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Metaphors in Language Pedagogy: A Mixed-Methods Study of Iranian EFL Teachers' Conceptualizations and Attitudes toward Conceptual Metaphor Use

Javad Khodadoust¹, Hossein Siahpoosh^{2*}, Mehran Davaribina³

¹ PhD candidate, Department of English Language, Ard.C., Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

² Assistant professor, Department of English Language, Ard.C., Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

³ Assistant professor, Department of English Language, Ard.C., Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran

*Corresponding Author's Email: h.siahpoosh@iau.ac.ir

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Metaphor awareness
Teacher cognition

ABSTRACT

According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the current research examines Iranian EFL teachers' metaphorical conceptualization of foreign language instruction as well as their view of the pedagogical value of metaphors. It was aimed at uncovering teachers' metaphorical teaching models and examining the degree to which these conceptualizations vary across gender, age, and educational context. A mixed-methods approach was employed. At the qualitative phase, 30 experienced teachers of EFL with a minimum of five years' experience were subjected to verbal metaphor elicitation and focus group interviews. MAXQDA coded data thematically. Three hundred eighty-four teachers completed the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ) in the quantitative phase. Descriptive statistics, Spearman's rho correlations, and independent samples t-tests were employed for data analysis. Qualitative findings indicated dominant metaphorical themes such as teacher as guide, gardener, engineer, and emotional performer that reflected teacher cognition with multilevel complexity. Quantitative analysis indicated that gender, age, and school type strongly influenced metaphor-based perceptions—female, older, and private school teachers responded with more emotionally and pedagogically relevant metaphors. The findings support metaphors' cognitive and affective contribution to pedagogical philosophy development and suggest metaphor awareness training in teacher education to improve reflective practice and lesson planning.

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1. Introduction

Language acquisition is not just a matter of acquiring grammatical rules and lexicon lists, but rather a deeply embodied, cognitively grounded, and culturally embedded human experience. Amongst the

most significant cognitive operations involved in how individuals come to make sense of abstract or complex experience, such as learning or teaching an unfamiliar language, is metaphor. Since Lakoff and Johnson (2020) presented the most celebrated assertion, metaphors are not mere peripherals of language but lie at the center of our thought, action, and speech. Conceptual metaphors enable us to think of one domain of experience (the target) in terms of another domain, which is more familiar and hence graspable (the source), actually channeling both cognitive processing and affective investment (Evans & Green, 2018; Kövecses, 2020).

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), increasing attention has been given to the application of conceptual metaphors in revealing learners' and teachers' beliefs, strategies, and affective stances toward language learning (Boers, 2018; Hoang, 2014; Oxford et al., 2014). If the learners say "climbing a mountain" or "breaking a code" in their attempts to describe English learning, they are acting unconsciously to express effort, travail, and problem-solving. Just as instructors explain their work as "planting seeds" or "walking a path," the metaphors instantiate embedded pedagogical assumptions, professional selves, and educative ideologies (Shaw & Andrei, 2020; Xu et al., 2022; Yüksel, 2019).

These metaphorical constructs, as recent studies have proved, not only symbolize states of mind—they construct classroom practice, teacher-student relationships, and even learning accomplishment (Adami, 2023; Farjami, 2012; Sullivan, 2018). Importantly, investigations have linked the utilization of metaphors with enhanced knowledge of grammar, increased writing cohesion, and enhanced learner motivation and self-assessed efficacy (Belkhir, 2021; Chen, 2019; Esfandiari et al., 2022; Nahavandi & Golfam, 2022). As multimodal learning environments have emerged, conceptual metaphors are increasingly embodied by not just language but also images, gestures, spatial arrangements, digital media, and bodily motion—all collectively called multimodal conceptual metaphors (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Forceville, 2017). For instance, educators may use a tree diagram to model syntactic structure or invoke gestures to mediate abstract meaning, such as "rising intonation" or "cohesive links." Such multimodal metaphors enable more embodied, richer ways of teaching and learning by engaging multiple sensory and cognitive channels (Anderson, 2018; Fugate et al., 2019; Golfam & Nahavandi, 2021).

Despite the growing recognition of metaphor as an intellectual and pedagogical device, much of what has been studied remains potentially one-sided in its emphasis on verbal metaphors only, and in ignoring richer multimodal varieties more actually encountered in naturalistic classrooms. More significantly, even while many studies have examined either students' or teachers' metaphors in isolation from one another, few have cited both parties together or examined the dynamic interaction between metaphorical thinking and pedagogical effectiveness in the EFL context. Even fewer have investigated how conceptual metaphors, especially when transmitted through multimodal ones, influence students' textual and grammatical literacy.

To fill these gaps, the present study utilizes a mixed-methods approach in probing how Iranian EFL teachers metaphorically frame foreign language teaching and in which ways and by which means they discover the pedagogical utility of conceptual metaphors for language instruction. By combining qualitative metaphor elicitation techniques with quantitative surveying of teacher attitudes, the study aims to provide a detailed insight into both the cognitive underpinnings and the applied perceptions

of metaphor use in the EFL classroom. Moreover, the study explores Iranian EFL teachers' opinions and perceptions of the pedagogical value of using conceptual metaphors as a part of teaching practice, attempting to reveal the way these metaphors are intentionally identified, evaluated, and potentially used by practitioners in real teaching contexts. Lastly, this research contributes to the growing body of work placing metaphor not as a linguistic fringe, but as a central source of human understanding and pedagogical use. This study is one of the few that offer a detailed, multimodal, and empirically grounded account of metaphor usage in the field of EFL instruction. It also offers useful insights to curriculum planners, teacher trainers, and classroom teachers who wish to use metaphor as a tool to build linguistic competence, affective arousal, and pedagogical imagination.

Some limitations must be recognized about this study so the findings can be appropriately interpreted. First, the study was conducted in a unique pedagogical and cultural context: Iranian EFL education contexts, meaning the findings may not be generalizable beyond contexts with differing pedagogical and cultural contexts. Second, the interpretative nature of metaphor analysis is a challenge. Peer debriefing and inter-coder reliability aside, subject bias may dominate participants' metaphorical language analysis. Third, reliance on self-report data from interviews, metaphor elicitation tasks, and questionnaires may encourage bias. Participants may give socially acceptable responses or fail to remember their experience to the best of their knowledge. Fourth, due to time constraints, the research controls for the short-term effects of metaphor-based instruction. In order to determine long-term gains in students' grammatical and textual competence, a lengthier longitudinal study approach could have been used. Finally, even if no mixed-method design was appropriate, naturalistic classroom observations and multimodal recordings were not collected, which may have added to students' generalizability of metaphor use during actual classroom discourse.

Certain delimitations were set to determine the scope of the research. The research only focused on Iranian EFL learners and instructors, 30 from each group being chosen for sampling purposes. The participants as learners were all on the intermediate level of proficiency, and instructional focus was narrowed to only two components: instruction on grammar, that is, idiomatic expressions, and textual competence in terms of rhetorical organization in academic writing. In addition, the research was concerned with short-term effects within a five-week intervention. Other aspects of language, such as listening, speaking, and pragmatic use, were outside the scope of the present research. Such restrictions were placed to enable depth and workability in the research design. Future research may extend the scope by means of cross-cultural comparisons, larger samples, longitudinal studies, and multimodal data collection to measure metaphor use more comprehensively.

