

## ***Teaching Idiom and Metaphor via Poetry in the Chinese EFL Classroom***

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### **Abstract**

The use of poetry is discussed as a vehicle for teaching concepts of idiom and metaphor to EFL students. It is difficult for any learning non-native speaker to understand idiom and metaphor, and the specific difficulties inherent in translating from Chinese to English, and vice-versa, make it such that many students rely on searching for one-to-one correspondences between unfamiliar English words and the familiar Chinese. Students often resort to working through new texts via literal translation, leaving them with an incomplete understanding of words in context. Poetic diction by nature pushes the boundaries of linguistic capability. Therefore, we argue that close reading of poetry in the EFL classroom helps students gain a more nuanced understanding of the English language. It is our belief that doing so is the best way for students to hone these skills, and thus move from a surface, rudimentary proficiency in English to a more fluent, nuanced, pragmatic understanding of the linguistic subtleties necessary to understand all varieties of academic texts, literary or otherwise.

Keywords: EFL, ESL, non-native speakers, English language learners, poetry, literature, poetic diction, academic language, idiom, metaphor, figurative language, abstract language, China

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## Introduction

Language is an imprecise approximation of our thoughts, feelings, emotions, etc. As such, languages will always be filled with ambiguity in meaning. This can be problematic at times, but it can also be a useful weapon when wielded properly. Metaphorical language works to expand our perception and understanding of otherwise one-dimensional ideas in all walks of life. When delivered well, this allows the speaker to more closely indicate the complexity and nuance of his or her message; when understood properly, this allows the listener to make a more personal connection to an otherwise straightforward idea. Metaphorical language is used every single day by every single English speaker, and the vast majority of these instances are not the stuff of Shakespeare. Nonetheless, these metaphors allow us in the same way to get closer to true meaning; therefore, it is important for all speakers not only to understand such metaphors, but be able to create and use them to express their own nuanced ideas.

For the non-native speaker, this is just one more thing to keep track of on top of many others. In order to become fluent, non-native speakers must learn to work with and understand metaphor as seamlessly as they strive to understand dictionary definitions and one-to-one translations of everyday English vocabulary. Our students, for example, as intermediate-level speakers, go through class with dictionaries open and mark up texts with a myriad of Chinese words that approximate the translation. First, this indicates that the students are focused on literal meaning rather than subtext, as the surface meaning of the texts often still eludes them. Second, it suggests that any complexity in the text also eludes them. This goes double for lectures, during which students may find themselves falling behind quite quickly if they have to pause to consider meaning.

Metaphor is a tool that requires the use of context clues in order to understand meaning. A student can look up all of the individual words in a metaphor, simile, or idiomatic expression, but the student will eventually have to use context in order to fully understand the meaning of the expression. Metaphor, therefore, would appear to be a useful tool in getting students to use context to understand English in all settings, including literal settings that may include unfamiliar words.

Of course, academic texts frequently use metaphors, idioms, etc. Literature does more so, though, and poetry more than any other genre of literature employs metaphorical language and capitalizes on nuance and complexity of language in order to develop meaning; whereas only the most abstract works of fiction may require the reader to work to understand the essential narrative, even mainstream poetry often forces the reader to work to understand precisely what he or she just read.

While it has long been thought that literature, in particular poetry, is too difficult for English language learners, in part because of this difficulty, others in more recent years have pushed back against this conventional wisdom (Khatib, 2011). For our part, given how closely the ability to read context and the study of metaphor in poetry can be related, we sought to determine if poetry might be used as a vehicle to better understand metaphor and, as a result, context for English language learners. In other words, through the study of poetry, might EFL students be better able to use metaphor

to express their own ideas? Might they likewise be better able to use context to understand others' ideas?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The pedagogical usefulness of poetry in the ESL/EFL classroom is still an understudied topic in TESOL and Applied Linguistics research. Moving into this terrain, we have turned to a few recent studies of direct relevance that we have used as guideposts. Beyond these works our study has been informed by some broader philosophical, linguistic, and neurobiological perspectives. The studies, theories, and authors detailed below have informed the questions we have asked as well as the manner in which we have structured our study and analyzed our results, particularly with regard to analyzing and tapping into the affective power of poetry and metaphorical language toward acquisitive ends in EFL settings at the college level.

