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In-service English Teachers' Conceptions about 'Learning' and 'Learner': Reflections from the Shift in Language Teacher Education

Görev Yapmakta Olan İngilizce Öğretmenlerinin 'Öğrenme' ve 'Öğrenen' Algıları: Dil Öğretmeni Eğitimindeki Değişimden Yansımalar

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Abstract

This study investigated 24 in-service English teachers' conceptions about 'learning' and 'learner' through metaphor analysis. A metaphor elicitation task including the statements "Learning English is like …………… because…………………." and "An English language learner is like …………… because…………………." was used to gather data. Results showed that the teachers' conceptions about 'learning' and 'learner' were not the reflections of a traditional understanding. Rather, their conceptions which generally seemed to be learner-centered could be attributed to their undergraduate education and the policies guiding English language teacher education programs over the course of the teachers' undergraduate education.

Özet

Bu çalışma görev yapmakta olan 24 İngilizce öğretmeninin 'öğrenme' ve 'öğrenen' algılarını metafor analizi yolu ile incelemiştir. "İngilizce öğrenmek……………….. gibidir çünkü…………………." ve "İngilizce öğrenen ……………gibidir çünkü…………….." ifadelerini içeren metafor üretme aracı veri toplamak için kullanılmıştır. Sonuçlar, öğretmenlerin 'öğrenme' ve 'öğrenen' algılarının geleneksel bir anlayışı yansıtmadığını, aksine genel anlamda öğrenen merkezli algılara sahip olduklarını ortaya koymuştur. Öğretmenlerin öğrenen merkezli algıları, lisans eğitimlerine ve lisans eğitimleri sürecinde İngilizce öğretmenliği lisans programına rehber olan öğretmen eğitimi yaklaşımlarına atfedilebilir.

1. Introduction

Although the main interest of researchers and practitioners in English language teaching (ELT hereafter) has traditionally been on the methodology to teach the language, recently, especially with the growth and changes in technology, science, and education, there has been a shift towards understanding who teachers and learners are, and what they bring to learning environment. As generally acknowledged in contemporary understanding of teaching and learning, learners reflect what they have previously been exposed to or taught, including the schooling patterns in their minds, their habits acquired in family, their individual characteristics, so on so forth. Similarly, teachers, even when they are considered as learners before becoming teachers, bring the patterns regarding what and how they have previously been taught and the understanding that they have developed on their way to the teaching profession. Therefore, their teaching practices are very well known to be affected by their previous schooling which, most probably, has the most evident effect in shaping their understanding of who learners are, and how they learn.

In this regard, the core component in teachers' already established understandings towards learners and learning is, with no doubt, their mental conceptions. Baş and Gezegin (2015) state that increasing number of studies have started to investigate how these conceptions are made sense of. In line with this, Coşkun (2015) suggests that while the word 'teaching' creates an image of the teacher in people's mind, 'learning' is viewed more like a student-centered activity depending on the attitudes and motivation of the learner. In terms of the conceptions about 'learner' and 'teacher', Cook-Sather (2010) also claims that, in educational settings, learners are seen as individuals doing what adults tell them to do, so they are perceived to absorb what adults offer. Therefore, while teachers are seen as in charge and responsible, students are seen as subjected to others or as subjects to be acted upon by others. Though this is a generalization, stakeholders in language teaching and learning may have various conceptualizations about language learning. Hence, as one of the key parties in teaching and learning processes, practicing teachers' views should also be investigated to see how they conceptualize the act of language learning.

Apart from their conceptions of language learning, it is of crucial importance to understand teachers' perspectives regarding the doer of learning act, in other words the language learner. Due to individual differences, each student brings his or her own personality, experiences, and background to the classroom. How all these differences are considered by language teachers may reflect teachers' conceptions of language learning and teaching as well. Therefore, it can be claimed that teachers' perceptions regarding language learner and language learning are the two closely interrelated concepts.

Moreover, as in all human beings, teachers have their own concepts in their mind which determine their decisions and actions. As a means of examining people's views

on several aspects, metaphors are among the important mental structures of human mind to reflect individuals' mental conceptions, emotions, and thoughts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 2009). Besides, Saban (2010) claims that metaphors do not actually demonstrate something new, but they help us see what we do or experience in a new light. For this reason, they are specifically employed while examining esoteric, abstract, and novel concepts (Yob, 2003). In this regard, defining or expressing views on such concepts as learning and learner may not be as easy as it is considered. However, metaphorical language helps researchers gather participants' views regarding these relatively difficult concepts in concrete terms (Pishghadam, Torghabeh, & Navari, 2009).

