



## Delving into EFL Learners' Cultural Conceptions Through Metaphor Analysis

### FOUILLER DANS LES CONCEPTION DES APPRENANTS D'EFL: LA CULTURE A TRAVERS L'ANALYSE DE LA METAPHORE

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#### Abstract

Metaphors are the windows through which it is possible to see individuals' particular way of thinking. In this paper, a case is made through investigating L2 learners' metaphors conceptualizing English culture. The data elicited by using the prompt "English culture is like... because..." and the dominant metaphors were identified with reference to the frequency of each metaphor. In total, 66 conceptual metaphors were placed under 14 specific categories. These 14 categories were further divided into three broad categories as: 1) *culture as a positive factor*; 2) *culture as a negative factor*; and 3) *culture as an unintelligible factor*. Of particular interest is the use of positive metaphors to represent culture. The findings showed that the choice of metaphors is different regarding learners' proficiency level. With beginners, English culture is mostly realized as a *negative* factor. However, in intermediate and advanced levels, learners are more optimistic about English culture and the dominating ideology is a *positive* view. Moreover, learners' conceptualization of second-language culture was different regarding *gender*. Finally, Chi-square test was computed to find out whether the differences are significant. The findings of this article are useful for investigating, selecting, and teaching cultural aspects in EFL classes. Hence, the results are of interest for researchers, material developers, and teachers.

**Key words:** Culture; SLA; Metaphor; Proficiency level; Gender; EFL learners

#### Résumé

Les métaphores sont des fenêtres à travers lesquelles il est possible de voir ainsi des individus en particulier de la pensée. Dans ce papier, une affaire est faite grâce à enquêter sur les métaphores apprenants L2 'conceptualiser la culture anglaise. Les données induites par l'aide de l'invite «la culture anglaise est comme ... parce que ...» et les métaphores dominantes ont été identifiées en référence à la fréquence de chaque métaphore. Au total, 67 métaphores conceptuelles ont été placés sous 14 catégories spécifiques. Ces 14 catégories ont été divisées en trois grandes catégories suivantes: 1) la culture comme un facteur positif; 2) la culture comme un facteur négatif, et 3) la culture comme un facteur inintelligible. D'intérêt particulier est l'utilisation de métaphores positives pour représenter la culture. Les résultats ont montré que le choix des métaphores est différente en ce qui concerne le niveau de compétence des apprenants. Avec les débutants, la culture anglaise est principalement réalisé comme un facteur négatif. Toutefois, dans les niveaux intermédiaire et avancé, les apprenants sont plus optimistes quant à la culture anglaise et l'idéologie dominante est un point de vue positif. Par ailleurs, la conceptualisation des apprenants de langue seconde culture était différente en ce qui concerne le sexe. Enfin, test de chi carré a été calculé pour déterminer si les différences sont significatives. Les conclusions de cet article sont utiles pour rechercher, sélectionner, et l'enseignement des aspects culturels dans les classes EFL. Par conséquent, les résultats sont d'intérêt pour les chercheurs, les développeurs de matériel, et les enseignants.

#### Mots-clés:

Culture; ALS; Métaphore; Niveau de compétence, Sexe, les apprenants d'EFL

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## INTRODUCTION

Chastain (1988) mentioned that in each language class “teaching of culture is an ideal, organized component of the course content” (p.298). Language and culture are tightly bound to each other in a way that understanding one without considering the other is impossible. Chastain further posited three main reasons why culture component is so crucial in language learning (pp.298-299): (a) language and culture are inseparably bound; (b) intercultural understanding; and (c) students’ need to know cultural aspects of a language. Culture has been defined variously by different scholars. Matsumoto (2000) specified the scope of culture through pinpointing key concepts of the definition of culture as dynamic; system of rules; group and units; survival; attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors; relatively stable; harbored differently by each specific unit; shared by a group; and potential to change across time (pp.24-26). Brown (2007) came to this realization that “reality is thought to be objectively perceived through our own cultural pattern” (p.191) and further viewed culture as “a way of life” (p. 188) which sets some restrictions on the way one thinks or even lives. Brown (2001) defined Western cultures as being non-directive and nonauthoritarian which may be in sharp contrast with Eastern cultures. Thus, the way individuals think about culture is a strong predictor of the way they view reality. It is important to take into account cultural differences when teaching a foreign language. Learners’ expectations of culture can affect their viewpoints toward target language and metaphor analysis can be a useful instrument to provide fruitful information about the concepts learners have of the target culture. As it is argued by Segall, Dasen, Berry, and Poortinga (1999, p. 23), “To the cross-cultural psychologist, cultures are seen as products of past human behavior and as shapers of future human behavior. Thus, humans are producers of culture and, at the same time, our behavior is influenced by it.”