### **The TESOL Frame**

Kadim Öztürk's study (2014) on teaching poetry in a Turkish EFL classroom emphasizes task-based instruction, as "language learners often find it difficult to transfer classroom language into real-life situations since the traditional type of language activities tend to eliminate the abstract nature of . . . language".

Mohammad Khatib's study (2011) of teaching English literature and poetry in an Iranian university pays particular attention to contributing factors that shape student attitudes and motivation. He introduces pedagogical strategies that he believes can positively impact the affective disposition of students toward literature, specifically poetry. Further, Khatib's assertion that "poetry writing can serve as a way of enhancing the learner's feel for the language" influenced our decision to emphasize creation in the tasks.

Educator and researcher Yu Ren Dong (2004) addresses the challenges of teaching metaphorical language to English language learners and invokes the research and theories of George Lakoff. Dong reminds us of a basic concept espoused by Lakoff regarding metaphor and convention, saying that "even imaginative or poetic metaphors are governed by cultural conventions and our beliefs and values". She argues that poetic, "non-conventional" metaphors are born out of these wider conventions, values, and conceptual systems. Therefore, to successfully achieve metaphorical language acquisition, both conventional and imaginative metaphors should be involved.

### **The Philosophy of Language Frame**

In discussing the nature of metaphor, Richard Rorty (1989) pointed out that "old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, then used as a foil for new metaphors". Linguist Guy Deutscher famously stated that "all language is a reef of dead metaphor" (2005). He went on to say that metaphor is "the engine of language change". We certainly agree with these observations of the nature of language. Metaphor is the cutting edge of language change, where fresh and clever turns of phrase, sufficient in their "lexical charisma", take hold within a small group or community of individuals before going viral, rapidly self-replicating throughout a language until reaching a level of full-fledged idiomaticity or cliché, and even reaching literality in cases where metaphors become so faint that they do not register

as metaphors. Lakoff discusses “the metaphors we live by”, metaphors in conventional use—i.e., the middling realm of idiomaticity. He characterizes metaphors as “general mappings across conceptual domains. . . . these general principles which take the form of conceptual mappings, apply not just to novel poetic expressions, but to much of ordinary everyday language.” His point is well-taken. The “locus of metaphor” essentially references the birth of meaning through a “cross-mapping” of disparate mental domains. Though we may, in light of Deutscher’s “reef of dead metaphor” insight, understand the locus of metaphor and the locus of language in general to be in essence one and the same. In other words, all language, not only what we perceive to be metaphoric language, consists in the possibility of conceptualizing one mental domain in terms of another.

Applying these wider pragmatic philosophical concepts to the field of TESOL raises questions surrounding the pedagogical value of historical linguistic knowledge and the prospect of raising pragmatic awareness of both conventional and imaginative metaphor, and crucially the interrelatedness between the two—that is, addressing how metaphorical expressions evolve over time, and discerning that creative and commonplace formulations both share and move along a common spectrum. Furthermore, these inquiries should not merely look into the efficacy of teaching/learning this knowledge, but also the efficacy of actively and imaginatively participating in it through the creation of original metaphorical language and poetic works by students themselves.

Some would argue that obscure, “imaginative” metaphors will not support proficiency when it comes to conventional idioms in writing and speech, and that it confuses and overburdens the learner. One response is that teaching metaphor through poetry is more than just reading obscure metaphors. It lends itself to teaching idiomatic expressions almost by default since the negotiating and translating of the meaning of a metaphor will frequently come in the form of more conventional and popular idiomatic expressions that relate the poetic sentiment. Extending from this we ask whether or not entering into a dialogue with students about the fundamental nature and pragmatic aspects of language boosts not only metaphor comprehension but second language acquisition in general. Is there real pedagogical value in teaching the relationship between imaginative/poetic metaphoric formulations and popular idiomatic expressions? If so, how can we quantify that value, and what are the best teaching practices to maximize it?

