

Oxymorons and Undergraduates' Repertoire in Literature: Exploring the Nexus

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Abstract

This study probed into figurative speech and its rhetorical effects with a particular focus on oxymorons which have often been conflated with paradoxes. Besides clarifying the difference between the two, an analysis of the academic records of fifty undergraduates and a test of oxymorons were a point of departure to measure their familiarity with such figurative devices. Using the Pearson correlation test, the participants' oxymoron test scores were correlated with their overall scores on the achievement tests of seven literature courses in the academic records. Findings showed a positive correlation coefficient ($r=.251$), yet it is considerably weak ($\text{sig.}=.079$ at $\alpha=0.01$). Further evidence on the magnitude of the phenomenon was solicited from five faculty members through a focus group discussion. The faculty substantiated the correlational findings, as they hold a view that oxymorons, tied with other linguistic devices, contribute to learners' repertoire in literature and language in general.

Key words: conceptual metaphor, metaphoric competence, oxymoron, rhetorical effect

Resumen

Este artículo de investigación explora el habla figurativa y sus efectos retóricos, centrándose en los oxímoros, a menudo confundidos con paradojas. Se aclara la diferencia entre ambos y se presenta un análisis de los datos extraídos de una evaluación acerca de oxímoros tomada a 50 estudiantes universitarios para medir su familiaridad con los mismos. Utilizando la prueba de correlación de Pearson, las puntuaciones de dichas evaluaciones se correlacionaron con sus puntuaciones en expedientes académicos en relación a su rendimiento en siete cursos de literatura. Los resultados mostraron un coeficiente de correlación positivo ($r=0,251$), aunque es considerablemente débil ($\text{sig.}=.079$ con $\alpha=0,01$). Se solicitó a cinco miembros del profesorado más evidencia sobre la magnitud del fenómeno a través de una discusión de grupo focal. Los profesores fundamentaron los hallazgos correlacionales, sosteniendo que los oxímoros, vinculados con otros dispositivos lingüísticos, contribuyen al repertorio de los estudiantes en literatura y lengua en general.

Palabras claves: metáfora conceptual, competencia metafórica, oxímoron, efecto retórico

Introduction

The communicative approach, which inaugurated a research period with a theoretical baseline that surpassed structuralism, subsumes allied competencies reflecting language as a natural phenomenon. Some of these well-researched competencies are idiomatic

competence (Al-Kadi, 2015) and pragmatic competence (Hadizadeh & Jahangirian, 2022). Given the broader context of language as a social phenomenon (Dafouz & Gray, 2019), the socio-cultural and metaphoric competencies have also become an area of research according to which language is congrued as a set of values, beliefs, and perceptions (Danesi, 1993; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Liu & Hsieh, 2020). The advocates of these competencies view language not as a skeleton of grammatical structures but as a dynamic phenomenon with socio-cultural dimensions— an integral part of the overall linguistic proficiency of language users (Almaktary, 2022; Chen, 2014; Dafouz & Gray, 2019; Liu & Hsieh, 2020).

In parallel, literature has been theorized as a medium for learning and teaching language more comprehensibly (Almaktary, 2022; Chen, 2014; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). Foreign language programs have credited literary genres to facilitate acquiring the target language in several ways (Chen, 2014; Hişmanoğlu, 2005). For the most part, literature presents natural language and promotes learners' sociocultural understanding and awareness, creating lifetime readers. Figurative speech has been investigated in light of metaphorical competence (Danesi, 1993), which is part of language users' overall linguistic repertoire (Liu & Hsieh, 2020). It subsumes aspects suitably taught through literature. Aspects such as paradoxes, similes, and metaphors have been well-researched in the existing literature as figurative devices of literary appreciation (Hoang, 2014; Liu & Hsieh, 2020; Vicente, 2020; Zhang, 2021).

