



Indonesian EFL Students' Perception of Online Learning as Expressed through Metaphors

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Abstract

Language learning can get two essential benefits from metaphor, as it is an effective tool for language learning and a useful tool for revealing abstract, obscure, and tacit ideas. One of the most problematic phenomena in education today is online learning (OL). Although all higher learning institutions have adopted it for almost three years, OL is still far from being effective. To get a better understanding of OL, this study aims at exploring EFL students' experience and perception of OL employing metaphor analysis. Involving 69 students of a private university in Jakarta, Indonesia, data was collected online through Google Form in which the participants were asked to complete a sentence running "Online learning is like ... because ...". The gathered metaphors were then analyzed using the content analysis procedures. The results showed the most predominantly metaphors produced by the participants are positive (32 items), followed by negative metaphors (25 items), and neutral metaphors (2 items). Based on the discussions, some suggestions are recommended for further research and OL practices improvement.

Keywords:

EFL, metaphor analysis, online learning, English Education

INTRODUCTION

Language learning can get two essential benefits from metaphors. First, metaphor is an effective tool for language learning. Based on his research on figurative language psycholinguistic cases (Gibbs, 2002) posited that metaphor is a property of communicative interaction because, in the proper circumstance, rather than its literal meaning, people mostly use a message's metaphorical properties. Thus, to completely

learn a language, one must be able to apply and encode its expressions in compliance with the conceptual system in which the language is arisen, learning activities with metaphors can facilitate this. Second, metaphor analysis is a powerful method of extracting conceptions from texts (Pitcher, 2013). Metaphor analysis facilitates one to make sense of abstract, obscure, new, or uncommon phenomena. As a result, more and more researchers have adopted metaphors to interpret perceptions, beliefs, assumptions, motivation, and practices in a diverse range of research fields, including politics (Charteris-Black, 2005), environmental science (Carolan, 2006), and health (Chopra & Doody, 2007) and education (Hagstrom et al., 2000); (Bozik, 2002)).

One of the most challenging features in English teaching and learning today is the implementation of online learning (OL). Although students have experienced OL for several years. many of them find OL unpleasant, ineffective, and even frightening. Consequently, its effectiveness varies widely. One of the main causes is stakeholders' different perceptions of online learning itself. When a learning method is implemented based on various, not to mention contradictive, understandings, it is doomed to failure. This study aims at analyzing EFL students' metaphors to gauge what they think of online learning.

Metaphor study is one of the oldest linguistic studies and has drawn terrific attraction to scholars since the ancient age. A countless variety of views about metaphor have emerged, but they are generally grouped into two schools, i.e. traditional metaphor, and modern metaphor. Emerging since the era of Aristotle, traditional metaphor is viewed as a rhetorical phenomenon, a transfer from one word to another, which is used as a tool for enhancing an expression of beauty and forcefulness. It was believed that only gifted linguistic experts or authors can well manipulate words to make and use metaphors. Modern metaphor began to attract scholars to take a completely new look at metaphor soon after Lakoff and Johnson (1980) proposed cognitive theory of metaphor (CMT) describing that metaphors are not only a figurative language or a decorative device but also a matter of thought and action that assist human beings to make sense of the world. The such sense-making process through metaphors takes place when something unclear or unknown is explained in terms of another thing that is clear and known.

In the light of CMT, Schnitzer & Pedreira (2005) accentuated that metaphors function as strong mental models with which people can understand complex phenomena in their world by relating them to something familiar, concrete, or previously experienced. In other words, metaphors can help us increase understanding. Stuart and Wilkelfend (2022) posited that metaphors, which are found in published papers, working hypotheses, policy documents, lecture slides, grant proposals, and press releases serve different functions. However, the most striking advantage they offer is way they enable understanding, of a theory, phenomenon, or idea.