### **The Neurobiological Frame**

The present study is further informed by neurobiological perspectives, particularly in its analysis of affective/emotional factors. Donna Tileston has argued that “when a learner is emotionally engaged the brain codes content by triggering chemicals that mark the experience as important and meaningful” (2004). This chemical triggering is the essential connection between cognitive and affective systems as content is chemically marked by emotion.

Complementary of Tileston’s work is John Schumann’s research (1997) on motivation in the context of second language acquisition in which he traces motivation to the interplay of affective and cognitive systems in the brain. His premise is that emotion is the essential driver of what we consider to be cognition, and

it is hugely determinative of motivation, and that motivation is the determining factor in second language acquisition outcomes.

## **Method**

The purpose of the experiment was to gauge the short-term efficacy of using poetry to strengthen students' relationship with metaphorical and idiomatic language in quotidian or academic contexts. Students completed a writing assignment with an emphasis on metaphor prior to classroom study. Students then studied two poems during two separate class periods, emphasizing the poet's use of metaphorical language in expression via a series of task-based assignments. Students then completed a longer follow-up writing assignment in which they attempted to describe similar subjects via extended metaphor.

## **Participants**

The twenty participants in this experiment were all in a single ESL course, Academic Written Discourse II. Students were all first-year, second-semester students between eighteen and twenty years old at Wenzhou-Kean University, an English-language university based in China. Students were all native Chinese speakers with intermediate-level proficiency in English.

## **Materials**

Two poems were studied. The first poem studied was Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz". This poem was chosen for its relatively simple language, use of extended metaphor, and ambiguous meaning. The second poem studied was Sylvia Plath's aptly titled "Metaphors". This poem was chosen for its more complex language and use of a series of phrasal metaphors. These poems were further chosen because they are widely anthologized in English-language literature textbooks, and because they focus on two different universal subjects—respectively, one's relationship with a parent figure and one's relationship with oneself.

Poems were photocopied, passed out in class, and read aloud as a group. Other supplementary materials were used in order to augment students' understanding of the studied poems.

## **Task**

As a class, vocabulary words were discussed and reviewed prior to poem study. Next, the poem was read out loud twice by the instructor. Students then split up into small groups of their own choosing and were asked to complete a series of tasks related to understanding the poem and, specifically, its use of metaphorical language. During the completion of these tasks, the instructor remained silent while observing and taking notes. Finally, the groups presented their interpretations, and the class as a whole discussed the poem.

## Procedure

### Pre-study

Students were given a series of metaphors taken from various poems and asked to identify the subject and object of each metaphor. The lines were as follows: “An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick” (William Butler Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium”); “Assorted characters of death and blight / Mixed ready to begin the morning light” (Robert Frost, “Design”); “the sun is a flame-white disc / in silken mists” (William Carlos Williams, “Danse Russe”); “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.” (Ezra Pound, “In a Station of the Metro”); and “To live in Wales is to be conscious / At dusk of the spilled blood / That went to the making of the wild sky” (RS Thomas, “Welsh Landscape”).

Students were then asked to rewrite five more metaphors, also taken from various poems, in their own words. The lines were as follows: “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” (TS Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”); “Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,— / The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells” (Wilfred Owen, “Anthem for Doomed Youth”); “The crowds upon the pavement / Were fields of harvest wheat” (W. H. Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening”); “The hawk comes. His wing / Scythes down another day, his motion / Is that of the honed steel-edge” (Robert Penn Warren, “Evening Hawk”); and “If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head” (Shakespeare, “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”).

Finally, students were asked to “write a paragraph in which [they] describe one of the following emotions in metaphorical terms: *love, hate, anger, happiness, sadness, or pity*.”

### Pre-task

Students were asked to consider questions in relation to the poem’s subject. Students were encouraged to write their answers down. Our reasoning for not requiring them to write their answers was that the questions being asked were intensely personal issues, and we felt that if they were required to write and submit their answers, they would be less likely to be honest with themselves. We were more concerned with putting them in the proper mindset to receive and understand the poem, we chose to forego asking them to record their answers in the hopes that they would be completely honest with themselves.