It is fair to say that oxymorons largely remained at the fringes of figurative language research, laying a foundation for equal research attention. An oxymoron refers to pairs of words that come together and contradict each other. Oxymorons are inextricably tied to literary work (Kamoliddinova, 2021; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Some interlocutors and authors tend to employ such figurative speech in their literary prose for deliberate ambiguity that has to do with rhetorical effects (Flayih, 2009; Qassim & Khudhair, 2022), e.g., humor, irony, or emphatic effects. Expressions such as *cool passion*, *wise fool*, and *civil war* are typical examples of oxymorons that language users utilize for rhetorical effects or conveying complex ideas and emotions. It has been accepted that oxymorons, if appropriately used, add flavor to speech and writing altogether. Nevertheless, "understanding of the oxymoronic real meaning depends on linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, the extra-linguistic context which contributes to the construction and interpretation of oxymorons" (Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020, p. 1457). In this light, it is important to elucidate how the familiarity of oxymorons in the target language contributes to learners' expertise in understanding the textuality of the target language.

Drawing on the conceptual metaphor theory (Danesi, 1993; Hoang, 2014; Kövecses, 2017; Littlemore, 2001; Liu & Hsieh, 2020; Zhang, 2021), this study rests on oxymorons and their relation to second language (L2) learners' competence in literature. For L2 learners, oxymorons can be challenging but also rewarding, as they enhance the understanding of themes and emotions in literary works. This enables learners to interpret underlying meanings and grasp abstract concepts. Hence, it is worthwhile to delve into such figurative speech devices from a literary perspective to bridge learners' knowledge of language and literature. This study explored undergraduates' use of rhetorical language, specifically focusing on oxymorons, and how these relate to their performance in university literature courses. It departed from the premise that effective use of oxymorons helps language learners communicate their ideas in depth and more effectively. In the first place, this endeavor intends to alleviate the confusion between oxymorons and paradoxes. Then, it correlates the learners' familiarity with oxymorons with their achievement in literature courses.

Research Questions

The study has a central question: Are undergraduates' familiarity with oxymorons and achievement in literature linearly correlated? The following sub-questions guided the territory of the investigation:

1. To what extent are students of literature cognizant of oxymorons?
2. Is there a statistically significant correlation between learners' familiarity with oxymorons and academic achievements in literature courses in the License program in the Department of English and Literature at Philadelphia University (PU), Jordan?
3. How do faculty members perceive the relationship between students' familiarity with oxymorons and repertoire in literature?

Literature Review

Oxymorons, a subsidiary research area, have often been conflated with paradoxes. Although both concepts bear a resemblance, they differ from each other. In the Cambridge Dictionary, an oxymoron is defined as two words that have or seem to have opposite meanings. Some authors conceive it as a figure of speech that produces an incongruous, seemingly self-contradictory effect in language, as in Arabic and English (Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020). Some language users employ this contradiction to create an effect such as humor and irony (Flayih, 2009; Kamoliddinova, 2021). To illustrate, the pair of words in *cruel kindness* and *haste slowly*, literally speaking, contradict each other. The two noun phrases in the title of Alfred Tennyson's "O heavy lightness! Serious vanity" are examples of oxymorons used in poetry. Add to that *honest* and *thief* in Charles Lamb's "the only honest thief". Researchers interested in oxymorons believe that such expressions add depth and complexity to language by forcing interlocutors to consider the contradictions and nuances of language and meaning (Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020; Hussein, 2020; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Qassim & Khudhair, 2022). In everyday conversation, however, people do not use an oxymoron to make profound statements like the one mentioned above. Instead, they turn to oxymorons to express wit or catch the target audience's attention (Qassim & Khudhair, 2022).

This differs from paradoxes, defined as literary statements that contradict themselves and contain a kernel of truth. While oxymorons are words with opposite meanings (Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020; Qassim & Khudhair, 2022), paradoxes are oppositions of ideas or themes. Literally, a pair of words in an oxymoron cancel each other out. Together, they bring contradictory (opposing) words for effect. This differs from a paradox, a contradictory statement, but implies truth and logic. That is, it seems like something true and false simultaneously. A well-known example of paradox in English literature is William Wordsworth's "The child is father of the man", and George Orwell's "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". Hence, the maintenance of this distinction is important because they are used for different rhetorical effects, and mixing them up likely distorts understanding writers' points of thought.

