

## The Impact of Metaphorical Competence and Metasemantic Awareness on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Writing Achievement

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**Abstract:** *The present study was conducted to survey the impact of metaphorical competence and metasemantic awareness on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing achievement. To this goal, after administering a PET test to homogenize the learners with regard to their language proficiency, 75 participants encompassing a control group and two experimental groups each consisting of 25 learners, were selected. They were given a validated pretest and posttest on metaphorical comprehension and production. Each experimental group enjoyed its treatment while the control group received no special treatment but general principles of writing. After eliciting the data based on pretest and posttest results, analyses conducted in this study were analyzed through certain statistical techniques including paired-samples t-test. The difference between pretest and posttest results is significant enough to lead to the rejection of two null hypotheses, hence concluding that metaphorical competence and metasemantic awareness will be considered as a step towards facilitating the process of learning and teaching metaphors.*

**Key Words:** *metaphor, metaphorical competence, metasemantic awareness, writing*

### 1 Introduction

In the last forty years, research findings of metaphors have indicated serious implications for second language teaching and learning, but a noticeable headway into pedagogical practice has not occurred yet. Some empirical assessments of language learning involvement started in the

last few years and hopefully they may lead to a good description of how and how much metaphor and generally figurative language is applied in real world.

As Danesi (1993, p.490) suggests, the literalness of L2 learners' language seems to be a result of their lack of "opportunity to access the metaphorically structured conceptual domains fundamental in second language discourse". What all of this means is that many of L2 learners never use the everyday metaphorical expressions of L2, or use them very rarely.

On the other end of the extreme, one of the language learning skills is writing. However, many teachers spend a little amount of their classroom time on writing and its assessment and beyond they ignore the area of metaphor as a facet of language and thought. Learners' writing performance can be supposed as a good measurement tool representing their efficiency in using correct forms of a specific language. Accordingly, teachers and researchers have always been searching for new and effective ways to fill this gap.

Based on the discussions above, one can immediately identify some areas of silence in finding the impact of the metasemantic awareness and metaphorical competence on L2 learners' writing achievement. Because little notice has been given to L2 learners in this domain among Iranian language learners, the present research aimed at investigating the above mentioned variables on their writing skill.

## **2 Review of Literature**

### **2.1 Metaphorical Competence**

Often an obvious ubiquitous aspect of language is ignored and goes under silence by SLA researchers and the second language learners' ability to use metaphors is still not taken as a core ability. It may be due to the reason that the subject of metaphor regarded as a literary device, a device of poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish matter of peripheral and secondary interest to many L2 learners. Metaphor and Metaphoric Competence (MC) play an important role in all fields of communicative competence and focally contributes to grammatical, illocutionary, sociolinguistics, textual and strategic competence. Therefore, it is possible to find a multidirectional use of metaphor to second language.

The lack of awareness of metaphorical concepts and lexical strategies often lead L2 learners to render a metaphorical expression in the L2 by using an analogous counterpart of their L1. So, the meaning of a word or sentence is frequently translated literally by activating the L1 concept owing to a lack of knowledge of all possible meanings a word or expression could have.

In addition, owing to the lack of the necessary L2 conceptual or linguistic resources, such learners may turn to their native language conceptual system and linguistic expressions (Danesi, 2008; Odlin, 2008), which might be different from those of the target language, or may appeal to the avoidance strategy.

## **2.2 Metasemantic Awareness**

Metalinguistic Awareness (MA), in broadest term, means knowledge or awareness about language. Fontich and Camps (2013) consider that the concept of metalinguistic awareness is multidimensional.

Metasemantic ability as a dimension of metalinguistic incorporates the knowledge that words are words and the skill to choose words deliberately in the process of writing. Metasemantics in writing has the possibilities to push readers just because the writer has more time to select the best word or semantic chains. Karmiloff-Smith (1996), points out that word choice is the deliberate competence to gain access to lexicon in order to choose vocabulary suitable for the given writing context. It is the ability to consider knowledge of the concepts words point to- both connotatively and denotatively (Croft & Cruse, 2004; Evans & Green, 2006).

