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Language learning as losing weight: Analysing students’ metaphorical perceptions of English learning process

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Abstract

Language learners come to the learning environment with an existing set of knowledge and experience, which shapes their attitudes towards language learning. One method of making this prior knowledge explicit is to examine the metaphors the learners use. The impetus for this study comes from the need to discover students’ existing beliefs on language learning so that language learning can be fostered. This study aims to investigate the underlying conceptualizations of a group of first-year students in an EFL setting (n=80) in regard to their language learning process. The instrument to obtain metaphors is a metaphor elicitation sheet including the prompt “English learning process is (like) ... because ...”. Metaphors collected were explored both qualitatively and quantitatively along the line taken by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) who argue that metaphors are mental constructs shaping human thinking about the world and reality. The metaphors found may be categorized in ten different groups: task, journey, period of life, progress, competition, enjoyable activity, torture, unending process, engraving process, and nurturing process. The results of the study indicate that students consider language learning to be an effortful and continuous process which requires support. Moreover, while some metaphors are similar to those observed in other studies, some others are highly culture-specific. The study is a contribution to the literature since there are a limited number of studies on students’ perceptions on language learning. The findings of the study can be applied to language classrooms to better understand how students view language learning, and to try new ways to change their negative attitudes.

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1. Introduction

In English language teaching world, there is an increasing number of studies focusing on language learner beliefs. These beliefs, which are described as “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” (Richardson, 1996:102), have been under investigation so that educators and other stakeholders can have an idea of what sets of beliefs students have and how this might affect their language learning process. Each student brings a complicated set of perceptions involving diverse experiences, attitudes and expectations with them to the learning environment. These perceptions play a significant role in learning a foreign language by both fostering and hindering their learning procedure.

In studies that explore learner beliefs, metaphor analysis has become an accepted and invaluable tool in educational and applied linguistic inquiry (see Cameron and Low, 1999). Researchers utilize metaphors to investigate aspects of the subconscious, including implicitly held beliefs. Pervaded into our everyday lives, metaphors are useful tools to reflect these beliefs and to raise awareness for the educators. Within this framework, this paper analyzes the metaphorical conceptualizations of a group of EFL learners on their language learning process based on the basic principles of the cognitive theory of metaphor proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). The underlying principle behind this theory is that “the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another” (Lakoff, 2006:185). In other words, a conceptual metaphor is a cross-domain conceptual mapping whereby we understand the abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones. Therefore, conceptual metaphors draw on relations of substitution and similarity. Conceptual metaphors are usually expressed in an A IS B format, using the capital letters. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor, ARGUMENT IS WAR, the target domain of ‘argument’ (the abstract concept) is viewed metaphorically in terms of the source domain ‘war’ (a more concrete concept).

There is a plethora of studies on metaphors done in this field; however, the majority of these studies focus on the perceptions of the roles of language teachers for language learning and teaching (Ahkemoğlu, 2011, Akbari, 2013; Cortazzi and Jin, 1999; De Guererro and Villamil, 2000, 2002; Nikitina and Furuoka, 2008; Oktay and Vanc Osam, 2013; Saban et.al, 2006, 2007; Wan, Low, Li, 2011). On the other hand, the analysis of learners’ beliefs on English language learning process has not received much attention in language teaching and learning context by the researchers (Ishiki, 2011, Nikitina and Furuoka, 2011). In regards with the research question “How do Turkish EFL students use metaphor to indicate the process of English learning?” it is aimed to shed light on Turkish university students’ conceptualizations on their English learning process.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The study was conducted in the Department of Foreign Language Studies at Amasya University in Turkey. The participants were 80 preparatory class students studying English during the 2014-15 academic year. The participants’ ages ranged between 18 and 20. They had been studying English since secondary school, and their English level could be considered A1 (CEFR).

2.2. Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected through a metaphor elicitation sheet prepared by the researchers based on previous studies (Saban et.al., 2006; Oxford et.al, 2006). First, brief information was given to familiarize the students with the concept of metaphor. During this introductory session, 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). As the next step, the metaphor elicitation sheets were distributed (see Appendix-A for the English version of the questionnaire). The first part of the sheet was designed to collect subjects’ demographical information including their age, gender, level of proficiency, and their field of studies. The second part of the sheet aimed to elicit participants’ metaphors of English teachers via the prompt “English learning process is (like) ... because ….”
In this prompt, the resemblance was anticipated to be explained via the use of the word “because” whereby participants make their implicit beliefs explicit. This personal metaphorical reasoning was later used to classify the metaphors in the data analysis phase, and to understand the rationale for choosing these specific metaphors. The participants were given one class-hour (roughly 45 minutes) and they were encouraged to focus on only one metaphor since we were interested in their immediate reactions rather than exhaustive essays on it.

