Iranian Journal of Applied Linguistics (IJAL), Vol. 15, No. 1, March 2012, 19-41

EFL Students Images and Metaphors of Grammar Learning

Hadi Farjami [a]
Assistant Professor, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

Received 14 March 2011; revised 13 November 2011; accepted 20 January 2012

Abstract

Metaphors and images, as part of the learners' belief systems, seem to play a large part in language learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). So, awareness of them can be of substantial value to teachers in dealing with language learning problems. Aiming to contribute to this awareness, this study sought to explore the images/metaphors English language learners hold about grammar learning. To elicit learners' images, a questionnaire was delivered to 350 adult English learners, including both males and females, with at least one year of serious language learning experience. It demanded the respondents to provide one or more images about learning grammar of English as a foreign language. One hundred and thirty-nine completed forms were content-analyzed and specific metaphors were identified and grouped under descriptive rubrics. Next, the specific images were examined and general and conceptually oriented categories were identified. The results of the content-analysis and categorization are reported and discussed in terms of their implications for language teaching practice.

Keywords: Conceptual metaphor; English grammar; Learners' beliefs; Learners' images; Metaphor analysis

[a] *E-mail address*: hfarjami@profs.semnan.ac.ir, zzmhadi@yahoo.com
Correspondence address: Department of English Language and Literature, Semnan University, Semnan, Iran

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Introduction

Good steps have been taken to understand foreign language learners and their thinking. Among many things, some researchers have tried to explore the beliefs of foreign language learners by examining the images and metaphors which they employ to define and describe their language learning agenda and map out the route they are to cover. Using metaphors as an educational research tool and thought elicitation device seems justified, in spite of the fact that we can enquire about people's minds with more direct means such as questionnaires or observation. The justification has to do with both the validity of the survey and the reliability of its data elicitation. It makes sense to think that when subjects are approached through indirect means they are more forthcoming and are better taken aboard for providing trustworthy and credible information. A more important justification may be the central role that imagery and metaphor play in shaping and directing cognition, orienting attitude and motivation, and determining action. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) dedicate a whole chapter to "Metaphor Analysis" in their seminal book, which "details the main methods of analyzing samples of learner language" (p. ix). They open the chapter with the following to put things in perspective:

> … the analysis of the metaphors that L2 learners use to talk about their learning can shed light on how they conceptualize the language they are learning, the process of learning itself and, in particular, the problems and obstacles they experience on the 'learning journey'. Metaphors provide 'windows' for examining the cognitions and feelings of learners. Because they are usually employed without consciousness on the part of learners they are arguably less subject to false-representation than learners' direct comments about learning. (p. 313)

The Epistemological Significance of Metaphors

It is now a truth widely acknowledged by cognitive scientists that metaphors have significance far beyond literary use as figures of speech and poetic imagination and constitute an essential mechanism of the mind. Any cognitive linguist is sure to know Lakoff and Johnson's famous statement about the omnipresence of metaphor in human cognition and life:

> [M]etaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of

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> which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3)

To bring home what they mean by "conceptual metaphors", Lakoff and Johnson (1980) offer telling examples. For instance, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR[i] is deduced from linguistic metaphors such as "I am sure this position will *come under fire* from the opposition", "Your claims are *indefensible*", "He *attacked* every weak point in my argument", "His criticisms were right on *target*", "I *demolished* his argument", and "The neighbors agreed to a *cease-fire* over their lawn ornament argument". Martinez, Sauleda and Huber (2001) interpret Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual or primary metaphors as the results of recursive co-ordinations of subjective experience and dub them "blueprints of thinking". This can, in turn, be related to Piaget's classic notion of assimilation, by which he refers to the process of taking in new information and incorporating it into an existing schema, i.e., interpreting new experience in terms of what is already known (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958).

While a particular metaphor enables us to see a phenomenon from a specific point of view, it may also disincline us to follow a thinking trajectory which may be a more adequate or promising perspective (Philips, 1996). This means that in learning and reconstructing reality, we are predisposed to base our hypotheses about our new experience on conceptual frameworks heavily influenced by pre-constructed and generalized images and metaphors; however, sometimes these images and metaphors do not enjoy much goodness of fit and consequently can be the source of misunderstanding and wasted effort, especially in instructional settings (Farjami, 2001).

So, it is not outlandish to say that the metaphors and imagery people develop are fundamental to their search for meaning and helps them make sense of their experience and the circumstances they get involved in. Indeed, people's metaphors not only represent the way they perceive the world and reality but also help shape their ideas, attitudes, and practices.