Due to the difficulty in understanding the idiosyncratic belief system of individuals, studies revealed conflicting results for the conceptions regarding 'learning' and 'learner'. Despite relatively more agreement on 'learner as a raw material' or 'learner as a developing organism' with a more traditional point of view (see Kalra & Baveja, 2012; Şaban, 2010), the case for 'learning' is just the opposite. While it is popularly seen as a way to explore (Farjami, 2012), it is also considered as a task to complete (Baş & Gezegin, 2015), or as a powerful factor that may change the world (Kalra & Baveja, 2012). Therefore, as can be seen, there is no unified conception with regard to 'learning' and 'learner'. Moreover, from a local point of view, the way that these two concepts are perceived may reflect the common sense among English language teachers in Turkey. With their conceptions in mind, it may also be possible to observe the effects of developing, modernized, and contemporary foreign language teacher education on teachers' understandings and practices.

In line with this, understanding practicing teachers' metaphorical conceptions regarding *learning* and *learner* may reveal the common sense upon language learning and teaching, and also the quality of language teacher education. Considering these, this study is an attempt to uncover metaphorical conceptions of a group of in-service English language teachers regarding what *learning* is and who *learners* are. With this aim in mind, this research aims to answer the following research question;

What are the conceptions of Turkish EFL teachers with regard to 'learning' and 'learner'?

Metaphorical perceptions of language learning and learner

A metaphor is defined as "a figure of speech in which a name, descriptive word, or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to which it is literally applicable" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2007). Metaphors reflect mental images by bridging peoples' experiences and professional thinking (Saban, 2003). Pishghadam et al. (2009) provide the major difference of metaphorical analysis from other research techniques by emphasizing its strength in gathering peoples' insights and attitudes without using direct questions. Also, metaphors have the strength

in placing participants as external observers to their beliefs. Only by this way can implicit beliefs be turned into explicit statements.

In this regard, metaphorical investigation, as an alternative method of investigation to the classical means of research, has gained popularity recently. *Language learning* and *learner* have also been among the concepts investigated through this method (see Alger, 2009; Eren & Tekinarslan, 2013; Kalra & Baveja, 2012; Saban, 2010; Pishghadam et al., 2009). Studies including metaphor analysis are not only limited to the views of teachers on learning and learner. In their studies, researchers have also been concerned with students' metaphors on themselves as learners (see Kamberi, 2014; Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011), as well as on language learning (see Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Farjami, 2012).

The related body of literature upon teachers' conceptions of *learners* through metaphor analysis mainly shows two classifications. In an extensive study, Saban (2010) reports that metaphors produced by prospective teachers studying in different departments at faculty of education are classified into 12 conceptual themes. These themes are 'raw material', 'developing organism', 'empty vessel', 'significant being', 'absolute compliant', 'knowledge recipient', 'knowledge reflector', 'knowledge constructor', 'defective being', 'social participant', 'knowledge carrier', and 'social capital'. Another classification belonging to Kalra and Baveja (2012) is simpler when compared to that of Saban (2010) including 'learner as elements of nature', 'learner as object of use', and 'learner as a being or a human being'. Though constructed with different expressions, both categorizations include almost the same types of metaphors. Even though the results were obtained from different cultures (Turkey-India), it is interesting that in both studies learners were commonly considered as raw materials that could be molded and as objects, or growing organisms. In these popular conceptual themes, metaphors such as *dough, clay, water, iron, plain sheet of paper, empty pitcher, and food* were used for 'raw material'; and *plant, flower, bird, drop of water, child, apprentice, and newborn calf* for 'objects or growing organisms'. Although prospective teachers' metaphors concerning learners differed in relation to gender, program type, and grade level, the prevalent theme was 'raw material' (see Saban, 2010). This may show us the fact that most of the prospective teachers still view their learners as someone who needs to obey the rules and someone to be shaped by teachers.

