



EFL Students' Metaphorical Perception of their Learning Experience

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Abstract

The present study explored EFL students' perceptions and attitudes towards their learning experience through metaphors. Conceptual metaphor analysis (CMA), as a method of discourse analysis that was promoted by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), was employed. The selected students were provided with a survey to share their learning experience metaphorically with the prompt "Learning English is like....." CMA was utilized to uncover the metaphorical aspect of the learning experience hidden in the simile provided by the students. The data collected was analyzed qualitatively by categorizing thematically the metaphors used. The analysis revealed the aspects of the students' learning experience. Their experience is lengthy, challenging, difficult, painful, uncertain, fearful, and negative. Such negative images may indicate some problems and challenges that these students have never dealt with. Negative attitudes towards their learning experience do not allow students to improve their English learning. For this reason, it is recommended to investigate and address students' issues and learning problems from the perspective of enhancing their perceptions of their educational and learning experiences. It was also concluded that students do not distinguish between their educational experience and learning experience.

Keywords: Attitude; Conceptual metaphor; Learning experience; Students' perception.

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1. Introduction

The process of learning a second language is a long and challenging one, as acknowledged by [1], who states that "learning a second language is a long process, if not endless. It is not like any other experience, especially for young adult learners." This is particularly true for English learners who do not have opportunities to use the language outside of the educational context. As [2] note, "for them, English is not commonly a language which is spoken by a definite nation or belongs to a definite culture." The limited use of English in educational contexts can result in students being "concerned with the English which is one of the lessons they are taught at school and one of the responsibilities they bear in their individual worlds" [2]. Additionally, many factors can influence the learning process, including motivation, attitude, age, intelligence, aptitude, cognitive style, and personality, as identified by [3]. Attitudes, perceptions, and emotions can significantly impact foreign language learning. However, educators often overlook these factors in their teaching approach [4].

According to [5], it is imperative to take learners' perspectives seriously in order to ensure quality learning. Learners' emotions, thoughts, and beliefs play a crucial role in the entire learning process. A positive attitude, for instance, fosters enthusiasm and motivation, which leads to an effective and smooth learning process [6]. Moreover, while group activities can enhance the learning process, it is essential to remember that learning a second language is an individual achievement, and thus, the success or failure of the process depends solely on individuals' attitudes towards it [7]. Maintaining a positive attitude is vital, but it is also challenging, and it requires sustained effort to reach the desired goal. Therefore, it is essential to keep students motivated, regardless of their performance or grades, as students who feel left behind may lose interest and give up on learning [6]. Therefore, it is highly recommended to involve parents and teachers in the learning process of children. [6] assert that parental involvement is always vital to ensure the success of any learning that children are undertaking.

Attitude is not the only factor that affects learning a second language; perception is no less influential. In fact, as [6] argue, the correlation between students' perceptions of the importance of English and their attitudes toward the process of learning a foreign language is positive. They continue to raise students' awareness of the importance of English to improve their attitudes toward learning the language. Accordingly, the higher their awareness, the more positive their attitudes will be. Besides, as with attitudes, students' perceptions are key to success in the learning process. "[R]egardless of teacher perceptions or intentions, it is the student's perceptions that are foundational for their own growth and learning" [8]. What is interesting about the notion of perception is that even students with poor performance are completely aware of the importance of learning a second language. "[D]espite the students' low achievement in their English language performance, they are not lacking in their perception of the importance of the language" [6]. Nevertheless, this is not surprising if one considers that our beliefs and experiences form our perceptions [8].

"Emotions are at the heart of the foreign language learning process. Without emotion, boredom would reign, and very little learning would take place" [9]. Many educators do not pay attention to emotions as a key factor in effectively learning a second language. Ignoring the emotional side when teaching leads to emotionless boring classroom sessions [9]. In fact, emotions affect the process of learning a second language differently, regardless of whether these emotions are positive or negative. "The diverse emotions that students may experience during

learning activities can cause different affective reactions in students” [10]. For example, when learning a second language, positive emotions, along with other positive characteristics and institutions, help students form their own useful experiences [11]; however, for this to happen, both parents and teachers should be involved [10]. On the other hand, negative emotions are not always bad, as they can help learners eliminate obstacles, but they can impede learning [9].

