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IDENTIFYING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF 'ENGLISH' THROUGH METAPHORS

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IDENTIFYING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF 'ENGLISH' THROUGH METAPHORS¹

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Abstract

This study aims to identify university students' perceptions of English through the use of metaphors. This is a qualitative study with phenomenological design. The data were collected from 342 first grade university students at a state university through a semi-structured form, in which the participants were asked to complete the sentence "English is like... because...". The data were analyzed through content analysis method. Besides identifying positive, negative and neutral metaphors, the data were also analyzed in terms of participants' gender, faculty and high school type as well as forming categories of metaphors based on their rationales. Some of the main results of the study include; more than half of the students created negative metaphors, male and female participants' percentages of positive and negative metaphors are close to each other, the faculties with the higher frequency of positive metaphors are faculties of technology, fine arts and law while the faculties with the higher frequency of negative metaphors are faculties of medicine, engineering and veterinary medicine. 15 different categories of metaphors are formed. The results of the study are expected to guide practitioners by informing them on students' perceptions of English and help them adjust teaching-learning practices.

Keywords: English course, perceptions of English, metaphors

1. Introduction

Foreign language education is among the fields on which most emphasis is placed in higher education as well as elementary and secondary education. An intense foreign language education is provided to students at tertiary level particularly in compulsory or optional preparatory classes. In addition, compulsory courses of English (English-1 and English-2) are also offered to students at the first or second grade beside optional English classes such as academic writing or speaking. Despite this emphasis on teaching of foreign languages, particularly English, the quality of foreign language education in Turkey is criticized too often and reasons for the blamed failure are being researched (Atar, 2018; Cesur, 2008; Demir, 2012; Evcim, 2008; Memduhoğlu & Kozikoğlu, 2015).

There are numerous factors affecting the process of teaching and learning a foreign language such as characteristics of instructors, learning materials, educational requirements and so on; however, learners should be paid special attention as they are the main actors of this process. Learners' perceptions regarding foreign language affective characteristics are among significant factors in learning a foreign language and these factors include learners' levels of motivation, attitudes towards the language and their metaphors with respect to the target language (Gömleksiz, 2013). As learners' perceptions of the foreign language is one of the most important factors affecting the learning process, identification of these perceptions would be a guiding light for instruction practices. The use of metaphors is an efficient method in revealing learners' perceptions of foreign languages and their images in

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their minds (Limon, 2015). Metaphor is a reliable method to be used in measuring attitudes towards certain concepts (Coşkun, 2015) and commonly used in education research as it enables gathering rich data in small amounts and short time as well as making thorough interpretation on them (Koçyiğit, 2018).

Lakoff and Johnson (1982), the pioneers of the use of metaphors in research, assert that metaphors are used to understand and experience one kind of thing through another and add that they are mindsets that shape individuals' thoughts regarding the world and enable expressing ambiguous concepts in daily life in a more tangible manner. Therefore, metaphors have been used in the literature to enlighten tacit concepts. This trend is also common in the area of foreign language education. The main reason for this is the fact that identifying foreign language learners' perceptions regarding the target language is significant (Başaran-Uğur & Baysal, 2017). When identified, practitioners can make provisions for reversing negative perceptions and promoting positive perceptions.

Regarding tertiary level, a myriad of students receives foreign language education. Particularly, the compulsory foreign language courses for all departments in all universities address thousands of students. English is taught in these courses, which is also taught in elementary and secondary levels. Foreign language education is mostly in English in Turkey because it is accepted as the most prestigious language due to the policies of governments in Turkey (Sarıçoban & Sarıçoban, 2012). Due to predominance of English (Alptekin & Tatar, 2011), it is regarded as a synonym for foreign language education (Özmen, Cephe, & Kınık, 2016). Therefore, the quality of these compulsory courses needs to be researched and learners' perceptions of English is the focus of this study.