The review literature revealed that some authors have used metaphors to define culture—as Brown (2007) and Larson and Smalley (1972) likened culture to *blueprint* and *glue* respectively. In the same vein, Donne (1975) came to this realization that culture is analogous to a *continent* within which individuals are pieces of that continent. Metaphor analysis is a useful way to figure out cultural expectations of learners and through the findings it is possible to modify, change, or reinforce cultural stereotypes.

This study aims at investigating EFL learners’ metaphors regarding the concept of English culture. This paper mirrors the ideologies learners have toward

the English culture. Besides, the findings of present study can be of interest for (1) researchers to find out the relationship between culture and language proficiency as well as studying the progress of learners; and (2) material developers to increase the quality of EFL textbooks. Since culture is not separated from language, the way individuals form mental pictures about a specific culture (in this study English) surely affects the way they precede in learning a foreign language. Besides the aforementioned aims, this study tries to provide answer for the following questions:

- What are the main stereotypes of learners toward English culture?
- Is there any significant difference between learners’ proficiency level and the choice of metaphors?
- Is there any significant difference between male and females’ cultural stereotypes?

## 1. THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

The publication of Lakoff and Johnson’s “*Metaphors we live by*” (1980) was a rise in interest rates for using the concept of metaphor in the field of cognitive linguistics. The term *metaphor* originates from the Greek *meta* and *pherian* which the former means *after* or *with* and the latter means *bring across* (Chambers, 1988). Aristotle (1952) defined metaphor as “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else.” Henderson (1994, p. 343) mentioned that “Metaphor can be viewed simply as text decoration; as a useful teaching device; as a central organizing principle of all language; as a way of viewing and constructing new problems; as a fundamental basis for argument and storytelling.” Aristotle definition of metaphor consists of three underlying elements. As it is mentioned by Richards (1936), the three elements are the *topic*, *vehicle* and *grounds*. Charteris-Black (2000, p.151) stated that “The original idea or context was the topic, the borrowed idea or notion was the vehicle and the shared element, the grounds.”

As it was postulated by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), through investigating metaphors it is possible to figure out the structure of thought. Researchers have advocated the manifold implications of using metaphors as a framework in different fields of study. For instance, Charteris-Black (2000, p.150) mentioned that metaphors “require a heuristic by which novices may be introduced to the particular ways of thinking which characterise the content domains of their subject.” He further mentioned that “teaching the language is, at least in part, teaching the conceptual framework of the subject” (p.150). Therefore, in order to find out a decent theory of second language culture, it is useful to investigate learners’ metaphors. Metaphors can be useful in four ways; in *linguistic* domain, metaphors provide information which

has contextual as well as literal meaning. This quality of metaphors sheds light on the metaphorical conceptions of different words. Metaphors are also a window to explore the structure of thought and mechanisms of mind in *cognitive* aspects. In *affective* aspects, metaphors include attitudes and feelings and can be analyzed to find individuals' viewpoint toward particular concepts. In *socio-cultural* domain, mutual conventions are important in forming metaphors. Metaphors can be used to understand people and their conventions.

As O'Halloran (2007) put it, metaphor analysis is a subfield of critical discourse analysis (CDA) in which specific characteristics of a text are studied to find the ideology behind the text (Fairclough, 2001). O'Halloran (p.2) mentioned that "One focus of CDA is highlighting how metaphors can be ideologically significant—how metaphors can help to construct evaluation of the situations being described." Lakoff and Johnson (1980) singled out *discourse* and argued that dominant world views emerge through the process of talking and thinking. Therefore, the way learners in EFL classes think and talk about an exotic culture shows their mental image of reality. Metaphors provide a framework through which we can figure out the common ways of thinking which in turn reveals individuals' prejudices and inclinations toward specific ideologies.