The educational experience of learners, “is a hybrid experience. That is, it is intellectual, social, and emotional” [1]. One of the subtle means to uncover this emotional aspect of the learning experience is metaphors, as “human thought processes are largely metaphorical” [12]. Therefore, the present study examines students' attitudes, perceptions, experiences, and emotions toward learning English as a foreign language by investigating learners' metaphors. This provides insight into a students' attitudes, perceptions, and emotional states of mind.

2. Metaphors and Education

It is well known that discursive strategies and linguistic devices are utilized to construct and represent issues positively or negatively, such as collocations, verbs, and metaphors through which they can reveal, express, and evoke emotions and attitudes [13]. It should be noted that metaphors were typically used to refer to literary language, because “[t]raditionally, metaphors were the exclusive domain of rhetoric, analyzed alongside other tropes as imaginative, poetic, ornamental devices” [14]. Cognitive linguistics, however, no longer regards metaphor as a rhetorical element. Instead, it regards metaphor as a crucial cognitive device used to reconstruct events and enables people to view the world from a variety of perspectives. Metaphor is vital for human cognition, as many philosophers and linguists have asserted. Speakers utilize metaphors for different reasons, including conveying meanings indirectly through vivid expressions loaded with emotions [15]. “On the cognitive view of metaphor, metaphors help us understand an abstract or inherently unstructured subject matter in terms of a more concrete, more highly structured subject matter” [16].

This method of viewing metaphors has led to the development of several theories related to metaphors, which have contributed to our understanding of metaphors in different discourses. Contemporary theories of metaphors state that metaphors require some relationship between any conceptually distinct entities to invest the characteristics associated with one entity (the *source* or *vehicle*), to understand the other conceptual entity (*target* or *topic*) [17]. Accordingly, metaphors have been examined in different contexts, most notably in educational settings. As a result, metaphors have been examined in terms of both teachers' and learners' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about teaching and learning. Metaphors can shape one's ways of thinking and actions. Metaphors in education are unavoidable [18]. “Educational language is replete with metaphors” [19]. Hence, in education, students' metaphorical perceptions of their learning experience can reveal their emotions, attitudes, ways of thinking, and accordingly their actions or behaviors.

Since 1980s, researchers have been interested in examining the attitudes and perceptions of second language and foreign language learners. It is believed that students' perceptions and attitudes affect and influence their learning behaviors. Interestingly, beliefs “are not usually consciously articulated without some assistance” [20]. Hence, metaphors can be viewed as aids that enable students to express and reflect on their perceptions of learning. In

addition, learners usually learn by reflecting on what has happened; accordingly, learners need to be provided with an opportunity to reflect on their learning [21]. A few studies have scrutinized learners' (and students') metaphors to offer a better understanding of how students view the learning process, including their perceptions and emotions towards it. Scrutinizing Malaysian public university students' metaphors concerning their learning experience revealed that, despite the dominant perspective of education as 'production,' the themes of the metaphors provided by students were recreation and leisure, socializing, having a unique experience, personal development, enduring hardship, and intellectual challenge/scientific experiment. The researchers concluded that such a perspective on how students view education "can enrich educational discourse and reveal previously obscured notions on education and learning" [22].

Another study conducted attempted to make students' beliefs about language learning explicit through the metaphors learners used. In so doing, they examined 80 first-year students in an EFL setting. They utilized a metaphor elicitation sheet with the prompt "the English learning process is (like) . . . because . . ." They examined the metaphors they collected qualitatively and quantitatively by employing Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of metaphors [23]. They categorized the metaphors learners produced into ten categories: task, journey, period of life, progress, competition, enjoyable activity, torture, unending process, engraving process, and nurturing process. These metaphors show that learners view language learning as "an effortful and continuous process which requires support" [12].