2.3. Data Analysis

The metaphor analysis methodology employed by Saban, Kocbeker and Saban (2006) and Oxford et.al. (1998) was adopted in the study. The steps followed for data analysis are: i) listing the collected examples of linguistic metaphors (e.g. Student-10 “balık tutmak” [fishing]), ii) identifying main categories of metaphors in accordance with the students’ rationale behind choosing specific metaphors (e.g. learning as a task - fishing), iii) constructing conceptual themes based on the main categories identified (e.g. TASK, JOURNEY, PROGRESS, etc.), iv) grouping the metaphors under main themes, and v) establishing inter-rater reliability. In order to ensure inter-rater reliability, we asked three outside researchers to independently review ten categories obtained from the data. Discrepancies were discussed and a consensus was reached on for disagreements.

It should be noted that poorly structured 6 papers out of total 80 were eliminated in the first step. Frequencies and percentages of the categories and individual metaphors were presented in the findings and discussion section. In addition, the metaphors were explained with reference to the entailments they include in order to reveal the participants’ conceptualizations underlying the metaphors.

3. Findings

The analysis yielded a total of 74 well-articulated metaphors on the English language learning process. As can be seen in Figure-1 below, the metaphors are grouped into 10 different thematic categories. These categories of LANGUAGE LEARNING are: TASK (n=21, 28%), JOURNEY (n=16, 23%), PROGRESS (n=12, 16%), ENJOYABLE ACTIVITY (n=8, 11%), PERIOD OF LIFE (n=7, 10%), COMPETITION (n=3, 4%), TORTURE (n=2, 3%), UNENDING PROCESS (n=2, 3%), ENGRAVING AGENT (n=1, 1%), and NURTURER (n=1, 1%).

Fig.1. Distribution of Conceptual Themes

The metaphors about the English learning process produced by Turkish participants are discussed under each conceptual theme or category as follows:
3.1. Category 1: English learning process is a task

The category TASK emphasizes any piece of work or activity that students do, but find it challenging to complete. What is common for the metaphors within this category is that it requires time, patience, hard work, effort, and training to complete these tasks as can be seen in these metaphors: going fishing, puzzle, labyrinth, dilemma, losing weight, training, climbing up a mountain (n=2), crossing a river, excavating, making friends (n=2), waiting for harvest, unending military service, 72 Camaro, working ant, walking tortoise, looking after a tree (n=2) a new building under construction and learning art. For example, the metaphor losing weight indicates that learner considers this process of language learning as a long and difficult process that requires willpower. The same student indicates at the end of this process, one gains power and happiness.

3.2. Category 2: English learning process is a journey

The category JOURNEY describes the act of traveling from one place to another, which usually takes time. This act usually involves the notions of a destination, passengers, and duration. The metaphors in this category are: adventure (n=2), compelling lap (n=1), travelling (n=3), world tour (n=2), and a road (n=8). How the students view the language learning process as a journey is diverse. In some metaphors, they consider it as a challenging road, whereas it is seen as an endless road in some others. There are also examples where the adventurous characteristic of the journey is emphasized. To illustrate, in the metaphor world tour, the student states that the more you travel, the more you want to travel, which as a language learner, the more one learns, the more s/he wants to learn. It is also emphasized that once the journey starts, things which seem difficult become easier along the road.

3.3. Category 3: English learning process is a progress

The category PROGRESS describes the process of improving or developing, and of getting closer to achieving or completing something (learning English, in our case). This PROGRESS can be gradual and slow, and leads a change. These metaphors in this category are: learning to walk as a toddler, being pregnant, learning to socialize, gaining experience in life, growing of a tree (n=2), growing of a plant, growing of a magical bean, growing of crop, growing of a seed, growing as a human being, growing of an unborn child. In accordance with the name of the theme, the metaphors in this category stress changing and gradual features of language learning process.

A sample excerpt for the metaphor “being pregnant” is as follows:

“We never know what English or any foreign language looks like in the beginning. When we become pregnant (start to learn a language), every day we need to eat regularly and do our exercises. Sometimes, this might force us and it might exhaust and cause trouble. But in the end, what we gain will provide happiness for us in all aspects of life.”

As seen in this example, the learner entailed is that there is a starting point in language learning process and it develops with time.

