Iranian Graduate Students' Conceptions about English Language Teaching and Learning

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Individuals have concepts and beliefs in their minds that shape everyday actions. Our behavior reflects the metaphorical nature and understanding of the conceptualization of the world. This conceptual system that is metaphorical in nature rules the interpretation and understanding of the realities (Dornyei, 2005; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Nowadays, not only has the study of metaphor entered into linguistics and cognitive psychology but also scholars believe that metaphor analysis has applications in many fields of study such as language teaching and learning. Besides, it provides the opportunity to carry out a wide range of research (Hong-mei, 2010).

Metaphors are the linguistic presentations of implicit knowledge that can be used and analyzed reliably. Since metaphors are learned through social interactions, they can reflect on the cultural and social processes in which they are learned, so they can be part of the subconscious level of language which is used automatically (Lakoff, 1993). Metaphor is perceived as a powerful mental tool that individuals use to understand abstract and complex phenomena and as a result these metaphors can explain key cognitive concepts (Gurol & Donmus, 2010). Analysis of the use of metaphors about teaching and learning has the potential for understanding the nature and meaning of learning (Haggis, 2004).

Therefore, the aim of the present study is to analyze the metaphors MA students select about themselves and their professors in both current and ideal situations, and also to examine them carefully in order to provide the opportunity to delve into the beliefs hidden in these metaphors.

Theoretical Background

There is no doubt that individuals' beliefs have major impacts on their lives because these beliefs are rooted in their minds. Analyzing these beliefs through metaphors can be an effective way of understanding the underlying concepts in people's mind because they emerge out of their experiences and help us understand highly complex concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) explained the conceptual metaphor theory in *Metaphors We Live By*. They claimed that metaphor is a main component of human thinking, in spite of former theories which supported the idea that metaphor was far from an acceptable form of language (Li-qun & Guo-hua, 2010). Lakoff (1993) claimed that in classical theories, metaphorical expressions were seen as elements of literature and poetic language that left no space for metaphor in the everyday language. While the contemporary theory of metaphor stresses the existence of the metaphorical expressions as a matter of thought and cognition, the theory proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) supported the fact that metaphors are prevalent in speech, and individuals use them unconsciously. They believe that an individual's conceptual system which controls actions and thoughts is metaphorical in nature.

Lakoff (1993, pp. 4-5) referred to metaphor as a "cross-domain mapping" in the conceptual system and metaphorical expression as "a linguistic expression" (a word, phrase or sentence) that is the surface realization of such cross–domain mapping. A set of linguistic expressions like *our relationship has hit a dead end street*, *look how far we've come*, and *we cannot turn back now* can be used to describe a love relationship. All of these expressions are common in everyday English. The general principle governing all these expression is a part of the conceptual system

of English. This principle can help us understand the target domain (love) in terms of the source domain (journey). The *Love as Journey* metaphor is a mapping across these conceptual domains.

Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) studied the metaphors about learning based on the reflections of 50 experienced teachers. They focused on categorizing the metaphors into three main dimensions: behavioristic/empiricist, cognitive/constructive, and situative/socio-historic. The behavioristic/empiricist approach views learning as the process of stimulus-response formation. This category describes learners as passive recipients and teachers as transmitters of knowledge (*molder, preacher,* and *provider)*. The second group (cognitive/constructive) defines teachers as facilitators and learners as active participants reconstructing knowledge (*mother, parent,* and *father*). Finally, the situative/socio-historic approach views learning as being situated in contexts and being produced by social participation (*researcher* and *shepherd*). The results of this study revealed that the majority of the participants define teaching and learning as the transmission of knowledge. Only a minority conceptualized teaching and learning as a social process.

Oxford (2001, as cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005) examined the narratives of 473 foreign/second language learners about three teaching approaches. Metaphors like teacher as manufacturer, tyrant, and hanging judge were taken from the "Autocratic Approach." The "Participatory/Democratic Approach" included metaphors like teacher as challenger, catalyst, and family member. The "Laisser-Faire Approach" produced metaphors like teacher as blind and bad baby-sitter. The researcher found that different learners favored different metaphors, and they also varied to the extent they used metaphors to talk about their learning and teaching.

Sommers (2003) employed a questionnaire, interviews and the children's classic, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, as metaphors to depict efficient middle school teachers. Using interviews, observations, and gathering documents, the researcher analyzed teachers' beliefs and practices. The study revealed that when teachers develop mentally, they can be more creative, transferring this sense of creativity to their students.

