

English Learners' Metaphors and Images of Vocabulary Learning

Hadi Farjami

Semnan University

h_farjami@profs.semnan.ac.ir

Abstract

The purpose of the study reported in this article was to explore images and metaphors English learners have in mind for vocabulary learning. First, 350 learners in seven cities in Iran with considerable experience of English learning were asked to compare vocabulary learning to concrete objects and activities. Their 130 analogies were reviewed and analyzed multiple times to identify fitting labels and assign inclusive categories. The five most frequent themes which emerged from the analysis were FOOD & DRINK, COLLECTING, JOURNEY, PUZZLE/PROBLEM, and MUSIC. Based on a scrutiny of the metaphorical themes and the images which gave rise to them, some salient practical and theoretical points with implications for teaching language and vocabulary are tentatively discussed.

Key Words: English vocabulary, metaphor for vocabulary learning, mental image for vocabulary learning

Introduction

Description of learning has been replete with imagery. An early and well-known image was proposed by Plato, who attempted to explain his epistemology by using the image of shadows in a cave. At the level of naïve theories of learners, images and metaphors, as “blueprints of thinking”, are claimed to have a powerful influence on the learning process and the perception and mental restructuring of the instructional input (Martinez, Sauleda & Huber, 2001). Accordingly, the images, metaphors and analogies language learners may have formed and carry in mind as part of their belief systems can have a significant role in shaping their learning trajectories, the study decisions they make and the learning strategies they adopt. Knowledge about the metaphors the learners hold about foreign language learning in general and the skills, components

and other elements associated with it would put the language teaching practitioners at a better vantage point.

This article reports part of the results harvested from an attempt motivated by this understanding about the role of imagery and metaphor in foreign language learning. Specifically, it explores what metaphors language learners hold about the processes involved in learning English vocabulary and how typical Iranian English learners visualize and analogize English vocabulary learning. The article first sketches out the conceptual and theoretical reference of the study before presenting its specific focus and procedures. Then, the categories derived from the metaphors and images provided by the learners are tabulated and a number of salient features in the images which seem significantly relevant to vocabulary learning are discussed.

This research was undertaken with the hope that learners from various ability levels would provide glimpses of pictures which presumably formed the basis for their particular vocabulary learning activities and strategies. It was assumed that such feedback would shed light on the actual processes of learning that take place in the learners and reveal their visualizations of the product they are working toward. Teachers equipped with some awareness of those images might be in a better position to develop a good rapport with the learners and help them improve their learning strategies and study skills.

The Metacognitive Significance of Mental Images and Metaphors in Organizing the Conceptual System

Metaphor is traditionally defined as “a device for seeing something in terms of something else” (Cameron, 1999, p. 78). However, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggested a broader conceptualization of metaphor, which relies on a distinction between abstract conceptual metaphors and specific metaphorical expressions. “A conceptual metaphor, such as ARGUMENT IS WAR¹ is an abstract rule or mapping which connects two distinct conceptual domains” (Lakoff, 1993, p. 208): the source domain of WAR, and the target domain of ARGUMENT. Thus, conceptual metaphors make us apply what we know about one area of our

¹ Conceptual metaphors are in small capitals throughout this paper according to metaphor research convention.

experience (source domain) to another area of our experience (target domain).

Concerning the metacognitive significance of metaphor, Lakoff and Johnson (2003, p. 158) contend:

In all aspects of life, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphor.

As Tubin (2005) asserts, the metaphor helps to highlight certain features of reality while forcing others into the background and thus points to features of the experience which is perceived as the most relevant and important. Through this function metaphors clarify abstract ideas by tangible, visual and sensual images (Neisser, 2003).

