




## Secondary Students' Metaphors for Learning English<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to find out the perceptions of secondary students about learning the English language through metaphor analysis. The research was carried out with 432 students studying in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades of 6 primary schools in Yozgat city centre. Qualitative method and survey model were used in the study; typical case sampling was used to form the study group. The data of the study were obtained with the data collection tool prepared by the researcher and finalized after expert opinion. In the data collection tool, students were asked to answer a semi-structured question reflecting their thoughts about learning English. The data obtained from the research were analyzed by content analysis method and descriptive analysis techniques were used to analyze the data. As a result of data analysis, metaphors were examined under five themes: challenging, progressive, beneficial, enjoyable, and intangible. The metaphors show that students generally have positive perceptions about learning English. These metaphors are substantial as they provide an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions and shed light on teachers and curriculum designers

**Keywords:** Metaphor, learning English, secondary students.

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## Introduction

In today's world, where science and technology are developing at a rapid pace and information is changing and transforming every day, it has become an important necessity to be individuals who will keep up with this speed and change and to raise the new generation to keep up with this information age. It is very important for individuals to successfully adapt to these changes occurring around them in order to sustain their lives. Achieving this adaptation effectively is possible through learning (Senemoğlu, 2009: 86). Individuals and the society they form must have various characteristics to ensure this adaptation. These characteristics can be stated as being able to conduct research (Sangasubanapproblem-solving solving (Araiza-Alba et al., 2021), using creative knowledge (Boydell, & Croguennec, 2022), creative thinking (Suherman & Vidákovich, 2022), knowing and applying different ways of thinking such as critical thinking (Polat, 2020) producing science and technology (Kimmons, & Veletsianos,

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<sup>1</sup>This study is based on the author's master's thesis titled "The meanings attributed to learning English by primary school students: A metaphorical analysis"



2018) and communicating with other people around the world (Fielder, 2022). It is undoubtedly education that will help individuals in their learning, realize their "effective adaptation", and gain the mentioned qualities. Moreover, learning English which is a lingua franca, is a significant factor in keeping up with the changing world and communicating (Chan, 2018).

Since the necessity of learning English is an indisputable fact, English language teaching is given great importance in Turkey. Students start learning English from the second grade of primary school, and it is compulsory until the end of the 1st grade of higher education. However, students fail to learn English at the desired level (Çelebi, 2006; Ozer and Akay, 2022) and develop a negative attitude towards learning English (Bağçeci, 2004; Genç et. al., 2021). In order to ensure the success of such labour-intensive teaching, first of all, knowing what students think about learning English will shed light on the researchers and teachers for the changes to be made.

One effective way of identifying the thoughts of students about learning English is metaphor analysis. Metaphor, which has definitions such as figuration, metonymy, analogy, simile and allegory, is a tool of perception (Cerit, 2008). Although Fisher and Grady (1998) define metaphor as "the ornament of language", we use metaphors, which we frequently use in daily speech without realizing it, to express information about an object or concept with words belonging to another object or concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: 5).

Although metaphors have a linguistic structure (Parzysz et. al., 2005), "metaphors are not only limited to words, they are also common in our thoughts and actions in our daily lives" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Metaphors, which Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) define as "the building blocks of thought", are often used to explain complex and difficult concepts or situations by using a simpler and more familiar concept or situation (Oxford et al., 1998). In other words, "by using metaphor, we explain a new concept with a known concept, an abstract concept with a concrete concept, and a complex concept with a simple concept" (McLaughlin & Bryan, 2003). Therefore, the metaphor should not only be seen as a linguistic tool used to enrich and beautify expression because they "do not only create a metaphorical expression, but also a mechanism of thought" (Martinez et. al., 2001).

Although metaphor has been used as a teaching technique by some researchers in educational sciences, it is mostly used to determine the thoughts of individuals involved in the educational process about the subject under investigation. Northcote and Fetherston (2006), who see metaphors as indicators of individuals' thoughts about education, state that individuals often explain their opinions, perceptions and personal views by using metaphors and that metaphors are important tools for understanding teachers' and students' thoughts about teaching and learning. Inbar (1996) stated that the most effective way to reveal the thoughts, interests and perceptions of individuals in their minds is to investigate their metaphorical perceptions and that metaphors can be used as analytical and explanatory tools for this purpose. In other words, metaphor analysis enables us to learn what individuals think and feel about a phenomenon (Martin & Lueckenhausen, 2005). Therefore, the most useful and effective way to find out what students, teachers, administrators and parents think about

any topic related to education is to find the metaphors that these individuals use about the topic under investigation.