Brown, Parsons and Worley (2005) collected and

analyzed the essays written by 100 senior-level elementary pre-service teachers. Metaphor analysis was used to interpret the students' understandings and attitudes about diversity and teaching in diverse settings with diverse populations. They identified metaphors which pictured diversity as an object of value, a guest in the inn, a construction project; and the participants described teachers as taxonomist, archaeologist, connoisseur, or voyeur; and students were portrayed as voyeur.

Groth and Bergner (2005) investigated 54 pre-service teachers' metaphors which were elicited through writing prompts about the concept of statistical sample. These metaphors help understand the individuals' content knowledge, and how the teachers practice their knowledge during teaching. The findings indicated seven different concepts. They pointed out some of the aspects of the studied concept that teacher educators need to take into consideration while instructing their learners.

McGrath (2006) studied the metaphors which 75 teachers in Hong Kong created about English-language course books and attempted to draw a comparison with the metaphors several hundred school learners provided on the same subject. Learners showed both positive and negative attitudes toward their course books, such as the importance of the book to the learners and also the cultural inappropriateness of the textbook. This study concluded that the existing difference between teachers' and learners' concepts of their course books should encourage teachers to stimulate self-awareness, leading to professional development.

The existence of metaphors in university lectures has been shown to be misleading, especially for international students. Low, Littlemore and Koester (2008) analyzed university lectures to discover lecturing styles, to identify how metaphors are used to mark the beginnings and ends of sections, and to predict the emergence of metaphors from the discourse.

Hong-mei (2010) suggested that the study of metaphor can have a number of applications in language teaching. First, teachers should inform their learners of the significance of conceptual metaphors in language learning. Second, teachers can use metaphorical theories to explain the relationship

between forms and meanings so that students can have a general idea of word formation. Third, conceptual metaphors can explain the collocation of words in the sense that some aspects of a word can be used to define other words. Fourth, many language phenomena can be simplified through conceptual metaphors, and finally, metaphors help students to learn about different cultures.

Li-qun and Guo-hua (2010) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies of non-English freshmen and instructors of English, and the effect of metaphor awareness-raising on vocabulary acquisition and retention. The results showed that the participants seem to favor the application of sound, image, and rote learning in their vocabulary learning and teaching. They concluded that English teachers should be encouraged to develop metaphor awareness in order to choose the best method for teaching vocabulary, and also that the differences between metaphorical themes should be discussed in the classroom so that students face less difficulty in understanding these concepts.

Gurol and Donmus (2010) conducted a study on the metaphors produced by 159 prospective teachers related to social networks. The participants included prospective teachers from 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grades in the Computer Teacher Department. The researchers obtained the data from the completion of the sentence "Social networks are similar to…; because…." The results of the study suggested that the metaphors related to the concept of social network created by the participants are grouped under eight conceptual categories: rapidly developing and changing, communication, correspondence and sharing, addictive, positive, negative, both positive and negative, and an indispensible platform. The findings showed that the concept of social networks cannot be explained by just one metaphor, and the gender and grade level of the participants do not make a significant difference in their choice of metaphors.

Pishghadam and Navari (2010) investigated the present and

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ideal situations of language teaching and learning in Iran's formal and informal educational context through metaphor analysis. The findings showed that behavoristic beliefs have complete control of the Iranian educational context. The metaphors produced by students at high schools and language institutes were teacher as conduit, provider, facilitator, scaffolder, and learner as recipient, developing organism, and interactor. The researchers reported a significant difference between learners at language institutes and learners at schools in the understanding of English education.

Purpose of the Study

The present study aimed to analyze the selected metaphors of MA students majoring in English teaching to talk about university students and professors in both the current and ideal situations in Iranian universities, and also to address the following questions:

(a) Are there any significant differences between the behaviorist, cognitive, and situative metaphors selected by the MA students about professors in the current and ideal situations in the universities?

(b) Are there any significant differences between the behaviorist, cognitive, and situative metaphors selected by the MA students about students in the current and ideal situation in the universities?

Participants and Setting

A total of 50 MA students participated in this study, all majoring in English language teaching (female=34, male=16). The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 50. They were studying in Mashhad, Iran. The students were in their first or second year of study at university. The MA program in Iran is both course and project-based.

Instrument

The participants were provided with two checklists (see Appendix) that were adapted by Pishghadam, Askarzadeh Torghabeh, and Navari (2009). The first checklist consisted of 27 metaphors about teachers, and the second checklist contained 18 metaphors about learners, comprising three types of metaphors which explain three important paradigms in psychology: behaviourism, cognitivism, and situative learning.