Guerrero and Villamil (2000, p. 341) urge researcher to pursue metaphor analysis in the context of foreign language learning and teaching as “an excellent heuristic for bringing implicit assumptions to awareness, encouraging reflection, finding contradictions, and ultimately fostering change in educational beliefs and practice.” There has been some research for raising awareness to the ubiquity of metaphors in language and describing various metaphors learners hold about language and linguistic processes. For example, Talebinejad and Dastjerdi (2005) conducted a cross-cultural study of metaphors and tried to raise awareness to the similar and different ways Persian and English native speakers conceptualized 44 animal metaphors. Parvaresh (2008) did a case study which focused on the metaphors of an adult learner about language teachers and learners to reveal whether his attitude toward language learning and teachers was open to change. The revelation was an attitudinal inflexibility in this language learner which was tentatively attributed to the school system which he had attended. However, when Villami and De Guerrero (2005) used “conceptualizing through metaphor” as a teacher training strategy in a 15-week long course, they observed significant changes in the metaphorical conceptualizations of the teacher trainees. Their conclusion was that using metaphor in education has both descriptive and developmental values because it allows the teacher to see the development in the learners’ beliefs, promotes reflection on the side of the learners, and initiates change in them. In addition to the premise that people frame and express their

experience on the basis of largely unconscious conceptual metaphor (Deignan, 2005), what motivates this approach to research is the assumption that metaphors allow learners to “verbalize what is unknown or difficult to describe in other terms” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999) and to mentally organize their beliefs and experience and to make them tangible (Deignan, 2005).

As a result of these explorations, some conceptual metaphors of teachers and learners on language learning have been identified and their various and sometimes contrasting views have been highlighted. For example, Ellis (2002) draws our attention to the contrast between metaphors which render learners as passive (LEARNERS ARE CONTAINERS) and those which imply active agency (LEARNERS ARE SURFERS/TRAVELERS). Moreover, there are metaphors and mental images which recur more frequently across these studies. For example, LANGUAGE LEARNING IS A JOURNEY occurs in Cortazzi and Jin (1999), Ellis (2002), Mill (2003), and Saban (2010) among others.

Learners' Metaphors and Teachers' and Learners' Language Awareness

It is a truth implicitly acknowledged in discussions of focus on form(s), consciousness-raising, noticing, and input-enhancement that the possession of an adequate level of awareness is an essential attribute of competent foreign language teachers. This attribute is underlined in the following quote from Michael Swan (1994, p. 47):

Good teaching involves a most mysterious feat—sitting, so to speak, on one's listener's shoulder, monitoring what one is saying with the listener's ears, and using this feedback to shape and adapt one's words from moment to moment so that the thread of communication never breaks. This is art, ...e

The thrust of these remarks in the light of the present study is that teachers should take learners' perspective into account in determining how they select, package and present the instructional content. According to Andrews (2007), this is a concern that should be included in any model or agenda of language awareness, although his subordination of learning awareness to language awareness appears to drastically marginalize and confine learners' perspective to an appreciation of “the current state of each learner's interlanguage and of its likely developmental path, as well as an awareness of the processes of

interlingual development” (Andrews, 2007, p. 29). It seems there should be more to learners' awareness than knowing something about what occurs in one's cognition. Metacognitive awareness of the linguistic processes is also bound to affect the control that learners exercise over their attempts and strategies. Practitioners' awareness of learners' metacognitive belief systems in turn fundamentally affects their classroom practice and the efficiency with which they tackle various challenges. Teachers are affected because of the awareness and the learners are affected because of the probable change in teachers' behavior and treatment of the learners and the subject.

In spite of the efforts and ideas briefly mentioned above, metaphors by students of various disciplines are not yet well documented and understood. In particular, foreign learners' beliefs as expressed through their metaphors and mental images, so far, have been largely a neglected variable (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005). Learners' metaphors on foreign language learning and its various aspects, skills, and components and probing into the implications may enrich our knowledge about learning in general and inform foreign language teaching in particular. Analyzing such metaphors can show the relationship between participants' metaphorical conceptualizations and their associated actual practice (Wan, Low & Li, 2011). It was in consideration of these implications and upshots that this study attempted to investigate the images and metaphors of language learners on English vocabulary learning as a contribution to the larger agenda of language learners' beliefs and schemata exploration.

The Investigative Procedures

To obtain the initial data, this study elicited images and metaphors about English vocabulary and its learning in a foreign context from available and cooperating learners with at least one year's serious language learning experience. It is worth mentioning that in spite of the apparent ease and straightforward nature of the task, data gathering proved to be highly challenging due to the imaginative nature of responses demanded by the questionnaire as can be understood from the rather low rate of return of the forms.

