

IDEOLOGICAL DIFFICULTY AND PEDAGOGICAL RESPONSE TO GENDERED PROVERBS IN EFL TEACHING

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Abstract

This study examines how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers interpret English proverbs and consider their use in the classroom, with particular attention to perceived difficulty with figurative language. Drawing on a qualitative dataset of 216 questionnaire responses (12 teachers × 18 proverbs), the study analyses patterns in teachers' interpretive and instructional reasoning.

The findings show that teachers were generally able to interpret the meanings of proverbs, but frequently evaluated them as problematic, particularly when they were perceived as sexist or culturally inappropriate. This indicates that difficulty is not limited to challenges of interpretation but may arise when interpreted meanings produce tension in relation to classroom use.

Based on these results, the study advances a conceptual framework in which difficulty arises through the interaction of interpretation and evaluation and gains significance when evaluation triggers constraints on pedagogical action. These constraints shape instructional responses, including critical reframing, contextualisation, and, in some cases, avoidance.

The present research contributes to current exploration of figurative language and language pedagogy, showing that understanding does not necessarily resolve difficulty, but may instead produce evaluative tensions that influence how, or whether, language is used in teaching.

Keywords: EFL teachers; Figurative language; Gendered proverbs; Ideological difficulty; Pedagogical constraints; Teacher cognition.

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1 Introduction

Proverbs are a distinctive domain of figurative language in which linguistic form, cultural knowledge, and social evaluation overlap. As formulaic expressions, they encapsulate culturally sedimented meanings while relying on metaphorical and often non-transparent linguistic structures, making them a challenging resource in English

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as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Figurative language – including idioms, collocations and proverbs – has long been recognised as central to communicative competence, yet also as an enduring source of difficulty, due to factors such as metaphorical opacity, lexical unfamiliarity, and limited exposure (e.g., Gibbs, 1994; Boers, 2000; Littlemore, 2009). Along these lines, difficulty has been predominantly understood in cognitive-linguistic terms, as a function of processing constraints and access to underlying conceptual mappings.

Among tropes, proverbs frequently encode culturally embedded norms and value systems, including gendered representations and historically situated assumptions about social roles (Schipper, 2004; Litovkina, 2019). In such cases, understanding a proverb linguistically does not necessarily resolve the challenges it poses, indicating that aspects of difficulty which relate solely to comprehension capture only part of the phenomenon.

Existing accounts of figurative language difficulty have largely treated difficulty as a matter of semantic processing and generally assumed that it is resolved through successful interpretation of meaning (Gibbs, 1994; Littlemore, 2009). The findings presented here show that this assumption is insufficient: difficulty may persist even after comprehension.

The interpretation of figurative expressions can give rise to evaluative tension when the decoded meanings are in disagreement with socially or culturally embedded values. In such cases, difficulty arises not from a failure of understanding but from the need to position oneself in relation to meaning. Thus, in such cases, evaluation introduces a constraint on pedagogical action, drawing on work in evaluation and stance (Martin & White, 2005) and critical approaches to language and ideology (Pennycook, 2001), while applying these perspectives to figurative language in teaching contexts.

To further analyse the phenomenon, this study brings forth a process model in which difficulty emerges through the interaction of interpretation and evaluation, especially when evaluation determines certain teaching decisions. Thus, difficulty is treated not simply as a property of linguistic items or a problem solved by comprehension, but as a relational and context-dependent situation that ramifies into the domain of use.

In teaching contexts, this tension is not only interpreted but also managed. Drawing on research on teacher cognition (Borg, 2003, 2006; Johnston, 2003), teachers are considered active interpreters and evaluators of language, whose instructional practices are shaped not only by linguistic concerns but also by contextual, ethical, and pedagogical considerations. In the case of proverbs, this mediating role becomes especially complex, as teachers must reconcile tensions between linguistic objectives, learner needs, and the potential risks associated with reproducing or challenging socially embedded meanings. Instructional decision-making is therefore central, referring to how teachers interpret, frame, contextualise, transform, or avoid figurative expressions in response to evaluative stances.

Against this background, the article examines how teachers respond to gendered proverbs, focusing on how evaluative judgements shape classroom engagement with figurative language.

Empirically, the research adopts a qualitative exploratory design to investigate how EFL teachers interpret, evaluate and act on a set of gendered English proverbs. Drawing on a dataset of 216 questionnaire responses (12 teachers $\times$ 18 proverbs), it analyses how difficulty takes shape across interpretation and evaluation in teacher discourse and how these constructions inform classroom decision-making.

The following research questions guide the study:

RQ1: How do teachers construct difficulty in their interpretation of proverbs, and how does this relate to processes of interpretation and evaluation?

RQ2: How do teachers evaluate gendered proverbs, and how do these evaluations shape their engagement with meaning?

RQ3: How do teachers respond pedagogically to proverbs that generate evaluative constraints, and what strategies do they employ?

RQ4: How does the interaction between interpretation and evaluation shape teachers' pedagogical decision-making?

2 Conceptual Framework

2.1 Linguistic accounts of figurative language difficulty

Figurative language, including idioms, collocations, metaphors and proverbs, has long been recognised as a central component of communicative competence and fluent language use (Pawley & Syder, 1983; Wray, 2002; Schmitt, 2004), while also representing a salient source of difficulty for second and foreign language learners. Figurative language difficulty has been explained through two related but distinct traditions: conceptual accounts of metaphor and meaning construction (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010, 2015), and psycholinguistic accounts of idiom processing, salience, categorisation and inferential interpretations (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Gibbs, 1994; Glucksberg, 2001; Giora, 2003).

Empirical research has shown that the comprehension of figurative language is shaped by familiarity, transparency, decomposability and frequency of exposure (Cieslicka, 2006), as well as by the representation and organisation of idiomatic meaning in the mental lexicon (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Nippold & Taylor, 1995; Abel, 2003). In second language contexts, these challenges are further increased by limited phraseological competence and restricted access to culturally specific knowledge, often leading learners to rely on literal interpretation strategies (Cooper, 1999; Boers, 2000; Lontas, 2002; Littlemore & Low, 2006; Littlemore, 2009). In this paradigm, difficulty is understood as a function of processing constraints and knowledge gaps (Nation, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008).

Proverbs illustrate these challenges. As formulaic expressions, they are stored and retrieved as prefabricated units, yet their semantic opacity, archaic lexical

items, cultural specificity, and phraseological density often render them difficult for non-native speakers (Sinclair, 1991; Moon, 1998; Howarth, 1998; Wray, 2002; Granger & Meunier, 2008). Their interpretation also depends on inferential reasoning, contextual knowledge, and familiarity with proverbial discourse (Honeck, 1997; Norrick, 1985, 2014; Mieder, 2004).