A study also explored college EFL students' metaphorical perceptions of English learning in China. The study examined 30 English majors and 30 non-English majors by requesting them to complete a prompt "learning English is (like) . . . because . . ." In doing so, it aimed to reveal how learners view their learning experiences. The analysis of the metaphors revealed that students believed that the process of language learning was challenging and that a successful language learner needed to work hard, be patient, and have a positive attitude [24]. Similarly, another study examined high schoolers' metaphorical perceptions of English. In so doing, they conducted a focused group interview to collect metaphors from 128 students of different grades. They categorized the 79 metaphors they collected into 12 categories, e.g., English as a process requiring time, effort, and patience, as joy or fun, as a tool for/way of achieving a goal, as a constantly changing entity, as a two-sided concept, as an endless infinite entity, as a new concept, and as fear and hatred. From the analysis and the interviews, they conducted, they concluded that students viewed English as "a target language to learn rather than a foreign language spoken by a definite society or belonging to a culture." In addition, unlike those whose attitudes were negative, those whose perceptions were positive tended to have higher motivation [2].

EKİZ examined students' metaphorical perception of literature to fill the gap noted in the literature. Accordingly, to better understand students' perceptions, EKİZ investigated junior and senior students' perceptions of literary genres. Through semi-structured interviews, multiple-choice questionnaires, and metaphor elicitation, metaphors were collected from 58 and 43 first fourth grade English language learners enrolled at İstanbul University. The findings showed both positive and negative perceptions [25]. With reference to teachers' metaphorical perceptions of their professional development, content analysis was employed to analyze metaphors concerning professional development from 526 teachers. It was concluded that teachers connected professional development with an object and viewed it as "a growing and developing entity." Accordingly, Yurtseven recommended that teachers should

be provided with research opportunities to examine their own teaching processes [26].

According to the literature review presented earlier, it is evident that metaphor is a potent cognitive device that can influence one's viewpoint and corresponding experience. The research cited above demonstrated how metaphors can affect both instructors and students, ultimately shaping their attitudes and ultimately their actions. The topic of metaphors in an educational context has attracted scholarly attention. Some studies have examined how metaphors can assist in forming educational policies (e.g., [27]), while others have examined teachers' perspectives on teaching and learning. In addition, some studies have focused on students and employed metaphors as indicators of their attitudes and perceptions of teaching strategies, learning experiences, and learning contexts (e.g., [27,30]). However, these studies were conducted in a Western educational environment. Because learners' perspective on their learning experience through metaphor has been neglected in the educational discourse [31] and most of the studies were done by discourse analysts, this paper is interested in exploring the learning experience of students studying English as a foreign language to shed light on the importance of metaphor as an education tool and further investigate the learners' experience, rather than attitude, which is an essential concept of their experience.

3. Methodology

To understand how students view and feel about the learning process, educators need to obtain access to their metaphorical perceptions of their learning experience. Hence, this study, as an exploratory study, surveyed and classified students' metaphors of learning. Furthermore, it is intended to reveal their emotions and attitudes toward their learning experiences of English as a foreign language. In this study, conceptual metaphor analysis [12], was employed to explore the role of metaphor in reconstructing the learning experience of students. The power of metaphor analysis can provide access to perceptions that "characterize a concept and drive action" [32]. The students were provided with a survey to share their learning experience metaphorically with the prompt "Learning English is like . . ." (see Appendix 1). The data collected were analyzed qualitatively by listing, categorizing them thematically and determining the types of metaphors used during language acquisition.

3.1 Data collection

As noted earlier, the current study used a questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire had an incomplete sentence "Learning English is like . . ." to complete. This method to solicit metaphors through filling in the blank with similes was utilized in many studies (e.g., [22,24,33]). The Department of English at Imam Abdulrahman bin Faisal University (IAU) in Saudi Arabia offers a three-year English program to female students. Each year, there are two levels. In total, there are six levels. The first year is the prep-year. Hence, those who joined the Department of English are level 3 students. The participants (N=122) in the current study were recruited from all levels, to capture their metaphorical perceptions of their learning experience. To recruit them, a survey along with the consent form was emailed to all department student, who were enrolled in the Department of English during 2021-2022. The researchers received (N=122) responses. The participants were native speakers of Arabic; English was taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. These students had been learning English since they were 10 years old. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24 years old. In addition, their proficiency varied from low- intermediate

to proficient. It is worth noting that this study is not interested in students' proficiency levels; it is concerned with their perception of their learning experience of English. The participants were requested to take the survey before their midterm exams; this period was chosen to avoid the negative impact of exams and marks on their perceptions.