Instrument

The instrument for collecting information about learners' images and metaphors depicting their conception of English vocabulary learning was a questionnaire. It was adopted from Lawley and Tompkin (2004), who

suggest sentence completion as a technique for eliciting students' metaphors. They recommend this elicitation technique because, according to them, it neither contaminates nor distorts the students' metaphorical expressions. The questionnaire used in this study first clarified the purpose of the study in Persian both by explanation and exemplification. Then, the questionnaire asked the respondents to provide images or metaphors depicting the way they accommodated learning English vocabulary by finishing sentences which started like this: *Learning English vocabulary is like* The respondents were told that they could write their responses in any language they felt more comfortable with. This resulted in answers either in Persian or English. The reason the learners were not limited to English was that such restriction could have prevented the free flow of their mental images and/or some learners might have refrained from expressing their images because of embarrassment over the quality of their writing, in spite of being anonymous.

Participants

The sampling strategy used in this study was convenience sampling (Dornyei, 2010), where member of the target population of language learners were selected if they satisfied some minimum requirements. No strict criteria were set for choosing participants except that they should be adult learners of English with at least one year of serious language learning experience so that they could readily understand the English-language elicitation prompt. Responses were requested of more than 350 English learners and 140 completed questionnaire forms were returned from intermediate and advanced English learners in private institutes and universities, in seven cities in Iran. Excluding the irrelevant and non-metaphorical responses, 125 forms were included in the analysis. The age of the participants turned out to be from 18 to 35 ($M = 21.6$), with the majority of them in their lower 20's, as most of them came from senior BA courses. Eighty-one respondents were female and 44 were male.

Data Collection

Although the written instructions were clearly worded in Persian, it was also made sure that there was clear understanding on the part of each individual respondent as to what s/he was expected to do. Practically in all cases, the questionnaire was handed to the respondents in person,

either by the researcher or his assistants. Individual delivery was adopted as initial group delivery of the questionnaire returned few completed forms. The forms were also returned individually. This situation introduced a potential bias as the submitted forms are more likely to be from relatively enthusiastic English learners and the images of those with less enthusiasm and less positive attitude are presumably underrepresented. However, as a tradeoff, personal delivery made it possible to make sure that there was a clear understanding on the side of each respondent as to what s/he was expected to do.

Data Analysis and Categorization

The output of the questionnaire was responses including metaphorical analogies about English vocabulary learning. Few respondents provided more than one comparison, but if more than one image or metaphor were provided, they were all considered for analysis. The responses were translated into English, if in Persian, or clear English, if clarification was needed. This review also acted as a familiarization stage and gave the researcher a vantage point over the responses. Later steps used to organize the responses are summarized as follows:

1. The responses were reviewed and the images and metaphors contained were listed.
2. The specific images were re-examined and categorized into more inclusive and conceptually-oriented themes based on content resemblance.
3. The frequencies of these categories were determined.
4. The themes and their frequencies were tabulated along with the images which gave rise to each theme.
5. Re-examining the themes and their underlying metaphors, general features and strands relevant to foreign language learning were identified. These features and strands were not categorically tabulated and counted but are discussed in some detail.

As these stages of the study were unavoidably highly interpretive, the researcher discussed his interpretations of the remarks and comparisons offered by the participants with applied linguistics colleagues and consulted them about the identified images and metaphors, and the categories which were derived.

Results

The researcher and his assistants examined the responses of 125 participants to the elicitation device multiple times and derived 130 metaphors. However, it seemed awkward, and not so telling and informative, to simply report a long list of individual images. Therefore, the images and metaphors were re-examined and more inclusive themes were extracted. Table 1 displays these metaphorical themes—the general notions which were abstracted from analogies—along with their frequencies in the full pool of comparisons. Key words associated with the original images are also provided for the sake of more transparency and to allow for other possible interpretations.