3.4. Category 4: English learning process is an enjoyable activity

The category ENJOYABLE ACTIVITY covers any kind of work that students do for interest and pleasure. Although the students may have a goal to achieve, unlike the TASK category, it is not obligatory, and it is done for fun. In this group of metaphors (eating sunflower seeds, watching a movie, playing games, being at funfair, eating bitter chocolate, going for a vacation, learning how to use a smart phone, and exploring a locked chest), the process of English learning is seen as an activity that the students enjoy doing. To illustrate, in watching a movie metaphor, the stated view of the learning process includes excitement, joy and curiosity that is felt in the beginning of watching a movie. The student also underscores the delight of learning English language within this metaphor.
3.5. Category 5: English learning process is a period of life

The category A PERIOD OF LIFE describes a very significant time in a person’s life, which has vital effects on the person going through that stage and leads a change in his/her life. Some students see the process as a challenging period which is difficult (e.g. puberty, primary school time), whereas other students consider it as a stage in life during which one can learn a lot (infancy, 0-5 age range, childhood period (n=2), the beginning of holding to life). In this respect, it has a positive impact on their future.

3.6. Category 6: English learning process is a competition

The category COMPETITION describes a situation in which the students feel the obligation of competing with someone or something. It entails the notions of struggle, winning and losing as well as an award at the end. Three metaphors were identified within this category are: super league, rope competition, and a hundred meter hurdles. In all these metaphors, the students think that elements found in a competition, such as regular training, preparation, workout and the fear of losing are also found in the process of learning a language.

3.7. Category 7: English learning process is a torture

The category TORTURE describes the act of causing severe pain or suffering, either physically or mentally. It entails the notions of punishment and suffering. Only two metaphors were identified in this group (torture, grave torment). One of the two students specifically mentions the intensive English year at the university, and he says because of this one year, he has to start work life one year later. It is obvious that he sees this period of English learning period as a waste of time and punishment. The other student expresses his negative attitudes towards language learning as: “English learning process is (like) grave torment because it gets long and long, and there is no way to go back (out of grave).”

3.8. Category 8: English learning process is an unending process

The category UNENDING PROCESS describes the continuity of a situation through one’s life. The metaphors (endless book, an infinite emptiness, an object in space) in this category emphasize that language learning is a life-long process. The unending feature of the process is highlighted by one of the students as seen in this excerpt: “No matter how much you learn, it never ends.”

3.9. Category 9: ENGLISH LEARNING PROCESS IS AN ENGRAVING AGENT

AN ENGRAVING AGENT is someone or something which has a deep impression as if by carving, etching or cutting materials. In this sense, learning English is seen as an experience that engraves the learner’s minds, memories and life. The only metaphor in this category is water. The student using this metaphor explicitly states that language learning is like flowing water and it leaves a significant trace in one’s life.

3.10. Category 10: ENGLISH LEARNING PROCESS IS A NURTURING AGENT

The category A NURTURING AGENT characterizes someone or something that nourishes and sustains the life of someone or something else. In this sense it emphasizes the developing aspect of language learning which is expressed with the metaphor “soil.” The student using this metaphor emphasizes that language learning is essential for personal development. With a positive attitude he says, “Language learning is like soil. The more you take care of it, the more it will yield fruit. Soil is the source of life for a plant.”
4. Discussion

In general, the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the metaphors produced by the participants in the present study demonstrated that language learners have diverse thoughts, which are categorized in ten different themes. Each of these themes presents an aspect of the language learning process and there is an uneven distribution of these metaphors among the themes. These aspects are further discussed in detail below.

The language learning process is generally seen as a TASK to be completed, which implies that students do not consider this process as a continuing acquisition in their life, but rather as work that they should finalize at school. In most of these metaphors, students indicate that this task requires effort and sometimes it is very difficult to figure out how to complete it (e.g., solving a puzzle, losing weight, crossing a river etc.). Similar to this group, there is yet another group, COMPETITION, which considers the process as a difficult and challenging task to be completed but in a competitive atmosphere (e.g., a hundred meter hurdles, super league). These metaphors may suggest that the students are more product oriented, and that their motivation of learning derives from their future goals.

Although it is quite small in number, there are also students who perceive language learning in a very negative way (TORTURE). Metaphors in this group indicate that students find the learning process as a disturbing, harming and dangerous activity. This metaphorical theme may imply the fear and hatred of these students of the learning process, and may reflect their anxiety and low motivation of language learning.

