

Research Article

Impact of Conceptual Metaphors on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Perceptions: A Mixed Methods Investigation

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Abstract

According to conceptual metaphor theory, metaphors create what learners perceive as abstract phenomena like English learning and shape their motivation, emotional involvement, and self-concept. Despite growing interest in metaphor-informed instruction, limited studies have explored how EFL learners' conceptual metaphors change with targeted interventions. This study investigated how Iranian intermediate EFL learners make sense of English learning using conceptual metaphors and whether metaphor instruction influences the recasting of these ideas. Using a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, the research began with a qualitative stage where thirty students were interviewed and asked to participate in metaphor elicitation activities. During the subsequent quantitative phase, 384 students completed a metaphor-awareness survey both prior to and following a five-week multimodal (visual, gestural, spatial, and digital) metaphor-informed teaching intervention intended to reframe limiting metaphors and support learner engagement. Common metaphors such as "learning is a journey," "grammar is a trap," and "language is a wall" reflected patterns of anxiety, low self-efficacy, and demotivation. Statistical analysis evidenced a significant change in metaphorical framing, as learners adopted more useful metaphors (e.g., from "grammar as a trap" to "grammar as a puzzle"). These findings suggest that metaphor-instructed learning, especially when delivered through multimodal presentation, can potentially increase learners' emotional and cognitive engagement in English. Pedagogically, teachers can integrate metaphor-sensitivity exercises to foster motivation, reduce anxiety, and facilitate intangible material. The study highlights the pedagogical value of introducing conceptual metaphors in EFL teacher training and curriculum design to guide more learner-centered and effectively responsive instruction.

Keywords: conceptual metaphors, Iranian EFL learners, learner perception, metaphor-based instruction, multimodal instruction

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1. Introduction

In English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, the students' affective domain (i.e., how they perceive, feel, and connect with the learning) is recognized as essential to successful language learning nowadays (Belkhir, 2021). Recently, research has emphasized that cognitive and affective variables such as self-efficacy, motivation, and anxiety often outweigh technical input variables in predicting learners' progress (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Thus, it becomes important not only to examine what students are doing in class but also how they internalize learning processes and emotionally invest in language acquisition.

Conceptual metaphors offer a rich window to this internal world. Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), originally outlined by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), suggests that metaphors are not stylistic embellishments but fundamental cognitive schemas through which people conceptualize abstract experiences in terms of more tangible ones. In EFL, metaphors such as "learning English is climbing a mountain" or "grammar is a labyrinth" reflect learners' affective and cognitive stances toward language learning challenges (Kövecses, 2020; Littlemore, 2019). These metaphors, often shaped by pedagogical, cultural, and emotional experiences, are not value-free since they carry implicit judgments, desires, and concerns that directly influence learner behavior and identity.

Scholars increasingly recommend analyzing students' metaphors as a way to comprehend their motivational obstacles, emotional inclinations, and self-concepts (Ahmad & Abd Samad, 2018; Shaw & Andrei, 2020). While metaphor analysis has been mostly employed as a diagnostic instrument to categorize learner beliefs, recent research has begun exploring whether metaphors can intentionally be reformulated to transform learners' attitudes toward more positive and robust positions (Adami, 2023).

This question has drawn the attention of researchers, particularly in the Iranian EFL setting, where traditional grammar-based instruction and test-based assessment often limit authentic communication and increase learner anxiety (Sarkhoush, 2013). Researchers have found that students can take up negative metaphors such as "English is a wall" or "language learning is a trap" that are accompanied by estrangement and low efficacy (Esfandiari et al., 2022; Vadipoor et al., 2021, 2023). These metaphorical frames contribute to disengagement and affective resistance if left unchecked.

Furthermore, are often unable to articulate the sources of their frustrations. Decontextualized writing activities, context-referred grammar

rules without any contexts, and word-for-word memorization induce dissonance between thought and feeling. While similar exam-oriented restrictions are reported in East Asian settings (i.e., China, Japan), Iran's EFL system has particularly rigid curricula and reduced exposure to communicative English. Therefore, educators may enhance correspondence between instruction and students' lived contexts through scrutiny and intentional recontextualizing of metaphors (Cameron & Maslen, 2010).

However, many of the existing studies treat metaphors as diagnostic snapshots of learners' beliefs, rather than pedagogical levers of change (Anderson, 2018; Golfam & Nahavandi, 2021). Belkhir's (2021) study focused on conceptual clarity in grammar rather than on shifting learners' emotional engagement or attitudes. While Fugate et al. (2019) approach involved creative metaphorical tasks, it targeted memory and vocabulary retention more than motivational or affective change. Piquer-Piriz (2022) study addressed genre awareness and text construction, but it did not investigate learners' metaphorical self-perceptions or emotional stance toward writing. Metaphors like "grammar is the skeleton of the language" or "sentences are building blocks" in grammar instruction allow learners to visualize abstract concepts and create more organized mental models. Metaphorical representations like "writing is building a house" or "writing is a journey" in writing instruction are claimed to foster better text structure and rhetorical awareness (Magnusson & Godhe, 2019). Yet, the emphasis remained on structural outcomes, with minimal consideration of affective or motivational shifts in learners.

Coupled with this is too little attention to multimodal metaphors—those communicated via gesture, images, spatial representations, and digital media. In practice, students typically draw, move, act, or computer-animate their figurative ideas. Relatively few empirical studies have attempted to explore how multimodal metaphor teaching might alter learner attitudes (e.g., Farjami, 2012; Oxford et al., 2014). Recent calls in applied linguistics advocate for a more interventionist metaphor education—not just analyzing learners' metaphors, but actively reconceptualizing them through instruction (Adami, 2023; Cameron & Maslen, 2010). This fits with affective and motivational theory, which emphasizes that perceptions, beliefs, and emotions strongly influence engagement, persistence, and achievement in language learning (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Despite the growing worldwide need for metaphor-based teaching, the Iranian EFL context, particularly regarding instructional interventions to remodel learners' metaphors, has yet to be explored. The majority of the research conducted in Iran examines learners' metaphor production as an expression of attitude or experience, but not whether the latter can be

manipulated, and how changing it would influence learners' motivation, anxiety, or classroom behavior (Esfandiari et al., 2022; Vadipoor et al., 2021, 2023).

While earlier studies have undoubtedly enriched the field's understanding of learners' metaphorical statements, fundamental gaps remain in both empirical scope and pedagogical application, especially in Iranian EFL contexts. Most of the studies reviewed have dealt with learners' metaphor production as a static representation of their beliefs, rather than as an arena of transformation. In addition, relatively few studies have documented systematically how metaphor-based teaching influences learners' broader perceptions, affective engagement, or motivational orientations over an extended time.

Hence, this study tried to fill these gaps by exploring the pedagogical function of conceptual metaphors, particularly when taught by multimodal methods, in shaping Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards English learning. Rather than considering metaphors as static reflections of learner beliefs, this research considered them as active, reconstructive resources. Through developing a multimodal instructional intervention that combines verbal, visual, spatial, and gestural metaphorical tasks, this study aimed to explore whether such an intervention could facilitate restructuring learning from being a source of fear to one of potential, advancement, and personal importance. Therefore, the present study integrates CMT with affective-oriented SLA research and employs multimodal pedagogy in designing a metaphor-based intervention. By introducing verbal, visual, gestural, spatial, and digital tasks, it aims to foster more embodied and culturally responsive metaphorical engagement. To that end, this study sought to investigate the following research questions:

RQ1: What affective, cultural, and pedagogical factors shape Iranian EFL learners' positive or negative attitudes toward language learning, as expressed through their conceptual metaphors?