According to Byram and Feng (2005), one of the main approaches toward culture is "The relationship between the foreign culture, or perceptions of it, and the motivation for leaning" (p.920). Metaphors can provide useful information about learners' perceptions of foreign language culture and metaphor analysis can make it possible to understand learners' motivation toward learning—since a negative attitude toward culture, which is revealed through metaphor analysis, can result in lack of motivation in learning. Sfar (1998) used an alternative perspective of language learning which is applicable to culture learning. Sfar made a distinction between *acquisition metaphor* and the *participation metaphor*. Acquisition metaphor refers to the relationship between acquisition of knowledge and its transfer to a context which is not in the realm of learning environment. Sfar (1998, p.6) defined participation metaphor as "a process of becoming a member of a certain community." Thus, as it is mentioned by Byram and Feng (2005, p.925), "language learning is conceptualized as the internalization of rules and specific linguistic entities."

Schmitt (2005, pp. 359-364) refers to various uses of metaphors in social-scientific and qualitative research in order to present a procedure to reconstruct the metaphorical concepts. The patterns include:

- The metaphor as a rhetorical instrument and its criticism
- The metaphor as therapeutic tool
- Metaphors used to describe the results of qualitative research

- Metaphors to describe the qualitative research process
- The search for specified metaphors in the material
- Metaphors for the self-reflection process of researchers
- Eliciting explicit metaphors from research participants
- The use of metaphors as part of a broader research strategy

Ortony (1975), as cited in Charteris-Black (2000), stated three ways in which metaphor facilitates learning. They are the *compactness*, *vividness* and *inexpressibility* theses:

The compactness thesis involves the transfer from well-known to less well-known domains; the vividness thesis allows a more memorable learning experience due to the greater imagery aroused by the vehicle and the inexpressibility thesis proposes that metaphors work by encoding certain aspects of our experience which it would not otherwise be possible to encode. Together these theses provide a strong basis for the claim that learning can be enhanced through the use of metaphor. (p.153)

Recently, there have been considerable studies conducted on the applicability of metaphors on language learning context. For instance, Kramsch (1995) referred to the *input-black box-output* as the dominant metaphor to conceptualize teaching and learning process. Oxford (2001) utilized personal narratives to figure out learners' conceptions about three teaching approaches. Pishghadam and Navari (2010) compared the metaphors used by Iranian learners in high schools and language institutes and figured out that language institutes learners are superior regarding their perception of English education. Ellis (2002) investigated diaries related to beginning learners of L2 to study their mental concepts about language, their teacher, and themselves. Schmitt (2005) conducted a study to propose a procedure to reconstruct individuals' metaphorical concepts. Through this study, Schmitt reviewed different interpretations that metaphor analysis provides researchers. Yazıcı (2010) conducted a research on 77 teachers-to-be and found that they used 60 metaphors to describe *literature*. Three metaphors which were mentioned more than the others in this study were literature as *sea*, *human*, and *life*. Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007) investigated the metaphors teachers mentioned about the concept of *teacher*. They gathered data through giving the participants a prompt "*A teacher is like... because...*" and found 64 personal metaphors and identified 10 main conceptual themes. This research was conducted in Turkey. The study conducted by Saban et al. (2007) shows that learners, to some extent, view themselves as passive students since most of them chose the metaphor related to *teacher as knowledge provider*.

Most of the studies regarding metaphor analysis, have investigated language learning process or the view toward teachers. However, there is not much at hand about L2

learners' mindsets about culture. Cultural conceptual metaphors can be useful to increase the quality of teaching L2 culture to learners. To this end, in this paper a case is made to investigate learners' cultural metaphors in an EFL context.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Participants

At the first phase of the study, there were 1100 participants but since they did not provide the proper information, 68 of the cases were excluded from the study. It should be mentioned that only metaphors were accepted not definitions or sentences. Therefore, final participants of this study were 1032 (528 females, 504 males) randomly-chosen EFL learners which were studying English in private language institutes in Mashhad, Iran. Learners were from various proficiency levels (beginners= 352; intermediate= 338; advanced= 342). Their language proficiency was figured out by placement tests institutes gave to learners. Participants' age varied from 12 to 25. The learners' native language was Persian. This study was conducted during autumn.