When the international literature (De Courcy, 1997; Jeyaraj & Harland, 2016; Wambach, 2014; Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2010) is examined, the language learning process is emphasized rather than the language teaching process. Therefore, the opinions of students, who are the subjects of learning, about the education and learning process are of great importance. It is impossible for a process in which they do not participate to be successful. For this reason, this study, which tries to identify students' thoughts through the metaphors they use, will provide teachers, educational administrators and curriculum developers with important information on how the English language teaching-learning process should be organized and managed. It is also hoped that it will fill an important gap in the field.

Lawley and Tompkins (2000) state that as students become aware of the metaphors they use for learning, they will realize how they limit or release themselves. In this respect, this study will lead students to know themselves better and increase their awareness about the process of learning English.

In addition, a literature review (Wang, 2010; Zhang, 2010; Akçakaya, 2009; Soylu, 2008) shows that there are many studies on English lessons and learning, but the metaphor analysis method is not used much in these studies. For this reason, this study will be pioneering and is expected to shed light on future studies.

### ***The aim of the study and research question***

The aim of this study is to determine the metaphors that secondary school students use about learning English and to find out what students think about this subject. In this regard, this study tries to answer the following research question.

**Q 1.** What are the metaphors that secondary school students use about learning English?

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Model***

In this study, which aims to find out the metaphors that secondary school students use about learning English, qualitative research method was used (Gordon & Langmaid, 2022). Accordingly, a data collection tool was developed and administered to 6th, 7th and 8th-grade students attending secondary school. The research was conducted over a period of approximately 14 months. The study group consisted of 432 students in the 6th, 7th and 8th grades of six schools.

### ***Data Collection Tools***

In the data collection process, firstly, the relevant literature was reviewed, and the ways in which the studies using the metaphor analysis method collected data were examined. As a result of the review, it was seen that these studies collected data by (1) asking semi-structured questions (for example, by asking to complete the sentence "the teacher is like ....., because...") (Mao et al., 2022; Inbar, 1996; Saban, 2010), (2) giving a list of metaphors related to the topic

under investigation and asking the participants to choose their preferred metaphors (Alger, 2009; Cerit, 2008), (3) observation and interview (Pramling, 2010; Girmen, 2007). Based on these studies, a data collection tool was prepared and submitted for expert opinion.

This study adopted the first approach in order to collect data and wanted students to produce metaphors reflecting their views on learning English by completing the sentence "Learning English is like ....., because, ....."". Participation in the data collection process was voluntary, and students who did not want to participate were excluded from the study. In each class, the implementation lasted one class hour and the students filled in the data collection tool given to them in their own handwriting. In addition, although learning English is an abstract subject, students were not given any guidance and were asked to reflect on their own thoughts without looking at each other.

### **Data analysis**

Descriptive analysis techniques were used in the analysis process. In this type of analysis, the aim is to present the findings to the reader in an organized and interpreted form. In addition, in descriptive analysis, direct quotations are often used to reflect the views of individuals in a striking way. (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005: 224).

The analysis process of the metaphors produced by the participants consisted of the following five stages (Aydoğdu, 2008; Saban, 2008): (1) naming, (2) elimination, (3) category development, (4) validity and reliability, (5) calculation and interpretation of the frequencies of the produced metaphors.

### **Validity and reliability**

Reporting the collected data in detail and explaining how the researcher reached the results are among the important criteria of validity in a qualitative research. For instance, in research using descriptive analysis, it is important for validity to include the views of the participants directly and to explain the results based on them (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005: 257). For this reason, in order to ensure the validity of this research, the research process was explained in detail, and direct quotations were made from the participants' statements in the analysis and interpretation of the data. To ensure reliability, two expert opinions were consulted to verify whether the metaphors collected under five main themes represented these categories.