RQ2: How does multimodal metaphor-based instruction influence Iranian EFL learners' motivation, anxiety, and engagement in language learning?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Embodied Cognition

Conceptual metaphor theory (CMT), introduced by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), posits that metaphor is not merely a decorative feature of language, but

an essential process through which humans understand abstract experience by mapping it onto more concrete domains. This theoretical position maintains that our conceptual systems are rooted in sensorimotor, sensory, and cultural experience (Evans & Green, 2018; Kövecses, 2020). In learning settings, metaphors like "argument is war" or "learning is a journey" are not just stylistic structures; they are also accounts of how individuals affectively invest in learning episodes.

Other studies have revealed that learners utilize metaphors to explain their foreign language learning experience and overall express their motivational and emotional orientations (Ahmad & Abd Samad, 2018; Oxford et al., 2014; Shaw & Andrei, 2020). For instance, learners frequently describe language learning as a battle, game, journey, puzzle, or even a different country—metaphors that express their experiences of challenge, agency, or fun in the process. Such metaphors are not merely words but signals of learners' mental state and comprehension of learning. The simile "language learning is war" can predict conflict, competition, or fear of losing, while "language learning is a game" can indicate enjoyment, preparation, and built-in motivation.

Such metaphorical constructs are strongly entangled with affective variables like self-efficacy, anxiety, and emotional resilience. Metaphor users who use negative metaphors have reported greater language learning anxiety and lower perceived competence (Aripin & Rahmat, 2021; Farjami, 2012; Xu et al., 2022). Students who use positive language in learner talk (e.g., as a building project or an adventure) are more resilient and effectively engaged. Yüksel (2019) found that metaphorical analysis would be employed to predict motivation levels among students as well as assist teachers in diagnosing affective barriers before their activation on academic performance. This study employed a correlational design without a pedagogical intervention though, limiting its ability to show causal impact on learner motivation or performance. Therefore, knowing learners' metaphors provides teachers with a powerful diagnostic window to their students' cognitive-emotional world.

2.2. Empirical Studies

Metaphor-based instruction is an instructional approach that uses metaphors deliberately to develop students' conceptual understanding. It has been used in some areas of language instruction, such as grammar (Belkhir, 2021), learning idioms (Fugate et al., 2019), and instruction of writing (Piquer-Piriz, 2020). For instance, Pan (2019) showed that classroom use of metaphor led to significant metaphor change among Taiwanese university students over five weeks. However, this study was limited to a small group of university students and did not examine longer-term affective shifts such as sustained

motivation or reduced anxiety. The students who initially had portrayed English as "a barrier" or "a war" later used metaphors such as "a tool" or "a journey," which reflected more agency and less stress. These results show that metaphors are not fixed but can be dynamic, and that students can move from deficit to growth metaphors through skilled pedagogical facilitation.

Similarly, Xu et al. (2022) elicited students' metaphors and incorporated them into class discussion. They found that students developed more sophisticated and empowering learning definitions. Yet, the intervention in Xu's (2022) study was relatively brief and focused mainly on conceptual outcomes, with limited data on learners' emotional development or classroom behavior.

While much of the prior research has been concerned with cognitive advantages (e.g., improved memory or conceptual understanding), there is some support also for affective and motivational advantages. Metaphorical teaching students feel more confident and motivated when they do better, particularly when metaphors are experientially or culturally aligned with their own (Shaw & Andrei, 2020; Golfam & Nahavandi, 2021). Particularly, metaphors have the power to normalize difficulty by placing it within a larger process, e.g., "fighting a storm" or "solving a puzzle."

Most of the available research has a limited design, small sample size, or short intervention length, and targets vocabulary, idiom, or writing skill rather than affective change. Only a handful of studies, however, have considered the effect of instruction based on metaphor on students' general orientations to learning, rather than on orientations toward specific linguistic outputs. This extension of using metaphors to teach writing or grammar to using them to alter affective and motivational orientations has not yet been sufficiently studied in the literature. In addition, multimodal metaphor-based instruction, ranging from gesture through image to spatial configuration and digital media, is neglected despite the potential of engaging a range of learners' likes and learning styles (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Piquer-Píriz, 2020).

3. Method

3.1. Design

This study employed a sequential exploratory mixed methods design to explore intermediate Iranian EFL learners' conceptual metaphors for language learning and assess the impact of multimodal metaphor-based instruction. The research design was implemented to tap the depth of qualitative insight and the generalizability of quantitative data. The two-stage design enabled it to carry out an initial exploration of metaphorical conceptualization first with an initial

qualitative phase for the identification of salient metaphorical themes via metaphor elicitation interviews, followed by a quantitative phase that involved a quasi-experimental phase with a pretest/post-test, control group design. The qualitative results guided instructional design during the quantitative phase to ensure conceptual congruence among metaphorical categories and teaching content.

3.2. Participants

3.2.1. Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase consisted of thirty EFL learners who were studying English at two private language institutes (Iranian and Nasr Institutes) in the city of Ardabil, Iran, in the autumn term of 2024-2025. The participants were selected on the following conditions: (a) intermediate level of English proficiency measured through the Oxford Quick Placement Test (QOPT), (b) at least six months of previous formal English education, and (c) volunteered to reflect on and narrate their language learning experiences. The proficiency in English of the participants was determined using the QOPT, a standardized test widely used to group learners at CEFR levels. On the basis of their performance, all the participants were in the B1 intermediate category. This test, administered under standard conditions at the participant's institutions, acted as an objective placement criterion. The QOPT has been noted to yield high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients typically above 0.85 (Geranpayeh, 2003). It has also been noted to demonstrate notable criterion-related validity through its correlations with internationally recognized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. The sample size was determined based on the data saturation principle (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pilot metaphor elicitation sessions confirmed that, after collecting data from thirty students, no new conceptual metaphors were generated, implying the sample size was sufficient to record the richness and diversity of metaphorical patterns.

The gender-balanced sample (15 male, 15 female) was comprised of students aged 17 to 22 years, all of whom were at the intermediate level of proficiency based on institutional placement tests. The participants were selected from English language private institutes in Ardabil and had all had at least six months of formal English classes before their participation. The choice focused on enrolling reflective learners who were able to explain their language learning experience via metaphor elicitation interviews. The same educational background facilitated a guarantee for the shared starting point for interpreting students' metaphorical understandings.

3.2.2. *Quantitative Phase*

Quantitative phase involved 384 Iranian EFL intermediate-level students (192 males and 192 females), aged 18-25 years old, who were randomly recruited by simple random sampling from a larger population of students studying in private language institutions and schools in Ardabil in the autumn term of 2024-2025. Random sampling was simply achieved by using a random number generator in Excel, thus giving each eligible learner in the institutional rolls of enrollment an equal probability of selection. The method enhanced the external validity of the sample by reducing sampling bias. The English level of the participants was determined by the OQPT, a standardized test widely used for placing learners at CEFR levels. According to their scores, all the participants fell into the B1 intermediate level. This standard condition test, administered at the participant's institutions, was used as an objective placement criterion. All the participants had a minimum of six months of English education and were at intermediate level proficiency according to standardized institutional placement tests. The institution administered the OQPT, a 60-item multiple-choice test of vocabulary and grammar. It is a 30-minute automatic placement test that places learners in CEFR levels (A1 to C1) based on their scores. The required sample size was calculated using Cochran's formula (1977), and a little over-sampling ($n = 390$) was done to provide for incomplete or invalid responses. Of the 390 students who were invited to participate in the study, 384 provided complete and valid responses, resulting in a response rate of 98.46%. Incomplete or inconsistent responses ($n = 6$) were excluded from statistical analysis. There were 384 participants who were divided randomly into two conditions of instruction. Experimental Group ($n = 192$) Received a five-week sequence of instruction in metaphors using multimodal methods like visual prompts, gesture activities, diagrams, and guided composition. There were eight subgroups with 24 students each. The control group ($n = 192$) received five weeks of regular idiom instruction that was centered on translation, rote memorization, and dictionary use techniques. They were also divided into eight sub-groups with 24 students per group.