## **2.3 Writing**

The most significant reason for teaching writing is that it is one of the four basic language skills: listening, speaking, and reading. "However, it seems the most difficult one compared to other skills. Consequently, teaching writing as one of the two productive skills cannot be split up from the other two receptive language skills"(Harmer 1998, p.78).

Brown (2001), asserts that writing is a process of transferring ideas and knowledge on paper to transcribe them into words, to develop main ideas, to structuralize them and make them coherent and well-organized. As Weigle (2002) believes, the ability to write effectively is getting more and more significant in our global world. Therefore, writing principles have an increasing role in foreign language education. It is essential for teachers to recognize writing stages through which learners are passing their writing process in order to teach writing effectively. Any learner matches his/her writing with his/her own abilities and needs (Chastain, 1988).

In order to investigate the raised research questions, the following null hypotheses are formulated:

HO<sub>1</sub>: Metaphorical competence has no significant impact on EFL learners' writing achievement.

HO<sub>2</sub>: Metasemantic awareness has no significant impact on EFL learners' writing achievement.

HO<sub>3</sub>: Traditional method does not enhance the writing ability of the Iranian

intermediate EFL learners.

### 3 Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

In order to carry out the study, 75 male and female Iranian intermediate EFL learners whose age ranged between 13 and 48 were selected through convenience sampling. After taking the PET, the homogenized participants were randomly divided into three equal groups of 25 learners in one control group and two experimental groups.

#### 3.2 Instrumentation and Materials

Prior to the treatment, to identify the homogeneity of participants a PET test (2003) was employed to make sure that they enjoy the same level of proficiency. The test comprised 50 multiple choice and filling the blanks items.

Next a teacher-made pretest, whose validation was checked, in the form of recognition, comprehension, recall and production test of intended metaphoric expressions of the study, comprising 21 items was administered. The items were selected on the basis of the learners' instructional objectives which would be fulfilled during the semester. The pretest aimed at seeking learners' metaphorical and their metasemantic competence to get the intended meanings.

Due to the extensive studies that have been conducted on the conceptualization of emotions in English (such as Kövecses 1986, Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and the system of event structure metaphor in English, these two groups of metaphors and their submappings were selected as the most pervasive metaphors in English. Then, reviewing lots of books and dictionaries including *Idioms Organisers* (Wright, 1999), *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (2007), selected units used to teach metaphorical expressions as the instructional treatment. The average instruction time was about one hour. After the completion of the instructional treatment, a validated teacher-made posttest in the same form as pretest was carried out.

#### 3.3 Procedure

To accomplish the purpose of the study, the first step was to give a PET test to make sure that all the participants were homogeneous. The second step was administering a pretest to find out the degree of form and semantic familiarity of participants with the intended metaphoric expressions. The third step was conducting classes for 15 one-hour sessions, based on different treatments. The control group just received the standard writing principles in order to learn a well-formed writing.

The metaphorical group received metaphorical expressions based on the units the researcher provided. Any unit served the purpose of presenting the participants with the metaphorical expressions with the exercises including recognition part of literal and metaphorical meanings of sentences, filling the blanks with proper words given in the box and a revision part containing the missing words based on the expressions taught in the unit. The metasemantic group received the metaphorical expressions emphasizing on the juxtaposition of the expression components in order to convey the intended meaning in the very context.

The teacher encouraged the learners to tackle the semantics of the expression as a problem-solving task. She encouraged them to resort to contextual clues to infer its meaning. If the learners were on the right track, the teacher offered further help towards the full interpretation. If they stayed in the dark, the teacher tried to clarify the meaning of the expression.

Based on the metaphorical expressions appeared in pretest and posttest, the researcher categorized some probable channels through which learners found the correct answers, including frequency of use, transparency, simplicity of form and vocabulary, similarity to L1, and context-bounding. To do so, a questionnaire was developed by the researcher and distributed at the end of pretest and posttest sessions to ask the learners mark the channels they went through.

To score the learners' writings an objective procedure was utilized. Criterion for scoring pretest, posttest, and writing assignments was based on the PET writing scale of Cambridge Framework. By implementing blind rating, three raters participated in the rating of pretest and posttest.