However, these models conceptualise difficulty primarily as a problem of comprehension and are therefore limited in accounting for difficulty arising from values encoded in language. This limitation is particularly prominent in proverbs, which are embedded in broader cultural systems through which social meanings and values are produced and negotiated (Eco, 1976; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Given the perspective of the current study, this line of research foregrounds interpretation as the process through which meaning is constructed.

2.2 Language ideology and evaluative meaning

Parallel to cognitive approaches, research in critical applied linguistics and discourse studies has emphasised that language is not a neutral medium of communication, but a site of value-laden meaning-making (Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Pennycook, 2001). Linguistic forms are embedded in social practices and power relations, and discourse both reflects and reproduces culturally shared norms and ideologies (Halliday, 1978; Talbot, 2010). Proverbs, as culturally sedimented expressions, function as carriers of socially shared values, beliefs, and normative expectations (Dundes, 1981; Norrick, 1985; Kramsch, 1998; Risager, 2007; Lomotey & Chachu, 2020; Dzahene-Quarshie & Omari, 2021). Within linguistic anthropology, language ideologies are conceptualised as shared beliefs about language linked to broader systems of social identity and cultural meaning (Kroskrity, 2000, 2004).

Within intercultural research, proverbs are treated as resources through which culturally embedded worldviews are interpreted and negotiated (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Risager, 2007). Proverbs frequently encode bias and assumptions, particularly in relation to gender, morality, domesticity, and social hierarchy (Romaine, 1999; Schipper, 2004; Litovkina & Mieder, 2006; Litovkina, 2019). These patterns often place women in more restricted social roles than men (Holmes, 1995; Romaine, 1999; Schipper, 2004; Talbot, 2010; Popescu, 2025), suggesting that proverbs may actively reinforce culturally established assumptions about gender, social norms and power relations.

The socially-embedded dimension of language is inherently evaluative. Research on evaluation and stance has shown that language users do not merely interpret meanings but position themselves in relation to them by expressing attitudes, negotiating alignment, and managing interpersonal meanings (Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Martin & White, 2005), often involving affective responses such as discomfort or resistance (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014). From this perspective, interpretation is closely tied to evaluation, since understanding an expression may also involve taking a position toward its social or interpersonal implications.

However, while evaluation is recognised as integral to meaning making, its role in shaping difficulty remains under-theorised. Existing accounts typically treat evaluative positioning as an outcome of interpretation rather than as a potential source of difficulty in its own right. This leaves unexplained cases in which expressions are successfully understood at a semantic level but nonetheless generate tension for users, particularly when their meanings conflict with social expectations or classroom norms.

In this study, the key construct is constraint on classroom use, defined as cases in which evaluation of meaning limits or shapes how a figurative expression can be used in teaching. Essentially, not all evaluative responses constitute difficulty, but only those that introduce such constraints, creating a need for negotiation, resolution, or strategic response. In this sense, difficulty emerges not from evaluation alone, but from the relationship between interpretation and evaluation.

2.3 Teacher cognition and classroom decisions

The divide between cognitive and normative perspectives becomes particularly evident in classroom settings, where teachers mediate how language is presented and explained. Research on teacher cognition has demonstrated that teachers' instructional practices are shaped by complex systems of beliefs, knowledge, and contextual judgement (Borg, 2003, 2006). Teachers interpret, evaluate, and adapt content in response to learners' needs and sociocultural considerations.

Within communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching, emphasis has long been placed on meaningful interaction, learner participation, and the negotiation of meaning (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981; Long, 1996; Ellis, 2003). Intercultural and critical approaches further emphasise engagement with issues of culture, identity, and power (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998; Liddicoat & Scarino, 2013; Norton, 2013; Crookes, 2013; Kumaravadivelu, 2006). From this perspective, teaching is understood as a process of mediation in which teachers guide learners in interpreting and evaluating language within its broader social and cultural context.

In the context of culturally sensitive or socially problematic material, this mediating role becomes especially significant. Teachers may explain, contextualise, critically reframe, discuss, transform, or avoid particular language items depending on their perceived appropriateness and classroom value. These decisions involve evaluative judgements about what should be taught and how it should be framed. However, existing research has not systematically examined how evaluation, particularly when it introduces constraints, shapes teaching decisions in relation to figurative language. As a result, the role of evaluative constraints in shaping instructional choices remains underexplained.

2.4 Bridging the gap

These strands of research reveal a conceptual gap. Cognitive-linguistic approaches provide detailed accounts of how figurative meaning is processed, but envisage difficulty primarily as a problem of comprehension (e.g. Gibbs, 1994; Littlemore, 2009). In contrast, critical and discourse-oriented approaches highlight the culturally sensitive and evaluative dimensions of language (e.g. Fairclough, 1992, 1995; Pennycook, 2001; Martin & White, 2005), yet do not integrate these insights into models of figurative language difficulty or classroom handling.

Existing frameworks do not adequately explain difficulty that arises despite successful understanding, particularly in culturally embedded expressions such as proverbs (Mieder, 2004; Schipper, 2004; Litovkina, 2019; Popescu, 2022, 2025). This study addresses this limitation by conceptualising difficulty as arising from the intersection between interpretation and evaluation, particularly in cases where evaluation triggers constraints on instructional choices, by developing a conceptual framework to account for how these processes influence instructional preferences, which will be explained in the following section.

2.5 A process model of difficulty in figurative language

Building on the preceding discussion, this study proposes a process model in which difficulty in figurative language is conceptualised as an emergent phenomenon arising from the interaction between interpretation, evaluation, and pedagogical action. The model retains the analytical distinction between these components while specifying the conditions under which their interaction produces different forms of difficulty and corresponding instructional responses.

Interpretation refers to the process of constructing meaning, including metaphor resolution, lexical access, and contextual inference. Evaluation concerns how interpreted meanings are assessed in relation to social, cultural, or educational norms. Pedagogical action refers to the ways teachers choose to address meanings in classroom contexts. Although these dimensions can be analytically separated, they frequently overlap in practice: interpretation shapes evaluation, while evaluation may influence the range of possible teaching strategies.

A central claim of the model is that evaluation does not automatically produce difficulty. It becomes a source of difficulty only when it creates a constraint on teaching approaches. Constraint is understood here as a decision-making situation in which the range of acceptable teaching options is reduced due to perceived conflict between the interpreted meaning of an expression and the norms governing its appropriate use in instructional contexts. These norms may be ethical (e.g. avoidance of harmful representations), educational (e.g. age-appropriateness), or contextual (e.g. institutional expectations). This distinction separates evaluation as positioning (e.g. recognising that a proverb is sexist) from evaluation as constraint-generating (e.g. deciding that the proverb cannot be used without modification). Only the latter gives rise to difficulty in the sense proposed here.

The model further proposes that constraint emerges under particular conditions. Expressions that encode socially contested values are more likely to trigger evaluative tension, especially where interpreted meanings conflict with teachers' pedagogical, ethical, or cultural norms. The extent to which evaluation becomes constraint-generating also depends on teacher positioning, including whether teachers adopt critical, neutral, or aligned stances toward the expression. These factors interact in shaping whether evaluation remains a matter of stance or begins to affect classroom practice.