2. Literature Review

The addition of metaphor to second language acquisition (SLA) has moved beyond questions of style and become a powerful cognitive and pedagogical tool. Central to this development is Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) by Lakoff and Johnson (2020), which posits that individuals comprehend abstract domains—like learning or teaching—through metaphorical mappings from more concrete,

bodily-based experience. This model suggests that metaphors are not only linguistic expressions but intrinsic human cognition mechanisms, which regulate the way teachers and students conceive language teaching (Akhtar et al., 2020; Kövecses, 2020; Yunus, 2020).

Conceptual metaphors have a significant function in educational contexts, particularly in EFL contexts, in uncovering the implicit beliefs, professional selves, and pedagogical decisions of teachers. The literature has uncovered that EFL teachers selectively make use of metaphorical schemata such as guiding, planting, building, or sculpting to define their professional role (Abdulaal et al., 2023; Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021; Shaw & Andrei, 2020; Xu et al., 2022). These metaphors are not merely personal pedagogical convictions, but they also inform curriculum planning, assessment practices, forms of feedback, and classroom conversation (Amerian, 2023; Shaw & Andrei, 2020; Vadipoor et al., 2023).

In addition, the metaphorical images of teachers are particularly relevant because they are instrumental in the cognitive and affective classroom atmosphere. For example, those with the view of teaching as guiding will foster learner independence and feedback for processes. At the same time, those with a sculpting metaphor would emphasize accuracy and standardization, often aligned with form-focused instruction, favoring accuracy and grammatical structure over fluency and meaning (Amerian, 2023; Boers, 2013; Xu et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2022). This metaphorical placement can either complement or conflict with students' metaphorical ideas about learning—yielding pedagogical tensions or deeper engagement (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Farjami, 2012; Vadipoor et al., 2021).

Empirical studies over the past few years confirm the pedagogical worth of metaphor-based instruction. Afifi (2021) and Vadipoor et al. (2021) confirm that metaphor-abundant teaching contributes to increased students' fluency in writing, rhetorical organization, and grammatical coherence. Abdulaal et al. (2023) also state that multimodal metaphors—expressed by gesture, image, and digital media—help motivate learners and improve recall, reducing cognitive load. This aligns with embodied cognition theory, which posits that learning and thought are sensorimotor-dependent and embodied (Alibali & Nathan, 2018; Borg, 2019; Deignan, 2005; Farrell, 2006; Shapiro & Stolz, 2019). This convergence of metaphor and embodiment shows the sensorimotor grounding of language instruction. In classroom practice, metaphors such as "writing is a journey" or "grammar is a puzzle" become kinesthetic in the form of movement, spatial mapping, or interactive simulation (Farrell, 2018; Golfam & Nahavandi, 2021; Kalay & Keçik, 2023). The multimodal instruction has been shown to not only increase comprehension but also facilitate metacognitive awareness building and self-efficacy (Esfandiari et al., 2022; Perez-Sobrino et al., 2019; Upadhaya & Sudharshana, 2021; Xu et al., 2022).

Particularly in Iranian EFL environments, where learners struggle to grasp abstract forms of grammar and discourse conventions, metaphor-based instruction has proved particularly effective. Farjami (2012) and Nahavandi and Golfam's (2022) research demonstrate that both learners and teachers perceive learning a language in terms of metaphors based on schooling experience and culture, and that explicit accounts of these metaphors enhance instructional alignment and learner motivation. In total, the literature suggests that the conceptual metaphors of teachers both reflect their pedagogical identity and foreshadow their instructional behavior. When linked to curriculum design—most especially with multimodal, metaphor-laden approaches—these metaphors can facilitate higher levels of student engagement, cognitive resonance, and emotional support. Although

Iranian EFL studies demonstrate the viability of metaphor-inflected instruction, systematic studies on the conceptualizations and attitudes of teachers are scarce. The present study aims to bridge this gap by exploring how Iranian EFL instructors view and value conceptual metaphors in instruction.

According to the above theoretical and empirical grounds, the present research seeks to explore the use of conceptual metaphor in the English language classroom from Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives. Specifically, it focuses on exploring how the teachers metaphorically realize the action of foreign language teaching and how they experience the didactic potential of conceptual metaphors in teaching practice. The following research questions reflect these goals:

RQ1. How do Iranian EFL teachers metaphorically conceptualize foreign language teaching?

RQ2. What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward the use of conceptual metaphors in language teaching, and how do these perceptions vary according to demographic variables such as gender, age, and type of educational institution (public vs. private)?

3. Methodology

In this study, the researchers used a sequential mixed methods design. Then, in the first phase, they used qualitative methods, and then continued with the quantitative phase.

3.1 Participants and Setting

The group of participants in this study was Iranian EFL instructors who were already putting conceptual metaphors into practice in their classroom instruction. Due to the specificity of the research—the examination of teachers' perception and classroom teaching impact of metaphorical instruction—the study required participation from teachers who not only possessed formal teaching experience for English but who had also infused conceptual metaphors as a main component of their classroom instruction activities specifically. Because there is no official registry or central database of this kind of teacher in Iran, the researcher needed an instrumental and purposeful approach to access this unique group.

For this challenge, the researcher applied a two-stage sampling plan. Convenience sampling was applied by the researcher in the first stage to generate an available sample of potential subjects. This method was selected because of its effectiveness and pragmatism to reach teachers with some teaching experience that would otherwise be hard to reach. The researcher issued open invitations to participate on a few of the most popular social websites, that is, WhatsApp, Telegram, and LinkedIn, which Iranian teachers use freely to network professionally and communicate. The recruitment message also made it clear that only teachers with prior or current experience in teaching with the help of metaphor-based instruction should reply. Such teachers who met this requirement approached the researcher independently and expressed their willingness to participate.

This first recruitment attracted a diverse pool of prospective teachers from a significant number of provinces across Iran (e.g., Tehran, Ardabil, Gilan, Khurasan, Mazandaran, Fars, Yazd, and

Hormozgan). Social media, which enabled recruitment, allowed the researcher to reach a widely dispersed group of teachers demographically and geographically. Consequently, while participants were recruited non-randomly for the first step, the representativeness of the study was maximized.

For the second step, simple random sampling was used by the researcher on this available population. This was a required step so that the bias that accompanies the first step's convenience sampling method could be countered. With the random selection of participants from the willing and available sample, the researcher attempted to make all eligible teachers equally likely to be represented in the final sample. This strategy raised the internal validity and external generalizability of the quantitative outcomes to the specific target group of metaphor-practicing educators.

The size of the sample was calculated using Cochran's formula, which is widely used in estimating the sample size when the population size is very large or unknown. The formula established that 384 teachers were to be selected to take part in the quantitative component of the study. This was found adequate in the production of statistically significant findings without the need for unreasonably large feasibility in data collection. Demographics indicated that the ages of participants ranged from 24 to 44 years, with a mean of 32, indicating a relatively young to middle-aged sample of teachers. The sample was also gender-diverse, with 199 males and 185 females, contributing to the representativeness as well as diversity of the sample.