Metaphors in Educational and Language Learning Contexts

If we consider metaphor as a process through which we construe the world as well as the essence of our thoughts and learning, metaphors have the potential to stand as an essential tool for investigating our understanding and conception of many

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educational components such as the teacher, the learner, and the course book. Several important studies have employed metaphors to describe prevalent perspectives on education (e.g., Beck & Murphy, 1993; Greene, 1973; Kliebard, 1982). Cook-Sather (2003) posited that two metaphors dominated formal education system in the United States, i.e., "education as production" and "education as cure". In the field of foreign language teaching, Herron (1982) identified two basic metaphors driving curriculum theories in foreign language education: "the mind-body metaphor", in which language learning is viewed as mental gymnastics aimed to strengthen and discipline the learner's mind and "the production metaphor", where the aim of language learning was to produce a marketable and skillful workforce.

Other studies of metaphors in education have been more local and setting-specific. These studies have explored and quantified metaphors teachers or learners hold about themselves or other elements in the instructional process. The elicitation tools typically used have been sentence completion, the questionnaire, or diary writing. Oxford (2001) studied the personal narratives of 473 foreign language learners and identified the metaphors they used about three teaching approaches. She reports that these learners varied both quantitatively and qualitatively in the content of the metaphors they employed about teachers and teaching. Nikitina and Furuoka (2008), dissatisfied that the majority of the previous metaphor studies focused on teacher-produced images, elicited student-generated metaphors about language teachers and examined the dimensions around which they aligned. The output of their factor analysis lent support to metaphor taxonomies offered by Oxford, Tomlinson, Barcelos, Harrington, Lavine, Saleh, and Longhini (1998) and Chen (2003).

Studies for teachers' educational metaphors and images are very numerous. An important aim of these studies has been helping teachers articulate and "construct representations of themselves and their experience" (Kramsch, 2003, p. 125) and "to promote awareness of professional practice" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 155). Saban (2004), reviewing previous research to put metaphors and metaphorical images in perspective, enumerates these functions for cognitive-epistemological metaphors: 1. Metaphor as a mirror of one's reality, 2. Metaphor as a mechanism of the mind, 3. Metaphor as a sense-making tool, 4. Metaphor as a medium of reflection, 5. Metaphor as an instructional tool, 6. Metaphor as a tool for

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evaluation. Another review by Saban (Saban, 2006), identifies more major educational functions of metaphors, adding to his previous list of six.

Martinez et al. (2001) investigated metaphorical conceptions of teachers regarding their images of learning and established that most of the metaphors were behaviorist and empiricist based. Maxson and Sindelar (1998) sought to elicit the teaching metaphors entry level pre-service teachers bring to the teacher education program. The metaphors they offered to describe their thinking revealed four dominant themes: teaching as guiding, teaching as nurturing, teaching as stimulating, and teaching as telling. De Guerrero and Villamil (2002) collected 28 metaphors from English teachers and nine categories emerged. Shaw, Barry and Mahlios (2008) explored English and foreign language teachers' metaphors and their relation to conceptions of literacy. The findings of the study indicated that beliefs fall into nine themes including nurturing and guiding.

Interestingly, the impression that a comparative review of educational metaphor studies in different setting creates is that there is a high degree of convergence for some concepts and many studies share similar metaphors and patterns of thought. Some of the recurring metaphorical themes associated with learning in the above-mentioned and some other studies are *travel, fear, growth, mystery, power, journey, detecting, building, climbing, excursion, sports, ocean and sea, nourishment, uncharted land, kaleidoscope, plants, and exploration,* many of which are also observed in the responses offered by the participants in the study reported below.

The General State of English Grammar Instruction in Iran

The overall impression this researcher has about mainstream grammar instruction in Iran is that teachers usually present a grammar point as it comes up in the textbook and try to engage the students in doing isolated exercises, practicing the grammar point. The job of the teacher during practice time is to give feedback and provide more illustrations if questions or uncertainties arise. Even if there are differences among the grammar textbooks used, the traditional presentation styles of teachers override creative or communicative aspects. Other Iranian researchers have surveyed and/or commented on the state of English grammar teaching in the country (e.g., Ghorbani, 2009; Maftoon, 2002; Moini, 2009; Talebinezhad & Sadeghi, 2005). According to Maftoon (2002), the centralized system of education, the immediate needs of learners, the allocated time in the weekly schedules, class

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size, and available resources present challenges to those who wish to implement a communicative, non-grammar-based approach in teaching English. Standardized tests, particularly the National Entrance Exam (Konkur), seem to force teachers and learners to focus on formal features as these are perceived to be the ones needed for good test performance (Ghorbani, 2009). Talebinezhad and Sadeghi (2005) make a distinction between grammar teaching in public schools and universities and what happens in private institutes: while the dominant style in the former is deductive and forms-focused, the latter follow communicative and inductive styles with less resort to L1 and more tolerance of errors.