### **3 Findings**

In order to arrive at the answers to the research questions certain statistical techniques were run to analyze and interpret the data gathered from the pretest and posttest. The obtained data were analyzed via the paired samples t-test which assumes normality of data. To avoid washback effects, the pretest and posttest of this study were different. Therefore, the reliability between them was checked. Because of three raters, interrater reliability was also calculated for the writing section of pretest and posttest.

As displayed in Table 4.1 the assumption of normality was met. The ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their standard errors were within the ranges of +/- 1.96.

**Table: 4.1**  
**Testing Normality Assumption; Pretest and Posttest of Writing by Groups**

Group	N	Skewness			Kurtosis			
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio	
<i>Metaphorical</i>	<i>Pretest</i>	25	-.498	.464	-1.07	-.678	.902	-0.75
	<i>Posttest</i>	25	-.505	.464	-1.09	.078	.902	0.09
<i>Metasemantic</i>	<i>Pretest</i>	25	-.529	.464	-1.14	.783	.902	0.87
	<i>Posttest</i>	25	.311	.464	0.67	.193	.902	0.21
<i>Control</i>	<i>Pretest</i>	25	-.751	.464	-1.62	.152	.902	0.17
	<i>Posttest</i>	25	-.022	.464	-0.05	-.340	.902	-0.38

A paired-samples t-test was run in order to investigate the impact of metaphorical competence and metasemantic awareness on the EFL subjects' improvement of writing ability in order to probe the first and second research questions. As Table 4.2 indicates, the metaphorical group had a higher mean on the posttest of writing ( $M = 14.90$ ,  $SD = 2.68$ ) than pretest ( $M = 13.88$ ,  $SD = 2.92$ ). Also based on Table 4.3, the metasemantic group showed a higher mean on the posttest of writing ( $M = 15.18$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ) than pretest ( $M = 14.25$ ,  $SD = 2.10$ ).

**Table: 4.2**  
**Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Writing (Metaphorical Group)**

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Metaphorical Posttest	14.90	25	2.680	.536
Metaphorical Pretest	13.88	25	2.929	.586

**Table: 4.3**  
**Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Writing (Metasemantic Group)**

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Metasemantic Posttest	15.18	25	1.499	.300
Metasemantic Pretest	14.25	25	2.109	.422

The results of the paired-samples t-test ( $t(24) = 2.44$ ,  $p = .022$ ,  $r = .44$  representing an almost large effect size) indicated that there was a significant difference between metaphorical group's means on the pretest and posttest of writing (Table 4.4). The similar result happened to the metasemantic group's mean (Table 4.5). Thus the first and second null hypotheses were rejected.

**Table: 4.4**  
**Paired-Samples t-test; Posttest of Writing (Metaphorical Group)**

		Paired Differences		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
1.020	2.089	.418	.158	1.882	2.441	24	.022

**Table: 4.5**  
**Paired-Samples t-test; Posttest of Writing (Metasemantic Group)**

Paired Differences							
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		T	Df Sig. (2-tailed)	
			Lower	Upper			
.927	1.935	.387	.128	1.725	2.395	24	.025

A paired-samples t-test was run in order to investigate the impact of traditional method on the EFL subjects' improvement of writing ability in order to probe the third research question. Table 4.6 shows that the control group had a higher mean on the posttest of writing (M = 11.83, SD = 2.34) than pretest (M = 10.75, SD = 2.54).

**Table: 4.6**  
**Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Writing (Traditional Group)**

Group	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control Posttest	11.83	25	2.349	.470
Control Pretest	10.75	25	2.540	.508

The results of the paired-samples t-test ( $t(24) = 1.59, p = .125, r = .30$  representing a moderate effect size) indicated that there was not any significant difference between traditional group's means on the pretest and posttest of writing (Table 4.7). Thus the third null-hypothesis was supported.

