Figuring the Figurative: Drama as a Tool for Teaching Idioms in Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

Idioms are often a challenging lesson in English language classrooms, particularly for learners from EFL/ESL contexts. Recent scholarship in language and language education emphasise the role of context, embodied interaction and other affective and sensory-motor factors in idiom comprehension. This article proposes drama as a tool to deepen conceptual and cultural understanding of idioms through the embodied theories of meaning and the Multi-Determined Model of Idiom Processing that stresses the integration of emotional, physical and contextual dimensions in language teaching. It explores drama as a pedagogical tool, putting together theories from embodied cognition, psycholinguistics, performance studies and ELT. Techniques like role-play and hot-seating are incorporated to render abstract figurative expressions accessible, presenting a creative and culturally responsive pedagogy. The article moves beyond theoretical discussions to present a concrete, classroom and teacher-ready activity that leverages the bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence of learners for comprehension of idiomatic expressions. It also situates the pedagogy within the broader contexts of Indian folk traditions, which blends performance and education. The proposed framework positions drama as a tool, not just for language learning but also as a primary modality through which idioms are felt, enacted, lived, and internalised. The task design further supports principles of translanguaging and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to ensure accessibility and inclusivity in the linguistically-empowered multilingual classrooms.

Keywords

Idioms, drama, embodied learning, figurative language, multilingual classrooms

Introduction

Humans are drawn to movement—to action. Action lets words transcend the abstract, giving the fullest form to that which cannot be expressed on paper. It ignites the otherwise unseen dimensions of communication, giving language its shape and power. But language is not always literal: metaphorical expressions are integral to human thought. The human conceptual system—i.e. the way we think, act, and experience—is fundamentally metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Hence, in education, this means learning a metaphor or idiom involves grasping an underlying conceptual mapping and not merely memorising a phrase.

Metaphors and idioms hide their meanings beneath them posing the greater question of "How do we teach what is not plainly said?" Drama pedagogy addresses this impasse and reimagines language acquisition as an embodied, socio-cognitive process. It emphasises whole-person learning that does not merely decode figurative language but integrates the cognitive, affective and physical modes of engagement and the innate capacity of humans to imitate, mimic and express through facial expressions and gestures (Maley & Duff, 2005).

Challenging the Idiom Challenge

Figurative language, especially idioms, are often the most culturally embedded form of language, making its teaching extremely complex in ELT. Though the most pervasive in everyday language, the non-literal meanings of idioms make its comprehension difficult for young learners and adults alike. An idiom that is obvious to one culture may be opaque to learners from a different language (Lowery, 2013). An English man could say "Even Homer nods" (referring to the ancient Greek poet Homer) due to their classical education influences, while people from Japan may say '猿も木から落ちる (*saru mo ki kara ochiru*—'Even monkeys fall from trees')' instead for the same idea that everyone makes mistakes. This gap in shared imagery may also lead to cognitive load.

A common method in traditional approaches to teaching idioms is to have

teachers provide a list of meanings of idioms. However, students here may fail to internalise the conceptual mapping, as they do not see "why" the words convey that meaning. The inherent difficulty in grasping cultural and contextual nuances embedded in idiomatic/metaphorical expressions often leads to persistent gaps in comprehension and usage.

To bridge these gaps, pedagogical approaches must aim at linking abstract language to students' concrete experiences to aid comprehension. A pedagogy that creates this experience, hence, is the current need. Drama emerges as a pedagogical solution that offers a resolution to transform abstract linguistic constructs into embodied experiences. Drama pedagogy in language education brings together both the mind and the body, integrates the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication and restores the equilibrium between the physical and intellectual aspects of learning (Maley & Duff, 2005). These affordances suggest that drama can enliven language education through its active, creative and imaginative manifestations, which situate human emotions as an apparatus that should be nourished and nurtured in language classrooms. The 'action' or the element of performative engagement in drama activates multimodal learning—rendering figurative language tangible through experiential learning. Drama, beyond language education, can also been leveraged as a tool in disciplines such as social sciences to promote critical thinking, experiential understanding and perspective-taking. This highlights its interdisciplinary pedagogical potential.