### 2.2 Procedure

This study investigates the metaphors that EFL learners (N=1032) formulated to show their mental representation of the concept of "English culture". In order to collect the data, the prompt "English culture is like . . . because . . ." was given to learners to complete. The metaphor-elicitation instrument was utilized for data gathering. Most of the studies of this kind use two ways to gather data. On the one hand, researchers themselves provide some metaphors through multiple-choice questions and learners are to check one of the metaphors which best represent their thoughts. In this way, there might be some imposition from the questions themselves. This imposition from the test, which is going to affect the test results, is referred to as the *reactivity effect* in research (Brown, 1988). As Brown mentioned, reactivity effect influences the results and the way the data are interpreted. On the other hand, researchers use some prompts to elicit the information from the learners which is one of the efficient ways of gathering data (Ellis, 2008). Through using open-ended elicitation procedures it is possible to understand learners' metaphorical conceptions and the relationship between their thoughts and the subject. Since metaphors are "essential mechanism of the mind" (Martinez, Saulea, & Huber, 2001, p. 965), analyses of learners' metaphors is a good way to figure out their attitudes toward culture. Finally, Chi-square test ( $\chi^2$ ) is formulated in order to figure out whether there is any significant difference among the frequencies of metaphors compiled from the learners.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learners come to English language institutes with miscellaneous ideas about the foreign language culture which is likely to affect their behavior in the process of learning the language. It is of key importance to provide learners with decent cultural knowledge in order to decrease cross-cultural miscommunication. Language institutes are the place that can form, change, and reinforce cultural stereotypes. Being familiar with learners' cultural attitudes helps teachers to educate learners better. This study intended to investigate EFL learners' cultural conceptions with respect to English language. To this end, the prompt "English culture is like . . . because . . ." was given to learners and the data was investigated thoroughly to find out metaphorical conceptions. After examining the prompts, 66 metaphors were recognized which were classified under 14 categories. In addition, these 14 categories were further classified into three broad levels as:

- Culture as a positive factor
- Culture as a negative factor
- Culture as an unintelligible factor

These three levels make the comparison between proficiency levels and gender easier. At the first phase of the study, 66 observed metaphors were classified into 14 smaller categories as Table 1 manifests (f= frequency; B= beginner; I= intermediate; A= advanced; M= male; F= female):

**Table 1**  
**Distribution of Metaphorical Conceptions by Proficiency Level and Gender**

Metaphors interpretations	No. of Metaphors	f	Proficiency level			Gender	
			B	I	A	M	F
Facilitative	13	134	23	48	63	75	59
Exciting	8	85	20	26	39	26	59
Sweet	7	66	16	15	35	22	44
Vital	6	70	18	29	23	32	38
Beautiful	6	54	11	24	19	16	38
Frightening	5	154	82	43	29	99	55
Difficult	5	128	48	36	44	83	45
Mysterious	4	80	35	26	19	27	53
Challenging	2	38	8	11	19	23	15
Precious	2	36	13	15	8	21	15
Dominating	2	70	32	20	18	30	40
Restrictive	2	35	16	14	5	20	15
Systematic	2	4	1	2	1	3	1
Growing	1	43	14	21	8	16	27
Ambiguous	1	35	15	8	12	11	24
Total = 14	66	1032	352	338	342	504	528

In *facilitative* group, thirteen metaphors were recognized: bridge (N= 25), leader (N= 21), glasses (N= 20), car (N= 16), friend (N= 9), shoe (N= 7), cell phone (N= 6), tractor (N= 6), horse (N= 6), computer (N= 5), gear (N= 5), police (N= 4), and language (N= 4). In *exciting* group, eight metaphors were identified: museum (N= 16), painting (N= 14), crown (N= 13), life (N= 13), tourist (N= 11), garden (N= 9), park (N= 5), and game (N= 4). In *sweet* category, seven metaphors were recognized: baby