When evaluation becomes constraint-generating, it reshapes the range of available instructional responses. In such cases, treatment of the proverb may shift from meaning-oriented strategies, such as explanation or dialogic engagement, toward regulation-oriented strategies, including critical reframing, contextualisation, or avoidance. Conversely, when evaluation does not impose constraints, teaching approaches are more likely to focus primarily on facilitating comprehension, with limited engagement with evaluative dimensions.

Figure 1 below illustrates how interpretive and evaluative processes interact in shaping pedagogical action. It highlights that evaluative processing may introduce constraints on instructional strategies, including critical reframing or avoidance, even in cases of successful interpretation.

On this basis, the model advances the following propositions:

P1. Interpretation and evaluation

When interpretive difficulty is low, evaluative processes become more significant in shaping perceived difficulty, as cognitive resources are not primarily engaged in meaning construction.

P2. Evaluation and difficulty in classroom use

Evaluation becomes a source of difficulty when perceived value conflict goes beyond a threshold of pedagogical appropriateness, transforming critical stance into a limitation on classroom use.

P3. Evaluation and mediation strategies

Constraint-generating evaluation is associated with a shift from meaning-oriented teaching strategies (e.g. linguistic scaffolding, dialogic interaction) to critical mediation strategies (e.g. critical reframing, contextualisation, avoidance).

P4. Teacher positioning and mediation

The form and intensity of constraint are mediated by teacher positioning, such that explicitly critical stances are more likely to produce strong constraints (e.g. avoidance), while ambivalent or neutral stances are associated with weaker or absent constraints.

P5. Difficulty beyond interpretive complexity

Constraint-generating evaluation may arise independently of linguistic complexity, such that controversial expressions can generate difficulty even when they are easily interpretable.

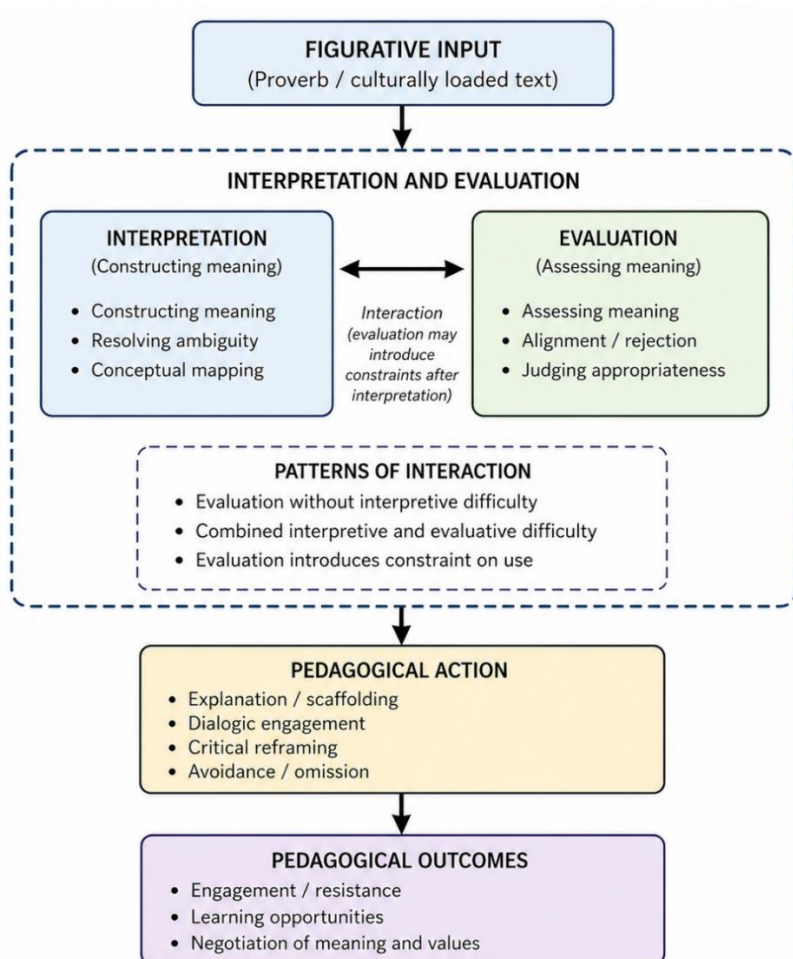


Figure 1. Interaction between interpretation, evaluation, and pedagogical action in figurative language

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design and participants

This study adopts a qualitative exploratory design to examine how EFL teachers interpret, evaluate, and approach culturally loaded figurative language (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Participants were recruited through professional and academic networks, including English teacher communities, professional contacts, and university-based teacher education networks, and were invited to complete an online questionnaire. Although the questionnaire was distributed to a wider group of English teachers, 12 participants completed the study. Seven taught at high-school level, four at university

level and one at primary level; seven were native speakers of English, four of Romanian and one of another language. Five had more than 20 years of teaching experience, four between 11 and 20 years, one between 5 and 10 years and two between 1 and 5 years. The sample thus provides a range of perspectives on proverb use in educational contexts (Patton, 2002).

Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the nature of the elicitation tasks prior to completing the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic research purposes.

3.2 Data collection

Data were collected using a structured online questionnaire (Google Forms) designed to elicit teachers' interpretations of, and pedagogical responses to, a set of traditional English proverbs. The questionnaire consisted of proverb-based elicitation tasks, a final open question on teaching proverbs in EFL contexts, and three background items (teaching level, teaching experience and first language). The main section presented participants with 18 proverbs. For each proverb, participants were asked to explain its meaning in their own words and to describe how they would teach it, in a single open-response field, and to rate how difficult they thought the proverb would be for their students to understand, on a five-point scale from 1 (very difficult) to 5 (very easy). The rating therefore records the difficulty teachers anticipated for their learners, not the teachers' own comprehension.

One participant (T1) provided difficulty ratings for all 18 proverbs but left every open-response field blank, and one further open response (T8, P8) was blank. Two ratings were missing (T7, P14; T8, P8); in the coded dataset these were assigned the values 1 and 3 respectively, the former being consistent with the teacher's comment ("No idea"). All 216 teacher-proverb cases were retained so that the analysis covers the full design, with the 19 blank responses coded ID0 and NONE. The frequencies of these two codes therefore partly reflect non-response rather than stance or pedagogical choice, and they are interpreted accordingly. Excluding T1 does not alter the patterns reported below; for example, the proportion of ID2 responses remains between 25% and 34% at every level of linguistic difficulty.

The selection of proverbs was purposeful and informed by the conceptual framework developed in this study. The selected proverbs varied in terms of language difficulty (e.g., metaphorical opacity, lexical unfamiliarity, archaic forms) as well as the extent to which they contained socially or culturally sensitive content (e.g., gendered representations, normative assumptions, potential offence or rejection).