Theoretical Framework

Drama and Idiom Processing

The comprehension of idiomatic expressions depends on a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic constraints. Idioms often carry strong affective content and invite embodied simulations of experience. Libben and Titone's (2008) multi-determined model suggests that idioms can be processed via direct retrieval, when they are highly familiar, or via compositional analysis when they are less predictable. Recent work by Morid and Sabourin (2023) confirms that affective dimensions of idioms (valence and arousal) influence processing. They show that the processing of familiar idioms is tuned by valence whereas that of less decomposable (opaque) idioms is by arousal. In practical terms, an

unfamiliar or low-decomposability idiom may be harder to grasp purely from text, such idioms benefit from additional contextual or embodied support. This implies that pedagogical techniques which increase an idiom's relative familiarity or contextual transparency should facilitate comprehension.

Cognitive theories of semantics such as Vigliocco et al. (2009) argue that word meanings are learned from experiential information, data that is grounded in sensory-motor interactions and emotional states. In embodied cognition accounts, the understanding of a phrase involves the simulation of perceptual and motor states associated with it. This when applied to idioms, means that the mental re-enactment of an idiom's scenario can ground its figurative interpretation.

Drama techniques and activities embody idioms in meaningful scenarios to provide rich contextualisation, emotional resonance and sensory-motor cues. When learners encounter idioms repeatedly in varied scenes, they anchor figurative meanings in vivid stories. These principles have been long embedded in Indian pedagogical traditions. Ancient Indian knowledge systems, folk traditions and performance arts like Bharata's *Nātyaśāstra* (C. 200 BCE–200 CE), the oldest treatise on dramaturgy, frames theatre (*nātya*) as a holistic educational tool. Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabhāratī* (tenth–eleventh century CE) also elaborates on drama as a means of experiential wisdom *(anubhava*) and self-reflection. Drama pedagogy also aligns with *Manomaya Kosh* and *Vijananamaya Kosh* from the holistic *Panchkosh Vikas* engaging emotions, sensory perception and cognitive processing that aids learners in internalising figurative language through contextualised and experiential practice.

Contemporary ethnographic studies (Richmond et al., 1990) document how the folk and oral traditions of India, such as Yakshagana, Kathakali and Koodiyattam blend entertainment with performance and didactic storytelling, transmitting values and preserving cultural idioms. When students adopt a character's perspectives and express the emotions behind an idiom, they tap into the idiom's emotional force. This exploits the brain's emotional circuitry (Citron et al., 2019) that is preferentially recruited by idioms and leverages the valence/arousal.

Another related construct to concreteness is imageability i.e., the ease with which a word or phrase can evoke a mental image. Idioms vary significantly in their imageability. Depending on task and familiarity, idioms with higher imageability can either facilitate or inhibit figurative

meaning activation. While high imageability generally aids memory and understanding of concrete words, it can also ironically distract from abstract figurative meanings in idioms unless learners are supported in making the figurative shift.

Drama-based pedagogy invites students to physically enact and visually stage the idiom externalising literal internal imagery to figurative interpretation. This helps learners navigate the dual layers of meaning and scaffold transition from image to abstraction. This also aligns with embodied theories of semantics which suggest motor simulations and ground conceptual understanding (Vigliocco et al., 2009). Sensory motor information is integral to idiom meaning and drama provides these naturally through experiential cues. The combination of these elements suggest that drama-based instruction can effectively heighten both the affective salience and embodied grounding of idiomatic expressions, consistent with multi-determined and embodied theories of idiom processing.

Embodied Cognition and the 'Action' Pedagogy

The embodied view of cognition connects the human brain with the body and the environment. Combining the body, physical activity and language learning dates back to the 1960s when language teaching methods endeavoured to initialise the body as a pivotal part of the language learning process, particularly with methods like the Total Physical Response (TPR). Literature in recent times also shows increasing attention to activating facial expressions, body movements, gestures and other objects of action for the meaning and sense-making processes in L2 interactions.

The multimodal view of language teaching centres embodied multisensory engagement in L2 teaching, such as action-based pedagogies. Improvisations, mime, work with dramatic scripts and other drama activities in language teaching have been shown to enhance the learning of L2 vocabulary, prosody and pronunciation. The emotional and motivational benefits of embodied language learning are also to be noted, strengthening confidence, engagement, interest and overall well-being. This nurtures a classroom environment where the pedagogy of embodiment, particularly drama enactments, enables the grounding of L2 vocabulary in meaningful situations, offering students the freedom to express themselves in 'authentic' language contexts that incorporate knowledge in lived experiences (Cannon, 2016).

