Comparing the Metaphorical Orientations of Iranian Male and Female English Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to elicit lived images about English learning from male and female Iranian English language learners. Ninety male and 210 female language learners from Iranian universities and language institutes chose from an inventory of images and provided own images. The 781 valid responses by males and 1903 valid responses by females were listed as images. The researcher examined the images and slightly summarized them under more generic labels. The number and percentages of males and females who offered each image were tabulated. The images by each gender were also arranged in descending order and their rank differences were calculated. The examination of the types of images and the frequencies of participants who chose or provided them offer patterns which reveal their conceptual models and lessons which can be of value to language teaching practitioners. Some of these patterns and insights are briefly discussed but many are left to the judgment, deliberation, and reflection and practical wisdom of the readers.

Introduction

According to Greek philosophers, notably Aristotle and Plato, mental images were taken to be a principal ingredient in the composition of the mind and sometimes were believed to be the elements of thought. The topic of mental imagery thrived in the western thought with the British empiricists, notably Locke, Berkeley, Hume, and Hartley. Some researchers of the introspectionists tradition (e.g., Galton, 1883/1907, 1973; Titchener, 1909), designed investigations of mental imagery which involved participants in recalling and reporting their lived images or rate their ability to visualize objects. With the rise of behaviorism, interest in the investigation of imagery sank below the horizon as it denounced introspection and subjective reports. However, it was reawakened in the late 1960s, when researchers did qualitative assessment of imagery (e.g., Sheehan, 1967), explored its role in learning (Bugelski, Kidd, & Gegmen 1968; Sheehan, 1971, 1973) and began to incorporate imagery in cognitive theory and develop theories of the visual representation of knowledge (see Solso, MacLin, & MacLin, 2008, pp. 273-298 for a brief review of cognitive imagery research).

The psychological role of mental images in performance is sound and solid and supported by empirical evidence. To survive, humans must be able to use imagery to navigate through the spatial world (Solso, 2008). Tolman (1932) calls these pieces of general spatial knowledge *cognitive maps*, which according to Thorndike and Hayes-Roth (1982) can be of two types: route knowledge and survey knowledge, the former referring to specific pathways, used to get from one point to another and the latter dealing with more global relationships between environmental cues. This is in line with Shepard (1994) who declares that mental images are, if not structurally identical to the real-world objects, at least functionally related. Kosslyn (e.g., Kosslyn, 1994, 1995) has demonstrated that a mental image is similar to the perception of a real object.

Metaphors enable people "to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5), for example, describing educational processes in farming or agricultural terms such as cultivation or growth. In other words, conceptual metaphors play a role in the way people conceptualize and represent reality in their thinking. So, a study of conceptual metaphors produced by teachers or learners should prove revealing, telling us something about their perceptions, thinking and learning. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), metaphors can be barriers as well as bridges to learning; they can mislead as much as they lead. They represent how teachers and learners think and feel about teaching and learning processes. Thus, the study of teachers' and learners' metaphors can be of great theoretical and practical significance for anybody who is concerned with one element or another in the educational process.

Although the exact mechanism for the connection between metaphors and action is difficult to specify, metaphor, imagery or vision often stimulates action

(Cortazzi & Jin, 1999). A growing body of research has supported the motivating power of vision for language learning, which is in line with the correlation found between success and vision in other fields (e.g., sports psychology.) According to Dornyei and Chan (2013) and Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014), a key aspect of the L2 motivation is imagery. Dornyei and Chan (2013) suggest that "the intensity of motivation is partly dependent on the learners' capability to generate mental imagery" (p. 437).

Moulton & Kosslyn, (2009, as cited in Muir & Dornyei, 2013) claim that the detailed visions we create and the senses we use to form each vision of our future selves are generated through the same neural mechanisms as if we were to experience the event in reality. In fact, the brain cannot tell whether an event is real or imagined (Woolley & Cox, 2007).

The motivational relevance of imagination has also been examined in more practical and specific contexts. Kim (2009) surveyed Korean primary school learners and found a positive relationship between their motivation for learning and the extent to which they engaged in creating mental images. Kim and Kim (2011) followed up this survey with high school learners and, among other things, found that mental imagery can reliably predict learners' ideal formation and motivation for learning English as a foreign language.

