

## **Metaphor analysis: Students' metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers at a university in Thailand**

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The study reported here investigated the metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers by students in a university in Thailand, and compared those conceptualisations with the metaphorical typology of language teachers produced by Oxford et al. (1998). An open-ended questionnaire was employed to gather data from 59 Thai university students. Findings show that Thai students conceptualized their English teachers using 32 metaphors. These metaphors were categorized into five groups: a guide (32.20%), a resource (27.11%), a caretaker (25.42%), an authority (8.47%), and a navigator (6.77%). The data show both positive and negative perceptions of English teachers. In a positive way, many Thai students (33.89%) perceived their teachers as a family member who takes care of them and is concerned about them in all matters. In a negative way, a small number of students (8.47%) perceived their teachers as moulders or commanders who assign them work and control how they behave. The findings also reveal that the Thai students' metaphorical perspectives were related to three philosophical perspectives of education (Oxford et al., 1998): social order, cultural transmission, and learner-centred growth.

**Keywords:** Metaphor analysis; students' perceptions of English teachers; metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers; EFL; Thailand

### **Introduction**

Metaphors play an important role in education and have diverse functions (Botha, 2009). They act as "powerful cognitive models through which educators and learners can understand educational phenomena by relating them to something previously experienced" (Botha, 2009, p. 432). Metaphors are regarded as "vehicles for reflection and awareness raising among educators" (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002, p. 95). They are also recognized as important in helping human cognitive processes and determining behaviour based on experiential perceptions (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008). Many aspects of metaphors in education have been studied such as metaphor analysis of students' perceptions or beliefs (see, among others, Baş & Bal-Gezegin, 2015; Kitikanan, 2010; Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008; Pishghadam, Hosseini Fatemi, Askarzadeh Torghabeh, & Navari, 2011; Valdez & Villorente-Saulo, 2014), metaphor analysis of teachers' beliefs (see, for example, Arshavskaya, 2014; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; İnceçay, 2015; Oxford et al., 1998; Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007), roles of metaphor in education (Botha, 2009), using metaphors to tackle problems in teaching and learning (Khoshniyat & Dowlatabadi, 2014; Lai & Shen, 2011; Schwartz & Fischer, 2006), metaphors as a bridge to understanding educational and social contexts (Jensen, 2006), metaphor analysis in educational discourse (Zheng & Song, 2010), parents' metaphorical perceptions about learning English (Coşkun, 2015), and metaphor for teacher education curriculum development (Simon, 2013).

Within the field of language teaching and learning, a few studies have focused on students' metaphorical conceptualizations of their teachers. A notable example from the EFL context is that of Baş and Bal-Gezegin (2015) which used the theoretical background of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) to investigate Turkish EFL students' metaphorical conceptualizations of their English language teachers. Findings from quantitative and qualitative data from 83 Turkish students majoring in English were then compared with the findings of Oxford et al. (1998) and Saban et al. (2007). In that study, English teachers were conceptualized using 67 metaphors which were grouped into 15 categories: a guide, the source of knowledge, basic need, a patient person, an instrument, a care giver/repairer, a cultivator, an authority, an entertainer, a chaser of knowledge, a moulder/ crafts person, a reflector, an effective agent, a harmful agent, and a builder. Four of the 67 metaphors tended towards negative views seeing English teachers as: a cactus, a hammer, a boss, or God. The remaining metaphors tended to be more positive. Another notable study of students' metaphorical conceptualisation of teachers was conducted by Nikitina and Furuoka (2008) who studied Malaysian students' perceptions of Russian language teachers through metaphor analysis. They employed the framework of Oxford et al. (1998) to analyse and discuss their data. They found that 27 metaphors produced by the participants matched with the metaphorical typology of the language teachers and that the gender factor was related to the imagination of the students.

In the Thai context, most metaphorical analysis in EFL classrooms relates to English literature texts used within the school curriculum. They seldom focus on the conceptual viewpoints of students or teachers. An interesting exception is the work of Kitikanan (2010) who studied metaphorical conceptualizations of English classes by comparing non-English first-year Thai EFL and Filipino ESL students. The Thai students were mathematics major and the Filipino students were majoring in applied maths with finance. The findings show that both Thai and Filipino students expressed both negative and positive concepts about English classes. The Thai students conceptualized the English classes as weapons (e.g. sword, weapon, Ninja weapon), beneficial things (e.g. food, rice, breakfast, air, water, tree, sun, money, jewel), dangerous things (e.g. ghost, poison, thorn, black forest), places (e.g. empty room, cave), and commodities (e.g. mirror, frame). The Filipino students conceptualized the English classes as beneficial things (e.g. computer, spare key, sharpener, pen, basketball, Rubik's cube, book, door, bridge, food, water) and animals (e.g. pig). The factors influencing the differences between the two groups of students were educational background, current educational system and socio-cultural factors.