What forms a metaphor an effective cognitive device is a process of constructing connections between two different ideas (the concrete and the abstract) or the projection of one source domain onto the target domain. Thus, anytime someone wants to inquire and understand something abstract, obscure, new, uncommon, or highly speculative, using metaphor is worth trying (Gilster, 1997). Shuell, (1990 102) elegantly accentuate

this by saying “If a picture is worth 1,000 words, a metaphor is worth 1,000 pictures! For a picture provides only a static image while a metaphor provides a conceptual framework for thinking about something.” Metaphors, however, are invaluable in understanding development not only due to what they say about the world but also because they cause people think (Stuart & Wilkelfend, 2022).

Defined as a form of education delivered over the Internet, OL practice is not new in English education. It started with the initiation of using the internet and mobile technologies in language teaching and teaching in the 1990s (Pardede, 2020). Also known as digital learning, eLearning, online courses, or distance learning, OL enables teachers and learners to interact with each other, irrespective of geography. Thus, it also allows students to engage with any institution and learn at their own pace and flexibility.

OL is differentiated into a triad of synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid/blended learning (Perveen, 2018); Dorsah & Alhassan, 2021)). Synchronous OL, such as live lectures, live students presentations, or live group seminars hosted via video conferencing or chat, permits students to interact with instructors or presenters and get their questions answered in real time. Using this mode, the participants meet at a prearranged time and conduct live learning sessions. (Fidalgo et al., 2020). Since they are in an environment like the traditional face-to-face class, the students and teachers enjoy a more active environment. On the other hand, in asynchronous mode, the participants are not possible to work simultaneously. Conducted over the internet, it is not time-bound. Interaction is conducted through online discussion boards, instant-messaging tools, and news feeds. It also enables teachers to deliver learning materials in several formats (audio, text, and/or videos). Students can access the course materials whenever they need them and take and submit assignments at their own pace. Each of the modes has its strengths and limitations. Therefore, to enhance OL, educators have started to mix synchronous and asynchronous modes, resulting in what is popularly called blended or hybrid OL.

Since its commencement, OL keeps on developing as it paves the way for novel and inventive methods of teaching and learning. Various studies have shown that it offers many benefits, including effectiveness in instructing students, professional development and running credit equivalency program at the post-secondary level, cost-effectiveness to fight the increasing cost of formal education (De la Varre et al., 2001); Koller & Ng, 2014; (Lorenzetti, 2013). In addition, OL also provides positive learning outcomes, including higher test scores and students satisfaction (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000)), an increase in students’ engagement with the learning material, a sense of community, and a reduction in withdrawal or failure ((Feeley & Parris, 2012)’ (Baron, 2017)). In the field of English teaching, OL implementation also keeps on growing.

Despite the various advantages it offers, some literature reviews (Bernard et al., 2003; McCutcheon et al., 2015), however, showed there was no significant difference in the learning achievement of students studying through face-to-face versus online learning. What is more, OL is still challenging for many teachers and students, particularly those who are not ready. This becomes more evident during the shift from in-class learning to OL classes amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Some studies found that students and teachers encountered problems in OL due to their unavailability and/or unfamiliarity with digital

gadgets, digital literacy deficiency, unsteady and low internet connection, inability to afford adequate internet quota, and lateness in joining online classes (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020) reported that instructors having online teaching experience expected fewer challenges than those having no experience in online teaching. Additionally, quality and timely student, teacher, and technical support interaction are highly needed (Nambiar, 2020) Thus, students' and teachers' proper familiarity with OL systems and tools and the availability of infrastructure and equipment, significantly affect its effectiveness.

In the educational field, there is a consensus that students' perception is a crucial success factor in any learning method enactment, including OL (Akkoyunlu & Ilmaz, 2008) because students are among the principal stakeholders of learning. Students' perception of OL is constructed by various factors, including their experiences, socio-psychological variables, the affordance of utilities, and familiarity with the technology that is at the heart of OL. Their perception of OL highly influences their level of engagement, while engagement is vital to student learning and approval in online courses since they have fewer opportunities to get involved with the school and teachers (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Thus, by considering what students perceive about the nature of online learning, the 'down to earth' meanings of the learning method could be probably described and can be considered as a basis for increasing online learning effectiveness and efficiency.