Both groups were taught by the same experienced instructor using the same time durations (three classes per week, each 60 minutes long) and in similar classroom environments to provide consistency and exclude instructional bias. The teacher instructed both groups under the same time and environmental conditions to provide consistent instruction and eliminate bias. To ensure instructional fidelity, two TEFL experts independently reviewed the lesson plans, instructional content, and tape-recorded sample sessions. Feedback provided consistency in content presentation and compliance with the intended methodology in experimental and control groups.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. A Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The qualitative data collection tool was a semi-structured interview guide, which consisted of metaphor elicitation questions (e.g., "Learning English is like...") to elicit participants' conceptualizations. The interview research questions were developed in Persian by the researcher following a rigorous review of the literature (e.g., Farjami, 2012; Xu et al., 2022) and were subsequently checked for validity by two experts in applied linguistics and metaphor pedagogy. Participants were asked to describe and elaborate on the metaphors used. The interview protocol was exploratory, allowing for follow-up questions to evaluate emotional and cognitive connections with each metaphor. Interviews were transcribed and coded thematically in MAXQDA version 24.

3.3.2. A Researcher-Constructed Questionnaire

Employing thematic categories from the qualitative phase, a researcher-constructed questionnaire is developed in Persian to quantify learners' knowledge of metaphors, language learning attitudes, and metaphor-based learning attitudes. The questionnaire included 31 items on a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*), measuring learners' involvement, affective reaction, and perceived benefit of conceptual metaphors on writing and grammar learning.

The questionnaire had high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.96) and acceptable construct validity, as confirmed by expert reviews, pilot testing, and factor analysis. Content validity was confirmed by three TEFL experts, and exploratory factor analysis (KMO = 0.72, Bartlett's Test $p < .001$) confirmed construct validity as it yielded a four-factor solution for 70% of the variance. Whereas the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was itself extremely high (0.96), all 31 items from the questionnaire were retained in the final version because exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed their construct validity and every item made a significant contribution to one of the factors obtained. There were no items eliminated after EFA because their communalities and factor loadings were greater than acceptable cut-offs.

3.4. Procedure

Initially, all participants gave a signed written informed consent form approved by the Islamic Azad University Ethics Committee. The consent form explained the purposes of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the

right to withdraw at any time without loss of any benefit, and the confidentiality of responses. It also included clear consent for audio recording of interviews. The form was written in the Persian language, which is the participants' mother language, to facilitate their understanding. The volunteers were given time to read the paper and pose any questions for clarification before signing the form.

Then, 30 language learners at an intermediate level were interviewed over two weeks to describe their general impressions and gut feelings regarding second language English learning. The participants were asked to provide as many metaphors as they could think of, with definitions to help identify the meaning. The interviews took approximately 30 to 45 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interviews were conducted in Persian, the participants' native language, to ensure clarity and expressiveness. The recorded data were then translated into English by the researcher, and the translations were reviewed and validated by two experts in translation studies and applied linguistics. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher utilized the application of icebreaker exercises and talk methodologies to generate a relaxed environment that facilitated good conversation. The researcher utilized the application of the English language in conducting the interviews. The quality of the qualitative information was ensured through member checking, where the participants were allowed to verify the transcription and interpretation of their responses for accuracy. Dependability was achieved by the research process audit trail and peer debriefing, enabling more dependable findings.

Thematic analysis served to identify recurring patterns and themes in participants' metaphorical constructions. Two trained coders independently analyzed 20% of interview transcripts, achieving a Cohen's κ of 0.82, indicating strong agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion. In fact, coding differences were resolved and agreed on together in order to ensure consistency and transparency. The coding procedure as a whole was recorded in an audit trail for dependability.

The experimental group was provided with a 5-week course of a metaphor-informed instructional program from metaphors developed during Phase 1. The course included multimodal metaphorical activities to teach idioms and support controlled writing. Twice a week (10 sessions) was the session frequency. The control group received traditional instruction focused on grammar rules and writing tasks via translation drills, rote memorization, and textbook exercises, mirroring common practices in Iranian EFL classrooms (Sarkhoush, 2013). At pre- and post-intervention phases, the same

questionnaire was completed by both groups to enable comparison through independent samples t-tests. To determine the results' validity and reliability, the questionnaire was piloted with thirty EFL learners and refined based on item-total correlation and factor loading analysis.

This rigorous methodological framework enabled a thorough exploration of the qualitative nature of metaphorical cognition as well as the quantitative effects of metaphor-informed multimodal instruction on students' grammatical and textual competence.

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher employed MAXQDA version 24 to identify the themes. Thematic analysis, following the principles of CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003; Kövecses, 2020), was employed to identify major metaphor categories and their emotional-cognitive interpretations. Cohen's κ was run to check inter-rater agreement. Thematic analysis applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step process: (1) familiarization with data by reading several times; (2) generation of initial codes with MAXQDA 24; (3) theme identification by collating similar codes; (4) ensuring themes against entire dataset were consistent and saturated; (5) labelling and specifying themes in line with conceptual metaphor categories and emotional-cognitive patterns; and (6) production of the final report.

SPSS version 25 was used for quantitative data analysis. The reliability coefficient for each subscale of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's α . Three applied linguistics experts reviewed the metaphor elicitation guide for content validity and cultural fit. Construct validity of the questionnaire was investigated through exploratory factor analysis.

4. Results

4.1. Results for the Qualitative Phase

In this section, results from thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of one-to-one interviews and focus groups with thirty Iranian EFL learners are presented. There were 15 males and 15 females, ranging from 17 to 22 years of age, chosen on the basis of the institutional placement test and learning background. Each participant was provided with a unique pseudonym (e.g., L10 = Learner 10) to ensure anonymity.

Through iterative coding and theme construction, five overarching thematic areas arose: (1) emotional factors, (2) perceived teacher role and support, (3) learning environment and cultural context, (4) multimodal and metaphor-based instruction, and (5) personal learning history. Each theme is

illustrated using representative quotes and frequency data contextualized (see Table 3). While frequency gives a snapshot of the thematic spread, depth and richness of metaphorical content are also considered, where themes were emotionally charged or co-constructed in focus group discussion. Students' metaphors reflected accurately how emotional experiences—motivation, confidence, fear, and frustration—shaped perceptions of learning English. Language Learning as a Journey (LLJ) had the subthemes of forward progress, obstacles, and milestones.

- Progress (n = 18) was a sign of advancement and growth in learning. Learner 4 (L4) stated, "When I learn something new in English, it's one step farther on a very long journey."
- Obstacles (n = 14) highlighted the emotional and cognitive barriers learners encountered. Learner 17 (L17) stated, "Sometimes it feels like I'm walking through mud, and my feet just won't move."
- Milestones (n = 11) represented meaningful achievements or breakthroughs. Learner 11 (L11) explained, "Passing IELTS was like reaching a checkpoint on my journey."

