TURKISH EFL LEARNERS' METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

The application of metaphor analysis on foreign language acquisition is relatively new. In this way, students' prior beliefs about learning a foreign language are possible to make explicit, identify, and analyze. So, this study attempts to investigate how Turkish tertiary level EFL learners view their courses of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through a metaphor analysis and the effects of gender, status at school, and self-reported academic success on their perceptions. Two hundred and fifty EFL learners were asked to generate metaphors of how they conceptualize learning English via prompts provided by the researcher. Data for the study were collected during the 2015-2016 academic year from the students of different faculties attending the School of Foreign Languages in a state university through a semi-structured questionnaire form. Firstly, a qualitative research method, which began to classify the data involving metaphorical images of the participants, was employed. Then, quantitative dimensions were analyzed using descriptive statistics, frequencies and chi square test of independence. The results indicate that students use various positive and negative conceptualizations to reflect their beliefs about studying English as a foreign language. Their concept of English is essentially an instrument of a better career, a better life, and success in business. The desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages has been seen as the first motivation for learning English. In addition, gender and academic success were not significant factors in their perceptions but "status at school" was. EFL learners, especially the ones taking optional English courses, hold positive attitudes toward the process of learning English. Implications and applications for learning English as a foreign language and suggestions for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Learning English as a foreign language, metaphors, qualitative research

Introduction

Metaphor has long been the concern of the arts and humanities. It is an old philosophical concern which dates back to Aristotle (Koller, 2003) who defines metaphor as instances of novel poetic language and is decorative and ornamental in nature (cited in Lakoff &Johnson, 1980). Metaphor analysis has traditionally been used in the study of literature, especially poetry. Recently however, metaphor seems to have caught up the interest of scholars of diverse traditions and backgrounds including educational studies. Research using metaphor as a research tool in language and thought began in the 1980s after 'Metaphors We Live By' was published by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). It was mainly used to discover teachers or learners beliefs about educational process. Nowadays, it has been widely used in second language acquisition and the application of metaphor in teaching foreign languages can contribute to the research on teaching and learning English as a foreign language.

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The importance of metaphor analysis has been emphasized with its power in uncovering tacit knowledge, thoughts and exploring "social and cultural processes of understanding" (Moser, 2000, p. 5) as well as providing insight into assumptions (Bullough & Gitlin, 1995). As Lakoff and Turner (1989) have explained, the nature of a metaphor evolves to the point where it becomes an 'unconscious and automatic' alternative to the word it replaces. Lakoff (1980) suggests that Metaphors help us to express our thoughts and feelings in a more interesting and clear way as well as shaping our perceptions and conceptions.

Botha, (2009) defines metaphor as seeing, describing or interpreting some unfamiliar educational phenomenon, event or action in terms of a familiar thing, event or action. In other words, using metaphor is expressing one idea or conceptual domain, in terms of another. To provide a better understanding of metaphor, Botha (2009) suggests the following list related to the roles of metaphors:

1. Metaphors could be constitutive to the educational policies we devise, e.g. the 'market' metaphor or school choice (goods, services, consumers).

2. They can also be constitutive of the teaching process (e.g. teaching as orchestrating, conditioning, guiding or training).

3. They could function heuristically as a tool for discovery (spiral staircase or ladder).

4. They often function didactically as approaches to teaching (dramatization and role playing).

5. They sometimes qualify the teaching actions of the teacher (pottery, gardening, artistry, policeman, entertainer, sermonizer, scholar, a guide, a coach, a researcher, a sculptor, conductor, gardener, mid-wife, etc.).

6. At times, they determine the way the learner or learning process is seen (sponge, filter, funnel, and strainer).

7. They are also characteristic of the content of the subject matter that is being taught and this in turn is often determined by the curricular metaphors (system, mechanism, organism) within which the subject matter is taught.

8. Metaphors can function as tools for communication.

9. Metaphors mediate the understanding of the nature of the school as educational institution (family, factory, etc.) (pp.433).