Supplementary materials were used in order to further acclimate the students to the mindset needed to consider and understand the poem. Unfamiliar vocabulary words were written on the board and defined via conversation. Finally, the poem was read twice out loud by the instructor in order to stress standard pronunciation and cadence.

### Task

As we allowed ourselves room to revise as the experiment proceeded, the specifics of each class period vary. However, it should be mentioned that for both class periods, although metaphor was used as a vehicle, our primary emphasis was on teaching the poem. For “My Papa’s Waltz”, we began with the following questions for consideration: “What kind of relationship do you have with your mother or father?”, “What do you think is good about that relationship?”, and “What difficulties are there

in that relationship?” The poem was supplemented with a recording of Strauss’s “Blue Danube” while the waltz as a musical form was explained. Students were asked to describe and discuss the emotion and/or tone of the waltz. Vocabulary words included *dizzy*, *romped*, *countenance*, *scrape*, *buckle*, and *clinging*.

There were eight tasks. First, the students were instructed to take turns reading the poem aloud to their group members; while doing so, students were asked to move slowly so that they could feel the weight, or stress, of each word and syllable. Second, students were asked to choose which of four paraphrases best fit the meaning of the poem: (a) “The speaker recalls happy memories of his father”; (b) “The speaker recalls ambivalent memories of his alcoholic, but loving, father”; (c) “The speaker recalls troubled memories of his abusive, alcoholic father”; or (d) “The speaker compares his mother and father”. Third, the students were asked to identify any figurative language used in the poem. Fourth, they were asked to replace their chosen examples with appropriate substitutions. Fifth, they were asked to describe what the poem, as a whole, meant. Sixth, they were asked to write down any ambiguous parts of the poem. Seventh, they were asked to add several lines to the end of the poem. Eighth, and finally, they were asked to describe the function of the poem’s title. The final fifteen minutes of the 75-minute period were then reserved for open-ended discussion focused on meaning and interpretation.

Because most groups did not complete all of the tasks assigned for “My Papa’s Waltz”, we reduced the number of tasks required for “Metaphors” to four. Questions for consideration were as follows: “Think about a time you were unsure of yourself. What made you insecure or critical of yourself?”; “If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be and why?”; and “What do you like about yourself?” As supplementary materials, the instructor provided a biographical sketch of Plath in order to emphasize her struggle with depression and eventual suicide in order to set a proper tone for the reading of the poem. Finally, vocabulary words were *syllable*, *ponderous*, *strolling*, *tendrils*, *yeasty*, and *minted*.

The first task, as with the Roethke poem, was to read “Metaphors” out loud. Next, the students were asked to consider the visual images in each line and draw each image as best they could (see Appendix C). Then, the students were asked to guess what the speaker is. (If you are unfamiliar with the poem, the speaker is describing her pregnant self; this poem is also included in the appendix for reference.) Finally, students were once again asked to extend the poem by several lines.

### **Post-study**

Students were asked to describe, using metaphors and imagery, either the relationship they have with another person or the relationship they have with the self. This was assigned as a freewriting assignment for which they had one hour. They were allowed to keep their technology out, although strongly encouraged to use it only if absolutely necessary. (In hindsight, it might have aided their creation of metaphor if we had forced them to eschew dictionaries, but live and learn.)

## Results

All students showed some level of competency in their ability to create metaphors in the initial exercise; although, as expected, some students had a better understanding of metaphor than others, even after discussion. (It should be noted that metaphor was discussed via a duo of Frost poems two or three weeks prior to this extended assignment, so all students had been familiarized with the core concepts.) Where students struggled, it was typically because they got the metaphor part of the assignment out of the way quickly, then settled into standard description. For example, Caroline wrote that “Anger is like a little monster in everyone’s mind”—not exactly a metaphor, but figurative, at least. However, she then goes on to describe a series of things the monster does in reaction to very real things that happen to us, suggesting that she struggles to move from her vision of reality to a symbolic construct.