### **Findings**

In this section, the metaphors produced by secondary school students about learning English were analyzed under different conceptual categories and the metaphors included in each category were shown in tables. In addition, direct quotations were made from the students' sentences. Firstly, the metaphors that students described in English as challenging were analyzed. Metaphors and frequency values are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Metaphors Regarding the Challenge of Learning English

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Metaphor Categories</b>	<b>Metaphors Produced by Students</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
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			<b>and Frequencies</b>	
			<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Challenging</b>	Difficult process	Driving a car, Climbing to the peak, Moving from 1st to 3rd grade, Walking on nails, Driving a car in the desert, Driving a camel over a ditch, Giving birth, Becoming a doctor, Climbing Everest, Tidying up the house, Weightlifting, Working in construction, Skiing, Crushing a rock, Teaching a dog to talk, Jumping off a bridge, Learning the Quran, Looking for a needle in a haystack, Driving an airplane, Trying to fly, Climbing a hill, Jumping from a height	26	6,02
	Long process	Growing a tree, Getting to know a person, Reading an endless book, Growing up, Saving money in a piggy bank, Cracking a code	17	3,93
	Complex process	Maze, Tangle, Computer, Flower root, Drawing a map, Untangling a ball of string, Something complicated, Learning math	11	2,54
	Negative process	Working as a laborer, Baby lost its mother, Dead end, Being tormented, Banging your head against the wall, Getting smashed, Wearing a coat in the heat, Watching TV	8	1,85
	Cautious process	Drawing, Driving on icy roads, Climbing a mountain, Walking in the rain	6	1,38
	Boring process	Staying home alone, Prison, A simple life, Bedtime, Staying prison alone	5	1,15
<b>Total</b>			<b>73</b>	<b>16,87</b>

When the table is analyzed, it is seen that students perceive learning English as a difficult process (n=26), a long process (n=17), a complex process (n=11), a negative process (n=8), a cautious process (n=6) and a boring process (n=5). The students produced metaphors related to "a difficult process" (n=26) most and "a process that requires attention" (n=5) least. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

"Learning English is like driving a car, because both are difficult" (S-353)

"Learning English is like growing fruit from a tree, because it takes a long time to learn English" (S-357)

"Learning English is like a maze, because the way out is very difficult" (S-70)

"Learning English is like doing manual labor, because it is an ordeal" (S-323)

"Learning English is like drawing, because it needs attention" (S-12)

"Learning English is like staying home alone, because it is very boring (S-6)

The students also perceive English as a progressive process. Metaphors and frequency values are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Metaphors Regarding Learning English as a Progressive Process

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Metaphor Categories</b>	<b>Metaphors Produced by Students</b>	<b>Number of Students and Frequencies</b>	
			<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
	Acquiring cognitive skills	Learning Turkish, Learning to speak, Baby trying to speak, Learning mother tongue, Using the brain	28	6,48
		Babies' learning to talk, Climbing stairs, Wearing tight gloves, Diesel car running, Developing, Running, Peeling	13	3

<b>Progressive</b>	A gradual process	cabbage, Solving a math problem, Digesting, Walking, Chain accident.		
	Maintenance process	Growing a flower, Watering a flower, Growing a seed, Watering a tree, Growing a plant, Feeding a parakeet	10	2,31
	Building process	Human birth, Constructing a building, Writing on blank paper, Building a wall, Knitting, Building a new world	8	1,85
	Treatment	Taking medicine, Taking vitamins, Drinking bitter syrup, Healing someone who is sick	7	1,62
	A process requiring continuity	Love, Walking in the swamp, Shadow, Wearing glasses, Playing a musical instrument	5	1,15
<b>Total</b>			71	16,41

Table shows that students perceive learning English as acquiring cognitive skills (n=28), a gradual process (n=13), a maintenance process (n=10), a building process (n=8), treatment (n=7) and a process that requires continuity (n=5). The students produced metaphors related to "acquiring cognitive skills" (n=28) most and "a process that requires continuity" (n=5) least. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

"... because the baby will eventually stand up after crawling and crawling. And as we learn and learn, we will finally learn as fully as the baby stands up" (S-280)

"... because tight gloves get looser the more you wear them, so English is learned by memorizing words" (S-162)

