

# "Metaphors and images utilized by EFL learners to depict the process of learning a foreign language."

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will contend that understanding the images and metaphors held by foreign language learners regarding the essence of the target language and its acquisition can offer significant insights to educators, aiding in addressing various language learning challenges. To uncover learners' perceptions, a questionnaire was distributed to 350 English learners across diverse locations in Iran, prompting them to complete the sentence: "Learning a foreign language is like . . ." After analyzing 200 responses, the obtained metaphors were categorized into broader themes. The implications of these metaphors and their categories, along with plausible theoretical interpretations, are explored within a cognitive-psychological framework.

**Keywords:** conceptual metaphor, language acquisition, learners' perceptions, metaphorical analysis, beliefs about language learning

## Introduction:

Researchers have long been intrigued by the beliefs and cognitive processes of language learners, with recent heightened interest in the field (Berry, 2004; Cotterall, 1999; Finkbeiner, 2003; Fortune, 2005; Hawkins, 1999; Liao, 2006; Svalberg, 2005). One approach to delving into learners' internal processes has been through direct questionnaires probing their beliefs across various aspects of language acquisition (Horwitz, 1988). Another method involves examining the images and metaphors learners use to conceptualize language learning. By eliciting concrete comparisons that align with learners' beliefs, researchers can uncover authentic insights into their thoughts and values (Block, 1992; McGrath, 2006). Understanding learners' beliefs and perceptions allows teachers to tailor instructional materials and activities to create a more learner-centered approach.

## Exploring the World of Metaphors:

The study draws inspiration from conceptual metaphor theory, positing that our thought processes are fundamentally metaphorical, as proposed by Lakoff & Johnson (1980). They argue that we define our reality and take actions based on metaphors, influencing cognition and behavior. Metaphors, according to this

theory, are not merely literary devices but pervasive in discourse and communication across various domains (Deignan, 2005). Gibbs (2011) builds on this theory, suggesting that common figurative expressions stem from specific metaphorical entailments shared by communities. For instance, the metaphor "ARGUMENT IS WAR" is evident in phrases like "come under fire" and "cease-fire" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Other studies, such as those by Gibbs & O'Brian (1990) and Nayakk & Gibbs (1990), provide empirical support for the relationship between linguistic expressions and conceptual metaphors. Furthermore, Gibbs, Lima, & Francozo (2004) argue that these conceptual metaphors are rooted in embodied action, as seen in metaphors like "I am starved for his affection." These insights underscore the intricate connections between metaphor, language, and behavior, prompting further studies to gain insights into individuals' thinking and behavior through their use of metaphors.

## Studying metaphors in language teaching and learning is essential:

Metaphors have become a recognized field of study within applied linguistics, as highlighted by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) in their comprehensive exploration of "metaphor analysis" (MA). In their seminal work, they delve into the various methods used to analyze learner language samples. The book reviews three key areas where MA has been applied: how SLA researchers conceptualize their domain, teachers' perceptions, and L2 learners' reflections on their learning process. The authors argue that examining the metaphors L2 learners employ offers insights into their understanding of the language being learned, the learning process itself, and the challenges they encounter. Metaphors serve as windows into learners' cognitions and emotions, often revealing subconscious insights less prone to misrepresentation compared to direct comments. Studies have also explored how language teachers conceptualize their practice, with research showing that the metaphors they rely on significantly influence their classroom behavior. Similarly, investigations into the metaphors used by teachers and learners highlight their impact on professional development and classroom dynamics. Cook-Sather (2003) and Herron (1982) identified dominant metaphors in educational systems and foreign language teaching, respectively, underscoring the influence of metaphorical frameworks on pedagogical approaches. Despite the potential of learner metaphors to enrich educational research, the integration of their insights into theoretical frameworks remains limited. While some researchers, like Oxford (2001) and Ellis (2002), have explored learners' metaphors in specific contexts, broader studies in this area are lacking. Ellis's examination of beginner learners' diaries revealed five conceptual metaphors, suggesting both cognitive and affective challenges in language learning. However, questions remain regarding the selection process for these

metaphors and the representativeness of the sample size. Overall, the study of metaphorical perceptions in foreign language learning presents a compelling area for further exploration.