3.2 Procedures

Similes were requested because students are familiar with such figurative language, and it achieves the purpose of this study by providing a metaphorical perspective of their learning experience. "Similes are often considered to be nothing more than metaphors made explicit by particles such as like and as" [34]. To examine the metaphors utilized by the learners, the metaphor identification procedure (MIP) [35] was adopted utilizing steps 2 and 3, and the theory of conceptual metaphor [12] was used to uncover the source and target domains of the metaphors under examination. Accordingly, a qualitative method of analysis was employed to explore the various themes of the students' metaphors. Based on the lexical units used in the similes, 8 themes based on context were identified, namely game, food natural phenomenon, journey, giving birth, war, hardship, and aspects related to water. Each simile/metaphor was examined to reveal their contextual meanings comparing it to other contexts, such as the simile of rollercoaster. Accordingly, such a simile was ruled negative. Some of the lexical units in the similes/metaphors were examined taking into consideration the broader culture of the participants and sometimes the learning culture in general. For example, "playing a video game with endless levels" is ruled negative due to the culture of learning and the achievement nature.

The three researchers coded the students' metaphors separately. One round of coding and a discussion round was held to compare the results and resolve discrepancies. The percentage of agreement among the three coders was 99%. After the metaphors were coded and the source and target domains identified, the various metaphors were categorized according to their source domains. In doing so, this study aimed to reveal the different aspects of the student's learning experiences. The source domains in the discussion are recategorized according to the shared aspects of the various metaphors. All the metaphors collected from the students were negative except for three. Accordingly, these insignificant metaphors were excluded as they were considered exceptions to the rules established by the most frequent metaphors. These metaphors are as follows: Learning English is like opening a new door; Learning English is like a walk in the park; and Learning English is like a piece of cake.

3.3 Limitations

As noted above, this research utilized conceptual metaphor analysis to investigate students' metaphorical perceptions of their learning experience and to provide significant insights into the role of metaphor in language acquisition. However, as with any research method, it has certain limitations. The study only included a limited number of participants, focusing solely on female students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the metaphor approach was limited to the prompt "Learning English is like . . .," which restricted the type of metaphors students provided, and as a result, other aspects of students' learning experiences may have remained unexplored due to the complexity of their learning experience. Additionally, this study only collected data from a single point in time, without offering the opportunity to track the development of students' learning experience through longitudinal data. The study also used qualitative analysis to identify patterns and themes in

students' metaphors, but the absence of quantitative data limits the ability to make strong claims about the prevalence or impact of specific metaphors.

4. Conceptual Metaphor Analysis

As noted earlier, the qualitative analysis of the collected metaphors aimed to identify the source domains of the conceptual metaphors and categorize them accordingly. The analysis resulted in several categories. The most commonly used metaphors are discussed below.

4.1. Learning English is a Game

It has been noted that the participants utilized the concept of games to reveal their perceptions of learning English. The following are illustrative:

1. Learning English is like playing a game.
2. Learning English is like the seesaw.
3. Learning English is like a rollercoaster.
4. Learning English is like solving a puzzle.
5. Learning English is like playing a video game with endless levels.

It is noteworthy to point out that viewing English language learning as a game may entail both having fun and the possibility of winning or losing, as well as uncertainty, as depicted in Example (1). Several students specified the type of game they were playing. That is, in Examples (2) and (3), learning English is likened to a seesaw and a rollercoaster, respectively. The seesaw metaphor suggests a game that requires balance and weight, and highlights the aspect of alternating movements, such as up-and-down or forward-and-backward. This same concept of alternating movement is illustrated by Example (3), in which learning English is compared to a rollercoaster. Unlike the previous examples that emphasize the physical aspect, Example (4) focuses on the cognitive aspect of learning English as solving a puzzle that requires thinking. Lastly, Example (5) demonstrates that learning English is akin to playing an endless video game, emphasizing how tiring it can be, even if it is interesting.

4.2. Learning English is Food

Students also choose some food metaphors to express their perception concerning their experience of learning English. Below are some examples:

6. Learning English is like learning how to peel a boiled potato without actually boiling it.
7. Learning English is like drinking water with a fork.
8. Learning English is like salted sweets.
9. Learning English is like a banana, it starts out green but -eventually- it will get mushy.