Concerning specific areas of language learning, there is enough research, to convince us of the cognitive facilitative effect of using imagination and imagery in vocabulary learning (e.g., Shen, 2010), grammar learning (e.g., Gerngross, Puchta, & Thornberry, 2006), and of the mediation of these mental capacities or habits in the deployment of strategies for learning or performing in listening (Center, Freeman, Robertson, & Outherd, 1999), reading (Green & Donahue, 2009; Janfeshan & Pourarian, 2017), and writing (Write & Hill, 2008). It can be argued that thinking and performing according to different visual styles and holding certain metaphors about learning and cognition can result in more or less efficient algorithms for language learning.

Gender-related differences

Some studies indicate that boys and girls learn a foreign language in very different ways (Dornyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006). Oxford's (1994), who focused on gender differences and the language learning styles and strategies of females suggested that a learner's sex can profoundly affect the ways they approach language learning, and consequently, their ultimate language proficiency. Having discussed grounds for difference such as subjectivity or objectivity, field dependence or independence, reflection or sensory preference among female language learners, she concludes that more research is needed to understand better the relationships between sex or gender and the differences.

It should be acknowledged that an important issue worth exploring in regard with variation across learners from the two sexes is the way boys and girls visualize and metaphorize learning. The claim that boys and girls may have different ways of visualizing things and hence form different pictures for the processes of language learning in their long term memories is intuitively appealing and has been explored. For example it has been found that male and females differ in spatial-visualization and in their performance in high-school geometry (Nemeth & Hofmann, 2006). Research on mental rotation ability also provides consistent evidence for gender differences in favor of males (e.g., Linn & Peterson, 1986; Voyer et al., 1995). Kaufman (2006) studied boys' and girls' performance on visualization tasks and found substantial differences between the two groups. Difference in analogizing the learning process and forming concrete pictures of it can be the result of different thinking and cognitive styles, beliefs, training, and socially-constructed experiences and may in turn, contribute to particular learning strategies, study decisions and behavior and have wide-ranging implications for teachers' practice. So, exploring them is both practically and theoretically of significance.

And it is also quite justified to incorporate picture, metaphor, and vision in this investigation as "this new generation of students thinks in pictures and communicates through pictures" (Wasilewska, 2017, p. 43). "Today's students live in a visually rich world where they permanently encounter and create meaning and knowledge through images" (Romero & Bobkina, 2017, p. 66). Understanding the preferences, social interaction patterns, various study strategies, learning styles, cross-gender personality variations, cognitive and metacognitive orientations and attitudinal and motivational levels of boys and girls give teachers a better vantage point in designing and providing language learning solutions and intervention which will be better attuned to the learners' needs and potential for performance.

The goal of the study

Examining many reports on the metaphorization of different aspects of the learning and teaching processes by teachers and learners, the researcher detected a gap which was worth exploration: Are men and women considerably different in the types of images they hold for foreign language learning? Specifically, the goal of this study was to see how images and metaphors for English learning offered by fairly experienced female learners of this language as a foreign language compared with images and metaphors offered by their male counterparts. For this purpose, the participants were given an inventory of possible comparisons and a number of incomplete sentences cueing them to compare language learning and learning its skills and components to concrete objects and acts.

In fact, this study is a follow-up and an extension of Author's previous research (2012a, 2012b, 2012c), where he elicited, interpreted, and categorized images and metaphors English learners had in mind for learning English as a foreign language, vocabulary learning, and grammar learning, respectively.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Do males and females hold different images in their minds for foreign language learning?

2. What patterns emerge from juxtaposing the images and metaphors held by the two sexes?

Like most research on language learning metaphors, this research is motivated by Lakoff's (e.g., 1987) idea that thought is structured metaphorically and linguistic metaphors that language users employ reflect underlying mental structures, variously referred to as schemata, scripts, frames, mental models, in which a target idea (topic) is understood and interpreted in terms of a more familiar tangible idea (vehicle) (see Cameron, 1999a) There is also good practical justifications for attempts at knowing about the imagery and metaphorical competence of learners as they live and learn in a visually rich world and teaching practitioners need to have a good analysis of their sophisticated minds in order to teach language and communication comprehensively and efficiently (Donaghy & Xerri, 2017).

