

Metaphors of English as a foreign language

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Abstract

This study aims at investigating the conceptual metaphors of students on English as a foreign language. Participants are students of English (n=80) at Amasya University preparatory classes. Students' metaphors are collected via metaphor elicitation sheets with the prompt "English is like ... because ..." and analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings reveal a variety of underlying conceptualizations that reflect different individual mappings across conceptual domains such as PRODUCT, INNOVATION, INSTRUMENT, HARDSHIP, NEED, OBLIGATION and JOURNEY. The results show that students generally have positive views on English as a foreign language, and they consider it as a necessity in their lives. The study is significant in the sense that it emphasizes the use of metaphor as an efficient cognitive tool to better grasp students' beliefs of their foreign language. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for the teachers to better understand how language students perceive English as a foreign language.

Keywords: Foreign language teaching, English, metaphor.

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1. Introduction

Metaphor studies on foreign language education have arisen with the application of Cognitive Linguistics to the field of language teaching in recent areas. These studies commonly center on students' perceptions of the school context, teachers, learning processes and textbooks. Today, English has a position of providing the global communication in the world that can be called as *lingua franca*, with the effect of its economical, technological and political superiority (Pennycook, 2001; Philipson, 1992). This feature of English as an international language makes communication easier in political, economic, media, and cultural contexts.

Conceptual metaphors are mental operations that give information on how we encode and interpret the world and our experiences in our minds (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Conceptual Metaphor Theory defines metaphor as seeing and conceptualizing one conceptual domain, which is usually more abstract (i.e. the target domain) in terms of the more concrete one (i.e. the source domain) based on similarities and substitutions (i.e. mappings). Therefore, conceptual metaphors are usually formularized as "A is B" (Lakoff, 2006; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors play a vital role in educational discourse, which is at the center of thinking, conceptualizing and understanding one another (Cameron, 2003). For this reason, it is important to reveal how students perceive and construe English as a language and a course that they meet at schools. With this respect, this study aims to investigate how students of English studying at the university preparatory classes conceptualize English as a language they learn and the perceptions and conceptual images they have in their minds.

Identifying metaphors of language students is believed to help teachers and educators in their professional developments since it uncovers the attitudes of students towards the language they are learning, and the experiences students go through during their language learning process (Cameron, 2003; Cortazzi & Jin, 1999; Guerrero & Villamil, 2002). Students' perceptions and beliefs on English are indicators of their attitudes towards their teachers and learning processes at the same time, which, in turn influence their success in the target language. Determining these hidden perceptions will assist foreign language teachers to detect and eliminate the reasons of negative attitudes, hence to facilitate language learning.

Literature review shows that metaphor studies in foreign language education generally focus on the learning and teaching processes, textbooks, and teachers (Akbari, 2013; Baş & Bal Gezeğin, 2015; Farrell, 2006; Guerro & Villamil, 2002; Kesen, 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008; 2011; Oktay & Vanci, 2013; Saban, Kocbeker & Saban, 2007; Wan, Low & Li, 2011). The question of in what ways the English language, which is the subject matter of learning and teaching process, is shaped in the minds of Turkish students, has not been clarified yet. This study is significant in the sense that it puts forth the beliefs and attitudes of students on English and guides the foreign language educators on this topic.

2. Method

This study took place in the Department of Foreign Language Studies at Amasya University in Turkey. The participants were 80 preparatory class students studying English. The participants' age ranged between 18 and 20. They had been studying English since their secondary school, and their English level could be considered A1 (CEFR).

2.1. Data Collection Tool

Data of the study were collected through a self-designed metaphor elicitation sheet adopted from previous studies (Cameron, 2003; Saban, Kocbeker & Saban, 2006). The students were first presented with a general definition and description of the concept of metaphor followed by examples and excerpts obtained from previous studies (e.g. a child is like a notebook because

whatever falls on it makes a trace). In the next step, students filled in the metaphor elicitation questionnaires, which consisted of two parts. The first part covered the demographical information of the students (e.g. age, gender, English level), and the second part included the prompt “English (as a foreign language) is (like) ... because ... ” which required the students to express their ideas about what they believe of the English language with their reasons. This personal metaphorical reasoning was important for the study since it reflects the participants’ covered beliefs; hence was later used to classify the metaphors in the data analysis phase and understand the rationale for choosing these specific metaphors. Participants were given 45 minutes to fill in the sheet and they were asked to focus on only one metaphor.

