

“A Language Teacher is Like...”: Examining Malaysian Students’ Perceptions of Language Teachers through Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract

This article examines metaphors about language teachers created by a group of 23 Malaysian university students. The aims of the study are (1) to determine whether metaphors produced by language learners in the Asian educational context can fit into the four philosophical perspectives on education outlined by Oxford et al. (1998), and (2) to explore whether students’ gender influences their metaphor production. This study employs both qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. The results of the content analysis of 27 metaphors produced by the participants show that Oxford et al.’s (1998) typology of metaphors is applicable in the Malaysian educational context. In addition, the qualitative analysis reveals that the imagery used in the metaphors is, to some extent, gender-related. However, the results of statistical analysis indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in the perceptions of the teacher’s role between the students of different genders. Pedagogical implications of the research findings are discussed.

1 Introduction

The present situation in language pedagogy has been described as that of “enlightened eclecticism” (Brown, 1994, p. 74). It has been suggested that the absence of clear guidelines as to how to organize the language classroom in the “post-method” situation has left a gap in language pedagogy that could be filled by returning the teacher “to centre stage” (Sowden, 2007, p. 304). With regard to this, it is important to understand what being the language teacher means, especially in various socio-cultural and educational settings (Borg, 2006).

One way to attain this understanding is through an analysis of metaphors about language teachers. In fact, a number of studies have employed this method to examine the pre- and in-service teachers’ attitudes towards the classroom practices, teacher-student classroom interaction, and the evolution of the teacher beliefs about teaching and learning (Bullough, 1991; Dooley, 1998; Knowles, 1994; Leavy, McSorley, & Boté, 2007; Mahlios & Maxson, 1998; Zapata & Lacorte, 2007). However, the majority of these studies focused on the metaphors produced by the teachers,

not the language learners themselves. The present study conducts analysis of metaphors about language teachers generated by Malaysian university students. It adopts a typology of metaphors on education and teachers developed by Oxford et al. (1998).

This study also examines whether and how the metaphors produced by male and female students are different. In formal educational settings, such as a school or university, language learning has often been viewed as a “feminine” pursuit, and the language classroom has been described as a “girls’ world” (Sunderland, 1998). However, the majority of previous studies have been conducted in Western and, for the most part, monolingual socio-cultural contexts. Analyzing metaphors produced by the students who grew up and were educated in a multilingual and multicultural environment, such as Malaysia, may widen our perspective on the issues of gender in the language classroom and on the teacher-student classroom interaction.

The present study is different from the previous studies in several aspects. First of all, it focuses on the metaphors about language teachers produced by the learners while a majority of previous studies explored the pre- and in-service teachers’ metaphors of teaching to enable the educators to articulate and “construct representations of themselves and their experience” (Kramsch, 2003, p. 125) and “to promote awareness of professional practice” (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999, p. 155). The present study explores the learners’ perceptions of the language teachers which may widen our perspective of what being a teacher means. Secondly, the present study analyzes differences/similarities in metaphors created by students of different genders. This angle has not been explored as a search of databases revealed a lack of studies that adopted gender perspective to examine metaphors created by language learners. Thirdly, the study conducts both qualitative and quantitative analyses of the metaphors. Statistical analysis, which has not been employed much in previous research studies on metaphors, may ensure a greater degree of certainty when assessing whether differences between the groups of respondents are significant. For example, Ben-Peretz, Mendelson and Kron (2003) employed statistical analyses (chi-square tests) to examine differences in self professional images between different groups of teachers according to their education level and the level of classes they taught. Finally, the present inquiry was conducted in an Asian educational context, Malaysia.

The study raises the following questions:

1. What images do Malaysian students generate to describe their language teachers?
2. Do the metaphors produced by the participants correspond to the four philosophical perspectives on education outlined by Oxford et al. (1998)?
3. Is the use of metaphors about language teachers gender-related?

2 Background to the study

This article reports on a research conducted among 23 second year students learning a foreign language (Russian) at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Malaysia. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual country with a population of approximately 28 million. Its various ethnic groups include Malay (50.4%), Chinese (23.7%), indigenous people (11%), Indian (7.1%), and others (7.8%). The official language of the country is Bahasa Malaysia (the Malay language). Other widely spoken languages are English, Chinese (Cantonese, Mandarin, Hokkien, Hakka, Hainanese, and Foochow dialects), Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Punjabi and so on.