There are elements of arbitrariness in the identification process of the images and themes. For one thing, these are not the only extractable themes from the data. There are alternative, albeit similar, ways of labeling and categorizing the same data. For example, the theme of community and friendship is shared by images in different categories. For another thing, many responses and images therein can have a place in other categories, whether identified here or not. For example, *finding food to sustain your journey* clearly belongs in more than one category. After all, reality is rarely neatly categorical. Still for another thing, not all images in the same category belong in it equally relevantly. There are also metaphors which are indeterminate in the sense that their interpretation depends on the person and situation, e.g., *walking in the cold rain*.

Table 1

Themes emerging from learners' images and metaphors about English vocabulary learning in order of frequency

1. FOOD & DRINK (16) adding new foods/eating ice-cream/eating delicious foods/sharing food joyfully with others/drinking water/finding pieces of food in	2. COLLECTING (14) putting new gold coins in a treasury/shopping list/adding to a collection (e.g., stamps)/a suitcase including your needed items/collecting	3. JOURNEY (9) finding tools of a journey to a new horizon/discovering a new way home/a new way to a place/	4. PUZZLE/ PROBLEM (9) Solving (2)/ doing (2)/ completing a puzzle/doing a very large puzzle/ playing a puzzle game/ hard
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<p>a new land to continue exploration/ essential as blood/eating pizza cheese (soft & delicious)/ drinking hot tea in cold weather/food which makes you more hungry/eating strange fruits/sweet cake/flexible menu/ eating chicken soup/drinking juice</p>	<p>stamps/storing wealth for no purpose/ recording Olympic gold medals/saving money/storing in a warehouse/ a bank of money/getting more drops of sea/adding dress to your wardrobe/ adding precious pieces to your collection/ collecting new marble balls</p>	<p>watching new people and cultures on an endless road/ removing blocks on the road/ shortcut to home/ walking on thorns/ learning road signs/ each word a path leading to the destination</p>	<p>math problem/ kaleidoscope</p>
<p>5. MUSIC (8) playing a musical instrument/ playing a note/tools for music/ learning musical notes/new songs/ learning musical instruments/ making the main sounds of an instrument/ playing violin (hard at first)</p>	<p>6. EXPLORING (7) jumping into the sea to find another world and discover more/a deep bottomless sea/ walking through a jungle (with marvelous new creatures)/ discovering new world (same objects , new names)/ exploring exotic islands/ identifying obscure objects in water/being in an unknown place</p>	<p>7. CONSTRUCTION (7) bricks for a wall/materials for building/ buying bricks for beautiful houses/ obtaining raw materials for building/ designing an entertainment center at a building/ putting bricks on each other/building a house</p>	<p>8. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (7) hammering a nail in place (fixing words in mind)/ walking/ climbing a steep mountain/ baby walking/ mountain climbing/ sports practice/ walking in the cold rain</p>
<p>9. GROWTH (5) growing new leaves and losing old ones</p>	<p>10. LIGHT (4) lighting a candle/night turning light and</p>	<p>11. FURNISHING/ EMBELLISHMENT (4)</p>	<p>12. TOOLS (4) adjustable tool (ever</p>

(2)/ growing a large tree with lots of fruit/growing new branches/rebirth / greener	beautiful/lights on road/turning on lights and lamps lighting other areas of minds too	furnishing a bare house with beautiful items/painting a house to add beauty (each word adds)/ show off/ making a colorful bunch of flowers	evolving)/ bettering your tools for fighting/ master keys/keys for locks
13. MEMORIZING (4) memorizing poems/phone numbers/times table/math formulae	14. COOKING (3) cooking/preparing cooking tools/ ingredients of a soup	15. AMMUNITION & fuel (3) loading a gun/bullets in a gun/ petrol in a car	16. SCENERY (3) new perspectives to familiar scenes/a vast ocean/a colorful sea
17. A BABY LEARNING MOTHER TONGUE(3) a baby learning mother tongue words (2)/learning new words by a baby	18. ENLIGHTENMENT (3) getting knowledgeable in all fields/expanding knowledge/ thumbing through pages of an interesting book	19. HUNTING (3) hunting ducks/ searching for a needle in an arsenal/ catching fish	20. PLAY & FUN (3) fun/hide & seek (hard but sweet)/ taking a rest under a shady fruit tree
21. PICKING (2) picking flowers/picking berries (one by one)	22. PEOPLE (2) diverse people of a country/old & new friends	23. life SKILLS (1) skills for life	24. KNITTING (1) knitting new designs
25. DRIVING (1) riding a bike	26. PREPARATION (1) obtaining equipment for a purpose	27. CHAOS (1) anarchy & diversity	28. MACHINES (1) movement for hands of a clock (never stop)

