (M: 3.12). Notably, the accuracy scores for the four different proverb groups showed that the highest accuracy score (3.4) was for the abstract-NS familiar proverbs. On the other hand, the lowest accuracy score was that for the concrete- NS familiar proverbs (2.83).

The Difference Between Familiarity and Accuracy Scores

Table 4.4 shows mean familiarity and accuracy scores for the 16 proverbs used in this study. Similar to familiarity scores, 5 indicates very correct and 1 incorrect on 1-5 accuracy scale.

Accuracy scores for interpretations are higher than expected, particularly in light of the low familiarity scores in the Proverb Familiarity Task. Appendix (G) presents a sample of participants responses in the Proverb Interpretation Task.

Table 4.4

Mean Familiarity and Accuracy Scores for the 16 Proverbs Used in the Study

PROVERB	Mean familiarity score	Mean accuracy score
Group 1: Concrete – NS Familiar		
2.The pot calls the kettle black.	1.30	1.70
9. Every cloud has a silver lining.	1.54	2.34
13. A leopard can't change its spots.	1.26	3.94
16. The early bird catches the worm.	1.70	3.36
	M = 1.45	M = 2.835
Group 2: Concrete – NS Unfamiliar		
3. The restless sleeper blames the bed.	1.30	2.98
8. Sleeping foxes catch no poultry.	1.18	3.48
10. A caged bird longs for the clouds.	1.20	2.28
14. Two captains will sink a ship.	2.48	3.42
	M = 1.54	M = 3.04
Group 3: Abstract – NS Familiar		
1. Two wrongs don't make a right.	1.52	2.00
4. The end justifies the means.	2.02	3.08
7. There is no glory without sacrifice.	2.30	4.20
15. The truth is better than a lie.	3.14	4.32
	M = 2.245	M = 3.4
Group 4: Abstract – NS Unfamiliar		
5. A wonder lasts but nine days.	1.26	1.96
6. Envy is destroyed by true friendship.	1.98	3.22
11. Of idleness comes no goodness.	1.24	3.52
12. A forced kindness deserves no thanks.	1.46	2.70
	M = 1.485	M = 2.85

As stated earlier accuracy scores of 2 and below were accepted as incorrect. Only two proverbs' mean accuracy scores are under 2, (proverb 2 M:1.70) and (proverb 5 M: 1.96). On the other hand, mean accuracy scores for 9 proverbs are above 3, (proverbs 13,16,8,14,4,7,15,6,and 11). This reflects a tendency for high degree of accuracy in the Proverb Interpretation Task.

Familiarity and Interpretation

It is notable that the data did not follow a normal distribution, so the non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was conducted as a significant test to compare the difference between the mean change in familiarity and accuracy scores for the Proverb Familiarity and Interpretation Task. The test will be considered "non-significant" if the p-value is greater than 0.05, "significant" if the p-value is less than 0.05, and "highly significant" if the p-value is less than 0,001.

Interviews Results

In this phase of the study, the participants were asked to report their attitudes towards proverbs in general and English proverbs in specific, thus, answering the fourth research question. It aimed to evaluate the participants' use of proverbs in daily language and investigate the factors that play a role in the interpretation of English proverbs, thus, more light on the first, second, and third research questions.

In this section, results of the Attitudes Towards Proverbs Questionnaire data analysis are presented. First, the use of proverbs in daily language both in English and their native tongue. Second, attitudes towards proverbs in general and proverb learning process in English. Third, the classification of interpretations. This is followed by a brief summary of findings.

Use of Proverbs

Based on the evaluations of participants' use of proverbs in daily language, in the interviews following the Familiarity and Interpretation Tasks, it is found that the participants do not use proverbs very often in English. Forty one students rated their use of English proverbs as rare or never while 37 of them considered the frequency of their use of Arabic proverbs as sometimes or often. Table 4.21 shows these results.

Table 4.21

Use of Proverbs

	Very often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
English (Foreign language)	___	9	15	26
Arabic (native language)	5	32	13	___

Twenty six students out of 50 evaluated their knowledge of English proverbs as "limited" or "low" while the other 24 students rated their use as "medium".

Furthermore, the question "which proverb do you often use?" revealed some interesting findings: upon assessing response time, it took (30 to 50) seconds for 34 students to come up with their favorite or most frequently used proverb in their native language (Arabic), whereas all students needed more time to find out their most frequently used proverb in English. Sixteen students who told that they never use proverbs in either English or Arabic did not reply to this question. Only 30 students recited their most frequently used English proverbs; the other 20 students said that they did not have one.