Overall, this two-stage sample design, which included preliminary convenience sampling for the sake of access to a hard-to-reach but well-established group and then random sampling for increased representativeness, was chosen particularly to address the requirements of the research. This helped the researcher in creating a valid, salient, and demographically representative sample of Iranian foreign language teachers of English with firsthand experience with instruction grounded in metaphor, thus permitting a sound basis of quantitative analysis in the study.

3.2 Instrumentation

To investigate Iranian EFL teachers' metaphorical conception of language teaching and their experience of metaphor-based teaching, two primary instruments were employed in this study: the semi-structured interview and the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ). Both tools were developed in alignment with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020) and on the basis of multimodal pedagogy principles (Cienki & Müller, 2008; Forceville, 2017) for the purposes of both theoretical congruence and practical feasibility.

3.2.1 Semi-Structured Individual and Focus Group Interviews

The qualitative stage used in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 experienced EFL teachers to obtain the conceptual metaphors through which they comprehended and explained their teaching functions. All interviews were carried out based on a guide of 10 open-ended questions, developed from a wide literature (e.g., Farjami, 2012; Xu et al., 2022) and piloted with two experienced EFL teachers for improvement. The questions prompted the participants to give metaphorical descriptions of their teaching experience, professional beliefs, emotional responses, and classroom practice.

Interviews were conducted in English to allow for natural elicitation of metaphors in the L2 pedagogical setting, though Persian was permitted for clarification or extended expression. To allow for credibility and reliability, several trustworthiness strategies were employed, including member checking, peer debriefing, long-term engagement, and triangulation with focus group data and written metaphor samples. Two focus group interviews ($n = 8$ each) were also conducted to facilitate interactive dialogue and collective metaphor creation. These 60- to 75-minute sessions permitted dynamic negotiation of meaning and exposure to multimodal representations (e.g., gesture, drawing). Co-facilitators regulated the flow of dialogue, and all sessions were audio-taped and transcribed word for word.

3.2.2 Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ)

To quantitatively assess teachers' attitudes toward metaphor-based teaching, the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ) was developed. The 33-item questionnaire was constructed directly from the 11 large themes that emerged during the qualitative phase, including: Teacher as a guide or navigator, teaching as nurturing or gardening, teaching grammar as construction or engineering, writing instruction as sculpting or weaving, conceptual metaphors as pedagogical tools, emotional role of teaching (performance or struggle), emotional commitment and fulfillment, institutional and curriculum constraints, pedagogical relationships with students, cultural and social expectations, and use of metaphors as an instructional approach.

There were three Likert-scale items per theme (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to prompt teachers' metaphorical thinking, pedagogical beliefs, and emotional orientations. Both symbolic and embodied aspects of metaphor use were reflected in items. For example, one item for the Teaching Grammar as Construction theme was: Teaching grammar through metaphors is like giving blueprints for constructing language ability. The CMBTQ was content validated through expert review by applied linguistics and educational psychology researchers for clarity, conceptual relevance, and cultural appropriateness. The reliability of the scale was established, and construct validity was confirmed in a pilot study involving 30 Iranian EFL teachers. Findings from item analysis and factor structure refinement specified the final version, which was administered to a nationwide sample of 384 metaphor-practicing EFL teachers.

3.3 Research Procedure

Following the study's sequential mixed-method design, the data of Iranian EFL teachers were collected in two stages: qualitative and quantitative. Whereas the qualitative stage was planned to explore teachers' metaphorical thinking regarding language teaching, the quantitative stage aimed to study their attitudes towards metaphorical instruction.

3.3.1 Qualitative Data Collection

Focus group interviews and verbal metaphor elicitation tasks served to collect the qualitative data. Thirty Iranian EFL teachers with at least five years of teaching experience were interviewed on one occasion and asked to generate as many metaphors as possible for their teaching philosophies, teaching practices, problems, and presuppositions. To guarantee depth and explicitness, the

participants were then asked to elaborate on each metaphor and clarify its meaning and relevance in context. All the interviews took between 30 and 45 minutes and were conducted in English, with incidental code-switching into Persian permitted. With participants' agreement, all the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

Two focus group interviews ($n = 8$ for each group) with teachers of EFL were conducted to examine shared metaphorical thinking in an interactive, dialogic context to corroborate and complement the qualitative findings. The interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes and provided space for explanation, contrasting, and co-construction of metaphorical meaning. Warm-up techniques and relaxed conversation techniques were used by the researcher to build an easy, non-threatening environment in which open reflection was promoted. Focus group interviews were also conducted in English and tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Credibility and reliability of qualitative data were ensured through several strategies: Member Checking: The interviewees read the transcripts and confirmed the accuracy of interpretation. Peer Debriefing: A qualitative research consultant reviewed selected transcripts and codes independently. Audit Trail: The researcher maintained detailed records of all decisions, coding processes, and analytical memos. Triangulation: Findings of individual interviews were compared with focus group data and written metaphor samples to validate emerging patterns. Thematic analysis was performed on all qualitative data in order to extract salient metaphorical frames and underlying cognitive-affective patterns in teachers' understandings of language teaching.

3.3.2 Quantitative Data Collection

Following the construction and validation of the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ), the quantitative phase involved large-scale data collection in order to assess Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the pedagogical use of conceptual metaphors. The 11 metaphor-theme, 33-item questionnaire was administered online to a convenience sample of Iranian EFL teachers from eight provinces. The sampling frame was built through social media solicitation (WhatsApp, Telegram, LinkedIn), and the final pool of participants ($N = 384$) was determined according to Cochran's formula. In the interest of wide reach and administration uniformity, the questionnaire was hosted on an online platform (Google Forms). The participants were invited electronically with details of the study purpose, their rights, data confidentiality, and the approximate completion time (~30 minutes). The questionnaire included brief definitions and examples of the principal metaphor-related terms to unify the understanding. No personally identifiable information was sought to protect anonymity and encourage honest responding. Data gathering proceeded for three weeks, with reminder messages at intervals to maximize response rates. Completed responses were downloaded as Excel files and prepared for statistical analysis in SPSS. This online method permitted efficient and affordable data gathering over a geographically dispersed sample of metaphor-practicing Iranian EFL teachers.

4. Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures during the research were organized according to the two phases of the sequential mixed-methods design, and various analysis techniques were used for the qualitative and quantitative data gathered from Iranian EFL teachers.

The qualitative data, such as individual interviews, focus group interviews, and written metaphor elicitation responses of 30 experienced teachers, were analyzed using MAXQDA 2020. Three-stage coding, involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, was used to identify, categorize, and interpret metaphorical conceptualizations of language teaching.

Open Coding involved line-by-line scrutiny of transcribed data to identify recurring metaphors and accompanying conceptual domains. Initial codes included metaphorical statements such as "teaching is nurturing growth" or "grammar is a puzzle," reflecting underlying pedagogical conceptions and classroom realities. Axial Coding was used to group similar codes under broader thematic categories following conceptual relationships. For instance, progress metaphors, challenge metaphors, and transformation metaphors were grouped under overarching themes like "teaching as journey" or "language learning as personal change." Selective Coding aimed to synthesize and formulate the core categories into wide-ranging theoretical themes that described the dominant metaphorical frames of the teachers, e.g., "teaching as facilitation" or "instruction as emotional labor."