Universiti Malaysia Sabah is a large public university situated in the state of Sabah in East Malaysia. The study of a foreign language (e.g., French, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish) or a local language (e.g., Kadazan-Dusun, Tamil) is compulsory for the UMS students who have good English language proficiency and have obtained Bands 4, 5, and 6 of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The students may choose any foreign language course they wish depending on its availability. The duration of the foreign language study is four semesters with four contact hours per week at Levels 1, 2, 3, and three contact hours per week at Level 4.

3 Literature review

3.1 *Metaphor as method*

The word metaphor originates from the Greek word *metapherein* (“to transfer”), where *meta* means “among” and *pherein* means “to bear, to carry” (Merriam-Webster Online). Therefore, the word “metaphor” may refer to “a transfer of meaning from one thing to another”.

Metaphors have been traditionally viewed as figures of speech that embellish the speaker’s language. More recently, psychologists and linguists began recognizing metaphors as an “important tool of cognition and communications” (Ortony & Fainsilber, 1989, p. 181) that reflects “images of social phenomenon” (Morgan, 1983, p. 21) through “mapping two often incompatible domains into one another” (Kramsch, 2003, p.125). In other words, metaphor could be viewed as a cognitive means for people to filter reality through their own mental images of real world phenomena.

Metaphors have another important quality. Not only do they have the ability to aid human cognitive process, they may also determine the way people act based on their perceptions of the reality. In other words, besides providing a compass to assess and comprehend the surrounding world, metaphors have both descriptive and prescriptive functions. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observed, “In all aspects of life... we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors” (p. 158).

As a research instrument, metaphors possess several important and unique qualities. Ortony (1975) identified three communicative functions of metaphors, such as expressibility, compactness, and vividness. To illustrate these qualities, let us compare two metaphors about learning. For example, if a student describes learning as “climbing the Everest”, the image conveys hardship and the danger of falling or failure that the learner has to deal with. It also says that one has to persevere and move steadily towards the ultimate objective. However, this metaphor is full of optimism because achieving the target will bring the learner to “the top of the world”. On the other hand, if a student describes learning as “clinging to a log after a shipwreck”, the associations this image evokes are quite negative. The image reveals that the student has to persevere in his or her efforts but instead of aiming for the “top of the world” the learner is concerned with his or her “immediate survival”. The metaphor is bereft of optimism and enthusiasm; it also indicates that the learner has not much certainty of a successful outcome of the endeavour. Thus, in very few words each of these two metaphors gives a vivid image of and expresses the students’ feeling towards such a complex cognitive process as learning.

Some researchers (Hegstrom & McCarl-Nielsen, 2002) commented on the value of a partial indirectness and a degree of personal and social detachment that speakers gain when they use metaphorical language for describing their experiences. Other scholars (Srivastva & Barrett, 1988, p. 36) pointed out that analyzing metaphors presents a unique opportunity to obtain a broader picture of the speaker’s mental images and reveals “a meaning much larger and fuller than its speaker intended, perhaps even outside his own awareness”.

This article examines students’ metaphors about language teachers and compares the images created by female and male language learners. The present enquiry does not pursue the aim to stress the “differentness” of female students from their male classmates. However, males and females do experience reality and view human relationships in different ways. Since the language classroom has been described as a “girls’ world”, it is useful to explore whether female and male students have different perceptions of the language classroom and the language teacher. If it is so, in what aspects and how these differences in perceptions will affect and inform language pedagogy.

3.2 *Studies on metaphors about learning and teaching*

Researchers, educationalists and educational psychologists recognize the immense potential of metaphors for research and practice in the field of education. As Kramersch (2003) observed, metaphors help reveal the ways teachers and learners “construct representations of themselves and their experience” (p. 125). A considerable number of studies that employed metaphor analysis was done in order to help teachers to articulate and assess their assumptions, beliefs and views on teaching and classroom interaction (Bullough, 1991; Dooley, 1998; Knowles, 1994; Mahlios & Maxson, 1998).

A number of studies attempted to conceptualize the process of language teaching and the role of a language teacher (Block, 1992; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2001; Kramersch, 2003; Oxford et al., 1998; Zapata & Lacorte, 2007). In Block’s (1992) study, the most common metaphors used to describe a teacher were (1) a contracted professional and (2) a providing parent, which he labeled as “macro-metaphors” (p. 44). A research by De Guerrero and Villamil (2001) discerned nine conceptual metaphors for an English language teacher: a co-operative leader, a provider of knowledge, a challenger/agent of change, a nurturer, an innovator, a provider of tools, an artist, a repairer, and a gym instructor.