Metaphor Theory

In the previous literature, one can find some theories of metaphor as follows:

1. Salience-imbalance theory (Ortony, 1979; Ortony et al., 1989) asserts that salience imbalance regulates which features will be transferred from a base to a target in a metaphor: high-salient features in a base are matched against low-salient features of a target. According to this theory, metaphor differs from literal similarity in terms of an asymmetry in the salience of the features or attributes that are shared between the base and target. In a literal similarity statement, (e.g., "Billboards are like placards.") the shared features are of high salience in both the target and the base domain. In a metaphorical comparison, such as the simile "Billboards are like warts.", the shared features (such as ugly) are of high salience in the base (warts) and of low salience in the target (billboards).

2. Domains-interaction theory (Tourangeau & Sternberg, 1981) focuses on domains, seems a potentially useful model. It adopts a mental distance model of similarity and dimensions according to which a good metaphor, such as "Brezhnev is a hawk", satisfies two criteria. First, a good metaphor involves two very different domains (i .e., political figures and birds) and thus has high between-domain dissimilarity. Second, it shows high within-domain similarity of the base and target: Brezhnev and hawks occupy the same relative position in their domain spaces. Therefore, a metaphor is better the greater the between-domain distance, and the smaller the within-domain distance, of its base and target.

3. Structure-mapping theory (Gentner, 1989) represents the domains in an analogy as systems composed of objects and the predicates applying to those objects (e.g., Norman & Rumelhart, 1981; Rumelhart & Ortony, 1977) . Understanding an analogy like "ideas are plants" involves comparing two domains and finding relational commonalities. Object matches are not crucial to analogy; the focus is on matching and transferring relations.

4. Class-inclusion theory (Glucksberg & Keysar, 1990) argues that metaphors are class-inclusion statements. Here, metaphors such as "my job is a jail" are understood as follows: the target of the metaphor ("my job") is considered a member of the category of things which confine, are stressful, are difficult to leave, etc. The metaphor's base ("a jail") refers to and is a prototypical member of this category.

5. Conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff, 1987; Gibss,1994) or contemporary metaphor theory challenges the traditional view of metaphor and results in an evolution in theoretical and empirical research on metaphor in language and thought. It views metaphor as a matter of thought rather than language. In addition, this theory suggests that metaphor is common and essential in our daily life. Instead of a figure of speech, it is defined in this theory as a cross-domain conceptual mapping in our conceptual system when we describe one thing through another. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff 1993).

Numerous studies using metaphor to discover the beliefs, views and perceptions of learners and teachers of English as a foreign language can be found in the literature. Oxford, et al. (1998) investigated teachers' metaphors in L2 teaching and claimed four major philosophical perspectives with corresponding archetypal metaphorical teacher roles (molding, gate keeping, gardening, and democratizing). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) identified various conceptual metaphors for teaching, language, and learning (for example, "teaching is a journey," "language is nature," and "learning is light") in their cross-cultural study among language teachers and students. Ellis (1998) found seven basic metaphors for "learner" in the SLA literature (container, machine, negotiator, problem solver, builder, fighter, and investor) and five metaphorical constructions by L2 learners themselves (sufferer, problem solver, traveler, fighter, and worker). Bullough (1991) used metaphors to discover pre-service students' conceptions of teaching and suggested that metaphor may be a potent means by which learners and teachers understand and express their learning and teaching experiences. Sakui and Gaies (2003) reported on a self-study by a Japanese EFL teacher and her beliefs about writing and teaching writing by analysis of the metaphors used by the teacher in diary entries and interviews. The results of their study indicated that the importance of teachers' beliefs on action and the meaningful relationship between beliefs, identities and changes in metaphors may be an evidence of changes in conceptions of teaching. Kramsch (2003) also used metaphor approach to investigate beliefs about learning foreign languages. Kramsch (2003) analyzed college students' explicit metaphors for language learning and

students' essays. She argued that learners and teachers construct representations of themselves and their experiences through metaphors.