The physical "doing" of metaphoric actions lets learners' link bodily experience with meaning and allows them to encode concepts using their bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence, a crucial human intelligences of expression. These strands also relate to Vygotsky's concept of "perezhivanie": the subjective experience where emotions and cognition are intertwined, emphasising an individual's understanding and relationship with their environment. It moves beyond simply feeling something and stresses actively processing and interpreting that feeling within the context of one's life and experiences.

Translanguaging, UDL and Multimodal Meaning-Making

The translanguaging approach allows for leveraging the entire linguistic repertoire fluidly to learn and communicate in multilingual classroom settings. This unified repertoire transcends linguistic boundaries to offer multiple languages to facilitate sense and meaning. Translanguaging encompasses an understanding of how the act of communication incorporates different modes—bodies, gestures and lives to the semiotic meaning-making repertoire.

The combination of pedagogy of embodiment and language learning through drama allows to reach linguistically diverse learners. This has further advanced to "translanguaging drama", which Galante (2022) describes as the activation of learners' emotions and multiple resources, using the benefits of meaning-making across languages and use of home languages, embodiment, and spatial and sensorial dimensions. He notes that participants in translanguaging drama accomplishes the goal through the negotiation of not just ideas—but actions and movements. Since learners are free to use any language in their repertoire, peers may not understand each other's home languages. This, however, instead of presenting a challenge, offers an opportunity to place importance on non-linguistic resources such as emotion, tone, volume, facial expressions, modulation and the movements of the body in relation to drama as a space for meaning-making. Translanguaging drama affords the possibility for learners to experiment with their own resources and language beyond 'languages' to creatively express their message.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework particularly relevant in the multilingual, multicultural, contexts of India. It encourages teachers to offer and emphasise multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement, addressing the physical and cognitive

barriers, the ability of students to plan, demonstrate, and organise their learning and factors like motivation, self-regulation and interest. UDL principles, when integrated with drama-based pedagogy include the visual, kinaesthetic, auditory and collaborative elements, enabling equal and accessible educational opportunities to all diverse learners.

Task Design

Language Activity: Idioms in Action

Level: Intermediate (B1+)

Time- Approximately 60-70 minutes, depending on class size.

Target Language: Idioms such as "carry the weight," "break the ice," "walk on air," "spill the beans," "hot under the collar."

These exemplify conceptual metaphors (burden, distance, etc.) in a coherent domain of emotional states and interactions.

Objectives

Students will:

1) Dramatise given idioms to interpret them.
2) Explain the meaning of each idiom in their own words (in L1 and L2).
3) Use the idioms in a new context (either verbally or in writing).

Focus: To teach idioms through drama-based, embodied strategies that strategise movement and expression.

Materials: Idiom flashcards, illustrated for each idiom (an illustration of a cat appearing out of a bag for "Let the cat out of the bag"), slips of paper with idiom phrases, open space for movement, chart paper or board for writing key vocabulary.

Optional: Few simple props like scarves, hats or cloth scarfs.

Procedure

***1. Warm-Up (10 min*)**: *Whole class*

Start the session with an energiser: Call out a verb (e.g., *"stand!"*, *"jump!"*, or *"clap!"*) and have everyone stand/jump/clap. Follow this with "freeze!" and stay still. Explain to the class that today they will be freezing and acting out ideas.

To develop physical anticipation, cooperation, and rapport between

students; play a small game 'Catch the ball'. Ask students to form pairs or a circle (if a small class) and throw and catch an imaginary (invisible) ball to and fro between them. After a few minutes, change partners. Different variations of this can also be tried. This activity prepares the students for the drama activities.

To get everyone warmed up vocally, let students talk in a completely unknown, made-up language for 3 minutes. Students are to speak loudly, quickly and with as much expression as possible. They can change partners every minute. Stop them and ask them to whisper the same. This activity gets everyone interacting vigorously and is a way to warm up the vocal apparatus. Since it does not involve competence in a real language, everyone is on an equal footing. The whispering stage lets the class calm down after the excitement of the 'loud' stage.