For achieving process reliability, 20% of the data were coded separately by a second researcher, and inter-coder reliability was established to ascertain consistency and avoid potential bias. Data from verbal metaphor elicitation, writing tasks, and focus group discussions were triangulated to enhance the credibility and representativeness of the findings. MAXQDA visualization and reporting functions were utilized to track frequency patterns, co-occurrences, and thematic saturation across the dataset.

The quantitative stage entailed the returns analysis of the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ) by 384 Iranian EFL practicing teachers. The data were first screened for completeness, and none were missing as the online platform had submission checks embedded. An Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation was conducted on SPSS version 25 to validate the underlying factor structure and determine whether the items merged according to the 11 metaphorical themes identified in the qualitative phase. Items with loadings $\geq .50$ were retained.

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) for all questionnaire items and thematic subscales were computed to review the distribution of teacher attitudes. Internal consistency of the CMBTQ was ascertained using Cronbach's alpha, whereby all subscales met or exceeded the $\alpha \geq .70$ criterion for good reliability. In addition, independent samples t-tests and Pearson correlations were performed to see if teacher perceptions differed across demographic variables, including gender, age, and institution type (public or private). The statistical significance was at $p < .05$. This mixed-methods approach enabled the integration of metaphorical themes that emerged from qualitative data with trends identified in statistical results from the quantitative data. Together, the analyses provided a clear indication of Iranian EFL instructors' metaphorical ideas and their sentiments regarding the instructional application of conceptual metaphors.

4.1 Qualitative Results

The qualitative findings of this study revealed a rich metaphorical conceptualization framework by which Iranian EFL teachers enacted their roles and classroom practices. Through 30 interviews and focus group sessions with experienced teachers, six broad metaphorical themes were identified. The

metaphors represent teachers' thinking, feeling, and teaching positions and provide insight into how they conceptualize and undertake language instruction.

Teacher as Guide or Navigator (TGN)

The most common was that of the teacher as a guide, navigator, or beacon, i.e., teachers who guide students down the often-perilous path of language learning. Teachers emphasized both intentional guidance and responsive accommodation:

"I think of myself as a tour guide. I know where we are headed, but every student has a different route, and I have to walk with them." (Teacher 5, individual interview)

"Sometimes we are like mountain guides—supporting their climb, not pulling them up." (Teacher F1, focus group)

These metaphors underscore a constructivist, student-centered pedagogy in which the teacher provides scaffolding and emotional support without interfering with individual learner trajectories.

Teaching as Nurturing or Gardening (TNG)

Teachers often likened themselves to gardeners or parents, stressing patience, care, and nurturing growth:

"Each student is a unique type of plant. Some need sunlight, some need shade. My job is to offer the proper climate." (Teacher 2, individual interview)

"We said we're emotional gardeners. When we quit, nothing grows." (Teacher F2, focus group)

This theme aligns with humanist and ecological views of education, wherein growth is incremental and emotion-mediated.

Teaching Grammar as Construction or Engineering (TGCE)

A vocational metaphor closer to the practical arts was discovered concerning teaching grammar, as teachers described themselves as architects, engineers, or mechanics who had to construct linguistic frameworks:

"Teaching grammar is like being an architect—you need to design the rules carefully, or the whole thing collapses." (Teacher 16, individual interview)

"We said grammar is like building a bridge—you must get the foundation right." (Teacher F5, focus group)

These metaphors reflect a deliberate, structure-based teaching approach to grammar in a context of clarity, accuracy, and planning.

Writing Instruction as Sculpting or Weaving (WISW)

Instruction in writing was viewed as an imaginative and cyclical process of constructing, organizing, and elaborating ideas:

"Writing is like sculpting. The student brings in the rough idea, and we sculpt it together into something clear and strong." (Teacher 13, individual interview)

"It's like creating a tapestry—grammar is the weave, ideas are the design." (Teacher F4, focus group)

These metaphors highlight the balance between form and imagination in writing instruction, consistent with process-oriented pedagogies.

Conceptual Metaphors as Pedagogical Tools (CMPT)

As well as considering their practice, teachers also explained utilizing metaphors as a deliberate means of enhancing student comprehension, engagement, and retention:

"I always use bridges when defining conjunctions—students recall that better than rules." (Teacher 4, individual interview)

"We said metaphors are like keys—they unlock understanding." (Teacher F2, focus group)

Teachers stressed that metaphors made abstract content concrete and viewable mental images to facilitate both cognitive and affective engagement.

Emotional Role of Teaching (ERT)

Lastly, teachers described their emotional labor through metaphors like performer, warrior, or flame-carrier, displaying resilience as well as passion:

"Teaching English is a flame to hold—you must keep it alight, even in the gale force." (Teacher 29, individual interview)

"We used to say that to be a teacher is to be on stage—always performing, even if you are tired." (Teacher F5, focus group)

Such metaphors encapsulate the identity and affective dimensions of teaching, conveying a commitment to maintaining motivation and purpose in the face of challenge.

Emotional Commitment and Fulfillment (ECF)

Metaphors employed by teachers tended to reflect intense emotional engagement with teaching, characterizing teaching as inspiring and exhausting. The majority saw their profession as an identity-shaping endeavor of importance, while others conveyed the feeling of fatigue and repetition of tasks.

"Sometimes I feel like a flame-carrier—I have to keep the passion alive, even when everything feels heavy." (Teacher 9, Individual Interview)

"We all concurred teaching is like being in the theatre—performing each day, but the energy it demands is genuine." (Teacher F2, Focus Group)

This theme captures the emotional ambivalence of teaching. Some teachers mentioned fulfillment and purpose, yet there were others who mentioned routine and emotional burnout. Teaching was not only presented as a profession but as a context of constant emotional investment.

Institutional and Curriculum Constraints (ICC)

Teachers described their classrooms in metaphors of futility, routine, and restriction in most cases. They lamented restrictive syllabi, exam-centric teaching, and a lack of freedom.

"It's like being in a cage—I want to fly, but the curriculum locks me in." (Teacher 19, Individual Interview)

"We said it's like running on a treadmill—working hard but going nowhere because of the exam system." (Teacher F1, Focus Group)

Teachers' professional creativity and decision-making were seen as constrained by pressures outside. Metaphors expressed a sense of constriction, weariness, and a gap between ideals of teaching and institutional realities.

Pedagogical Relations with Students (PRS)

Teacher metaphors suggested that pedagogical relations with students played a large part in building the experience of teaching. When pupils' cooperation was present, metaphors said care and joint success; when absent, frustration and imbalance.

"Teaching them is like coaching a team—you win and lose together." (Teacher 12, Individual Interview)

"We said it's like rowing a boat with one oar—if they don't cooperate, you just go in circles." (Teacher F6, Focus Group)

The metaphors indicate that the level of student engagement significantly impacts the sense of accomplishment and motivation among teachers. Optimistic student-teacher relationships evoked hope and dedication, while indifference or resistance evoked feelings of uselessness and emotional exhaustion.

Cultural and Social Expectations (CSE)

Teachers often explained how parents' and society's perceptions of English influenced their role. Some perceived themselves as underrated or not being appreciated, seeing themselves as always having to justify the value of their subject.