Methodology

Several works significantly influenced the methodological decisions made by this researcher. Concerning metaphoricity and categorization, mention should be made particularly of Lakeoff and Johnson (1980) Cameron (1999b), Gibbs, Lima, and Francozo (2004), Cortazzi and Jin (1999), and Kittay (1987).

The concept of metaphor in this study is used in a very broad sense and it seems there is no need to add the concept of image. However, the similar concept of image is used interchangeably, in part because of its communicative value, i.e., it seems more transparent and could more easily elicit responses which are considered either metaphors or images, probably because it is more frequently used.

Elicitation Tools

In order to elicit images from the participants, they were given sentence frames (incomplete sentences), which cued them to compare learning English and its components and skills to concrete actions and objects. For example, "Learning English grammar is like …." Altogether, there were nine incomplete sentences in this format asking for metaphors and comparisons about learning English in general and its vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, idioms, and the four skills, as well as items to illicit images about teachers, learners, and course books. The nine items were preceded by elaborate clarification and guidance, clear examples in Persian and a few slots to insert personal data, including their sex. The participants were advised to complete the sentences in any language they were comfortable with. Although this research was particularly interested in the general pictures men and women held for the language learning process, a detailed itemization was thought to be more

conducive to the elicitation of valid and representative data about the process of language learning in the learners than general prompts about language learning.

With the continuous and fuzzy nature of metaphors and images (Cameron, 1999b), it was expected that few possible responses could offer strict and compartmentalized images for the questionnaire items. So, to ease the later process of content analysis, the participants were provided, in addition to a space to offer own images, with an extensive list of images, which was drafted based on the reports of previous studies.

Procedures

The questionnaire was given to and responses were accepted from those who had at least one year experience of serious English learning. This precondition was set for the obvious reason that it was very unlikely that novices or nonchalant English learners would provide valid and noteworthy comparisons. These respondents studied in universities and/or language institutes in several cities in Iran. In some cases, they themselves taught English but still considered themselves learners of English. The decision about who met this criterion was made by the researcher or his aids. It was not hard to choose respondents who truly met this pre-condition because it was concomitant with the fact that more often than not only those who had an established relationship with the providers of the questionnaire returned it or gave reliable responses. The forms were delivered to individual learners to complete at their convenience and return in person, via e-mail, or, more recently, via Telegram channel. To ease the respondents to providing images, two channels for giving metaphors/images were open in the questionnaire: choosing from a bank of images, and giving their own metaphors.

The purpose of the study was to compare the pool of analogies and comparisons provided by male respondents with those provided by female respondents. So, as long as their comparisons could be counted as metaphors or similes or images and validly add to the general picture the study was after, they were included in the analysis whether the participants responded to all items or provided a single comparison.

The responses were meticulously examined by the researcher and the images or metaphors included in them were identified and listed as more general metaphorical categories, for example, MUSIC for *playing the guitar* and BRIDGE for *building a bridge between islands*. Next, the categories of images extracted from males' and females' responses were separately listed along with their frequency tags. Originally, it was conceived that there would be three groups of categories: categories unique to male learners, unique to female learners and common to both groups; but, this did not happen, except for TEAMWORK. (See Tables 1 &2)

Participants

All language learners who could loosely be labeled intermediate or above were considered eligible participants. Exact records of the number of people who were solicited to reply to the questionnaire were not kept. However, one can be certain that those who did not return the questionnaires commanded a huge majority. At the end of the testing and trying data collection attempt, some 300 fully or partly completed forms, which were legible for analysis, were on hand.