There are some research in the literature on foreign language education with respect to the use of metaphors; however, these studies are limited to the examination of perceptions of elementary and secondary school students towards 'English teacher' (Başaran-Uğur & Baysal, 2017; Ocak & Gürel, 2018), perceptions of high school students towards 'English' (Bekdaş, 2017; Limon, 2015; Ocak & Gürel, 2014), perceptions of university students towards 'English instructor' (Ahkemoğlu, 2011), 'foreign language' (Gömleksiz, 2013) and 'foreign language textbook' (Kesen, 2010). Perceptions of university students, particularly ones who take compulsory English classes, towards 'English' have not been examined, which would provide significant findings for the field and practitioners at tertiary level. Therefore, this study aims to identify first grade university students' perceptions of English through their use of metaphors. The research questions are as follows:

1. What is the distribution of metaphors in terms of positive, negative and neutral categories?
2. What is the distribution of positive, negative and neutral metaphors in terms of gender?
3. What is the distribution of positive, negative and neutral metaphors in terms of faculties?
4. What is the distribution of positive, negative and neutral metaphors in terms of high school type?
5. Under which categories do metaphors gather based on their rationales?

2. Method

2.1. Design

This qualitative study has been carried out in phenomenological design. This design includes examination of how people experience the world and the meanings people give to the things they experience (Newby, 2014). This study seeks to unearth the meanings first grade university students attach to ‘English’ through the use of metaphors.

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data were obtained through a semi-structured form. The participants were asked to complete the sentence “English is like... because...” as well as demographic information part. The data were analyzed through content analysis method. The analysis process followed these steps:

- The appropriateness of the metaphors created by the participants was examined. 26 forms were excluded as they did not include a meaningful metaphor or had missing parts.
- The rationales of the metaphors (the part after ‘because’) were analyzed and they were grouped as positive, negative or neutral.
- Positive, negative and neutral metaphors were analyzed in terms of gender, faculty and high school type variables.
- Metaphors were grouped under new categories based again on their rationales.
- Specialist opinion was asked for the appropriateness of categories and the distribution of the metaphors under those categories, which made the results more valid.

2.3. Participants

The participants are 342 first grade students, 159 females and 183 males, attending to a state university in the Aegean region in Turkey. The participants were included in the research through convenience sampling method. The data were collected in the second and third weeks of fall semester of 2017-2018 academic year in order to reveal their perceptions before they took the course. 368 students in eight faculties took the form and 342 participants’ forms were included in the analysis. Detailed information about the participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. *Participants’ demographic information*

High school type	Faculty								Total
	Sci./Lit.	F. Arts	Law	Engineering	Health sciences	Tech.	Med.	Vet. Med.	
Open HS	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	3
Anatolian HS	26	35	16	32	41	60	17	24	251
Science HS	0	1	0	2	1	0	5	0	9
Religious Vocational HS	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	5
Vocational HS	7	6	0	2	0	8	0	0	23

Teacher Training HS	1	3	0	3	3	1	2	3	16
Medical vocational HS	0	2	0	0	7	0	0	0	9
International students	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	3
Basic HS	0	5	0	4	2	12	0	0	23
Total	35	55	17	45	54	84	25	27	342

3. Findings

3.1. The Distribution of Metaphors in Terms of Positive, Negative and Neutral Categories

The participants created 230 valid metaphors. 94 of them are positive and they are used 141 times. 146 metaphors are negative and they are used 182 times. 16 metaphors are neutral and used 19 times. The most frequently used metaphors include water (f=21), world (f=8), life (f=6), cat (f=6), obligation (f=6), torture (f=5), mathematics (f=5) and basic need (f=5). The most frequently used positive, negative and neutral metaphors are given in Table 2.

Table 2. *The most frequently used positive, negative and neutral metaphors*

Positive metaphors		Negative metaphors		Neutral metaphors	
<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>Metaphor</i>	<i>f</i>
Water	19	Cat	6	Flower	2
World	7	Torture	5	School	2
Basic need	5	Crossword puzzle	4	A new person	2
Telephone	4	Inessentiality	4		
Car	3	Obligation	4		
Fun	3	Sea	3		
Necessity	3	Prison	3		
Life	3	Life	3		
Money	3	Woman	3		
Total	141	Total	182	Total	19

The most recurring metaphors are shown in Table 2; however, there are also some metaphors used in different categories at the same time. The metaphors of riding a bicycle, insect, sea, world, literature, life, human, door, dream, meal, obligation are used both as positive and negative; the metaphor of song is used both as positive and neutral; the metaphor of doing sports is used both as negative and neutral; the metaphors of water, a little child and mathematics are used as positive, negative and neutral.