Students' perceptions of OL have been studied quite extensively using surveys, case study, or exploratory mixed methods (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Bailey & Lee, 2020). However, research on students' perception of OL using metaphor analysis, i.e., a method of extracting conceptions from texts, including a body of literature, an interview transcript, or other forms of written material (Pitcher, 2013) is still rare. Considering the discussion in the previous section, this study was conducted to determine what online learning is to EFL students. To approach the purpose, the following research questions will be addressed: (1) What are the metaphors used by EFL students for the concept of online learning? (2) Under which categories could the metaphors used by EFL students for the concept of online learning be collected?

METHOD

This study took place at a university in Jakarta. The participants were students from the English Literature and English Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Letters and Languages. They were selected purposively from the fifth and seventh semesters to ensure that they had had the proper experience of attending OL classes. As many as 69 students were selected. Each of them was then invited to reflect on his/her own OL experience and perception through a metaphor. The metaphors, which were used as the data in this study, were gathered online through Google Forms in October 2022. Some days before writing their metaphors, to ensure that they could create metaphors well, a discussion and practice in creating a metaphor were held in the participants' classroom. In the Google Form, the participants were asked to complete a sentence running "Online learning is like ... because" The sentence is intended to prompt a metaphorical

statement in which the source domain (the first blank) is mapped onto the target domain (Online Learning) and the rationale explains how the metaphor is sensible to the participant.

The collected data were analyzed using the content analysis method, primarily aimed to encode the content as data (Berg & Lune, 2019). The data analysis was conducted in four stages: (1) coding the data to define the metaphors, (2) forming categories by organizing similar codes, (3) ensuring reliability and validity, and (4) calculating the metaphors' frequencies and categories. At the metaphors coding stage, expressions of comparisons, i.e., the first part of the participants, metaphor sentences made were analyzed by coding the concepts that the participants likened OL to. Any eligible statements, i.e. those without the meaning of analogy and rationalization, or are answered only in a single word, or statements with dissimilar comments were not included in the next analysis step. The categorization stage was conducted to analyze the justification of the metaphor written in the second part of the sentences. Stage three, validity and reliability assessment, was conducted by asking two different lecturers the expertise in metaphors to check the researcher's analysis, particularly in terms of the codes and categories compatibility. In this context, the formula of (Miles et al., 2014), i.e., $(\text{Reliability} = \text{Consensus}/\text{consensus} + \text{Dissensus} \times 100)$ was employed, and it was determined that the agreement percentage was 94.2% (65 consensuses and 4 dissensuses). After the codes and categories were determined, the metaphors' frequencies and categories were calculated using the Microsoft Excel program.

RESULTS

In the study, metaphors were firstly coded and separated into categories denoting themes could be related to OL literature. This section, discusses positive, negative, and neutral metaphors separately in terms of the resulting categories and findings. To increase the study's reliability to put the discussion in context, direct quotations are incorporated. Interpretation is presented after the emerging themes are presented.

Table 1. Positive Metaphors

Category	Metaphor	N	f	%
Support	assistance, city, crutches, music, remote control	5	5	13.5
Usefulness	bulb, guitar, lighthouse, moon	4	4	10.8
Flexibility	beverage, dough, keyboard, room	4	4	10.8
Technology	commander, robot, virtual lab	3	3	8.1
Freedom	cooking, family gathering, pencil	3	3	8.1
Comfort	arm chair, singing, water	3	3	8.1
Wideness	ocean (2), sun	2	3	8.1
Trip	country, museum, world	3	3	8.1
Virtuality	fiction, glass, wind	3	3	8.1
Endurance	furniture, mountain	2	2	5.4
Community	planting flower, football team	2	2	5.4
Endurance	climbing a mountain, making a furniture	2	2	5.4
Total		36	37	100

Positive Metaphors

As shown by Table 1, positive metaphors consist of 12 categories with 36 positive metaphors that emerged 37 times were determined. The positive metaphors show that the participants define their perceptions of OL in terms of various objects ranging from nature, city, hobby, arts, human family, technology, etc. Among the 37 metaphors, only 2 use the same object as the source domain, i.e. ocean. In terms of percentage, the top three slices are support, usefulness, and flexibility. The followings are samples of the participants' metaphors for some categories.