These metaphors reflect students' views of language learning as a dynamic, staged activity driven by determination and thought. The Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery (GPM) theme covered the manner in which the students intellectually and emotionally understood grammar with regard to puzzle, machinery, and maze metaphors.

- Puzzle (n = 12) portrayed grammar as something that one had to fit together logically. Student 13 (L13) said, "Each rule is like a piece of a big puzzle—you need to figure out where it goes."
- Machinery (n = 9) emphasized technical correspondence and accuracy. Student 19 (L19) said, "Grammar is a machine. If the pieces don't fit, it breaks."
- Maze (n = 6) reported frustration and perplexity. L25 posted, "Grammar is like a maze. Just when I think I've got it, I hit another wall."

These metaphors illustrate the way in which the learners cognitively construe grammar as a solvable puzzle or an affective struggle. Writing in English as Building or Crafting (WEBC) was metaphorically constructed around three subthemes: building, painting, and cooking.

- Building (n = 10) suggested structural planning and cohesion. Learner 14 (L14) explained, "Writing is like building a house. You need a strong base, then add bricks—your ideas."
- Painting (n = 6) emphasized expressiveness and creativity. Learner 9 (L9) reported, "It feels like painting. I want to make my ideas colorful and alive."
- Cooking (n = 5) illustrated experimentation and spontaneity. Learner 27 (L27) explained, "Writing in English is like cooking without a recipe. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't."

These metaphors place writing in the middle of structure and feeling, and creativity. The English Teacher as Guide or Gardener (ETGG) theme contained guide, gardener, and coach subthemes, the echo of how students effectively positioned their teachers.

- Guide (n = 13) emphasized direction and leadership. Learner 1 (L1) stated, "My teacher is like a GPS. She always shows me the way."
- Gardener (n = 11) conveyed concern and personalized care. Learner 5 (L5) stated, "She's like a gardener who knows how much each of us needs to grow."
- Coach (n = 7) represented pressure and encouragement. Learner 18 (L18) said, "My teacher is like a coach—she pushes us but also believes in us."

These metaphors illustrated that the students not only perceived their educators as sources of knowledge but as affective companions in the learning process. Emotional Metaphors (EM) theme integrated learners' affective state as reflected in metaphors of fear/anxiety, motivation, and confidence.

- Fear/Anxiety (n = 10) evoked emotional vulnerability. Learner 23 (L23) clarified, "It's like trying to swim in deep water with no one to help."
- Motivation (n = 8) was conveyed in light and growth metaphors. Learner 10 (L10) said, "Learning English is like lighting a candle in the dark. It gives me hope."
- Confidence (n = 6) was concerned with getting the balance right between courage and risk. Learner 6 (L6) described it like this, "It's like a rollercoaster—fun but scary."

These metaphors emphasize how language learning is not a matter of cognition but an affective process governed by inner states of affect. The

Perceived Teacher Role and Support (PTRS) theme consisted of four subthemes: guidance, trust, dependence, and disconnection.

- Guidance (n = 11) emphasized instructional direction and clarity. Learner 1 (L1) expressed, "My teacher is like a GPS. She always points the way to me."
- Trust (n = 7) was emotional and intellectual safety. Student 5 (L5) described, "She is like a bridge over a river—stable and supporting when things feel unstable."
- Dependence (n = 6) evoked nurturing metaphors. One student from Focus Group 2 described, "She's like a gardener who understands how much water each of us requires."
- Disconnection (n = 6) revealed emotional remoteness. L20 said, "My teacher is like a wall—no emotion, no connection."

These metaphors reflect a spectrum of affective teacher-student relationships from warmth and trust to coldness and distance. Learning Environment and Cultural Context (LECC) theme, students accounted for external pressures and supports in four subthemes: institutional stress, parental expectations, peer comparison, and autonomy/liberation.

- Institutional Stress (n = 10) was characterized by the pressure of high stakes. Learner 21 (L21) indicated, "Learning English in Iran is like running a race where nobody wants you to succeed unless you are perfect."
- Parental Expectations (n = 8) emphasized restraint and conformity. Learner 7 (L7) described, "It's like having tight clothes—you have to act a certain way."
- Peer Comparison (n = 7) reflected surveillance and suspicion. Learner 16 (L16) said, "It's like walking in a spotlight—always watched and judged."
- Autonomy/Liberation (n = 5) reflected positive change. Learner 2 (L2) said, "English is a window—through it, I see the world beyond my town."

Such metaphors are representative of emotional tension between freedom and control, driven by Iran's educational and social context. Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction (MMBI) theme enacted the students' response to metaphorical pedagogy in four subthemes of engagement, understanding, recall, and empowerment.

- Engagement (n = 8) focused on pleasure and bonding. In Focus Group 3, one student said, "Metaphors are shortcuts in my mind. I get it and remember better."
- Understanding (n = 9) involved knowledge organization in space. One of Focus Group 5 students remarked, "Before, grammar was like messiness. Now it's like putting things on a shelf."
- Remembering (n = 7) was enhanced with strong imagery. Student 16 (L16) stated, "Now I see tenses as layers in a cake—past, present, future."
- Empowerment (n = 6) reported affective change. One participant in Focus Group 1 stated, "Metaphors made grammar real. I stopped being scared of it."

These metaphors suggest that multimodal teaching facilitated deeper learning, emotional safety, and learner agency. Personal Learning History (PLH) was categorized into four subthemes: early success, early failure, language exposure, and self-image and identity.

- Early Success (n = 7) was connected with imagination and creativity. Learner 4 (L4) indicated, "English was like a movie I wanted to be in—my teacher told stories, and I loved it."
- Early Failure (n = 10) revealed internalized discouragement. Learner 13 (L13) indicated, "English has always been a locked door for me—too hard, too foreign."
- Language Exposure (n = 6) demonstrated how high-quality input prompted engagement. Learner 12 (L12) said, "English was music. I heard it on TV and wanted to join the song."
- Self-Image and Identity (n = 7) showed enduring emotional traces. Learner 19 (L19) said, "It still feels like climbing a wall with no grip."

These metaphors suggest that formative experiences have enduring effects on emotional stance and learner identity. In line with the Emotional Factors (EF) theme, Learners' internal emotional states were actualized through metaphors categorized under motivation, confidence, fear/anxiety, and frustration.

- Motivation (n = 9) was described in terms of hope and development. Learner 10 (L10) said, "Learning English is like lighting a candle in the dark. It gives me hope."
- Confidence (n = 6) was an ease. Learner 6 (L6) explained, "It's like a rollercoaster—fun but scary."

- Fear/Anxiety (n = 10) was emotional danger. Learner 23 (L23) explained, "It's like trying to swim in deep water with no one to help."
- Frustration (n = 5) appeared as blockage and confusion. Student 14 (L14) said, "I had been trying and trying but felt I was walking through fog."

These metaphors reflect the psychological depth of second language acquisition, where emotion deeply affects cognition and behavior. As reflected in Table 1, metaphoric information gathered from individual interviews yielded rich interactions among instruction, emotion, culture, and history in the construction of students' experience with English. While themes like anxiety and institutional stress were most frequently mentioned, others like empowerment and frustration were highly evocative due to their emotional currency. Overall, the findings indicate that metaphors are not only expressive devices but doorways into learners' social and psychological realities.

Affective value in this study refers to the affective charge and strength of a metaphor, i.e., the degree to which a metaphor evokes personal feelings such as fear, motivation, or confidence. Metaphorical valence refers to the positive or negative emotional value imbued in students' metaphoric statements (e.g., "English is a storm" = negative valence; "English is a window" = positive valence).

