



## INTERPRETING MEANING IN *LIAR AND SPY* THROUGH THE LENS OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of figurative language as a form of meaning transference in *Liar and Spy* by Rebecca Stead and explores its implications for English Language Teaching (ELT). Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research identifies and interprets figurative expressions found in narrative passages and dialogues. Selected excerpts containing non-literal meanings were categorized into four types: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and simile. Through close textual analysis, each expression was examined in relation to its thematic function and contribution to meaning construction. The findings indicate that figurative language significantly reinforces five central themes: school life, family relationships, friendship, bullying, and overcoming fear. These devices transform abstract emotions into vivid imagery, enhancing readers' emotional engagement and interpretive understanding. From a pedagogical perspective, the novel demonstrates strong potential as a literary resource in ELT classrooms. Its rich figurative expressions provide opportunities to develop students' interpretive skills, linguistic awareness, and emotional literacy through guided discussion and reflection. Overall, the study highlights the value of integrating literary analysis into language learning to promote both communicative competence and personal growth.

**Keywords:** *Figurative language, meaning transference, young adult literature, English Language Teaching.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Language extends far beyond its instrumental function as a medium of communication; it operates as a dynamic system through which individuals articulate cognition, emotion, and culturally embedded meanings (Al-Bahadli et al., 2023; Ardiyansah & Auliya, 2023; Al Awlaqi & Ghozali, 2023). Within literary discourse, language acquires an aesthetic and symbolic dimension, enabling authors to convey nuances that transcend literal expression (Dash, 2022; Sulistyowati, 2023; Parhadjanovna, 2023). One prominent manifestation of this phenomenon is the transference of

meaning a form of semantic deviation in which lexical items shift from denotative reference to figurative or symbolic significance. Such deviation enriches narrative texture and invites readers to engage in interpretive and affective participation (Arisman & Haryanti, 2019; Abbot, 2020; Listyani, 2019).

Figurative strategies including metaphor, simile, metonymy, and synecdoche function as cognitive bridges that render abstract ideas experientially accessible. Particularly in children's and young adult literature, these devices mediate between linguistic simplicity and thematic complexity, addressing profound human concerns

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such as friendship, family, fear, and self-discovery while remaining developmentally appropriate (Sujarwo et al., 2023; Petropoulou et al., 2024; Meisani & Purnawarman, 2019). Engagement with figurative language not only refines interpretive competence but also cultivates empathy, critical reflection, and imaginative reasoning. As PISA (2021) suggests, readers become active constructors of meaning rather than passive recipients. This perspective resonates with constructivist pedagogy, which positions learning as an interactive process shaped by dialogue and personal interpretation (Tomlinson, 2021; Pratt, 2020).

In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), literature assumes a pedagogical function that extends beyond linguistic exposure. Texts rich in figurative expression stimulate collaborative inquiry, creative response, and communicative practice (Arroba & Acosta, 2021; Tran et al., 2024; Saptiany & Prabowo, 2024). Reader-response theory further underscores the value of personal engagement, suggesting that meaningful connections with characters and events enhance motivation and interpretive depth (Wiwin et al., 2022; Fitria, 2024; Fadilah et al., 2023). Moreover, emotionally resonant narratives can reduce learners' anxiety, aligning with Smith, Mason and Krashen (2021) affective filter hypothesis and fostering a supportive learning environment.

Rebecca Stead's *Liar and Spy* (2012) exemplifies these qualities. Through the perspective of its young protagonist, the novel explores school life, family relationships, friendship, bullying, and personal maturation.

Figurative language animates these experiences, transforming them into vivid emotional realities (Sulystio, 2024; Sapari, 2024; Adika & Budiarsana, 2023). A stylistic analysis conducted by Ardiyani and Puspitaloka (2025) identified extensive use of synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, and simile to foreground central themes, demonstrating how such devices deepen reader engagement and thematic comprehension.

Building upon Romala's work, the present study investigates how the figurative dimensions of *Liar and Spy* may inform pedagogical practice, particularly in EFL contexts. It examines the types of figurative language employed, their thematic implications, and their potential application in enhancing learners' comprehension, critical inquiry, and emotional responsiveness. Ultimately, this research positions literary analysis as a conduit through which language instruction intersects with personal insight and social understanding, enabling learners to connect linguistic form with lived human experience.

**2. METHODS**

A qualitative descriptive design was employed to examine figurative language in its natural context (Neuman, 2019; Tisdell et al., 2025; Patton, 2020). This approach enabled the researcher to explore language phenomena in depth without manipulating any variables, producing descriptive insights in the form of textual data rather than numerical outcomes. The primary focus was on identifying transference of meaning in Rebecca Stead's *Liar and Spy* (2012, Yearling edition). Narrative passages and character dialogues that

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contained figurative expressions were carefully identified, providing rich evidence of how meaning is constructed and conveyed in the text. In line with qualitative research principles, the researcher acted as the main instrument, selecting, interpreting, and coding relevant data (Moleong, 2016). To ensure systematic analysis, a data sheet was used to record each instance of figurative language, including its type synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, or simile page number, line, and thematic relevance. This process promoted transparency, traceability, and reliability throughout the study.

Data collection involved repeated reading of the novel, which allowed the researcher to become intimately familiar with the text and its linguistic subtleties. Candidate segments were highlighted and categorized based on the type of figurative language they represented. To support validity, the researcher cross-checked findings with relevant literature on figurative language and transference of meaning (Susanto et al., 2023) and considered prior analyses. This triangulation process ensured that the identification and interpretation of figurative expressions were grounded in established theoretical frameworks while remaining sensitive to the novel's narrative context.

