

College EFL Learners' Metaphorical Perceptions of English Learning*

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This article explores college EFL students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English in a minority area in Northwest China. 120 students (30 English majors and 30 non-English majors), participated in the study by completing a prompt "learning English is (like)... because...". Through metaphor analysis, it is hoped to have an insights into how students currently perceive their experiences of learning English and what thinking the students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English may stimulate. 115 metaphors were used for analysis in terms of attitudes towards English, types of metaphors and perceptions revealed through metaphors. It was found that students had a good understanding of English learning. Their metaphors revealed their beliefs about the English learning, about English learning process and about themselves as language learners. They understood that language learning was hard process and that being a successful learner requires a variety of demands such as hard work, perseverance, patience, and a positive attitude. The results of the study may help students in exploring an important aspect of their past, present and even future lives and teachers who work in a similar context in understanding these perceptions and using them to facilitate and foster their students' English learning.

Keywords: metaphor, perception, English learning, college, China

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Metaphor in General

Definition

A metaphor is “a figure of speech that describes a subject by asserting that it is, on some point of comparison, the same as another otherwise unrelated object” (Wikipedia on metaphor). The *Cambridge Advanced Learners' Dictionary* (online) defines it as “an expression which describes a person or object in a literary way by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to the person or object you are trying to describe.” The *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* defines it as “the use of a word or phrase to indicate something, different from (though related in some way to) the literal meaning” (Hornby, 1997, p. 928). It is obvious in these definitions that a metaphor is regarded as a linguistic device which is used in a deliberate and literary way. Since the 1980s, Lakoff's book *Metaphors We Live By* has provided core concepts of the study of metaphor in the linguistic field, proposing that “metaphor is a matter of thought and action rather than a device of poetic imagination and rhetorical flourish” (Zhang & Hu, 2009, p. 77).

A metaphor consists of the topic or tenor, that is, what or who is being talked about; the vehicle, which is the metaphorical expression; and the ground, which shows how the speaker sees the topic by using the vehicle that is similar in some way to the topic. Here is a typical metaphor: “life was like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're gonna get” (from the film *Forest Gump*). In this metaphor, “life” is the topic and “a box of chocolates” serves as the vehicle, while “you never know what you're gonna get” is the ground.

Metaphors and Similes

We were taught that examples as in “as busy as a bee” and “my love is like

a red, red rose” were similes, due to the use of words such as “as” or “like” in making the comparison. This illustrates that there is a linguistic distinction between metaphor and simile. But conceptually, metaphor and simile involve the same process of indicating something in terms of something else. Punter (2007) regards simile as “a subspecies of metaphor, which is distinct only in that it keeps the notion of comparison explicit” (p. 3). And in the present study, the author focused on the conceptual similarity between the two.

How Metaphors Reflect Perceptions and Beliefs

People can use metaphors in their daily lives to show how they perceive the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). People can also use metaphor as a cognitive tool to understand the real world (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008). The cognitive idea of metaphor as mediating human understanding and world view is illustrated in the studies of Kovecses (1986) and Pishghadam (2011). In investigating metaphors, researchers usually analyze either the naturally produced metaphors by teachers and learners in uncontrolled contexts or the elicited metaphors by participants completing the sentence frame “learning (English) is like... (because...)”. Studies reported in Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Ellis (2001) and Oxford et al. (1998) are examples of the former procedure, while studies reported in Guerrero and Villamil (2002) and Wan, Low, and Li (2011) are examples of the latter procedure. In the study of Sykes (2011), it was found the elicited metaphor generated by the participants were representative of their implicitly held beliefs.

“The more a metaphor is creative and unique, the more it reflects the active thought processes of the person who produced it, including thoughts that the speaker may not have been able to express explicitly” (Littlewood, 2012, p. 33). People’s thoughts and perceptions become more vivid and interesting when they use metaphor. This is why metaphors have been used as a research tool in a considerable number of studies (Kesen, 2013), such as in teacher education (as in the research of Akilli & Seven, 2010) and in second language acquisition (as for example in Gregory, 1992 and Guerrero & Villamil, 2002).