#### **The study :**

The study aimed to investigate the metaphors language learners associate with the processes of learning, as these metaphors significantly shape thinking and learning. Martinez, Saulea, and Huber (2001) emphasized that these mental images serve as "blueprints of thinking," influencing perception, learning, and mental restructuring. Feedback based on learners' metaphors can provide insights into their learning processes and their conceptualization of the learning outcome. This study responds to Finkbeiner's (2003) call for teachers' awareness of learners' thought processes and Andrew's (2007) advocacy for increased awareness of language-related issues. It focused on learners of English as a foreign language, acknowledging that different languages may evoke different metaphors and impressions. While the findings are primarily applicable to learning English, they may also offer valuable insights into learning other foreign languages.

#### **The Instrument:**

A questionnaire was utilized to gather learners' perceptions of learning English, commencing with study clarification and a metaphor example. Demographic details were sought before prompting respondents to share their metaphors on learning a foreign language, starting with "Learning a foreign language (for example English) is like . . ." The questionnaire was primarily in Persian, allowing responses in either Persian or English for comfort. This approach aimed to facilitate the expression of mental images freely, avoiding potential reluctance due to writing quality concerns, despite anonymity.

#### **Participants:**

The researcher and his team enlisted their own students as dependable participants, requiring only that they be adult English learners with at least one year of experience and able to comprehend English prompts. They received responses from over 350 English learners, with 200 completed questionnaires returned by intermediate and advanced students from private institutes and universities across seven cities in Iran. Participants' ages varied from 18 to 35, with the majority in their early twenties, largely stemming from senior BA courses. In terms of gender, 150 respondents were female and 50 were male.

#### **Data Collection:**

Despite the Persian instructions being clearly written, each respondent received verbal explanations alongside their questionnaire to ensure comprehension. Typically, the researcher or assistants personally distributed and collected the forms from each respondent, inadvertently introducing a bias. This could lead to an overrepresentation of enthusiastic language learners' submissions, while those with less

enthusiasm and positivity might be underrepresented in the study's imagery and metaphors.

#### **Data Handling:**

The questionnaire yielded responses containing various images and metaphors regarding learning a foreign language. While most respondents provided a single comparison, all provided images or metaphors were considered. Responses were translated into English if in Persian or clarified for comprehension. This review served as a familiarization stage, enabling the researcher to gain insight into the responses. The researcher then identified linguistic metaphors, grouped them under descriptive rubrics, and examined specific images, categorizing them into more inclusive and conceptually-oriented groups. Due to space constraints, only emerging categories and descriptive keywords from responses are presented in the Results section. The interpretive nature of these stages led the researcher to discuss interpretations with colleagues in applied linguistics, resulting in few differences in interpretation and reaching a consensus in all cases.

#### **The Results:**

The researcher and his team analyzed the responses of 200 participants, identifying 229 metaphors. Rather than presenting a lengthy list, they conducted further analysis to extract broader metaphorical themes, as showcased in Table 1. Each entry in Table 1 outlines a metaphorical theme along with its frequency and keywords. Despite condensing the metaphors, the diversity of responses is evident in the various metaphorical themes, ranging from concepts like FOOD, COOKING, EATING to ARTS AND AESTHETICS. These themes span from vivid and concrete comparisons, such as "Learning a foreign language is like eating spaghetti," to more abstract ones, like "Learning a language is like attaining a more meaningful life."

#### **Discussion: A Journey into the Minds of a Group of Foreign Language Learners**

Gerjets and Hesse (2004) posit that learners' actions are primarily influenced by their conceptions and theories of learning, including metaphors. These metaphors, along with learners' images of learning a foreign language, can reveal significant insights into their motivation, attitudes, and preferred learning strategies. This understanding can inform language teaching practices, enabling teachers to guide learners away from misconceptions and towards effective language acquisition. Additionally, teachers can identify when a shift in perspective is needed to support sustained learning efforts. The benefits of this awareness, as outlined by Johnson and Nelson (2010), can be both instrumental and transformative.

