

### *EFL learners' metaphors and images about foreign language learning*

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#### Abstract

In this paper, I will argue that awareness of images and metaphors held by foreign language learners about the nature of the target language and its learning can be of substantial value and provide teaching practitioners with useful insights about how to deal with various language learning problems. To elicit images which learners hold about foreign language learning, a questionnaire was given to 350 learners of English in different places in Iran. The questionnaire asked the respondents to provide images about learning a foreign language by using a sentence completion task: "Learning a foreign language is like . . ." The responses gained in 200 questionnaires were content-analyzed and the identified images and metaphors were summarized under more broad-ranging categories. The information that the metaphors and the resulting metaphorical categories provide and the theoretical interpretations which can plausibly be made are discussed in some detail and put in a cognitive-psychological perspective.

*Keywords:* conceptual metaphor, foreign language learning, language learners' images, language learners' metaphors, learners' beliefs, metaphor analysis

The study of language learners' beliefs and thought processes has been of interest to researchers for several decades and has recently gathered increased momentum (e.g., Berry, 2004; Cotterall, 1999; Finkbeiner, 2003; Fortune, 2005; Hawkins, 1999; Liao, 2006; Svalberg, 2005). Direct questionnaires tapping into learners' beliefs about different dimensions of language learning (e.g., Horwitz,

1988) have been one of the ways in which learner-internal processes could be explored. Another way of exploring the substantive content of learners' thinking processes is to elicit and look into the images and metaphors which learners construct about language learning. In this elicitation mode, instead of directly asking learners about their beliefs, the researcher asks for concrete comparisons which closely match those beliefs. The advantage of enquiring into learners' thoughts and beliefs through less explicit means is that the findings are more likely to be authentic and genuinely reveal beliefs and values learners cherish (Block, 1992; McGrath, 2006). When teachers are aware of learners' beliefs and subjective impressions related to foreign language learning, they can adjust the instructional materials and activities accordingly and bring about more learner-centered teaching.

### A Taste of Metaphor Studies

The inspiration for this study comes from conceptual metaphor theory, which assumes that the underlying nature of our thought processes is metaphorical and we think and act in terms of metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Concerning the role of metaphors in structuring cognition and behavior, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) contend:

In all aspect of life, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors. We draw inferences, set goals, make commitments, and execute plans, all on the basis of how we in part structure our experience, consciously and unconsciously, by means of metaphors. (p.158)

So, in this framework, metaphors are not primarily literary devices but are claimed to permeate almost all domains of discourse and communication (Deignan, 2005).

Gibbs (2011), evaluating 30 years of conceptual metaphor theory, insists that our common figurative verbalizations are instantiations of specific metaphorical entailments arising from a small closed set of conceptual metaphors shared by many people in a speech community. This is basically a reendorsement of the earlier work by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), who specify a list of such basic metaphors. For example, the conceptual metaphor ARGUMENT IS WAR<sup>1</sup> can be deduced from linguistic metaphors such as *I am sure this position will come under fire from the opposition*, and *The neighbors agreed to a cease-*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

*fire over their lawn ornament argument* (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). Or, the conceptual metaphor THEORIES ARE BUILDINGS motivates such expressions as *The theory needs to be buttressed* or *The foundation of the theory is shaky*. Some studies provide empirical and psychological support for the claim that metaphorical linguistic expressions are fuelled by preexisting patterns of thought or conceptual metaphors (Gibbs, 2011; Gibbs & O'Brian, 1990; Nayakk & Gibbs, 1990). Gibbs, Lima, & Francozo (2004, p. 1189) take the argument one step further and, through a survey of some American English and Brazilian Portuguese speakers, offer evidence that conceptual metaphors are, in turn, "fundamentally rooted in embodied action," as exemplified by the metaphorical conceptualization of desire in terms of hunger (*I am starved for his affection*). While these observations have vast implications beyond the scope of the present study and involve causal and interactive relationships of metaphor, language, and behavior, they also encourage studies of limited scope with the goal of getting insights into the current thinking and behavior of individuals through their metaphors.