Lots of studies using metaphors as research tools were also conducted in Turkish educational and EFL context. Saban, et al. (2006) examined the metaphors that prospective teachers formulated to describe the concept of a teacher. They generated the categories such as teachers as knowledge provider; a developer and formative; therapeutical and remedial; a super authority figure, a change agent, an entertainer, a character prototype, a supporter of personal development, an advisor and leader, a partner and democratic leader. In a study by Seferoğlu et al. (2009), metaphorical images of pre-service and in-service teachers about classroom management in a social constructivist learning environment were elicited and they concluded that most teacher candidates held a traditional teacher-centered view of classroom management before they were subjected to a constructivist curriculum practice. Kesen (2010) conducted a study with teachers and learners of English as a foreign language to compare their perceptions of an English language teacher. She concluded that students' and teachers' perceptions have many things in common as well as differences in the way teachers and learners perceive a language teacher. More specifically, the study concluded their perceptions of a languge teacher are affected by past experiences, expectations, and personal constructs created for the notion of a language teacher. Ahkemoğlu and Mutlu (2016) investigated the conceptual metaphors of both ELT major and non-ELT major learners in regard to their perception of an English language teacher and indicated that while some metaphors are peculiar to English language teacher such as oracle, schizophrenic, and gum, some metaphors seem to be common with the ones developed for the concept of a teacher such as "light", "guide" and "bridge". Yeşilbursa and Sayar (2014) examined the EFL teachers' and their students' conceptions of professional teacher identity through metaphor analysis. According to the results of the study, while the instructors depicted their professional identities under six distinct categories of metaphors, the students categorized them under 14 themes and some metaphors of instructors overlapped with the ones given by the students.

In this article, the focus will be on the use of metaphors in regard to foreign language education process because the purpose of the study is to understand how EFL learners conceptualize "learning English" in the current conditions of the School of Foreign Languages in a state university in Turkey, through the metaphorical images they use in their everyday lives. Using metaphor as a research tool and mixed methods of research design at the same time is thought to give the opportunity to have a better understanding of Turkish EFL learners' perceptions of their foreign language studies. Thus, to enhance this understanding the study tries to answer the following questions:

Research questions:

1. What metaphors EFL learners create to describe their process of learning English as a foreign language?

2. Do EFL learners' perceptions of learning English as a foreign language change with regard to gender, voluntary or compulsory status at school and self-reported academic success?

Method

Setting

The study took place at the English Preparatory Program offered by a state university located in eastern part of Turkey. The participants were 200 undergraduate students enrolled in the English Preparatory Program during the fall term of the 2015-2016

academic year. Participation in the study was completely on a voluntary basis and only 200 students from English Preparatory Program agreed to participate in the research.

Participants

The participants were 84 (42.4%) male and 114 (57.6%) female students with an age range of 18-25. They were all A2 proficiency level students studying in the preparatory program for one year. Twenty-three (11.5%) students reported that they enrolled in the preparatory program voluntarily whereas 175 (87.5%) students reported that one year English preparatory education is compulsory at the university for them. Additionally, 131 (67.2%) students reported that they find themselves successful at studying English while 64 (32.8) students reported that they do not find themselves successful.

Instruments

In order to answer the research questions, a questionnaire involving two parts was used. The first part of the questionnaire only involved personal information while the second part which was a semi-structured form involved 6 open-ended statements inquiring into students' metaphorical images about the process of English language learning. More specifically, the students were firstly asked to think and write three images about their English studies and the reasons for generating such images. In other words, participants were to complete the prompt "Learning English as a foreign language is .... because......." and add the reason why they generated that specific metaphor. Secondly, they came up with 5 metaphors about how they associate their English learning process with a color, season, fruit, vehicle, and sports. They were asked to complete the statements like "if English were a color/season/fruit/vehicle/sports, it would be .... because................" They were requested to write a single metaphor under each category through which they could convey their personal perception of their study of English as a foreign language. Besides, they were asked to express their rationale for why they chose those particular metaphors or images and elaborate on them in detail.

Data Analysis

The study focuses on understanding how EFL learners conceptualize and perceive English language learning process through using metaphorical images they use in their daily lives. For this reason, the present study was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative research methodology. In other words, the mixed method was used to gather data for this research. Creswell and Clark (2007) assert that instead of using one of the quantitative or qualitative methods, using both at the same time provides more comprehensive evidence for studying a research problem.