Because several proverbs included gendered or potentially offensive content, participants were informed in advance that the questionnaire contained historically situated expressions reflecting traditional social norms. Their intentional inclusion formed part of the study's focus on evaluative and pedagogical responses

to culturally loaded figurative language. Table 1 lists the proverbs included in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Proverbs included in the questionnaire ($N=18$).

No.	Proverb
1	Man works from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done
2	Men build houses; women build homes
3	He that will thrive must first ask his wife
4	The grey mare is the better horse
5	A deaf husband and a blind wife are always a happy couple
6	He that marries late, marries ill
7	Every man can tame a shrew but he that has her
8	Too many cooks spoil the broth
9	A worthy woman is the crown of her husband
10	A man's best fortune – or his worst – is a wife
11	A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men
12	Choose a wife rather by your ear than by your eye
13	All are good lasses, but where come the ill wives from?
14	While the tall maid is stooping, the little one has swept the house
15	Prettiness makes no pottage
16	She that is born a beauty is half married
17	Choose a horse made and a wife to make
18	A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat 'em, the better they be

3.3 Analytical framework

Data were analysed using a theoretically informed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), integrating deductive and inductive procedures. The coding categories used in the analysis (e.g. linguistic difficulty (LD) and ideological difficulty (ID)) represent empirical operationalisations of the broader conceptual framework developed in this study. In this framework, linguistic difficulty (LD) reflects challenges in interpretation, while ideological difficulty (ID) captures evaluative responses, including cases in which it limits or reshapes the proverb's classroom use.

The coding framework was structured around categories capturing linguistic difficulty (LD), ideological difficulty (ID), and mediation strategies (coded as MS), while remaining open to patterns emerging from the data.

Systematic coding identified recurring patterns in how teachers interpret, evaluate, and respond to proverbs. While frequencies and percentages are reported, they serve a descriptive function to support interpretive claims rather than statistical generalisation.

Analytical rigour was ensured through iterative coding, constant comparison, and the use of explicit decision rules.

3.4 Data analysis

Coding was conducted iteratively using explicit decision rules, with categories refined across multiple passes to ensure internal consistency. The unit of analysis was each individual teacher response.

Responses were coded to capture (1) linguistic–cognitive processing, including challenges related to meaning construction and interpretation; (2) evaluation, including stance-taking, value conflict, and affective response; and (3) forms of teaching approach emerging from these processes:

(1) Linguistic–cognitive processing

- Linguistic difficulty (LD) (e.g., vocabulary, metaphor, structural complexity)
- Ideological difficulty (ID) (e.g., value conflict, discomfort, evaluative tension)

Linguistic difficulty was derived from the teachers' five-point difficulty ratings and collapsed into three levels:

- LD0 (low; ratings 4–5), LD1 (moderate; rating 3), LD2 (high; ratings 1–2)

LD thus captures the difficulty teachers anticipated for their learners. The written comments show that these judgements were often informed by teachers' own familiarity with a proverb: responses in which teachers stated that they did not know or were unfamiliar with the proverb ($n = 32$) received markedly lower ratings, i.e. were judged more difficult (mean 2.0), than all other responses (mean 3.4). LD should therefore be read as teacher-perceived learner difficulty, partly grounded in the teacher's own interpretive access, rather than as a direct measure of either teachers' or learners' comprehension. ID and mediation strategies, by contrast, were coded from the open responses.

Ideological difficulty was likewise coded on a three-point scale:

- ID0 (no ideological engagement),
- ID1 (implicit or ambivalent critical engagement),
- ID2 (explicit ideological difficulty, including critique or rejection)

(2) Evaluation

- ID0 → neutral or descriptive stance (acceptance / non-engagement)
- ID1 → implicit or ambivalent stance
- ID2 → explicit evaluative stance (critique or rejection)

(3) Forms of pedagogical action

Pedagogical responses were coded into five strategy types:

- Avoidance (AVO)
- Contextualisation (CON)
- Critical reframing (CRI)
- Dialogic engagement (DIA)
- Linguistic scaffolding (LIN)

Responses that did not include a clear teaching strategy were coded as NONE.

Each response was assigned one primary strategy code. Because critical reframing presupposes an explicit evaluative stance, CRI occurs only in responses coded ID2;

the association between ID2 and CRI reported below therefore partly reflects the definition of the categories and is interpreted descriptively rather than as an independent finding.

The analysis was recursive rather than linear (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and moved through four phases. Responses were first read repeatedly to identify recurring patterns (familiarisation). Framework-based and emergent codes were then applied (initial coding) and grouped into broader analytical themes (category development). Finally, the interactions between linguistic difficulty, ideological difficulty and mediation strategies were examined (relational analysis).

3.5 Trustworthiness and limitations

To ensure analytical rigour, the study follows established criteria for qualitative research, including transparency, consistency, and grounding in data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Interpretive coherence was supported through the use of a theoretically informed coding framework and the inclusion of participant excerpts, which make visible the link between data and analysis.

All responses were coded by the author. No second coder was involved, and inter-coder agreement was therefore not calculated. To offset the risks of single-coder analysis, coding followed an explicit codebook with decision rules applied across several passes, and the coded dataset, codebook and all cross-tabulations are openly available (see Data availability statement), so that coding decisions can be inspected and re-analysed. Single-coder analysis is nonetheless acknowledged as a limitation of the study.

The dataset consists of elicited written responses rather than naturally occurring classroom interaction. While this limits the depth of contextual detail, it allows for systematic comparison across the same set of proverbs and makes it possible to identify recurring patterns in teachers' interpretations and classroom approaches.

The relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings, and the reliance on elicited responses may not fully reflect teachers' practices in situated classroom contexts. The data therefore provide insight into reported beliefs and instructional approaches rather than observed behaviour.

4 Results

4.1 Constructing difficulty: Linguistic and ideological dimensions

The analysis of 216 teacher responses (18 proverbs $\times$ 12 participants) shows that difficulty is not treated as a unitary property of figurative language. Teachers construct difficulty through both interpretive and evaluative processes, and these dimensions strongly influence how proverbs are approached in classroom contexts.

4.1.1 Interpretation as a source of difficulty

Linguistic difficulty was widely distributed across the dataset. Based on teachers' ratings of anticipated learner difficulty, 61 responses (28.2%) were categorised as high linguistic difficulty (LD2), 66 (30.6%) as moderate (LD1), and 89 (41.2%) as low (LD0). In their written comments, teachers associated linguistic difficulty with metaphorical opacity, lexical unfamiliarity, semantic ambiguity, and structural complexity, and frequently referred to their own unfamiliarity with the proverb. For example:

1) LD2 × ID1 → AVO: "I am not familiar with the proverb. The meaning is somewhat opaque." (T4, P4)

2) LD2 × ID1 → DIA: "They need to understand the many definitions of 'ill' – not just the health-related ones." (T6, P6)

3) LD2 × ID0 → LIN: "Understanding this proverb would hinge on understanding what is meant by 'thrive' and, to a lesser degree, 'ask'." (T6, P3)

These responses show cases in which difficulty is constructed primarily at the level of meaning construction. Excerpt (1) also illustrates how teachers' own unfamiliarity informs the difficulty they anticipate for learners. Pedagogical attention is directed toward resolving opacity and supporting comprehension, with evaluative engagement either absent or implicit.