### Metaphor Studies in Language Teaching and Learning

Metaphors now constitute a well-recognized area of inquiry in applied linguistics. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) dedicate a whole chapter to "metaphor analysis" (MA) in their seminal book, which details "the main methods of analyzing samples of learner language" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, p. ix). Therein, they review three areas of research in which MA has featured: (a) SLA researchers' conceptualization of their field of study, (b) teachers' cognitions, and (c) L2 learners' accounts of their own learning. They justify an agenda for the analysis of language learners' metaphors as follows:

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 (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 313).

Some studies have looked at how language teachers conceptualize their practice. A study by Briscoe (1991) shows that the metaphors which teachers depend on to make sense of their teaching have a substantial effect on their classroom practice. Block (1997), implying a causal role for metaphors teachers hold about their practice, also reports differences in the metaphors teachers use to conceptualize what language learning involves and what their roles as lan-

guage teachers are. Likewise, de Guerrero and Villamil (2002) elicited and reported metaphors from 22 Puerto Rican teachers about teachers' and learners' roles and called attention to the merits of such information in the professional development of language teachers and the enhancement of their practice.

Cook-Sather (2003) posited that two metaphors dominated the formal educational system in the United States, that is, "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.

The fact that the metaphors people use reflect their mental worlds and influence the way they see the world and the recognition of the importance of learners' naive theories or implicit models about learning (Schaw & Bruning, 1996) have surprisingly failed to merge in the theoretical thinking of researchers to produce a notable research strand of learner metaphor studies. A few researchers have, however, paid heed to the research potential of learners' metaphors. One is Oxford (2001), who 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. More process-focused and learning-centered is Ellis's (2002) examination of metaphors in the diaries of six beginner learners of German as a second language. He reports five conceptual metaphors and their entailments, giving examples for the key words related to each metaphor. They are: LEARNING IS A JOURNEY (e.g., *I got hopelessly lost*), LEARNING IS A PUZZLE, LEARNING IS WORK, LEARNING IS SUFFERING, and LEARNING IS A STRUGGLE. He suggests these metaphors reveal two main points: Learning German was problematic for these learners for cognitive and affective reasons and they constructed themselves as both agents of their learning and patients of experiences they could not control.

Oxford's (2001) metaphor study was confined to teaching approaches and Ellis's (2002) study was done with a limited number of participants. Moreover, one may wonder how the open-ended diary entries in Ellis's study gave rise to only five conceptual metaphors unless they were selected because of, say, prominence or frequency. These observations, coupled with the fact that similar research is scarce, shows that the study of metaphorical perceptions of foreign language learning is well motivated.

## The Study<sup>2</sup>

Since metaphors play a significant role in shaping people's thinking and learning, I set out to study the metaphors language learners hold about the processes involved in their learning, that is, the images they have uppermost in their minds about language learning. According to Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001), mental images and metaphors, as "blue prints of thinking," have a powerful influence on the perception, the learning process, and mental restructuring of the instructional input. It was hoped that feedback based on learners' images and metaphors would shed light on the actual processes of learning that take place in the learners' minds and reveal their conceptualization of the product they are working toward. Teachers equipped with some awareness of those images might be in a better position to help in improving learners' strategies and study skills. In fact, this study is a response to Finkbeiner's (2003) call for teachers' awareness of language learners' thought processes and Andrew's (2007) advocacy of teachers' increased awareness of language and language related issues.

In this study, due to the exploratory nature of its design, the learners of one foreign language, English, were prompted to think of and report the metaphors they held about foreign language learning in general. As different foreign languages may enjoy different status in particular settings and their learning may produce different impressions in learners, the results obtained in this study may be primarily applicable to learning English. However, one cannot rule out that they may also prove very informative about other foreign languages.

### The Instrument

The instrument for collecting information about learners' images and metaphors depicting their conception of learning English was a questionnaire. The questionnaire started with some clarification concerning the purpose of the study and an example of a likely metaphor about learning a foreign language. After requesting some demographic information, the questionnaire asked the respondents to provide images or metaphors about the nature of learning a foreign language by finishing this prompt: "Learning a foreign language (for example English) is like . . ." All parts of the questionnaire were in

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<sup>2</sup> This is a report of a part of a larger study. In addition to what is reported here, the study explored the metaphors and images of English language learners about the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, and the three components of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary.