"Being an ambassador in a nation that doesn't value your language." (Teacher 9, Individual Interview)

"We said it's like being in the spotlight—everyone sees, but not many stand behind." (Teacher F5, Focus Group)

Teachers believed their efforts were emotionally exposed and undervalued. These metaphors exemplified the anxiety of public exposure and institutional lack of appreciation, creating a feeling of isolation and professional vulnerability.

Use of Metaphors as an Instructional Approach (UMIA)

Some teachers clarified using metaphors intentionally as a teaching strategy to clarify dense subject matter, improve retention, and emotionally connect students.

"When I explained to them that grammar is like Lego blocks, they finally got it." (Teacher 18, Individual Interview)

"We explained to them metaphors are memory helpers—students catch on more than definitions." (Teacher F2, Focus Group)

Teachers reported that the use of metaphors in teaching helped students learn better and made teaching more engaging. The metaphors were useful tools that bridged abstract concepts with concrete images, improving communication and classroom rapport. Table 1 shows the summary of themes and subheadings and their frequencies.

Table 1

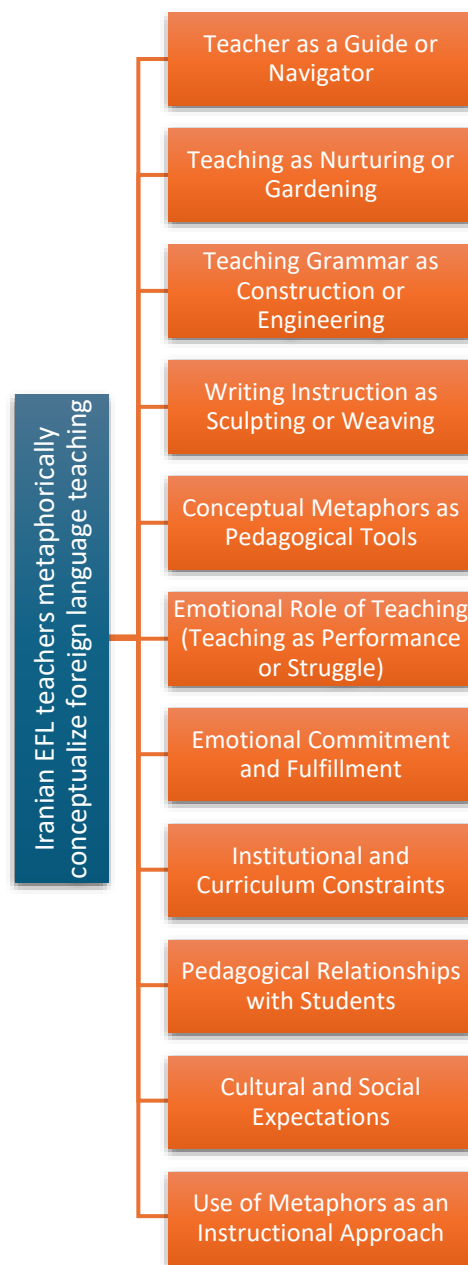
Summary of Themes

	Subtheme	Frequency (n = 30)
Teacher as a Guide or Navigator	Guide	16
	Navigator	9
	Torchbearer	5
Teaching as Nurturing or Gardening	Gardener	10
	Farmer	6
	Parent	4
Teaching Grammar as Construction or Engineering	Engineer	7
	Architect	6
	Mechanic	5
Writing Instruction as Sculpting or Weaving	Sculpting	8
	Weaving	6
	Cooking	4
Metaphor Use in Instruction	Clarifying Concepts	14
	Motivating Learners	10
	Enhancing Retention	7
Emotional Role of Teaching	Performer	6
	Warrior/Fighter	5
	Flame-carrier	4
Emotional Commitment and Fulfilment	Passion	10
	Identity	7
	Exhaustion	6
Institutional and Curriculum Constraints	Rigidity	8
	Time Pressure	7
	Lack of Autonomy	6
Pedagogical Relationships with Students	Empathy	9
	Responsibility	7
	Frustration	6
Cultural and Social Expectations	Status of English	8
	Parental Pressure	6
	Societal Misunderstanding	7
Use of Metaphors as an Instructional Approach	Clarifying Concepts	14
	Motivating Learners	10
	Enhancing Retention	7

The most recent Iranian EFL teacher model figuratively considers foreign language teaching as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Final Model of Iranian EFL Teachers' Metaphorically Conceptualized Foreign Language Teaching



4.2 Quantitative results

4.2.1 Piloting the Questionnaire

To ensure the psychometric value of the teacher questionnaire developed in this study, a pilot study was conducted on 30 Iranian EFL teachers. The goals were to attempt to measure the reliability and construct validity of the tool before the large-scale administration.

Internal consistency was also evaluated with Cronbach's alpha and was 0.782 for raw items and 0.783 for standardized items. The above values present adequate internal consistency (George & Mallery, 2003), testifying that the 33 items equally represented the underlying construct of interest.

Descriptive item analysis indicated that item means varied from 1.87 to 2.97, with standard deviations ranging from 0.56 to 1.81, indicating a proper range of responses and preventing ceiling or floor effects. Corrected item-total correlations were well above the traditional cutpoint of .30 for all items, with strong evidence of contributions to overall scale consistency. Moreover, no deletion of an item was identified as having a substantial effect on the reliability of the scale, indicating further evidence of the instrument's robustness.

For testing construct validity, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was conducted based on Principal Component Analysis (PCA) with Varimax rotation. Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure was 0.735 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($\chi^2 = 518.926$, $p < .001$), indicating sampling adequacy and fit for factor analysis. PCA revealed nine components having eigenvalues larger than 1, which collectively accounted for 81.80% of the total variance, indicating a multidimensional underlying structure of the scale.

Monte Carlo simulation also validated the factor solution's stability and trustworthiness with superb factor loading recovery, negligible bias, and high reliability (estimated $\alpha = 0.96$). Varimax-rotated component matrix produced well-interpretable factors such as affective engagement, cognitive/metacognitive strategies, systematic learning behaviors, self-regulation, and evaluation processes.

Taken overall, the pilot study demonstrated that the instrument possessed strong psychometric qualities, including satisfactory reliability and factorial validity. The outcomes testified to the suitability of the scale for use in the forthcoming large-scale data collection stage among Iranian EFL teachers as the population of interest.

4.2.2 Main Study

4.2.2.1 Gender-Based Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Conceptual Metaphor Use

An independent samples t-test was conducted to explore the following: whether there were differences in Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards conceptual metaphor-based language teaching by gender along 11 major factors. Overall, the general picture that came across was one of agreement between male and female teachers, whereby there were statistically significant gender variations in only four of the factors.

As Table 2 shows, specifically, female teachers had significantly more positive attitudes than the respective male teachers towards: Writing Instruction as Sculpting or Weaving (WISW): $t(382) = -3.74$, $p < .001$, reflecting greater metaphorical expressiveness in females; Conceptual Metaphor Pedagogical Tools (CMPT): $t(382) = -2.72$, $p = .007$, revealing greater belief regarding the pedagogical efficacy of metaphors in females; Emotional Role of Teaching (ERT): $t(382) = -2.93$, $p = .004$, with greater perceived efficacy of metaphor-supported instruction in promoting teaching reflection; Use

of Metaphors as an Instructional Approach (UMIA): $t(382) = -6.61$, $p < .001$, signifying the significantly higher use of metaphors by women teachers in instructional activities during teaching practice.

