

# Wahana AKADEMIK

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- Addressing Metaphors and Symbols In An ESL Reading Comprehension Class.
- Corporate Financial Reporting : The Challenges In The New Millennium.
- Focussing On Teacher Talk In Motivating Students In The English Language Classroom At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM).
- Genocide.
- How Can Three Dimensional Computing Inform The Industrial Design Process.
- Improving Mathematics Teaching And Learning.
- Kesedaran Pendidik Terhadap Elemen ISO 9000 — Kajian Awal Di Hulu Perak.
- Pembangunan Manusia Dari Perspektif Ekonomi Islam.
- Sistem Ekonomi Islam : Definisi, Falsafah Dan Masalah Asas Ekonomi.
- Ta'liq Agreement : A Proposal For Reformation.
- Extending Vocabulary The Fun Way.

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**UiTM**  
**(KEDAH)**

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*Wahana*

# AKADEMIK



JURNAL ■ UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA ■ CAWANGAN KEDAH ■ KAMPUS SUNGAI PETANI

Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah  
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# **WAHANA AKADEMIK**

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**Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah**  
**Kampus Sungai Petani**  
**Vol. 2, No. 1, Jun 2003**

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## **DARIPADA KETUA PENYUNTING**

Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh

Y.A.B. Dato' Seri Setia Di Raja Dato' Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, Menteri Besar Kedah telah melakukan lawatan rasmi ke UiTM Cawangan Kedah pada 3 Julai 2003 yang lalu. Sempena lawatan beliau, Pengarah Kampus telah memberi taklimat mengenai kemajuan dan sumbangan UiTM Cawangan Kedah melalui penyelidikan dan perundingan terhadap negara khususnya negeri Kedah. Kata alu-aluan Y. Bhg. Dato' Naib Canselor UiTM dalam buku "UiTM Kedah Sepintas Lalu" sempena lawatan Menteri Besar Kedah telah menekankan peranan UiTM terhadap negara terutamanya dalam bidang penyelidikan dan perundingan untuk membantu kerajaan negeri bagi memajukan negeri masing-masing. Oleh itu, satu saluran perlu diwujudkan bagi mendokumentasikan hasil penyelidikan dan perundingan supaya ianya boleh dijadikan sumber rujukan oleh semua pihak yang berminat.

Justeru itu, UiTM Kedah telah menerbitkan jurnal akademik bertajuk 'Wahana Akademik' untuk menampung keperluan penerbitan tersebut. Untuk itu, Jawatankuasa Jurnal Akademik, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Kedah amat mengalu-alukan hasil penulisan akademik samaada hasil penyelidikan dan perundingan ataupun analisa '*literature*' untuk dimuatkan dalam penerbitannya.

**Wan Faizah Wan Abdullah**

# ADDRESSING METAPHORS AND SYMBOLS IN AN ESL READING COMPREHENSION CLASS

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## ABSTRACT

*Our lives are affected, knowingly or unknowingly through the usage and influence of metaphors and symbols. This paper attempts to highlight an overview of their presence as seen from the aspect of ESL reading comprehension by a group of selected respondents. It also provides some insights into the roles of metaphors and symbols being utilised in the ESL learning class. The impact and application of the roles played by metaphors and symbols have been greatly used by writers. This paper also seeks to focus on analytical and descriptive details such as looking at the students' perception of metaphors and symbols as used in certain reading comprehension passages, the percentage of students who were able to interpret the precise meaning of metaphors and symbols correctly, and lastly the interface of students' background knowledge with the presupposed meaning of metaphors and symbols. Using open-ended questions, the responses of respondents regarding the usage and influence of metaphors and symbols in an ESL reading comprehension class were analysed. It is hoped that the findings will be beneficial to educators and readers alike and will serve as a framework for future research into the elements of metaphors and symbols as used in the literary field.*

**Key words** : **Metaphors, Symbols, English as a Second Language class**

## INTRODUCTION

It cannot be denied that metaphors and symbols have been widely used in various types of genres. This paper examines and limits its scope to the aspects of the exploitation of metaphors and symbols in the literary context. Findings from this qualitative and quantitative survey will look into the intricate aspects of how students of second language learning particularly diploma students of UiTM Campus Sungai Petani taking BEL 250 are able to comprehend the intrinsic meanings of metaphors and symbols as seen from the literary perspective.