Firstly, data collected from the students through the questionnaires were analyzed by qualitatively by reading all the data that include metaphorical images produced by the participants. At this stage, metaphorical images, similes, analogies, descriptions and adjectives were sorted out and gathered under different headings since the study aimed to focus on only metaphorical images. Then, metaphorical images were classified according to their contextual similarity and the reasons given by the participants for their choice of metaphors. Finally, each classified image group was given a name that showed the main theme of the group. In the analysis of the qualitative data, emerging themes were investigated based on the research questions posed. The metaphorical images clustered under each metaphorical group were analyzed through descriptive analysis and the frequencies and percentages of those groups were presented in tables.

Lastly, chi square test of independence was applied to the data to investigate the relationship between students' perceptions about their studies of English as a foreign

language and the variables of the study such as gender, status at school (compulsory or voluntary), and self-reported success in English.

Findings and Discussion

1. What metaphors EFL learners create to describe their process of learning English as a foreign language?

The following metaphorical groups (Table 1) were drawn from the analysis of 200 metaphorical images stated by the participants. It should be noted that all the metaphors generated by the students were not involved in the analysis process of this research question unless the reasons for choosing those metaphors were not stated logically. The metaphors generated by the students are presented in Table 1 in descending order.

Table 1: Students' Metaphorical Images of learning English as a Foreign Language

Groups	f	%	Metaphors (f)
1. Learning English as a way of career development (getting a good job or for a future career)	49	24.9	Lantern, the goose that lays the golden egg, golden bracelet, investment tool, foreign currency, tie pin, lockpick, blue bead, pearl, bulb, key,
2. Learning English as an easy and enjoyable process	35	18.1	Joke, lifestyle, amusement park, swimming pool, fast food restaurant, wonderland, watching a film, travelling
3. Learning English as a demanding and boring process	29	15.0	Pregnancy, peak, ice-skating, climbing Everest, Chinese torture,
4. Learning English as an unnecessary process	27	14.38	Plane tree, ornamental plants, security guards at the school, draftsman compass, shoe lace, tango, folk dances,
5. Learning English as a way of understanding cultural differences	25	13.4	A window to a new world, a novel called "round the world in 80 days", different life styles, freedom, remote countries, new lives, different people,
6. Learning English as a process requiring intelligence	13	6.12	A jigsaw puzzle, labyrinth, chess, computer games,
7. Learning English as an endless process	7	4.50	Galaxy, black hole, ocean, river, a vast forest, sky,
8. Learning English as an instrument for self-development (to be more knowledgeable)	6	3.60	Caterpillar-butterfly, flower, growing a child, seed-tree, life
Total	191	100	

The results indicate that the most frequently stated metaphorical images (24.9%) by the students were the images grouped under the theme named "Learning English as a way of career development (getting a good job or for a future career)". So it can be said that major reasons leading EFL learners to study English are mainly related to its power in business world. One quarter of the learners seem to have high expectations of English to get a prestigious job for their future. One of the participants demonstrated his expectations by stating that "English is a picklock. If you ask the reason, I will explain its importance by giving an example about my future plans. I would like to be a mechanical engineer and want to go abroad either to work or to do my postgraduate education. However, in both cases I cannot do anything without learning English. But if I can learn