4.1.2 Evaluation as an independent source of difficulty

Alongside interpretive difficulty, a substantial proportion of responses engaged with problematic dimensions of meaning. Specifically, 93 responses (43.1%) were coded as ID0, 65 (30.1%) as ID1, and 58 (26.9%) as ID2. Explicit ideological difficulty (ID2) occurred at every level of linguistic difficulty: 22 cases at LD0 (24.7% of LD0 responses), 16 at LD1 (24.2%) and 20 at LD2 (32.8%). This distribution suggests that evaluative constraints may arise independently of interpretive complexity. The following responses illustrate this point:

4) LD0 × ID2 → CRI: "I find the gender differences portrayed problematic and would not introduce this proverb to my class without [some] critical commentary." (T4, P1)

5) LD2 × ID2 → CRI: "This reflects a strongly outdated and sexist belief that women should be quiet and submissive." (T12, P11)

6) LD1 × ID2 → AVO: "I am not familiar with this apology for domestic violence. I find it so offensive I will not explain its meaning." (T4, P18)

In these examples, the teachers construe the proverbs' meaning without apparent difficulty, whatever level of difficulty they anticipate for learners, yet difficulty arises from evaluation of their socially embedded implications. In some instances, concerns about the proverbs also affected the way in which teachers were prepared

to discuss them in classroom contexts, as in (6), where engagement was explicitly refused. At the same time, not all evaluative responses resulted in this kind of difficulty. Implicit or ambivalent responses (ID1) indicate awareness of sociocultural implications without, in most cases, substantially affecting classroom use of the expression.

4.1.3 Co-occurrence and interaction

The interaction between interpretation and evaluation is particularly visible in responses where both processes are co-articulated, as can be seen in the following examples:

7) LD2 × ID1 → DIA: “First, they would need to understand the meaning of ‘shrew’ as it is used here and understand the power implications of the word ‘tame’.” (T6, P7)

8) LD0 × ID2 → AVO: “The semantic difference between house and home, overflows onto the preceding verb [...] I find it anachronistic, as well as objectionable.” (T4, P2)

In such responses, lexical explanation and ideological awareness become part of the same interpretive process. Rather than operating as fully separate stages, interpretation and evaluation frequently overlap, although their relative prominence varies across expressions and contexts.

Difficulty therefore cannot be reduced to challenges of meaning construction alone. While some responses focused primarily on interpretive complexity, others showed that evaluative concerns shaped how proverbs were regarded in classroom contexts, even where comprehension itself posed little difficulty. Table 2 summarises the distribution of linguistic and ideological difficulty across the dataset.

Table 2. Distribution of linguistic and ideological difficulty ($N = 216$).

	ID0	ID1	ID2	Total
LD0	43	24	22	89
LD1	30	20	16	66
LD2	20	21	20	61
Total	93	65	58	216

4.2 Evaluative stance and pedagogical response

Teachers’ responses show that evaluative stance varies systematically, shaping how evaluation influences classroom use. Across the dataset, 58 responses (26.9%) involved explicit evaluative positioning (ID2), indicating overt recognition, critique, or rejection of the values encoded in the proverb.

A significant subset of responses displayed a critical stance, explicitly labelling proverbs as “sexist”, “outdated”, or otherwise problematic. Such responses treat the proverb as socially problematic rather than as a neutral linguistic expression. This stance is often realised through evaluative lexis (e.g. “objectionable,”

“offensive”) and modal expressions indicating rejection (e.g. “I doubt I would introduce it”). These responses frame the teacher as responsible for addressing or challenging problematic content. All 42 instances of critical reframing (CRI) occurred in ID2 responses, where CRI accounted for 42 of 58 cases (72.4%).

Other responses reflect more negotiated or ambivalent forms of stance-taking, corresponding to implicit ideological difficulty (ID1 = 65 cases, 30.1%), in which teachers reproduce or describe gendered assumptions without overt critique. In these cases, evaluative positioning remains implicit and does not necessarily lead to constraint, allowing for continued pedagogical engagement, most often through dialogic strategies (DIA = 31 cases, 47.7% of ID1 responses) and linguistic scaffolding (LIN = 20). Six ID1 responses, however, involved avoidance (see 4.2.1).

Lastly, many responses (ID0 = 93 cases, 43.1%) adopt a neutral or descriptive stance, focusing primarily on meaning and form with minimal engagement with cultural implications. These responses underscore linguistic–cognitive processing rather than evaluative positioning and are associated mainly with dialogic (DIA = 38) and linguistic scaffolding strategies (LIN = 24). This category also contains most of the responses without a stated strategy (NONE = 29), including the 19 blank responses (see Section 3.2).

These patterns show that evaluative stance shapes how proverbs can be treated as a teaching resource. Strongly critical stances are more likely to give rise to constraint, whereas neutral or ambivalent stances allow for continued engagement. Table 3 summarises these mediation strategies according to perceived ideological difficulty.

Table 3. Mediation strategies by ideological difficulty ($N = 216$).

	DIA	CRI	LIN	CON	AVO	NONE
ID0	38	0	24	2	0	29
ID1	31	0	20	5	6	3
ID2	1	42	1	2	5	7
Total	70	42	45	9	11	39

As seen above, teachers described a range of pedagogical responses to linguistic and evaluative difficulty, including explanation, contextualisation, dialogic interaction, critical reframing, and, in some cases, avoidance. Together, these strategies illustrate how instructional decisions are shaped by different forms of evaluative positioning. In the following, these strategies are exemplified.

4.2.1 Avoidance

In a limited number of cases (11 responses, 5.1%), teachers indicated that they would avoid using certain proverbs altogether. Avoidance was concentrated among a few participants (eight of the 11 cases came from one teacher), occurred in both ID2 (5) and ID1 (6) responses, and most often concerned proverbs rated as linguistically difficult (LD2 = 6).

9) LD2 × ID2 → AVO: “Misogyny should not be taught – I would avoid this proverb.” (T7, P18)

10) LD2 × ID1 → AVO: “These just get worse and worse! I’ve hardly heard of them and certainly wouldn’t bother teaching them to be honest!” (T8, P18)

Excerpt (9) represents strong constraint, in which explicit evaluation leads to rejection of classroom use. Excerpt (10), by contrast, combines evaluative distance with unfamiliarity: the proverb is set aside as not worth teaching rather than as harmful. Avoidance therefore does not arise from ideological rejection alone but may also reflect pragmatic judgements about the obscurity or relevance of an expression.