These and similar surveys may paint a general picture of grammar instruction in Iran and, among other things, show some inconsistency between what is abstractly conceived in principle and policy (see, for example, Anani Sarab, 2010) and what is practiced. However, they do not deal with teachers' and learners' beliefs concerning grammar learning. Hence, eliciting and examining learners' images and metaphors about grammar learning can be considered a part of necessary follow-up research to add to our understanding of grammar teaching and learning in Iran and help us have a realistic picture of the pertinent expectations and needs at grass roots level.

The Study

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to explore the way typical English learners in Iran visualize and analogize English grammar learning. It was conceivable at the outset that, due to the open-ended elicitation device, there would be responses with different orientations, some describing process, some describing product, while some others would be about reasons for learning grammar. However, because the researcher was interested in authentic responses about grammar learning, he did not attempt to bring more focus to the elicitation prompt described below.

There are certain considerations that justify this study. For one thing, most of the research done in this tradition is based on teachers feedback and only a few resort to learners' minds , as if learners were too naïve to have learning theories of their own. Another needed redress is a lack of focus on specific areas. While the research reported above is interesting and essentially helpful, when we resort to it for practical application, the results do not seem to tell very much. It may be unrealistic to expect coverall metaphors on complex entities or processes such as

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the teacher, language, textbook, instruction, schooling, which are sometimes as large as life itself. Images and metaphors, as "blueprints of thinking", have a powerful influence on the learning process and the perception and mental restructuring of the instructional input and insight into students' metaphors of grammar learning will not only guide and enhance our understanding of what it means to them to learn grammar, but also of how some conceptualizations may misguide or limit their strategies and actions, and ultimately their achievements. This is in line with recent developments in the prolonged grammar learning question, which is not on whether it is important or not to learn grammar but rather on how to teach grammar.

Methodology

Participants

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 described below, have a clear conception of grammar learning, and, hence, be valid research informants. Responses were requested of more than 350 such English learners studying at different levels in major universities in Iran. The task of the participants was to complete the unfinished items seeking mental images and analogies depicting the way they accommodated the learning of grammar. One hundred and fifty completed forms were returned, of which 15 could not contribute to this study due to careless and/or non-visual answers. The age range of the respondents was 19 to 35 (M=21.6), with the majority in their lower 20's. One hundred and seven respondents were female and 43 were male.

Data Collection

The instrument for collecting information about learners' images and metaphors depicting their conception of English grammar learning was a questionnaire. It was adopted from Lawley and Tompkin (2004), who suggest asking simple questions to elicit students' metaphors. A typical question is "Learning … is like what?" They also recommend sentence completion because, according to them, this elicitation technique 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, it asked the respondents to provide an image or metaphor about the nature of learning English grammar by

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finishing this prompt: "Learning English grammar is like …." This prompt and the demographic section of the questionnaire were in English so that there was an in-built mechanism for filtering out respondents with inadequate English learning experience. However, it was clearly stated that they could decide to write their responses either in English or Persian. The reason the learners were not limited to English was that such restriction could halt the free flow of their mental images.

Practically, in all cases, the questionnaire was handed to individual respondents in person, either by the researcher or his aides. Individual delivery was adopted as group delivery of the questionnaire returned few completed forms. This mode of delivery provided the opportunity to make sure that there was a clear understanding on the side of each respondent as to what s/he was expected to do. Participants consented to respond on a voluntary basis; however, this introduced a potential bias into the study, which could not be avoided, that is, the images and metaphors of those who were not highly enthusiastic about English learning and did not enjoy very positive attitude toward it may be underrepresented.

Data Analysis

The output of this survey was responses including images and metaphors depicting learning English grammar. Most respondents provided only one comparison, but if more than one image or metaphor were provided, they were all considered for analysis. The non-visual and the non-metaphorical responses were not considered for analysis. The metaphorical responses were translated into English, if in Persian, or clear English, if not eloquently expressed. This 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 the metaphors contained within them were listed.
2. The specific images were re-examined and categorized based on content resemblance.
3. The frequencies of these categories were calculated. (See Table 1.)
4. The themes and the images which gave rise to them were tabulated in frequency order. (See Table 1.)