The checklist for the professors was comprised of 8

behaviouristic metaphors, 7 cognitive metaphors and 12 metaphors for situative learning. The checklist for the university students included 9 behaviouristic metaphors, 6 cognitive metaphors, and 4 metaphors for situative learning. The MA students were asked to choose the metaphors which depicted their attitudes, first toward the current situation, and then towards the ideal situation of teaching and learning English in Iranian universities. To describe the current situation, the stem of the question was: "In my opinion, a university professor/student is like….," and to describe the ideal situation, the stem of the question was: "In my opinion, a university professor/student should be like…." The content validity of the checklist was substantiated in a previous study (Pishghadam et al., 2009). The reliability of the checklist was computed by the Cronbach's Alpha which was found to be 0.83 for the whole sample. It showed that the results of the checklist are satisfactorily reliable in terms of their internal consistency as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Reliability of the Variables in the Checklists

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha
Students' metaphors about how professors are	0.84
Students' metaphors about how professors should be	0.85
Students' metaphors about how students are	0.82
Students' metaphors about how students should be	0.84

Procedure
The process of data collection started in September, 2010 and continued until February, 2011. All participants received both checklists, and were asked to select as many metaphors that portrayed their view about the present and ideal situations of English language teaching and learning in Iranian universities. For the purpose of analyzing the data, the randomly placed metaphors chosen by the participants were grouped under the three educational perspectives (behaviourist, cognitive, situative) suggested by Martinez et al. (2001). A Chi-square test was run to

compare the metaphors selected by the MA students to talk about professors and university students in both current and ideal situations.

Results
As illustrated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the behaviorist, cognitive, and situative metaphors MA students selected to talk about university students in the current situation (= 98.637, p<.05).

Table 2
The Results of Chi-square for the Metaphors Selected by MA Students about Students in the Current Situation

Paradigms	Observed N	Expected N	df	X^2	Sig.
Behaviorist	109	53.3	2	98.637	.000
Cognitive	43	53.3	2		
Situative	8	53.3	2		
Total	160				

Table 2 shows that the behaviorist metaphors (N=109) occur more often than expected (N=53.3). The results reveal that MA students consider themselves to be the followers of behaviorist ideas in the current situation, which means they do not question the professors' authority and they cannot take control of their learning. Cognitive and situative metaphors do not occupy a noteworthy place among the students' dominant beliefs.

Table 3
The Results of Chi-square for the Metaphors Selected by MA Students about Students in the Ideal Situation

Paradigms	Observed N	Expected N	df	X^2	Sig.
Behaviorist	14	37.3	2	22.089	.000
Cognitive	51	37.3	2		
Situative	47	37.3	2		
Total	112				

According to Table 3, there is a significant difference between the metaphors chosen by MA students about university students in the ideal situation (22.089, p<.05). The metaphors related to the

cognitive view of learning (N=51) seem to occur more often than expected (N=37.3). Students would like to be active constructors of knowledge, while having the support of their professors as their guides to lead them through the correct path. Situative metaphors were the second general attitude among MA students describing an ideal student (observed N=47, expected N=37.3). Finally, behaviorist metaphors were found to be the least selected ones by students (observed N=14, expected N=37.3).

Table 4
The Results of the Chi-square for the Metaphors Selected by MA Students about Professors in the Current Situation

Paradigms	Observed N	Expected N	df	X²	Sig.
Behaviorist	107	71.0	2	29.662	.000
Cognitive	44	71.0	2		
Situative	62	71.0	2		
Total	213				

Table 4 reports the results of the Chi-square for the metaphors chosen by MA students about professors in the current situation. As can be seen in Table 4, there is a significant difference among the behaviorist, cognitive, and situative metaphors (29.662, p<.05). Behaviorist metaphors (N=107) are selected more often than expected (N=71.0). This implies that students interpret their professors' role as leaders who order learners what to do regardless of their feelings and learning styles. The next prevailing group of metaphors was attributed to situative notions (observed N=62, expected N=71.0).

Table 5
The Results of the Chi-square for the Metaphors Selected by MA Students about Professors in the Ideal Situation

Paradigms	Observed N	Expected N	df	X²	Sig.
Behaviorist	22	66.0	2	73.121	.000
Cognitive	57	66.0	2		
Situative	119	66.0	2		
Total	198				

As Table 5 shows, there is a significant difference between the metaphors MA students selected to describe professors in the ideal situation 73.121, p<.05). Situative metaphors (N=119) occur more often than expected (N=66.0). These results clarify the belief that MA students would prefer their professors to follow the guidelines of the situative paradigm and act as facilitators rather than controllers of their actions. Students want to enjoy a learning environment in which they can do collaborative activities and construct knowledge socially. Cognitive and behaviorist metaphors are the next selected metaphors.