4.2.2 Contextualisation

A smaller set of responses (9 cases, 4.2%) involved contextualisation, in which proverbs were framed within their historical, cultural, or cross-linguistic context. For example, one teacher proposed framing a proverb by its intended audience and function before turning to its meaning and a first-language equivalent:

11) LD0 × ID2 → CON: “The method would be to discuss who the proverb is directed to (males, not females), and what its functions are (advice), and then go into meaning. Then finding the Turkish equivalent would work well.” (T2, P17)

Here, the proverb is not presented as universally valid, but as a culturally situated piece of advice addressed to a particular audience. By foregrounding its function and its cross-linguistic counterparts, the teacher creates distance from the proverb’s message while maintaining pedagogical engagement.

12) LD1 × ID1 → CON: “Ha! Men can’t control their wives. We’d have to teach some background around shrew and Shakespeare.” (T5, P7)

These responses illustrate cases in which teachers maintain pedagogical engagement by situating proverbs within specific cultural, literary or historical contexts.

4.2.3 Critical reframing

Critical reframing was a prominent strategy (42 cases, 19.4%) and was confined to responses involving explicit ideological difficulty: all 42 CRI responses were coded ID2, so that almost three quarters of explicitly ideological responses (42 of 58, 72.4%) were mediated through critique. CRI was also concentrated in a subset of participants, with three teachers accounting for 34 of the 42 cases.

13) LD1 × ID2 → CRI: “I would guide students to analyze the underlying assumptions. And then open the issue up for debate.” (T12, P13)

14) LD0 × ID2 → CRI: “Students would need vocabulary help with ‘pottage’ and should identify who might be speaking. They might also try rewriting it with other attributes or with a female speaking.” (T6, P15)

In these cases, proverbs are not simply explained but actively reframed as objects of critique. These responses show that teachers can remain pedagogically engaged while explicitly reframing proverbs for critical analysis, rather than treating them as neutral expressions. Excerpt (14) also shows that critique can be combined with lexical support.

4.2.4 Dialogic engagement

Dialogic strategies were the most frequently reported (70 cases, 32.4%), spanning all levels of linguistic difficulty but occurring almost exclusively in ID0 (38) and ID1 (31) responses. Within ID1 responses, dialogic engagement was the most frequent strategy (31 of 65 cases), suggesting that implicit ideological content often prompted discussion rather than explicit critical assessment. These strategies reflect situations in which teachers' stance remains open and negotiable. Dialogic approaches positioned learners as active participants in meaning-making and evaluative negotiation.

15) LD0 × ID1 → DIA: "To teach this, I would ask who my students would expect to respond to their needs at home and I would give them a list of possible situations." (T2, P1)

16) LD2 × ID1 → DIA: "I would also make sure that they understood the metaphorical ways someone could be deaf or blind. Finally, they might speculate on why it was the husband who was deaf and the wife who was blind." (T6, P5)

These responses position learners not only as interpreters of meaning but as participants in the negotiation of social and cultural values. This corresponds to a form of instructional choice in which interpretation and evaluation are jointly explored.

4.2.5 Linguistic scaffolding

Linguistic scaffolding accounted for 45 responses (20.8%), typically in contexts where difficulty was framed as primarily linguistic. This included explanation of vocabulary, paraphrasing, and clarification of metaphorical meaning. Linguistic strategies were particularly common in responses coded as ID0 (24 cases) and ID1 (20), and almost absent from ID2 (1).

17) LD2 × ID1 → LIN: "I would first clarify the archaic vocabulary, then guide students to interpret the metaphor." (T12, P4)

18) LD2 × ID0 → LIN: "I would guide interpretation through metaphor analysis." (T12, P17)

Here, pedagogical attention is directed primarily toward comprehension, with ideological dimensions remaining largely implicit.

The strategies identified across the dataset range from non-engagement (NONE, AVO) to dialogic and critical engagement (DIA, CRI). Overall, teachers' responses differed more clearly according to evaluative stance than according to anticipated linguistic difficulty: CRI was confined to ID2, while DIA and LIN dominated ID0 and ID1 responses at all levels of LD. Where linguistic difficulty was high, the most distinctive outcome was the absence of a stated strategy (NONE = 20 of 61 LD2 responses), often because teachers did not know the proverb.

4.3 Interaction between linguistic and ideological difficulty

The interaction between linguistic and ideological difficulty reveals recurrent patterns in teachers' responses. LD0 × ID0 (43 cases) and LD1 × ID0 (30 cases) indicate that many linguistically accessible items were treated without ideological engagement, while LD2 × ID0 (20 cases) shows that linguistically demanding items are not necessarily socioculturally marked. Conversely, ID2 occurred across all levels of LD (22 cases at LD0, 16 at LD1 and 20 at LD2), indicating that ideological difficulty operates largely independently of linguistic complexity. At the level of individual proverbs, mean difficulty ratings were unrelated to the proportion of ID2 responses ($r = -0.02$, 18 proverbs). This pattern supports the independence of evaluation from linguistic–cognitive processing (Figure 1).

When mediation strategies are examined in relation to this interaction, three broad patterns emerge:

Pattern 1: Low linguistic difficulty / High ideological difficulty (LD0 × ID2)

Where proverbs are linguistically accessible but ideologically marked (22 cases), mediation was dominated by critical engagement (CRI = 18), with contextualisation (2), avoidance (1) and no stated strategy (1) in the remaining cases, indicating that the primary challenge in these cases is not comprehension but how to position the proverb in relation to its embedded values. These responses illustrate cases in which evaluation overrides linguistic accessibility, leading predominantly to critical reframing and only rarely to disengagement.

Pattern 2: High linguistic difficulty / Low ideological difficulty (LD2 × ID0)

Where linguistic difficulty is high but ideological engagement absent (20 cases), most responses stated no teaching strategy (NONE = 12), typically because the teacher did not know the proverb or left the response blank; where a strategy was proposed, it was mainly linguistic scaffolding (LIN = 6; DIA = 2). Here, difficulty is treated primarily as a problem of comprehension: when interpretation fails, neither evaluation nor pedagogical planning follows.

Pattern 3: High linguistic difficulty / High ideological difficulty (LD2 × ID2)

Where both dimensions are salient (20 cases), mediation was strongly concentrated on critical reframing (CRI = 13), with avoidance in 2 cases and no stated strategy in 5. Although each response was assigned a single primary strategy code, several of these responses combine critique with attention to meaning or wording, so that teachers address comprehension and critical positioning at the same time (e.g., excerpt 5).

Overall, the findings point to several distinct configurations of difficulty. In some cases, linguistic complexity dominates with limited critical reflection, while in others, teachers' concerns about the proverbs become central even where interpretation itself poses little difficulty. Cases in which both dimensions are salient require teachers to negotiate comprehension and evaluation simultaneously, most often through critical reframing that also attends to meaning.