Persian, the mother tongue of the respondents, except the incomplete sentence. However, it was indicated in the questionnaire that the participants could write their responses in any language they felt more comfortable with. This resulted in answers either in Persian or English. The reason the learners were not limited to English was that such restriction could have prevented the free flow of their mental images; otherwise, some learners might have refrained from expressing their images because of embarrassment over the quality of their writing, in spite of being anonymous.

### Participants

The researcher and his assistants turned to their own students as reliable participants, the only requirement set for participation being that they should be adult learners of English with at least one year of English learning experience and able to understand the English-medium prompt. Responses were requested of more than 350 learners of English and 200 completed questionnaire forms were returned by intermediate and advanced learners of English in private institutes and universities, in seven cities in Iran. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 35, with the majority in their lower 20s, as most of them came from senior BA courses. When it comes to gender, 150 respondents were female and 50 were male.

### Data Collection

Although the written instructions were clearly worded in Persian, they were also explained orally when the questionnaire was given to each respondent so that there was a clear understanding as to what s/he was expected to do. Practically in all cases the questionnaire was handed to individual respondents in person, either by the researcher or his assistants. The forms were also returned individually. This introduced a bias into this study as the submitted images and metaphors were likely to come from those participants who were relatively enthusiastic about language learning and the images of those with less enthusiasm and less positive attitudes are presumably underrepresented.

### Data Handling

The output of the questionnaire consisted of responses including images and metaphors about learning a foreign language. Most respondents provided only one comparison, but if more than one image or metaphor were provided, they were all taken into account. The responses were read and translated into

English, if in Persian, or clear English, if clarification was needed. This review also acted as a familiarization stage and gave the researcher a vantage point over the responses. Then, the researcher reviewed the responses to identify images and metaphors. First, specific linguistic metaphors were identified and grouped under descriptive rubrics; next, the specific images were examined and more inclusive and conceptually-oriented categories were identified. Because of space limitations only the categories which emerged and descriptive key words from the responses are reported in the Results section.<sup>3</sup> As these stages of the study were unavoidably highly interpretive, the researcher discussed his interpretations of the remarks and comparisons offered by the participants with applied linguistics colleagues and consulted them about the identified images and metaphors, and the categories which were derived. Differences in interpretation were few and a consensus was reached in all cases.

## The Results

The researcher and his assistants examined the responses of 200 participants and derived 229 metaphors. However, instead of reporting a rather long list, further analysis was carried out on the identified metaphors to extract more inclusive metaphorical themes, which are displayed in Table 1. Each cell in Table 1 includes a metaphorical theme, the frequency of each theme in the full pool of comparisons, and key words which may elucidate the themes.

In spite of abstracting from the collected metaphors, the diversity of the responses is also visible in the metaphorical themes. In the same way that the images in the responses vary from "*Language is a dish and learners are cooks*" and "*Language is a vehicle and learners are drivers*" to "*Language is artwork and learners are artists*," the metaphorical concepts and categories vary from FOOD, COOKING, EATING to ARTS AND AESTHETICS. Some images are vivid and concrete: "*Learning a foreign language is like eating spaghetti*" or "*Learning language is like climbing a ladder*;" some are less so: "*Learning a language is like attaining a more meaningful life*."

