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Examining Iranian Language Learners' Perceptions of Language Education in Formal and Informal Contexts: A Quantitative Study by **Reza Pishghadam and Safoora Navari**

## **Examining Iranian Language Learners' Perceptions of Language Education in Formal and Informal Contexts: A Quantitative Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the metaphors created by two groups of language learners in Iranian high schools (Formal context) and private language institutes (Informal context). To this end, 50 language learners at schools and 50 at language institutes in Mashhad, Iran received two checklists of 27 metaphors about teachers and 18 metaphors about learners. Learners were required to select the metaphors which truly conceptualized their perceptions of the English educational system in Iran. Their metaphors were categorized based on the taxonomy developed by the scholars in the field. The results highlighted remarkable differences in schools and language institutes, emphasizing the language institute learners' superiority in their perception of English education.

**Key Terms:** Conceptual metaphor, High school, Language institute, Linguistic

metaphor, Metaphor analysis

### **1. Introduction**

Generally, individuals think and act based on their beliefs and conceptions of the world. These conceptions and ideas have been formed through years under the influence of various



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factors and are greatly impressive in people's actions and decisions in life. As in the context of education, language learners hold conceptions and beliefs about the whole process of learning. Clearly, finding out these hidden beliefs and views, turning implicit insights into explicit ones for learners to reflect on, is one of the many solutions to the myriad of problems in the English language education in our country. Accordingly, a remarkable advantage of knowing someone's beliefs can be revealed in the factors which are actually promoting or hindering learning for learners at schools or institutes since learners as well as teachers hold some views about teaching and learning which will consequently affect the way and styles they apply in the classroom.

Metaphor is defined by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) as understanding one conceptual domain (the target domain) in terms of another conceptual domain (the source domain) which leads to the identification of a conceptual metaphor. As an efficient research tool, metaphor is a useful way of bringing implicit assumptions to awareness, encouraging reflection, finding contradictions, and fostering change in educational beliefs and practice (Cameron, 2003). In addition, metaphor analysis as a useful research device can provide a systematic profile of the ideas people hold on different entities, attempt to uncover conceptual metaphors and permit reflection and change on the problematic parts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Metaphorical language in the traditional fashion was just used and understood in literary texts as decorative figures of speech which would specify metaphor as primarily ornamental in nature. In fact, as Lakoff (1993) claims, in classical theories, metaphorical expressions were just seen in the realm of literature and poetic language, leaving no space for metaphor in the everyday conventional language. So, while in the traditional theories, metaphor was just a matter of language, contemporary theory of metaphor puts emphasis on the fact that, metaphorical expressions are the matter of thought and are understood in the mind by mapping across domains in the mind. The proponents of this new theory hold that metaphors are ubiquitous and are used unconsciously and automatically in our everyday speech, shaping our thoughts and actions (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993).



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Several studies have investigated the metaphors SLA researchers use to discuss L2 acquisition. Kramsch (1995) refers to the 'input-black box-output' metaphor which is dominant in SLA and makes it easier for researchers to talk about teaching and learning process. Ellis (2002) analyses some articles written by several SLA researchers to identify the metaphors they use such as 'learner as machine' metaphor which is widely used by researchers. Oxford (2001) used some personal narratives kept by language learners to identify the metaphors by which they characterize three teaching approaches (cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Oxford et al. (1998) gathered the metaphors used by learners to talk about their concept of teacher. These metaphors were then organized under four philosophical perspectives of education to provide a typology for the language teaching field. Actually, in education research, metaphor analysis has been often used as a cognitive tool to raise awareness about assumptions and beliefs held by teachers and learners alike (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2002).

Ellis (2002) examined the metaphors in diaries of some beginner learners of L2 to find out what their belief system reveal about the language they are learning, their teacher and themselves. Nikitina and Furuoka (2008), using the context of Malaysian education, gathered some metaphors from language learners in perception of their language teachers, then categorized and analyzed these metaphors based on the typology of metaphors on education developed by Oxford et al. (1998). While most of the studies deal with the learners' attitudes toward their teachers, Swales (1994) conducted a study on the learners' perceptions of language learning. In the study, the learners were asked to describe their perception of learning a foreign language by drawing cartoons, which the results were closely related to the learners' social and political experiences in the countries they came from (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008).