A number of students developed some striking work. We highlight three examples below. (Original spelling, punctuation, grammar, and mechanics have been retained.)

### Sheila

Sheila had an interesting trajectory because she was one of the few students who correctly identified the subject and object of the fifth metaphor in the first exercise (from Thomas’s “Welsh Landscape”). That metaphor was chosen specifically because it reverses the typical syntax of the metaphor, which indicates that she was actually able to understand it, not just follow the format described in the introduction to the exercise. Then, though, her prewriting paragraph is virtually void of metaphor: “Anger, a sudden evil comes to mind, makes you feel like doing anything bad to survive. He may come without any reasons and may go when you feel peaceful. When he comes, you are controlled all by him and cannot get rid of him.” Rather than describing anger using metaphor, the student instead personifies anger—a kind of metaphorical language, to be sure, but not true metaphor.

She improved greatly on her freewriting, in which she describes a lost relationship of sorts: “The string linked us together has been cut off recently. The first time two talkative sparrows flied everywhere together and built up their neats closely. Sharing things with each other is really a happy thing. Gradually, they flied farther and found other groups to live with though the relationship never changed. . . . When they were taking a break on a tree after a long time of flying, one of the sparrows asked another sparrow that why it always find her when she felt tired. The sparrow who was asked felt akward and lonely and thought itself is the one who always accompany her.”

Outside of her use of first-person pronouns, there is no explanation otherwise—the piece remains entirely in the metaphor of the two sparrows. This may have been a product of time—she understood metaphor, but ran short on time during her prewriting—but there is no doubt that her freewriting demonstrates a better understanding of how to create metaphor than her prewriting does.

## Optimus

In Optimus's case, the assessment could go either way rather easily. He was able to identify metaphor about as well as any other student in the class, getting three out of five correct (he missed the Thomas example), and his second exercise is filled with rather literal descriptions of the metaphors rather than paraphrases; for example, he "paraphrases" the Shakespeare lines as "The writer compare a woman's hair to wires, to show the hair is hard and straight." But, his prewriting does demonstrate some understanding of metaphor, even if it is of the call-and-response method: "The hate in his heart is a flame, almost burn everything into ashes and dusk. His unsuccessful revenge increased the emotion of hate, which gradually burned himself into a devil." His freewriting, on his relationship with his mother, demonstrates a similar formulaic approach in which he provides a metaphor, but follows it with an explanation: "My mother is a flashlight. She only beacons me and others, hardly shines up herself. She is my alarm clock, maybe more accurate than a real one. . . . After several years, I began my high school life. My relationship with my mother changed. The heavy study pressure was a high mountain pressed me out of breath. My mother became my shield. She kept me from the interference of the outside world, help me to deal with many other things."

Optimus, therefore, demonstrated a clear understanding of metaphor, even if he was unable—by design or otherwise—to maintain an extended metaphor describing their relationship. It is difficult to say if this is to be called an improvement or not (and indicates to us that we may have been better off using a full freewriting assignment as prewriting rather than a shortened version.)

## Hans

While Hans performed about as well as the other students in identifying metaphors in established poems, his prewriting demonstrates a strong preliminary understanding of metaphor: "Pity: The sun goes down before I take a look; The plane takes off when I arrive at the airport; My parents grow grey hair when I come back home; Time goes by when I finally realize."

His version of freewriting made use of a nested story, in which he introduces his topic—his relationship with his best friend—in largely literal terms (although he calls her "a flower standing beside" him). He then provides the metaphor: "Two rivers flowed along the mountain, they divided sometimes, but kept parallel. One day, one of them, tried to collaborate with the other one, while it just found it impossible. Because the other one have focused on another river. . . . Then two rivers had to cross the mountaintop, which brought enormous pressure honestly. They all knew it clearly that over the hill, they would separate immediately. That's life and they had to finish it. They did their best on the process, unfortunately, which made no difference on the result at all. . . . Two rivers flows still, toward unknown directions. However, they did believe to see each other again soon."