The research aimed to explore the metaphors and conceptualizations held by English language learners regarding learning a foreign language. These metaphors serve as windows into learners' belief systems, shedding light on their cognitive and affective processes in language learning. While it's challenging to categorize the metaphors solely based

on affect-cognition dimensions, there's a discernible distinction between affective and cognitive elements in learners' imagery.

Notably, learners generally exhibit a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language, with many expressing integrative tendencies. However, some learners also associate learning with hardship or suffering, which may hinder their progress. The study reveals a variety of metaphors, some focused on the process of learning, others on its end product, and a few that are ambiguous. Nonetheless, encouraging imagery with a process dimension is crucial for promoting language awareness and enhancing learning outcomes.

Among the conceptual metaphors identified, "Exploration" emerges as a prevalent theme, suggesting learners' sense of agency and the incremental nature of language learning. Additionally, metaphors related to personal growth and identity renewal highlight the humanistic aspect of language learning. However, these themes are less frequent in learners' responses, indicating a potential area for improvement in teaching practices.

Interpreting the data from this study poses challenges due to its subjective nature. Nonetheless, several observations can be made regarding learners' attitudes, beliefs, and views on language learning. Language teaching practitioners can leverage learners' imagery to tailor their instruction accordingly, either by aligning with existing metaphors or by challenging them to adopt alternative perspectives that support effective learning strategies. Ultimately, understanding learners' metaphors can lead to more grounded and effective language teaching practices.

### Conclusion and Practical Implications :

This research aims to increase awareness of the mental images and comparisons learners develop during foreign language acquisition, highlighting their significant metacognitive consequences. Applied linguists emphasize the impact of learners' beliefs on emotional, attitudinal, and cognitive outcomes. Both teachers and learners need to recognize and evaluate these mental constructs, as they influence learning and problem-solving strategies. As learners progress, they transition from reflexive reactions to reflective thinking, shaping their own conceptualizations. Misalignment between learners' mental constructs and the subject matter can impede learning. The learning process is viewed as a journey of metaphor or image transformation, with teachers playing a crucial role in guiding learners towards new or corrected mental representations. Techniques such as eliciting metaphors and images from students and providing feedback can enhance learning experiences. This approach is valuable not only in language courses but also in teacher training programs to ensure educators have accurate conceptualizations of language skills. Material designers can incorporate learners' metaphors into instructional materials to improve language

awareness and skill development. Additionally, comparing language elements to natural processes like plant growth can discourage rote memorization. However, the hypothesis that educators can alter learners' metaphors to enhance effectiveness requires further research validation.

### Further Research:

This research delved into the portrayal of learning a foreign language within a specific cultural framework through imagery and metaphors. It suggests a need for broader investigations beyond the limited scope of metaphors derived from a small group of learners in similar environments. Researchers are encouraged to pursue more universally applicable metaphors and images, necessitating a larger and more diverse participant pool. Exploring various age groups, analyzing similarities and differences, and probing the underlying reasons for variation are avenues for further inquiry. Additionally, extending comparisons to different cultural and linguistic contexts could yield valuable insights. For instance, the study's author aims to contrast metaphors and mental images held by learners of Arabic and English as foreign languages. Investigating and comprehending the metaphors of struggling language learners, along with empirically assessing intervention strategies to enhance learners' metaphorical metacognition, could offer significant contributions. Another intriguing avenue is exploring the imagery associated with proficient language learners. The cognition and motivation of successful individuals may heavily rely on visual representations, akin to how the visual motto "Tall oak trees grow from little acorns" contributed to Nobel Prize wins in Chemistry for Herbert C. Brown and Akira Suzuki, as highlighted in an NHK World documentary.

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