Structurally speaking, an oxymoronic phrase consists of an adjective preceding a noun, and both words carry contrasting meanings (Qassim & Khudhair, 2022), as in *cruel kindness* and *living death*. A well-known example from Shakespeare's oxymorons crafted in *Romeo and Juliet* includes "parting is such sweet sorrow". The words *sweet* and *sorrow* convey the bittersweet nature of the characters' separation. This linguistic device (i.e., oxymoron) provokes interlocutors' thoughts, making them ponder the meaning of such contradicting ideas. This is an instance of a confusing phrase that expresses a complex nature of love that could not be expressed otherwise—other similar examples in the works of a

myriad of English and American literary figures. For instance, Lord Byron's well-known oxymoron in his poem *Don Juan*, *melancholy merriment*, describes the intricate relationship between sadness and happiness. Another oxymoron is William Butler Yeats's *terrible beauty*, which describes the consequences of the 1916 Irish Easter Rising against the British government, which were violent but brought a beautiful feeling of longing for independence.

Although oxymorons are often discussed with reference to literature, day-to-day conversational discourse exposes a big number of such linguistic expressions (Hameed, 2020; Kamoliddinova, 2021; Littlemore & Low, 2006). Common oxymorons include word pairs such as *artificial intelligence*, *original copy*, *almost certain*, *old news*, and the list continues. Hameed (2020) emphasized that oxymorons enhance the expressiveness and creativity of language, thereby making interactions more engaging and thought-provoking. The study provided common examples to illustrate the subtle yet significant impact of oxymorons on enriching communication. It highlighted the value of oxymorons in adding depth and humor to speech, which is beneficial for casual as well as formal communicational contexts.

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

The conceptual metaphor theory, first proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is one of the important theories in modern research on second language learning and acquisition. It construed metaphors as an aspect of language and a significant part of human thought (Kövecses, 2017). Based on this theory, nonliteral language is central to human understanding and expression (Vicente, 2020). The conceptual metaphor (Liu & Hsieh, 2020; Zhang, 2021), dubbed generative metaphor, relates to how the brain stimulates thought and language and how cognition is embodied. Littlemore (2001) and Hoang (2014) are among the few writers who explicated metaphorical competence from the CMT standpoint.

In terms of research, Hoang (2014) pointed to its state-of-the-art, showing that, despite the challenges of metaphor learning, metaphor competence is important and relevant to second language learning. Littlemore and Low (2006) explored metaphor comprehension and the relationship between metaphor interpretation and learners' production in first and second languages. Four dimensions of metaphoric competence surfaced from this study: finding meaning in metaphor, speed in finding it, multiple interpretations and producing new metaphors. In this light, oxymorons are part of figurative speech interpreted conceptually. CMT deals with thought and language, crucial for second language learners who have enrolled in a literature program.

Oxymorons in Prior Research

Despite a good number of previous studies on figurative speech, there is still a lack of clarity between oxymorons and paradoxes. Some have speculated that the two concepts are two sides of the same coin and the terms could therefore be used interchangeably.

Some researchers approached oxymorons from different methodological and conceptual paradigms. For instance, Flayih (2009), relying on extracts from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, studied oxymorons as a linguistic device for rhetorical effects such as humor, irony, paradox, or merely emphatic. The topic was also the theme around which Al-Mawla and Falih (2020)'s contrastive study was designed. The authors discussed oxymorons as a linguistic poetic device, providing illustrative examples from two poems belonging to Arabic and English poetry. The study explains that both languages have a wealth of direct and indirect oxymorons deliberately used by poets to convey ambiguous meanings as an aim in itself.