Cortazzi and Jin (1996 as cited in Oxford et al., 1998) reported a variety of metaphors generated by teachers and students on their educational experiences, among which were journey, cooking, plant growth, cultivation, and search for treasure. Caballero (2006) noted a high frequency for the usage of the “learning is a journey” metaphor in the context of foreign language learning/teaching and explored its practical potentials for the organization of the language learning process.

Swales (1994) conducted a research on the students’ perceptions of language learning. The participants in Swales’ (1994) study were twelve adult female students from developing countries learning the English language at the British Council in Dubai. They were asked to draw cartoons to describe their perceptions of learning a foreign language. As Swales concluded, the drawings were closely related to social and political experiences of women in developing countries. The most prominent themes they depicted were nature, village life, family/nurturing, and personal empowerment that education gives.

A thorough and comprehensive study on language teaching/learning that employed metaphor analysis was done by Oxford et al. (1998). Since the typology of metaphors developed by Oxford et al. (1998) is used as the main tool to codify the metaphors in the present research, we will discuss Oxford et al.’s study in greater detail.

3.3 *Oxford et al.’s (1998) study*

In their article “Clashing Metaphors About Classroom Teachers: Toward a Systematic Typology for the Language Teaching Field”, Oxford et al. (1998) explored various perspectives on what constitutes the concept of a teacher, with a special focus on the language teacher. The data for their research were personal narratives written or told orally by students, teachers, and former students; influential books in the fields of language acquisition and education were also consulted.

Oxford et al. (1998) identified 14 distinct metaphors for teachers (e.g., *teacher as manufacturer*, *teacher as conduit*, *teacher as nurturer*, *teacher as acceptor*, *teacher as entertainer*, *teacher as learning partner*), which were organized around four philosophical perspectives on education: (1) Social Order, (2) Cultural Transmission, (3) Learner-Centered Growth, and (4) Social Reform. The researchers also demonstrated how underlining principles of each educational concept could be translated into the language classroom proceedings.

The first perspective, Social Order, can be traced to the ideas of Plato who lived in the 4th century BC. In this educational paradigm, schooling is viewed as a “production line” or a “factory system” where the teacher is a “technician... in the process of social engineering” (Oxford et al.,

1998, p. 8). The archetypal metaphor for this type of educational process is *molding*. Metaphors for the teacher are *manufacturer*, *competitor*, *hanging judge*, *doctor*, and *mind-and-behaviour controller*. In this educational setting, the teacher has full control of the classroom; the best fitting language teaching approach would be the audiolingual method and suggestopedia as the former stresses intensive drilling, repetition and memorization while the latter reduces learners to “childlike receivers of suggestions” (p. 44).

The second philosophical concept of education, Cultural Transmission, views education “as a process of enculturation or initiation into the historical practices and achievements of a given society” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 8). In this society, knowledge is associated with power. The archetypal metaphor for the educational process is *gatekeeping*; the teacher is a “gatekeeper”, “a guardian of wisdom” who controls the learners’ entry into “the inner sanctum” of the elite (p. 24). The teacher is fully in charge of the classroom proceedings. The metaphors for the teacher in this educational paradigm are those of *conduit* and *repeater*. The best suited approach to language teaching in this perspective is the grammar-translation method with its emphasis on “the pursuit of cultural and linguistics knowledge” and the training of the brain (p. 44).

The third concept, Learner-Centered Growth, is linked to the ideas and theories of the Enlightenment era. In this educational paradigm, the development of the learner’s full potential is prioritized. Control of the classroom proceedings and the learning process is shared between the teacher and students, and the “student interests replace discipline as the central focus of schooling” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 27). The archetypal metaphor for the learning process is *gardening* while the metaphors for the teacher are *nurturer*, *lover or spouse*, *scaffolder*, *entertainer*, and *delegator*. Language teaching methods that fit well into the Learner-Centered Growth perspective are community language learning, the silent way, and the communicative approach.

Finally, the Social Reform concept of education aims to create a better society for all, not just for the privileged strata of society. The full realization of the learners’ potential and the promotion of culture are prioritized. The teacher and students represent “miniature democratic communities” where control of the learning process is shared by the teacher and the learners. The role of the teacher is to promote the development of a democratic, scientifically and culturally advanced society. The metaphors for the teacher are *acceptor* and *learning partner*. The best language teaching method is any one that encourages the learners to become a community (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 44).

As Oxford et al. (1998) concluded, a metaphor is “an important instrument of analysis” in educational research that is “aimed at understanding the role of the teacher” (p. 45). In their study, the researchers employed a wide array of data sources. However, the focus was on Western educational contexts; the sources of data and the discussion did not explicitly include viewpoints of teachers and students from Eastern societies. The present study aims to expand the perspective of research on metaphors and the language classroom by examining whether Oxford et al.’s (1998) typology would be applicable to the Asian educational context.