Conclusion
The metaphors selected by the participants to express their ideas about English language teaching and learning in both the current and ideal situations were grouped according to the three paradigms of behaviorist, cognitive, and situative as laid out by Martinez et al. (2001). Uncovering learners' hidden beliefs about both university students and professors has the potential to help learners fill the gap between their implicit and explicit knowledge which could enable them to develop their teaching and learning.

The results revealed that in the current situation the MA students participating in this study view themselves as followers of the behaviorist/empiricist approach to learning. Apparently, they define their roles as passive learners who are dictated to by the professors. They portray a learner who absorbs information with no control over it. Typical metaphors of this group are *sheep* and *recipient,* emphasizing the conceptual metaphor of *Learner as Recipient*, which demotivates students to act as active agents of learning.

However, the metaphors used to describe students in the ideal situation disclose the participants' strong desire to move toward the cognitive paradigm, in which they are the active constructors of knowledge. The most dominant metaphors in this group are *partner* and *friend* which are the manifestation of the conceptual metaphor of *Learner as Significant Being*. These metaphors draw attention to the fact that professors should act as *counselors* who provide

students with the necessary support.

In the same vein, students depicted their professors as loyal followers of behaviorism. The selected metaphors such as *leader, book,* and *provider* exemplify the conceptual metaphor of *Teacher as Conduit* and *Authoritative Figure*. They conceptualize their teachers as dictators who exert power and influence and control what and how students want to study. Moreover, under such conditions, students are seen as *Empty Vessels* who need to be filled by their professors (Saban, Kocbeker & Saban, 2007).

The metaphors used for the professors in the ideal situation show that students prefer their professors to provide them with necessary guidance and help construct knowledge socially. Metaphors such as *sunshine, travel guide,* and *researcher* prove the existence of this attitude among students. Such professors view their students as *Developing Organisms* who need support to grow (Saban, 2010).

This study suggests that the participants believed that behaviorism was the dominating influence in the current context of university education while indicating a desire to study and research in mainly situative and cognitive learning environments. The reason for the domination of behaviorism can be traced back to the beginning years of the participants' education in Iran, which has been overshadowed by a national high-stakes test. Based on the situation, both teachers and learners consider test results as the predicting factor of success at schools. Teachers only expect their students to achieve the highest marks, without considering whether these students actually understand their lessons. Therefore, the main aim of teaching is for testing, which is manifested in the university entrance exams in Iran.

Later, this trend of education is continued in higher education. University students and professors have formed the belief that testing is the reason they study, so students still work hard to succeed in the several tests they have and professors just teach the points they are going to cover in exams. This means that collecting knowledge is considered the primary goal of teaching and learning, not its application and full understanding. According to the results, the MA students in this study unanimously expressed the belief that behaviorist notions control the current situation in universities, but they wish to move

towards the cognitive and situative paradigms.

In this study the gender and age of the participants were not taken into account, so another study is required to take these points into consideration. Moreover, this study was done in only a few universities in Iran, so more research could be conducted in other universities in Iran or in other countries to compare the results.

Finally, by becoming aware of their underlying beliefs, professors and university students can reflect on the current situation of teaching and learning. They can also look for the main causes of their success and failure based on their viewpoint towards their roles. This self-awareness can assist professors in the modification of their method and their assumed position. In fact, if professors and university students do not ponder their assumptions, they can become counter-productive which may lead to making incorrect decisions for both students and professors in selecting the right path for education.

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Appendix

Tick as many of these words which reflect your idea of the university professors.
In my opinion, a university <u>professor</u> is like……

Entertainer	Nurturer	Parent
Gatekeeper	Innovator	Mother
Gardener	Artist	Leader
Travel guide	Repairer	Provider
Candle	Manufacturer	Challenger
Preacher	Book	Magician
Policeman	Sunshine	Comedian
Molder	Researcher	Friend
Ladder	Shepherd	Computer

Tick as many of these words which reflect your idea of the university student.
In my opinion, a university <u>student</u> is like……

Friend	Player	Recipient
Constructor	Sheep	Raw material
Partner	Employee	Computer
Traveler	Observant	Plant
Viewer	Building	Magic bean
Child	Mechanic trainee	Pottery

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