Additionally, Littlemore and Low (2006) examined the ubiquity and significance of metaphor in language, showing how metaphoric competence is a mainstay of communicative abilities in second language learning. The study evinced benefits for writers to promote not only the textual competence of the target language learners but also illocutionary competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. In a similar vein, Abbood (2023) examined the effectiveness of oxymorons as rhetorical devices in political communication. Findings showed how oxymorons are used to convey complex messages and create a dramatic impact on listeners. The study also discussed the pedagogical implications of using oxymorons to enhance communication, persuasiveness, and creativity in educational settings. In a relevant situation, Qassim and Khudhair (2022) analyzed 100 pairs of oxymorons, identifying their grammatical forms, and semantic and pragmatic functions. The study concluded that such a combination of an adjective-noun pair is commonplace in sarcastic, dramatic, and humorous expressions. In the context of literature, Hussein (2020), drawing on Alfred Tennyson's "Lancelot and Elaine", examined oxymorons semantically in poetry to showcase how such linguistic rhetorical devices are used for implied meaning. The study discussed how this device, besides other figures of speech, enabled Alfred Tennyson to relay the poem's dramatic atmosphere.

In these studies, oxymorons were mostly interpreted interchangeably with paradoxes. There needs to be more clarity in defining and interpreting both terms. The present endeavor intends to fill this gap by singling out oxymorons from paradoxes, elucidating how being able to use such figurative speech devices correlates to learners' performance in literature, with an emphasis on oxymorons, being the thrust of the current investigation.

Method

This study centers on oxymorons and the relationship between learners' familiarity with such an aspect of figurative language and their achievement in literature adopting a mixed-method research design—a combination of both qualitative and quantitative approaches inspired by Dörnyei (2007) and Rose et al. (2020). This combination is rationalized by the fact that a mono-method is insufficient for investigating a topic thoroughly or as Dörnyei (2007) contends, a mixed-method approach minimizes "the inherent weaknesses of individual methods by offsetting them by the strength of another" (p. 43). The correlational design in this study was followed by an elaboration on a phenomenon through a focus group discussion, which was inspired by Dörnyei (2007), who conceived such a research design as an investigation in which numbers proffer precision and words reinforce the numeric data, and thereby maximize both the internal and external validity of research" (2007, p. 44). Following Dörnyei (2007) and Rose et al.'s (2020) methodological guidelines for such a mixed-method approach, this study applied complementary designs in sequence, beginning with quantitative data collected through an oxymoron test and academic record analysis, followed by qualitative data from a focus group discussion.

Participants

Fifty male and female undergraduates, aged between 19 and 22, socio-linguistically homogeneous, were conveniently sampled. During the study, they were pursuing a license degree in English language and literature at the Faculty of Arts, PU. For the present study, their scores in seven literature courses were considered as a whole set, representing their overall performance in literature measured by formal achievement tests. In addition to this cohort of learners, five faculty members serving in the same department were recruited for a moderated group discussion. They were assistants, associates, and full professors. Three

of them were in charge of teaching courses in literature and two taught courses in linguistics to the target sample of learners.

Data Collection

Two types of data were collected. In the first place, quantitative data were collected through an oxymoron test and academic record analysis. The oxymoron test was designed to assess the participants' knowledge of oxymorons. The test consisted of two parts. The first part included 14 sentences in which oxymorons were used along with instances of paradox. The sentences were a combination of common expressions and famous quotations by well-known writers such as Oscar Wilde, John Donne, and George Orwell. The participants were asked to set apart all the oxymorons from paradoxes in each sentence. The second part was a list of 10 oxymorons to be used in sentences the participants came up with in literary context. After the oxymoron test, the academic records of the participants were analyzed. Each participant's scores in a series of seven literature courses were obtained. The courses were documented in the syllabi of the Department of English Language and Literature at PU during the academic year 2022–2023. These courses are *Introduction to Literature and Language Learning through Literature*, *Poetry*, *Novel*, *Drama*, *Literary Text Analysis*, and *American Literature*. Based on the syllabi, this series of literature courses intends to cultivate their literary repertoire.