The study reported in this paper investigated how Thai university students conceptualize their English teachers in metaphorical ways and investigated the similarities and differences between the metaphorical conceptualizations of those Thai students and language teachers as represented by the metaphorical typology of Oxford et al. (1998). With these purposes, two research questions were formulated:

1. What metaphorical conceptualizations do Thai students use to describe English teachers at their university?
2. What similarities and differences exist between the Thai student metaphorical perspective and the metaphorical typology of Oxford et al. (1998)?

To facilitate the answering of these research questions, a conceptual framework was used and this is described below.

### Conceptual framework

This study employs, as a conceptual framework, the metaphorical typology of language teachers produced by Oxford et al. (1998). The framework provides a metaphorical taxonomy for describing the teaching process and the nature of language teacher roles within four philosophies of education, namely: social order, cultural transmission, learner-centred growth, and social reform. These philosophies “in addressing basic issues about the nature of mind, the individual and society, cause shifts in the curriculum” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 7). Table 1 shows the similarities and differences among these perspectives and Table 2 shows how Oxford et al. (1998) used them to categorize fourteen metaphors for describing language teachers according to data gathered from student writing, teacher narratives, interviews, articles and texts by educational theorist, and methodologies.

Table 1. Four perspectives on education (after Oxford et al., 1998, p. 7)

Key aspects	The perspectives			
	Social order	Cultural transmission	Learner-centred growth	Social reform
Control	Teacher control	Teacher control	Shared teacher and student control	Shared teacher and student control
Focus	Shaping learners through external reinforcement	Unidirectional information-giving	Facilitating development of innate potential	Encouraging multiple viewpoints in community of learners
Archetype	Moulding	Gatekeeping	Gardening	Democratizing
Associated language teaching methodologies	Audiolingual and Suggestopedia	Grammar translation	Community Language Use, Silent Way, Communicative Approach	Various emphasising engagement with the community

Table 2. Metaphorical categorizations of four philosophies (adapted from Oxford et al., 1998, p. 14)

Social order	Cultural transmission	Learner-centred growth	Social reform
Manufacturer, competitor, hanging judge, doctor, and mind and behaviour controller	Conduit and repeater	Nurturer, lover or spouse, scaffolder, entertainer, and delegator	Acceptor and learning partner

The study described here examined the theoretical framework of Oxford et al. (1998) expressed through the fourteen metaphorical types of language teachers within the context of the Thai EFL students' perceptions of their English teachers.

### Research methodology

This study applied a quantitative research methodology. Data were gathered from Thai students using an open-ended questionnaire. Details of participants, the setting, data collection tool and the analysis are provided below.

***Research participants and setting***

In the academic year of 2015-2016, 59 Thai students (16 male and 43 female) who had been studying in an English Studies major (International Program) at a university in Thailand were purposively selected to participate in the research. They were in the second semester of their first academic year. Their age ranged between 19 and 21 years old. English language is the medium of an instruction for this group of students. The university is located in a city in the northern part of Thailand. There are 26 English teachers in the Department of English, including 22 Thai teachers and four foreign teachers (American, New Zealand, British, and Iranian).

***Data collection tools and analysis***

The open-ended questionnaire used in this study was adapted from one used by Baş and Bal-Gezegin (2015) which used simile sentences to investigate metaphorical conceptualizations of the term “English teacher” by English major students and utilized the theoretical concept of Oxford et al. (1998) to discuss the findings. The present study also used simile sentences to investigate students’ metaphorical concepts of their English teachers. A simile sentence is simple and practical for students to understand and use as a way of expressing their feelings about their teachers. The open-ended questionnaire consisted of three sections:

1. Personal information
2. Metaphorical descriptions of English teachers
3. Suggestions

In the second section, participants were required to complete the statement “an English teacher is like \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_”. This would enable them to describe their English teachers as a metaphorical concept and explain the reasons underlying their concepts.

For analysis, the linguistic metaphors contained in the data were first listed. Then metaphorical categories were identified according to participants’ explanations and from this, themes were constructed of the metaphorical concepts. Two external raters then reviewed the categories and underlying details.