(*N*= 23), sugar (*N*= 13), candy (*N*= 7), honey (*N*= 6), cake (*N*= 6), grape (*N*= 6), and cookie (*N*= 5). In *vital* group, six metaphors were identified: water (*N*= 19), food (*N*= 17), air (*N*= 14), milk (*N*= 10), sport (*N*= 7), and egg (*N*= 3). In *beautiful* group too, six metaphors are placed: flower (*N*= 20), rainbow (*N*= 13), waterfall (*N*= 10), doll (*N*= 7), sky (*N*= 2), and village (*N*= 2). In *frightening* group, five metaphors were identified: nightmare (*N*= 45), earthquake (*N*= 40), spider (*N*= 35), dog (*N*= 22), and ghost (*N*= 12). In *difficult* group too, five metaphors were identified: mountain (*N*= 43), puzzle (*N*= 40), train (*N*= 30), river (*N*= 10), and problem (*N*= 5). In *mysterious* group, four metaphors were identified: forest (*N*= 33), human (*N*= 21), world (*N*= 14), and fox (*N*= 12). In *challenging* group, two metaphors were mentioned: sea (*N*= 22) and exam (*N*= 16). In *precious* group, two metaphors were mentioned: gold (*N*= 25) and money (*N*= 11). In *dominating* group, two metaphors were identified: sun (*N*= 48) and plane (*N*= 22). In *restrictive* group, two metaphors are placed: prison (*N*= 23) and room (*N*= 12). In *systematic* group, two metaphors were identified: watch (*N*= 3) and engine (*N*= 1). In *growing* and *ambiguous* group one metaphor were identified: tree (*N*= 43) and dream (*N*= 35).

One of the categories is named as ambiguous. Some of the learners mentioned that culture is like a *dream*. The analogy itself is to some extent vague. However, a dream may be frightening or joyful, happy or sad; hence, its value is not clear and it is relative. The name ambiguous is chosen because the word ‘dream’ should be defined according to learners viewpoint. One may have a good dream and the other day it might be a horrible one. Thus, the nature of the category is changing.

The metaphors which are mentioned in Table 1 can be further categorized into three broad categories. The first category is ‘*culture as a positive factor*’ in which metaphors such as facilitative, exciting, sweet, vital, beautiful, challenging, precious, and systematic are placed. The frequency of positive metaphors in all proficiency levels is 487. The second category refers to ‘*culture as a negative factor*’. Metaphors such as frightening, difficult, dominating, and restrictive are placed in this category (*N*= 387). The third category includes those metaphors such as mysterious, growing, and ambiguous (*N*= 158). This category is called ‘*culture as an unintelligible factor*’. Table 2 shows the distribution of metaphors in these three broad categories.

**Table 2**  
**Distribution of Conceptual Categories in Different Proficiency Levels**

Conceptual category	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Total
Culture as a positive factor	110	70	207	487
Culture as a negative factor	178	113	96	387
Culture as an unintelligible factor	64	55	39	158
Total	352	338	342	1032

According to Table 2, most dominant metaphors (487 out of 1032) are related to “*culture as a positive factor*”. The positive nature of culture reveals that culture teaching should be one of the important ingredients in EFL classes. Chastain (1988) referred to culture as “one of the two major areas in second-language education in which the greatest need and the greatest potential for improvement exist” (p. 317). However, positive attitude toward culture should be investigated more closely to see why learners have such viewpoint toward foreign language culture. It should be mentioned that the distribution of metaphors is different regarding learners’ proficiency levels, as Table 2 manifests. Beginners’ concept of L2 culture is “*culture as negative factor*”. This viewpoint may have arisen by the ideologies the families or the society may impose on individuals. Beginners are more attached to their ego and a new language with its diverse aspects of culture may be a threat to this ego. However, when the proficiency level increases, learners figure out the positive aspects of learning the target culture. Intermediate and advanced learners have been imposed to L2 culture more than beginners via teachers, books, and educational CDs. In other words, through the passage of time, they may adopt themselves to some cultural differences. As it is mentioned in Table 2, intermediate and advanced learners view culture as something which helps them learn better and facilitates the process of learning. It can be concluded that, from the results, the view of culture is to some extent language-based. Learners who are at higher proficiency levels are competent in using the language and have less defensive mechanisms since their linguistic knowledge of target language is above others and there is nothing to be afraid of. However, more studies are needed to show the relationship between proficiency level and language ego. The Chi-square test is formulated to find out whether there is a significant difference among the observed frequencies:

**Table 3**  
**The Results of Chi-Square Conducted on Beginning Learners’ Cultural Metaphors**

Category	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	$\chi^2$
Culture as a positive factor	110	117.3	2	.000	56.068
Culture as a negative factor	178	117.3	2		
Culture as an unintelligible factor	64	117.3	2		
Total	352	-	-		

As Table 3 reveals, there exists a significant difference among the three categories regarding beginners ( $\chi^2=56.068$ ,  $p<.05$ ) which implies that there is a significant difference among the positive, negative, and unintelligible categories regarding culture. Moreover, the negative aspects (*N*= 178) of culture outnumbered the expected frequency (*N*= 117.3).