4 Method

4.1 Participants, instrument and data collection

Participants in this study were twenty three (23) second-year students who attended the same Russian language class at UMS in the first semester of the academic year 2006/2007. Participation was on a voluntary basis. The students were quite interested to take part in this research and were keen to know the results of the inquiry; all of them returned the completed forms to the lecturer. The age of the participants was between 20 and 22 years old; there were 14 female and 9 male participants. A greater number of the students were majoring in science and engineering subjects (n=16, or 69.5%) compared to arts and humanities disciplines (n=7, or 30.4%).

All the respondents were Malaysians of various ethnic backgrounds: Chinese (n= 13, or 56.5 %), Kadazan (n=3, or 13%), Kadazan-Dusun (n=2, or 8.7%), Indian (n=1, or 4.3%), Malay

(n=1, or 4.3%), Thai (n=1, or 4.3%), Lun Bawang (n=1, or 4.3%), and Bidayuh (n=1, or 4.3%). All of the students were bilingual or spoke more than three languages and/or dialects.

Photocopied forms with an incomplete sentence written in English “A language lecturer/teacher is like...” were distributed in class at the end of the first semester of the academic year 2006/2007. The students were asked to complete the task at home as this gave them sufficient time for reflection.

The students were asked to create metaphors for language teachers in a general sense rather than describing one particular person. As the English and Malay languages are compulsory school subjects in Malaysia, all the participants have had an extensive previous formal language learning experience to form their own opinion about the language teachers. They were also asked to write a few words explaining their images. The resulting metaphor entailments allowed a more precise interpretation and classification of the metaphors into categories.

4.2 Data analysis

As Ortony and Fainsilber (1999) observed, “Metaphors are generally better conceptualized as single ideas than as individual words” (p. 182). Therefore, to organize the data, the metaphors generated by the students were listed verbatim alongside with the metaphor entailments. Next, Cameron and Low’s (1999) method of metaphor analysis was employed. The method requires “collecting examples of linguistic metaphors used to talk about the topic..., generalizing from them to the conceptual metaphors they exemplify, and using the results to suggest understanding or thought patterns which construct or constrain people’s beliefs and actions” (p. 88). As the final step of the analysis, the metaphors were codified according to the typology of metaphors developed by Oxford et al. (1998). This was done to determine whether the metaphors produced by the participants would fit into the four philosophical perspectives on education (Social Order, Cultural Transmission, Learner-Centered Growth, and Social Reform).

The present study also employed statistical analysis to examine the relationship between the students’ gender and their perceptions of the language learning process and the interaction with the teacher. Data analysis was carried out using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software, version 14.

5 Results

5.1 Results of the content analysis

Twenty seven metaphors were generated by the participants in this study. Listed below are the metaphors produced by female students together with their metaphor entailments. The language teacher was described as:

1. travel guide (explains about new country and culture)
2. encyclopedia (knows many things and gives knowledge)
3. gambler (takes chances to succeed)
4. mother (teaches a baby to speak)
5. nanny (teaches us and corrects our mistakes)
6. candle (burns oneself for others)
7. vitamin (essential source of nutrition, which can be sweet, bitter, sour...)
8. mother (nurtures and molds her child)
9. ant (is patient and gives the best)
10. mother (teaches her child to speak)
11. magician (we know things after learning from them)
12. bad song on Monday morning (it just spoils our mood)
13. water (essential element)
14. plant or animal (needs constant mutation and evolution to answer students’ needs)

The male respondents generated the following metaphors and entailments:

1. underwater King or Queen (different kinds of fishes must speak the ruler's language)
2. big lorry (don't make it angry or you will never see the road again)
3. discovery channel (can always learn new things from the teacher)
4. walking dictionary
5. ambassador of a country
6. book (different titles and contents, some are absorbing and some are boring)
7. fruit tree
8. God of passion
9. bird singing to the wall (teaching students is a futile effort)
10. parent (teaches us how to talk and behave)
11. operating system (essential for computers)
12. sunshine (essential for plants and crops)
13. cook (needs ingredients and effort to cook good food)

Because a metaphor can mean different things to different people, the entailments that the students had given for their metaphors were thoroughly analyzed, and the images were grouped into several themes. "Teacher as caretaker", "teacher as giver", and "teacher as essential element" were three most recurring themes in the students' descriptions of the language teacher.