For data analysis, textual analysis and qualitative content analysis were employed (Susanto et al., 2023). Each figurative expression was examined to determine how it contributed to the development of central themes such as school life, family relationships, friendship, bullying, and overcoming fear. The analysis also considered pedagogical implications for English Language Teaching, exploring how figurative language could be utilized to enhance students' interpretative skills, linguistic awareness, and socio-

emotional engagement. By combining systematic coding with reflective interpretation, the study provided both descriptive and analytical insights into the ways that language in *Liar and Spy* shaped meaning and thematic understanding.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis revealed that four types of figurative language: synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, and simile were consistently employed throughout *Liar and Spy* to highlight five major themes: school life, family relationships, friendship, bullying, and overcoming fear (Leech, 2016). These results confirmed previous observations by Adika and Budiarsana (2023), while extending their pedagogical relevance by demonstrating how figurative language can actively support comprehension and emotional engagement in young readers.

In exploring school life, figurative language frequently emphasized not only the physical environment but also the social interactions and emotional experiences of students. Synecdoche drew attention to salient objects and actions, such as when a volleyball net represented the entire gymnasium, highlighting the centrality of shared spaces in students' everyday routines. Similes further clarified the atmosphere; for example, the description of an old school as smelling "*like a hundred years of lunch*" created a vivid, sensory image that made the setting more tangible and memorable. These expressions allowed readers to experience the school environment in both literal and metaphorical terms, bridging the gap between observation and personal interpretation.

Family relationships were predominantly portrayed through

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metaphor and metonymy, providing insight into the intensity and subtlety of interpersonal dynamics. Metaphors, such as “*my heart is going a mile a minute*”, conveyed emotional immediacy, illustrating moments of tension, excitement, or worry within familial interactions. Similarly, metonymic references, like “*three seconds of Beethoven*” to represent a piece of music, grounded abstract experiences in culturally recognizable contexts. These linguistic devices facilitated emotional engagement, enabling readers to connect personally with the characters’ experiences, which corroborated Delaney (2021) findings regarding family representation in the novel.

The theme of friendship was illuminated using multiple figurative devices. Similes and metaphors clarified nuances in relationships, as in descriptions of actions performed smoothly “as silk” (Stead, 2012), conveying ease, trust, and fluidity in social interactions. Synecdoche captured immediacy and attention to detail, such as focusing on a character’s nose to represent the face during tense moments (Stead, 2012), emphasizing subtle emotional reactions. These figurative expressions enhanced readers’ understanding of relational dynamics, confirming and extending observations that the novel’s language actively supports interpretation of social bonds (Sapari, 2024).

Bullying and social tension were also communicated effectively through figurative language. Synecdoche highlighted specific acts, for example, wrapping hands around an ankle to depict a struggle (Stead, 2012), while metaphors externalized internal states of fear and anxiety, allowing readers to empathize with characters’ psychological experiences. Figurative devices translated abstract emotions into

concrete, understandable imagery, thereby deepening thematic understanding and supporting critical reflection on social interactions.

The theme of overcoming fear was particularly reinforced through metaphors and similes. Descriptions such as thoughts “swimming around in the brain” (Stead, 2012) captured the process of confronting and managing internal anxieties. Such figurative depictions not only conveyed emotional growth but also offered opportunities for discussion and reflection in educational settings. They allowed students to engage with characters’ psychological development, encouraging both emotional literacy and critical thinking.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings demonstrated several implications for ELT. The use of figurative language in *Liar and Spy* supported constructivist learning, encouraging students to actively interpret meaning and make connections between text and personal experience (Williyan et al., 2025). Social constructivist approaches benefited from collaborative discussions of figurative expressions, promoting shared understanding and co-construction of knowledge (Bahufite et al., 2023). From a reader-response perspective, learners were able to relate personal experiences to characters’ narratives, enhancing motivation, empathy, and interpretive skills (Dash, 2022). Critical pedagogy perspectives were also supported, as figurative language invited reflection on social issues such as bullying, trust, and socio-economic differences (Davids & Rinquest, 2024; Jaya et al., 2025). Additionally, repeated exposure to figurative expressions helped reduce affective filters, activated schema, and supported the development of multiple intelligences, including linguistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills.

**4. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrated that *Liar and Spy* by Rebecca Stead makes extensive and purposeful use of figurative language specifically synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, and simile to convey complex and layered meanings. These stylistic devices function as interpretive tools that illuminate central themes such as school life, family relationships, friendship, bullying, and the process of confronting fear. Through figurative expression, abstract emotions and internal conflicts are transformed into vivid and relatable imagery, enabling readers to grasp both the narrative progression and its deeper psychological dimensions. The findings further reinforce the importance of examining figurative language as a means of strengthening linguistic awareness, empathy, and analytical thinking in English language learning contexts.

Furthermore, the study highlights the pedagogical value of integrating literary texts into classroom practice. Engagement with figurative language fosters cognitive depth, emotional engagement, and social reflection, effectively bridging language acquisition with personal growth. By incorporating novels such as *Liar and Spy* into instructional settings, educators can encourage students to connect textual interpretation with real-life experiences while simultaneously developing socio-emotional competence. In this sense, literature serves not only as a medium for language development but also as a powerful instrument for holistic and reflective learning.

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