Note. Total metaphors = 130

Discussion

The repeated scenario in the exploration of teachers' and learners' visualizations of different aspects of learning has been to categorize the elicited metaphors, and/or specify factor patterns and loadings. But the survey of images provided by the participants in this study made it clear that although it is not hard to assign the metaphors to categories, it is very problematic to find categories with compatible members, in that, the members of the same category oftentimes represent different, even contradictory attitudes, goals, desires, strategies, styles, etc. For example, JOURNEY includes *walking on thorns, discovering a new way home, finding new horizons, removing road blocks*; COLLECTING includes *collecting money for no purpose, collecting gold coins, and a suitcase of your needed items*. This means that the analysis should not stop at this stage and should go further. So, this study makes no universal claims and offers no strong generalizations. The purpose of the study is to have a glimpse of the mental pictures of a group of EFL learners and tentatively describe, how they see vocabulary learning so that practitioners' awareness is raised about their own experience and challenges and they are prompted to reflect on their practice. It is in the spirit of this purpose that some issues, features, and strands running through the metaphors and concepts identified above are discussed below.

FOOD & DRINK tops the list of categories of images for English vocabulary learning. It may be problematic to read the images in this category cognitively; however, it is clear that the majority of them signal positive attitude toward the subject suggesting the existence of intrinsic motivation. This interpretation is supported by the majority of images in several other categories as they also show the balance to be well toward motivation and positive affect. The categories PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, JOURNEY, EXPLORING, LIGHT, FURNISHING, and GROWTH considerably consist of positively charged images. For example, *vocabulary learning is like drinking juice*, which indicates both ease and interest, or *It is like walking in rain*. The reason FOOD & DRINK is the most frequent category may have to do with the importance of this aspect of daily life in youth culture and its being foregrounded in the thinking of the respondents, who were predominantly young.

Images with negative emotional charge are also frequent, though. Most saliently, some images show how overwhelming and painful vocabulary learning is for some learners. So much so that some

compared it to *walking on thorns, needles in an arsenal and an unfamiliar vast ocean*.

A salient strand running through many categories of vocabulary-learning images is the acknowledgement of the notion of *newness*. Apart from EXPLORATION and JOURNEY, which characteristically include *the new*, some other categories also display this outlook, e.g., *new marbles, strange fruit, new songs, new leaves, new designs, new perspectives*. This may seem like plain truth in the context of learning a new language, but it is important for practitioners to be cognizant of this expectation in their teaching and materials if they want to have sustained vocabulary learning.

A substantial number of images and metaphors, in one way or another, show the acknowledgement by the learners that vocabulary learning is something *incremental*. For example, some participants compare vocabulary to “*saving money in saving banks*” or to the way “*women add to their wardrobe or jewelry collections*”. Some metaphors emphasize that this should be done on a one-by-one basis like *berry picking*. Specifically, the two metaphorical categories, COLLECTING (*Vocabulary learning is like collecting stamps*) and CONSTRUCTION (*Vocabulary learning is like brick laying*), conceptualize language as an entity which consists of bits and pieces which should be acquired, collected, or procured otherwise and mounted on previously acquired pieces and materials in a linear, piecemeal fashion within the framework of an ongoing project. The preponderance of these metaphors and the fact that COLLECTING images rank high in frequency may add to the balance weight on the side of a structuralist view of language.