On the other hand, studies making use of metaphor analysis for the examination of *learning* have been more common (e.g. Alger, 2009; Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Eren, & Tekinarslan, 2013; Farjami, 2012; Kalra & Baveja, 2012; Saban, 2010; Pishghadam et al., 2009). The perspectives of various groups such as prospective teachers and EFL students were examined, and different categorizations regarding learning emerged (e.g. Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Eren & Tekinarslan, 2013; Kalra & Baveja, 2012). Nesting their study on the metaphors generated by prospective teachers, Eren and Tekinarslan (2013) found two main categories, 'learning as a challenging and an explorative process' and 'learning as a basic human need'. Classification of Kalra and Ba-

veja (2012) investigating prospective teachers' metaphors with regard to learning was similar to that of Eren and Tekinarslan (2013) including categories, such as 'learning as elements of nature', 'learning as objects of use', 'learning as a being', 'learning as a process', and 'learning as a product'. In their classification, 'learning as elements of nature' was the dominant category including metaphors which mostly mean that learning can enlighten the world. *Learning* investigated through metaphors was also categorized in a recent study by Baş and Gezegin (2015). First-year EFL students' metaphors regarding English language learning were put into the following categories, 'a task', 'a journey', 'a progress', 'an enjoyable activity', 'a period of life', 'a competition', 'a torture', an unending process', 'an engraving agent', and 'nurturing agent'. The dominant categories were 'learning as a task' with metaphors, such as *going fishing, losing weight,* or *labyrinth*; 'learning as a journey' with metaphors such as *adventure, compelling lap,* or *travelling;* and 'learning as progress' with metaphors, such as *learning to walk as a toddler, being pregnant,* or *learning to socialize.* Studies concerned with the act of learning came up with the results suggesting that learning, especially for the prospective teachers and students, is something to be completed as a challenging job at school rather than a life-long process, and their views mostly stem from traditional teaching methods they have been exposed to.

As can be seen, although there have been studies investigating metaphors regarding learner and learning produced by students and prospective teachers, studies examining in-service teachers' conceptions about *learner* and *learning* are scarce. Considering the scarcity, this study is supposed to contribute to the related body of literature.

2. Methodology

Participants

A group of EFL teachers (N=24) teaching in different parts of Turkey, ranging from the Aegean to the Southeast, provided the data for the current study. All were graduates of ELT departments of various universities in the country. Since they were young teachers having been teaching for about six or seven years, age range was between 21 and 30. Majority of the group consisted of female teachers (n=14) which is the general case in the country. Of the 24 teachers, the great majority (n=18) was teaching at public schools, mostly with a 25 or 30-hour workload per week. Similar to the general situation in public schools in the country, the teachers were generally teaching to the groups consisting of 21 to 30 students in each. As the 4+4+4 education model was in act when the data were collected, the teachers were teaching in all stages in the schools where they taught. While some were teaching at grades 4-8 (n=14), some others were teaching at grades 2-4 (n=4), 9-12 (n=9), and even pre-school (n=2).

Instrument And Data Collection

In order to address the research question, data were collected through a metaphor elicitation task. This was the methodology in almost every other study making use of metaphor analysis (e.g. Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Farjami, 2012; Pishghadam et al., 2009; Saban, 2010). The participants were asked to write as many metaphors as possible regarding their conceptions of *'learner'* and *'learning'*. Thus, the metaphor elicitation task included the statements *"learning English is like …………… because…………………"* and *"an English language learner is like …………… because…………………."*.

Before the teachers were asked to fill in the statements, there was a very brief section devoted to the elicitation of some very basic participant information, such as age, gender, teaching level and experience, workload, and number of students in their classes. Right before the task was used for data collection, so as to assure its workability, it was pilot-tested with two English language teachers who had a very similar profile to the participant group. As suggested by Dörnyei (2007), this was to test the instrument on a similar group which was almost the same with the group that the instrument had been designed for. In other words, this was also to prove its validity by checking the clarity and comprehensibility of the instructions and the statements given to elicit the teachers' metaphorical conceptions. After ensuring that it could be used, the researchers proceeded to the data collection. As the participants were teaching in different cities in the country, it was not possible to reach them personally, therefore, e-mail administration was used. The teachers were contacted through their e-mail accounts with an attachment to the data collection tool. Within the set deadline, the teachers were requested to turn back with as many metaphors as possible. Most of them could keep up with the deadline, but for those who could not, reminders were sent with an extended deadline. After, responses were received from the whole group, the researchers sat down for the analysis, the details of which are provided in the following section.