Table 1 Themes emerging from learners' images and metaphors about learning a foreign language in order of frequency

1. EXPLORATION (56) new, strange, new lands, new window, visiting another plan-	2. SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (28) play football, diving, fly- ing, wish to fly, mountain	3. JOURNEY (22) unknown rough road, foreign land, travel- ling in a ship, travel-	4. FOOD, COOKING, EATING (19) how to cook, tasting new foods, sweet,
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<sup>3</sup> Interested readers and researchers are warmly invited to contact the author for the full list of linguistic metaphors and their entailments.

et/heaven, wandering, palace with many rooms, strange city, new horizons, opening a door/window to a new world, new people, touring unexplored area, Roald Dhal's giant peach, landing on the Moon/a planet, inside a volcano	climbing (hard but pleasant), swimming in the sea, climbing up a hill/ladder/peak/knotted rope, diving into shallow water (hard and painful), climbing a log (easy), bike race, increasingly heavier weights, monkey bars	ing abroad, winding path, planning a trip, (never ending) travel/voyage	sugar, bitter poison, eating a red/delicious apple/ice-cream/, drinking sweet cool lemon/fruit juice, water, quench, sweet as candy, cooking a dish, chef
5. PERSONAL GROWTH, IDENTITY RENEWAL (15) becoming a new person, rebirth, new personality, born again, metamorphosis, from worm to butterfly, new character/new identity/life	6. FUN AND ENTERTAINMENT (12) flying in the sky, cool exercise, pleasure trip, scuba diving, ecstasy feelings, computer game, roller coaster, blowing bubbles, sugar cubes	7. COMMUNICATION BRIDGE (10) bridge between islands/cultures, link, communication gadget, new code, talking to aliens, satellite dish	8. MUSIC (9) learning to play guitar/piano, strange music, listening to good new music, new musical instrument
9. PROBLEM SOLVING (10) unlock doors, key, doing/solving a puzzle/mysteries, tracing a maze	10. OBJECT, MACHINE (7) soft silk; tough/hard steel, using a tool, clock moving in stages	11. FRIENDSHIP AND EMOTIONAL SATISFACTION (7) making (new) friends, finding old friends, joining a club	12. ADVANTAGE AND OPPORTUNITY (6) spare tire, key to success, craft for survival, trump card
13. LIGHT (6) a bridge to a light source, rays of sun, opening eyes to light, candlelight, turning up a dimmer	14. QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE (4) drink [thirst for knowledge], quenching thirst, water, large library waiting for readers	15. ARTS, AESTHETICS (5) arranging flowers, learning a craft, decoration	17. BABY EXPERIENCE (5) baby enjoying talking, child learning to speak, curious baby
18. SEARCH FOR MEANING IN LIFE (3) shedding new light on life, larger/meaningful world	19. DRIVING (4) learning to drive (first slow, then fast; first appalling, then pleasing), traffic rules	20. SCHOOL SUBJECT (3) harder than math/physics, learning math	21. AWE AND WONDER (3) vast ocean, strange
22. FIGHT/BATTLEGROUND (2) strong weapon, defense/fighting tool	23. CONSTRUCTION WORK (2) building a skyscraper, toy house of sugar cubes		Respondents: 200 Total Images: 229

*Note.* The numbers within parentheses refer to the frequency of the respective themes in the total identified images of 229. Some respondents provided more than one image and, in a few cases, some images were placed in two categories. However, the majority of the respondents provided only one metaphor. The words listed under each theme are primarily meant to make that theme more meaningful by revealing the original comparisons in the fewest words possible.

EXPLORATION tops the list of metaphorical themes which were derived from the images and comparisons the learners offered as a description of foreign language learning. This theme is evident in images such as "*Language is a strange land*" or "*Language is a window or door to new space.*" Other themes to which the participants frequently referred include SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, JOURNEY, FOOD, COOKING, EATING, and PERSONAL GROWTH. As is briefly discussed below, these metaphors may encourage speculation about certain educationally important tendencies in the cognitive and affective domains. It is also worth noting that some learners might have given only one of several alternative visual and metaphorical clues to their conceptualization of language learning.