**Findings and discussion*****Thai students’ metaphorical conceptualizations of their English teachers***

The findings reveal that Thai students conceptualized their English teachers using 32 distinct metaphors which can be categorized into five groups (in order of popularity): guide, resource, caretaker, authority and navigator (see Table 3 for the frequency and of usage and examples). Each category consists of a variety of linguistic metaphors, including interpersonal relationships (e.g. family members), animals (e.g. bird, ants, lion), natural resources (e.g. tree, big tree, water), vehicles (e.g. ship, airplane, sampan, bus), learning resources (e.g. Google, book, dictionary) and the supernatural (e.g. god). The most frequently used category illustrates that students in this study most often characterised their English teacher as a guide (n = 19, 32.2%) who provided knowledge to students and helped them deal with their studies and other related issues. The linguistic metaphors included: a guiding light, a consultant, parents, a parent, second parents, father and mother, a family, a lamp, a candle, a rocket or satellite, a master of the nation, a wonderful knowledge, a colour, and a friend. The high frequency use of this category is consistent with the study of Baş and Bal-Gezegin (2015) in which this is

also the most frequently used category to conceptualized English teachers as a guide with the concept of providing knowledge, suggestions, helping and supporting students, and correcting them when needed.

Table 3: Thai students' metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers

No.	Categories	Definition	Occurrences (n = 59)	Examples
1	Teacher as a guide	As a guide, the teacher is responsible for providing content and awareness in order for students to solve problems and prepare for life. The teacher also provides suggestions about different life situations and offers guidelines for success in life.	19 (32.20%)	candle, colour, consultant, family, father and mother, friend, guiding light, lamp, master of the nation, parents, rocket or satellite, second parents, wonderful knowledge
2	Teacher as a resource	As a resource person, the teacher is the vessel of knowledge. He/she is qualified and is the source for knowledge. Students know this and go to the source for important information. Teachers are professionals who are life-long learners and develop greater knowledge in their profession. The teacher as a resource person is ready and willing to give students information and knowledge for their development.	16 (27.11%)	ants, book, dictionary, Dodraemon, faucet, giver, Google, jug, librarian, library, parent, river, water
3	Teacher as a caretaker	The teacher as a caretaker takes care of students in all aspects of life similar to their parents. Students respect teachers in the same way they respect their parents. Teachers as caretakers are available for consultation and assistance at any time, freely and in a loving manner. They want their students to become good members of society.	15 (25.42%)	big tree, bird, father and mother, god, grantor, member of the family, mother, parent, second parents, tree
4	Teacher as authority	The teacher as an authority figure act as a manager in controlling students' behaviour and values and belief systems. They are responsible for setting the rules and regulations and defining the do's and don'ts of behaviours. Students look up to the authority figures because that reflects aspects of Thai culture that feature the importance of authoritative figures in their lives.	5 (8.47%)	boss, lion, oil and water, producer
5	Teacher as a navigator	The teacher as a navigator acts as a driver of a vehicle and controls the steering to get to the correct destination. A good navigator steers students in the right direction to become successful and useful members of society. A navigator also leads students to windows of opportunity that help develop them. They also steer students away from problems and difficult situations.	4 (6.77%)	airplane, bus, sampan, ship

The second highest scoring category was that of the teacher as a resource ( $n = 16$ , 27.11%). Teachers were conceptualized as having a lot of knowledge, being smart and qualified. Teachers should always study to gain more knowledge and get ready for giving students information/knowledge. The linguistic metaphors to describe this category were: a book, ants, a parent, a library, a librarian, a jug, a river, water, a faucet, a dictionary, Google, a giver, and Dodraemon. This category also corresponds to the findings of Baş and Bal-Gezegin (2015) who show that some Turkish EFL students conceptualized their English teachers as a resource with the concept that teachers were “the source and/or conduit of language: [who] dispenses language knowledge to students” (Baş & Bal-Gezegin, 2015, p. 4).

The five categories of metaphors as described by students are based on teachers’ roles as a leader, a commander, a manager, a caretaker, and a consultant. Students’ roles, on the other hand, are mostly those of a follower and a learner. It seems from looking at the metaphors provided by students that they prefer to be followers and learners because most students conceptualized their English teachers in a positive way. 20 of them (33.89%) perceived their English teachers as a family member (e.g. parents, father, mother, and family) because of teaching characteristics, suggesting good things for life, teaching life skills, helping to solve problems, improving students’ ways of life, supporting students in getting new experiences, teaching morality, providing knowledge, being concerned about students’ future, guiding students to many good opportunities, and having a lot of patience to deal with students (it should be noted that some of these occurrences fell into the category of teacher as guide and some into teacher as caretaker). For instance, Koy (pseudonym) commented positively about her English teachers that they are knowledge providers and consultants facilitating success and solutions for her situation. She remarked, “Teachers provide knowledge that will lead to succeed and give some advices for solutions”. Another student, Noi (pseudonym) equally said that teachers provide her with knowledge about all related matters in her life and help her to gain more world experience. She noted “teachers teach about everything in my life, they help me for learning with the world such as teaching other languages and teaching life skills in society, etc.” Phai (pseudonym) explained that teachers always help him to deal with problems both inside and outside of the classroom. He noted “teachers always help me a lot not only when I study in the class, but they also give some good advices for me. That is why I respect them as my second parents”.