*Negative > Positive/Unintelligible*

**Table 4**  
**The Results of Chi-Square Conducted on Intermediate Learners' Cultural Metaphors**

Category	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	$\chi^2$
Culture as a positive factor	170	112.7	2	.000	58.692
Culture as a negative factor	113	112.7	2		
Culture as an unintelligible factor	55	112.7	2		
Total	338	-	-		

Table 4 reveals the results of the Chi-square test on intermediate levels. The results show that there is a significant difference among intermediate learners with regard to choosing cultural metaphors ( $\chi^2= 58.692$ ,  $p < .05$ ). With comparison to beginners, intermediate learners are more inclined toward positive views of cultures. They have an optimistic view toward L2 culture. Intermediate learners' choice of positive and negative metaphors ( $N= 170$ ,  $113$ ) were more than the expected ( $N= 112.7$ ). In addition, beginning learners pointed to unintelligible factors of culture more than the intermediates.

*Positive > Negative > Unintelligible*

**Table 6**  
**The Results of Chi-Square for Cultural Metaphors with Respect to Various Proficiency Levels**

Category	Proficiency level			Expected N	df	Sig.	$\chi^2$
	B	I	A				
Culture as a positive factor	110	170	207	162.3	2	.000	29.524
Culture as a negative factor	178	113	96	129.0	2	.000	29.039
Culture as an unintelligible factor	64	55	39	52.7	2	.048	6.089
Total	352	338	342	-	-	-	-

After considering the significant differences of three conceptual levels in each proficiency level, the Chi-square formula is conducted for each category to find out whether there is a significant difference regarding proficiency level. With regard to culture as a positive factor, the results showed a significant difference between various proficiency levels ( $\chi^2= 29.524$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The observed frequency of advanced and intermediate levels ( $N= 207$ ,  $170$ ) were above the expected frequency ( $N= 162.3$ ).

*Culture as a Positive Factor = Advanced > Intermediate > Beginner*

For culture as a negative factor, the results showed that there is a significant difference among three proficiency levels ( $\chi^2= 29.039$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The observed frequency in beginning learners ( $N= 178$ ) outnumbered the expected ( $N= 129$ ). The use of negative metaphors was mostly seen in beginning learners.

*Culture as a Negative Factor = Beginner > Intermediate/Advanced*

Finally, for the third factor, which is culture as an unintelligible factor, there is a significant difference among proficiency levels ( $\chi^2= 6.089$ ,  $p < .05$ ) in that beginners ( $N= 64$ ) outnumbered the other proficiency

**Table 5**  
**The Results of Chi-Square Conducted on Advanced Learners' Cultural Metaphors**

Category	Observed N	Expected N	df	Sig.	$\chi^2$
Culture as a positive factor	207	114.0	2	.000	128.053
Culture as a negative factor	96	114.0	2		
Culture as an unintelligible factor	39	114.0	2		
Total	342	-	-		

For advanced learners, the results shows a significant difference between cultural categories ( $\chi^2= 128.053$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Advanced learners showed a high frequency in referring to positive aspects of L2 culture ( $N= 207$ ). The observed frequency for cultural concept as a positive factor outnumbered the expected frequency ( $N= 114$ ). In addition, culture as a negative factor and culture as an unintelligible factor were employed least frequently by advanced learners ( $N= 96$ ,  $39$ ).

*Positive > Negative/Unintelligible*

levels. Moreover, the observed frequency of beginner and intermediate learners ( $N= 64$ ,  $55$ ) were above the expected frequency ( $N= 52.7$ ). The results show that most learners have a clear attitude toward target culture (whether positive or negative). Unintelligible factors imply that learners have a vague concept about culture.