The use of food metaphors in learning is an interesting concept, as it allows for the processes of chewing and digestion to be likened to the process of acquiring knowledge. However, the food metaphors utilized in Examples

(6) and (7) convey a sense of hardship and difficulty, rather than enjoyment. In Example (6), the comparison is made to peeling a boiled potato with one's fingers, however, the potato has not been boiled, making the task nearly impossible. Similarly, Example (7) depicts the challenge of learning English by equating it to drinking water with a fork. Conversely, Example (8) contrasts the enjoyment of eating sweets with the unpleasant experience of consuming salty sweets, emphasizing the incompatibility of the two flavors. This comparison highlights the student's belief that learning should be a sweet experience, but their perception of their own learning journey as being salty, or ruined. Finally, Example (9) portrays the learning process as starting with a raw banana that becomes mushy as it progresses.

4.3. Learning English is a Natural Phenomenon

Another frequent image is related to natural phenomena. Students utilize such images to highlight selected aspects of their learning experience, the following are some examples:

10. Learning English is like being in a storm.
11. Learning English is like a tornado.
12. Learning English is like a windy road.

Our research utilizes metaphors derived from natural phenomena to depict the learning experiences of students. Examples of such phenomena include storms, tornadoes, and windy roads. These images serve to represent various aspects of the learning journey, such as pain, hardships, loss, uncertainty, and dangers. Furthermore, they portray the students as vulnerable and powerless, as the forces of nature are beyond their control. Additionally, such natural disasters can highlight the various emotional whirlwinds that students may encounter as a result of the challenges, uncertainty, and loss they face. Such disasters also illustrate chaos, trauma, difficulty, and ultimately negativity.

4.4. Learning English is a Journey

Journey metaphors are common in education and any experience that involves a lengthy process that has stages, phases, and may result in changes. The following are some representative examples:

13. Learning English is like exploring the universe.
14. Learning English is like a journey that will never end.
15. Learning English is like a never-ending journey.

Example (13) characterizes the learning process as an expedition through the universe. It is imperative to acknowledge that the expedition metaphor alludes to development, advancement, and the attainment of objectives. Although the expedition can be arduous, it is also rewarding. However, it is essential to recognize that the expedition is interminable, and the aspects of pain and burden are overemphasized in Examples (14) and (15). This lack of an endpoint or destination deters students from formulating plans, as they cannot perceive a conclusion, leaving them in a state of aimless wandering, lost at sea. Consequently, this perception of the learning journey dissuades students from embarking on it.

4.5. Learning English is Giving Birth

A recurring theme in the students' learning experience is pain. The pain of the learning experience is emphasized in the following examples:

16. Learning English is like being in labor
17. Learning English is like giving birth
18. Learning English is like cesarean birth.

The process of labor and delivery signifies the final stage of pregnancy, a protracted and arduous yet jubilant experience. The act of giving birth represents the creation and transformation of knowledge gained through pregnancy, analogous to the process of learning. In certain circumstances, delivery may necessitate surgical intervention when natural childbirth is impracticable due to medical reasons. This metaphor encompasses hazards, difficulties, pain, uncertainty, fear, and hardship. Similarly, students may encounter obstacles during their learning journey that they cannot surmount without aid and encouragement. Furthermore, students may opt to express their learning experiences rather than their educational attainments and accomplishments.

4.6. Learning English is War

A war image is one that has the struggle to achieve and win. War metaphors are one of the most prominent metaphors in language. The students used some remarkable metaphors concerning their struggle to achieve their goals. The following are illustrative:

19. Learning English is like fighting a battle.
20. Learning English is like fighting a war.
21. Learning English is like fighting, you attack but get defeated every time.

It is clear that the students have a deep connection to their educational journey, as evidenced by the metaphors they use to describe their experiences. These metaphors convey a sense of trepidation, unpredictability, and the possibility of defeat. Furthermore, the metaphors suggest that the students' achievements were hard-earned and required significant effort and resilience. They involve conflict, combat, offense, and defense, and ultimately, the students emerge victorious. In this context, the students can be seen as soldiers who have fought a battle to achieve academic success. Example (21) demonstrates that the student engages in combat, but regrettably, fails every time. The repetitive nature of this defeat can be demoralizing and may cause students to abandon their pursuit of success. Individuals who perceive themselves as underdogs prior to entering a competition may lack the motivation to strive for victory or triumph. More crucially, the use of war metaphors encourages students to perceive their academic struggles as a tragedy, even if they emerge victorious. As a result, it is essential to reconsider and change this metaphor to enable students to perceive their learning experiences in a different light.