First of all, the metaphors *mother*, *parent*, *nanny* could be combined into the "teacher as caretaker" theme. The entailments for these metaphors were that a teacher "teaches the child to speak", "teaches us and corrects our mistakes", "teaches us how to talk and behave", and "nurtures and molds her child". Secondly, the "teacher as essential element" theme contained such metaphors as *vitamin*, *water*, *sunshine*, and *computer operating system*, and the entailments were that a teacher is an "essential element" and "essential source of nutrition". Finally, the "teacher as giver" theme included the metaphors like *candle* (burns oneself for others), *ant* (patient and gives the best), *plant or animal* (needs constant evolution to answer students' needs), *cook* (needs ingredients and effort to cook good food), *fruit tree* and *God of passion*.

An analysis of the thought patterns embedded in these metaphors shows that the teacher's role as perceived by the participants was ensuring the learners' linguistic development and taking care of their overall wellbeing. This perception corresponds to Oxford et al.'s (1998) *Teacher as Nurturer* metaphor where the teacher "facilitates the full and harmonious development of the learner's inner powers" (p. 27). The corresponding philosophical perspective as suggested by Oxford et al. (1998) is the Learner-Centered Growth. Other metaphors for language teachers generated by the participants in the present study that fit into the Learner-Centered Growth perspective are *book* (different titles and contents, some are absorbing and some are boring), *bird singing to the wall* (teaching students is a futile effort), *a bad song on Monday morning* (it just spoils your mood). All of these images correspond to *Teacher as Entertainer* metaphor in Oxford et al.'s (1998) study. Though, in the present study, perceptions of the teacher as entertainer contain a degree of cautiousness (some books are boring) or negativity (it just spoils my mood).

The next largest theme of metaphors contains such images for the language teacher as *travel guide* who "explains about new country and culture", *encyclopedia* that "gives knowledge", *magician* from whom "we know things after learning", *Discovery channel* because the students "can always learn new things from the teacher", and *walking dictionary*. These images describe the teacher as the source of knowledge. They correspond to the *Teacher as Conduit* metaphor in Oxford et al.'s (1998) typology. This conceptual metaphor belongs to the Cultural Transmission perspective of education as outlined by Oxford et al. (1998). In this approach to schooling, the teacher is a "unidirectional information-giver" and "a degree of social distance" exists between the teacher and his or her students (p. 24). Taking this detail into consideration, the metaphor *ambassador of a country* produced by a participant in the present study fits the Cultural Transmission paradigm of education because an ambassador is a person of an elevated position who, coming from a different country and culture, represents a source of knowledge and information about the target language culture.

The next theme of metaphors included the following descriptions of the language teacher: *gambler* (takes chances to succeed), *underwater King or Queen* (different kinds of fishes must speak the ruler’s language), and *big lorry* (don’t make it angry or you will never see the road again). Corresponding metaphors in Oxford et al.’s (1998) typology are *Teacher as Competitor* for the *gambler* metaphor in our study because the thought pattern was that the teacher competes with students for control over the learning outcome, and *Teacher as Mind-and-Behaviour Controller* for the *King/Queen* metaphor in our research because the image reflects the teacher’s power and capacity to control the students’ behaviour (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 21). *Teacher as Hanging Judge* in Oxford et al.’s (1998) research corresponds to the *big lorry* metaphor in our study because the teacher is perceived as a “capricious and callous authority” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 18).

Table 1 below shows a summary of the metaphors created by the respondents. A majority of the students of both genders described the language teacher as *nurturer*, *entertainer* or *giver* (n=18, 66.7%), followed by the view of the teacher as *conduit* of knowledge (n=6, 22.2%), *competitor*, *mind-and-body controller*, and *hanging judge* (n=3, 11.1%).

Aspect	Female students	Male students
Social Order (teacher control)	Gambler/ <i>competitor</i> *	King or Queen/ <i>mind-and-behavior controller</i> Big lorry/ <i>hanging judge</i>
Cultural Transmission (teacher control)	Encyclopedia/ <i>conduit</i> Travel guide/ <i>conduit</i> Magician/ <i>conduit</i>	Discovery channel/ <i>conduit</i> Walking dictionary/ <i>conduit</i> Ambassador of a country/ <i>conduit</i>
Learner-Centered Growth (shared teacher-and-student control)	Mother/ <i>nurturer</i> Nanny/ <i>nurturer</i> Candle/ <i>nurturer</i> Vitamin/ <i>nurturer</i> Mother/ <i>nurturer</i> Ant/ <i>nurturer</i> Mother/ <i>nurturer</i> Bad song/ <i>entertainer</i> Water/ <i>nurturer</i> Plant or animal/ <i>giver</i>	Book/ <i>entertainer</i> Fruit tree/ <i>nurturer</i> God of passion/ <i>nurturer</i> Bird singing to the wall/ <i>entertainer</i> Parents/ <i>nurturer</i> Operating system/ <i>nurturer</i> Sunshine/ <i>nurturer</i> Cook/ <i>nurturer</i>
Social Reform (shared teacher-and-student control)	-----	-----

*Provided in italics are codes for the role of teacher as classified by Oxford et al. (1998).