Metaphor Identification, Categorization

In identifying metaphors and images from elicited verbal information, a big challenge for this research was to ascribe participants' responses to descriptive labels as images and metaphors. Fortunately, there was already enough theoretical and empirical research literature on metaphor analysis and identification. Having studied them, I found that there were not fixed prescribed identification and classification procedures whose validity was guaranteed and that some subjectivity was unavoidable and common. Following the suggestions by Cameron (1999b), metaphoricity and imagery was judged in the immediate context of individual responses and in view of explicit and implicit cues present in that context as suggested by (Cameron, 1999a). The basic necessary conditions for metaphors were taken to be domain incongruity and potential transfer of meaning from the source domain (vehicle) to the target domain (topic), after Kittay (1987). The checklist and steps suggested by Kittay (1987, p. 84) and Cameron (1999b, p. 117) for identifying and describing metaphors in discourse data were informally consulted in making decisions about including metaphors and images and excluding non-metaphors. The author's own previous research was also consulted to have fitting categories and descriptive labels (Farjami, 2012a, b, c). Moreover, informal postings on the Internet were meticulously examined in the attempt to compile a comprehensive inventory of educational metaphors.

To furnish a rich portrait of the pool of images, which inevitably overlapped and gave crisscrossing patterns, I compared the males' and females' data at several attempts, each with a slightly different purpose. First, the responses of males and females were compared in terms of the categories which were born out of several rounds of the examination of the pool of either the responses themselves or categories used in previous research (Table 1). Second, the images from each gender were ranked based on their frequencies in the responses and their frequency rank differences were tabulated (Tables 2 & 3). Finally, some patterns and dispositions relevant to language learning, which could be inferred from the images, were abstracted from the data, quantified, and tabulated to show how the two sexes attested regarding each pattern or tendency (Table 4).

Results

Forty-five image categories were concluded from male and female participants' responses. Table 1 below presents the number and percentage of each image for

each sex. Although the fact that the total number of males' images is different from that of the females' images, the numbers are also given to make comparison across categories easier. Alternatively, to make the differences more pronounced and visible, the reader can ignore the decimal point for percentages.

Table 1. A quantitative comparison of male and female images for foreign language learning

images/metaphors	numbers & percentages	images/metaphors	numbers & percentages	images/metaphors	numbers & percentages
organic growth	41(5.25%)	**finding direction**	30(3.84%)	**journey**	42(5.38%)
	73(3.84%)		55(2.89%)		78(4.10%)
climbing	16(2.05%)	**cooking**	10(1.28%)	**knitting/weaving**	8(1.02%)
	54(2.84%)		36(1.89%)		26(1.37%)
ammunition	9(1.15%)	**dancing**	23(2.94%)	**life**	8(1.02%)
	8(0.42%)		63(3.31%)		20(1.05%)
baby	5(0.64%)	**decorating**	18(2.30%)	**music**	49(6.27%)
	17(0.89%)		32(1.68%)		102(5.36%)
body parts	16(2.05%)	**puzzle solving**	51(6.53%)	**medicine**	7(0.90%)
	22(1.16%)		143(7.51%)		15(0.79%)
construction	28(3.58%)	**gate**	12(1.54%)	**mirage**	3(0.38%)
	54(2.84%)		40(1.05%)		9(0.47%)
bridge	15(1.92%)	**driving**	19(2.43%)	**mirror**	4(0.51%)
	31(1.63%)		57(3.00%)		12(0.63%)
light	16(2.05%)	**fighting**	16(2.05%)	**parents**	2(0.26%)
	55(2.89%)		23(1.21%)		9(0.47%)
food	66(8.45%)	**fishing**	6(0.77%)	**ocean/sea**	14(1.79%)
	195(10.25%)		26(1.37%)		59(3.10%)
game/play	46(5.89%)	**flood/storm**	19(2.43%)	**parrot**	5(0.77%)
	97(5.98%)		72(3.78%)		16(0.84%)
chatting	16(2.05%)	**flowing/river**	10(1.28%)	**peeling onions**	10(1.28%)
	13(0.68%)		21(1.10%)		18(0.95%)
collecting	29(3.71%)	**gem/treasure**	26(3.33%)	**sight seeing**	39(4.99%)
	50(2.63%)		55(2.89%)		77(4.05%)
sports/physical activity	33(4.23%)	**smelling flowers**	7(0.90%)	**teamwork**	3(0.38%)
	102(5.36%)		26(1.37%)		0(0.00%)
artistic production	9(1.15%)	**space exploration**	11(1.41%)	**wardrobe**	4(0.51%)
	18(0.95%)		22(1.16%)		5(0.26%)
shopping	4(0.51%)	**sponge**	2(0.26%)	**washing dishes**	4(0.51%)
	24(1.26%)		5(0.26%)		17(0.89%)

Total images given by males: 781; Total images given by females: 1903

Note: The Gray boxes are for males' statistics; the percentage in each box refers to the share of that image category in the total images counted for each sex.