Since uncovering the beliefs and ideas language teachers and learners hold regarding language teaching and learning process in an indirect way can be truly rewarding, this study took a look at the learners' role in language learning and teaching system. For this and, due to the scarcity of research about learners in formal (high schools) and informal contexts (private



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language institutes) of L2 education in Iran, this study hopes to clarify and categorise the language learners' metaphors in the light of metaphor analysis.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants and Setting**

The participants in this study consisted of 50 learners from high schools and 50 learners from language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. The school students were studying in the third grade of high school and the language learners at the institutes had different educational background but both groups were truly eager in taking part in the study. The average age of the students at the schools were 16 with no experience of studying English at private institutes but having studied English at schools for almost 6 years, while the average age of the students at the language institutes were 18 who had several years of studying English at different institutes.

### **2.2. Instrumentation**

Two instruments were employed in this study in order to address the research questions. First, in order to measure and determine the learners' level of general English language proficiency and ensure their homogeneity, the learners at the schools and institutes were required to do the standard Nelson's intermediate level test. Thus, test 200 D of Nelson test battery was used as the language proficiency test in this study (Fowler & Coe) Each of the 40 tests in this battery is consisted of 50 items in the form of multiple choice questions and students are supposed to choose the correct answer from among the alternatives. The required time to complete the test was 50 minutes. At each level, the passing score is intended to be 30 (60%).



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As for the second type of instruments, a checklist was adapted by the researchers. The checklist constitutes 27 items for the teachers and 18 items for the learners. The checklist constitutes three types of metaphors, exhibiting three important paradigms in psychology: Behaviourism Cognitivism, and Situative learning. The checklist for the teachers comprised 8 behaviouristic metaphors, 7 metaphors for Cognitive, and 12 ones for situative learning; and for the learners, the checklist are composed of 9 behaviouristic metaphors, 6 cognitive metaphors, and 4 ones for situative learning. The learners were required to select the metaphors which showed their attitudes towards both teachers and learners in current and ideal situations. The checklist was made based on the guidelines laid out by Nikitina and Furuoka (2008), Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007), Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001), and de Guerrero and Villamil (2002). The metaphors were taken from a study (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008), by which described the language teacher as a *parent, mother, magician, book, sunshine, entertainer, gardener, travel guide, candle, and policeman*. In yet another study, Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007) collected some metaphors about language teachers which compare them to a *leader, provider, challenger, comedian, friend, computer, nurturer, innovator, artist*, and in the same study they discussed that a language learner can be considered as a *recipient, raw material, plant, pottery, building, mechanic, friend, constructor, and parent*.

The reliability of the checklist was computed by the Cronbach's Alpha which was found to be 0.75 for the whole sample. It shows that the results of the checklist are satisfactorily reliable in terms of their internal consistency.

### **2.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection process started in October (2008) and continued until December (2008) to gather all the data in the high schools and language institutes. Both high school and language institute learners received a checklist about teaching and one about learning which has been driven from some metaphor analyses on English language education. Each participant was



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asked to select the metaphors that reflected to the highest degree her view about her present and ideal situations of teaching and learning English in her specific context of education. The metaphors collected by the checklists displayed the learners' beliefs and views about the current and ideal situation of English teachers and learners in Iran. As for the first step, the metaphors that have been used randomly in the checklist were categorized under the three educational perspectives suggested by Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001). Finally, the frequency and percentage of the metaphors of each group in both contexts were computed and Chi-square was run to find out whether the differences are meaningful.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Schools (Formal Context)

##### 3.1.1. Metaphors for Teachers

As Table 1 shows, there is a significant difference ( $\chi^2=16.568$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) among the learners' behavioristic, cognitive or situative views towards their teachers. As the results point out, the behavioristic metaphors (N=271) in this group are more than expected (N=224.3). Therefore, the school learners believe that their teachers follow the guidelines of the behavioristic paradigm more than any other perspectives in teaching English at schools.

*Table 1.: The results of Chi-Square for the school learners' metaphors for teaching in the current situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
Behavioristic	271	224.3	2	16.568	.00
Cognitive	186	224.3	2		
Situative	216	224.3	2		



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Table 2 illustrates a significant difference among the three learning perspectives in the school learners' metaphors for ideal teachers: ( $\chi^2=227.082$ ,  $p<0.5$ ). In addition, this table shows that the school learners talking about their ideal teachers have selected the cognitive (N=396) and situative (N=303) metaphors more often than expected (N=255), while the behavioristic metaphors (N=66) were selected much less. This implies that the school learners prefer a teacher who observes cognitive principles in her teaching.