**Table: 4.7**  
**Paired-Samples t-test; Posttest of Writing (Control Group)**

Paired Differences							
Mean	Std. Deviation Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Lower	Upper				
1.080	3.394 .679	-.321	2.481	1.591	24	.125	

The inter-rater reliability for the three raters who rated the subjects' writings on the pretest and posttest were .828 (p = .000) and .846 (p = .000) in order (Tables 4.8 & 4.9).

**Table: 4.8**  
**Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficient; Pretest of Writing**

95% Confidence Interval				F Test with True Value 0			
Intra-class Correlation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig	
Single Measures .616	.496	.721	5.805	74	148	.000	
Average Measures .828	.747	.886	5.805	74	148	.000	

**Table: 4.9**  
**Inter-Rater Reliability Coefficient; Posttest of Writing**

	95% Confidence Interval			F Test with True Value 0			
	Intra-class Correlation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Value	df1	df2	Sig
Single Measures	.647	.533	.746	6.495	74	148	.000
Average Measures	.846	.774	.898	6.495	74	148	.000

A meticulous comparison of experimental groups' pretest and posttest lead the researcher to provide tables of learners' familiarity percentage with conceptual metaphors (Tables 4.10 & 4.11). By comparing the mean of any skill, it is obvious that raising metaphor competence improved recognition, comprehension, and recall of metaphors in posttest. Among the skills, recall holds the highest difference with 44%. It is worth saying that the percentage of familiarity of emotion metaphors, except 3, is above 50%.



**Table: 4.10**  
**Percentage of Familiarity of Metaphorical Expressions on Pretest**

No.	Metaphorical Expressions	Skill	Percentage of Familiarity
1	Blow up*	Recognition	56%
2	Be on cloud nine*		76%
3	Buy time		96%
4	Razor-sharp		11%
5	The rat race		32%
6	Hot under the collar*		68%
7	A throw of the dice		8%
			Mean: 49.57%
8	To spend	Comprehension	100%
9	Make somebody's blood boil*		54%
10	Play your cards right		38%
11	Be shaking in your shoes*		19%
12	Spend money like water		96%
13	Light at the end of the tunnel		64%
14	Gloomy*		17%
			Mean: 55.42%
15	Blow a gasket*	Recall	0%
16	Keep an open mind		84%
17	Looking up		46%
18	Down the drain		0%
19	Play ball		11%
20	Floating on air*		51%
21	Slice of the pie		19%

*= Emotion Metaphor	Mean: 30.14%
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**Table: 4.11**  
**Percentage of Familiarity of Metaphorical Expressions on Posttest**

No.	Metaphorical Expressions	Skill	Percentage of Familiarity
1	Somebody's hands are tied	Recognition	48%
2	Play with fire		92%
3	Read somebody's mind		100%
4	Two-faced*		100%
5	Have a loose tongue*		76%
6	Add fuel to the fire		60%
7	Cross your fingers		80%
			Mean: 79.42%
8	Pull someone's leg	Comprehension	36%
9	Give something the thumbs up		76%
10	Sunny*		84%
11	Have a heart of gold*		81%
12	Slip of the tongue		63%
13	Get cold feet*		89%
14	Over the moon		11%
			Mean: 62.85%

15	Darken somebody's mood*	Recall	96%
16	Lift someone's spirits*		52%
17	In a rut		86%
18	Go one's separate way		92%
19	Cloud		56%
20	Spare time		64%
21	Erupt*		73%
* = Emotion Metaphor			Mean: 74.14%

**Table: 4.12**

**Percentage of Factors Leading to Choose the Answer**

No.	Metaphorical Expression	Frequency of Use	Transparency	Simplicity of Form & vocabulary	Similarity to L1	Context-bounding
1	Blow up	40%	62%	68%	32%	47%
2	Be on cloud nine	68%	96%	100%	88%	64%
3	Buy time	100%	96%	100%	96%	58%
4	Razor-sharp	17%	58%	46%	13%	68%
5	The rat race	41%	52%	76%	23%	48%
6	Hot under the collar	72%	63%	81%	18%	49%
7	A throw of the dice	4%	61%	46%	11%	36%
8	To spend	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
9	Make somebody's blood boil	42%	86%	78%	92%	0%
10	Play your cards right	37%	46%	100%	22%	62%
11	Be shaking in your shoes	8%	28%	58%	17%	92%
12	Spend money like water	78%	96%	100%	49%	0%