Table 4 presents the distribution of mediation strategies across combined configurations of linguistic and ideological difficulty.

Table 4. Distribution of mediation strategies across LD × ID configurations (*N* = 216).

LD × ID	DIA	CRI	LIN	CON	AVO	NONE	Total
LD0 × ID0	18	0	11	1	0	13	43
LD0 × ID1	12	0	9	3	0	0	24
LD0 × ID2	0	18	0	2	1	1	22
LD1 × ID0	18	0	7	1	0	4	30
LD1 × ID1	11	0	5	2	2	0	20
LD1 × ID2	1	11	1	0	2	1	16
LD2 × ID0	2	0	6	0	0	12	20
LD2 × ID1	8	0	6	0	4	3	21
LD2 × ID2	0	13	0	0	2	5	20
Total	70	42	45	9	11	39	216

5 Discussion

This study examined how EFL teachers interpret, evaluate, and might teach English proverbs. The findings indicate that difficulty with figurative language extends beyond comprehension, particularly when evaluative concerns shape how teachers approach expressions pedagogically. Alternative factors, such as teacher beliefs, institutional norms, or classroom context, may also shape instructional decisions. The present analysis focuses specifically on how such tensions are articulated through teachers' evaluations of meaning.

5.1 Interpretation and the construction of difficulty (RQ1)

Regarding RQ1, teachers generally demonstrated high interpretive competence. Of the 197 non-blank responses, only 12 (6.1%) offered no interpretation of the proverb's meaning; ten of these stated that the teacher did not know the proverb (e.g., "No idea", "I don't know this proverb"), while the remaining two expressed only an evaluation. Even the explicit refusal to explain a proverb in excerpt (6) presupposes that its meaning had been understood. In all other cases teachers offered an interpretation, frequently even when they described the proverb as unfamiliar. This is in line with research showing that figurative meaning relies on linguistic knowledge and contextual inference (Honeck, 1997; Gibbs, 1994).

Nevertheless, variation across responses – particularly in cases of high linguistic difficulty (LD2 = 28.2%) – indicates that interpretability is not uniform.

Teachers identified metaphorical opacity, lexical unfamiliarity, and ambiguity as sources of difficulty, consistent with established accounts of figurative processing (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Abel, 2003). These findings align with cognitive linguistic models of figurative meaning construction (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010).

At the same time, the findings extend purely cognitive accounts. Proverbs function as context-sensitive and socially embedded expressions open to multiple readings (Norrick, 1985). Divergence in interpretation reflects not only processing constraints but also differences in evaluative positioning. Figurative competence therefore involves not only successful interpretation, but also engagement with the cultural and evaluative implications attached to meaning.

With respect to the construction of difficulty (RQ1), the findings further show that difficulty is differentiated along linguistic (LD) and ideological (ID) dimensions.

While linguistic difficulty was widely distributed across the dataset (LD0 = 41.2%, LD1 = 30.6%, LD2 = 28.2%), 56.9% of responses engaged with ideological dimensions of difficulty (ID1 + ID2). This indicates that difficulty is not limited to lexical or structural complexity, but includes evaluative and sociocultural considerations.

This reconceptualisation challenges traditional models of figurative difficulty, which tend to focus on factors such as transparency, decomposability and familiarity (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Abel, 2003). While these factors remain relevant, they are insufficient to account for the full range of difficulties encountered by teachers and learners. Ideological difficulty (ID2 = 26.9%) occurred across all levels of linguistic difficulty, including cases where proverbs were linguistically straightforward (LD0), suggesting that evaluation may operate independently of interpretive complexity.

These findings also reinforce the importance of cross-linguistic and cultural knowledge in figurative language processing (Liontas, 2002; Cooper, 1999). Proverbs with culturally specific or value-laden content were frequently perceived as more problematic, even when linguistically transparent. Conversely, proverbs with recognisable metaphors or equivalents in learners' first language were often perceived as more accessible.

5.2 Evaluating gendered proverbs (RQ2)

Regarding RQ2, teachers' evaluations of the gendered proverbs ranged from neutral description (ID0 = 43.1%) through implicit or ambivalent positioning (ID1 = 30.1%) to explicit critique or rejection (ID2 = 26.9%). Explicit evaluations were realised through evaluative lexis ("sexist", "outdated", "objectionable", "offensive") and through modalised statements about classroom use ("I doubt I would introduce it", "I would not introduce this proverb to my class without [some] critical commentary"). These evaluations shaped engagement with meaning in two ways. In most ID2 responses, the evaluation became part of the treatment of meaning itself,

with the proverb reframed as an object of critique (CRI = 42 of 58); in a minority, evaluation curtailed engagement with meaning altogether, as when a teacher declined to explain a proverb because of its content (excerpt 6). ID1 responses, by contrast, typically retained a meaning-oriented approach (DIA or LIN in 51 of 65 cases), with evaluative implications raised indirectly through discussion. This gradient is consistent with Proposition 2: evaluation becomes a source of difficulty when it crosses a threshold of pedagogical appropriateness, and below that threshold it remains a matter of stance.

Proposition 1, however, is not supported by the distribution of codes. If evaluation became more significant when interpretive difficulty was low, explicit ideological difficulty would be expected to be most frequent at LD0. Instead, ID2 occurred at similar rates at LD0 (24.7%) and LD1 (24.2%) and somewhat more often at LD2 (32.8%), and at the level of individual proverbs mean difficulty ratings were unrelated to the proportion of ID2 responses ($r = -0.02$). One reason may be that several of the most ideologically marked proverbs in the set (e.g., P11 and P18) were also among those rated most difficult, so that interpretive and evaluative demands co-occurred by design rather than trading off. P1 may still describe individual reasoning, as in responses where comprehension is unproblematic and evaluation dominates (e.g., excerpts 4 and 11), but the present data do not allow it to be confirmed. What they do show is that evaluative difficulty arises at every level of interpretive difficulty, as stated in Proposition 5.

Importantly, difficulty is not treated solely as an obstacle. Teachers frequently reframe it as a teaching resource, especially where it enables discussion and critical reflection. In this respect, the findings are consistent with Propositions 2 and 5, which distinguish evaluative difficulty from interpretive complexity and relate it to pedagogical engagement.

5.3 Pedagogical approaches and teacher cognition (RQ3)

Regarding RQ3, the findings show that teachers use a repertoire of teaching practices, with a clear preference for interactive, student-centred approaches. The most frequent strategy was dialogic engagement (DIA), followed by linguistic scaffolding (LIN) and critical mediation (CRI).

The prominence of dialogic approaches reflects communicative language teaching principles, emphasising interaction and negotiation of meaning (Canale & Swain, 1980; Littlewood, 1981). The use of linguistic scaffolding indicates attention to the cognitive demands of figurative language, such as archaic vocabulary and metaphor (excerpts 17 and 18).