2.2. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with content analysis method in order to explicate the concepts and the relationships included in the data. Data analysis consisted of four steps:

- i) listing the collected examples of linguistic metaphors (e.g. Student-50 ‘a new life’),
- ii) identifying main categories of metaphors in accordance with the students’ rationale behind choosing specific metaphors (e.g. door - English as a tool),
- iii) construction of conceptual metaphors (e.g. TOOL, PRODUCT, etc.), and
- iv) establishing inter-rater reliability.

In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, three outside researchers reviewed the categories independently obtained from the data, and the reliability of the metaphors was confirmed. The conceptual metaphors were identified and explained with regard to the entailments they included. Responses from two participants out of 80 participants were excluded in the analysis since they did not include and explain their reasons for the metaphors they provided.

3. Findings and Discussion

Data analysis yielded 78 linguistic metaphors, which can be grouped under 7 main conceptual categories: ENGLISH AS LABOR/PRODUCT, ENGLISH AS INNOVATION, ENGLISH AS A TOOL, ENGLISH AS DIFFICULTY, ENGLISH AS A NEED, ENGLISH AS COMPULSION, ENGLISH AS A JOURNEY. These categories are presented in Table 1 with their definitions, frequencies and linguistic samples:

Table 1. Metaphors of English

Categories	Definitions	n	Linguistic Examples
1 ENGLISH AS LABOR / PRODUCT	A product that the students gets after hard study; positive result of the hard work	19	an empty house, tree (n=2), blackberry, strawberry, a meal without a prescription, crop, construction, balloon, invention, bud, stove, ivy, meal, health, theatre, love, field, aged wine
2 ENGLISH AS INNOVATION	A joyful and interesting occupation that makes the student meet with new cultures and people, and that should be discovered	18	a stacking doll, Lego, pomegranate, alien, puzzle (n=2), dining table, a closed chest, picture, a newly bought book, play dough, a new life, space, making a friend, garden, meeting a new person, an unknown country, oil painting
3 ENGLISH AS A TOOL	A vehicle that helps the student to reach their destination, and that develops the student	11	door, vaccination, our future, a big bridge of career, the original document, ship, Google, father, step, river, open ticket
4 ENGLISH AS DIFFICULTY	A situation or thing that troubles and disturbs the student, or that the students does not want to deal with	10	stomach ache, chemistry, a deep pool, ocean, whirlpool, brain gymnastics, ungrateful cat, Chinese, the grim reaper, cactus
5 ENGLISH AS A NEED	A basic need that the student is obliged to have to carry on their life	9	water (n=4), a glass of cold water, sense organs, reading a book, sun, eating
6 ENGLISH AS COMPULSION	A situation that is imposed to the student from outside and that they have to do even if they don't want to	6	worship, colony, anise, drugs, clothes, couch grass
7 ENGLISH AS A JOURNEY	A road that the student follows	5	a city that one didn't go, the start of a road, a high mountain, a long slope, an endless road

ENGLISH AS LABOR/PRODUCT is the most frequent metaphor used by the participants. The linguistic usages under this category generally highlight that English is an occupation that requires struggle and devotion, as well as a result or product that can only be obtained with hard work, which entails that they are actively involved in the learning process.

- (1) English as a foreign language is like a product because the more effort you make to grow it up, the more efficiency you get (S20)

The ENGLISH AS INNOVATION metaphor indicates that English is conceptualized as a new activity that arouses interest and curiosity of the student. It is perceived as a different situation that is enjoyed and get accustomed to in time, although it can be difficult to get used to and learn in the beginning.

- (2) English as a foreign language is like a stacking doll because when you open it up you meet with new things, like a new language, a new culture, a brand new world (S16)

Additionally, the descriptions in this category reveal the part-whole relationship, which emphasizes that English is made up of distinct linguistic structures. This demonstrates that the students are aware that the English language is composed of linguistic units, and students enjoy using each new structure they learn.

- (3) English as a foreign language is like an oil painting because although each painting (the structures that are learnt) are different from each other, they will become special and different when they come together at an exhibition (S78)

The ENGLISH AS A TOOL metaphor demonstrates that the students realize the importance of English in academic and work life, and its place as a world language; therefore, they conceptualize English as a tool or vehicle, which helps them reach their goals.

- (4) English as a foreign language is like an open ticket because whenever you want to go somewhere it will take you there (S51)

The ENGLISH AS DIFFICULTY represents the difficulties of learning a new language and the distress the students experience in their language learning process in different ways.