For the remaining seven variables—TGN, TNG, TGC, CSE, ICC, PRS, and ECF—statistically significant differences between genders were not found ($p > .05$). This suggests a general compatibility of metaphor-related cognition and instructional perspectives between genders. These findings indicate a gender-based difference in the practical and affective use of metaphor, with greater metaphorical involvement among women teachers. However, the mutual responses to cognitive and attitudinal use indicate an underlying consensus. These results underscore the potential benefit of gender-aware teacher education, especially for in-service courses aimed at building metaphorical capacity in teaching design.

Table 2

Independent Samples t-test Results for Gender Differences in Teachers' Attitudes Toward Conceptual Metaphor Use

Factor	Male Mean	Female Mean	Mean Diff.	t-value	p-value	Sig.
TGN	3.56	3.58	-0.02	-0.27	.786	n.s.
TNG	3.67	3.74	-0.07	-1.00	.316	n.s.
TGC	3.91	3.95	-0.04	-0.73	.467	n.s.
WISW	4.33	4.62	-0.29	-3.74	.000	*
CMPT	4.42	4.63	-0.21	-2.72	.007	*
ERT	4.17	4.45	-0.28	-2.93	.004	*
ECF	2.73	2.78	-0.04	-0.53	.595	n.s.
ICC	3.38	3.42	-0.04	-0.57	.568	n.s.
PRS	2.74	2.75	-0.02	-0.23	.822	n.s.
CSE	2.94	2.95	-0.01	-0.09	.927	n.s.
UMIA	3.36	3.81	-0.44	-6.61	.000	*

Note: n.s. = not significant; * = significant at $p < .05$

4.2.2.2 Age-Based Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Conceptual Metaphor Use

In order to check if the age of teachers affected their perceptions and attitudes towards conceptual metaphors in language teaching, independent samples t-tests were run on eleven thematic dimensions of the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ). Two groups based on the age of the teachers were formed: younger teachers (24–34 years old) and older teachers (35–44 years old).

The results indicated that in the majority of fields—namely, TGN, TNG, TGC, ECF, ICC, PRS, and CSE—there were no notable differences between the two age groups ($p > .05$). The findings are indicative of a shared underlying understanding and acceptance of conceptual metaphors by Iranian EFL teachers, regardless of age.

However, statistically significant differences manifested in four of the big five areas. Older teachers exhibited significantly greater engagement with writing instruction as sculpting or weaving (WISW; $p = .002$), more belief in the conceptual metaphors as pedagogical tools (CMPT; $p = .024$), more endorsement of emotional role of teaching (ERT; $p = .007$), and more classroom use of metaphors (UMIA; $p < .001$) than younger teachers. These findings can be attributed to acquired teaching experience, deeper pedagogical insight, and a greater repertoire of teaching strategies in more experienced teachers.

In total, while the baseline theoretical understanding of metaphors is comparable across age groups, more experienced teachers demonstrate greater practical engagement and pedagogical confidence in metaphor use, indicating the potential role of teaching maturity in metaphor use.

Table 3

Summary of Age-Based Differences in Teachers' Perceptions of Conceptual Metaphor Use

Factor	Mean (24–34)	Mean (35–44)	Mean Difference	Sig. (p)	Significant	Direction
TGN	3.5633	3.5767	-0.0133	.843	No	–
TNG	3.6946	3.7209	-0.0263	.698	No	–
TGC	3.9163	3.9509	-0.0346	.575	No	–
WISW	4.3620	4.6135	-0.2515	.002	Yes	Higher in 35–44
CMPT	4.4502	4.6227	-0.1725	.024	Yes	Higher in 35–44
ERT	4.1968	4.4571	-0.2603	.007	Yes	Higher in 35–44
ECF	2.7398	2.7699	-0.0301	.722	No	–
ICC	3.4050	3.3957	+0.0093	.895	No	–
PRS	2.7285	2.7669	-0.0384	.634	No	–
CSE	2.9321	2.9693	-0.0372	.611	No	–
UMIA	3.4638	3.7331	-0.2693	<.001	Yes	Higher in 35–44

4.2.2.3 School Type and Teachers' Attitudes Toward Conceptual Metaphors

To examine whether the institutional environment influences teachers' classroom application and perceptions of conceptual metaphors, a comparison was made between private and public school EFL teachers. Independent samples t-tests were applied to the eleven facets of the Conceptual Metaphor-Based Teaching Questionnaire (CMBTQ).

It was discovered that in the majority of domains (TGN, TNG, ICC, PRS), there were no statistically significant differences between public and private school educators ($p > .05$). These results point toward an overall baseline state and knowledge regarding metaphorical pedagogy by institution type. However, significant differences existed in four practice-based, applied areas. Teachers in private schools demonstrated: Greater imagery and conceptual wordings (WISW) ($p < .001$); Greater positive beliefs in the potency of metaphor-based teaching (CMPT) ($p = .002$); Greater positive

judgments of employing metaphors as an effective instructional method (ERT) ($p < .001$); Greater frequency of employment of metaphors in actual teaching practice (UMIA) ($p < .001$).

These differences are most likely a result of increased institutional adaptability, pedagogic autonomy, or exposure to training more prevalent in Iran's private schools. Even though conceptions underlying beliefs were the same across contexts, private school contexts appeared to facilitate more robust enactment of metaphor-based pedagogy.

Table 4

Comparison of Public and Private School Teachers' Perceptions of Conceptual Metaphor Use

Dimension	Mean (Public)	Mean (Private)	Mean Diff.	Sig. (p)	Significant	Direction
TGN	3.5634	3.5754	-0.0120	.857	No	–
TNG	3.6854	3.7291	-0.0437	.515	No	–
TGC	3.9195	3.9441	-0.0246	.688	No	–
WISW	4.3195	4.6397	-0.3202	<.001	Yes	Higher in Private Schools
CMPT	4.4122	4.6508	-0.2386	.002	Yes	Higher in Private Schools
ERT	4.1439	4.4944	-0.3505	<.001	Yes	Higher in Private Schools
ECF	2.7220	2.7877	-0.0658	.433	No	–
ICC	3.3854	3.4190	-0.0336	.629	No	–
PRS	2.7293	2.7626	-0.0333	.676	No	–
CSE	2.9366	2.9609	-0.0243	.737	No	–
UMIA	3.3878	3.7961	-0.4083	<.001	Yes	Higher in Private Schools

4.2.2.4 Correlation among Dimensions of Conceptual Metaphor Perception and Use

Spearman's rho correlation matrix provided a glimpse of how various subcomponents of practice and awareness of metaphors were related among Iranian EFL teachers. Findings reveal an integrated conceptual framework surrounding the application of metaphors in instruction.