On the other hand, the qualitative data were elicited from a selected focus group discussion to substantiate the correlational data. Because faculty members are important in the learning process, their experiences were invested in enriching the investigation. Guided by Rose et al. (2020), a two-hour discussion was assembled to delineate information on oxymorons from the faculty's perspectives. The group of five members was formed from the teaching staff working for PU while conducting the study. They were selected based on accessibility and voluntary action.

Procedures and Data Analysis

As in any scientific research, reviewing the existing literature is the first step to establishing the theoretical background. On this basis, the relevant literature was reviewed to set up the scope, objectives, and questions, and formulate the hypotheses of the study. An oxymoron test was prepared and validated by four inter-raters who suggested some instances of oxymorons that had not been present in the first draft and agreed on the scores assigned to each part of the test. The raters were also involved in the scoring process. A list of scores on the test was approved for analysis against the participants' scores in the seven literature courses. The two datasets of scores were fed into the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) for descriptive (mean and standard deviations) and inferential analysis (Pearson correlation).

The faculty's voices were also considered to reinforce the numeric data. A note-based analysis was used for the debriefing session, following Wilkinson's (2004) qualitative analysis techniques of focus groups along with the framework of Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009). Based on these two, the group was adopted as a unit of analysis. Only the statements of overt consensus among the participants were incorporated into the analysis. During the discussion, one of the researchers was a moderator and the other was a note-taker. The session was also audiotaped on the participants' informed consent, to verify quotations of interest and glean central information in due course in the analysis. The faculty's real names were anonymised for research ethical considerations. In the Results section, they are simply referred to as faculty members or participants, and their voices were incorporated into the analysis as verbatim statements and summary points and comments.

Results

The inquiry determines the extent to which English literature students are familiar with oxymorons and pinpoints whether a correlation exists between their knowledge of oxymorons and their achievement in literature courses. The oxymoron test shed light on learners' familiarity with oxymorons. The achievement in literature courses was obtained from the department by analyzing their academic records. The results are arranged in three strands: the first relates to the participants' familiarity with oxymorons, the second to correlational findings, and the third to faculty's perceptions about such correlation. The first was measured descriptively, the second inferentially, and the third perceptually.

RQ1: To what extent are students of literature cognizant of oxymorons?

This question probed into the participants' cognizance of oxymorons as measured by the oxymoron test, giving insights into their abilities to use oxymorons. The answers were analyzed descriptively. The frequencies of correct and incorrect answers were tabulated to recognize the whole set of answers precisely. The overall results of the test are outlined in Table 1. The data in the table shows that the score ranged from 11 to 97 (out of 100). Taking the two parts of the test, the mean score of their overall performance is 51.16, a notably low mark, indicating that the level of the participants' general knowledge of oxymorons is below expectations. That is, most participants were not very much cognizant of oxymorons.

Table 1. Participants' Mean Scores in the Oxymoron Text

		Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Oxymoron Test	0	11	97	51.16	20.824
Valid N (listwise)	0				

RQ2: Is there a statistically significant correlation between learners' familiarity with oxymorons and academic achievements in literature courses in the License program in the Department of English Language and Literature at Philadelphia University (PU), Jordan?

The second question measured the correlation between the two variables in question: (a) the participants' performance on the oxymoron test, and (b) their achievement in literature courses. It demonstrates the magnitude and vector of the correlation by using inferential statistics. For this correlational analysis, the Pearson correlation coefficient $-1 \leq r \leq +1$ operated on two statistical hypotheses.

H_0 = there is no statistically significant correlation between students' performance in literature courses in the course syllabi at the Faculty of Arts, PU and abilities in using oxymorons.

H_1 = There is a statistically significant correlation between students' performance in literature courses in the course syllabi at the Faculty of Arts, PU and abilities in using oxymorons.