Analysis

As it was previously stated, the study aimed to obtain metaphorical conceptions of a group of in-service English language teachers' about *learning* and *learner*. This also required a metaphorical analysis which is actually quite evident in its method of data collection. Although principally it is a qualitative technique, it also includes quantitative procedures especially in the categorization stage by the quantification of frequencies and percentages of the metaphors produced by the teachers. Therefore, for the analysis, the following six stages suggested by Saban, Koçbeker and Saban (2007) were utilized. They were namely; *naming, clarification/elimination, deciding the unit of analysis, categorization, establishing inter-rater reliability*, and *quantification of the qualitative analysis*.

In the first stage, the metaphors produced by the participants were written down

into two columns; metaphors and explanations. The initial analysis of the raw data revealed 54 metaphors produced for '*learner*' and 49 metaphors for 'learning'. Following this stage, the aim in the second stage was to identify 3 necessary elements: the topic (i.e. learning and learner), the vehicle (i.e. the term to which the topics are compared), and the ground (the nature of the relationship between the vehicle and the topics) (see Saban et al., 2007). At this stage, 3 metaphors from '*learning*' and 11 metaphors from '*learner*', with a total of 14 metaphors, could not be placed clearly under any category. Therefore, they were omitted from the analysis. Before categorizing all well-articulated metaphors, the number of metaphors needed for the formation of a category was decided to be at least 2. The purpose in limiting the categorization was to reach a unified theme reflected through each categorization. Therefore, each category should include at least two metaphors, and these metaphors should be produced by different participants. In the categorization stage, for the categorization of metaphors regarding '*learner*', the researchers were inspired by the studies of Saban (2010) and Kalra and Baveja (2012). Similarly, some other researchers inspired the researchers for the categorization of '*learning*' (see Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Eren & Tekinarslan, 2013; Kalra & Baveja, 2012).

The fifth stage, namely establishing inter-rater reliability, was an important step in qualitative studies. In order to establish it, the list including the metaphors and their explanations was separately analyzed by sorting 43 learner-related metaphors into 7 and 46 learning-related metaphors into 8 categories. In order to estimate the level of agreement, simple percentage calculation was performed by examining the ratio of all coding agreements over the total number of coding decisions made by the coders (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The level of agreement was found to be 93.6% for the metaphors regarding 'learning', and 86.4% for the other metaphors with regard to 'learner'. As a result, the two percentages revealed through level of agreement between the researchers suggested an overall 90% agreement. According to Trumbull's (2005) suggestion, reaching an agreement level between 80 and 90% is adequate to establish the inter-coder reliability. Therefore, the expected level seemed to be reached. As a result, for the final stage of analysis, the analysis of data regarding both conceptions was quantified through calculating frequency and percentage of each category.

3. Findings and Discussion

As stated earlier, this study attempted to find out a group of in-service Turkish EFL teachers' conceptions of '*learner*' and '*learning*' through the use of metaphor analysis. For these concepts participants produced a total of 89 (43 metaphors for 'learner' and 46 metaphors for 'learning') metaphors which were sorted into different categories by considering their explanations as well. The categories emerged for 'learner' were 'raw material', 'knowledge recipient', 'knowledge reflector', 'defective being', 'someone in need', 'discoverer', and 'constructer'. Among these, 'someone in need', 'discoverer', and 'constructer' were the categories that were not available in the litera-

ture and they were named by the researchers as a result of the detailed analysis of the metaphors produced by the teachers. Besides, *'learning'* was put into the following categories: 'learning as a challenging process', 'learning as an explorative process', 'learning as a basic human need', 'learning as an unending process', 'learning as a progress', 'learning as an enjoyable activity', 'learning as a means of pleasure', and 'learning as a construction'. The categories of 'learning as a means of pleasure' and 'learning as a construction' were added in the list by the researchers as the metaphors produced in this study could not be placed under the categories suggested by the previous studies.

This means, explanation made a lot sense for putting the metaphor under a certain category. For this reason, the same metaphor (e.g. baby or bridge) could be placed under different categories. The metaphors produced by the teachers regarding their conceptions of *learner* are presented below (see Table 1).