Researchers have also studied the motivation of learners through metaphor analysis (Jin et al., 2014). Wan, Low, and Li (2011) used students' and teachers' metaphors to explore how they perceived aspects of learning and teaching and found that metaphor is a powerful cognitive tool in gaining insights into students' and teachers' beliefs.

This study is based on qualitative research of how college EFL learners perceive their experiences of learning English through metaphor analysis. In this article metaphors serve both as a research tool and as a stimulus for communication. It is hoped to get a picture of how students perceive their experience in learning English in a personally meaningful way and put the "living, thinking, experiencing and feeling person at the center of the language learning process" (Hanauer, 2012, p. 108). The purposes of the present study on students' metaphors are 1) to discover how students perceive their experiences of learning English to date; and 2) to explore what thinking the students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English may stimulate.

Methodology

Participants

A group of university students, 60 English majors and 60 non-English majors, at Inner Mongolia University of Technology in Northwest China were asked to reflect on their own experiences and perceptions of learning English. Among the English majors, 30 are freshmen and 30 are sophomores, while the non-English majors are all sophomores, but with different English levels. Of the non-English majors 30 are B level students and 30 are C level students. The level is grouped at the beginning of the first semester according to students' English scores on the University Entrance Examination in China. At the B level, students' English scores should be in between 90-100 of the total 150, while the C level is below 90.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for analysis in this study was obtained by asking students to provide a metaphor which best describes their experience of English learning. Before they provided their metaphors, students were given an introductory lecture on understanding the definition of metaphor and how it can be a powerful cognitive tool for gaining insights into their beliefs. Then they were asked to respond to the question “What is learning English like to you?” and to complete the sentence frame in English: “Learning English is (like) _____, because _____.” This frame provides the three elements of metaphor for analysis: tenor, vehicle and ground. For the 120 metaphors students produced, 115 metaphors were used for analysis (five were repeated). These 115 metaphors were then categorized by identifying naturally occurring themes. The metaphors were analyzed from three perspectives, students’ attitudes towards English learning, the types of metaphors generated by students, and their perceptions of the English learning experience revealed through metaphors. The following section reports the findings of this study.

Findings

Attitudes towards English Learning

By analyzing the vehicles and grounds of students’ metaphors, it is found that students’ have a clear attitude towards English learning, that is, either positive (positive oriented), or negative (negative oriented). Neutral and ambivalent attitudes were not identified in this study. It is also found that freshmen English majors are more optimistic than sophomores, and C level students are pessimistic about learning and improving their English (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Percentage of Attitudes among Learners

Learners (Number of students mentioned attitudes in metaphor)	Positive Attitude (%)	Negative Attitude (%)
Freshmen (15)	80	20
Sophomores (17)	52.94	47.06
B level (16)	54.02	45.98
C level (21)	85.71	14.29

Positive (positive oriented) Attitude

Metaphors in the following examples (I) indicate that learners have a pleasant and positive experiences of learning English.

Examples (I)

<i>Learning English is like</i>	<i>because</i>
Traveling	We can enjoy a new world.
Reading a book	It can cultivate us.
Playing	We can have a lot of fun.
Walking	It's good for us.
Adventuring	We can learn a lot in the end.
Moving ahead in the desert	It is very difficult but exciting, we can make a little progress every day.

Negative (negative oriented) Attitude

Students' metaphors as in the following examples (II) show their unpleasant feelings and dislike of English learning.

Examples (II)

<i>Learning English is like</i>	<i>because</i>
Learning to cook	It's so difficult.
Traveling	It's boring.
Suffering	I feel it's too complex for me to learn and it is useless to me.
Walking	I don't know where the end is.
Falling in love	It's happy but sometimes hurts you.
Climbing a mountain	It's easy at first, but difficult later.