The correlation operates on two numeric variables. The first variable encompassed learners' achievement in literature courses—measured by calculating their scores in those courses of study (elicited from learners' academic record analysis). The second constituted

the performance on oxymoron text, measured by the oxymoron test scores. The correlational values are presented in Table 2. As displayed in the table, a small positive correlation between the two variables exists. However, it is to be noted that relying on students' scores on the oxymoron and achievement tests, the correlation is relatively weak. The Pearson correlation coefficient was .251 and *Sig.*=0.079 at $\alpha=0.01$. That is, H_1 is retained. Although this correlation value falls within the positive category of correlations, it is, according to Lehman et al. (2013), not substantial evidence to confirm a strong correlation between students' performance in literature courses and their knowledge of oxymorons. In other words, the correlational value at hand does not support a postulation that high familiarity with oxymorons results in better achievement in literature. That is, those who scored high on the test did not necessarily have a high literature profile.

Table 2. T-Test Results of Pearson Correlation Between Oxymorons Test Related to Overall Achievements in Literature Courses

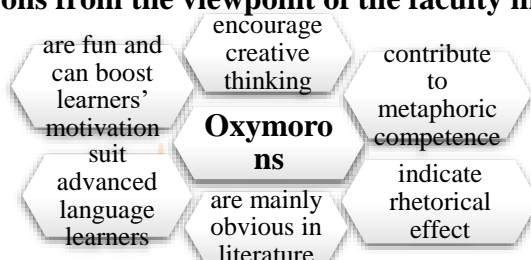
	Oxymorons	Achievement in literature
Oxymorons	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.079
	N	50
Achievement in literature courses	Pearson Correlation	.251
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.079
	N	50

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

RQ3: How do faculty members perceive the relationship between students' familiarity with oxymorons and repertoire in literature?

The third research question solicited qualitative data from the focus group discussion. Although it is not possible to obtain a linear correlation from the qualitative data that surfaced from the discussion with the faculty members, it makes sense to argue that the faculty members' insightful ideas add depth to the statistical results of the first and second research questions. The following oxymoron-related points were extracted from the discussion to illustrate the relationship between students' familiarity with oxymorons and repertoire in literature from the viewpoint of their instructors. These points were of overt consensus among the participants and they generally reflect the group's views as one unit. To begin with, the group members had a consensus that using figurative speech in learning literature is a good chance to stimulate students' imagination, artistry, and creativity—these elements characterize the genre of language used in literature. Oxymorons as with other figurative devices are used for such artistic language. The faculty members had a common-sense approach to oxymorons, defined as part of a larger set of linguistic devices invested for rhetorical effects, as with similes, and metaphors that leave gaps for our imagination to fill.

Figure 1. Oxymorons from the viewpoint of the faculty members



Within the focus group, there is a shared belief that when learners use literary language rich in figurative expressions, they develop a more nuanced understanding of the language as it reflects their deep appreciation and enjoyment of literature. A faculty member who lectures in American Literature to the students in this study opined that the literary language, by its very nature, intentionally employs these linguistic devices as a medium for conveying feelings, emotions, and other human experiences that plain language cannot convey. Another lecturer highlighted that using language metaphorically gives way to imagining how apparently unrelated and contradictory things match and what brings them together. An instance of their responses is, “Learners who master such figurative devices likely excel in using oxymorons, thereby enhancing their metaphoric competence which is part and parcel of literary appreciation.” Another member said, “I appreciate students’ assignments that include such linguistic devices because that shows their rich and wide not only linguistic repertoire but also sense of literary taste.”