Table 1. Teachers' Conceptions of 'Learner'

Learner category	Metaphors	f	%
Discoverer	Map, cook, foreign person (2), mountaineer, actor/actress, adventurer, child, discoverer (2), explorer, traveler, detective, tourist, inspector, ship, baby	17	39.5
Knowledge reflector	Parrot, sleeping bear, cleaning lady, actor/actress, imitator, baby, stars	7	16.2
Someone in need	Baby (3), a new born baby, Obelix	5	11.6
Knowledge recipient	Recorder, sponge, baby, alien	4	9.3
Defective being	Fish, imaginary person, old man, runner on the treadmill	4	9.3
Raw material	Puppet, white page, tabula rasa	3	6.9
Constructer	Designer, builder, grinder	3	6.9
Total		43	100

As presented in Table 1, majority of the teachers interpreted learner as *discoverer* (*f*=17) with 15 different metaphors. Learners' curiosity, interest, and wish to learn something new were among the major elements of this category. Metaphors, such as *discoverer, explorer, and traveler* reflected the idea that learners were considered as human beings in search of something new. The following categories except for 'constructor' could be claimed to reflect traditional views of teachers or behaviorist aspects of teaching. Among these categories, 'knowledge reflector' (*f*=7), in which the role of learner is accepted to reflect teacher's knowledge mostly without producing any new knowledge (Saban, 2010), was the second frequent category. Metaphors, such as *parrot, imitator,* and *baby* showed that learners are viewed as knowledge reflectors who do not add their perspective, rather imitate the teacher. In line with the idea of 'knowledge reflector', learners were also accepted as 'someone in need' (*f*=5) with the metaphors of *baby* who should always be cared of. This seems to be quite similar to what Cook-Sather (2010) suggested through the commentary "students are seen

as individuals to be acted upon" (p. 3). It was interesting to find out that the teachers considered themselves as the main source of knowledge and learners as the passive recipients of information. Of all the categories, the most negative one was 'defective being' (*f*=4) which claims that learners are either intellectually defective with the metaphors of *fish* and *old man* or emotionally defective by focusing on the lack of motivation and wish to study. It was also interesting that learners were accepted as 'raw material' (*f*=3) which can be shaped by teachers. The category of learner as 'constructor' (*f*=3) embodies the notions of constructivist approach, which supports the view that learners should construct their own knowledge from their own experiences and teachers should play the role of facilitators or mediators rather than the mechanic role of disseminator of knowledge (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Keeping all these in mind, the results regarding the in-service English language teachers' conceptions of *learner* can be said to differ from the related literature to a large extent. First of all, in most studies (e.g. Kalra & Baveja, 2012; Pishghadam et al., 2009; Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011; Saban, 2010) the most prevalent learner categories indicated behaviorist notions. Learners were mostly accepted as passive recipients of knowledge (Pishghadam et al., 2009) to whom knowledge is transferred (Pishghadam & Pourali, 2011). Besides, learners were also mostly characterized as 'raw materials' that can be molded into any format teachers want (Kalra & Baveja, 2012; Saban, 2010). Contrary to the common understanding, the prevalent category in this study was 'discoverer' which contains metaphors representing more contemporary and learner-centered views. The other category representing the same up-to-date views concerning learners was 'constructor'. These two categories constituted almost half of the metaphors generated by the teachers. For these reasons, teachers' relatively more learner-centered conceptions could be attributed to several factors, such as their undergraduate education, English language teaching policy of the period during which they were students at education faculties, and also the university professors by whom the teachers were educated, and who also inspired the teachers to appreciate learners as stakeholders in learning and teaching process, thus as active participants of their own learning. As previously mentioned, in this study the teachers producing their conceptions regarding learning and learners did not have more than seven years of experience in teaching profession. Therefore, their undergraduate education period, which was generally between 2003 and 2008, fell on the change that took place in 2006 when there was a restructuring in initial teacher education programs. With this change, the main aim was to change teacher education programs with scientific findings of research studies and to cover the tenets of constructivist approach (Yavuz & Zehir Topkaya, 2013). The constructivist point of view guiding the policy change in 2006 was in favor of the understanding for the education and preparation of teachers who were pretty well aware that learners construct their own learning by relating what they already know to what they will learn. Therefore, the message aimed to be conveyed to teachers through the constructivist approach was *let your learners construct knowledge rather than spoon-feeding them*. In line with this change in

