

# Similes in the ESL Classroom

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## Similes Defined

*Time flies like an arrow.*

*A legend as old as the hills.*

These are examples of a figure of speech called a simile. Similes are used to illustrate a point or elicit an emotion by comparing two objects or actions equally. The word simile comes from the Latin root *similes*, meaning sameness or likeness. The words similar and facsimile also use the same root. Similes are commonly used in literature but are also regularly used in conversation.

Similes can be recognized by the grammar patterns "... as (adjective/adverb) as ..." or "(verb) like ...". The original word or phrase of a simile is called the *tenor*, and the word or phrase used to illustrate the tenor is called the *vehicle*. In the two examples above time and legend are the tenors, and arrow and hills are the vehicles. The tenor and vehicle of a simile share some characteristic associated with the adjective, adverb, or verb, but otherwise would not literally be compared with each other.

Sometimes the adjective, adverb, or verb use a different meaning of the same word to compare the tenor and vehicle. In the simile, *The boy lies like a rug*, both a boy and a rug can *lie*, but the boy doesn't tell the truth, and the rug is spread out on the floor. *The man smokes like a chimney* is another such example.

## Classroom Activities

Similes can be easily introduced into ESL lessons to stimulate the students' creativity, interest, and humor while teaching parts of speech (adjectives, nouns, and verbs) or the comparative grammar forms.

### Parts of Speech

The activities here will work as the building blocks to creating similes for practicing the comparative patterns below.

Write several adjectives (hard, busy, flat, white, etc.) on the blackboard. Have your students write three or four nouns or noun phrases that can be associated with the adjectives. Encourage noun phrases and secondary meanings of the adjectives. As an example, under the word *hard* you can write the words rock, their last English examination, week-old bread, and walking up Mt. Fuji with a twenty kilogram backpack. Have the students share their lists of words and phrases in groups or with the class.

Next, write types of animals (fish, dogs, cows, eagles, etc.) on the blackboard. Animals are commonly used in similes because of their familiarity. Have the students come up with a list of three or four verbs associated with those animals. As an example, under the word *fish*, you could write swim, drink, and flop around when out of the water. Likewise, write some inanimate objects (ice, homework, silk, their textbook, etc.) on the blackboard and have the students come up with three or four adjectives for each. Again, have students share their lists.

### Comparative Pattern Practice

Similes are useful for learning and practicing the "... as (adjective/adverb) as ..." and "... (verb) like ..." comparative grammar patterns. After introducing these patterns, use the list of adjectives, nouns, and verbs that the students generated above to create a complete simile by combining the tenor, adjective or verb, with the vehicle. As an example, write the sentence, *My last English examination*

was as hard as climbing Mt. Fuji with a twenty kilogram backpack. For further practice, students could change the vehicle to use the words they came up with and add a new tenor; for example, *The bread was as hard as my last English examination.* Use this same activity for creating similes with the animals and objects using both the "... as ..." and "... like ..." grammar patterns.

## Conclusion

Have fun with similes and encourage imagination. You can use similes to enhance your students' creative English language abilities.

Similes are not limited to the English language. If you are teaching English to people of a culture different than yours, encourage your students to share their language's similes. You and your students will gain much insight into each other's cultures.

## Matching Similes

The similes below are so common that most have become cliché in their usage. However, they will give students a good idea of simile formation and usage.

Match the sentence on the left with the simile on the right. Write the letter on the line next to the number.

1. ___ The girl never tells the truth.	A. It's as smooth as silk.
2. ___ Please water that plant.	B. I'm as busy as a beaver.
3. ___ Those two children don't like each other.	C. She has been as quiet as a church mouse.
4. ___ That girl won't harm anyone.	D. Then I can fly like an eagle.
5. ___ I have many things to do today.	E. It's as flat as a pancake.
6. ___ Be careful of the the broken glass.	F. He's as strong as a bull.
7. ___ The water has frozen.	G. She's as slow as molasses in January.
8. ___ This material is very soft.	H. It's as fresh as a daisy.
9. ___ Did you scrub the floor?	I. He eats like a pig.
10. ___ Put on some warm gloves.	J. He eats like a bird.
11. ___ This cake is soft and fluffy.	K. She can sing like an angel.
12. ___ I want to do well on my tests.	L. She lies like a rug.
13. ___ This bed sheet is very clean and smells good.	M. It's as hard as a rock.
14. ___ I can't understand this question.	N. They're as black as coal.
15. ___ He will get lung cancer if he's not careful.	O. She looks as white as a ghost.
16. ___ My father taught me many things.	P. It's as light as a feather.
17. ___ Why is she taking so much time?	Q. It's as sweet as honey.
18. ___ I have heard that story many times before.	R. Time flies like an arrow.
19. ___ He's such a sloppy eater.	S. It's as clear as mud.
20. ___ He doesn't listen to anyone.	T. She is flying as high as a kite.
21. ___ The patient looks very ill.	U. She's as blind as a bat.
22. ___ He doesn't eat very much.	V. Your hands are as cold as ice.
23. ___ She sings with much feeling.	W. He's as stubborn as a mule.
24. ___ The man can lift this heavy box.	X. He sits there like a bump on a log.