Students who are familiar with the linguistic devices such as metaphors and symbols will be able to comprehend and perceive the precise meaning of the literary text easily. Steen (1994) in his book *Understanding Metaphor in Literature*, mentioned that there is the aspect of readers' background knowledge that could help in the understanding and interpretation of metaphors. The perception of this underlying factor will affect the differences in the interpretations of the meanings from one

reader to another. Generally, the problem arises because students are not able to interpret the metaphorical and symbolical meanings as used in the literary texts. Many of them will only be able to comprehend the literal meaning rather than the metaphorical or symbolical meaning as required.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There has been a lot of research conducted on these two aspects. In retrospect, the views regarding the various interpretations can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. From the traditional point of view, metaphors and symbols are devices used by writers to convey their thoughts and messages to the readers. Such devices would definitely provide a means for the authors to translate their thoughts into something meaningful. William (1984:19) states that these elements of metaphors and symbols can be considered as part of a linguistic code that enables readers to create their own set of agreed references. Within this set of agreed references, there are many distinctive codes and patterns of both metaphorical and symbolical usage whereby they are easily recognised by the readers.

To understand the functions of both metaphors and symbols in literature, it is pertinent to understand the roles played by them. In view of this, it is every author's wish to ensure that their readers are able to grasp a better understanding of their works through the employment of these devices. Metaphors and symbols used by the authors can offer the readers those concrete objects that may assist in the understanding of the thoughts conveyed. It is deemed that the more abstract the thought the more necessary it is for the author to employ these devices to help their readers to gain a full understanding of their literary works.

Approaches and findings carried out by researchers on metaphors and symbols have drawn lots of interest. The best construct to convey the traditional meaning of 'metaphor' could be traced to its classical definition in *'The Poetics'*, where Aristotle writes: Metaphor (metaphora) is the transference (epiphora) of a name from that which it usually denotes to some other objects (Knights 1960: 5). In other words, it simply means a figure of speech whereby two unlike objects are compared to each other. The usage of metaphors will therefore render easy understanding of the discourse as used in the genre. It may also enable the readers to enjoy the interesting aspects of the discourse, and it is hoped that the elements of metaphors and symbols will assist in the easy understanding of literary works.

As for symbolism, most of us understand that it uses signal signs (symbols), which are already established, and the interpretation of the meaning will not pose any problems to users who are already familiar with the linguistic meaning of it. However, at times the interpretation of the symbols that are utilised by the authors may have to take into account all the familiar intuition and conventional signs shared by all speakers. In this aspect, the existence of these systematic relations justifies the adoption of a theoretical concept of the symbols used (Serber 1975: 9). Sometimes problems do arise when there are a number of possible associations, which are related to the use of symbolism. When this happens, there will be various interpretations and the meanings may become obscure and are subjected to diverse understanding of it. In this research, it is interesting to note that this phenomenon was clearly identified among the answers given by the respondents.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Population sample**

Four groups of diploma students taking BEL 250 (Mainstream English II) from the branch campus of Mara University of Technology in Sungai Petani were chosen as respondents in this small-scale research. The groups were respectively pursuing their Diploma in Industrial Design Engineering, Diploma in Information Management, Diploma in Business Management and Pre-Law students. A total of 150 respondents (40 Pre-Law students, 30 Diploma in Industrial Design Engineering students, and 40 Diploma in Business Studies students) were given open-ended questions on the areas of metaphors and symbols. This mixed population sample should provide enough insight into how the different interpretations of metaphors and symbols could be seen.

### **Materials**

Respondents were gauged on their understandings and interpretations of metaphors and symbols through open-ended questions. In the questionnaires given, respondents had to answer to their best of their ability the meaning of metaphors and symbols. To gain better insight into how these elements would help the students in the understanding of literary texts, the researcher enlisted a poem taken from 'The Road Not Taken' by Robert Frost (Perrine 1993 : 599).

The aims of posing the open-ended questions as well as the poem are to test the following research questions:

- a. What is the profile of those metaphors and symbols that students have given the correct answers, and those wrongly answered ones? The focus is on high and low degree of metaphoricity (Steen 1994: 52).
- b. What is the profile from students' perspectives regarding the importance of the literary elements being taught in the BEL 250 courses?
- c. Is there a significant difference in the understanding of metaphors and symbols between those respondents who received their formal education from the rural and urban settings?
- d. Is there a significant relationship between metaphors and symbols as used in the sample?
- e. What is the relationship between readers' background knowledge (cultural aspect) and the understanding of the literary elements (metaphors/symbols) being used?
- f. What are the significant differences among students pursuing the different programmes and the understanding of the literary elements (metaphors/symbols) being used?
- g. To seek statistical analysis regarding the hypothesis that respondents from science stream are not able to perceive the elements of metaphors and symbols accurately.
- h. To seek insight into the percentage of students who are able to understand poems of metaphorical and symbolical undertones.