Table 2 presents the percentages of male and female images for foreign language learning in descending order along with the lag or lead in ranking of each category in comparison with its corresponding item. A lead sign (+) means that the image is more frequent in the replies from that gender next to the replies from the other gender and, hence, enjoys a higher ranking, while a lag sign (-) means otherwise.

Table 2. The lags and leads of the frequency ranking of males' and females' images (- = lag; + = lead)

	male images	lag/lead	female images	lag/lead
1	food 8.45	0	food 10.25	0
2	puzzle solving 6.53	0	puzzle solving 7.51	0
3	music 6.27	+1	sports/physical activity 5.36	-5
4	game/play 5.89	+1	music 5.36	-1
5	journey 5.38	+1	game/play5.98	-1
6	organic growth 5.25	+2	journey4.10	-1
7	sight-seeing 4.99	0	sightseeing 4.05	0
8	sports/physical activity 4.23	-5	organic growth 3.84	-2
9	finding direction 3.84	+4	flood/storm 3.78	+5
10	collecting 3.71	+8	dancing 3.31	+3
11	construction 3.58	+6	ocean/sea 3.10	+12
12	gem/treasure 3.33	+2	driving 3.00	+3
13	dancing 2.94	-3	finding direction 2.89	-4
14	flood/storm 2.43	-5	gem/treasure 2.89	+2
15	driving 2.43	-3	light 2.89	+6
16	decorating 2.30	+4	climbing 2.84%	+4
17	chatting 2.05	+21	construction 2.84	-6
18	body parts 2.05	+9	collecting 2.63	-8
19	fighting 2.05	+8	cooking 1.89	+7
20	climbing 2.05	-4	decorating 1.68	-4
21	light 2.05	-6	bridge 1.63	+1
22	bridge 1.92	-1	smelling flowers 1.37	+12
23	ocean/sea 1.79	-12	knitting/weaving 1.37	+8
24	gate 1.54	+6	fishing 1.37	+11
25	space exploration 1.41	+3	shopping 1.26	+14
26	cooking 1.28	-7	fighting 1.21	-8
27	flowing/river 1.28	+2	body parts 1.16	-9
28	peeling onions 1.28	+5	space exploration 1.16	-3
29	artistic production 1.15	+3	flowing/river 1.10	-2
30	ammunition 1.15	+11	gate 1.05	-6
31	knitting/weaving 1.02	-8	life 1.05	+1
32	life 1.02	-1	artistic production 0.95	-3
33	medicine 0.90	+4	peeling onions 0.95	-5
34	smelling flowers 0.90	-12	baby 0.89	+2
35	fishing 0.77	-11	washing dishes 0.89	+6
36	baby 0.64	-2	parrot 0.84	+1
37	parrot 0.77	-1	medicine 0.79	-4
38	mirror 0.51	+1	chatting 0.68	-21
39	shopping 0.51	-14	mirror 0.63	-1
40	wardrobe 0.51	+4	mirage 0.47	+2
41	washing dishes 0.51	-6	parents 0.47	+3
2	mirage 0.38	-2	ammunition 0.42	-11
43	teamwork 0.38	+2	sponge 0.26	+2
44	parents 0.26	-3	wardrobe 0.26	-4
45	sponge 0.26	-2	teamwork 0/00	-2

Table 3 lists image categories with rank differences higher than five.

Table 3. Images with differences larger than 5 ranks across genders

	images	rank differences
1	gossiping	21
2	shopping	14
3	ocean/sea	12
4	smelling flower	12
5	fishing	11
6	ammunition	11
7	body parts	9
8	fighting	8
9	collecting	8
10	knitting/weaving	8
11	cooking	7
12	construction	6
13	gate	6
14	light	6
15	washing dishes	6
16	flood/storm	5
17	peeling onions	5
18	sports/physical activity	5

Finally, Table 4 presents a number of general themes which are in some way important to and have traditionally been discussed in relation to language learning. They are juxtaposed to the images which implied them. Non-determinate images, images which could not be decided on concerning their implication, are not included; notwithstanding this, SPORTS ACTIVITY and GAME are considered social because of their frequent social nature.