No.	Metaphorical Expression	Frequency of Use	Transparency	Simplicity of Form & vocabulary	Similarity to L1	Context-bounding
13	Light at the end of the tunnel	6%	64%	100%	31%	10%
14	Gloomy	42%	16%	22%	8%	89%
15	Blow a gasket	0%	18%	15%	0%	0%
16	Keep an open mind	92%	88%	100%	83%	58%
17	Looking up	92%	67%	100%	24%	78%
18	Down the drain	0%	2%	37%	0%	0%
19	Play ball	19%	46%	100%	4%	18%
20	Floating on air	28%	58%	71%	48%	64%
21	Slice of the pie	26%	10%	100%	6%	78%
22	Somebody's hands are tied	29%	56%	78%	89%	10%
23	Play with fire	83%	96%	100%	89%	15%
24	Read somebody's mind	100%	100%	100%	100%	58%
25	Two-faced	78%	100%	100%	100%	68%
26	Have a loose tongue	63%	68%	87%	91%	78%
27	Add fuel to the fire	18%	68%	89%	58%	11%
28	Cross your fingers	76%	68%	84%	42%	28%
29	Pull someone's leg	16%	18%	83%	24%	4%
30	Give something the thumbs up	36%	29%	41%	8%	51%
31	Sunny	100%	81%	100%	63%	11%
32	Have a heart of gold	29%	89%	100%	53%	0%
33	Slip of the tongue	47%	36%	66%	37%	13%
34	Get cold feet	17%	26%	100%	41%	8%
35	Over the moon	5%	44%	100%	19%	6%

No.	Metaphorical Expression	Frequency of Use	Transparency	Simplicity of Form & vocabulary	Similarity to L1	Context-bounding
36	Darken somebody's mood	0%	89%	78%	29%	68%
37	Lift someone's spirits	38%	36%	58%	58%	89%
38	In a rut	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
39	Go one's separate way	86%	98%	96%	87%	91%
40	Cloud	100%	63%	100%	18%	64%
41	Spare time	24%	17%	49%	33%	72%
42	Erupt	18%	25%	23%	18%	68%
Mean		44.64%	52.97%	74.52%	43.38%	43.16%

Having investigated on 42 metaphorical expressions, the researcher came to the conclusion shown in Table 4.12 in terms of the percentage of effectiveness of each metaphorical expressions used in pretest and posttest. As the table speaks, simplicity of form and vocabulary is the most influential factor in choosing the correct answer by holding 74.52%. After that, transparency of each expression, frequency of use, context-bounding, and finally similarity of each expression to L1 hold 52.97%, 44.64%, 43.16%, and 43.38% in order.

Raising metaphorical competence and metasemantic awareness significantly improved the experimental group's ability to write in a metaphoric frame. Therefore, it may be one of the most useful methods in language learning, especially to improve the learners' writing performance.

Based on the results gained through paired-samples t-test, most of the learners could apply metaphorical words and expressions in an appropriate way after participating in this study and enjoying the instructional treatments. Comparing the results, it is concluded that raising metaphorical competence is more effective than that of metasemantic awareness on learners' writing.

Overall, the analyses of data reported in the previous part indicated that metaphorical competence and metasegmentic awareness had significant impacts on EFL learners' writing achievement. Therefore, the first two null hypotheses were safely rejected while the traditional method did not enhance the writing ability of the Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Thus, the third null hypothesis was supported.

The findings are in line with the recommendations of many scholars including MacLennan (1994) who maintains that overt attention should be given to metaphor in classroom based on being an integral part of language which should not be neglected. Moreover, Deignan, Gabrys, and Solska (1997) suggest that raising awareness by means of discussion and comparison of metaphors in L1 and L2 is a helpful strategy to push learners to comprehend and generate metaphors properly and finally, according to Cacciari and Glucksberg (1994, p. 448), "figurative language is no longer perceived as merely an ornament added to everyday, straightforward literal language, but is instead viewed as a powerful communicative and conceptual tool".