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5. The participants' analogical statements were further analyzed to get a quantitative delineation of 1) their perception of grammar difficulty, 2) their attitude toward grammar learning, 3) the joy they experience in learning grammar, 4) their recognition of the communicative and social purpose of grammar, and 5) their theoretical tendency toward structuralism versus constructivism. (See Table 2).

To minimize the subjectivity in-built in the interpretive procedures, the researcher sought repeated consultations from people familiar with qualitative research in applied linguistics, particularly in ascribing images and metaphors to remarks and comparisons, categorizing, and deriving general themes. Differences in interpretation were few and a consensus was reached in all cases.

Results

One hundred and thirty-nine images and metaphors were derived from the responses provided by the learners. Although the diversity of these images was a lot less than what the researcher expected, it seemed awkward, and not so telling and informative, to simply report a long list of individual images. So, more inclusive metaphorical themes were extracted, too. Table 1 displays these metaphorical themes—the general notions which were abstracted based on the related comparisons— along with their frequencies in the full pool of comparisons. Key words associated with the original images are also provided to allow for other possible interpretations.

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Table 1
Metaphorical themes emerging from learners' images and metaphors about grammar or grammar learning

1. CONSTRUCTING & STRUCTURES (19; 13.66%) building/designing a brick house, building a house (6), a tall tower (3), digging a water well, joining bricks, building (brick) walls (2), building a flat, building a playhouse, construction work, columns for buildings, human body, cements for walls	**2. BODY OF INSTRUCTIONS (18; 12.94%)** social norms, manual, regulations, traffic rules (7), rules, laws (5), lawyer, rules of another country, discipline	**3. PROBLEM SOLVING (14; 10.07%)** doing/solving a puzzle (5), solving physics problems, solving math problems, doing an experiment, math (5), easy math	**4. LOGISTICS & SUPPORT (12; 8.63%)** light in darkness, pegs, bitter drugs, a walking stick, getting injections, fixing a bike, torch in dark, road signs, umbrella for rainy time, fixing a car, roadmap, bitter cold drug
5. JOURNEY (12; 8.63%) unknown lands, vacation, finding new paths in new lands, journey of clock hands, traveling on a train for no end, travelling in a dark forest, finding way in jungle, road signs, traveling/following a road, traveling in time, walking on the streets	**6. PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (11; 7.91%)** daily stroll, learning swimming, carving rocks, Carrying boxes, swimming in the sea, tidying up, swimming in a deep sea/pool, physical exercise, driving nails into rocks, jogging	**7. PLAYING GAMES (8; 5.75%)** playing chess (3), language game, word play, rules of games (2), a game	**8. FOOD & EATING (8; 5.75%)** eating ice cream/chocolate/ deliciously, drinking water (2)/ cold water/ boiling water, roots of a tree carrying nutrients
9. COOKING (7;	**10. HARDSHIP &**	**11. MUSIC (6;**	**12.**

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5.03%) cooking to a recipe (4), learning cooking a (delicious) dish (2), order of adding ingredients of a cake	**SUFFERING (6; 4.31%)** hardship of school learning, getting stuck in a swamp (2), memorizing irrelevant formulas, life challenges, moving to death (with hatred)	**4.31%)** reading musical notes, playing violin, composing music, listening to a lover, using an instrument of music, playing music according to notes	**DRIVING/STEERING (6; 4.31%)** driving a car (2)/bike, changing gear, learning how to drive (2)
13. CLIMBING (4; 2.87%) climbing a berry tree, climbing mountain (increasing difficulty) (2), climbing a mountain	**14. IDENTITY (3; 2.15%)** applying for an ID card, growing as a tree, character building	**15. ARTS (3; 2.15%)** painting/drawing a picture, interior design	**16. MYSTERY(2; 1.43%)** confusing novel, mysterious giant,

NOTES: The numbers within parentheses refer to the frequency of the respected themes in the total identified images. The items listed under each theme are primarily meant to make it more meaningful by revealing the original comparisons in the fewest words possible. The frequency of these comparisons is indicated in parentheses if more than one learner suggested them.

Table 2 provides the results of further analysis of the images provided by the participants. The parameters included in the table were not in the questionnaire but emerged during the first stage of analysis. The information in this table serves several purposes. First, it aims to make the results in Table 1 more meaningful, telling and transparent. Second, it points to some tendencies in the responses about several significant affective and theoretical parameters, i.e., ease of grammar learning, attitude toward it, the pleasure learners experience, the communicative and social nature of grammar use. Finally, it provides very cautious frequencies for poles within these dimensions both separately for each theme or image group and collectively as totals.