### Discussion: A Journey into the Minds of a Group of Foreign Language Learners

As Gerjets and Hesse (2004) argue, learners' activities are largely governed by their conceptions and theories of learning, an important part of which are metaphors. Likewise, the images and metaphors learners provide about learning a foreign language and the themes that emerge can be revealing about various aspects of the endeavor they are coping with. Among other things, they can show the level and type of motivation that drives learners, the attitude they take to language learning and/or the learning strategies they may prefer. This insight has the potential to enhance language teaching practice because the informed teachers can advise learners who hold images symptomatic of misunderstandings about language skills and components and encourage images which are in line with efficient language acquisition. Teachers will also know when it is necessary to work for a perspective change in learners to help sustain learning effort. The benefits of this awareness can be both "instrumental" and "transformative," to use a dichotomy by Mezirow (as cited in Johnson & Nelson, 2010, p. 36). According to Johnson and Nelson (2010), learning in the context of a foreign language classroom can happen on two levels: Students may learn the content and skills; they may also critically reflect on their own assumptions about learning and try to make sense of information in relationship to the real world and themselves, a process which may lead to "perspective transformation."

The aim of this research was to explore the images and consequently conceptualizations English language learners hold about the nature of learning a foreign language. This was based on the conviction that learners' metaphors and images, because they both construct and constrain thought, can function as a window to view their belief systems. The analysis of their visualizations reveals that some learners are very naïve in their personal theories, while some seem to have a well-wrought system of beliefs about language learning

and its entailments. In what follows these images are discussed in terms of findings about the cognitive and affective processes in language learning.

Although it is hard to separate the metaphors and concepts they yielded into two distinct groups based on affect-cognition dimensions, as most concepts and images include both, one may think that these are two valid forces behind the images and concepts. For example, MUSIC, FUN AND ENTERTAINMENT and FRIENDSHIP AND EMOTIONAL SATISFACTION images, especially as they are realized in these learners' metaphors, tend to point to the affective significance of learning a foreign language; while those subsumed under EXPLORATION, and FOOD, COOKING AND EATING and PROBLEM SOLVING tend to mirror cognition, and LIGHT and PERSONAL GROWTH metaphors ("*Language learning is expanding our living space*") may be said to represent something of both aspects of foreign language learning.

A striking point about the images these learners hold is that they have a very positive attitude toward learning a foreign language and, as they are all students of English, one can safely say, toward learning English. Some seem to express direct endorsement and interest; that is, the images which fall in the categories of FRIENDSHIP AND EMOTIONAL SATISFACTION, ADVANTAGE AND OPPORTUNITY, and many images in FOOD, COOKING AND EATING, SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, PERSONAL GROWTH, FUN AND ENTERTAINMENT, and LIGHT. Some are more pragmatic and, although they do not praise directly, imply a dynamic route of learning. For example, a student who regards language learning as EXPLORATION is likely to adopt an active role and be autonomous as a language learner. What is more interesting and promising is that the majority of the images seem to point to some noninstrumental drives in the learners. Many of them show integrative tendencies, for example when they consider foreign language learning a journey or a link to other cultures or when they compare the language learner to a baby learning to speak. But most of the metaphor sets and images of these learners seem to have other intrinsic and more personal forces behind them. Among the images which support this conclusion are those included in SPORTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, MUSIC, PROBLEM SOLVING, and ADVANTAGE AND OPPORTUNITY. Of course, these are only general tendencies; many images and categories include both instrumental and integrative elements, their common denominator being an unspecific positive attitude. On the other hand, there are a few images of "hardship" or "suffering," which may not be beneficial to learning. For example, such comparisons as "*Learning a foreign language is like bitter poison*" or "*pain*" show either a strong aversion or considerable difficulty perceived by the learners expressing them.

A first impression of the researcher was that some of the responses to the sentence completion task and the images they conveyed were focused on the process of learning, some on its end product, and a few others were hard

to interpret in this regard. However, the point is that many learners may have metaphors for both language *and* learning. Moreover, it is difficult to categorically judge an image to be process-focused or product-focused. Nevertheless, looking at the images subsumed under the themes in Table 1, one can still be inclined to conclude that the two orientations exist in some measure because some learners had the product foregrounded in their imagery while others foregrounded the process. However, regardless of the question of identification and dichotomizing, encouraging imagery with a process dimension, that is, "*Learning is like climbing up a hill*" or "*Learning a language is like learning to use a tool,*" should be a concern of teachers interested in bringing about language awareness in learners and using meta-cognitive awareness to enhance learning. This seems of great import and, as Svalberg (2007) reports, a number of studies support the notion that awareness directs attention and noticing and hence memory and learning. To this end, a mental image with a process dimension might serve as a road map or a guiding principle which affects the actions and strategies learners take when they think of the objectives of learning. In other words, the images and metaphors learners hold might heuristically inform their actions and give them a sense of orientation. Different learners may have different process images and it certainly matters whether or not those images are attuned to how people learn; but, probably, even more important than correspondence of learners' comparisons to brain mechanisms is that process images might help learners make personal sense of their effort and help them see a rationale for it.

