

„ELIXIR, HIGHWAY CODE OR MYSTERY” – TEACHER STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING*

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Introduction: Investigating teacher students’ conceptions on various pedagogical concepts, reflections and attitudes on learning is important from the point of view of giving more insight into their underlying beliefs which may have an important effect of their teaching practices. The aim of the present research is to help to reveal the less conscious opinion and attitude in reference of the source concept. i.e. foreign language learning by using metaphor research. The participants of the research were teacher students, in consequence, another aim was to compare the attitude of teacher students on different specializations (teaching English language vs. other subjects).

Keywords: metaphor research, foreign language learning

Subjective theories of learning

Teachers’ views and beliefs have a significant effect on their pedagogical decisions and classroom practices, consequently, research into the construction of foreign language learning theories and teaching practices may inform teacher educators about the influences initiated by the training. Some researchers claim that these personal theories of learning are deeply embedded concepts based mainly on stereotypes about language learning and their role becomes even more significant “when an unexpected situation occurs, and such are frequent in the classroom environment, inexperienced, but also quite a number of experienced teachers, resort to

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safe routines and stereotype behaviours in order to feel more secure when facing a group of learners” (Michońska-Stadnik, 2016, p. 110).

However, Busch (2010) argues that personal theories and beliefs are subjects to significant modifications during the course of the training. She used the BALLI instrument (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory designed and first implemented by Horwitz, 1988) to investigate pre-service teachers’ beliefs over three years and she concluded that significant changes were found in different domains, for instance in beliefs about the length of time necessary for acquisition, difficulty of language learning and acquisition, the role of culture and the successful learning strategies. These changes of views may lead to deeper understanding and increased expectations of difficulty of language learning.

We can see that underlying subjective theories may have an essential impact on perceiving the nature of foreign language learning and teaching processes. In addition, they directly affect the teaching practices and procedures influencing the whole teaching career. Subsequently, teacher training courses should take into account student teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in order to develop efficient training programs. By raising students’ awareness of the differences between theoretical knowledge, personal beliefs and their actual teaching practices increases their self-reflection and may result in more conscious and stereotype-free pedagogical actions.

Metaphor as a research tool

Pedagogical studies use metaphor as a qualitative research instrument since it is believed to promote teachers’ expression of subjective beliefs and the formation of their professional experiences. In this sense, beliefs and actions are supposed to be interactive and influence each other, consequently, the use of metaphors gives insights into student teachers’ beliefs and their practices.

Metaphors are effective tools of human cognitive processes and communication through “mapping two often incompatible domains into one another” (Kramsch, 2003, p. 125). In this case, the metaphor fulfils the role of a filter through which elements of reality are represented in mental images. Oxford et al. (1998) argue that metaphor as a research tool should

be treated as an essential element of scientific research as metaphor can be used as “an essential mental tool, which should be harnessed as an instrument of imaginative rationality a problem-solving device applicable to all fields, including language learning and teaching” (p. 4).

Metaphor belongs to the qualitative research methodology and is connected to content analysis, however, quantitative procedures are also used on the categorical data (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Different approaches of metaphor research have been implemented in the field of language pedagogy. Some studies concentrate on learners’ metaphorical conceptualizations of their teachers (for instance Oxford et al., 1998), others focus on the process and context of foreign language learning. Kramsch (2003) investigated the views of university students learning a foreign language by completing the following sentence: “Learning a language is like ...”. She found that these responses reflected not only the students’ individual beliefs, but also the emotional side of the language learning process and the experiences of the foreign language classes, that is, the context of the learning. The present research is a sequel of previous research (Kisné, Furcsa and Molnár, 2016) which investigated students’ interpretations of the concept of learning by using quantitative and qualitative method: a metaphor study and a students’ questionnaire survey.

Research design

Process and data of research

A qualitative design was judged to be appropriate for highlighting the importance of teacher students’ conceptions on a vital pedagogical concept – foreign language learning, reflections and attitudes. The aim of the research was to help to reveal the less conscious opinion and attitude in reference of the source concept, i.e. what teacher students believe in foreign language learning. Furthermore, we inquired how different specializations of teacher students influence their views. The responses of students specialized in teaching English was compared to and contrasted with the answers of students specialized in other subjects.

The *tool of the empirical research* was qualitative metaphor research in order to reveal useful linguistic devices to capture conceptions of foreign language learning. In our opinion qualitative research yields a multitude of

heterogeneous pieces of information, which contains complex meaningful structures.