2. Introduction

Write an idiom on the board (e.g. 'Get cold feet'). Tell students to guess its meaning. Students might give literal meanings. Introduce the idea that "we often speak of feelings in interesting ways". Show a short story example of the idiom "get cold feet" (say, "Sarah had always dreamed of skydiving. She had saved up the money, booked the jump and even trained for it. On the day of the jump, she looked up at the aeroplane, her heart pounding, but her mind suddenly filled with fear. She started to sweat and her legs felt shaky. Seeing the plane soar into the sky, she realised she could not do it. She had got cold feet and decided not to jump.")

Provide the meaning ('to feel too frightened to do something that you had planned to do') and relate to the body feeling cold or body freezing. This models the connection between expression and meaning.

3. Introduce Literal and Figurative Meanings

Put down a list of idioms on the board. Let the students discuss them in pairs or small groups. Let the students guess the meaning of each idiom. Go over the ones that they do not know yet. Pass around papers. Let the group/pair choose an idiom of their liking. Ask the students to draw the literal meaning on one side (what it sounds like it means) and the figurative meaning on the other side (what it actually means).

***4. Idiom Brainstorming and Preparation*:** Give groups or pairs 2-3 minutes to list out idioms about a topic in any language. Walk around and note a few on the board. Introduce an idiom and ask students to

brainstorm for similar ones in their home languages (e.g. *kill two birds with one stone in English,* ഒരു വെടിക്ക് രണ്ടു പക്ഷി or ഒറ്റക്കല്ലിൽ രണ്ടു മാങ്ങ in Malayalam, एक तीर से दो निशाने in Hindi).

5. Preparation for Drama Task 1:

Hand out one idiom per group (written on a card). Additionally, provide a picture hint on the card's back for each idiom. Example idioms: "carry the weight", "break the ice," "walk on air," etc. Explain "In your groups, you will figure out what this idiom means by acting it out. Make sure that your classmates can guess the meaning of the phrase. "

Assign groups so that each has one idiom. Let the students discuss in groups, "What might this phrase mean? How could we show it?"

Encourage them to use L1 if needed. Provide scaffolding by asking students to think "What is the literal image? Can you show that? How do people behave when they _____?

At this point, each group makes a simple plan (possibly draws on paper or gestures to each other). They might decide roles ("Anju holds this book on her head; Amit struggles to walk" for "carry the weight").

6. Drama Performance: Groups take turns presenting. They come to the front and enact their idiom in silence or with minimal dialogue. The rest of the class watches and tries to guess the idiom or explain the scene. After each performance, the class guesses the idiom, and then the group reveals the idiom. The teacher writes the idiom on the board. The group for 'get cold feet' might show a bride or groom freezing during a wedding scene. They mime rubbing arms/shivering or shaking heads "no" wildly. Encourage creativity through props or exaggeration. Students may guess "Are they scared? Changing their mind?"

Through this activity, the students will physically embody the idiom to understand its meaning (losing courage/hesitating before a big moment).

The teacher can then clarify that 'Get cold feet' means losing courage last minute, like before a wedding or performance.

Encourage students to think of equivalent idioms in their home languages. Ask "In your language, how do you say someone 'chickens out'?"

Examples: Hindi: "डर जाना" or Malayalam: "പേടിച്ചു പോവുക"

7. Discussion and Reflection

After all the groups finish their tasks, review each idiom briefly. For each idiom, ask: "What is happening in this scene? What feeling or situation does it show?" Write a simple idiom and its meaning on the board (e.g. 'Carry the weight' = having great responsibility). To check understanding, ask students to use it in a new sentence.

Additionally, give real-life scenarios for students to identify idioms that match the context. Example: "Your friend is very nervous before an exam." Students discuss which idiom from the discussions could describe that feeling. Students may come up with "I think she is *hot under the collar*" or "She feels *butterflies in her stomach.*"

Allow students to write keywords, if helpful, or let them draw quick sketches of literal v/s figurative meanings. They may also use their home languages in the discussions. This allows for multiple forms of expression.

8. Drama Task 2: Hot-seating ('Becoming' an idiom)

The teacher selects a target idiom from the ones discussed in class. A student is chosen to be "in the hot seat". This volunteer student then takes the role of the idiom itself, while the rest of the class prepares to be the 'idiom investigators'.

The student in the hot seat has 2-3 minutes (with/without peer help) to think about:

- Who/What am I? (e.g. Am I stomach? Am I the butterflies? The feeling of responsibility/pressure? The sensation of nervousness?)
- What is my core message and what might my personality be like?