Still another frequent feature of the images is their forward-looking nature. Although PREPARATION does not directly subsume many images, the metaphors which point to vocabulary as a prerequisite to language learning and use are considerable. COLLECTING (*storing wealth*), JOURNEY (*tools for a journey*), MUSIC (*learning notes*), FUEL (*petrol*), CONSTRUCTION (*bricks*), COOKING (*ingredients*), and TOOLS are categories which include metaphors related to the notion of preparation. The good news about this type of belief about vocabulary can be that learners enjoy a sense of goal and direction. A potential downside can be considering vocabulary as an add-on, embellishment, or extra, not part and parcel of the process, a misconception which is widespread among language learners in Iran and is reinforced by books and courses

designed for teaching words non-authentically. *Adding dress to your wardrobe* and some metaphors under FURNISHING can be mentioned as unpromising signs of belief in non-integrative language learning.

These images inform us about learners' implicit theories of language learning and cognition as well as about theory of language. While the majority of the metaphors in most categories point to a structuralist view of language and vocabulary learning and give rise to the impression that the respondents consider vocabulary learning and, by extrapolation, language learning an individual endeavor, some communicative and constructive thinking can also be inferred from some categories and metaphors. For example, the metaphorical categories of GROWTH, some in CONSTRUCTION, and even COLLECTING metaphors can be reminiscent of constructivist ideas, e.g., *Learning vocabulary is like growing a large tree* or *By learning new vocabulary, you get greener*. Even EXPLORATION, JOURNEY, and COOKING may be discussed within a constructivist framework, as the fact that the traveler-explorer or cook learner is dynamically situated at the center of learning process supports the cumulative and constructivist nature of thinking behind these sets of metaphors.

Some other points of relevance to vocabulary learning can be summarized as follows:

1. Fortunately, there are only four images which explicitly portray vocabulary learning as a memorization enterprise. In fact, an examination of the responses convinces us that the dominant mentality of these learners allows for incidental, hands-on vocabulary practice and experience.
2. The images suggest varying scopes for vocabulary learning in the language learning endeavor. Some delineate a large scope (*vocabulary learning is finding a new way home*); some define limited room (*learning vocabulary is removing blocks on the road*)—the former is the whole road, the latter, part of the process.
3. Some images denote a substantive role for vocabulary while others consider its role superficial and peripheral (*show off, decorating*).
4. The images and metaphorical categories give different degrees of agency to learners. For example, the images under

FOOD AND DRINK tend to suggest a passive role for learners while those subsumed by COOKING and PHYSICAL ACTIVITY tend to require more proactivity and encourage more autonomy and self-determination.

5. The notion of *enlightenment* or *illumination* is understandable from some metaphors (e.g., those subsumed under LIGHT and ENLIGHTENMENT). Although far from being a strong strand, the fact that there are a few who go beyond the immediate and associate vocabulary learning with knowledge and light is promising and can be inspiring if brought to the attention of other learners.

Concluding Remarks

The image profile and the inferred categories presented and partially discussed here are by no means definitive. Other populations and samples may bring forth other metaphors and themes. They are presented as sensitizing concepts which might heuristically inspire teachers to reflect on how they can more effectively facilitate vocabulary and language learning. Teachers with practical wisdom and theoretical knowledge of language teaching can use the metaphors which seem to match the principles of language learning as points of departure, capitalize on them, and encourage them among the learners or work toward amends, if they seem symptomatic of learners' misconceptions about vocabulary learning. From a more learning-centered perspective, learners' metaphors may serve as road maps or guiding principles which affect the actions and strategies learners take when they think of the objectives of learning. In other words, the images and metaphors learners hold might heuristically inform their actions and give them a sense of orientation. Different learners may have different process images and it certainly matters whether or not those images are attuned to how people learn; but, probably, even more important than correspondence of learners' comparisons to brain mechanisms is that process images might help learners make personal sense of their effort and help them see a rationale for it.

There is much room for further research. Most of the research done, including this one, is of cataloging type. There is a dearth of comparative research. For example, how do metaphors of failing learners compare with those of successful ones? Are metaphor profiles of language learners significantly different at different proficiency levels? How do

they change? Longitudinal studies of intervention to manipulate existing learners' metaphors or encourage new ones can also be of great interest.

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