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Table 2
The frequencies of tendencies emerging from the content analysis of language learners images in each metaphor cluster

	Ease			**Attitude**			**Pleasure**			**Socialness**			**Learning Theory**		
Image Clusters	easy	hard	ND*	posi-tive	nega-tive	ND	pain-ful	plea-sant	ND	social	Indivi-dual	ND	construc-tivist	struc-tural	ND
CONSTRUCTING & STRUCTURES (19)	2	4	13	7	0	12	0	1	18	0	11	8	0	18	1
BODY OF INSTRUCTIONS (18)	0	2	16	8	10	0	1	0	17	6	7	5	1	12	5
PROBLEM SOLVING (14)	3	6	5	4	2	8	2	1	11	0	14	0	0	10	4
LOGISTICS &SUPPORT (12)	0	4	8	9	1	2	4	2	6	1	10	1	0	3	9
JOURNEY (12)	3	4	5	10	1	1	3	4	5	1	11	0	0	7	5
PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (11)	1	7	3	5	3	3	4	2	5	1	9	1	0	3	8
PLAYING GAMES (8)	2	1	5	4	0	4	0	3	5	2	2	4	0	3	5
FOOD & EATING (8)	6	1	1	7	1	0	1	7	0	0	8	0	0	5	3
COOKING (7)	0	1	6	3	1	3	0	3	4	0	6	1	0	7	0
HARDSHIP & SUFFERING (6)	0	6	0	1	5	0	6	0	0	0	4	2	0	3	3
MUSIC (6)	1	2	3	3	1	2	1	2	3	1	5	0	0	3	3
DRIVING/STEERING (6)	0	2	4	3	0	3	0	3	3	0	5	1	0	3	3
CLIMBING (4)	1	1	2	4	0	0	0	4	0	0	1	3	0	1	3
IDENTITY (3)	0	0	3	3	0	0	0	00	3	0	1	0	2	0	1
ARTS (3)	0	1	2	1	0	2	0	2	1	0	3	0	0	2	1
MYSTERY(2)	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	1	0	2	0
Total	19	44	60	74	25	40	24	34	81	13	98	28	3	82	54

* Nondescript

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to probe into the images and metaphors some Iranian English learners held about the learning of grammar. Sixteen image groups or themes emerged based on the examination of the images learners provided. As Table 1 shows, the more frequent or dominant themes are CONSTRUCTING & STRUCTURES (13.66%), BODY OF INSTRUCTIONS (12.94%), PROBLEM SOLVING (10.07%), LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT (8.63%), JOURNEY (8.63%), and PHYSICAL

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ACTIVITY (7.91%). These conceptualizations are by no means counter-intuitive, particularly given these learners experience with grammar. They see grammar as structures to construct, a set of rules or instructions to know, puzzles and problems to solve, logistical support for a project they have undertaken, or a journey to make. As the brief expository notes below may show, these themes and the images they subsume reveal important facts about the beliefs of the learners and have important implications about their level of motivation, how much they are ready to invest, how learning-wise they are and what strategies they pursue.

1. **CONSTRUCTING AND STRUCTURES (13.66%).** Not surprisingly, for quite a number of the respondents learning grammar is like constructing a structure. You have to start from the ground and build up. It can be downward to make a well or upward to make a tower. In most cases it implicitly or explicitly involves blocks and some joining, e.g., cement. The good news is that there is always a purpose even if it is building a playhouse and the purpose involves activity because it is building by the learners not filling an empty vessel by the teacher. Like the BODY OF INSTRUCTIONS category below, this category shows that the participants were rule-conscious and held a structural view toward grammar learning.
2. **BODY OF RULES (12.94%).** The fact that this category is a frequent one shows that many learners are rule-conscious. Most of the images in this category portray grammar as an assortment of laws or regulations such as traffic rules or the laws of another country. The holders of such images will most certainly be focused on making themselves acquainted with those rules and increasing their knowledge base. So, their ideal state will be such as that of a lawyer. In fact, one learner wrote "Learning English grammar is like becoming a lawyer who knows the laws in different areas." Most images in this category emphasize *knowing*. Only two images presumably focus on *doing*: "following social norms" and "becoming disciplined".
3. **PROBLEM SOLVING (10.07%) and PLAYING GAMES (5.75%).** Most of the problem-solving images are quite serious and academic, comparing grammar to a school subject and its problems. Some are less so and include an element of play and fun, which makes them akin to the *game images*. Except the learners who compared learning grammar to learning the rules of a game, the others in the latter category tended to prefer hands-on exercises and hated learning *about* grammar.