Table 1
Frequency of Factors

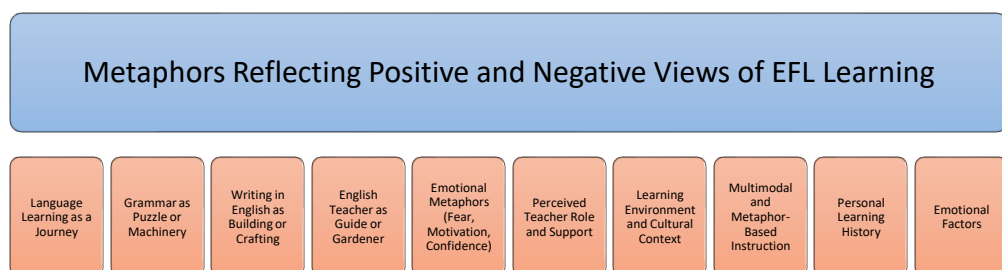
Theme	Subtheme	Frequency
Language Learning as a Journey	Progress	18
	Obstacles	14
	Milestones	11
Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery	Puzzle	12
	Machinery	9
	Maze	6
Writing in English as Building or Crafting	Building	10
	Painting	6
	Cooking	5
English Teacher as Guide or Gardener	Guide	13
	Gardener	11
	Coach	7
Emotional Metaphors	Fear/Anxiety	10
	Motivation	8
	Confidence	6

Theme	Subtheme	Frequency
Perceived Teacher Role and Support	Guidance	11
	Trust	7
	Dependence	6
	Disconnection	6
Learning Environment and Cultural Context	Institutional Stress	10
	Parental Expectations	8
	Peer Comparison	7
	Autonomy/Liberation	5
Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction	Engagement	8
	Comprehension	9
	Memory	7
	Empowerment	6
Personal Learning History	Early Success	7
	Early Failure	10
	Language Exposure	6
	Self-Image and Identity	7
Emotional Factors	Motivation	9
	Confidence	6
	Fear/Anxiety	10
	Frustration	5

The final themes of conceptual metaphors reflecting positive and negative views toward EFL learning are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Themes of Conceptual Metaphors Reflecting Positive and Negative Views Toward EFL Learning



To visually merge the metaphorical terms employed by participants, a word cloud was created based on the frequency and emotional valence of metaphors identified from interviews. The visualization gives an impression of the metaphorical topography of learners' emotional and cognitive experience of learning EFL as follows:

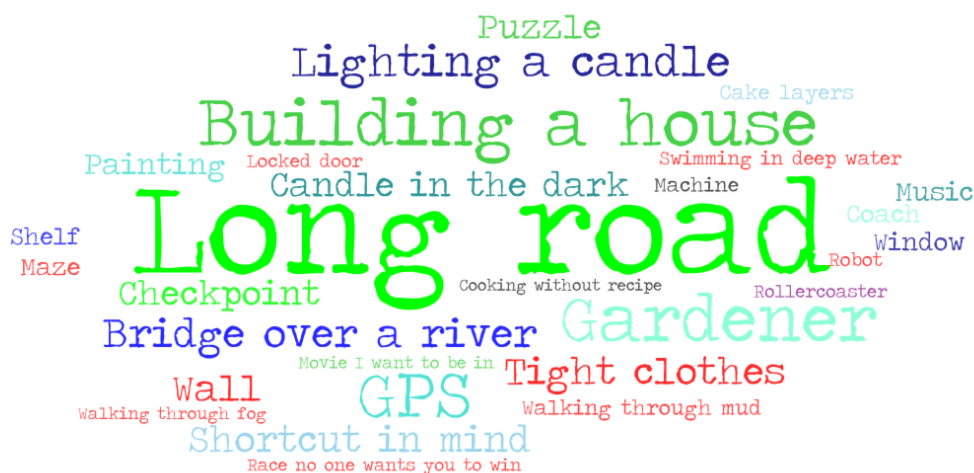
- Red colors represent negative metaphors, indicating learners' affective difficulties such as pressure, frustration, or anxiety (e.g., "Swimming in deep water", "Storm / Dark tunnel", "Race with backpack").
- Green and blue colors represent positive metaphors, indicating motivation, clarity, and power (e.g., "Climbing a mountain", "Lighting a candle", "GPS", "Planting a tree").

Color gradations also echo thematic categories: a) Language Learning as a Journey, Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery, Writing in English as Building or Crafting, English Teacher as Guide or Gardener, Emotional Metaphors, Perceived Teacher Role and Support, Learning Environment and Cultural Context, Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction, Personal Learning History, and Emotional Factors. This red-green-blue color code scheme not only enhances readability but also facilitates immediate visual comprehension of students' attitudes. Highlighting negative metaphors in red represents usual emotional and sociocultural barriers, while green and blue regions illustrate students' internal motivations and the pedagogical impact of metaphor-focusing teaching.

In brief, this visualization improves the argument that metaphor is more than a linguistic device but a window into learners' identities, emotions, and perceptions, and hence an extremely powerful tool for teaching and analysis.

Figure 2

Word Cloud of Learners' Conceptual Metaphors



4.2. Results for the Quantitative Phase

4.2.1. Independent Samples *t*-Test Results for Pre-Test Data

To establish pre-intervention initial equivalence between experimental and control groups, a comparative analysis was conducted of pre-test scores on ten constructs (Table 2). Each construct is a thematic domain evoked from metaphor-informed perceptions of English language learning (see Items 1–31) (e.g., Language Learning as Journey (LLJ), Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery (GPM), Writing in English as Building or Crafting (WEBC), and etc.).

Table 2
Descriptive Analysis of Pre-Test Group Comparison

Variable	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
LLJ	Experimental	192	2.80	0.71	0.05
	Control	192	2.76	0.70	0.05
GPM	Experimental	192	2.83	0.73	0.05
	Control	192	2.79	0.69	0.05
WEBC	Experimental	192	2.81	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
ETGG	Experimental	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	2.80	0.73	0.05
EM	Experimental	192	2.83	0.70	0.05
	Control	192	2.78	0.66	0.05
EF	Experimental	192	2.83	0.69	0.05
	Control	192	2.82	0.70	0.05
PTRS	Experimental	192	2.79	0.58	0.04
	Control	192	2.83	0.55	0.04
LECC	Experimental	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
MMBI	Experimental	192	2.79	0.73	0.05
	Control	192	2.82	0.69	0.05
PLH	Experimental	192	2.78	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	2.85	0.72	0.05

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation; *SE* = standard error. LLJ = Language Learning as a Journey; GPM = Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery; WEBC = Writing in English as Building or Crafting; ETGG = English Teacher as Guide or Gardener; EM = Emotional Metaphors; EF = Emotional Factors; PTRS = Perceived Teacher Role and Support; LECC = Learning Environment and Cultural Context; MMBI = Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction; PLH = Personal Learning History.

As reflected in Table 2, both the experimental and control groups consisted of 192 participants. A comparison of mean scores reveals minimal difference on all variables, reflecting that the experimental and control groups began at similar baseline levels on all measures. The pre-test results indicate a

high degree of equivalence for all measures between the control and experimental groups. Mean differences are minimal and statistically insignificant, and provide an effective baseline for comparison after the metaphor-based instruction treatment. This comparability strengthens the study's internal validity as well as ensures that any difference observed on the post-test can be more reassuringly ascribed to the treatment.