- (1) OL is like *practicing music under the guidance of a great musician*. You can ask Google anytime you meet any form of trouble. (support)

In this metaphor, the participant accentuates that the internet, on which OL is conducted, is like a great musician who knows everything about music. Thus, the writer is optimistic about studying through the OL method.

- (2) OL is like a *lighthouse*. It gives directions to the skipper so as not to hit the rocks in the dark

Through this metaphor, the writer compares OL to a lighthouse, which guides the skipper to direct his ship safely. The writer was possibly still overshadowed by the gripping Covid-19 outbreak. He expressed his gratitude to have OL as a safe alternative to learning.

- (3) OL is like an *electric keyboard*. You can play it as a piano, organ, or even a band (flexibility)

By describing OL as an electronic keyboard with which someone can play music in various formats, the writer meant to emphasize the flexibility and opportunities he can get through OL.

- (4) **OL is like a *virtual lab* because we conduct experiments in the digital environment and present them in the same environment (technology)**

By focusing his description of a virtual lab as a place to carry out research activities and present the results online, it seems that the writer meant to highlight the sophistication of technology that supports OL.

- (5) OL is like a family gathering. You can listen to your elders while eating and drinking (freedom)

The writer of this metaphor highlighted the informality and freedom of attending an OL. Unlike in the conventional face-to-face class in which the hierarchical culture is relatively strict, the author feels that the authority in an OL is like his/her parents and close relatives. He does not need to behave formally.

(6) OL is like visiting a tourist resort. It is relaxing (comfort).

The writer seems to believe that one day he or she will have the conventional face-to-face class again. He/she thinks learning through OL modes is temporary. Thus, he/she decided to enjoy it.

Negative Metaphors

Table 2 shows negative metaphors consist of 12 categories with 25 items that emerged 25 times. Similar to the positive metaphors, the negative metaphors show that the participants define their perceptions of OL in terms of various objects ranging from nature, animals, adventure, drinks, human family, technology, etc. Among the 25 metaphors, none uses the same object as the source domain. In terms of percentage, the top two slices are on the uselessness and uncertainty categories. The followings are samples of the participants' metaphors for some categories.

Table 2. Negative Metaphors

Category	Metaphor	N	f	%
Uselessness	daydreaming, riding a static bicycle, orphan, pouring water on sand,	4	4	16
Uncertainty	climbing mountain, surfing, white bread and vegetables, faraway voice	4	4	16
Difficulty	downpour, endless dark tunnel. puzzle	2	2	8
Captivity	bird in a cage, stranded on uninhabited island	2	2	8
Loneliness	black cat is, football game without spectators	2	2	8
Tasteless	bitter medicine, unsweetened tea	2	2	8
Confusion	dark room, ghost	2	2	8
Obligation	drug, stuntman	2	2	8
Dependence	a huge cup of coffee	2	2	8
Fault	fragile heart, sleeping on the floor.	2	2	8
Distant	remote control	1	1	
Communication				4
Total		25	25	100

(1) OL is like *pouring water on sand*. Teachers keep on teaching but students do not learn anything. (uselessness)

Through this metaphor, the writer shows how pointless OL implementation is. Despite the teachers' dedication to teaching, students learn nothing from it.

- (2) OL is like *surfing on the waves*. I love doing it but I'm not sure how big, and dangerous the waves are (uncertainty).

This metaphor indicates that the writer seems to be fond of OL, but he/she is not sure whether it is safe or beneficial or not.

- (3) OL is like *exploring an endless dark tunnel*. You can only study the little spot illuminated by your flashlight and hard to know when you will reach your destination (difficulty).