Top among the conceptual metaphors generalized from specific comparisons is that of EXPLORATION. Out of 229 images, 56 depict foreign language learning as an exploratory endeavor. Related to EXPLORATION, JOURNEY metaphors also rank high ( $n = 22$ ) in the elicited imagery of these learners. Many images under EXPLORATION and JOURNEY seem to express, among other things, learners' sense of agency and the accumulative nature of learning a language and are, therefore, worth encouragement. As a journey, 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 and it is, therefore, very unlikely that holders of 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, 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 the cumulative 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, a point which can also be made about some other images, particularly those under PERSONAL GROWTH and SEARCH FOR MEANING.

PERSONAL GROWTH AND IDENTITY RENEWAL metaphors can be discussed as humanistic conceptualizations of language learning. The development of a subidentity as a foreign language learner and the enhancement of his/her self-image in that role may be the main thrust of and a favorable condition for learning grammar, vocabulary and other components (see Mercer, 2011). Hence, teachers might consider strengthening and spreading images related to PERSONAL GROWTH and SEARCH FOR MEANING, which are infrequent in the responses here.

To bring the discussion section to a close, we should recognize how difficult it is to interpret the data and results obtained in this study. On the one hand, it does not sound advisable to try to fit the themes which emerged or even the specific images into sweeping interpretations. For one thing, subjectivity is a prominent feature of these data from their very conception and development in the learners, to their expression on paper and their interpretation and categorization by the researcher. On the other hand, one cannot help identifying several strands and tendencies. One is an affective strand. Many of these images about language learning may imply positive or negative attitudes and the expression of ease or difficulty, fear or attraction or pleasure or pain as seen by those who offered them. Another observation may be that the images and metaphors reveal different beliefs about the interpersonal and interactive nature of language learning and use. Related to this is the impression that some images make us think that their authors probably follow an instrumental and utilitarian interest rather than an integrative one. One may also ponder the degree to which the metaphors expressed by these participants tend to reflect a constructivist view of language learning. Although many are hard to interpret in this regard, we may suspect the absence of a strong constructivist element running through the images. These or similar impressions, of course, must be supported by further probe of the learners and considered in the light of more circumstantial evidence before specific decisions about practice could be taken. When the language teaching practitioners have a clear situated understanding of the imagery of the learners, they can capitalize on it by attuning their teaching, that is, their presentation, examples, explanation, and so forth, to learners' metaphors and prove to be more down-to-earth. Or, in case they see there is more to what they want to teach than what the current learners' images allow, they can engage the learners in reflection on learning by challenging their images and offering and fostering alternative ones. For example, encouraging images with a strong constructivist element,

such as the one in "*Learning a vocabulary item is like the growth of a plant*" or "*the development of an embryo*," can make a difference in shaping the way learners tackle different challenges involved in vocabulary learning.

### Conclusion and Practical Implications

This study can be a step in raising awareness about pictures or comparisons which learners develop for foreign language learning. Even if we make light of the idea that thinking is highly visual and learning and conceptualization rely on mental images (Solso, Maclin, & Maclin, 2008), the metacognitive consequences of the pictures which learners construct are significant. There is a growing sense among many applied linguists that learners' beliefs about learning and what they learn can have serious emotional, attitudinal and cognitive consequences (e.g., Aragao, 2011; Arnold, 1999; Cotterall, 1999; Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003). Teachers' awareness of these pictures is necessary because they are the usual initiators and facilitators of change in learners. Learners' awareness of these pictures is also valuable because they are the most important agents in the learning process.