## **DATA ANALYSES AND FINDINGS**

The descriptive aspects of the findings will cover each category systematically whereby the researchers will try to establish analytical details on the aspects of respondents' background, the percentage of students who are able to comprehend the meaning of metaphors and symbols accurately, the importance of the literary

elements being taught in UiTM, and finally to gain insight into the students' understanding of the poem as used in the research. Such information will prove useful as it provides insight into the students' strengths and weaknesses in the understanding of literary elements used in an ESL class. Besides, the findings will also focus on the 7 areas of the research questions formulated by the researchers.

Table A : Respondents' background

Gender:	60 males (40%)	90 females (60%)
Secondary Education:	Rural schools : 37 (24.7%) Urban schools : 91 (60.7%) Missionary Schools : 6 (4%) Boarding/Premier : 16 (10.7%)	
Stream:	Science : 56 (37.3%)	Arts : 92 (72%)
Subjects taken while in Form Five :	Geography : 18 (12%) Pure Science Subjects : 56 (37.3%) Malay Literature : 18 (12%) Social Sciences : 55 (36.7%) Technical Studies : 3 (2%)	
Highest Education obtained:	Matriculation : 4 (2.7%) Mara Junior Science College : 1 (0.7%) Till Form Five : 129 (86%) Till Form Six : 8 (5.3%) Others/Certificates : 88 (5.3%)	

Based on the statistical output of the table above, we can conclude that a vast majority of the respondents had their secondary education in rural schools as it was reported that 85.3% of the respondents were from urban, boarding/premier and missionary schools. Respondents in this research comprised 60 males (40%) and 90 females (60%). Most of them have completed their secondary education till Form Five (86%). The other 14% of the respondents had undergone Matriculation, Mara Junior Science College (MRSM) and certificate courses. It is interesting to note that 72% of the respondents were from the arts stream and the subjects that they had taken ranged from accounting, Malay literature, economics, geography, and social sciences to technical studies. The background knowledge of the respondents will prove useful as it could provide input to some of the research questions posed by the researchers.

blanket. This could be due to the fact that it is not found within the context of their daily lives.

- b. The profile from students' perspectives regarding the importance of the literary elements being taught in the BEL 250 course.

Based on the analysis from the data, it is proven that respondents in this particular institution have shown strong preferences for literary elements to be taught in Mainstream English II. In fact, 87.3 % of the respondents reported that such elements should be incorporated into the syllabus of BEL 250. This finding could be interpreted positively as it shows that many students pursuing courses such as Diploma in Industrial Design Engineering, Diploma in Information Management, Diploma in Business Studies and Pre-Law have shown readiness to learn literary elements.

Literary elements should therefore be incorporated into the syllabus because many of these students have a fair command of the English Language and greater awareness should be placed on the teaching of literary elements as the joy of learning could be greatly enhanced.

- c. Is there a significant difference in the understanding of metaphors and symbols between those respondents who received their formal education from the rural and urban settings?

The null hypothesis states that there is no difference in the understanding of metaphors and symbols between the respondents who received their formal education from the rural and urban settings. Through statistical procedures from the Mann-Whitney Test (the equivalent of independent samples t-test), results have shown that the null hypothesis could not be rejected as the p value was shown at 0.137. In other words, the researcher found that students from both of these settings did not show any differences in their understanding of both metaphors and symbols. This means that students who received their formal education whether via a rural or urban setting were not affected in their understanding of the interpretation of the elements used.

- d. Is there a significant relationship between metaphors and symbols as used in the sample?

Statistical procedure through the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test that is the equivalent of paired samples t-test has shown that there is a significant difference between metaphors and symbols. The null hypothesis, which states that there is no significant difference between metaphors and symbols, should be rejected as the results from the statistical procedure showed that the p value was at 0.002. In other words, metaphors and symbols play different roles in their usage when they are used in the literary context.