He was largely able to maintain the extended metaphor, even if at times he switched to personification. It is likewise unclear if this was a success or not, though it should be noted that his ability to interpret and paraphrase metaphor was on the weaker end during the prewriting process. At the least, we can say that his freewriting demonstrates an ability to synthesize metaphor into a larger context, woven into a real-world story rather than set up as a series of disparate metaphors. This is not to say

the latter is necessarily bad, but the student nonetheless showed a different, developed approach in his freewriting that did not exist in his prewriting.

## **Conclusions**

While students generally came in with some understanding of metaphor, either through previous study in other classes or because of earlier study in our class, the class as a whole appears to have demonstrated an improved ability to create and work in metaphor following study of the poems. Following the two class periods, most students were able to demonstrate some ability to describe either themselves or their relationship with another person in metaphorical terms. The students sometimes struggled with these metaphors, but they appeared to be able to work with them and sustain them over the course of the freewriting assignment, which seems to be indicative of the affective power of personal creation in the learning process. This act of creation is important because it demonstrates an ability to do more than translate metaphorical language into terms they may or may not understand. Rather, it demonstrates that they can think of themselves and the world around them in these terms, and gives them a more powerful articulatory arsenal with which to express their own developing personal perspectives with original, imaginative expressions and phraseology, which is a fundamental skill necessary in critical thinking and, thus, in participating in academic discourse (Dong, 2004). It furthermore demonstrates that they have the pragmatic and metalinguistic understanding that the line between conventional and imaginative expressions is not fixed, that the contexts in which we write and share ideas are ever-shifting, and that through the power of their own imaginative writing they can influence popular conventions, in academic discourse and culture at large.

A long-term approach would yield clearer results. However, focusing on short-term gains is helpful because it demonstrates that the study of poetry could be useful in short bursts. Most ESL/EFL classes will not be literature-based; efficacy aside, students struggling to learn the language may get worn out if their linguistic skills are put to such an extensive test regularly. Therefore, it is useful to examine whether or not short-term gains may be made, so such exercises may be used periodically as diversions to break from the usual academic essays, etc. Using poetic study as a working break may develop a more well-rounded reader, one who will not hesitate to analyze unfamiliar words and phrases in academic texts in context, and may be more ready to describe new academic contexts using critical thought as opposed to regurgitation.

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## Appendix A

*My Papa's Waltz*, by Theodore Roethke<sup>1</sup>

The whiskey on your breath  
Could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.  
We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.  
The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.  
You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

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<sup>1</sup> Courtesy of *The Poetry Foundation* <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172103>>

## Appendix B

*Metaphors*, by Sylvia Plath<sup>2</sup>

I'm a riddle in nine syllables,  
An elephant, a ponderous house,  
A melon strolling on two tendrils.  
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!  
This loaf's big with its yeasty rising.  
Money's new-minted in this fat purse.  
I'm a means, a stage, a cow in calf.  
I've eaten a bag of green apples,  
Boarded the train there's no getting off.

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<sup>2</sup> Courtesy of *Shenandoah* <<http://shenandoahliterary.org/blog/2012/01/metaphors-by-sylvia-plath/>>

## Appendix C

Student interpretations of the imagery in “Metaphors”. Each group was asked to contribute one image on the board; however, some groups had a lot of fun with this task.