*Culture as an Unintelligible Factor = Beginner > Intermediate > Advanced*

With regard to first question of this study, it should be mentioned that language proficiency is a predictor of cultural attitudes toward target language. The results of this study revealed that there is a significant difference between proficiency level and the choice of metaphors. It can be concluded that learners who are imposed to target language more, have more positive attitude toward target culture. In other words, learners adopt themselves to some cultural differences as their language proficiency increases. The argument which is made here can tell us why beginning stages of learning are the most difficult and most of the students drop out. Maybe cross-cultural differences are a reason for learners' drop out. Moreover, Persian EFL learners have a vivid viewpoint about culture since unintelligible factors were employed the least by

learners.

After considering proficiency level, the effect of gender on cultural metaphors is investigated. Gender has always been a strong variable for researchers which has shed light on various interesting points (Brettell & Sargent, 1993). Cultural and societal features are areas in which there is a great potentiality for gender-based variation. In every society, there are some special role obligations and definitions for boys and girls. These social and cultural norms may have some influences on gender. The following table shows cultural variation among male's corpus:

**Table 7**  
**Results of the Chi Square Test for Males**

Categories	Male		Sig.	$\chi^2$
	observed	expected		
Culture as a positive factor	218	168.0	.000	116.619
Culture as a negative factor	232	168.0		
Culture as an unintelligible factor	54	168.0		
Total	504	-		

The results of Table 7 advocate a significant difference among males' choices of cultural stereotypes ( $\chi^2= 116.619$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Males most frequently ( $N= 232$ ) referred to negative aspects of target culture. The observed frequency for negative and positive aspects ( $N= 232, 218$ ) are above the expected ( $N= 168$ ). Therefore, the relationship among the three conceptual categories for males' attitude is as follow:

*Negative > Positive > Unintelligible*

For females, the results show variation unlike what was observed in males' cultural stereotypes. Table 8 reveals the distribution of cultural metaphors for females' attitude:

**Table 8**  
**Results of the Chi Square Test for Females**

Categories	Female		Sig.	$\chi^2$
	Observed	expected		
Culture as a positive factor	255	176.0	.000	65.193
Culture as a negative factor	169	176.0		
Culture as an unintelligible factor	104	176.0		
Total	528	-		

The results of the Chi-square showed a significant difference between females' observed frequencies ( $\chi^2= 65.193$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The observed frequencies in culture as a positive factor ( $N= 255$ ) outnumbered the expected frequency ( $N= 176$ ). Culture as a negative factor and culture as an unintelligible factor were employed the least ( $N= 169, 104$ ).

*Positive > Negative > Unintelligible*

The previous studies conducted on gender-based behaviors, have advocated that there are differences between males and females' stereotypes in that males tend to be more dominant, independent, and adventurous while females are more emotional, submissive, and weak (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). The cross-cultural study conducted by Williams and Best (1990) is in same line with the results of Table 8. They conducted a research on twenty-seven countries in Africa, Europe, Asia, North America, and South America and found that there is a large-scale difference between males and females' stereotypes among these countries. They presented the participants some adjectives and wanted the participants to select those adjectives which are advocated by men or women in their society. This study was an attempt to recognize universals in gender stereotypes. The results of their study showed that males are more inclined to show adventurous, aggressive, forceful, masculine, autocratic, and dominant adjectives while females were reported sensitive, sentimental, affectionate, dreamy, and submissive adjectives. With a comparison to Persian cultural stereotypes revealed in this study, it can be figured out that males were more inclined toward unemotional stereotypes and most cultural metaphors embrace those that are related to less sensitive metaphors such as facilitative, frightening and difficult interpretations. However, females most frequently referred to emotional metaphors related to exciting, sweet, and beautiful interpretations.

**Table 9**  
**Significance of Differences for Gender Variability Based on Chi-Square**

Categories	Male		Female		Sig.	$\chi^2$
	Observed	expected	observed	expected		
Culture as a positive factor	218	243.5	255	243.5	.297	1.086
Culture as a negative factor	232	193.5	169	193.5	.013	6.204
Culture as an unintelligible factor	54	79.0	104	79.0	.000	15.823
Total	504	-	528	-	-	-