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4. **LOGISTICS AND SUPPORT (8.63%).** Some learners apparently do not see a pervasive role for grammar, which inform the whole system of communication. When they look at it as a lamp which sheds light on their road, or a walking stick or a cold pill, it seems that they give it a peripheral role. In such conceptualization, grammar is not omnipresent: only when it rains, the language user opens her/his grammar umbrella.
5. **JOURNEY (8.63%).** This frequent theme in the images seems to pervade the participants' reifications of grammar learning. This is good news because it promises to be more productive and conducive to sustained learning as it implies exploration and discovery. In most cases, there is a point of departure, a road, and a destination, albeit unfixed and uncertain and not predetermined, e.g., traveling in a dark forest. Except in the case of "the hands of the clock", the journey makes a difference. A striking feature of this image group is vividness and transparency. So, in case learners are in want of a sense of orientation or some justification to boost their motivation, it may be easy to convert them to followers of one or another of journey metaphors.
6. **PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (7.91%).** Although the images in this category may present different, even opposing, implications like fear, liveliness, pleasure, perseverance and hardship, they all focus on a basic similarity between mental and physical exercise. At the same time, most of them are promising ones. The *sporting* images in this category suggest that learning grammar is pretty strenuous and takes effort but is enlivening, spirit-boosting, energizing and necessary. If the learner has not come to terms with grammar learning and does not see it as "daily stroll" and the enormity of the task reminds him/her of "swimming in a deep pool or ocean" , chances are that he has braced up for the task. Even those who see the task as “carving rocks” or “driving nails into rocks” or “tidying up”, probably will flex their muscles and not give up their determination, as these images imply some engagement with the challenge. It should also be acknowledged that there are other categories which have a physical-activity dimension in them, e.g., CLIMBING, COOKING, CONSTRUCTING, and DRIVING. This bears out Yu’s (2008) observation to the effect that metaphorical mappings are largely grounded in bodily experience as well as being mediated by culture and learning.
7. **EATING (5.75%) and COOKING (5.03%).** These categories have food in the center. But, while one can find a parallel between the role of nutrition

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and sustenance in growth and subsistence and the crucial role of grammar in language learning and use, most of the images the participants offered are far from portraying such a role for grammar. In fact, the images which gave rise to EATING, except "roots of trees carrying nutrients" point to a lack of insight about grammar. Another worthy observation is that images of cooking show a mostly structural view of grammar learning while the images of eating suggest a holistic view. The *eaters*, even those who compare it to water or ice, likely "just do it", while the *cooks* are more deliberate, following a recipe and thinking of the ingredients.

8. **HARDSHIP AND SUFFERING (4.31%).** This category, which may seem redundant given the fact that the images have been reanalyzed for pains and pleasure and ease and difficulty, only includes images which explicitly refer to the experienced and perceived difficulty and pains of grammar learning. It could get a higher rank if negative images from other categories were included, e.g., MYSTERY, EATING ("drinking hot water"), PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. However, the fact that the images of suffering and pains, which were negative enough to fall within this category, were not frequent enough to make their way toward the top of Table 1 is heartening considering the general expectation about learners' reaction to grammar learning in non-communicative ways which we have in Iran.
9. **MUSIC (4.31%).** The images in this category vary from being romantic, e.g., "listening to a lover" to structural, e.g., *"playing music based on notes"*. Along with the ones in the more inclusive category, ARTS, which did not attract many images, these images all emphasize the aesthetic importance of grammar for some learners. These learners may pay much attention to accuracy in communication and language but the teacher should be aware of the need for balance between accuracy and fluency. A focus on accuracy certainly serves a useful purpose unless it detracts from learners' fluency, in which case the teacher should raise their awareness by underlying other images and the essential non-aesthetic role grammar plays.