Assumptions of independent samples t-tests were checked before analysis. Levene's test for equality of variances revealed homogeneity of variances for most variables. Levene's test indicated that all constructs had the equal variances assumption met ($\text{Sig.} > .05$). The variables were all nearly normally distributed based on the skewness/kurtosis values. Additionally, the equal group sizes ($n = 192$ in each group) render the analysis even more robust, even when variances were unequal. In order to determine whether there were any statistically significant differences between the control and experimental groups at baseline, an independent samples t-test was conducted for all ten of the constructs that were being measured (Table 3).

Table 3

Independent Samples Test for Pre-Test

Variable	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	SE Difference	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper
LLJ	0.00	0.99	0.51	382	0.61	0.04	0.07	-0.11	0.18
GPM	0.08	0.78	0.57	382	0.57	0.04	0.07	-0.10	0.18
WEBC	0.04	0.83	0.32	382	0.75	0.02	0.07	-0.12	0.17
ETGG	0.33	0.57	-0.07	382	0.94	-0.01	0.07	-0.15	0.14
EM	0.08	0.78	0.83	382	0.41	0.06	0.07	-0.08	0.19
EF	0.48	0.49	0.07	382	0.94	0.01	0.07	-0.13	0.14
PTRS	0.63	0.43	-0.77	382	0.44	-0.04	0.06	-0.16	0.07
LECC	0.37	0.54	0.07	382	0.94	0.01	0.07	-0.14	0.15
MMBI	1.23	0.27	-0.39	382	0.69	-0.03	0.07	-0.17	0.11
PLH	0.27	0.60	-0.99	382	0.32	-0.07	0.07	-0.22	0.07

The tests indicated there were no significant differences between the groups on the variables at the $p < .05$ level, thus establishing baseline equivalence. Based on Table 3, the independent samples t-tests confirm that the control group and experimental group were statistically similar at the pre-test stage for all constructs being measured. No difference noted was statistically significant, and all the p-values were significantly greater than the

.05 level. This enhances the internal validity of the study by guaranteeing that any changes in post-test scores observed will be more securely attributable to instructional intervention, and not to pre-intervention differences between the groups.

4.2.2. Independent Samples *t*-Test Results for Post-Test Data

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of the experimental and control groups' post-test scores for ten metaphor-informed English language learning constructs.

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics of Post Test

Variable	Group	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SE</i>
LLJ	Experimental	192	2.80	0.71	0.05
	Control	192	2.76	0.70	0.05
GPM	Experimental	192	2.83	0.73	0.05
	Control	192	2.79	0.69	0.05
WEBC	Experimental	192	2.81	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
ETGG	Experimental	192	2.79	0.72	0.05
	Control	192	3.40	0.70	0.05
EM	Experimental	192	3.02	0.96	0.07
	Control	192	3.39	0.72	0.05
EF	Experimental	192	2.87	0.90	0.06
	Control	192	3.40	0.69	0.05
PTRS	Experimental	192	2.87	0.98	0.07
	Control	192	3.41	0.71	0.05
LECC	Experimental	192	3.00	0.95	0.07
	Control	192	3.40	0.72	0.05
MMBI	Experimental	192	3.17	0.86	0.06
	Control	192	3.36	0.69	0.05
PLH	Experimental	192	3.19	0.79	0.06
	Control	192	3.42	0.71	0.05

Note. LLJ = Language Learning as a Journey; GPM = Grammar as Puzzle or Machinery; WEBC = Writing in English as Building or Crafting; ETGG = English Teacher as Guide or Gardener; EM = Emotional Metaphors; EF = Emotional Factors; PTRS = Perceived Teacher Role and Support; LECC = Learning Environment and Cultural Context; MMBI = Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction; PLH = Personal Learning History.

The experimental and control groups had 192 participants each. For all the constructs, the experimental group had a better performance compared to the control group, which reflects the efficacy of the instructional intervention based on multimodal and metaphor-based teaching. The greatest noteworthy

mean differences were noted in Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction (MMBI), Personal Learning History (PLH), and Learning Environment and Cultural Context (LECC).

In all constructs, the experimental group exhibited consistently higher post-test means, with moderate to large differences. The steady trend of enhancement across cognition, affect, instructional perception, and learning history for all aspects testifies to the effectiveness of multimodal instruction grounded in metaphor in reframing students' conception of English language learning. These results will be augmented with statistical tests of significance between independent samples with independent samples t-tests to ascertain whether the differences obtained are statistically significant (Table 5).

Table 5
Independent Samples Test for Post Test

Variable	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
	F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	SE Difference	Lower	Upper	Cohen's <i>d</i>
LLJ	9.10	.00	4.46	349.30	.00	0.38	0.09	0.21	.55	0.45
GPM	10.09	.00	6.19	365.16	.00	0.51	0.08	0.35	.67	0.63
WEBC	28.59	.00	6.09	344.01	.00	0.53	0.09	0.36	.69	0.62
ETGG	12.41	.00	4.77	352.96	.00	0.41	0.09	0.24	.57	0.48
EM	6.75	.01	2.85	370.80	.01	0.23	0.08	0.07	.39	0.29
EF	3.70	.06	2.27	382.00	.02	0.17	0.08	0.02	.32	0.23
PTRS	5.66	.02	6.68	375.39	.00	0.45	0.07	0.32	.58	0.68
LECC	1.29	.26	10.28	382.00	.00	0.76	0.07	0.61	.90	1.05
MMBI	1.33	.25	13.07	382.00	.00	0.93	0.07	0.79	1.07	1.33
PLH	0.73	.39	11.68	382.00	.00	0.85	0.07	0.70	.98	1.19

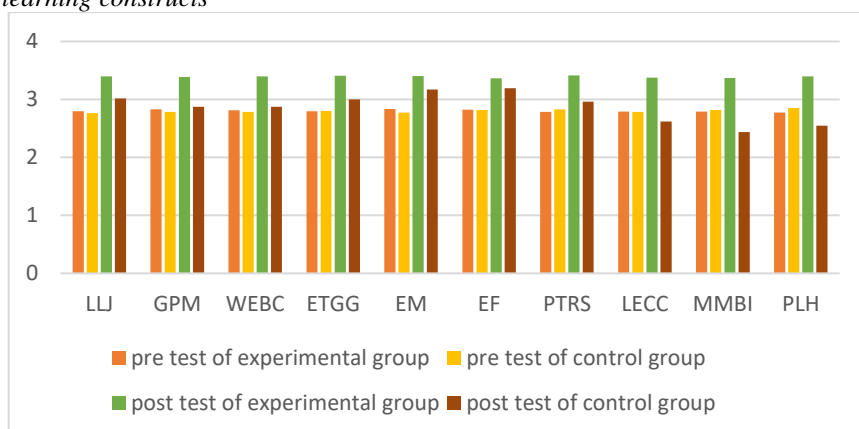
The equal variances assumption was checked using Levene's Test. All variances were assumed equal (Levene's Sig. < .05). The results in Table 6 also show that all the differences were statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level, with most p -values being less than .001, which indicates a significant effect of the metaphor-based multimodal instructional intervention. The independent samples t-tests confirm that all ten metaphor-related constructs were significantly enhanced in the experimental group compared to the control group. The intervention had statistically significant and educationally

significant effects, particularly on students' interaction with metaphor and multimodal input (MMBI), their self-concept and learning history (PLH), and their perception of the classroom context (LECC). These findings provide strong quantitative evidence that metaphor-grounded multimodal instruction benefited Iranian EFL learners' cognitive, conceptual, and affective engagement in English.