*Table 2: The results of Chi-Square for the school learners' metaphors for teaching in the ideal situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
Behavioristic	66	255.0	2	227.082	.00
Cognitive	396	255.0	2		
Situative	303	255.0	2		

### 3.1.2. Metaphors for Learners

*Table 3: The results of Chi-Square for the school learners' metaphors for learners in the current situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
Behavioristic	240	145.3	2	94.161	.00
Cognitive	109	145.3	2		
Situative	87	145.3	2		



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According to Table 3, there is a significant difference ( $\chi^2=94.161$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) among the metaphors selected by the school learners for the learners studying English at schools. Furthermore, based on this table, the behavioristic metaphors (N=240) outnumber what is expected (N=145.3) among the rest. Thus, the school learners' views about the learners at schools exhibit more the behavioristic orientation to learning.

*Table 4. The results of Chi-Square for the school learners' metaphors for learners in the*

*ideal situation*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Observed N</b>	<b>Expected N</b>	<b>df</b>	<b><math>\chi^2</math></b>	<b>Sig.</b>
<b>Behavioristic</b>	134	147.3	2	12.452	.00
<b>Cognitive</b>	182	147.3	2		
<b>Situative</b>	126	147.3	2		

Table 4. reveals a significant difference among the three types of metaphors chosen by the school learners for the ideal learners: ( $\chi^2=12.452$ ,  $p<0.5$ ). As evident in Table 5.4., the participants considered the cognitive metaphors (N=182), comparing to the expected number of metaphors (N=147.3), more efficient for the ideal learner in an English language classroom at schools.



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### 3.2. Language Institutes (Informal Context)

#### 3.2.1. Metaphors for Teachers

*Table 5: The results of Chi-Square for the institute learners' metaphors for teachers in the current situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
Behavioristic	73	90	2	7.200	.00
Cognitive	108	90	2		
Situative	89	90	2		

As demonstrated in Table 5, there is a significant difference ( $\chi^2=7.200$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) among the behavioristic, cognitive and situative kinds of metaphors being selected by the institute learners. Besides, the results of Table 5.5. show that the cognitive metaphors (N=108) have been selected more often than expected (N=90). Thus, the language institute learners hold the view that the cognitive concepts form the bedrock of their teachers' teaching principles.

*Table 6: The results of Chi-Square for the institute learners' metaphors for teachers in the ideal situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
Behavioristic	28	93.3	2	75.543	.00
Cognitive	108	93.3	2		
Situative	144	93.3	2		



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Table 6 exhibits a significant difference ( $\chi^2=75.543$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) among the metaphors chosen by the institute learners about their ideal teachers. Also, based on this table, the institute learners' selection of situative (N=144) and cognitive (N=108) metaphors outnumbered the expected number (N=94.3). These results imply that the institute learners would rather have the kind of teachers in their classes who follow the guidelines of situative and cognitive learning.

### 3.2.2. Metaphors for Learners

*Table 7: The results of Chi-Square for the institute learners' metaphors for learners in the current situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
<b>Behavioristic</b>	64	64.7	2	27.845	.00
<b>Cognitive</b>	95	64.7	2		
<b>Situative</b>	35	64.7	2		

As the results of Table 7 reveal, there is a significant difference among the three types of metaphors the language institute learners selected for the language learners: ( $\chi^2=27.845$ ,  $p<0.5$ ). Furthermore, based on Table 5.7., the cognitive metaphors (N=95) have been selected the most by the participant, comparing to the expected number (N=64.7). In other words, the institute learners consider the present language learners as those with the cognitive learning principles.



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*Table 8: The results of Chi-Square for the institute learners' metaphors for learners in the ideal situation*

Variables	Observed N	Expected N	df	$\chi^2$	Sig.
<b>Behavioristic</b>	31	49.0	2	17.429	.00
<b>Cognitive</b>	48	49.0	2		
<b>Situative</b>	68	49.0	2		

Finally, according to Table 8, there is a significant difference ( $\chi^2=17.429$ ,  $p<0.5$ ) among the behavioristic, cognitive and situative types of metaphors in this group. In addition, the results of this table indicate that the situative metaphors (N=68) outnumber the expectation in the selection of the rest of metaphors (N=49). Thus, to state the obvious, the institute learners hold the view that in order to learn a second language it is best to join the situative learning pool.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to the results of the study some noteworthy and significant points about the present and ideal situations of language teachers and learners in Iran's English education were gained by organizing the metaphors on teachers and learners around the three perspectives of behaviorist, cognitive and situative learning. In fact, Martinez, Sauleda and Huber (2001) asserted that by disclosing the metaphorical base of thinking about teaching and learning, the researchers can assist learners to bridge the gap between their implicit and explicit knowledge. Therefore, it is expected that by interpreting the metaphors that the learners have selected, their true insights of teaching and learning L2 are gained.