Key Findings are: Core Instructional Constructs (TGN, TNG, TGC): They were very highly correlated with each other. TGN was very highly correlated with TNG ($r = .489$, $p < .01$) and TGC ($r = .425$, $p < .01$), and TNG with TGC ($r = .542$, $p < .01$), indicating consistency among teachers' noticing, understanding, and confidence when handling metaphors. Pedagogical Involvement (WISW, CMPT, ERT): Extremely high positive correlations were found between WISW and CMPT ($r = .845$, $p < .01$), CMPT and ERT ($r = .896$, $p < .01$), and WISW and ERT ($r = .784$, $p < .01$), meaning that use of metaphor, effectiveness perceived, and teaching approach are highly dependent upon each other in practice. Creativity and Real Use (ICC, UMIA): ICC was strongly correlated with TGN ($r = .473$), CMPT ($r = .143$), ERT ($r = .135$), and above all with UMIA ($r = .421$), revealing the importance of creative confidence

among teachers in real metaphorical practice. Learner-related Constructs (ECF, PRS, CSE): They were highly intercorrelated (e.g., ECF-PRS, $r = .778$; PRS-CSE, $r = .738$), which signifies consistency in how teachers perceived metaphorical fit, relevance, and student efficacy. Negative or Weak Associations: TGC was negatively correlated with ECF ($r = -.241$), PRS ($r = -.180$), and CSE ($r = -.197$), which suggests that greater teacher control or abstraction sometimes unlinks from learners' affective or contextual realities. UMIA, a critical behavioral component, was highly correlated with TGN ($r = .246$), WISW ($r = .139$), and ICC ($r = .421$), substantiating that awareness, imagery, and creativity are predictors of authentic classroom implementation of metaphors.

These findings collectively validate conceptual metaphor use in EFL teaching to be a construct with various dimensions that include cognitive understanding, affective and creative engagement, and classroom deployment. The high intercorrelations validate the theoretical underpinning of embodied cognition and metaphor theory, and few negative correlations reflect practical misalignments deserving correction in teacher education.

Table 5

Key Significant Correlations among Metaphor-Related Constructs

Variable Pair	Spearman's ρ	Significance	Interpretation
TGN – TNG	.489	$p < .01$	Coherent general and instructional awareness
TNG – TGC	.542	$p < .01$	Noticing and confidence are linked
WISW – CMPT	.845	$p < .01$	Imagery use is strongly tied to teaching belief
CMPT – ERT	.896	$p < .01$	Teaching belief drives perceived effectiveness
WISW – ERT	.784	$p < .01$	Imagery use linked to strategy effectiveness
ICC – UMIA	.421	$p < .01$	Creativity supports metaphor use
ECF – PRS	.778	$p < .01$	Fit and perceived relevance aligned
PRS – CSE	.738	$p < .01$	Relevance predicts learner efficacy
TGC – ECF	-.241	$p < .01$	Conceptual control may reduce perceived fit
TGC – PRS	-.180	$p < .01$	Confidence may misalign with relevance
TGC – CSE	-.197	$p < .01$	Confidence is not always aligned with efficacy

4.3. Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Results

The integration of qualitative and quantitative findings in this study provides an in-depth explanation of how Iranian EFL teachers think about, feel, and employ metaphors during their professional practice. Both avenues of inquiry met on the value of metaphors as thinking and speaking devices as well as teaching and affective devices that build teaching identity, classroom strategies, and learner motivation.

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups provided evidence of rich metaphorical reasoning in teachers. Eleven salient metaphorical themes emerged, with teachers described as guides, gardeners, engineers, sculptors, emotional performers, and metaphorical users of teaching methods. The metaphors were used to describe sophisticated images of teaching—emphasizing scaffolding, care, structure, creativity, emotional resilience, and pedagogical intentionality. Metaphors were not used by teachers as mere verbal tools but as essential tools that helped facilitate student understanding, emotional involvement, and instructional clarity.

These qualitative patterns were confirmed and explicated by the quantitative findings. Results of the questionnaire solidified that application and comprehension of metaphors were ubiquitous and multi-determinant, and internal correlations between constructs such as TGN, TNG, TGC, and UMIA were high. More metaphor-sensitive and more confident teachers also used metaphors more frequently and more easily in teaching practice—particularly in themes related to WISW, CMPT, and ERT. Highest inter-correlations (e.g., CMPT-ERT: $r = .896$, WISW-CMPT: $r = .845$) capture the qualitative themes of metaphor as reflective and action-guiding tools.

In particular, each strand found considerable demographic differences. Female teachers, older teachers, and private school teachers showed considerably greater metaphor-related activity in both affective and applied contexts (e.g., WISW, CMPT, ERT, UMIA). This is corroborated by qualitative accounts in which more experienced or autonomous teachers accounted for more advanced and situational use of metaphors—frequently sourcing from emotional and imaginative metaphors to enhance class life. A fascinating intersection was the metaphor theme as an instructional tool. Instructors of qualitative data referred to metaphors as "keys," "bridges," or "tapestries," making abstract concepts more real and assisting in memory and understanding. The quantitative results supported this impression with high CMPT and UMIA scores, indicating strong belief in the instructional value of metaphor and extensive metaphor use in teaching.

In contrast, the few modest negative correlations in the quantitative data—i.e., TGC (confidence) inversely correlating with ECF, PRS, and CSE learner-centered constructs—undercut a subtle divergence. While many teachers avowed high personal confidence in using metaphors, this was not always accompanied by perceptions of learner compatibility or achievement. This tension was echoed in qualitative instances where educators acknowledged the cognitive and affective density of metaphor usage and the need to calibrate metaphors to learners' needs and environments.

Overall, qualitative and quantitative findings converge to underscore the salience of metaphors in shaping Iranian EFL teachers' pedagogical mind and classroom practices. Metaphors are not secondary stylistic devices but deeply rooted instruments for conceptualizing teaching, constructing instructional sense, and negotiating affective and cognitive classroom space. Such rich insights contribute to the value of metaphor-sensitive teacher education programs that promote reflective, adaptive, and contextually responsive metaphor use within professional development.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The Iranian EFL teachers' answers were revealed to include a rich array of conceptual metaphors reflecting their beliefs regarding teaching English, professional identity, and roles in the classroom. The metaphors not only reflected teachers' cognitive styles but also their emotional engagements and strategic dispositions, making metaphors worthy of being reflective and generative in composing pedagogical philosophy.

The dominant metaphorical schema was Teacher as Navigator or Guide, where teachers envisioned themselves as guides guiding students through the terrain of language learning. The metaphor underscores Farrell's (2018) view of teachers as adaptive decision-makers and is reaffirmed in Borg's (2019) theoretical formulation of teacher cognition as situational and interactive. It is a pedagogical shift away from didacticism towards student-centered teaching with an emphasis on support, flexibility, and responsiveness.

Another prominent conceptualization was Teaching as Nurturing or Gardening. Here, teachers invoked imagery of cultivation—comparing themselves to gardeners or parents—underscoring the importance of emotional labor, patience, and individualized attention. This mirrors Shaw and Andrei's (2020) findings on the affective dimension of teacher metaphors and supports Yunus's (2020) observation that metaphor reveals teachers' underlying emotional commitments. The gardening metaphor suggests a nonlinear, organic approach to learning, consistent with Golfam and Nahavandi's (2021) work on metaphor in Iranian EFL discourse.

A more technical metaphorical cluster emerged around Teaching Grammar as Construction or Engineering. Teachers positioned themselves as engineers or architects, which emphasizes logic, structural design, and accuracy in grammar instruction. These metaphors highlight the role of the teacher as a problem-solver and planner, reinforcing Afifi's (2021) and Kalay and Keçik's (2023) findings on the spatial and mechanical metaphors teachers often use concerning grammar.