Figure 3 illustrates the pattern of the students' scores on ten big constructs—from Language Learning as a Journey (LLJ) to Personal Learning History (PLH)—measured in the experimental and control groups at pre-test and post-test stages.

Figure 3

Comparison of post-test mean scores for experimental and control groups across metaphor-based learning constructs



As can be seen in the figure, the pre-test scores on all the variables were nearly identical for the two groups, testifying to baseline equivalence. However, in the post-test phase, the experimental group showed consistent and high gains across all constructs, while the control group showed small gains or, in some cases, small declines. The highest gains in the experimental group were in Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction (MMBI), Learning Environment and Cultural Context (LECC), and Personal Learning History (PLH), testifying to the powerful effect of metaphor-enhanced, multimodal instruction. Conversely, the control group scores were relatively flat, especially in MMBI and PLH, with little change occurring without the intervention. This visual trend corroborates the quantitative findings that the instructional approach significantly enhanced learners' emotional, conceptual, and cognitive involvement with English across all dimensions assessed.

Among the ten measured constructs, the three with the largest effect sizes—MMBI, PLH, and LECC—were selected for deeper analysis and

interpretation, as they reflect the most transformative outcomes of the intervention.

One of the most significant impacts was evidenced in LECC, $t(382) = 10.28$, $p < .001$, with a very large effect size ($d = 1.05$), suggesting that metaphor-rich instruction had a highly significant impact on making students feel classroom and culturally relevant. Most importantly, there was a difference of large effect size in MMBI scores, $t(382) = 13.07$, $p < .001$, with Cohen's $d = 1.33$, indicating the practical significance of metaphor-based multimodal instruction. Finally, PLH scores were significantly higher for the experimental group, $t(382) = 11.68$, $p < .001$, with Cohen's $d = 1.19$, indicating more transfer of prior learning experiences to current learning.

The large effect sizes obtained, particularly in MMBI ($d = 1.33$), LECC ($d = 1.05$), and PLH ($d = 1.19$), reflect statistical significance—translate into actual pedagogical change. The strength of MMBI indicates that dissolving the distinctions between metaphors and multimodal strategies not only increases knowledge but also increases learner enthusiasm and engagement, following Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1990), which stipulates that verbal and pictorial input paired mutually enhance memory and understanding. In the same manner, the sudden increase in LECC and PLH reflects more effective engagement and use of personal experience in class instruction among students, meaning that metaphor-coached teaching can unveil English acquisition for EFL learners amidst difficult cultural settings. This statistical trend was reflected in qualitative data, where several students described grammar as “finally making sense” and “clicking like puzzle pieces,” reinforcing the idea that metaphor-based input aided structural understanding.

4.3. Integration of Qualitative and Quantitative Findings

The qualitative and quantitative phases' results converge in several areas of importance in the support of the effectiveness of metaphor-guided instruction. For example, the "Learning English is like lighting a candle" metaphorically comes under Motivation as an Emotional Factor, and converges with statistically significant gain in the LLJ (Language Learning as a Journey) construct ($t = 4.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.46$). Similarly, the metaphor "Swimming in deep water," a learner anxiety state, conditioned the EF (Emotional Factors) construct, which exhibited measurable though smaller improvement ($d = 0.23$), reflecting a small reduction in negative affect.

Themes such as "Climbing a mountain" (motivation) and "GPS" or "Gardener" (teacher guidance) had direct impact on the WEBC and PTRS constructs, with big effect size ($d = 0.62$ and $d = 0.68$, respectively), which are evidence of how metaphors can enhance students' view of learning and

teaching. Particularly, the significant effects of MMBI (Multimodal and Metaphor-Based Instruction; $d = 1.33$) and PLH (Personal Learning History; $d = 1.19$) correspond with the qualitative results of increased recall, engagement, and personal connection to learning. These bridges illustrate how metaphor-based instruction affected both the cognitive and affective domains of language learning, verifying the mixed-methods strategy's capability for a deeper insight into learner change.

5. Discussion

The qualitative data show that students' metaphorical constructions are not merely descriptive analogies but cognitive-affective blueprints guided by Iran's emotionally charged, exam-oriented education system. For instance, "planting a tree" contains not only hope but also long-term commitment in studying, possibly guided by delayed academic gratification within Iranian education.

Affect emerged as a significant influence on metaphor valence. Students generally employed affective metaphors—such as "planting a tree," "tightrope walking," or "lighting a candle"—that expressed hope, motivation, vulnerability, or fear. Consistent with the embodied metaphor theory of Lakoff and Johnson (2003) and further refined by Anderson (2018), with the notion that metaphor is not just a thinking device but also a feeling. These results also align with earlier studies (e.g., Aripin & Rahmat, 2021; Soleimani et al., 2020) that have established that affective states, above all, anxiety and confidence, tend to be expressed metaphorically by EFL learners.

The influence of their teachers on metaphorical conceptualization was also significant. Students who used the terms "GPS," "gardener," or "lighthouse" for their teachers anchored these metaphors with experiences of encouragement, clarity, and affective care. By contrast, metaphors like "robot" or "wall" were linked to rigid and isolating attitudes. These findings are in line with Ahmad and Abd Samad (2018), who assert that metaphor may be employed as a representation of relational identity, and with Vadipoor et al.'s (2021) statement that teacher affect is most important in the class emotional climate.

Sociocultural influences were also reflected in the metaphors of students. Students described English as a "race with impossible expectations" or "tight clothing" that reflected institutional demands and societal expectations. These metaphors concur with Dehghan (2013) and Getie (2020) that test-centric, high-stakes environments can generate metaphors of constraint rather than liberty. More positive metaphors, such as "window" or "door," captured learners' hopes for autonomy and possibilities from across the

globe, supporting Liddicoat's (2020) contention that language learning is an identity-embedded, culturally performed act.

A final dominant theme was the metacognitive impact of metaphor-instruction. Students described how visual, bodily, and conceptual metaphors promoted accessibility of grammar and language ability, particularly when complex structures were explained in terms of concrete, multi-layered pictures like "tenses as cake layers" or "grammar as shelves." This confirms earlier studies (e.g., Golfam & Nahavandi, 2021; Sodeiri & Rashidi, 2023) that arose with metaphor as a tool to reduce cognitive load and enhance learner activation.

Spatial and gestural metaphors, such as "tenses as cake layers" show how learning is brought about through embodied cognition via the use of metaphor. Such metaphors enable learners to create mental representations by activating sensorimotor schemas, an outcome that aligns with recent research (Kövecses, 2020; Macrine & Fugate, 2021) emphasizing the bodily foundation of abstract language meanings.

These findings show that Iranian EFL teachers may use metaphor-based pedagogy as not just a stylistic tool but also as an affective-filter-reducing scaffolding process. For example, using metaphors like "grammar as building blocks" or "tense as time-travel maps" can help learners internalize forms more naturally. Iranian teacher training courses should incorporate modules on metaphor pedagogy, especially for exam-focused courses where motivation is particularly tenuous.

The metaphors found in the current study also illustrate cultural aspects such as collectivism and high-stakes testing. The "tightrope walking" metaphor, for instance, might be able to speak to students' experience of dealing with tight academic demands and social demands. In Iran, where achievement at school is bound up with family and social status, metaphor-based teaching might serve as a coping strategy that allows students to reframe stress-inducing experiences in a less negative manner.