Language learners at high schools have selected metaphors indicated that the present condition of teaching English in Iran emphasized the still existence of classical



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*behaviouristic* guidelines of learning. Metaphors such as *leader*, *provider*, *moulder* which represent the conceptual metaphor TEACHER AS CONDUIT or TEACHER AS PROVIDER OF KNOWLEDGE display teacher's role as holder, provider and transmitter of knowledge. Similarly, the metaphors like *raw material*, *recipient* and *viewer* that language teachers selected for their current and ideal learners emphasize the conceptual metaphor of LEARNER AS RECIPIENT which allows little or no activity for the learner in the process of learning.

These findings regarding the ideas of the school learners in noticing the behaviouristic principles running in their classes are compatible with those of Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) which asserted that Iran's educational system is still under the influence of modernist, behaviourist and positivist views of learning. They also hold that Iranian teachers would rather exercise their authority in the class, be the absolute determiner of all class decisions. Therefore, it seems that it is somehow demanding for the school teachers to drag their teaching into the modern world. On the other hand, these school learners are more oriented towards active student learning (*cognitive/constructive*) perspective than knowledge transmission (behaviourist perspective). By selecting metaphors like *parent*, *mother*, and *friend* for their ideal teachers and *child*, *player*, and *constructor* for learners, these learners conveyed that they are fed up with having a passive role in the learning process and prefer to construct their own version of knowledge and enjoying the privilege of facilitator teacher with whom they can *befriended*. The findings of the study show the school learners' preparation for a 'reform' in the current educational context which needs sufficient attention by those responsible in the field.

The other significant findings of this research point to the institute learners' ideas about themselves and their intended view of enjoying more or less learner-centered rather than teacher-centered instruction. They have selected metaphors like *friend*, *comedian*, *artist* for their teachers and metaphors such as *friend*, *team member*, *child* and *partner* for themselves that according to de Guerrero and Villamil (2002) emphasize the learners' need for constant encouragement, support, feedback, positive affectivity and active participation in learning process. In fact, the institute learners' considering themselves and their teachers as following



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the conventions of cognitive/constructive learning, illustrates the different condition they experience comparing to that of school learners who are mostly passive in the learning process. Moreover, as *challenger*, *travel guide*, and *repairer* metaphors for teachers and *plant*, *traveller*, *magic bean* for learners show, the institute learners opt for the *situative* perspective of learning to gain more knowledge from the interaction between them and teacher and more opportunities for practice and using the L2. In fact, such learners would rather to expand the concepts of TEACHER AS FACILITATOR and LEARNER AS DEVELOPING ORGANISM (the conceptual metaphors derived from cognitive linguistic metaphors) to the more rewarding ideas of TEACHER AS SCAFFOLDER and LERNER AS INTERACTOR. Such learners in the language institutes confirmed the views of their teachers and planted this idea that they would rather sit a situated learning class. This difference of the language institute learners and the school learners identified in the metaphors they have created may display the confidence and motivation they have gained in their former experiences of being an active *team member* in the class. Therefore, by the analyzing the results of the study and categorizations of the metaphors selected by language learners, one can realize why language learning is not much satisfactory in Iranian schools (Pishghadam, 2008). It seems that language learners at schools by being under the influence of traditional ways of learning and teaching (behaviourism) and newly opting for the more facilitating notions of learning presented by cognitivism are one step behind language learners at language institutes which are found to wish for the more situational type of learning in future.

Furthermore, the analysis of the metaphors about language teachers and learners can shed light on the way the learners conceptualize their learning process and the things that they consider as rewarding or hindering in the learning *journey*. And consequently, by exploring these ideas, learners can become aware of the feelings existing implicitly in their minds. Thus, this study confirmed that metaphor analysis can contribute to learners' self-reflection and critical-awareness since metaphors they provided are the genuine reflection of their beliefs which are partly supporting and partly constraining. Actually, by reflecting on their metaphors, language learners can perceive and define problems in the classroom setting,



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consider relevant theories of others, test for mistaken assumptions, refine their hypotheses, and decide upon actions which can improve the educational practices for all that is concerned. By talking in metaphorical language, learners can detect the problematic points that hinder their learning and might actually exist in the way they look at the learning process in general and L2 learning in particular. The majority of learners, especially at schools, seem frustrated by the way they English language classes are presented to them which may eventually discourage them to pursue learning English. In addition, learners can notice that the way they conceptualize themselves as language learners may not equip them with enough motivations or abilities to deal with the learning process. Knowing that they may have lacked in participating in class activities for instance, may stop the learners from blaming the present situation of L2 learning on teachers.

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