language teacher education programs, teachers' understandings of learners, learning, and teaching could have been affected in a positive way resulting in more learner-centered conceptions. However, the remaining 50% of the metaphors were sorted in 5 different categories. Although they were not the dominant categories, the hidden message behind these categories was that learners were passive recipients (*knowledge recipient*) and reflectors (*knowledge reflector*) of teachers' knowledge, or defective beings (*lacking the necessary capacity to succeed*). Similar to Cook-Sather's (2010) commentary upon the common understanding of learners as individuals to be acted upon, though not very popularly, learners were also considered as *someone in need* and *raw materials* which can be shaped by teachers. Despite differences, the results were also in accordance with those of Saban (2010). Some of the least mentioned learner metaphors belonged to the same categories in both studies, such as *defective being, knowledge recipient*, and *knowledge reflector.*

So as to make more sense of their conceptions, the teachers were also asked to produce metaphors with regard to 'learning'. Table 2 presents what the researchers came up with.

Table 2. Teachers' Conceptions of 'Learning'

Learning category	Metaphors	f	%
Learning as an unending process	Running forever, the sea, rain, infinite, life, an endless road, an ocean, diving in the ocean, an endless race	9	19.5
Learning as an explorative process	Being a detective, travelling, painting, a discovery, solving a puzzle, ocean, cooking, beginning a new journey	8	17.3
Learning as progress	A collection of a lot of things, a box, bridge (2), broadening your horizon, rain, spaceship	7	15.2
Learning as a means of pleasure	A sweet dream, loving something, cheesecake, blossoming, breathing, body-building, eating a delicious meal	7	15.2
Learning as a challenging process	Mountain climbing, riding a motorbike, puzzle, having a baby /being a mother, a long but rugged road, carrying a heavy burden on your back	6	13
Learning as a construction	Building something, building a house (2), doing puzzle, playing jenga	5	10.8
Learning as an enjoyable activity	A game (2)	2	4.3
Learning as a basic human need	Looking for water in a desert, breast-milk	2	4.3
Total		46	100

As presented in Table 2, the analysis for the teachers' conceptions of learning, revealed 8 categories. When the results are closely examined, it could be seen that all categories' frequencies and percentages are quite close to each other. However, learning was mostly characterized as an unending process (*f*=9) by putting emphasis on the role of life-long learning in foreign language learning. In line with the popular metaphorical categorization of 'learner as discoverer', the teachers commonly interpreted 'learning as an explorative process' (*f*=8) with such metaphors *as travelling,*

discovery, and *beginning a new journey.* Additionally, learning was considered as *progress* (*f*=7) and *as a means of pleasure* (*f*=7) with the same number of metaphors. Although it could be claimed that in what way people describe 'learning', it cannot be denied that that description would eventually indicate some kind of progress due to the fact that learning something helps and also requires progressing. However, some metaphors, such as *box, bridge,* or *broadening your horizon* with their explanations specifically emphasized improvement and development for achievement and completing something. 'Learning' was also characterized as *a fun activity* in two categories (*learning as a means of pleasure* and *learning as an enjoyable activity,* *f*=2). In both categories, there was a positive conception towards learning. Apart from these, despite unpopularity compared to other categories, the teachers also focused on the necessity (*learning as a basic human need,* *f*=2) and difficulty (*learning as a challenging process,* *f*=6) of learning. It shows that teachers' conceptions of learning were also affected by the changing nature of teacher education programs and needs of learning. In connection with the conception of learner as 'constructor', learning was also considered 'as a process of construction' (*f*=5) by the teachers as they used metaphors like *building* and *putting pieces together to create their own learning.*

All the categories gained through the detailed analysis showed that learning was not interpreted in a traditional way in which learners just play a passive role and learning is only accepted as knowledge transmission from teacher to learners. Quite the contrary, learning was characterized as a life-long process through which learners have fun, progress further by improving themselves, explore, learn, and construct their own knowledge. The results show both differences and similarities when they are compared to the existing body of literature. First of all, *learning as exploration* was among the most popular categories in the study of Farjami (2012) as well. However, in the literature 'learning' is mostly considered as a challenging task (Baş & Gezegin, 2015) which is not the dominant category in this study. Similarly, learning was also seen as a pleasure in some other studies (e.g. Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Farjami, 2012). Moreover, only few participants described learning as a construction process in many studies (e.g. Baş & Gezegin, 2015; Eren & Tekinarslan, 2013; Farjami, 2012).