"... because if you water flowers, they grow and become beautiful. Similarly, the more you study English, the more you learn" (S-46)

"Learning English is like building a wall because we learn English by memorizing words" (S-88)

"Learning English is like taking medicine because the more we take it, the better we get and the way people see us changes" (S-230)

"Learning English is like walking in quicksand because if you stop walking, you start sinking" (S-325)

The students also perceive English as a beneficial process. Metaphors and frequency values are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Metaphors Regarding Learning English as a Beneficial Process

Main theme	Metaphor Categories	Metaphors Produced by Students	Number of Students and Frequencies	
			f	%
Useful process		Growing a flower, Watering a flower, Growing a seed, Watering a tree, Growing a plant, Feeding a parakeet	26	6,02
Tool		Key, Getting a passport, Answer key, Carrying a flash drive, Future insurance, Wearing glasses, Lightsaber, Crossing a bridge, Ear, Getting on a plane, Buying a ticket to a new world	16	3,7

<b>Beneficial</b>	Gainin physical skill process	Baby walking, Learning to walk, Swimming, Tightrope walking	11	2,54
	Return	Being reborn, Returning to first grade, Formatting the computer, Starting life again, Learning to read and write, Starting to speak again	9	2,08
	Seeing in different way	a Crossing the mountain and seeing the ocean, Wearing glasses, Wearing lenses, Opening a new window, Gaining a new perspective	5	1,15
	Artistic activity	Playing the flute, playing the violin, playing the kemencha	3	0,69
<b>Total</b>			70	16,18

The table shows that students perceive learning English as a useful process (n=26), tool (n=16), gaining physical skill process (n=11), return (n=9), seeing in a different way (n=5) and artistic activity (n=3). The students produced metaphors related to "useful process" (n=26) most and "artistic activity" (n=3) least. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

“Learning English is like learning Turkish because it is also a language” (S-149)

“Learning English is like reading a book because it has all the information” (S-71)

“Learning English is like a key because many problems can be solved by knowing the language” (S-185)

“Learning English is like formatting the computer because you start all over again” (Ö-119)

“Learning English is like wearing glasses because if we wear glasses, we see our surroundings better. If we speak English, we understand other people better” (S-365)

“Learning English is like playing the flute because it is difficult” (S-67)

The analyses revealed that the students also perceived English as enjoyable. Metaphors and frequency values are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Metaphors Regarding Learning English as an Enjoyable Process

Main theme	Metaphor Categories	Metaphors Produced by Students	Number of Students and Frequencies	
			f	%
	Pleasurable process	Playing games, Having fun, Playing computer, Riding a bike, Going to the sea, Playing football, Singing, Playing basketball, Watching cartoons, Attending a festival, Dancing, Making cakes, Walking in the countryside, Entering the adventure room, Eating bananas, Reading stories, Eating cake, Eating candy, Going on vacation, Watching TV	20	4,62



<b>Enjoyable</b>	Discovery	Exploring a new world, Solving puzzles, Finding treasure, Fishing, Door to the world, Entering a secret room, Opening an interesting cabinet, Digging, Starting a new book, Seeing a new city, Getting to know something new	17	3,93
	Socialization process	Talking to animals, Communicating, Communicating with animals, Making friends, Making connections, Buying a communication tool, Connecting to the internet, Increasing culture, Learning culture, Meeting someone new	13	3
	Facilitative process	Flying, Simple machines, Using computers, Learning math, Making roads	6	1,38
<b>Total</b>			56	12,93

Table shows that students perceive learning English as a pleasurable process (n=20), discovery (n=17), socialization process (n=13) and facilitative process (n=6). The students produced metaphors related to "pleasurable process" (n=20) most and "facilitative process" (n=6) least. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

“Learning English is like playing games, because you have fun while playing, you have fun while learning English” (S-4)

“Learning English is like fishing, because we capture something new by learning English” (S-305)

“Learning English is like talking to animals, because we don't know the language of animals, also we don't know the language of people living in foreign countries. But when we learn English, we can talk to those people easily” (S-122)

“Learning English is like learning maths, because they both make our lives easier” (S-306)

The analyses revealed that the students also perceived English intangible. Metaphors and frequency values are presented in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Metaphors Regarding English as Intangible