A number of themes and images which emerged from the responses of the participants in this study are shared by other studies of metaphors about language learning. For example, all the five metaphors identified in Ellis's (2003) analysis of language learners' diaries—LEARNING IS A JOURNEY, LEARNING IS A PUZZLE, LEARNING IS SUFFERING, LEARNING IS STRUGGLE, and LEARNING IS WORK —can

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also be found in the categories tabulated above. However, there is not an exact one-to-one correspondence between all of them. While JOURNEY, PUZZLE and SUFFERING explicitly feature in Table 1, STRUGGLE and WORK are only implicit in such categories as PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, CONSTRUCTING, and CLIMBING. Moreover, in the study by Ellis, JOURNEY is the most frequent metaphor; but, in this study, it holds the 5th position, CONSTRUCTING AND STRUCTURES holding the highest frequency rank. This can be attributed to the fact that, unlike Ellis's (2003) study, this study focuses on grammar not language learning in general. Nevertheless, these five metaphors can serve as windows through which one can see learners' belief systems— how they see the importance of their overall progress and progress in particular lessons, success and failure, the importance of self-directed effort, whether they regard themselves as patients or agents in learning, and what degree of suffering is perceived and to what it is attributed (Ellis, 2003).

Applying the same research methodology as the present study, Kesen (2010) categorized 57 learners' metaphors about course books. From the 11 categories which emerged, PUZZLE, FEAR, MYSTERY, and SUFFERING showed strong resemblance to the categories presented in Table 1. The analysis by McGrath (2006) of teachers' and learners' images about course books shows less convergence with this study in general but strong similarity for negative images. An examination of the metaphors listed by Bozik (2002) also reveals that, although she studied college students in a general education course, their metaphors about academic learning imply some of the themes identified by the present study, i.e., FOOD AND EATING, JOURNEY, PROBLEM SOLVING, SUFFERING, CLIMBING, and PHYSICAL ACTIVITY. These findings support the impression that although the context and subject of study and focus of research may modify the metaphors which learners form about learning, there may be universal concerns which need to be addressed by educational practitioners so that they are resolved in helpful and productive ways.

The responses of the participants were also analyzed to discover general educationally relevant trends in their thinking and imagery, which went beyond specific metaphors and categories. Consequently, five bipolar or two dimensional parameters were specified: 1) ease, 2) attitude, 3) pleasure, 4) socialness, and 5) learning theory (See Table 2). As it was sometimes difficult to ascribe polarities to the responses, for each bipolar category in Table 2 there is a neutral column, representing responses not categorically ascribable to either polarity. For example,

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one can speculate that when learners compare grammar learning to doing physics lessons or solving math problems, they may be thinking of a difficult or even painful experience and look at it negatively. Nevertheless, such subjective decisions were aborted in the absence of strong and direct evidence from respondents. Only when the polarities were clear and unambiguous, they were reported in the related box. For example, "learning grammar is like a tree growing from a tiny seed" was marked as a case of constructivist thinking while "learning grammar is like moving to death" was designated as a case of unfavorable impression.

44 (35.75%) images implied some kind of hardship or challenge in learning grammar; only 19 (15.44%) images portrayed it as an easy task. The only category which could be judged to have a majority of images of ease was FOOD AND EATING with 6 out of 8 images implying ease in grammar learning. This should not be disheartening because the next two columns in Table 2 tell us that a significant number of the respondents consider grammar learning a pleasant experience (34; 24.46%) and the majority regards it with positive attitude (74; 53.23%).

The last two parameters, however, may not make the language teachers who are interested in communicative approaches to language and constructivist approaches to learning very happy, as an overwhelming number of the images portray grammar learning as an individual activity (98; 70.50%) (disregarding those which were uninterpretable) and only a total of three images include a constructivist view of grammar learning.

Overall, some images seem to be more cognitively sound, e.g., images of problem solving, construction, journey, physical activity and life and growth. These are images which should be capitalized on, deepened and elaborated. In fact, there seems to be a tendency in learners to adopt sound images and metaphors and beliefs, when they are brought to their attention. In this respect, the leading effect of the journey metaphor, whether the learner adopts it as a motto or just agree with is as a heuristic, cannot be overestimated. This metaphor seems to be theoretically sound and educationally helpful because it takes into account, among many other things, learners' sense of agency and the accumulative nature of learning language. Within this metaphor, learning does not happen in one go or overnight. When one wants to go on a journey or expedition, one should brace for different situations, which may be sometimes exacting and tough; so, it is very unlikely that holders of

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journey metaphors would expect to learn a foreign language by memorizing a set of rules and a number of vocabulary items. As with making any serious journey, holders of and believers in such images would do, or are currently doing the spadework, gear themselves up for the language learning voyage, delay gratification, expect to occasionally cross rough lands and move on bumpy and winding roads, sometimes in foul and not so agreeable weather, even in terrible gales.