The outcomes of the present study may serve as recommendations to teachers to modify instruction and offer a variety of opportunities for learners in the classroom. These findings can guide teachers about conducting classes utilizing metaphor and figurative language and ask their students to apply this aspect of language in writing.

The outcome may help materials developers and syllabus designers select a variety of appropriate writing materials to meet the needs of learners with different capabilities and interests. Curriculum designers should pay more attention to dedicate some room in textbooks for metaphorical expressions. Therefore, teachers as well as learners will certainly devote more time and energy to reinforce the incomparable footprints of this secretive fading aspect of the L2. The results of this study also provide them with information they can use to influence the writing performance of learners in a way to explore creative ways to implement figurative language and metaphorical expressions into the writing curriculum.

Likewise, test designers can make the most use of metaphor and metasegmentics and their impact on writing skill. Therefore, testers can work on metaphorical comprehension-production tests and make criteria to correct learners' writing. Consequently, based on the concept of washback effect, diagnostic instructional programs can be made in order to improve learners' writing performance.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The results gained from the current research substantiate explicit instruction of metasemantic and metaphorical expressions and the following conclusions can be drawn:

The first is the fact that L2 learners' metaphorical competence can be developed if they are exposed to metaphoric language via formal and explicit instruction. As mentioned earlier, Danesi (2003) maintained that metaphorical competence is not taken into account in teaching L2. Therefore, the application of metaphorical expressions in L2 classes will foster this vital aspect of language proficiency in L2 learners.

Based on the significant difference found between posttest results of control and experimental groups, it was concluded that making learners aware of figurative meaning of the expressions through understanding the juxtaposition of words and their own metalinguistic approaches, they could be more competent on comprehending and producing metaphors.

Despite some concerns, the outcomes of this research confirmed that the advantages of raising awareness in terms of figurative language clearly outweigh the negative aspects and existed obstacles. It was a good chance for learners to develop their metalinguistic abilities. Accordingly, it did affect positively learners' attitude towards their writing experiences.

#### **6 Suggestions and Recommendations**

Clearly, learning metaphors had turned to a kind of decoding process and learners were eager to enrich their writing via metaphors. By endorsing the techniques offered here, teachers can make learners more active, enthusiastic, alert and also make their classes more fruitful, rewarding and motivating. Metasemantic awareness and metaphorical competence raising strategies can be steps towards independent learning. Therefore, this study would be helpful for learners who study on their own. However, there is a problem even if teachers and learners are briefed and motivated enough to apply such a strategy, their policies are partly assigned by materials designers without whom teaching and learning if not impossible, at least seems to be a hard task. Inadequacies of the available references on metaphorical expressions may be a hindrance to applying this strategy. It is hoped that this study will be beneficial to materials designers as well as teachers and learners.

Metaphorical expressions should be taught overtly in contexts. So, the results of this study reflect that it is feasible to teach metaphorical expressions and increase the learners' awareness in metasemantics. Consequently, it may lead L2 learners to enjoy a good command of

this aspect of figurative language and finally form their language like native speakers. In other words, Learners will be able to comprehend and produce metaphoric language.

To sum it up, hopefully the results of the current study will motivate L2 instructors to pay closer attention to the concepts of metasemantic awareness and metaphorical competence. Regarding the favorable impact drawing L2 learners' attention to this facet of language, L2 teachers are supposed to support more in increasing the level of learners' awareness of relevant input. Also, the outcomes may hold up a part in saving figurative language, metaphoric here, from the risk of being inactive in L2 curricula.

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*Appendix A*

**Questionnaire attached to pretest & posttest**

How did you answer the following questions appeared on your test? More than one answer is possible.

Part	Question	I have heard it.	It was clear.	It was easy in form & vocabulary.	It had an equivalent in Farsi.	Based on context
A	1					
	2					
	3					
	4					
	5					
	6					
	7					
B	8					
	9					
	10					
	11					
	12					
	13					
	14					
C	15					
	16					
	17					
	18					
	19					
	20					
	21					