Table 1: Classification of metaphors according to perspectives on education and students’ gender

As to the philosophical aspects of education, the majority of the metaphors reflected the students’ view of the language learning process as the Learner-Centered Growth, followed by the Cultural Transmission and the Social Order. In the majority of the metaphors (n=18, 66.7%) control of the learning process was shared between the teacher and students; however, a considerable number of the metaphors (n=9, 33.3%) revealed that the language classroom was perceived as the “teacher’s world” where the teacher had the organizing and leading role.

The frequency of images produced by students of different genders transpires that female students in the present study used the metaphor “child’s caretaker” to describe the language teacher more often than did their male classmates. Thus, three female students described the

language teacher as *mother* and as *nanny* while only one male student described the teacher as *parent*.

5.2 Results of statistical analysis

The statistical analysis was based on the findings of the qualitative analysis of the metaphors created by the participants. It was performed in order to determine whether differences in the students' perceptions of the language teacher's role and the language learning process detected in the course of the content analysis were statistically significant. Therefore, cross-tabulation analysis was used (1) to determine the relationship between students' gender and their perceptions of learning according to the four aspects of education described by Oxford et al. (1998), and (2) to assess the relationship between students' gender and their perceptions of the learning process control.

Among various cross-tabulation analyses, Pearson chi-squared test is the most popular method to test statistical significance of association between two different variables. However, this study employs Fisher's exact test rather than the chi-square test. This is because Fisher's exact test is more suitable when the sample size is small (Siegel, 1956), as is the case in the present study. A standard Fisher's exact test is used to test the relationship between two variables in a 2x2 contingency table. Statistical packages, such as SPSS version 14, can provide Fisher's statistics for contingency table with more than two rows and columns by using the Monte Carlo estimation method.

First of all, as Table 2 shows, results of the statistical analysis of the relationship between respondents' gender and their views of the language learning process reveal that the p-value for Fisher's exact test is 0.855, which is above the alpha level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). This means that there was no significant difference in the students' perceptions of the learning process across genders.

		Control			Total
		Social Order	Cultural Transmission	Learner-Centered Growth	
Gender	Female	1	3	10	14
	Male	2	3	8	13
	Total	3	6	18	27

Fisher's Exact Test: P-value =0.855

Table 2: Cross-tabulation of students' gender and perspective on learning

Secondly, this study carried out cross-tabulation analysis to examine the relationship between students' gender and the perceived control of language learning. As seen in Table 3, the p-value for Fisher's exact test is 0.586 ($p > 0.05$), which is above the alpha level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). This means that no considerable difference was detected in the perception of control of the language learning process across genders.

		Control		Total
		Teacher Control	Shared Control	
Gender	Female	4	10	14
	Male	5	8	13
	Total	9	18	27

Fisher's Exact Test: P-value =0.586

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of students' gender and perceived control of learning process

In short, while the content analysis detected some disparities in the perceptions of language teachers among students of different genders, the empirical results show that the differences were not statistically significant.

6 Discussion

The qualitative analysis of the metaphors generated by the participants in our research showed that the students generally had positive perceptions of language teachers. Only two images out of 27 contained a negative description of the teacher, comparing the teacher to *a big lorry* that “you should not provoke”, and *a bad song* that “just spoils the mood”. The former image was generated by a male student while the latter description was given by a female student. Therefore, there was no difference in attitude (overtly positive vs. overtly negative) towards language instructors between male and female participants.

The metaphors produced by the students were diverse; they included images of human beings and inanimate objects, and were similar to the images generated by language learners in other educational contexts, that is, *teacher as parent* (Swales, 1994), *teacher as nurturer* and *teacher as provider of knowledge* (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2001). In the present study, *teacher as nurturer* was the most recurrent metaphor. This fact reveals that the learners perceived their language teachers as caring individuals who provided not only knowledge but also comfort and sense of security. This metaphor is revealing of the students’ emotional needs. Obviously, they would appreciate a language classroom with a warm and pleasant atmosphere.