English well, both doors will be open for me". In this category, students mostly claimed that they will have different job opportunities if they have good command of English. The percentage of the students who associated learning English with the metaphors indicating enjoyable and easy process is 18.1%. It can be thought that only one fifth of the participants show a clear desire to learn English. In other words, it seems that they study English for the sake of learning it and enjoys the process. In this category, one student said that "English is sometimes an amusement park. We play games in some different ways and lose track of time". However, 15.0% of EFL learners associated learning English with the metaphors which represent demanding, difficult and also boring activities. A student used the metaphor "pregnancy" for learning English and added that "pregnancy is the hardest process in a woman's life. In order to reach a good end like having a baby, she has to overcome lots of difficulties. This is the case in studying English. Even when I was at high school, I had difficulty in passing my English exams. It was my nightmare and the hardest lesson of my life". Moreover, the percentage (14.38%) of the learners associating the process of learning English with the metaphors representing unnecessary activities cannot be underestimated. It can be understood that those are the students for which English is a compulsory part of their university education and they are just trying to fulfill the requirements in the program. One student expressed his feelings by saying, "Actually, English is a plane tree. A plane tree is very famous but completely useless. I mean, it does not yield fruit. Learning English is also famous but it does not avail". Another student simply said that "Learning English is a waste of time. Because however hard we study we cannot learn". Twenty-five of the participants (13.4%) generated the metaphorical images associating learning English with a way of understanding cultural differences. As can be understood from the students' reasoning for choosing those metaphors, students perceive English as a vehicle to understand foreign culture and lifestyle. One of the students said that "English is a window to a new world. For instance, in our reading course last week, we read a very interesting passage about Diwali which is an Indian festival. We enjoyed it a lot. We frequently read and learn a lot about different traditions of the societies, living in the other parts of the world in our courses. This is what I like most about studying English". Some students (6.12%) generated the images describing a process requiring intelligence. Among the reasons students mentioned about under this category were the complexity of grammatical rules and the huge number of words which must be always kept in mind to figure out the meanings of the sentences. One student stated the difficulty he was experiencing as "English is a jigsaw puzzle, because we have to memorize five or six different meanings of some words. Otherwise, we cannot figure out the exact meanings of the sentences. In addition to those groups of metaphors, 4.50% of the participants created metaphors associating learning English as an endless process. An interesting statement made by a student was "English is certainly a black hole. You certainly do not have any idea about how deep it is and it seems impossible to know everything about it". Another student stated that "English is a vast forest. You can never know how to find your way in it without a teacher". Some other interesting metaphors were gathered under the title "learning English as an instrument for self-development (to be more knowledgeable)", (4.50%). Under this group, students generated some very interesting metaphors as listed in Table 1. The main point under this group is on growing different in the process of learning a foreign language. An extract taken from the statement of a student clearly explains the reasons of those metaphorical images: "For me, learning English is becoming a butterfly out of a caterpillar because learning English will give me the opportunity to read and understand in a different language which will help me gain new perspectives and broaden my horizons". Similarly, one student stated that "learning English is like becoming a tree out of a tiny seed. I believe that mastering a second language will make me as powerful as a tree".

However, the metaphors and also similes which are beyond the scope of this research though were analyzed as positive and negative perceptions to avoid missing data. For this purpose, metaphors and similes based on students' responses and their reasons of choosing that metaphor or simile were divided into two sub-categories. The first group included 112 positive metaphors and the second 79 negative metaphors. It can be seen that the majority (n=112) of the students used metaphors to describe their process of learning English positively.

2. Do EFL learners' perceptions of learning English as a foreign language change with regard to gender, voluntary or compulsory status at school and self-reported academic success?

The second research question of the study intended to analyze the relationship between EFL learners' positive or negative perceptions which were diagnosed by their metaphorical images towards language study experiences. In this part of the research, similes which were basically beyond the scope of this research were also involved in the analyses to avoid the missing data. First of all, the metaphors and the similes based on the students' responses and their reasons of choosing them were divided into two sub-categories as positive and negative perceptions. Then, chi-square tests were conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the total number of respondents generating positive or negative metaphors or similes and some variables such as gender, status at school and self-reported success in studying English and the results are presented in Tables 2 through 4.

Table 2 shows that female students have more positive thoughts about their experiences of learning English than male students. However, chi-square test conducted on the conceptual categories did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the metaphors produced by female and male students.

Table 2: Students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English in terms of gender

Variables	Positive Metaphors		Negative Metaphors		Total	
Gender	n	f	n	f	n	f
Female	83	74.1	29	25.9	112	100
Male	53	67.1	26	32.9	79	100
Total	136	71.2	55	28.8	191	100

$X^2=1.113^a$ SD=1   P=0.291

Table 3 shows that female students have more positive thoughts about their experiences of learning English than male students. However, chi-square test conducted on the conceptual categories did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the metaphors produced by female and male students. Conversely, the studies conducted by Saban et al. (2007) and Tercan, (2015) found that male and female participants differed in the groups of metaphor they generated.