Taken together, the qualitative findings stress the point that students' metaphorical framings may provide a partial window into their beliefs, emotions, and learning identities. Even though the findings suggest that metaphorical framings may be representative of deep learner beliefs and affective orientations, such an estimation should be interpreted cautiously and within the sociocultural boundaries of the current Iranian EFL context.

Quantitative findings corroborated and added to the findings presented in the qualitative phase. Statistical testing revealed that the experimental group taught with metaphor-based instruction outperformed the control group on all

aspects of learner perception assessed. Statistically significant differences after testing were detected in such constructs as LLJ, GPM, and most significantly for MMBI, indicating substantial practical effects of metaphor-based pedagogy. This significant improvement in both affective (e.g., EM, LECC) and cognitive (e.g., GPM, EF) aspects supports the fact that conceptual metaphors enhanced students' overall engagement in the learning process. The large effect sizes obtained for LECC, MMBI, and PLH also suggest that students were not just processing information more effectively but restructuring their emotional and conceptual associations with English as a foreign language.

The overall findings of this research are in strong alignment with CMT (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003), that metaphor is a central mechanism through which humans conceptualize abstract domains via embodied experience. Students in this research utilized metaphors to reconceptualize difficult or ominous language concepts and cognitively and emotionally locate their experiences. Metaphors "writing as meaning-making" or "grammar as a puzzle" functioned both as conceptualization vehicles and as reflective representations of learner identity.

Also, the results of this confirm Kövecses (2020) and Macrine and Fugate (2021) in their positions that metaphor enhances embodied and affectively nuanced learning by linking abstract structures to the learners' sensory and affective experiences. In this case, metaphor turns out to be more than just a phrase but a pedagogical device of cognitive, affective, and sociocultural significance.

This study supports the pedagogical potency of metaphor emphasized in recent works (e.g., Kövecses, 2020; Macrine & Fugate, 2021; Sodeiri & Rashidi, 2023), extending their claims to broader learner identity formation and classroom engagement. However, while much of the previous research was focused on vocabulary learning or reading ability, this study extends the scope by focusing more on general learner perception, identity, and emotional attitude.

In the Iranian context, Nematollahi et al. (2022) and Vadipoor et al. (2023) identified instruction in metaphors as helpful for improving writing ability and classroom participation. The present research replicates and expands on these findings, emphasizing how metaphor also improves cognitive restructuring and motivational convergence of learners in a broader category of areas, such as grammar, fluency, and learner identity.

There is a noticeable difference when juxtaposing these results with with sociocultural studies like Lantolf and Thorne (2006), who argued that conceptual change is mostly a product of dialogic negotiation in interactive,

learner-centered contexts. Alternatively, the Iranian teacher-centered classrooms in this study demonstrated that metaphor pedagogy—albeit without peer scaffolding—can trigger rich conceptual change. This contrast could be attributed to cultural and contextual specificity, where teacher-led instruction still has robust cognitive and affective influence.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study examined Iranian EFL learners' metaphorical conceptualization of English language learning using a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative investigation revealed that students' metaphors were greatly influenced by emotional, pedagogical, sociocultural, and experiential factors. Hopeful metaphors (e.g., "planting a tree," "lighting a candle") were associated with hopefulness, persistence, and empowerment, while their negative counterparts (e.g., "walking on a tightrope," "being pursued") reflected anxiety and mental overload. Teacher scaffolding was seen to be key, with guiding metaphors ("GPS," "lighthouse") emerging in emotionally safe environments, as opposed to detachment metaphors ("robot," "wall") identified disengaged learners. Sociocultural pressures, such as test anxiety and societal pressures, impacted constraint metaphors, whereas access metaphors ("window," "door") attended to aspirational identities. Crucially, students taught metaphor-based, multimodal learning were found to produce more dense, more constructive metaphors and reported higher emotional engagement and conceptual coherence.

In the quantitative phase, results confirmed that metaphor-based instruction played a significant role in reinforcing learners' beliefs in various domains (e.g., grammatical consciousness, emotional commitment, teacher-student communication, learner self). Experimental group students showed statistically significant differences in post-test scores compared to the control group, supported by large effect sizes in such measures as MMBI, LECC, and PLH. The fact that pre- and post-test scores are not correlated suggests that gains in learners were not founded on prior attitudes but were shaped by the metaphorical intervention in itself. These findings point to the emancipatory role of metaphor in reconstructing learners' affective and cognitive engagement with English.

This study demonstrates that metaphors are not only stylistic adornments but crucial cognitive-affective resources that help learners engage emotionally, construct identities, and develop concepts in the foreign language learning of English. Instruction infused with metaphors, particularly when practiced through multimodal and participatory pedagogies, has the potential to revolutionize classroom discussion from rote learning to consequential

learning. Ultimately, conceptual metaphors are not merely descriptive—they are pedagogical instruments capable of transforming learner identity, emotional stance, and classroom agency.

A study confirms that conceptual metaphors, when pedagogically rooted, have the potential to make learners more aware of abstract concepts of language and make them emotionally resilient. Learners who were taught with metaphors recorded higher motivation, self-efficacy, and a more humane understanding of learning. Importantly, metaphors helped transform challenges into tolerant and meaningful experiences. These findings show that incorporating awareness of metaphors, elicitation, and multimodal modeling in teaching has the power to transform learners' engagement in language learning.

Metaphor-based teaching can provide strong advantages when applied through thoughtful and intentional classroom practices. To convert these results into effective strategies, EFL instructors may find the following techniques helpful: They may be provided open-ended metaphor questions such as "If grammar were a machine, what would it have?" or "If learning English were a journey, what problems would you encounter?" This evokes metacognitive thinking and expression of feelings. Students can be asked to draw, write into a performance script, or physically model metaphors—e.g., navigating down a 'tense timeline' or drawing a 'grammar toolbox.' Such bodily activities trigger sensorimotor knowledge and make abstract acquisition easier through visualization. Individual metaphor journals can be kept by students, recording how pictures and their view of learning English undergo a transformation over time. Reviewing the journals can allow teachers to assess shifts in learners' motivation, self-efficacy, and conceptual clarity.

Teachers can ask students to label devaluing metaphors (such as "grammar is a wall") and collaborate in reframing them into empowering versions (such as "grammar is a bridge" or "a puzzle to solve"), fostering emotional resilience and cognitive engagement. These practices allow metaphors to be recognized not only as embellishing words but also as pedagogical tools for enhancing classroom communication, identity construction, and emotional safety in high-stakes EFL contexts.

Future research would be concerned with evaluating the stability and growth of students' metaphorical schemas with longitudinal follow-up over a number of months. Cross-cultural comparative research would also reveal how metaphor functions differently in collectivist versus individualist education contexts. Experimental designs would be concerned with how metaphorical

framing influences peer-to-peer interaction, assessment practice, and teacher feedback both in traditional classrooms and virtual classrooms.

While the research offers strong evidence of teaching via metaphor, it has its faults. The relatively small, region-constricted sample may indeed generate cultural bias, limiting the generalizability of the results. Second, the self-report data used may be vulnerable to social desirability bias, especially in post-test descriptions. Most significantly, the five-week time period may not capture long-term retention or transfer of metaphor-directed learning. Later work ought to utilize delayed post-tests (e.g., 6-12 months later) to measure persistence of change. Findings may not generalize beyond similar high-stakes, teacher-centered EFL contexts. Replication in communicative-focused settings (e.g., Western Europe) would test the model's adaptability. While effect sizes were robust, the Hawthorne effect may have influenced outcomes, as participants knew they were part of an intervention.

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