As for the *hypothesis of the research* we assumed that discrepancies between the conceptions of learning of students specialized in teaching English language and students specialized in teaching other subjects can be detected.

The *sample of the research* consisted of teacher students studying at Eszterházy Károly University, Jászberény Campus based on convenience sampling method. They were full-time students (I-IV grade): teacher students specialized in English language teaching (n=12) and teacher students specialized in other subjects (n=20).

The *methodology of the research* included qualitative forms (spontaneous metaphor analysis). In our metaphor analysis, students were asked to finish the following sentence: “*Foreign language learning is like ... because ...*”. The date of the research was September 2017, and data were processed in October 2017.

The *process of analysing* and discussing the metaphors developed by teacher students were carried out in four stages by using Cameron and Low’s (1999) methodology of metaphor analysis: (1) identification of metaphors - linguistic metaphors were listed as similes (2) metaphors were broken down into analysable parts to determine salient features and similarities categorization of metaphors (3) category development exemplar - metaphors were assigned to a conceptual category they represented (4) analyzation of the categories.

Results of the research

Metaphor analysis has long been used as a heuristic to raise awareness about theoretical assumptions and in our empirical research the spontaneously evoked metaphors concerning concepts of foreign language learning could be divided into different conceptual categories.

According to the results, totally 32 metaphors were identified by participants and they were collected under 9 conceptual categories. In consideration of the training, 4 categories could be distinguished in the group of student teachers specialized in EL teaching: *discovery*, *elixir*, *hobby*, *challenge* and 5 categories were given by the student teachers specialized in

other subjects: *discovery*, *elixir*, *hobby*, *pain*, *puzzle*. It can be noticed that 3 conceptual frameworks are based on similar concepts and subcategories.

First, the conceptions of teacher students specialized in English language teaching are analysed. The subdomains of the main conceptual categories and the metaphor collections can be seen in Figure 1, which were categorized on the basis of thoughts and explanations belonging to the metaphors. The four categories can be recognized as 1. discovery (n=5), 2. hobby (n=3), 3. challenge (n=3) and 4. elixir (n=1).

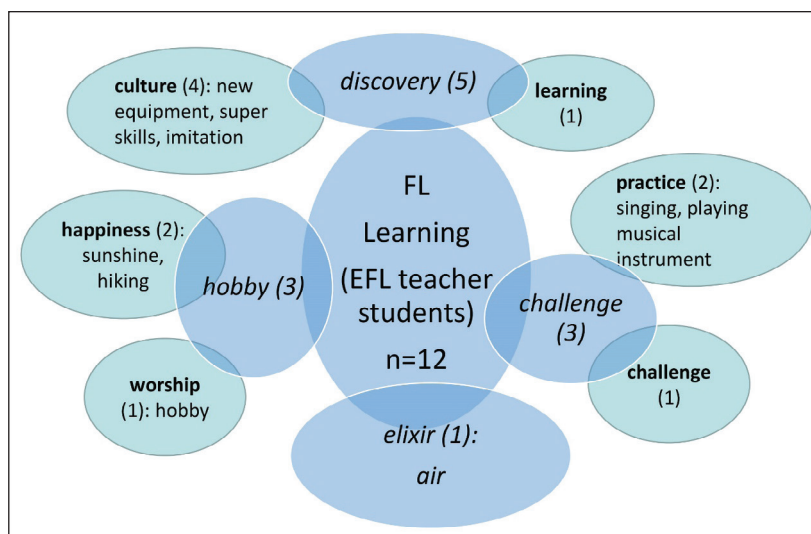


Figure 1

Metaphors and conceptual framework of the concept of FLL of EFL teacher students

In terms of the category of **discovery**, foreign language learning indicates the way of learning new things, a tool which helps you to get to know new cultures and people in the world. These thoughts are collected as the subcategories of *culture* and *learning*. The conceptual framework **hobby** refers to foreign language learning as free time activity and positive feelings identical to the groups of *happiness* and *worship*. The concepts of ‘sunshine’ and ‘hiking’ emphasize that language learning can be a great experience and joy for the student teachers. The metaphors evoking the thoughts referring to **challenge** were grouped into two subconceptual domains demonstrating the concepts of *practice* and *challenge*. The metaphors gathered in the group *practice* are specific from the point of view

that language learning is identified with music. Two notions are based on the terms of ‘singing’ and ‘playing musical instrument’ highlighting the required repetition. The association to the basic condition of living can be found in the group of **elixir** with only one metaphor (‘air’) that shows the necessity of foreign language learning in our life. These previous findings indicate that the perceptions about foreign language learning of student teachers specialized in English language teaching are diverse, generally positive and harmonious.