Types of Metaphors Generated by Students

According to the superordinate categories of the metaphors given by students, eight types of metaphors were generalized (see Table 2). Through these types, students showed their perceptions of English learning. These perceptions are displayed in the next section.

TABLE 2

Types of Metaphors

Types of Metaphor	Examples (Learning English is like...)
Construction work	Building a house Building a skyscraper
Journey / Movement	Traveling Climbing a high ladder Running Marathon
Playing / Leisure	Listening to music Breathing fresh air Playing games Shopping
Exploration	Discovering treasure Moving ahead in the desert

Experience	Walking
	Doing business
	Learning Math
	Washing clothes
	Reading a novel
Farming / Planting	Farming
	Planting an apple tree
Food & Drinking	Eating chocolates
	Drinking tea / coffee
Things	Road
	Key

Perceptions of English Learning

In the process of coding, it is found that students show a wide range of views about English language learning through metaphors. In this section, students' beliefs about English learning, about the English learning process and about themselves as learners were presented.

Students' beliefs about English learning

For this category, students' beliefs regarding the importance of English, the benefits of learning English and the demands to master English are illustrated. One student at the B level said in his metaphor "learning English is like reading the encyclopedia, because it is important to know a different culture." Another student said "learning English is like traveling around the world, because it is important for us to learn English as a global villager." Another student said "learning English is like my phone, because I can not live without my phone." Only 6% of students mentioned the importance of English learning and those are all at the B level.

As for the benefits, 23.3% students said they benefit from learning English. They use metaphors like construction work (e.g., building a house), journey

(e.g., traveling, running), leisure (e.g., playing games, listening to music), experience (e.g., reading a book) or things (e.g., key) to express their understanding of the benefits they can get from learning English. They believe that learning English will make them better in the future and there will be rewards in the end, as listed in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Benefits

Learning English Is Like...	Because (Benefits)
Climbing a high ladder	The higher you stand the more you will see.
Listening to music	It makes you full of energy.
Climbing mountain	You can harvest knowledge which is on the top of the mountain.
Breathing fresh air	I can become more active and energetic.
Discovering treasure	We always can find some new things.
Reading a book	It can cultivate us.
Building a skyscraper	We can constantly, in the process, build self-confidence and make ourselves stronger.
Traveling	We can enjoy a new world.
Playing	We can have a lot of fun.
Playing games	It makes me happy and enriches me.
Doing business	It makes us rich.
Running	It makes us stronger.
A road	It will lead me somewhere.
A key	We can use this key to open a door to success.

46.8% of all the students mentioned the demands needed in learning English. They all emphasize the systematic hard work that is involved in learning. They use metaphors such as journey, construction work and personal experience to show the hard work, solid foundation, perseverance, confidence, and patience that are involved in learning English (see Table 4).

TABLE 4
Demands

Learning English Is Like...	Because	Demands
Sailing against the current	If you don't move hard forward you will fall behind.	Hard work (efforts)
Planting an apple tree	The more you look after it, the more you will get.	
Waiting for the sunrise	You must struggle to wake up, but it's worth it.	
Marathon	Only if you study hard can you make progress.	
Building a skyscraper	Laying a strong foundation is a must for	A solid
Building a house	Having a strong foundation is the first and most important step	Foundation
Climbing mountain	If you work hard you will find a new world.	Perseverance
Making friends	It needs time to learn the essence.	
Running	Perseverance is the most important thing.	
Falling in love	If speaking out bravely we can succeed.	Confidence
Watching football match	The process is difficult, but I still think they will be successful someday in the future.	
Building a house	It needs a great deal of patience and practice.	Patience
Playing football	You must be patient enough to shoot.	