Regarding research question 2, the results of the content analysis showed that the metaphors generated by this cohort of Malaysian university students corresponded to three out of the four educational paradigms outlined by Oxford et al. (1998). Thus, the Social Order, Cultural Transmission, and Learner-Centered Growth perspectives on education were all present in the students’ metaphors. However, metaphors that fit the Social Reform perspective were conspicuously lacking. This could be due to specific characteristics of the Malaysian educational context, which we will discuss below.

The majority of the students described the language teacher as *nurturer* and *entertainer*. These metaphors fitted the Learner-Centered Growth perspective on education. In this educational paradigm, control over the learning process is supposed to be shared between the teacher and students. However, if we compare the conceptual metaphors for teachers in the Learner-Centered Growth perspective given by Oxford et al. (i.e., *teacher as spouse*, *teacher as delegator*, *teacher as scaffolder*) with the metaphors in the present research, which predominantly described the teacher as *nurturer*, it becomes clear that the participants were not prepared to assume an equal share of control over their learning; they would rather delegate this function to the teacher. Power sharing involves a “give and take” relationship. However, since the participants perceived the language teacher as a nurturer the teacher was, in effect, positioned at the “giving” side of the relationship while the learners remained somewhat passive “receivers”. This perception could be culturally determined. Some researchers have argued that in Asian educational contexts conceptualization of the teacher as learning partner is culturally inappropriate because the teacher is seen within society at large as a transmitter of knowledge and a figure commanding respect (see Sripathy, 1998). To reflect this, the students would expect their teachers to be an “authoritative figure in a teacher-centered environment” (Tan, 2005, p. 24).

Perception of the teacher as the initiator and the leader of the classroom proceedings was recurrent in this study. Thus, all six metaphors in the Cultural Transmission perspective on education generated by the students (i.e., *encyclopedia*, *travel guide*, *magician*, *Discovery channel*, *walking dictionary*, *ambassador of a country*) described the language teacher as *conduit*, that is, the holder and provider of knowledge. The teacher is clearly the agent of control in the classroom. In their study, Oxford et al. (1998) provided another metaphor for the teacher in the Cultural Transmission educational paradigm, that is, *Teacher as Repeater*. This image reveals that language

learning can be perceived by students as a repetitive, dull and unrewarding process, where the teacher implements classroom activities in a predictable manner and makes classroom proceedings routine. However, in our study, no such negativity was detected and the images produced by the students were all quite positive. Three metaphors in the present study corresponded to the Social Order perspective on education; these metaphors conceptualized the teacher as *competitor*, *mind-and-behaviour controller*, and *hanging judge*. Comparing these metaphors to those in Oxford et al.'s (1998) study (i.e., *teacher as manufacturer*, *teacher as hanging judge*, and *teacher as doctor*) we can see that the images were quite similar.

Addressing research question 3, the analysis of metaphors from the gender perspective revealed that female students in this cohort used the “child’s caretaker” image to describe the teacher considerably more often than did male students. Female students viewed language teachers as *mother* who “teaches baby to speak”, *nanny* who “teaches us a new language and corrects us”. This imagery is quite similar to the metaphors about language learning created by female students in Swales’ (1994) research where family/nurturing was among the most prominent themes.

A comparison of the metaphors generated by the participants in the present research shows that the images produced by the female students (*mother*, *nanny*, *travel guide*, *magician*) indicate a greater involvement and a more intense interaction between the teacher and students. On the other hand, the metaphors produced by the male students (i.e., teacher as *King/Queen* or *country’s ambassador*) indicate a greater degree of “power distance” in the teacher-student relationship. In addition, among the metaphors generated by the male students, there was an element of caution in constructing relations with one’s language teacher. Thus one student wrote, a “language teacher is like a big lorry; don’t make it angry or you will never see the road again”. Though there was no obvious dichotomy between female and male students’ conceptualization of relationship with the language teacher, a binary “closer involvement/greater distance” can be detected in the metaphors produced by the students of different genders. The fact that teachers tend to have more positive contacts with female rather than male students has been reported in several studies (see Sunderland, 1998) while the lack of openness and the greater distance in interaction between teachers and male students were observed in Allard’s (2004) research. However, as the statistical analysis revealed, these differences were not statistically significant.