The essence of metaphor again helps to understand one kind of concept (foreign language learning) in terms of another also in the control group which consisted of student teachers specialized in teaching other subjects. Figure 2 represents clearly that the interpretative concepts of these students can be investigated in more aspects.

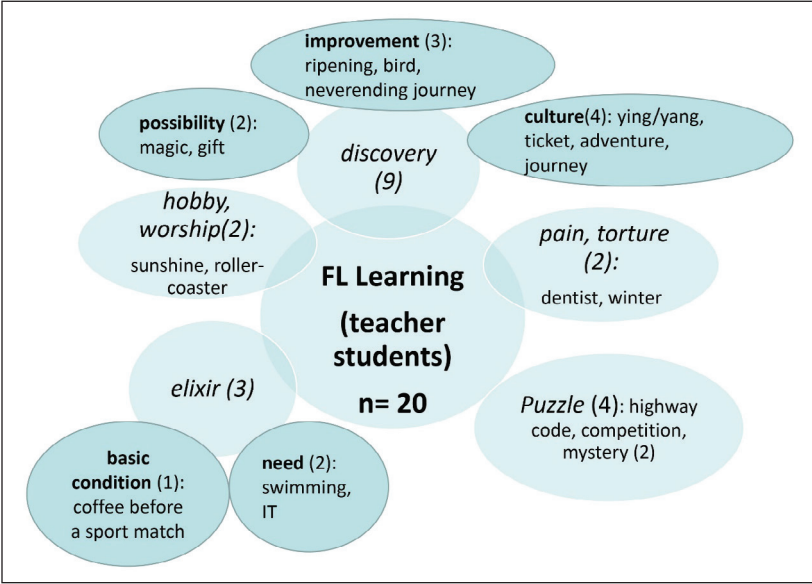


Figure 2
Metaphors and conceptual framework of the concept of FLL of teacher students of other specializations

The approach of foreign language learning as giving the chance of **discovery** plays the most important role regarding this group of students. The subconceptual domains of *culture*, *improvement* and *possibility* are the meaning transfer of the concepts demonstrating language learning as an

adventurous, exciting and effective process. Improvement can be indicated by the metaphors of ‘ripening’ or ‘neverending journey’, whereas the concept of ‘ying/yang’, ‘ticket’ or ‘adventure’ focuses on new and unknown, even mysterious places and information. It was found that the metaphors associated with the *basic conditions of living* and *need* could be categorized in two groups forming the conceptual framework of **elixir**. Students specialized in other subjects transcribed thoughts and notions into metaphors which they adore (e.g. ‘a coffee before sport match’, ‘swimming’, ‘IT’). It can happen that the previously mentioned activities refer to their specialization in teacher training (physical education, informatics) but this issue was out of the scope of the research. Although the conceptual framework of **hobby, pain and torture** could not be classified into different sub-conceptual groups, an important meaning was emphasized with these three categories. **Hobby** concerns the joyful and delighted activity of foreign language learning (e.g. ‘rollercoaste’). The metaphors suggesting concepts in the category of **puzzle** uncover that foreign language learning is a complex, global phenomenon. Students who preferred negative images concerning the key concept of foreign language learning (n=2) could not be underestimated since it was claimed that “*foreign language learning is like going to the dentist, because I always feel pain*”.

Comparing the research and control groups, the following comparisons and differences can be discussed. The most common type of response characterized the process of foreign language learning as a discovery. The subconceptual framework of **discovery** dominates in both groups (n=14) and the richest descriptions and most vivid ideas can also be determined in this category. There are three similar subconceptual domains (**Discovery, Hobby, Elixir**) referring to the idea of how pleasant, important and enriching activity language learning can be (‘sunshine, equipment, journey’). The attitude of the research sample can be described as predominantly positive towards language learning.

The differences of the notions transferred by the metaphors can be perceived in the categories of **challenge, pain** and **puzzle**. Metaphors detected language learning as challenge or procedure where much practice is needed were given by student teachers specialized in English language teaching. The ideas of language learning suggested by the control group include negative concepts referring to the difficulties and complications of learning (‘dentist, winter’). Learning can be interpreted by the metaphors

evoking from the thoughts of parts of knowledge, a route where barriers appear, a competition of winners and losers ('highway code, mystery').

Based on the typology of Simsek (2014), the distribution of language metaphors is presented in Table 1.