It is safe to say that the faculty members are aware of the significant role that oxymorons play in enhancing learners’ linguistic and literary repertoire. Based on the discussion, oxymorons derive their importance from the significance of figurative speech. In the discussion, lecturers also pointed out that oxymorons mainly appear in literary language or language where rhetorical effects abound. That is, not everyone understands figurative speech and only a few instances of oxymorons appear in daily communication. One of the participants noted that oxymorons often confuse students as they swap them with paradoxes, and, hence, they should be taught how to differentiate between the two figurative devices. While they believe in the positive impact of oxymorons on students’ use of literacy language, the faculty also recognizes the need for explicit teaching of such linguistic devices and including them in the syllabi, just as other devices—metaphor and idiomatic expressions.

Discussion

The study pored over figurative speech and the rhetorical effects that language users invest in literature and everyday communicational discourse. This part is dedicated to discussing the results outlined in the previous section. The results of the first research question about learners’ familiarity with oxymorons suggest that the low level of familiarity with oxymorons, under the current examination (Table 1), could be attributed to confusing oxymorons with paradoxes or a lack of knowledge of this type of figurative language. By definition, paradoxes are oppositions of ideas or themes that appear both true and false simultaneously, implying a deeper truth and logic, whereas oxymorons are contradictions between two words that cancel each other out for rhetorical effect (Abbood, 2023; Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020; Flayih, 2009; Qassim & Khudhair, 2022). According to the focus group, learners in the context of this study tend to swap oxymorons with paradoxes. This is not at odds with learners in other contexts where oxymorons were reported to be used interchangeably with paradoxes (Al-Mawla & Falih, 2020; Flayih, 2009).

In terms of correlation, the results of the second research question demonstrate a positive correlation between oxymorons and achievement in literature (Table 2), but this correlation is weak and cannot be used to generalize the correlational findings. That is, the transference of expertise in oxymorons to performance in literature courses is not strongly supported. More importantly, correlation, in principle, is not necessarily a cause-effect relationship. In the present investigation, the correlational findings could be indicative of the significance of oxymorons being part of a broader context of literary language enhancement. In other words, numeric data did not support a strong correlation between oxymorons and

achievement in the context of the present study. This is chiefly because the correlational research design does not yield conclusive findings and correlations do not necessarily identify a cause-effect relation because other variables are expected to have a causal relationship between the inter-correlated variables (Dörnyei, 2007; Rose et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the qualitative data solicited from the focus group discussion supports the indicative results.

The attitudinal data from the focus group discussion confirmed that oxymorons, tied to other figurative speech devices, help language learners perform better in literature courses, and this is not because oxymorons are used in isolation for scaffolding expertise in literature but because such linguistic devices enhance learners' metaphoric competence which ultimately boosts learners' imagination and thinking. The faculty members, who taught the learners in question literature courses, stated that they noticed that the students with a good command of figurative language generally achieved better results in the courses they taught. This may suggest that such figurative devices expand the literary repertoire of the learners. These remain attitudinal findings and need to be strengthened. Despite the faculty members' assertion of the significance of oxymorons and their connection to learners' performance in literature, it is hard to argue that the more oxymorons the students use appropriately, the better their achievement in literature classes will be. That is to say, the evidence of association is not statistically strong, though, it is intuited.

By and large, the results echo those obtained in previous studies. For instance, Danesi (1993), Hoang (2014), Littlemore (2010), Littlemore and Low (2006), and Liu and Hsieh (2020) indicated that oxymorons, as a figurative device, challenge students to appreciate the complexity of language and think critically. In the present study, the faculty supports using linguistic devices, including oxymorons, to enhance learners' literacy competence. Such figurative language often requires a higher level of engagement, interpretation, and emotional connection, which are all signs of a strong appreciation for literary works (Liu & Hsieh, 2020; Zhang, 2021). Arguably, accumulative knowledge of these aspects of figurative language, in the long run, contributes to understanding non-literal expressions of language and metaphorical competence (Hoang, 2014; Kövecses, 2017; Vicente, 2020). In the literature, it has been widely accepted that learners' figurative language is a good indicator of their appreciation of literature, a viewpoint endorsed in Al-Mawla and Falih (2020), Littlemore and Low (2006), and Qassim and Khudhair (2022).