The reason why learning was mostly characterized as an unending process might have been affected by European Union's lifelong learning programs, which refers to the activities undertaken throughout life to improve knowledge within personal, social, and employment-related perspectives (MEGEP, 2006). Although this program as a policy concept belonged only to the most developed countries in the beginning, in recent decades, developing countries like Turkey have also taken role in employing it so as to transform the society and improve skills of individuals (Yazıcı & Ayas, 2015). Considering this, it seems that in-service language teachers who were learners just a few years ago adopted life-long learning strategy both as learners and teachers, and this view was observable in their conceptions of learning. Likewise, as previously mentioned, the effect of prevalent constructivist approach during the teachers' under-

graduate education period could have played role upon their conceptions of learning as a constructive and an explorative process. This approach holds the view that learners construct their own meaning in the learning process by taking the responsibility for their own learning (Can, 2009). Also, with the responsibility and guidance of teachers, learners discover and construct what they discover themselves. Therefore, education faculties, and approaches and philosophies embodied there could be regarded as significant factors shaping future teachers' conceptions of learning and learner and eventually their ways of teaching the language.

4. Conclusions

As previously stated, the current study attempted to find a group of in-service English language teachers' conceptions regarding 'learner' and 'learning' through metaphor analysis. While learner was mostly viewed as a *discoverer* reflecting the idea that learners try to find the information themselves and they have the wish to explore, some other metaphors, even limited in number, were produced to describe learners as *constructors* of knowledge. Learners were also seen as *raw materials* to be shaped by teachers. Similarly, learning was considered as an unending exploration. Therefore, the teachers' conceptions for learners and learning were consistent with one another.

Despite the availability of some other metaphors representing traditional understanding of learner and learning, these two terms could mostly and positively be explained with learner-centered and modern views of teaching and education. The main approach (constructivist) embodied in the teachers' undergraduate teacher education could have played a significant role in the formation of these metaphors. Apart from this, the teachers' experiences with learners, positive or negative experiences they gained after starting teaching, learners' interest and motivation for language learning, and many other factors could have also affected the teachers' conceptions regarding learning and learners. However, it could be understood that the schooling that the teachers went through during their undergraduate education as prospective teachers and with no doubt the academics that the teachers worked with played a major role in shaping their understandings concerning the two main elements, namely *learner* and *learning,* of learning and teaching process.

Keeping these in mind, this paper could give insights into how English language teachers perceive language learning and learners. The results could suggest that the philosophy guiding teacher education programs could be a key factor in shaping future teachers' understandings with regard to such key concepts; *learning and learner*. Hence, traditional teacher-centered views could affect teachers' conceptions of 'learning' and 'learner' as well. These concepts are all interrelated. Although teachers criticize learners and their learning, they avoid finding mistakes on their own and their way of teaching. Therefore, in order to be more objective, teachers should leave the understanding that 'teachers are without mistake'. They should rather be taught that

they may be responsible for learners' failure as well. This may help them see learners and learning more objectively.

Beyond the conclusions and implications, as in any other study, this study also has some limitations which could inspire future researchers. First, though the number of participants is not a major concern of qualitative studies, when we think of the last stage of analysis which is related to quantitative measurements, the number of participants in this study may seem to be limited. Therefore, future research should include a larger sample to have more varied and inclusive body of metaphors representing learning and learner. Second, some of the metaphors produced by the teachers were eliminated because they could not be categorized. These metaphors could be placed into some conceptual themes in another study if more metaphors indicating the same or similar concepts emerge. Therefore, some data may have been lost. Certainly, there are a lot of possibilities for further research beyond this small scale study. In addition to larger sample suggestion, interested researchers may conduct a study comparing more and less experienced teachers' conceptions regarding learning and learner in order to elaborate on the findings of the current study. By this way, it could be possible to find an answer to the question if ELT methodology and approaches employed during teachers' undergraduate education have any effect on teachers' understandings and conceptions concerning learning and learner. Last but not the least, such a metaphorical study, with no doubt, becomes better and stronger in its effectiveness to explain the reasons lying behind teachers' conceptions of learning and learner if it is supported and complemented by one-on-one interviews. Therefore, future studies may also include interview data which could enable the study to become richer and in-depth.

5. References

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