Beliefs about the language learning process

Students' metaphors also indicate their understanding of the English learning process. Specifically, they mentioned in their metaphors the

difficulty of English, their feelings on learning English and their motivation to learn it (see Table 5). 22.5% of students expressed the view that learning English is not easy. 16.7% students expressed their feelings that learning English is happy, exciting, or boring. 5% students' metaphors, which are all from students at C level, are about their lack of motivation in learning English.

TABLE 5
Beliefs about the Language Learning Process

Learning English Is Like...	Because
Climbing up to the mountain	It's a tough and long process.
Moving ahead in the desert	It is very difficult but exciting, we can make a little progress every day.
Chinese football	The process to fight for the World Cup is especially hard.
Climbing a mountain	It's easy at first, but difficult later. / harvesting knowledge is always on the top of the mountain and you can get it after great hardship.
Walking on the road	There are too many difficulties to deal with.
A long trip	It's full of both beauty and challenges.
Eating chocolate	It tastes not only sweet but also bitter.
A bird learning how to fly	The process is hard, but we must master it.
Reading novel	The process is painful.
Earning money	It's very hard but necessary.
Learning to cook	It's so difficult.
Going up into space	It's too difficult for me.
A child wanting a toy far away	I never reached my goal in learning English.
Walking on a busy street	Nobody knows you or helps you when you are in trouble and you are afraid to speak.
Traveling	I feel tired, but sometimes happy.
Shopping	It's boring.

Drinking coffee	It tastes bitter at first, but later you will enjoy its sweetness.
Enjoying life	I feel happy.
Long-distance running	It makes me tired and weak.
Falling in love	It's happy but sometimes hurts you.
Suffering	I feel it's too complex for me to learn and it is useless to me.
Walking	I don't know where the end is.
Being lost in the forest	I don't know why I have to learn it.

Students' beliefs about themselves as learners

This category may overlap, to some extent, with the previous two. The author includes it to emphasize how students perceive themselves as learners in learning English. For example, one student said "learning English is like moving ahead in the desert, because we need to be struggling not to succumb to difficulties." Here he/she is emphasizing agency as a language learner. 25% of students mentioned how they perceive themselves as learners as shown in Table 6. They believe themselves either as a positive agent or lacking in confidence.

TABLE 6
Students' Beliefs about Themselves as Learners (pronouns in bold emphasize the agent)

Learning English Is Like...	Because
Moving ahead in the desert	We need to be struggling not to succumb to difficulties.
Farmers farming	We should persist in looking after it, then we can harvest.
Collecting stamps	We should learn more skills to become wiser.
A long road	We must put every footprint on it.
Washing clothes	I don't like to wash my dirty clothes, but I have to, otherwise I can't go anywhere.

Building a skyscraper	We can constantly, in the process, build self-confidence and make ourselves stronger.
A sweet fruit which is hard to get	I know it is good, but I cannot learn it well.
Happy traveling	I understand a new culture and different things.
Brushing teeth	We have to insist on doing it everyday.
Death	I cannot pass the final stage.
Flying in the sky	I tried my best, but never realized my goal.

Discussion

Hoang (2014) argued that the “implications of metaphor research have several practical implications for learners, teachers, curriculum designers, and material developers” (p. 15). Students’ metaphors in the present study revealed interesting and suggestive information about their mental world of learning English. The results may be helpful for teachers and students to explore an important aspect of students’ past, current or even future lives.

Different Level Students Have Different Perceptions and Experience of Language Learning

As shown in Table 7, students frequently mentioned the demands that are involved in learning English. For example, 70% of freshmen English majors and 56.7% of sophomores mentioned demands. The most common demand is the hard work that is involved in learning, followed by the solid foundation. Students believe that the foundations must be strong enough to support a complex and higher structure. Learning English is hard, like climbing a mountain, and although there will be rewards (a beautiful view at the top), one must work hard and be persistent to reach to the top.