While the faculty generally believe in oxymorons as an indication of vivid literary language, there is a missing point that should be brought to the foreground—using oxymorons could be an indicator of effective communicative skills. Such an aspect is relevant not only to literature but also to writing skills and daily English. Hameed (2020) and Qassim and Khudhair (2022) surmised that oxymorons in everyday conversation show wit or draw the target audience's attention. Oxymorons are not solely confined to literary works; they are also widely used in other contexts to evoke specific emotions, provoke thought, engage the audience and create emphasis. For example, in the context of politics, Abbood (2023) illustrated how politicians use such linguistic devices to create a dramatic impact on their residences. One of the faculty members recalled, in the discussion, that two of his students are witty and usually tend to use metaphoric language, including oxymorons, when they participate in classroom discussion. This indicates that metaphoric language partly shapes learners' abilities to use ingenious language.

Conclusion

The study advanced towards understanding the differences between oxymorons and paradoxes and the extent to which learners of English literature integrate such rhetorical devices into their English. It explored the relationship between learners' familiarity with oxymorons and achievement in literature courses at university. Although correlation does not imply causation, the investigation assessed the association between the two variables in focus, showing a positive but weak correlation. Faculty members viewed using such linguistic devices as a positive sign of learners' valuing and enjoying literature. There is a tacit agreement among the faculty that the use of oxymorons, like other forms of figurative speech, must be encouraged in learners' performance in literature courses, as such linguistic devices introduce students to literary language and style, rhetoric effects, imagination and thinking skills. Taken as a whole, the descriptive, inferential, and perceptual findings, along with findings from previous studies on figurative speech devices, encourage bringing oxymorons explicitly into the language curriculum—as with other linguistic figures such as similes, metaphors, and metonymy, which are meant to reveal inner thoughts that are hard to convey otherwise. Nurturing students' abilities in using figurative speech, including oxymorons, develops a repertoire of figurative speech which would enrich their metaphoric capacity and literary appreciation in the long run.

Implications

The study has some pedagogical implications for language learners, pedagogues, and researchers. It helps learners to set apart oxymorons from paradoxes and use both forms of figurative language that ultimately contribute to rhetorical effects. Despite their differences, both paradoxes and oxymorons help students pursuing advanced English programs to have depth in their writing and metaphoric meanings conveyed. Such linguistic patterns are particularly useful for learners to leverage their repertoire in literature. The study is also insightful for language educators to incorporate oxymorons in their teaching to improve their learners' rhetorical skills and to learn how to employ oxymorons in engaging audiences more effectively. Researchers interested in figurative speech and metaphoric capacity in the syllabi of second language learning are invited to shed more light on oxymorons along with other linguistic devices that shape learners' rhetoric language expertise in other contexts.

Limitations and Future Research

The current investigation suffered shortcomings that could be encountered in future research projects. One of the reasons is that the sample size posed a population gap that could be covered in future research that intends to replicate or generalize the findings. Another limitation stems from the correlational research design. As pointed out earlier, a correlational research design, by its very nature, provides a tentative rather than conclusive explanation of the phenomenon. The correlation cannot be interpreted as causation. A better achievement in literature does not necessarily stem from familiarity with oxymorons per se. An association between the two variables (oxymorons and achievement in literature) might be influenced by a third variable (e.g., motivation, awareness of the literary language, and some other factors which can be explored in future research projects. Above all, oxymorons are an integral part of figurative language, and the interplay between oxymorons and any other literary figurative speech goes hand in hand. It is challenging to dissect oxymorons from the students' linguistic repertoire. Even within the seven literature courses, there may be variances in the usage of oxymorons—they may be more evident in drama and poetry than in any other genres of literature. Other findings may be derived from correlating oxymorons with literature from individual courses. As an aside, using a different methodology that may

echo the present investigation, future research may also determine if oxymorons impact creative writing and communicative competence.

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