Type	Teacher students (n=20)	Metaphors	EL Teacher students (n=12)	Metaphors
Structural	3 (15%)	<i>mystery...</i> it has a lot of solutions; <i>highway code...</i> it consists of a lot of rules;	1 (8,3%)	<i>challenge....</i> there are many difficulties;
Functional	4 (20%)	<i>dentist....</i> it is a torture, if I am there; <i>sunshine...</i> I adore languages; <i>roller-coaster...</i> it is interesting and exciting; <i>coffee before a sport match/IT...</i> it is essential;	7 (58,3%)	<i>playing a musical instrument...</i> it needs a lot of practice in order to be perfect; <i>sunshine....</i> it makes me happy; <i>air....</i> I need it for my life;
Interactional	13 (65%)	<i>ying/yang...</i> we can be aligned with different cultures of people; <i>ticket to a new world....</i> I will be part of it; <i>journey...</i> it never ends;	4 (33,3%)	<i>journey....</i> it helps you to get to know a new culture; <i>super skill....</i> I can understand people all over the world; <i>new equipment/hobby...</i> I can learn something new

Table 1
Type of metaphors (based on the typology of Simsek, 2014)

As it is exposed among the 20 spontaneous metaphors created by student teachers specialized in other subjects, 3 structural (15%), 4 functional (20%) and 13 interactional types (65%) can be distinguished. Interactional metaphors (65%) outnumber and regard language as “a *ying/yang which aligns with different cultures*“ or “a *journey which never ends*” since it consists of typical patterns.

The structural concepts apprehend language as “a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning” (Richards and Rodgers, 2002, p. 20) for instance “*Foreign language learning is like a highway code because it consists of a lot of rules*”. The functional aspect emphasizes categories of meaning and function (“*Foreign language learning is like Information Technology because it is essential*”). Our results diverge from Simsek’s data (2014) because he claimed that according to the key concept

of *language*, functional metaphors denote 40%, structural and interactional terms signify similar percent of the whole research sample (30-30%).

According to the research group it can be observed that student teachers specialized in English language teaching suggest more functional metaphors than the control group (58,3% vs. 20%) and it is even higher proportion than the number of the functional notions (40%) in the research of Simsek (2014). One of the students obviously brought the metaphor out from its function: “*Foreign language learning is like air, because I need it for my life*”. The attitude of these students to language learning tends to be rather interactional (33,3%) since “*Foreign language learning is like a journey, because it helps you to get to know a new culture.*” Only one concept refers to the structural aspects of metaphor (8,3%) in this group of students and the given thought indicates some difficulties as parts or structures of language learning. To summarize the results in the point of the structure of metaphors, it can be understood that the main features of the student teachers’ thinking patterns are described clearly. Furthermore, essential differences can be perceived to foreign language learning between the attitude of the students in the research and control groups.

Reflecting on the main consequences of our metaphor research we applied a qualitative design because the study sought to investigate and designate the thinking patterns of 32 student teachers rather than to make statistical generalizations to a larger population. The present study aimed at exploring the role of foreign language learning in teachers training, which may have an effect on the beliefs and viewpoints of future teachers. It was supposed that discrepancies between the conceptions of foreign language learning of student specialized in teaching English language and students specialized in teaching other subjects can be detected. This hypothesis was established by the metaphor analysis mainly with the conceptual framework of **pain** and **puzzle**. Teacher students specialized in English language teaching highlighted the importance of communication and social competence and they are much more addicted to innovation, new places and people. Teacher students specialized in other subject areas have more negative experience and in the light of their concepts, language learning is seen as a process where they need to cope with different rules while learning a language.

Despite the previously mentioned facts, a lot of similarities can be identified in the perceptions according to the conceptual framework of **discov-**

ery, hobby, elixir. Obviously, intercultural approach is required by both groups. Most of the student teachers have instrumental motivation, positive attitude and feeling to foreign language learning. One of the most important results is that learning a language is a natural and essential activity in their studies and life.

Conclusions

The aim of the present study was to analyse student teachers' metaphors concerning foreign language learning in order to have a deeper understanding of their beliefs about learning which is thought to have an effect on their classroom practices and pedagogical procedures and to focus on awareness of professional practice. Creating metaphors make teacher students not only face their different learning concepts but also influence them to change attitudes and motivation concerning foreign language learning. The present study provides directions for further research and some pedagogical implications (using quantitative research methods, expanding research sample e.g. student teachers of Hungarian teacher training colleges).

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