Teachers' writing pedagogy was also framed using the metaphor Writing as Sculpting or Weaving, which framed the practice of writing instruction as structure-based, involving creativity, structure, and revision. Such metaphors support research by Vadipoor et al. (2023) and Chen (2019), which asserted that metaphorical teaching enhanced the stylistic awareness and metacognitive approaches of students. The innovative nature of these metaphors reaffirms the circular and self-directed nature of writing instruction in EFL contexts.

The Theme Conceptual Metaphors as Pedagogical Tools covered precisely how teachers apply metaphors intentionally in pedagogy in the classroom. Teachers defined metaphors as "keys," "recipes," and "bridges" that highlighted their belief in metaphors as cognitive aids that aid in understanding, memorization, and emotional connection. This is adapted from Perez-Sobrino et al. (2019) and Upadhaya and Sudharshana (2021), emphasizing the multimodal and memory-enhancing potential of metaphor in teaching. Lastly, metaphors in the Emotional Role of Teaching category—such as performer, warrior, or flame-carrier—captured the emotional costs and motivational challenges teachers face. These representations convey the personal cost of teaching and passion upon which it feeds, consistent with studies by Al-Ahdal and Abduh (2021) and Akhtar et al. (2020) on

emotional labor in EFL teaching. They also echo Zhu et al.'s (2022) conclusions that metaphor occupies a central role in the construction of teacher identity and in expressing professional resilience.

Collectively, the metaphorical repertoire of Iranian EFL teachers conveys a multidimensional understanding of their work that blends strategy, creativity, affect, and identity. It affirms Adami's (2023) claim that metaphor, as a multimodal and social semiotic resource, offers insight into the layered nature of pedagogical self-perception. Teachers do not merely "teach" language—they build, nurture, navigate, and perform, using metaphor to frame, express, and shape their pedagogical engagement.

The second research question probed whether Iranian EFL instructors' metaphor-based beliefs varied across demographic factors such as gender, age, and school type (public or private). Statistical tests, i.e., independent samples t-tests and Spearman's rho correlations, indicated that female, older, and private school teachers scored higher on four of the most significant metaphorical aspects of WISW (Writing Instruction Strategies with Metaphors), CMPT (Perceived Metaphorical Teaching Effectiveness), ERT (Emotional Resonance of Teaching), and UMIA (Use of Metaphor in Instructional Activities) consistently.

These findings corroborate that while overall metaphorical sensitivity is widespread among educators, everyday enactment and affective-metacognitive deployment of metaphor differ by demographic group. This corroborates Littlemore's (2009) and Cameron's (2003) argument that women teachers employ more relational and emotionally charged metaphors, reflecting a more empathetic pedagogy. Similarly, higher metaphor use among older teachers is consistent with Farrell's (2006) hypothesis that pedagogical expertise facilitates metacognitive awareness of metaphor employment.

In comparing private and public-school teachers, the superiority of private school teachers in larger metaphorical aspects is in line with findings from Pishghadam and Meidani (2012), who found greater flexibility and creativity in private schools. This shows that the availability of training and the culture of institutions can have significant impacts on metaphor-guided pedagogy.

Unexpectedly, some constructs, such as PRS (Perceived Relevance to Students) and ICC (Instructional Creative Competence), did not reveal much difference between groups. Either a frequently uniform understanding of these constructs or limited training for instructors in using them effectively may be a reason, reflecting concerns voiced by Pishghadam and Naji Meidani (2012) regarding poorly developed metaphor awareness within formal teacher training.

Correlation analysis also indicated that metaphorical dimensions are context-dependent but integrated. For instance, TGN, TNG, and TGC (the ability to perceive and create metaphors) were all positively correlated, suggesting cognitive integration of metaphor in pedagogical thought (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020; Cameron, 2003). Emotional and instructional motivation factors such as CMPT, WISW, and ERT were also highly correlated, confirming Kövecses's (2020) embodied teaching theory and Boers's (2013) findings on the motivational impact of metaphor.

Negative correlations between TGC and affective measures like ECF, PRS, and CSE would indicate possible tensions between cognitive demand and student affect, possibly due to the demands of the curriculum or lack of familiarity with metaphoric discourse (Deignan, 2005). These nuances emphasize the necessity for context-sensitive and targeted teacher training in teaching using metaphors.

Generally, the current research assures that institutional and demographic elements make an impact on teachers' use of metaphors, as noted in earlier research (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Littlemore, 2009), and points to some areas where adjustment in teaching is called for. The addition of sensitivity to metaphor to teacher education could assist in bridging gaps in instruction, especially in state schools and among less experienced teachers.

The present study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' metaphorical conceptualizations and orientations towards the application of conceptual metaphors in language pedagogy through a mixed-methods study. Drawing upon Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 2020) and socio-cognitive theories, findings showed that Iranian teachers utilize highly contexted metaphors to conceptualize their pedagogical selves, teaching selves, and affective selves. The most evocative metaphorical themes—i.e., teacher as guide, gardener, engineer, and performer—invite a rich interweaving of cognition, emotion, identity, and practice in the classroom. The metaphors are employed not as rhetorical flourishes but as cognitive structures that organize thinking and guide instructional practice (Cameron, 2003; Kövecses, 2020).

The quantitative results also showed that teachers' metaphor-based understanding varied markedly according to gender, age, and school type. Female, older, and private school teachers reported higher usage and perceived utility of affectively engaging and pedagogically sensitive metaphors (e.g., CMPT, ERT, WISW, UMIA), a pattern consistent with previous research (e.g., Littlemore, 2009; Pishghadam & Meidani, 2012). Conversely, some structures, such as PRS and ICC, were non-variable between groups, and this suggests that some of the metaphorical spaces may be acceptable to everyone or underdeveloped due to training limitations or institutional priority.

The findings confirm the theoretical hypothesis that conceptual metaphors play an important part in teacher cognition and classroom practice construction (Boers, 2018; Littlemore & Low, 2006). They also bring into focus the serious function of context in influencing metaphorical consciousness since sociocultural and institutional contexts influence knowledge and habits of mind regarding metaphors. Pedagogically, the study affirms the value of the incorporation of metaphorical methods in teacher education, curriculum planning, and lesson design, simply concerning enhancing grammar instruction, writing proficiency, and affective engagement.

Furthermore, the study reveals that metaphor awareness is a reflective middle ground between practice and philosophy and can facilitate more thoughtful consideration among teachers of their work and coping with challenging education contexts. Thus, targeted professional development—specifically, in public schools and among new teachers—can facilitate more adaptive, empathic, and conception-ful teaching practices.

In sum, conceptual metaphor is not an ornament but a sophisticated interdisciplinary construct that affects teachers' cognition, teaching, and affective bonds with students. Revealing Iranian EFL teachers' pedagogical ideology and classroom practices in terms of metaphorical schemata, this study contributes to a more sophisticated description of teacher cognition and testifies to the potential of metaphor as a diagnostic and generative construct in language pedagogy. Longitudinal designs, bigger demographic samples, and cross-linguistic investigations would be beneficial in future studies to better tap the resilient and dynamic aspects of metaphor in SLA and teacher training.

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