The student sits in the 'hot seat' (preferably a chair facing the class). The 'idiom investigators' then ask questions directly to the idiom character (E.g. To 'Butterflies in my stomach: 'Why are you fluttering', 'Are you happy or sad?', 'Do you ever go away?' or "What happens when you speak?" to 'Spill the beans').

The teacher moderates the questioning and encourages questions that probe the meaning and feeling of the idiom. Provide gentle prompts that assist the students in eliciting the actual idiom. Allow the interview to continue until the idiom's meaning is revealed completely through the dialogue.

After this, debrief with the students to discuss "What did we learn about the meaning of '[idiom]'?", "Which answers helped reveal the meaning?" etc.

***9. Wrap-Up*:**

Let students reflect on their learning. Ask "How did acting out help you understand the idiom?" Elicit ideas like "It made me remember it, "I could feel it", "It was easier than memorising" etc. Ask students how it felt to actually "be the idiom". Reiterate that metaphors and idioms often come from actual physical experiences. Encourage students to notice and act out idioms in future meetings.

Throughout this activity, the teacher continuously applies UDL principles. The teacher offers multiple choices, checks comprehension at multiple stages, offers opportunities for home languages and lets students express understanding in diverse ways. The teacher can integrate simple drama conventions in the classroom such as tableau/ freeze frame, improvisation, hot-seating, mime and gesture. The drama components give concrete form to abstract or metaphoric ideas, ensuring that the students are *learning by doing.*

Implications for ELT Practice

This drama-infused approach to pedagogy has several practical implications. First, it emphasises that advanced or abstract phrases like idioms need not be taught through mere rote explanations, but can be made tangible when teachers use embodiment. The language activity discussed in this article allows students to bond as collaborators who negotiate meaning in groups. The risk-taking inherent to the nature of drama (stepping into pretend roles) can transfer to risk-taking with language where students are open to play with English expressions, with the assistance of their own home languages, after seeing it in action. Second, the framing of idiom instruction within the UDL framework allow multiple representations to promote a shared understanding of the language and helps nurture inclusivity and accessibility. Practices like using visual supports, offering various output modes, and accepting L1 benefit learners across cultural, and linguistic spectrums.

Additionally, hot-seating the idiom activity shifts the focus to embodied enquiry and perspective-taking. Beyond the demonstration of the idiom's literal or situational meaning, this activity requires students to personify

the idiom itself, capturing its figurativeness through improvised action and dialogue.

Third, the model shifts the teacher's role from someone who delivers meaning passively, to someone who guides exploration—transferring responsibility to the learners and leveraging the advantage of body-mind link in language teaching. In practice, teachers might also routinely encourage students to act out or 'become' new vocabulary and incorporate actions, gestures, and movements in the language classroom.

The dramatisation task in this framework requires little to no materials, other than a 'roomful of humans', making it ideal for practice in classrooms (Maley & Duff, 2005). This allows for creativity over tools and collaboration over technology, aspects that ensure its accessibility across low-SES contexts.

Finally, evidences such as the compatibility effect studies suggest that when meaning is embodied, it gets tied to sensorimotor memory. This implies that the learners' comprehension improves when their body posture matches the metaphor being described.

Teacher education programmes such as B.El.Ed (Bachelor of Elementary Education) incorporate practicum-based courses with theatre, drama, performing and fine arts, which reinforces the applicability of drama-based approaches in classroom practice. The pedagogical use of drama also corresponds with the transformative goals of the National Curriculum Framework 2023 and National Education Policy, 2020 with "culturally contextualised" classrooms that shifts from rote methods (CG-2, C-2.1, C-2.2). It also aligns with the National Curriculum Framework 2005, position paper on 'Arts, Music, Dance, and Theatre', which emphasise the significance of drama in the exploration of the self, critical empathy, not limited for humans but also towards the natural, physical, and social worlds. This resonates strongly with the embodied and drama-based pedagogy proposed in this article.

In conclusion, this article attempts to put together an approach grounded in evidence to bring classroom interactions to life and promote a linguistically-empowered classroom where every student participates fully—some may act, some may direct, some may draw, but all engage, move and learn. In doing so, the classroom grows to be a site not just of instruction, but a space where, reflecting Lakoff and Johnson (2003), our conceptual system rooted in metaphor—is enacted, embodied, and lived.

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