4.7. Learning English is a Hardship

Hardship has been a recurring theme throughout the various metaphors the students under examination used. To

represent their perception of their experience, students used different images. Below are illustrative examples:

22. Learning English is like digging a hole with no bottom.
23. Learning English is like building a house with matches.
24. Learning English is like climbing a high mountain.
25. Learning English is like reading a hard book.
26. Learning English is like farming during a storm.
27. Learning English is like racing with a fast plane.
28. Learning English is like going out for ice cream and getting a ticket instead.

The above examples are drawn from diverse source domains, but they all share a common theme, namely, the challenges and difficulties associated with learning English. In particular, the arduous task of mastering the language is depicted through various metaphors, including scaling a steep mountain and engaging in a mentally taxing activity, such as reading a complex book. Some of these images are particularly daunting, such as attempting to farm during a storm or participating in a high-speed race. These metaphors effectively convey the message that the journey of studying a foreign language is never-ending and often fraught with obstacles. Furthermore, the metaphors also highlight the concept of unexpected outcomes, such as receiving a fine instead of a reward, emphasizing the unpredictable nature of the learning process.

4.8. Learning English is Related to Water

The last source domain is water, which is a powerful force in nature. Paradoxically, water can offer life or death. As the previous examples reconstruct negative perceptions, the water metaphors below reemphasize similar experiences. Below are illustrative examples:

29. Learning English is like a deep ocean.
30. Learning English is like diving in an ocean and getting stuck and don't know the way out.
31. Learning English is like drowning.
32. Learning English is like swimming a huge pool.

The deep ocean in Example (29) symbolizes fear, darkness, and danger, suggesting that the process of learning English or the experience itself may be more intricate than initially perceived, concealing a deeper truth. This study also uncovered the vulnerable and challenging situations students encounter when learning English. The ocean image reappears in Example (30), wherein the experience of learning is likened to diving into knowledge, yet students may become stuck and unsure of how to extract themselves from the ocean. Being trapped in the ocean while diving is a daunting experience that can result in death. In Example (31), the same image is reconstructed differently, emphasizing students' struggle to keep their heads above water. This may indicate that students were not in the appropriate place at the appropriate time. Furthermore, it amplifies the fear and pain of being unable to breathe, potentially leading to death. Consequently, students struggle to remain afloat against tides, high waves, and the threat of death in Example (32), where the student compares learning English to swimming, a sport that builds endurance and muscle strength. However, swimming in a large pool can be

exhausting and challenging.

5. Discussion

The analysis below has identified several key aspects of the students' learning experiences that are worthy of note. The use of similes in reconstructing the participants' learning experiences has proven to be valuable in this regard. In light of previous research, the current participants' learning experiences can be described as typical of English language learners in certain respects. Specifically, their experiences can be characterized as involving hardship, torture, an unending process, a journey, a challenging process that requires hard work, time, and patience, a constantly changing entity, an endless infinite entity, and expressions of fear and hatred ([2], [22]-[24]). The analysis of the metaphors used by the students indicates that their learning experience is long, challenging, difficult, painful, uncertain, fearful, and negative. In general, the metaphors utilized by the students highlight the *lengthy* nature of the learning process. Learning in general, and learning a language, is a long and endless process. This is demonstrated in metaphors such as journeys, and in some metaphors, such as a game with endless levels and digging an endless hole. However, these metaphors also reveal that the students might not recognize that they are improving and developing as language learners. It is therefore important for educators and learners to focus on progress through this process in order to avoid frustration and burnout and to develop a clear vision of their improvement and achievements. Learners should also be encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate their small progress in order to make the learning process more successful and enjoyable.