The writer's view of OL looks very pessimistic because this metaphor depicts darkness and difficulty,

- (4) OL is stranded on an uninhabited island. You have to try yourself to survive (captivity).

Like the third metaphor above, this metaphor indicates pessimism. The writer feels he cannot communicate or interact with someone else during the OL session. It seems he joins an OL just because he is compelled to.

Neutral Metaphors

Table 3 shows neutral metaphors consist of 1 category with 2 items that emerged 2 times. The two metaphors show that the participants define their perceptions of OL in terms of two different objects, i.e. heavy traffic and roller coaster.

Table 3. Neutral Metaphors

Category	Metaphor	N	f	%
Endurance	Heavy traffic, roller coaster	2	2	100
Total		2	2	100

- (1) OL is like *the traffic in Jakarta*. If the internet network is smooth, you can travel fast. If the internet is slow, or interrupted, you cannot reach your destination on time.

Through this metaphor, the writer seems to express that he/she has been accustomed to the ups and downs of OL. He/she realizes that the Internet network is not always good. When the network is slow, there's no need to get upset.

- (2) OL is like *rollercoaster* because sometimes we are on fire, but sometimes we are also dispassionate and slow down

This metaphor expresses the same ideas as the first metaphor above. The writer has adjusted to the ups and downs of OL. A rollercoaster is not steady. Whether someone is up or down, he/she should try to enjoy it.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that the participants have more positive metaphors (36 items) than negative ones (25 items). This might indicate that since the participants have joined online learning for more than two years, they have become more familiar with the learning mode. Such familiarity, together with the experiences they had, has enabled a majority of them to meet the challenges and begin to adapt to it. This confirms the findings of Atmojo and Nugroho's (2020) and Bailey and Lee (2020) revealing that the challenges encountered by students at the beginning of OL implementation (when Covid-19 began to spread), to a certain extent, were due to students' and teachers' unfamiliarity with the tools employed to run OL classes. However, this finding is different from the results of a current study conducted by Yin (2022) reporting high level of negative emotions and attitudes like anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and fear of failure.

The finding that uselessness is the main criterion of the negative metaphors echoes the finding of Civril et al. (2018) that the main category of the participants' negative metaphoric perceptions of distance education is expectation. Expressed through the metaphor "Distance education is like a radio because it never plays the track you want," the writer seems to view that distance education could never provide the preferred outcome like radio. Additionally, captivity and loneliness are two dominant criteria of the negative metaphors. This indicates that the writers had not yet optimized information and communication technologies (e.g. social media, email, etc.) to boost contact with their friends and teachers. Research has shown that Interaction is a defining and crucial component of the OL process and context (Anderson, 2013)

Interestingly, all criteria of the positive metaphors, i.e., support, usefulness, flexibility, technology, and freedom, etc. are closely related to successful online learners' characteristics listed by Churton (2006), including independent learners, self-motivated and driven to achieve, liable for responsibilities, balancing multiple responsibilities, and appreciative of time and distance. The metaphor belongs to the category of support, "OL is like *practicing music under the guidance of a great musician* because you can ask Google anytime you meet any form of trouble," this shows that the writer views the internet as a very helpful resource, and only independent and self-motivated students can realize this. Additionally, the metaphor "OL is like virtual lab because we conduct experiments in the digital environment and present it in the same environment" indicates the writer's ability to balance multiple responsibilities. On the other hand, the categories of negative metaphors contradict these successful online learners' characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The finding that the positive metaphors outnumber the negative metaphors indicates that the participants have become more familiar with OL so that they now could meet the challenges confronted in learning online. In this regard, it is necessary to study students'

perceptions of OL in more detail through metaphors. However, since this study was conducted in a single setting it cannot be generalized to students studying in different higher learning, and living in different regions as well. Thus, further studies are recommended: (1) to involve more participants with different demographic variables; and (2) to focus on exploring the OL implementation process. Finally, education institutions need to focus on the negative issues revealed by the negative metaphors and follow up with new policies and practices for OL improvement.

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