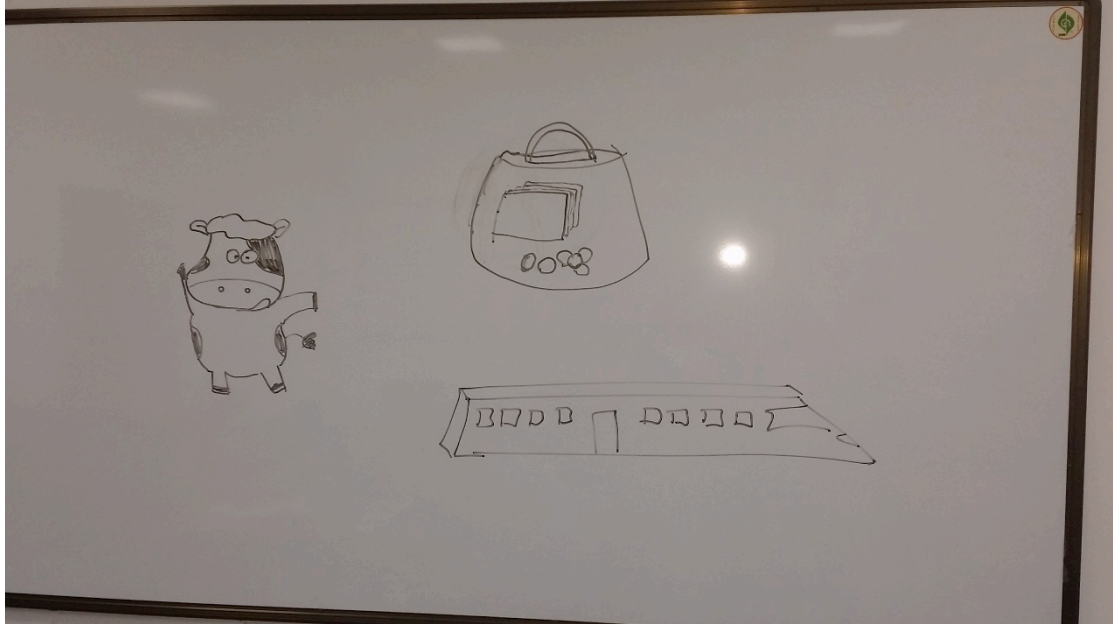


Figure 1: Clockwise from left: “a cow in calf”, “Money’s new-minted in this fat purse”, and “Boarded the train”.

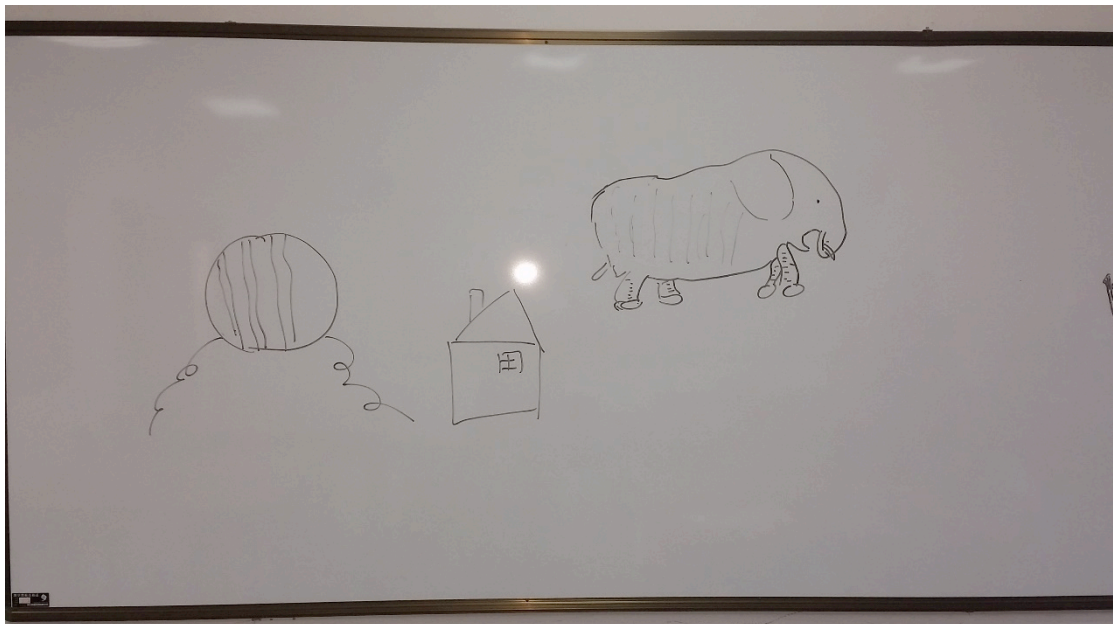


Figure 2: From left: “A melon strolling on two tendrils”, “a ponderous house”, and “An elephant”.