As it is mentioned in Table 9, there is a significant difference among all of the categories except for 'culture as a positive factor' which is non-significant ( $\chi^2= 1.086$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Males have more negative attitudes toward L2 culture than females with a significant difference observed between them ( $\chi^2= 6.204$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, culture was more unintelligible for females than males ( $\chi^2= 15.823$ ,  $p < .05$ ). One reason for these discrepancies may be the relationship between individuals and the surrounding environment—whether it is the norms of society or the individuals' ideologies. The formation of ideologies is influenced by two relationships; On the one hand, individuals establish a stimulus-response behavior with the environment and the people around. In this way, society can affect and form individuals' ideologies. In the same vein, Vygotsky (1978), the leading author in this tradition, "postulated that the typically human forms of psychological functioning are societal rather than individual in nature" (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002, p.22). On the other hand, individuals react upon themselves—their needs and personal desires. Therefore, when a particular way of thinking or an ideology is reinforced or tabooed by the society, a person may deviate from the conventions and vice versa; the individuals' ideologies are shaped, rejected, or reinforced by the society. Gender is another parameter which can influence individuals' way of thinking and the society will surely impose some constraints on people.

The first question of this study which dealt with the main stereotypes of L2 learners toward culture can be answered now. The main stereotype of learners toward culture is that L2 culture will facilitate the process of learning. In other words, individuals referred to culture as being something which contributes to the process of learning. The second question of this study dealt with the relationship between proficiency level and the choice of cultural metaphors. The findings of this study revealed that learners' proficiency influences their views toward culture. Beginning learners have more negative attitudes toward L2 culture which may be the result of their lack of language proficiency and little exposure to L2 culture. Intermediate and advanced learners have a more optimistic attitude toward L2 culture, for most of them chose positive metaphor as the dominant one. Another important finding which covers the third question of this

study is that the view toward culture is to some extent gender-based. The conceptual category most of the males referred to was the *negative category* ( $N=232$ ). However, females referred to *positive category* ( $N=255$ ) as the most frequent one in the data. Thus, it can be stated that the following factors have the most influence on L2 cultural attitude:

- language proficiency
- gender
- amount of exposure to L2 culture
- conventions of the society
- individuals' ideologies

## CONCLUSION

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), Lakoff (1987), and Johnson (1987) were the pioneers who mentioned that the individuals' conceptual thinking is metaphorically structured. They advocated that human being use metaphors to define the experiences and the surrounding world. These metaphors are the representations of individuals' ideologies which are formed through their life.

In this study, through investigating metaphors, it was revealed that culture should be an inseparable part of every EFL class. The dominant metaphor most of the learners referred to was positive with the frequency of 487. Furthermore, the view of culture is to some extent gender-based; in other words, males were more inclined toward negative aspects of culture but females were interested in positive features of culture. Another important finding of this study focused on the relationship between proficiency level and metaphorical conceptions. This study showed that beginners have a more pessimistic view toward second language culture. With more proficient learners, culture is viewed as being more advantageous. Culture and language are bound together. Advanced learners can benefit much more from cultural awareness than beginners since they have more opportunity to use language; hence, advanced learners should be able to communicate properly and they should be able to understand subtle cultural points and they should be familiar with aspects of language such as politeness and style.

Therefore, being familiar with foreign language culture increases the appropriateness of the language.



The findings of this study are useful for researchers, material developers and teachers. Researchers can use the metaphorical conceptions presented in this article to study cultural conceptions of EFL learners in different countries and to find a decent theory of second language culture. Material developers can use cultural metaphors to provide activities in order to increase learners' cultural awareness and to write books with specific cultural points suitable for each proficiency level. Teachers can use this study to instruct learners and to teach culture. In addition, it was revealed that girls were more inclined toward positive features of culture but boys referred more to negative features. When teaching culture, gender should be taken into consideration too.

Culture is a thriving field of study. Studies of this kind should not be limited to a couple of articles. For instance, the effect of age on the choice of metaphors can be investigated to find out parameters affecting individuals' construction of metaphors. Furthermore, studies can be conducted to compare native and nonnative metaphors to show whether there is any difference between their ideologies. Moreover, there should be more research on cross-cultural differences. Culture is one of the areas which is to a great degree ignored in EFL classes; however, it can influence individuals' progress positively if attended carefully and purposefully. A person who has a negative view toward target language culture is not as motivated and successful as the person who has a positive view toward culture. More studies are needed to figure out the relationship between various attitudes toward the target culture and learners' proficiency level. The results would be useful for teachers to modify their approach toward teaching culture. To put it in a nutshell, culture is one of the subjects that can bring joy and excitement to language classrooms if it attended with careful consideration and awareness.

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