No metaphors generated by the participants in the present study suited the Social Reform perspective. This could be culturally-determined. The idea of Social Reform, or democratic social reconstruction, as an approach to schooling was developed by Dewey (1933 as cited in Oxford et al., 1998). The teacher’s role in this educational paradigm is to promote the development of a more democratic and egalitarian society. To reach this target, the classroom itself must be a “miniature” democratic community (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 41). However, the previous learning experience of the participants in our study might not have prepared them for this type of classroom interaction. First of all, in Malaysia, like in many other Asian countries, school is a hierarchical organization where the teachers are to be respected rather than befriended or be treated as equals. The relationships between the teacher and students are “not lubricated with the democratic oil of warmth and first names” (Biggs, 1998, p. 730). Secondly, in the Social Reform perspective as envisioned by Dewey (1933), the learning process is not a mechanical accumulation of facts, information and skills; learning is conceptualized as a process of exploration and adaptation to life. This approach to schooling may not fit well into Asian educational contexts. Education systems in many Asian countries have been described as exam-driven and result-oriented (Aldridge, Fraser, & Huang, 1999; Biggs & Watkins, 1996). In these systems, the teacher’s role is to equip the learners with the necessary knowledge and skills rather than to develop the learners’ creativity and a wider epistemological awareness. Therefore, the traditional pattern of interaction with the “teacher as mentor” and “student as obedient disciple” perceptive may be seen as the preferred mode of communication, one that is able to ensure the best learning outcome.

7 Pedagogical implications

Regarding the organization of the classroom proceedings, uncovering deeper structures of students' perceptions may help avoid what Oxford et al. (1998) dubbed as “style wars” between the teacher and students. What insights for language teaching pedagogy could be gained from the findings of this research? First of all, the findings support the notion that “enlightened eclecticism” should be practiced in the language classroom rather than a single specific method of language instruction. Even the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) method, which has dominated language pedagogy since its inception in the 1970s, has undergone so many changes and modifications that there remain no clear guidelines of how to organize the language classroom (Sowden, 2007). Moreover, the validity of adopting the CLT method in various – and often very different – educational contexts has been questioned by some researchers (Tan, 2005). As the metaphors produced by the participants in our study attest, the students were not wholly prepared for the learner-centered organization of the language classroom; neither were they ready to share control of their learning with the teacher and become negotiators, interactors, givers as well as takers in the learning process, all of which is strongly endorsed by the CLT method (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).

The finding that in five metaphors language learning was seen as the Cultural Transmission indicates that the learners would give priority to “the pursuit of cultural and linguistic knowledge, rather than communicative language use” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 44). In this situation, incorporation of authentic materials in the language program will answer the learners' needs and offer them a wider exposure to culture, native speakers and everyday realities of the target language country. Furthermore, three metaphors in this study described language learning from the Social Order educational paradigm where the emphasis is on the “following prescribed patterns” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 44). This fact reflects the learners' need for an ample opportunity to practice newly acquired lexis and grammatical structures. Thus, mechanical drills, form-oriented exercises, semi-structured conversations need to be an indispensable part of the curriculum.

These findings are not controversial. The participants in the present study were learning a language that has a different structure from the languages they already know (i.e., English, Malay, various Chinese dialects, and other local languages and dialects, such as Bajau, Kadazan-Dusun, Bidayuh). Because there is virtually no opportunity to practice the Russian language outside the classroom, it is especially important for the learners to gain enough linguistic confidence through the form-oriented exercises before they can comfortably participate in the communicative activities. Moreover, as Russia is a distant country for Malaysian learners in both geographic and cultural sense, the socio-cultural aspect should be featured prominently in the language program. Although all of these activities promote the teacher-directed classroom organization, language instructors may want to strive to gradually delegate the initiative to the students. To achieve this, language instructors may alternate between being *nurturer*, *entertainer*, *delegator*, *scaffolder*, and *knowledge conduit*.

This study has some limitations. First of all, the number of participants was rather limited, and they were all from the same university and the same language program. A bigger sample size might have yielded slightly different or more significant results. Secondly, the participants in this research were successful language learners who had obtained good results in the MUET and thus were eligible to learn a foreign language at the university. For future research, it could be insightful to explore whether metaphors about language teachers created by less successful learners would differ from those obtained in this inquiry. Future studies on student-generated metaphors in the context of language pedagogy could explore the influence of learners' motivation on their metaphor production. Another interesting approach could be investigating whether instructors' gender affects the learners' perceptions of their teachers and shapes their views on the teacher-student interaction.

To conclude, the present post-method situation calls for the “enlightened eclecticism” in language pedagogy. This means that there are fewer constraints regarding the choice of teaching method, materials and classroom activities. The teacher has a greater field for maneuver in the classroom. There is also a growing realization that in each educational context the organization of the classroom proceedings in the language class would vary. Asking the students to write their own metaphors about language learning may help language educators to understand specific characteristics of a particular education context and create a classroom that accommodates the polyphony of voices and opinions.

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