- (5) English as a foreign language is like a stomachache because it is something you are learning for the first time and it gives you lots of pain since it is an unknown language (S4)

- (6) English as a foreign language is like *the grim reaper* because *it comes to take your soul during the mid-term week* (S70)

The linguistic examples under the ENGLISH AS A NEED category demonstrate that English is perceived especially as a physical need, basically like water. This is significant in the sense that it emphasizes the central position of English that students place in their lives.

- (7) English as a foreign language is like water because just like we need water in our life and we cannot survive without water, we need English in a similar way (S7)

The ENGLISH AS COMPULSION metaphor is important in that it reflects the negative attitudes of students towards English language. It indirectly displays that students feel obliged to learn English because of the program they are studying, not because they really want to.

- (8) English as a foreign language is like a colony because you don't do it voluntarily but compulsorily; it surrounds you all four sides so that you cannot escape, and if you don't do what it says you become devastated (S33)

In the ENGLISH AS A JOURNEY metaphor, English is seen as a road and a journey on this road that has a start and an end. This road is mostly full of obstacles, and it requires consistent and regular work. Students construe the end of this road as receiving an award, and this shows that students strengthen their motivations with their long-term goals.

- (9) English as a foreign language is like a long slope because at first you don't want to do up, but as you go up you desire to go on more. As you proceed, you get tired, but at the end of the road, you see your success and become happy, despite your tiredness (S54)

The findings suggest that there can be diverse range of conceptualizations of English as a foreign language. All these conceptualizations identified show multifaceted aspects of English as a foreign language and the language learning process. The consistent and varied use of metaphors by the target participants has a lot to reveal on language learning process from their perspective.

The study shows that the students give importance to different dimensions of the language in the learning process. Accordingly, majority of the students have positive beliefs on English as a foreign language, and see it as a requirement for their future. They see themselves playing an active role in the learning task, rather than passive receivers. Also, most of the students believe that learning English is a long and hard process, but at the end of this process there is an award waiting for them. This essentially indicates that students are aware that language-learning process is not easy, successful learning involves factors such as hard work, patience and a positive attitude, and they focus on the end result. They want to use the language with different purposes such as having a good job, seeing new people, or traveling to new places. Such long-term goals should be taken into consideration and encouraged by the language teachers.

The negative conceptualizations bring to light that some students do not learn English voluntarily. Bearing in mind that the linguistic expressions under this category can be indicators

of students' level of success and lack of confidence, it is important to search for the reasons of these negative perceptions by making interviews with the students. Students' previous educational background and experiences may have impacts on their current perceptions and attitudes. As Cameron (2003, p.36) highlights, "by being a vivid use of language, a particular metaphor may be stored in episodic memory along with the information it carries." Therefore, changing the metaphorical structures in students' minds may lead changes in their attitudes, hence motivation and success in learning. In this sense, teachers and the textbook writers should gain awareness on the importance of the metaphorical thinking in their instructions to eliminate the negative aspects of the analogies students make.

4. Conclusion and Implications

By departing from the minds of individuals, metaphors fulfill the duty of a bridge in understanding the social contexts. This study aimed at uncovering the metaphors in the minds of learners who are studying English as a foreign language at an intensive English program. When the data, which were gathered through metaphor elicitation tool, were analyzed, 78 linguistic metaphors were found which were grouped under 7 main conceptual categories: ENGLISH AS LABOR/PRODUCT, ENGLISH AS INNOVATION, ENGLISH AS A TOOL, ENGLISH AS DIFFICULTY, ENGLISH AS A NEED, ENGLISH AS COMPULSION, ENGLISH AS A JOURNEY. These conceptual categories reveal important insights about the students' perceptions of English.

The findings have the characteristics of being beneficial sources especially for the foreign language teachers since they disclose positive and negative views of the students. Metaphors can help teachers better question and understand themselves as teachers and relate this understanding to their own practice. It is important to carry out studies, which ascertain the views of different groups of students about foreign language in Turkey. This way, EFL teachers can be alert to language learners' ideologies and modify their teaching methods and approaches to meet the learners' need and challenge the possible language learning problems. By investigating and being aware of students' images of language learning, language teachers have a chance to monitor their own development and growth professionally.

The use of metaphor as a data collection method should be employed more frequently in language learning studies since the results of these studies can be implemented on language education in general. The question of how English should be taught better is still a hotly debated topic today; therefore, metaphor studies will be valuable sources for the parties that aim to increase the quality of the education. Conceptual metaphors can be used as effective research tools in revealing, explaining and interpreting the perceptions and conceptualizations related to the concept of a foreign language for both students and teachers. This, in turn, helps educators to develop, improve and eliminate the current problems in language education.

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