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>Metaphor Categories</b>	<b>Metaphors Produced by Students</b>	<b>Number of Students and Frequencies</b>	
			<b>f</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Intangible</b>	Source	Sun, Knowledge box, Entering the treasury, Reading the Quran, Fruit tree	10	2,31
	Union	Doing puzzle, Cooking, Making salad	6	1,38
	Travel	Going to a different world, Going to an unknown place, Traveling around the world, Going to a new world	6	1,38
	Metamorphosis process	Becoming another human being, Creating a different human being, Cloning, Becoming superior	4	0,92
	Undefined	Something different, something strange	2	0,46



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<b>Total</b>	28	6,45
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The table shows that students perceive learning English as a source (n=10), union (n=6), travel (n=6), metamorphosis process (n=4) and undefined (n=2). The students produced metaphors related to "source" (n=10) most and "undefined" (n=2) least. Some of the students' statements are as follows:

“Learning English is like the sun because the sun warms and nourishes us. English feeds us with knowledge” (S-22)

“Learning English is like doing a puzzle because the pieces fall into place over time” (S-169)

“Learning English is like travelling around the world because we know and understand more people when we learn English” (S-24)

“Learning English is like cloning because because one language is one person and two languages are two people” (S-168)

“Learning English is like a weird thing because it seems different to me” (S-21)

## **Discussion**

This study aims to determine the views of the students about learning English through metaphors. Northcote and Fetherston (2006) state that individuals often explain their opinions, perceptions and personal views by using metaphors and that metaphors are important tools for understanding students' thoughts about teaching and learning. Therefore, the metaphors found in this study may be useful in designing the learning process for students.

The metaphors of the students were analysed under five themes: challenging, progressive, beneficial, enjoyable and intangible. The students perceive learning English as a challenging process most. Coskun (2015), Shaw and Andrei (2020) and Suzuki and Childs (2015) found similar results in their studies. Students' age may be a significant factor in seeing learning English as a challenge, because learning a foreign language takes time and secondary students may not be patient enough. Moreover, this finding is meaningful for teachers and curriculum designers. Teachers may change their students' perceptions by providing them with appropriate practices and curriculum designers can encourage communicative learning activities instead of linguistic ones (Al-Roomy, 2015) as learning language is based more on speaking for children and they see it as a tool for communication rather than a systematic structure (Cameron, 2003). In fact, the students who participated in this study also produced metaphors showing that they see English language learning as a tool.

The rates of the metaphors under beneficial and progressive themes are very close to each other. In a study with preservice teachers, Shaw and Andrei (2020) indicated similar results. These metaphors may have been generated because of the importance of English as a global language and it is likely to offer many opportunities (Coskun, 2015) such as finding a job (Focho, 2011) for learners in developing countries. Lawley and Tompkins (2000) states the

progressive nature of learning in their study. Therefore, it is possible to say that secondary students have realistic thoughts about learning English.

The students also think learning English is an enjoyable process. This finding contradicts the challenging theme. Al-Roomy (2015) found in his study that university students had both positive and negative beliefs about learning language. Researchers may shed light on teachers and curriculum designers by revealing the reasons for perceiving learning English as enjoyable so that they can change the views of students who have negative attitudes about learning English.

Philips (2001:5) expresses that children view language as a tool they can use rather than an abstract system or a mental game, therefore, the theme “intangible” which has the lowest frequency coincides with his statement. These students may see learning English as an abstract process because of not using the language in or out of the class. Teachers may encourage the students to use the language or implement more communicative and active practices in the class.

The results of the study show that students have various perceptions about learning English which are both positive and negative. They have also realistic thoughts about the nature of the language learning process, such as progressive and challenging. Therefore, English language teachers should take students opinions into account, and they should be aware of the fact that students in the classroom have very different perceptions of learning English and that these perceptions have a great impact on their learning. Such research data can be shared with English teachers to increase their awareness. Future studies might also use the findings of this study to carry out quantitative or large-scale research, and the effects of different variables on students’ perceptions may be investigated. Moreover, similar studies can be conducted with various study groups, such as primary, high school and undergraduate students, with teachers, families and learners of different ages.

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