Mediation strategies are more clearly related to evaluative stance than to anticipated linguistic difficulty. Responses without explicit ideological difficulty were mainly handled through dialogic engagement and linguistic scaffolding, whereas explicit ideological difficulty prompted critical reframing and, less often, avoidance. High linguistic difficulty was associated less with a particular strategy than with the absence of one, mainly where teachers did not know the proverb.

From a teacher cognition perspective, these findings highlight teachers as adaptive decision-makers (Borg, 2003, 2006). Rather than applying fixed methods, they respond dynamically to the interplay between linguistic and sociocultural tensions, mediating both meaning and value.

5.4 Interpretation, evaluation and pedagogical decision-making (RQ4)

Regarding RQ4, the LD $\times$ ID configurations (Table 4) show how interpretation and evaluation jointly shape what teachers propose to do. Where interpretation was unproblematic and evaluation explicit (LD0 $\times$ ID2), critique dominated (18 of 22 cases); where interpretation was difficult and evaluation absent (LD2 $\times$ ID0), the most common outcome was no stated strategy (12 of 20), suggesting that failed interpretation pre-empts both evaluation and pedagogical planning; and where both were salient (LD2 $\times$ ID2), critical reframing again predominated (13 of 20). Successful interpretation thus appears to be a precondition for evaluation, while evaluation, once explicit, largely determines the type of mediation chosen. This is consistent with Proposition 3: ID0 and ID1 responses were handled mainly through meaning-oriented strategies (DIA or LIN in 113 of 158 cases), whereas ID2 responses were handled mainly through regulation-oriented strategies (CRI, CON or AVO in 49 of 58 cases). Because CRI was only assigned to ID2 responses, this contrast partly reflects the coding scheme, and its strength should not be overstated.

Proposition 4 receives only partial support. Explicitly critical stances were more often associated with critique than with exclusion: avoidance occurred in only 5 of the 58 ID2 responses, and slightly more often in ID1 (6) than in ID2 responses. Avoidance was also concentrated in a small number of participants and frequently co-occurred with unfamiliarity (excerpts 1 and 10), indicating that the strongest form of constraint is not a simple function of critical intensity but may also reflect pragmatic judgements about the obscurity or relevance of an expression.

5.5 Proverbs, ideology and critical pedagogy

A major contribution of this study is the identification of the ideological dimension of difficulty and its implications for pedagogy. A substantial proportion of responses (ID2 = 26.9%) involved explicit recognition of proverbs as “sexist”, “outdated”, or otherwise problematic, with teachers expressing reluctance to present them uncritically in the classroom. Such proverbs were often reframed as starting points for discussion, critical reflection, or intercultural comparison.

This perspective resonates with critical discourse approaches, which view language as implicated in the reproduction of social norms (Fairclough, 1995; Talbot, 2010). In line with previous research (Schipper, 2004; Litovkina, 2019), the findings suggest that proverbs frequently encode gendered assumptions, which teachers address through critical assessment, contextualisation, or discussion. Proverbs thus become objects not only of interpretation, but also of evaluation and classroom negotiation.

Avoidance (AVO = 5.1%) remained relatively rare, indicating that most teachers preferred to engage with rather than exclude problematic content. The distinction between avoidance, contextualisation and critical reframing reflects the broader variation in pedagogical responses associated with evaluative difficulty, as outlined in Proposition 3. At the same time, some linguistically accessible expressions still required reframing or contextualisation when their meanings conflicted with educational or social expectations, corresponding to the relationship described in Proposition 2.

These patterns are also consistent with critical applied linguistics (Pennycook, 2001), particularly in their emphasis on language as a site of negotiation and critical reflection. More broadly, the findings suggest that pedagogical engagement with figurative meaning cannot be determined solely by interpretive complexity but must also account for how evaluation shapes classroom engagement with meaning.

6 Conclusion

This study examined how EFL teachers interpret, evaluate, and consider teaching English proverbs, focusing on how difficulty is constructed in relation to figurative language and pedagogical use. The findings indicate that figurative difficulty cannot be understood solely in terms of interpretive complexity. Despite the fact that teachers generally demonstrated strong interpretive competence, many responses also reflected evaluative concerns with culturally or socially marked meanings. In a substantial number of cases, proverb meanings were understood without being regarded as unproblematic to teach.

A central contribution of the study is the introduction of ideological difficulty as a distinct dimension of figurative language difficulty. The findings show that evaluative difficulty may arise independently of linguistic complexity, particularly in cases where interpreted meanings are perceived as socially problematic or incompatible with classroom expectations. In this respect, the findings challenge approaches that conceptualise figurative difficulty primarily as a matter of metaphorical opacity, lexical unfamiliarity or inferential processing. While such factors remain important, they do not fully account for cases in which linguistically accessible expressions become difficult because of the values or social implications attached to them.

The proposed analytical framework contributes to this reconceptualisation by distinguishing between interpretation and evaluation as separate, but interacting dimensions of figurative difficulty. More specifically, it helps explain why successful comprehension does not necessarily result in straight classroom use and why different forms of difficulty are associated with different forms of classroom mediation. Responses without explicit ideological difficulty were more often addressed through explanation, scaffolding and dialogic interaction, whereas ideologically marked expressions predominantly prompted critical reframing and,

less often, contextualisation or avoidance. The framework, therefore, accounts for the divergence between comprehension and didactic acceptability observed across the dataset.

By underscoring teacher perspectives, the study contributes to current research on figurative language and EFL pedagogy by extending existing cognitive accounts of figurative difficulty into the domain of evaluation and classroom use. Proverbs emerge not simply as linguistic items to be interpreted, but as socially situated expressions whose teaching potential requires judgement, positioning and negotiation. More broadly, the results suggest that figurative language pedagogy involves not only facilitating comprehension but also managing the evaluative and ideological tensions that interpretation may engender in classroom contexts.

The study is exploratory in scope, and several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample and reliance on self-reported questionnaire data limit the generalisability of the findings and do not necessarily reflect classroom practice directly. Linguistic difficulty was operationalised through teachers' ratings of anticipated learner difficulty, which were partly informed by teachers' own familiarity with the proverbs; coding was carried out by a single coder; and one participant provided ratings without written responses. In addition, the study focused on teachers' perspectives, rather than learner responses. Future research could therefore examine how learners engage with evaluatively marked figurative language across different instructional and cultural contexts, as well as how the proposed framework applies to other figurative domains, including idioms and metaphors.

Data Availability Statement

The coded dataset (216 teacher $\times$ proverb cases), the codebook, all cross-tabulations reported in this article and the questionnaire are openly available in Zenodo at <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23534788>. Raw questionnaire responses are not publicly shared in order to protect participant anonymity.

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Ethics Approval

Formal ethics approval was not required, as the study involved an anonymous questionnaire with adult professionals. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained through a statement at the beginning of the questionnaire (see Section 3.1).

AI Use Disclosure

During the revision of this manuscript, the author used Grammarly to assist with language editing. The author reviewed and edited all output and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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