Table 4. The cumulative percentages for themes or issues which embrace images in several categories in Table 1

issues	Entailments	females	males
attitude	Positive images (light, food, game, dance, decorating, gate, gem, music, sight, arts, smelling flowers, parents)	40.25	40.07
	Negative images (flood, mirage, washing dishes (chores))	5.14	3.32
pleasure	Images implying pleasure (light, food, game, dance, decorating, gem, shopping, smelling flowers)	29.63	26.37
Sociality	Images implying sociality (game, teamwork, sports activity, gossiping)	12.02	12.55
dynamism	Images implying dynamism and activity on the part of learners (game, cooking, dance, fight, journey, knitting, sports, shopping, space exploration, fishing, driving, direction, collecting, construction, decorating, climbing, peeling, arts production, washing)	45.71	46.33
Edge	Images implying edge (ammunition, light ,body parts, growth, direction, detective, gate, driving, gem, medicine, mirror)	27.02	29.58
constructivism	Images implying costructivism (growth, baby, knitting)	6.10	6.91
structuralism	Images implying structuralism (body parts, construction, cooking, peeling, wardrobe, collecting)	9.73	12.41

Discussion

This study involved a high degree of subjective decisions at multiple levels: design of elicitation tools, data collection, data summarization, categorization, and interpretation of images and categories. Many images, which would be easily identified with by many learners may not be represented in the bank of images cues used in this study. Moreover, one cannot be sure whether, say, ice-cream as food, connote positively for those who compared language learning to eating it. Relatedly, it is certain that perception and cognitive and affective consequences of the same image for various learners is different. For example, mountain, ocean, and skyscraper, which refer to the enormity of the task for some, may be a manifestation of overwhelm, while for others they may imply joy, inspiration, and awe.

The other side of subjectivity is that we are dealing with a rich source of information from which people can learn about different aspects of language learning at several levels. So, in spite of the ambiguities which exist with almost all images to different degrees, an overview of the images and their comparison can, albeit tentatively, tell something about how the two genders conceptualize and understand foreign language learning, how they may be affected by the social and biological processes, and how they may defy these processes in thinking, and possibly, in action.

One observation about the images is that altogether they are not strikingly different. Many images offered by the two genders go on side by side or close to each other in terms of frequencies (see Tables 1 and 2). When different clusters of images are added up, the cumulative percentages are interestingly similar, despite there being images in the clusters which may have attracted different frequencies, because some images with different frequencies cancel each other out (See Table 4). This shows that even if the two genders conceptualize language learning differently and are guided by different guidelines, at the end of the day, they may have the same affective and cognitive harvest. For example, according to the data here, the degree of positive attitude is almost the same, although derived from different images; or, both genders will look at language as a construction made of constituents, whether blocks or other ingredients. So, maybe it is not the case that "men are from Mars, women are from Venus" (Gray, 1992). And, even if they bring different mentalities to some tasks, they end up in the same solution, albeit in their own particular ways.

One good piece of news about the images is that they are mostly positive and the number of negative ones, e.g., walking on thorns, mirage, flood, is low. With English learning being so high-profile, prestigious, and instrumental, a high number of images portraying English learning as an advantageous edge is not surprising, but suggestive of a healthy motivational condition. But the situation could be better; we could have more constructivist images and images which more tellingly imply positive attitudes, or credit language learning with advantages. One can contend that many images are generally shallow in describing both cognition and affect. Nobody

compared English learning to depositing money, few to growth (for mind and cognition), and few to fuel (for affect and motivation).

Comments on Selected Images

The following are brief notes and comments on images or groups of images specified for particular reasons. One should remember that there are countless images which could describe language learning but were not cued by the researcher or were not brought up by the participants. What are listed in the tables above are images particularly foregrounded in the minds of the participants and arranged for the purpose of comparison along gender line. This comparison can reveal the mentality of the two genders and hint and sensitize practitioners about learners' gender specific training needs and how this knowledge can be employed in teaching language, e.g., in promoting particular strategies, and dealing with particular misconceptions.