25. ___ We shouldn't waste time worrying.	Y. It's as dry as a bone.
26. ___ Go to the bathroom to clean your hands.	Z. He smokes like a chimney.
27. ___ The boy is very lazy.	a. It's as clean as a whistle.
28. ___ The pudding tastes delicious.	b. It's as sharp as a knife.
29. ___ She has very poor eyesight.	c. She's as gentle as a lamb.
30. ___ Did you step on this?	d. He's as wise as an owl.
31. ___ She is very excited about getting her driver's license.	e. They always fight like cats and dogs.
32. ___ I will go check on the baby.	f. It's as old as the hills.

## Matching Similes - (answer sheet)

Match the beginning part of the conversation on the left with the simile on the right. Write the letter on the line next to the number.

1. <u>L</u> The girl never tells the truth.	A. It's as smooth as silk.
2. <u>Y</u> Please water that plant.	B. I'm as busy as a beaver.
3. <u>e</u> Those two children don't like each other.	C. She has been as quiet as a church mouse.
4. <u>c</u> That girl won't harm anyone.	D. Then I can fly like an eagle.
5. <u>B</u> I have many things to do today.	E. It's as flat as a pancake.
6. <u>b</u> Be careful of the the broken glass.	F. He's as strong as a bull.
7. <u>M</u> The water has frozen.	G. She's as slow as molasses in January.
8. <u>A</u> This material is very soft.	H. It's as fresh as a daisy.
9. <u>a</u> Did you scrub the floor?	I. He eats like a pig.
10. <u>V</u> Put on some warm gloves.	J. He eats like a bird.
11. <u>P</u> This cake is soft and fluffy.	K. She can sing like an angel.
12. <u>D</u> I want to do well on my tests.	L. She lies like a rug.
13. <u>H</u> This bed sheet is very clean and smells good.	M. It's as hard as a rock.
14. <u>S</u> I can't understand this question.	N. They're as black as coal.
15. <u>Z</u> He will get lung cancer if he's not careful.	O. She looks as white as a ghost.
16. <u>d</u> My father taught me many things.	P. It's as light as a feather.
17. <u>G</u> Why is she taking so much time?	Q. It's as sweet as honey.
18. <u>f</u> I have heard that story many times before.	R. Time flies like an arrow.
19. <u>I</u> He's such a sloppy eater.	S. It's as clear as mud.
20. <u>W</u> He doesn't listen to anyone.	T. She is flying as high as a kite.
21. <u>O</u> The patient looks very ill.	U. She's as blind as a bat.
22. <u>J</u> He doesn't eat very much.	V. Your hands are as cold as ice.
23. <u>K</u> She sings with much feeling.	W. He's as stubborn as a mule.
24. <u>F</u> The man can lift this heavy box.	X. He sits there like a bump on a log.
25. <u>R</u> We shouldn't waste time worrying.	Y. It's as dry as a bone.
26. <u>N</u> Go to the bathroom to clean your hands.	Z. He smokes like a chimney.

27. <u>X</u> The boy is very lazy.	a. It's as clean as a whistle.
28. <u>Q</u> The pudding tastes delicious.	b. It's as sharp as a knife.
29. <u>U</u> She has very poor eyesight.	c. She's as gentle as a lamb.
30. <u>E</u> Did you step on this?	d. He's as wise as an owl.
31. <u>T</u> She is very excited about getting her driver's license.	e. They always fight like cats and dogs.
32. <u>C</u> I will go check on the baby.	f. It's as old as the hills.

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