20% of freshmen and 3% of sophomores mentioned the difficulty in the process of learning English, which shows that freshmen may lack learning

experience as English majors and find that learning is more difficult. This indicates that teachers should help students (especially freshmen) realize and learn to be an English major by sharing with them the learning experience, focusing on developing more skills and helping them build up confidence.

As for non-English majors, their beliefs about English learning are not significantly different. The similar percentages of beliefs about the hard learning process show that although C level students are not as good as B level, this does not mean that lower level students believe that learning is more difficult. Teachers who teach C level students should know that it may not be the difficulty that causes their students to have poor results. There must be other factors such as attitude, motivation or ability. We can also see this in C level students' metaphors on motivation. 20% of students from C level said they lack motivation in learning English, and 20% of them mentioned their (mostly negative) feelings about learning English. For example, they said "... (because) it is boring", "... (because) it makes me tired and weak.", "... (because) I don't like it." and "... (because) it's bitter."

TABLE 7

Perceptions of English Learning

Class	Beliefs about Language and Learning			Belief about the Learning Process			Beliefs about Self
	Importance	Benefit	Demands	Difficulty	Feeling	Motivation	Agency
Freshmen	-	20%	70%	20%	-	-	6.7%
Sophomores	-	13.3%	56.7%	3%	23.3%	-	13.3%
B	6%	30%	33.3%	33.3%	23.3%	-	13.3%
C	-	26.7%	23.3%	33.3%	20%	20%	13.3%

Students Use Different Metaphors to Show That English Learning Involves Systematic Hard Work

As mentioned above, most students mentioned the demands involved in learning English. Among the demands (see Table 4 for subcategories), the most

frequently mentioned one is the hard work. Students use different metaphors to express their experience of the hard learning process (see Table 8).

TABLE 8
Metaphors of the Hard Learning Process

	Learning English Is Like...	Because
Journey / Movement	Climbing a mountain	If you want to come to the top, you need to work hard. At the beginning it is easy, but hard at the end. It is hard but necessary. The process is hard, but once you get to the top, you will see a beautiful view. It is hard, and we need to work hard and be persistent to get to the top.
	Climbing stairs	When you climb up to a new step, you need a lot of effort.
Construction work	Building a skyscraper (house)	It needs hard work. You must accumulate day in and day out.
Growing	Planting (an apple) tree watering	The more you look after it, the more you can get. You have to take care of it day by day. There will be harvest if you irrigate hard. The flower will be successful in growing up only if you water it every day.
	Farming	Only by working hard can we gain success

The climbing, growing, construction work and journey (travel) metaphors which students used all highlight the systematic hard work involved in learning English. The learner is a worker, a farmer, or a traveler who must ensure that they take every step to get the desired results. Learning English is

hard and sometimes the learner may feel exhausted or puzzled. But it is worth the effort because it will “lead them somewhere as they expected.” For teachers, it is very important to help students better motivate themselves to be successful language learners, since students accept the notion of being hard-working, persevering and active (Shi, 2006).

Conclusion

In this article the author explored students' experience of learning English by asking them to complete the frame “Learning English is (like) _____, because _____.” To keep their originality, the author did not make any changes to students' metaphors. The 115 metaphors were coded based on the two questions that the author explores, namely, how students perceive their experiences of learning English so far and what thinking the students' metaphorical perceptions of learning English may stimulate. Their metaphors show that students have a comprehensive understanding of English learning. They believe that language learning is not easy, and that successful learning involves not only hard work but also other factors such as confidence, a strong foundation, patience and perseverance, and a positive attitude. They also expressed their feelings of being happy, sad or confused in learning English.

Students at different levels have different perceptions of English learning. English majors talk more about the demands, while non-English majors experience more difficulty and negative feelings in learning. But this does not mean that lower level students believe that it is the difficulty that causes their results. Instead there must be other factors that need to be explored.

This article gives us an insight into how college EFL students in a minority area in Northwest China perceive their experience of learning English, and may help teachers who work in a similar context understand these perceptions and use them to facilitate and foster students' learning.

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