This positive point reflects on the Thai cultural perspective that a family is very important to Thai society. Hence, the students seemingly prefer teachers to behave like their family members who are always ready to help whenever needed. The concept of help is not only confined to providing assistance when they have problems, but also includes taking care of everything in students’ lives. It can be said that in this context a relationship and cultural factors are important to support positive teaching and learning processes. This is consistent with the context of Malaysia where students studying Russian as a foreign language conceptualized their teacher as a mother, a parent, and a nanny (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008). The concept underlying these metaphors for the Malaysian students was that the Russian teacher taught them like his or her child how to speak and behave, corrected their mistakes, took care of them, and mould them. They stated, “a teacher teaches the child to speak, teaches us and correct our mistakes, teaches us how to talk and behave, and nurturers and molds her child” (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008, p. 198). It is noteworthy that Thais and Malaysians probably share some common approaches to interpersonal relationships and the importance of cultural background between teachers and students. Elsewhere the importance of interpersonal relationship

and cultural background between teachers and students is also important. EFL Turkish students conceptualized their English teachers as family, and placed importance on the supportive role of teachers, one Turkish student said “Teacher provides guidance and directs students, helps them achieve goals, supports the students, and corrects them when necessary” (Baş & Bal-Gezegin, 2015, p. 4). The findings suggest, therefore, that foreign language teachers should pay attention to the interpersonal relationship between teachers and students and the cultural background of students in order to build the environment of teaching and learning processes in a positive way and achieve success.

The data in the current study produced negative metaphors from a very small number of the students ( $n = 5$ , 8.47%). For example, Kaew (Pseudonym) conceptualized her English teacher as a book that contains wrong contents. She remarked, “Sometimes the book has wrong contents like teachers that sometimes have errors in their teaching”. Similarly, Ploy (pseudonym) conceptualized her English teacher as a lion. Her message implied that teacher knows everything and are talented. They are able to speak English and other languages but do not understand and cannot teach students well. She said:

Teachers are great, can do and know everything. Some teachers are so good, but many teachers are not good sometimes because use just their thinking, don't understand students. They think that they can do, can speak English or other languages, but they don't know how to teach and help students to understand the contents.

Kate and Boy (pseudonyms) used the metaphor of a boss to represent their English teachers with the reasons that teachers assigned tasks for them to finish every day. Teachers also had the power to assign grades according to students' behaviour. If they were active, they got good marks. If they were inactive, they got low marks. They said “Teacher is like a boss to teach us about survive method for each day” and “if we are active in learning, teachers will give us good grades, but if we are lazy, teachers will give us low grades”. These findings correspond to Nikitina and Furuoka's (2008) in terms of the concepts underlying the metaphors. Their findings indicated that teachers were conceptualized as the authority that can judge what is right or wrong or good or bad for students. The metaphors representing this concept were an underwater king/queen, a big lorry, and a book. Similar to Bas and Bal-Gezegin's (2015) study, English teachers were conceptualized as an authority, a moulder/craftsman, and a harmful agent. These metaphors refer to the superior power and authority of the teachers. They have rights to make decisions and punish students.

To summarise, being a commander or moulder who holds all the power in the classroom predominately affects students' perceptions in both positive and negative ways. That is to say, the dependent students, who like to be followers, probably prefer this type of teacher. On the other hand, the independent students, who like to share roles in the classroom with teacher, are probably unsatisfied.

***A comparison of the metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers of Thai university student and the metaphorical typology of language teachers of Oxford et al. (1998)***

The second purpose of this study is to compare the participants' metaphorical conceptualizations of English teachers with the fourteen metaphorical types of language teachers created by Oxford et al. (1998). The perspectives of Thai EFL students towards their English teachers were related to three of Oxford et al.'s (1998) four philosophical perspectives of education: social order, cultural transmission, and learner-centred

growth (see Table 4) but none of the participants expressed perspectives which relate to the social reform philosophy.