Identifying, evaluating and critiquing these pictures according to established ideas about foreign language learning can offer educational rewards. A major reason can be the fact that the conceptual metaphors of learners affect, among other things, their learning and problem-solving strategies in the respective domains (McEwan, 2007; Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2005). Although at very elementary levels the learners may react reflexively and limit themselves to external input provided by the instructors, they soon advance to a reflective mode and begin to think about what they are exposed to. This is because, in all the areas of their mental world, they conceive mental embryos and start growing intellectual seeds of their own. In other words, they do not just absorb teacher's knowledge and keep it for a long time. Rather, they soon begin appropriating external knowledge and then interpret everything in terms of that appropriated internalized knowledge. If, for any reason, personal conceptualizations of learners do not match the reality of the subject of study, their learning will be adversely affected.

With metaphors and mental images as guiding signposts for learners' thinking and conceptualization, the learning process can be understood as a process of metaphor or image change; in a pedagogy giving such a pivotal role to images, one important task of the teacher would certainly consist in facilitating the development of images that generate new learning or correct the existing learning. A useful application of this study is for teachers to probe the foreign-language-related imagery of learners and then provide positive or negative feedback according to the results of their probes. One technique for eliciting

metaphors and images can be the one employed in this study; the teacher can ask the learners to compare the subject s/he wants to raise their awareness of with concrete and familiar objects or concepts. Forming a pool of student-generated images and metaphors, they can then evaluate them as well as those suggested by the teacher for “goodness of fit” and come wiser out of the discussion. The teacher can be more prescriptive and set his mind on a particular metaphor and present it in the form of an illustration, photo or even short story and then relate it to the subject or concept he wants to teach or to teach about.

Eliciting and offering metaphors and building on the sense of excitement that probably emerges can be a useful strategy, especially during the opening sessions, for different skills courses, so that the learners have a better understanding of the nature and goals of those courses and remove their likely false beliefs and expectations about them. This teaching strategy can also be given a place in teacher training courses, not only for establishing the right conceptualization about the ways language skills and components may be taught but also for making sure the trainees themselves are not misconceived about language skills and components and their learning entailments.

Material designers’ efforts might also be enhanced by taking learners’ metaphors into account and having image formation on the instructional agenda. They can design language awareness lessons and exercises using a host of images for learners to analyze and connect the features of the images to the objectives of the lessons, for example, developing skimming skill. They can also provide examples of skimpy or misleading images so that the learners correct themselves if they are holding similar ones. Authors of grammar or vocabulary course books as well as teachers can be more effective by resorting to this awareness-raising strategy at the orientation stages of their output. For example, they can compare a vocabulary item or a grammar rule to plants and embryos, which do not come into being overnight but develop gradually, and thus discourage rote learning and list memorization. Of course, the speculation that teachers and other practitioners can change the metaphors learners hold and by doing so make the learners more effective remains to be substantiated by research.

### Further Research

This study explored images and metaphors about learning a foreign language in a specific cultural context. Certainly, there is a lot of room for further research beyond this small set of metaphors elicited from a limited number of learners in rather similar settings. Interested researchers may like to obtain more generalized metaphors and images which are stable across different learners and settings, a goal which requires a much larger number of partici-

pants. They may want to seek images from different age groups and explore the similarities and differences and look for reasons behind the variation. They may also like to extend the comparisons to different cultural or linguistic contexts. For example, the present researcher aspires to elicit metaphors and mental images learners of Arabic as a foreign language hold about the Arabic language and the skills and elements they are learning and juxtapose them with those provided by learners of English as a foreign language. Exploring and understanding the metaphors of struggling language learners and empirically testing the effect of intervention to guide learners' metaphorical metacognition can also be a valuable contribution. Another interesting project could be exploring the imagery of good, successful language learners. The cognition and/or motivation of successful people might be characteristically picture-based, in the same way that, according to NHK World (Japanese public broadcaster) documentary aired on October 15, 2010, the visual motto "Tall oak trees grow from little acorns" helped Herbert C. Brown and Akira Suzuki win the Nobel Prizes for Chemistry in 1979 and 2010, respectively.

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