- e. The relationship between readers' background knowledge (cultural aspect) and the understanding of the literary elements (metaphors/symbols) being used. In this aspect, the researchers noticed that students' background knowledge might influence the understanding of literary elements such as metaphors and symbols. This could be seen from the frequency count of the students' response regarding their understanding of the elements. Students who are well exposed

### Summary of major findings

- a. The profile of those metaphors and symbols which students have given the correct answers, and those wrongly answered ones; high and low degree of metaphoricality respectively (Steen 1994: 52). Steen believed that readers interpret metaphors differently and came up with the notion that there are two groups of metaphors, one group with a high degree of metaphoricality and the other with a low degree of metaphoricality. In this research, the researchers are able to confirm and reaffirm the ideas stated by Steen. The ideas mooted by Steen could also be applied to the usage of symbols and metaphors alike as it is noted that the respondents showed the same complexity in the usage of both. Table B shows the two groups with a high degree and a low degree of metaphors and symbols.

Metaphors		Symbols	
High degree	Low degree	High degree	Low degree
Room for improvement (80.7%)	Wet blanket (8.0%)	Pigeon (96.0%)	White elephant (41.3%)
Lion (71.3%)	Fishy business (40.0%)	White flag (96.7%)	Carnation (28.0)
Bookworm (96.3%)	Comb out the area (6.7)	Crow (96.0%)	Iron fist (39.3%)
Blowing one's trumpet (57.3%)		Black sheep (56.0%)	Saffron robe (4.7%)

Those categorised under the high degree showed that students were able to explain the exact meaning, as the metaphors and symbols used are quite clear. Perhaps this is due to the fact that some of this high degree of understanding of the meaning of metaphors and symbols could easily be found in their native language. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that some metaphors and symbols are unclear, deviant and ambiguous. This is because students are not familiar with their usage. In this aspect, this research has proven empirically that those, which are unclear, deviant and ambiguous, come under the category of low degree metaphoricality (Steen 1994). In this research, the researcher has included the usage of symbols such a carnation and saffron robe, as these two symbols are not within the readers' grasp. These symbols were used merely to show that if certain symbols that are not within the context of the culture, naturally these would not be easily interpreted correctly. As such it has been proven statistically as only 4.7 % of the respondents were able to interpret the meaning of the saffron robe. From the cultural perspective, the respondents were not able to interpret the metaphorical meaning of a saffron robe as many of them did not understand or were not exposed to the usage of a saffron robe. Likewise, it is interesting to note that only 8.0 % of the respondents were able to comprehend the metaphorical meaning of a wet

to some of the elements are able to interpret the precise meaning correctly. Statistics obtained from the frequency count are able to show that background knowledge about the usage of these elements is rather useful. Respondents clearly understand usage of symbols such as bookworm, room for improvement, white flag and pigeon as these elements are actually found in their native language. This implies that the cultural aspect can have an influential role in establishing the understanding of metaphors and symbols. In retrospect, results of this research have shown that many of the respondents were not able to comprehend the precise metaphorical or symbolical meaning of words such as carnation, saffron robe, fishy business, comb out the area or iron fist as many of these elements are not embedded in their culture. Among the responses given by the respondents were that they had never heard of them, they did not understand the elements and some did not even answer the questions when they were asked to do so. This clearly justifies the fact that the role played by the interface of students' background knowledge will enable the readers/students to understand the usage of such elements.

- f. The significant differences among students pursuing different programmes that their understanding of the literary elements (metaphors/symbols) being used. To obtain a better insight into this question, the researcher has utilised statistical procedure through the Kruskal-Wallis test, that is the equivalent of independent sample t-test, to test the hypothesis. Empirically, it is proven that among the three programmes there is definitely a significant difference in the understanding of the literary elements used as the p value was found to be at 0.000. A further statistical procedure through mean ranking has revealed that students pursuing the Diploma in Industrial Design topped the list in having a better understanding of the literary elements (metaphors/symbols) with the loading of mean ranking of 71.25. Students from the Pre-Law course registered a mean ranking of 66.65 and lastly students pursuing their Diploma in Information Management had a loading of 32.54. This clearly indicates that students from the certain programmes showed greater understanding and had strong inclinations towards the usage of these literary elements.
- g. Statistical analysis regarding the hypothesis that respondents from science stream are not able to perceive the elements of metaphors and symbols accurately.