Most metaphors used by the participants related to the learner-centred growth philosophy (n= 32, 54.23%, see Table 4). Within that group of metaphors the most commonly used type, following Oxford et al.'s (1998) categorisation, is that of nurture (n=23, 38.98%). Other corresponding metaphors (n = 9, 15.25%) fit within the metaphorical type named scaffolder.

Table 4. Classification of metaphors according to four philosophical perspectives on education by Oxford et al. (1998)

Philosophical perspectives of education (Oxford et al., 1998)	Metaphorical type (Oxford et al., 1998)	Metaphors produced by Thai EFL students
Learner-centred growth (n= 32, 54.23%)	Scaffolder (8)	parents (2), candle, consultant, guiding light, lamp, rocket or satellite, second parents,
	Nurturer (23)	father and mother (5), second parents (5), parents (3), big tree, friend, giver, god, grantor, master of the nation, member of the family, mother, tree, wonderful knowledge
	Delegator (1)	family
Cultural transmission (n= 20, 33.89%)	Conduit (20)	book (3), bird (2), airplane, bus, colour, dictionary, Dodraemon faucet google, jug, librarian, library, parent, river, sampan, ship, water
Social order (n= 7, 11.86%)	Competitor (3)	book, boss, lion
	Manufacturer (4)	ants, boss, oil and water, producer

Note: A small number of metaphors are listed under multiple types according to how participants explained their intended meaning.

The philosophical perspective representing the metaphorical type second most frequently used by Thai students, was cultural transmission (n= 20, 33.89, see table 4). Despite the range of these metaphors, they tend to share a similar concept of teachers as a conduit who transfer information or knowledge (including culture of the target language) in a single direction.

The metaphors in this study which related to Oxford et al.'s (1998) social order philosophical perspective were third most commonly used (n= 7, 11.86%, see Table 4). These metaphors fit with two of the metaphorical types of language teachers (Oxford et al., 1998): a manufacturer (n= 4, 6.77%) and a competitor (n= 3, 5.08%). This shows that the students who used these metaphors reflected their English teachers as moulders who lead them in all matters and have power to control them.

In short, all the metaphors produced by the 59 Thai EFL students can be grouped into five thematic categories (competitor, manufacturer, conduit, nurturer, and scaffolder) which fall under three of Oxford et al.'s (1998) four philosophical perspectives on education, i.e. social order, cultural transmission, and learner-centred growth. No metaphors were produced in this context which relate to their fourth theme of social reform.



## Conclusion

Within the context of Thai university students this study has investigated the students' metaphorical conceptualizations of their English teachers and the similarities and differences between those conceptualisations and the fourteen metaphorical types of language teachers grouped into four philosophical perspectives on education by Oxford et al. (1998). The study has yielded some insightful perspectives related to its context. Firstly, Thai students perceived their English teachers through 32 different metaphors, but the concepts underlying them fell thematically into five categories: guide, resource, caretaker, authority, and investigator (arranged here in order of frequency). Four out of five thematic categories (Table 3) were positive rather than negative. Only the category relating to authority showed negative views. Secondly, the interpersonal relationship and cultural background of students are clearly important factors in the Thai context. These factors help teachers and students to have positive attitudes towards English language teaching and the learning process both inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly, the metaphors produced by these Thai EFL students are related to three philosophical perspectives on education: social order, cultural transmission, and learner-centred growth (as defined by Oxford et al., 1998). This indicates that teachers play multiple roles in the teaching and learning processes in this context. The majority usage of metaphors lies within the area of learner-centred growth philosophy with a nurturer thematic category. Notably, there is no evidence of metaphorical use relating to what Oxford et al. (1998) defined as the philosophy of social reform. It seems reasonable to predict, therefore, that teachers within this context try to stimulate students to participate in the process of teaching and learning both inside and outside classroom by considering and applying factors relating to interpersonal relationship and cultural background but probably do not entirely relinquish control.

## Limitations and implications

It is difficult to generalize from the findings of this study due to the limited participant population and the single university context. The use of an open-ended questionnaire might also have resulted in some unclear explanations. Including interviews would have helped clarify these points but the limited scope of the study made this impossible. Despite these limitations, it is believed this study offers important insights into the conceptual metaphor analysis within the context of a Thai university. It is believed that this study has contributed in some small way to the field of metaphor analysis, especially in the context of this university, and has provided insights for foreign teachers to assist intercultural communication with and the teaching of Thai students.

## About the author

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