In addition to accumulative and non-atomistic nature of journey and exploration, the fact that the traveler/explorer learner is dynamically situated at the center of learning also supports the constructivist nature of thinking behind these sets of metaphors. If we encourage learners to adopt growth imagery and see grammar learning as embryonic development, they are more likely to tolerate ambiguity, change their conception of errors, expectation of success and achievement, and the text and task that they attempt, and welcome a spiral syllabus. Encouraging images which reflect physical activities, e.g., walking, climbing, canoeing, may make learners welcome TPR and related right-brain activities and reduce resistance to approaches which are not purely linguistic (Asher, 2002; Asher & Adamski, 2000).

On the other hand, counterproductive and short-sighted images should be dealt with. True, one should not judge an image counterproductive off-hand; nevertheless, one can be suspicious that comparing learning with "eating ice-cream", if the author thinks beyond the affective dimension of ease and pleasure, is not cognitively very helpful. Most images of COOKING and DRIVING had better be reinforced by, if not replaced with, images of, say, journey and/or growth and the learners be made aware that there is a social dimension to BODY OF INSTRUCTIONS that they are set to learn and the “problems” they try to “solve” so that they embrace functional and communicative activities besides engaging in cognitive code-learning.

Learners who associate grammar learning with negative ideas such as hardship and suffering mystery in their images should also be attended to. They may have had a history of hardship with grammar study and be still confused about its nature. They may not have a clear idea about the amount of the grammatical knowledge that they should acquire; or, the unrealistic demands of the programs may have created in them a state of despair and helplessness. Certainly, some demystification

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about the nature of grammar and some functional and tangible emphasis can light their minds and remove their misconceptions about grammar as something airy-fairy and ultimately toiling.

Conclusion

This study is an attempt to raise awareness about metaphors and comparisons which learners develop for grammar learning. Teachers' awareness of these pictures, and accordingly of learners' thought processes, is necessary because teachers are the usual initiators and facilitators of learning and their satisfactory teaching of grammar may be highly dependent on their knowledge of learners conceptions and misconceptions about grammar and grammar learning. Identifying, evaluating and critiquing learners' conceptual metaphors and applying the insights to practice can go a long way in affecting, among other things, learners' attitude and their grammar learning strategies and styles (McEwan, 2007). Similarly, learners' awareness of these metaphors can have significant emotional, attitudinal and meta-cognitive consequences (Aragao, 2011) and, when dealt with constructively, may orient them towards more autonomy and self-sustained study.

An assumption of this study was that learners have one or more dominant images or metaphors (mental constructs based on a physical-external object or activity) to which they compare grammar and its learning. Learners may not all be aware of these metaphors or they may not readily formulate a clear picture for this linguistics endeavor, but upon demand they prefer some over others. Another assumption was that the learners' explicit or implicit metaphors affect their learning strategies and motivation and ultimately their rate and route of learning grammar, which, in turn may lead to a revision of their existing mental images and conceptualizations.

This study acknowledges serious shortcomings in several respects. First, the categories identified might be different or of different frequencies if learners with other profiles were included, although the fact that the category increase slowed down as the content analysis progressed and toward the end of the analysis there were few additions to the categories shows that there are some consistent and repetitive themes across different learners. Another problem, which limits the generalizability of this study, was that because of the open-endedness of the question and its rather high cognitive demand, some uninterested and poorly motivated learners opted out as respondents and are presumably underrepresented

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in the study. Moreover, in some cases the images that the responses communicate are hazy and ambiguous and hard to interpret. Triangulating the present output by interviewing some of the learners or applying more rigorous methods of analysis could furnish more reassurance that the reported results were in line with what the learners had in mind. Still another defect of this study, which might be redressed by further research, is that it failed to consider whether there existed a connection between factors such as the gender and the proficiency level of the learners and the type of images they held. Nevertheless, the study can serve as a small step toward achieving a comprehensive visuo-cognitive map of the language learners' minds. The bottom-line of all this is that the study seems to provide images and metaphors which usefully point to patterns of thinking and beliefs, albeit rough and in serious want of fine-tuning for significant learners' variables.

[i]Following the norm in the literature for conceptual metaphor studies, this paper uses SMALL CAPITALS TO designate conceptual metaphors and categories and *italics* to indicate metaphorical linguistic expressions.

Notes on Contributors:

Hadi Farjami *is assistant professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Semnan University, Iran. He has taught EFL, EAP and teacher training courses for 16 years. He has published articles in international and national journals and authored and co-authored EFL textbooks.*

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