The null hypothesis states that students from the science stream are able to perceive the elements of metaphors and symbols as accurately as those students from the arts stream. Results from the statistical procedure through the Mann-Whitney test (the equivalent of independent samples t-test) showed that the null hypothesis could not be rejected as the p value was found to be at 0.137. This means that the students from the science stream were able to understand and define the meaning of the elements used in the research. It appears that there is no difference in the aspect of interpreting and understanding of metaphors and symbols between the two groups of students from the different streams. Students from the science and arts stream do not show any significant difference in the understanding of the usage of these literary elements.

- h. The percentage of students who are able to understand the poem (The Road Not Taken) with metaphorical and symbolical undertones.

A statistical procedure through frequency count revealed that a high percentage of the respondents were able to interpret the metaphorical and symbolical undertones of the poem correctly as 87.3% of the respondents responded positively towards it. Further analysis into the aspects of deriving the precise meaning of the stanza and literary elements has revealed that the respondents could understand the poem easily as 89.3% showed understanding of it. This clearly indicates that the respondents showed great appreciation of the aesthetical value of the poem intrinsically.

### **RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This small-scale research was initiated with the intention of probing into how well literary elements are understood by the students pursuing the various programmes in the campus of UiTM Kedah branch. Students who are familiar or well exposed to literary elements should be able to interpret the precise meaning of metaphors and symbols used by the writers to convey their ideas. Background knowledge of the students is shown to play an influential part in enhancing the aspect of the interpretation of these literary elements. The findings thus will serve to give added value to the literature concerning the usage and the incorporating of literary elements in the learning process in an ESL class.

It is undeniable that literary elements such as metaphor and symbols consist of two components. From one aspect, there is the literal meaning and on the other, the aspect of the metaphorical or symbolical meaning. Undoubtedly, the inherent ambiguity of these utterances gives rise to significant differences, as sometimes the readers could not interpret correctly the precise meaning metaphorically or symbolically as required. This constitutes the more reasons why literary elements should be incorporated into the syllabus as students have already acquired the required proficiency. In short, this calls for a more meaningful review of the syllabus and these literary elements should be taught in an ESL class as it is hoped that most of the words found in metaphors or symbols may later become clichés that may gradually become standard terms in our daily discourse. Kitty (1987: 40) enunciated that there would be little difficulty in recognizing them if the readers are already exposed to the conceptual meaning of these elements.

Generally, the respondents were also able to grasp the meanings of metaphors and symbols used in this research as 77.1% was reported to be able to understand the usage of these literary elements. Probably this implies that students do have strong inclinations towards the learning of literary elements and teachers should play more meaningful roles by encouraging their students to read more novels or works on literature by prominent writers.

Findings of this research showed that the respondents were highly in favour of the fact that literary elements should be taught in an ESL course. Students who are well exposed to the usage of literary elements should be at an added advantage as it could help to raise their awareness to appreciate creative works of art. These elements have always been well incorporated into many forms of linguistic communication such as in our daily conversations, magazines, newspaper articles,

as well as in novels and creative genres of the writers (Mooij 1976 : 2). In practical terms it simply means parents, teachers and educators should inculcate the joy of reading in their readers by exposing them to many literary works, as many of the respondents in this research have registered strong preferences for literary elements being taught in class. The goal of getting students to read as many genres as possible is actually to familiarise them with the usage of literary elements. As indicated by Robin in David (ed) 1993: 170, the prevalence of metaphor could greatly assist in the understanding of interpreting meaning. As such, students who read a lot will be well exposed to the various forms of metaphors and symbols and thus could enhance their understanding of seeing things anew.

Based on the findings of this research, there is strong evidence to indicate that students from the various programmes showed certain levels of inclinations towards the understanding and usage of metaphors and symbols. As there is a wide spectrum of inclinations towards these literary elements, this calls for the need to incorporate literary elements into the reading materials of an ESL class. The ideal way to have this integration is by providing sufficient and interesting materials with such elements in the reading passages in an ESL class. Teachers on their part should be more proactive by providing the right guidance such as explaining some of the difficult contexts, that is not within the understanding of students'. Black (1961: 39) argued that sometimes the metaphorical sentence in question would not convey its intended meaning to the readers sufficiently as some of the readers may be ignorant of the exact meaning both literally or metaphorically. In this context, teachers' intervention by providing proper guidance could serve to motivate and ultimately help to nurture students to appreciate the different types of creative works.

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