Another significant aspect that these metaphors highlight is the *uncertainty* that often accompanies the learning process, or the possibility of encountering unexpected results. For example, a student expressed that learning English is akin to "going out for ice cream and getting a ticket instead." Additionally, metaphors of tornadoes and storms can convey the unpredictability of the learning experience, as no one can predict the severity of natural phenomena and their potential damage. Unfortunately, these phenomena often cause destruction, resulting in pain and loss. It appears that students may be confusing their educational experiences in school with their perceptions of the learning process. Therefore, it is important to encourage students to view their learning experiences through the lens of the knowledge they gain, rather than solely focusing on grades and marks.

The use of these metaphors inevitably reveals the long and arduous nature of the learning process, encompassing *hardship*, *difficulty*, and *pain*. As previously noted, educators play a vital role in supporting students through this process and encouraging them to view it in a more positive light. By acknowledging their development, students' perceptions may change, leading to a more positive outlook on their learning journey. The struggles that students experience is clearly depicted in the metaphors of actions that are intended to be easy but are in fact impossible, such as peeling a potato that has not been boiled, drinking water with a fork, digging bottomless holes, embarking on a never-ending journey, building a house out of matches, drowning, and playing an endless-level game. The metaphor of labor and birth is also used to describe pain. However, the common thread underlying all of the metaphors used by the students is the experience of pain. Any experience characterized by endlessness, hardship, repetitiveness, unexpectedness, uncertainty, and lengthiness is likely to cause pain.

Last but not least, the examination of metaphors uncovers an important aspect of students' learning experience,

namely *fear*. This aspect is represented through various metaphors, such as war, struggle, pain, and uncertainty. Students fear losing marks and failing, which causes them to view education and learning as a single experience, or at least to allow their experiences at school to impact their learning. It is widely acknowledged that fear can negatively impact both the learning and teaching processes, as fearful students may miss numerous opportunities for growth and development. Their sense of danger is heightened, making the use of the war metaphor appropriate.

The use of metaphors by students to describe their learning experiences serves as a reflection of their awareness of these experiences. Through their own metaphors, the students' learning experiences can be evaluated as negative, which leads to a sense of loss over achievement, pain over gain, and struggle, fear, and instability over peace and stability. These negative experiences can cause anxiety and lead to low self-esteem or a lack of confidence. Furthermore, the students' negative images towards their learning experiences indicate that problems and challenges have not been addressed. The lack of variety in the students' images suggests that their learning experiences are greatly similar in the aspects discussed. Therefore, it is recommended to investigate and address the students' issues and problems in order to enhance their perceptions of their educational and learning experiences. Improving students' learning experiences allows them to perceive it positively, thereby improving their English language proficiency [36].

It is imperative to emphasize that certain metaphors uncovered by the study indicated that the students conflated their learning experiences with their educational experiences. A distinct and clear demarcation between these two types of experiences is essential for students to recognize that their learning experience commences prior to school and persists beyond school. Moreover, it is equally vital to scrutinize the students' educational experiences to address and enhance their educational problems. The findings of the study indicate that the students' educational experiences are arduous, trying, and unsatisfactory.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed the most critical aspects of students' learning experiences and perceptions, which unfortunately characterize pain and difficulty. Students' perceptions are often described through negative metaphors that emphasize the arduous and painful nature of the learning process, as well as the ups and downs of emotions they may experience. Such emphasis on these aspects of the learning experience may lead to a number of psychological and educational issues and barriers that may impact future learning. Therefore, the importance of students' perceptions of their own learning experiences is emphasized, as they are an integral part of the learning process. This underscores the significance of metaphors, which can offer insights into various aspects of students' perceptions and attitudes. By allowing students to use metaphors to describe their experiences, particularly learning experiences, educators can address learners' problems and initiate a two-way dialogue with students to reflect on their learning experience and potentially modify it through the use of more positive metaphors. Further studies are needed to utilize conceptual metaphors to uncover students' understanding, perception, emotions, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs. Such studies will provide a deeper understanding of the learning process and experience, as well as the psychology of learners. It is also essential to consider possible variables that may affect students' perceptions, such as GPAs, academic year, proficiency levels, and prior experience. Additionally, future studies should examine the correlation between students' perceptions of their learning experiences and pivotal

factors, such as motivation, learning styles, and student attributes.

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