Images associated with one gender in Iranian culture

Some images are more associated with men or considered men's job in Iranian culture. This may seem a good reason to expect that they should be scored more by men than by women. But, with the exception of the meager category of AMMUNITION, where men outdid the women in thinking of language learning in association with arms and military practice (1. 15% v. 0.42%, respectively), few images, which are culturally or universally associated with men, attracted more responses from men than women; and a very small number of participants invoked a BABY image in conceptualizing language learning. However, this point cannot as strongly be raised for Images associated with womanliness in general or particularly in Iranian culture, as men lagged behind females for COOKING, KNITTING, SHOPPING, DANCING, and WASHING DISHES. This may be an indication that men are less accommodative of female roles.

While one can partly use the modest difference in male and female imagery to support de Beauvoir's (1997) idea that "one is not born [a particular gender], but rather becomes one" (p. 182), one should also bear in mind that the ability to metaphorize and form certain mental images does not necessarily mean those images and metaphors will be unvaryingly applied and lived by. In fact, both image formation and image application can be influenced by various personal and situational factors, which are not always bound to culture.

Organic growth, other constructivist images, and explicitly structural images

A rather small number of participants, regardless of gender, invoked images, which imply natural growth and development. If the participants are close to a representative sample of the population of Iranian English learners, the instructive message is that the mentality of constructionism is weak among the Iranian learners and this explains the resistance frequently raised against natural approaches and techniques in teaching English in Iran (Dahmardeh, 2009), while contrived and formal techniques are taken for granted and welcomed. This situation may be fueled

by the prevalent learning culture which associate learning with memory and facts and/or the fact that a deeply seated implicit theory of learning is transferred and perpetuated from generation to generation. Another observation can be that Iranian, and possibly other, language learners are not as much concerned with cognitive and processing issues as they are with analytical and structural issues. In fact, although structural images outnumbered the constructivist ones in the responses of the participants of the study, the number is much below the expectation of a teacher familiar with the general atmosphere in the language learning circles in Iran.

Climbing

In the current daily life, both genders are familiar with climbing images and practice them in reality, although females may associate them with hard work more than men. The fact that both genders reacted similarly to climbing but females well outnumbered males for MOUNTAIN shows that the two genders are similar as long as their attitude is concerned but females invoked the notion of MOUNTAIN more either because they probably find language learning more difficult or because they associate MOUNTAIN to difficulty more than men.

The dominance of non-social images

Only a few images refer to collaboration and social nature of language learning, e.g., TEAMWORK, GAME, and SPORTS; in the majority of responses, language learning is presupposed as a solo project. This may partly justify the fact that, in many cases, CLT, TBLT, peer and group work are paid just lip service and teachers slide back to traditional instructional procedures and styles.

Conclusion

In spite of a high degree of subjectivity in data collection and interpretation, the presence of some biases in prompting images, and other limitations and problems, the elicited data provides a rough indication of the range of ways the two genders visualize the nature of the components and skills they are to learn and the processes which their learning involves. Apart from the nuanced understandings that comparing the two sets of images can bestow, more general patterns also emerge. One significant observation seems to be the low number of images which imply depth and compatibility with theories of learning and language. Another observation with wide social, political and educational implications is lack of serious difference between the two genders in terms of the images they offered. If we assume that images inform us about belief systems and possibly practices, lack of striking differences in the imagery of the two groups not only implies that socialization exert an overriding influence and cancel out the effect of biology and neuro-cognitive differences, but also that members of the two genders converge in beliefs and practice in spite of cultural experiences and expectations about their respective roles. These parallel realities may explain the existence of inter-subjectivity and possibility of communication and cultural transmission across genders. So, there is no need to worry that some learners may be from Mars and others from Venus. But, this

scheme of things may not be due to similarity in thinking but to the ability of humans to empathize. A final point is that teachers need to encourage more dynamic, constructivist and social images in learners so that their efforts are in line with sound models of language and language learning, although the ultimate answers and guidelines should ideally come from further and more fine-tuned research. This suggestion is supported, among other things, by Azabdaftari (2018), who, in his recent review of the ground breaking thoughts and contributions of Henry Widdowson, emphasizes non-contrived holistic materials and acquisition-oriented instruction.

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