

Understanding New Age Texts

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ABSTRACT

More than ever before, people use supplemental tools to communicate with each other. However, communication tools that rely solely upon writing (e.g., email) often lead to misunderstandings. People are particularly likely to misunderstand the messages' emotional connotations. The Metaphors Test (Barchard, Hensley, Anderson, & Walker, 2012) was designed to measure the ability to perceive the emotional connotations of written language. This study explored whether this ability can be improved by increasing overall verbal skill. 181 participants completed our study online. The correlation of the Metaphors Test and verbal skill was positive but only moderate, suggesting that the ability to perceive emotional connotations cannot be improved by boosting basic verbal abilities alone.

INTRODUCTION

The way people communicate with each other has changed dramatically. Because of the advancement of communication tools such as e-mail, people less frequently communicate with others in person (Byron, 2008). These convenient communication tools, however, do not convey emotional subtleties due to the absence of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions (Barchard, Hensley, Anderson, & Walker, 2012). This deficiency in written language can easily cause emotional miscommunication (Byron, 2008). For example, people are less likely to correctly interpret a person's emotion in e-mails (Byron, 2008). There are two types of information that are carried in written language (Barchard et al., 2012). The first type, denotative information, refers to the direct meaning of a word (Barchard et al., 2012). The second type is connotative information, which refers to an associated meaning of a word (Barchard et al., 2012). For example, "the words house and home have roughly the same denotative meaning, but home has stronger emotional connotations than house" (Barchard et al., 2012, p. 1).

The Metaphors Test was designed to measure people's ability to correctly interpret connotative meanings of written information. The Metaphors Test is suitable as the measurement for two reasons. First, the metaphors are often used to represent emotions, especially anger, sorrow, fear, and happiness (Barchard et al., 2012). Second, metaphors do not have to include direct emotional information; thus, a reader must have the ability to go beyond the denotative meanings of the words to correctly interpret the emotion (Barchard et al., 2012). The current study focuses on this second reason and examines the relationship between a reader's verbal ability and the ability to interpret metaphors.

Previous studies have shown that a person's ability to correctly interpret metaphors does not correlate with the person's vocabulary knowledge (Jones & Stone, 1989). For example, the ability of language learning disabled and normally achieving adolescents to interpret metaphors was not related to general vocabulary knowledge or to knowledge of task-specific vocabulary (Jones & Stone, 1989). In contrast, a different study found that the development of metaphor comprehension is highly linked to receptive vocabulary (Rundblad & Annaz, 2010). The purpose of the current study is to explore whether the ability to correctly interpret metaphors can be improved by increasing overall verbal skill. We hypothesize that there is a moderate, positive correlation between the ability to interpret creative metaphors and verbal skill.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 181 participants (81 female and 100 male) completed this study. Ages ranged from 20 to 68 (M_{age} = 31.05 years, SD = 10.83). The majority of participants were Asian (78.5%), followed by Caucasian (11.6%), other (5.5%), American Indian/Alaska Native (3.3%), and Black (1.1%). Participants were recruited through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mTurk) system.

Measures

The Metaphors Test

The Metaphors Test consisted of 10 items that were closely related to emotional intelligence (Barchard, 2012). Participants were asked to imagine that a person stated the metaphor to them (Barchard, 2012). For each metaphor, three emotions were presented – e.g., refreshed, upset, guilty (Barchard, 2012). Participants rated the extent to which the speaker was feeling each of the three emotions by using a 5 – point scale (Barchard, 2012).

Verbal Skills

Participants' verbal skills were measured by a self-report. First, participants were asked to report how many years they have been speaking English. Second, participants were asked to indicate how comfortable they were with English in Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening.

Procedure

Participants completed the online study that took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

To examine the relationship between the Metaphors Test and the verbal comprehension assessment, we used a Pearson Product-Moment Correlation. The two variables we correlated were verbal skills and metaphor comprehension.

RESULTS

We found a moderate positive correlation between the Metaphors Test and verbal skills ($r(179) = .30, p < .001$). Figure 1 shows the scatter plot for these two variables.

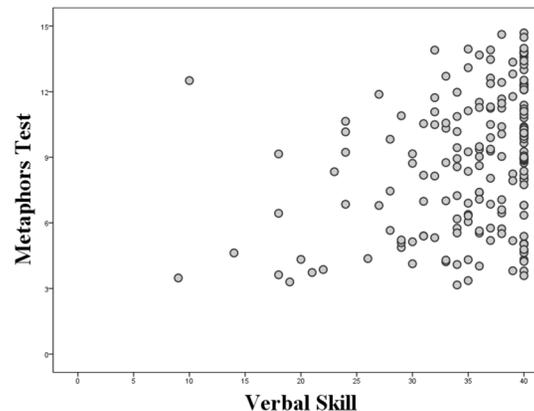


Figure 1. Correlation between the Metaphors Test and verbal skill.

DISCUSSION

In the current society, people less frequently communicate with others in person. Instead, people more frequently communicate by using tools such as e-mail. This type of communication tends to cause misinterpretation due to the lack of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions (Barchard et al., 2012). The Metaphors Test was designed to measure people's ability to interpret connotative meanings of written language (Barchard et al., 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore whether the ability to correctly interpret metaphors can be improved by increasing overall verbal skill. We hypothesized that there is a moderate, positive correlation between the ability to interpret creative metaphors and verbal skill.

The results were conclusive with our original hypothesis. The results were conclusive with our original hypothesis. Because there was a positive correlation between the two, learning verbal skills may boost people's ability to correctly interpret metaphors. However, it does so only in a moderate degree. Perhaps, this is because the ability to accurately interpret metaphors has more to do with cognitive processing rather than simple verbal skills.

Our result, however, might have been significant because of the backgrounds of our participants. Participants were collected online, and they were from various countries. Needless to say, a participant's verbal skills in English have an impact in answering a survey that was written in English. Therefore, future research should examine the discriminant validity between the Metaphors Test and verbal skills by using participants whose native language is English. In addition, this current study did not fully measure people's English comprehension skills. We used a self-report to measure the participant's verbal skills. Thus, future research should use a professional English comprehension test.

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