The JOURNEY category implies a destination; that is, a goal that students desire to achieve, and suggests that the experiences of getting there are as important as the final result. There are two opposing attitudes within this view; one group sees the learning process as a hard way to go (e.g. rough road) emphasizing the hardness of learning English as in TASK and COMPETITION. The other group views it as travel that they like experiencing (e.g. adventure). UNENDING PROCESS is a category which implies that the process has no ending without indicating neither negative nor positive attitudes of the students.

PROGRESS is a specific category, which only emphasizes the changing and developing aspect of the learning process. In this group of metaphors, the students view language learning as a gradual change like the growing of a tree or a baby. This metaphor suggests that the learning process is seen as a progressive, goal-oriented process facilitated by the teacher. A PERIOD OF LIFE theme emphasizes the contribution of learning English on the learners’ lives by preparing them to the future. ENGRAVING AGENT and NURTURING AGENT are the two groups displaying the positive influence of the process on the student’s life by leaving an important trace in their lives, and by providing the basic needs for them to develop.

As its name suggests, the group, ENJOYABLE ACTIVITY, has only positive thoughts on the process. Students in this group highlight the pleasure of learning a language by giving examples of activities they enjoy doing, for example, watching a movie, playing games, and being at funfair etc.

In general, the metaphors in the TASK, COMPETITION and TORTURE group indicate that students see the learning process not as a life-long learning procedure but as a course that they need take and finish at school. This finding has challenged us as the researchers and teachers and made us review our teaching practices. We thought that these students do not see the entertaining aspect of language learning compared to other students in the ENJOYABLE ACTIVITY group. This is actually a point stemming from the role of English in this teaching context. Students do not have the opportunity to practice English outside of their classrooms since it is not an ESL but an EFL atmosphere. They might be right to view the English language learning process as a part of schoolwork; however, if they are provided with communicative, interactive and challenging activities by which they can have a chance to make use of their target language, they might enjoy the process.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study attempted to investigate the conceptual metaphors of Turkish learners in regard to their perceptions of English language learning process. In general, the metaphors produced by the participants in our study attested that the students were not wholly negative or positive but have diverse thoughts. A close examination of these metaphors provided us, as language educators, with some insight into the students’ beliefs and attitudes on language learning process. In addition, the metaphor elicitation task itself helped the learners to think about their language learning process as a whole and question their beliefs. This is also highlighted by Oxford et. al. (1998:46) as follows: “The
metaphors ... can be used for several purposes: first, to challenge individuals to consider their own deep assumptions about the aims and methods of language teaching and, second, consequent to these implicit theories, to initiate the kind of careful, informed inquiry into the fundamental questions of education.” Similar to this view, further discussions on methods of language teaching were made based on metaphors signifying a negative attitude. It was found that the students who have negative attitudes mostly see the process as a part of schoolwork. Therefore, they do not get the joy of learning a new language compared to students with positive views who regard the process as journey, exploration, enjoyable activity or a way of growing. As language instructors, we came to the conclusion that we need to review our methods, practices, activities and our presentation of the target language so that students can enjoy language learning process more.

Compared to common metaphors such as road, travelling, some of the metaphors (eating sunflower seeds, unending military service) found to be specific to Turkish culture, which shows cross-cultural variation in metaphors. For example, the metaphor of eating sunflower seeds is an activity that is done in Turkish context. People often realize this activity while they are chatting with friends or watching T.V. in their leisure times. Someone from another culture might not figure out what kind of underlying meaning this metaphor has since it is unique to Turkish culture.

This paper is a report of an ongoing research on the application of the theory of conceptual metaphor to the language learning and teaching pedagogy, which will be followed by two complementary steps. As a next step, it is aimed to investigate how learners change their metaphors over time with the improvement of their proficiency level. As the second step, a survey will be conducted to find out whether there exists a relationship between the metaphors and the students’ overall proficiency.

To sum up, this study provided several outcomes: i) during metaphor elicitation task, students had the opportunity to gain self-awareness about their perceptions of language learning process, ii) teachers had the chance to learn about their students’ hidden perceptions on their language learning process, iii) the data obtained triggered the teachers to review and revise their teaching philosophies, methods, and classroom practices, and iv) this study opened new gaps for further studies on metaphors for language learning/teaching.

Appendix A. Demographic and metaphor survey

Name:
Age:
Gender:
Program:
Instruction:

Please think of a metaphor and complete the sentences below. You need to explain why you choose specific metaphor after ‘because.’

English learning process is (like) ……………………. because …

References