Attitudes Towards Proverbs

Several questions in the interview focused on the following aspects of proverbs use in general and proverb learning process in English. The researcher asked the participants to describe a situation where they use proverbs and give some examples. All participants told the researcher that they preferred to use proverbs in informal situations e.g., among friends or family members. It is found that the participants use proverbs in order to elicit different effects, such as joking, being practical or indirect.

Twenty two students reported that they use proverbs because they love the effect of the proverbs which lets them sound wiser and they prefer proverbs in situations where they do not want to express themselves with their words or instead of being silent. Five students reported that they often find themselves using proverbs when they talk with their friends about their relations. Other ten students added that many times in their chatting through the Internet, they made use of translations of Arabic proverbs into

English. Eight students also said that they translate some Arabic proverbs into English when they feel they need to use them. One student added that she used to stimulate herself in studying by typing some motivational proverbs on her books.

All participants reported that they acquired their English proverbs by exposure to daily language e.g., through the media, books, newspapers, television and the Internet. All participants mentioned that they never learned proverbs at school.

Classification of Interpretations

Interpretations that were scored under 3 (2 and 1) were classified as incorrect. The classification scheme below was developed to analyze the incorrect interpretations:

- *Unrelated*: Although the interpretation is not literary, it is totally unrelated to the meaning of the proverb. For example, an interpretation like "If you failed to achieve your goal, it doesn't mean that this is the end of life, you have to keep trying till you reach your goal" to the proverb number 4 (The end justifies the means) is considered totally unrelated. Most of the incorrect interpretations fall in this category.

- *Partly Related*: Such interpretations are partly related to the meaning of the proverb. That is, they capture the correct meaning partly. An interpretation such as "early means good. Birds like to go in the morning but if we think of people, it may mean you should finish your work in the morning" to the proverb "The early bird catches the worm" can be classified as partly related since the interpretation is vague.

- *No answer*: Among 800 interpretations of 16 proverbs, only 93 responses are classified as "no answer" which represents a quarter (25,5) of all the incorrect interpretations (I don't have a clue about the meaning of this sentence, I don't know and "ambiguous" to the proverb "Every cloud has a silver lining")

- *Literal* : It was expected that some interpretations would be literal. That is, the participants would comprehend the proverbs literally. An example of literal interpretation might be "if someone cannot sleep, it means that the bed is not

comfortable" to the proverb "The restless sleeper blames the bed". The analysis of the incorrect responses shows that only 28 incorrect interpretations out of 365 fall in this category, which represents 7.7% of all the incorrect interpretations. This might support the idea that if listeners are not familiar with a given proverb, they tend to comprehend it non-literally (see chapter 2). Table 4.22 shows the classification of incorrect interpretations it also presents the number and rate of participants' incorrect interpretations.

Table 4.22

Number and Rate of the classified incorrect interpretations

Unrelated	Partly Related	No answer	Literal
127	117	93	28
34.8%	32%	25.5%	7.7%
Total: 365 (100%)			

To summarize, The results of the Proverb Familiarity and Interpretation Task revealed that the participants are not familiar with the English proverbs. In interviews, the participants confirmed that they are not very familiar with English proverbs. On the other hand, the results of the Proverb Interpretation Task indicated that participants have an overall high accuracy rating. There was a highly significant difference between familiarity ratings (M: 1.67) and accuracy scores (M: 3.02) which indicated that familiarity played a minor role in proverb comprehension for EFL learners.

Moreover, each of the fifty participants were able to recognize the metaphoric nature of proverbs (i.e., some proverbs have a literal and a metaphoric meaning that is usually intended by using the proverb), which a participant expressed by reporting, "I tried to figure out the figurative meaning of the proverb". Thus, even if EFL learners are unfamiliar with a particular proverb and even if they encounter that proverb for the first time, they can still recognize proverbs as expressions that have figurative meanings. Moreover, the analysis of the interview data revealed that metaphorical proverbs required more time and cognitive effort and posed more difficulty than the non-metaphorical ones.

The results of the Proverb Interpretation Task did not show any substantial difference in accuracy scores between concrete (M: 2.94) and abstract proverbs (M: 3.12). Furthermore, the analysis of the incorrect responses to the Proverb Interpretation Task revealed that only 7.7% of the incorrect responses were literal. Accordingly, the participants did not comprehend the English proverbs literally.

The data from the interviews also provide some insight for the participants' learning of English proverbs in formal settings. All participants acquired their English proverbs by exposure to daily language rather than learning proverbs at school.

In chapter 5, the results of the Proverb Familiarity and Interpretation Task and the interviews data analyses presented in this chapter are discussed in relation to the research questions and hypotheses. The pedagogical implications, the recommendations, and finally the conclusion are presented.

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