Table 3: Students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English in terms of status at school

Variables	Positive Metaphors		Negative Metaphors		Total	
Status at school	n	f	n	f	n	f
Volunteer	20	95.2	1	4.8	21	100
Compulsory	115	67.6	55	32.4	170	100
Total	135	70.7	56	29.3	191	100

$X^2=6.866^a$ SD=1   P=0.009

As can be seen in Table 4, chi-square test indicated a significant difference between students' status at school. In other words, students enrolled in optional English courses programs seem to have more positive attitudes than the ones enrolled in compulsory programs where English is a prerequisite for their departments. This is not surprising but gratifying news in terms of students' motivation.

Table 4: Students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English in terms of self-reported academic success

Variables	Positive Metaphors		Negative Metaphors		Total	
Academic Success	n	f	n	f	n	f
Successful	94	74.6	32	25.4	126	100
Unsuccessful	39	62.9	23	37.1	62	100
Total	133	70.7	55	29.3	188	100

$X^2=2.748$ SD=1   P=0.097

Regarding the self-reported academic success of the students, it can be seen that there is not a significant relationship between the achievement of students and their positive or negative perceptions. This result indicates that students' perceptions of courses do not have an impact on their academic success or vice versa.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the findings of this study enhanced our understanding of the Turkish EFL learners' perceptions about their foreign language learning process. The findings show that Turkish EFL learners have some metaphors about language learning that are the same as those reported by the EFL learners in previous studies and some that are different.

The metaphors mostly endorsed by the participants obviously indicated that EFL learners are aware of the fact that EFL is important mainly in cultural, educational and commercial exchanges between Turkey and the world. The developments in science and technology, the constant spread of international institutions throughout the world in different fields of interest and occupation, and the economic and cultural exchanges between countries require individuals to adapt to new situations by acquiring some qualifications such as learning foreign languages. More specifically, qualitative analyses of the metaphors produced by EFL learners have revealed eight metaphorical groups. "Learning English as a way of career development (getting a good job or for a future career)" has been determined as the essential function of language learning process for those learners who are in their first year of their university education. The number of the learners holding the belief that "Learning English as an easy and enjoyable process" is quite higher than the ones believing that "Learning English as a demanding and boring process". This is a quite hope inspiring result on behalf of language education in the School of Foreign Languages. However, the students holding the belief that "learning English as an unnecessary process" cannot be underestimated since this negative belief would certainly effect their motivation and success in language learning. Believing that "learning English as a way of understanding cultural differences", a considerable number of the participants expect to have an influence on the foreign communities and meet diverse people. The desire to gain social recognition or economic advantages through knowledge of a foreign language is referred to as an instrumental orientation by Gardner and Lambert (1972). The career development and instrumental orientations endorsed by the subjects in this study reflect the desire to learn English for a future career and to be successful in business. They are instrumental orientations.

In addition, an overall evaluation of the metaphors and similes indicates that EFL learners in this study, especially the ones taking optional English courses, hold positive attitudes toward the process of learning English. It should be noted that low motivation and disengagement are inevitable to lead learners to failure in their EFL studies. Hence, the reasons for low motivation and disengagement of the students must be analyzed and ought to be taken into consideration seriously to help them enhance their motivation and arouse their interest. On the other hand, another striking conclusion of the research is that a considerable number of EFL learners believe that although learning English is a challenging and demanding process, they report that enjoy it and show positive feelings towards the process. This conclusion is also supported by a recent study conducted by Fang (2015). He revealed that language learning was reported to be a hard process and being a successful learner requires a variety of demands such as hard work, perseverance, patience, and a positive attitude. Finally, in the present study, it has been concluded that students' positive or negative perceptions did not differ significantly in terms of gender and self-reported academic success.

The study provides evidence about how EFL learners conceptualize "their process of learning English as a foreign language" through the help of metaphorical images used in everyday lives. It can be suggested that case-based metaphorical analysis may be an effective analysis to be conducted in different educational settings with different variables and different research techniques. Moreover, the study may help EFL teachers to have an insight into the process of teaching English as a foreign language. So, they may help learners to be more motivated and engage in learning languages.

As for the limitations, it should be reminded that the study was conducted with a relatively small sample size and limited to the university students where the study was conducted. So, the results are far from generalizable.

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