Of all the 342 metaphors, 41% is positive while 53% is negative. The percentage of neutral metaphors is 6. This finding reveals that negative perceptions are more dominant in the metaphors. Yet, the metaphors used also put forth that the participants' perceptions towards 'English' vary significantly. The most frequent metaphor is water. The participants refer that water is a basic and daily need and highlight the vitality of 'English'. The quotations of two participants are as follows.

"English is like water because it is indispensable in our lives just like water."

“English is like water because it is required throughout the life and we always encounter it.”

The second most frequent metaphor is world. The students who have used this metaphor refer to the fact that English is a universal language and a common communication tool among people. Examples of this metaphors are as follows.

“English is like the world because it is used everywhere.”

“English is like the world because we can talk and contact with people from all nations thanks to it.”

3.2. The Distribution of Positive, Negative and Neutral Metaphors in Terms of Gender

The distribution of the metaphors in terms of gender is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. *The distribution of metaphors in terms of gender*

Gender	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	f	%	F	%	f	%
Female	64	40	82	52	14	8
Male	77	42	100	55	5	3
Total	141	41	182	53	19	6
		(all metaphors)		(all metaphors)		(all metaphors)

Of the 141 positive metaphors, 64 were created by females and 77 were created by males; of the 182 negative metaphors, 82 were created by females and 100 were created by males; of the 19 neutral metaphors, 14 were created by females and 5 were created by males. As the number of males and females isn't equal, the percentages were calculated. Of the metaphors created by females, 40% are positive, 52% are negative and 8% are neutral while of the metaphors created by males, 42% are positive, 55% are negative and 3% are neutral. These findings reveal that the percentages of positive and negative metaphors are quite close to each other for males and females, which suggests that the perceptions of students do not differ by gender to a great extent. It should also be noted that more than half of the both males and females have negative perceptions regarding 'English'.

3.3. The Distribution of Positive, Negative and Neutral Metaphors in Terms of Faculty

The distribution of the metaphors in terms of faculties students attend to is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. *The distribution of metaphors in terms of faculties*

Faculty	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Science and literature	12	34	19	54	4	12
Fine arts	25	45	27	49	3	6
Law	7	41	9	53	1	6
Engineering	13	29	30	67	2	4
Health sciences	19	35	31	58	4	7
Technology	52	62	31	37	1	1
Medicine	5	20	18	72	2	8

Veterinary medicine	8	30	17	63	2	7
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An analysis of the distribution of metaphors by the faculties reveals that the students with the highest number of positive metaphors belong to technology faculty (62%). Students at the faculty of fine arts (45%) and faculty of law (41%) follow it. The students with the highest number of negative metaphors belong to the faculty of medicine (72%). Students at the faculty of engineering (67%), faculty of veterinary medicine (63%) and school of health sciences (58%) follow it. Among neutral metaphors, the highest percentage belongs to faculty of science and literature (12%) and the lowest percentage belongs to faculty of technology (1%).

The distribution of metaphors by the faculties suggests that, except for faculty of technology, the students studying at departments of social sciences tend to create more positive metaphors while students at departments of hard (quantitative) sciences tend to create more negative metaphors, which unearths the need to analyze high school types.

3.4. The Distribution of Positive, Negative and Neutral Metaphors in Terms of High School Type

The distribution of the metaphors in terms of high school types that students graduated from is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *The distribution of metaphors in terms of high school types*

High school type	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Open high school	1	33	2	67	0	0
Anatolian high school	113	45	124	49	14	6
Science high school	3	33	5	56	1	11
Religious vocational high school	0	0	3	60	2	40
Vocational high school	9	39	14	61	0	0
Teacher training high school	5	31	10	63	1	6
Medical vocational high school	1	11	8	89	0	1
Basic high school	7	30	15	66	1	4
International students	3	100	0	0	0	0

As the number of participants is not equal among groups, the percentages are considered. The students with the highest number of positive metaphors are graduates of Anatolian high schools (45%). Graduates of vocational high schools follow it (39%). None of the graduates of religious vocational high school students used positive metaphors and all of the international students used positive metaphors.

The highest percentage of negative metaphors belongs to graduates of medical vocational high school (89%). That nearly all of those students created negative metaphors puts forth their negative perceptions towards 'English'. Percentage of negative metaphors is also quite high with graduates of open high school, basic high school, teacher training high school and religious vocational high school respectively.

Neutral metaphors have low level percentages, except for graduates of religious high school students (40%), which may have stemmed from their low number.

3.5. Categories of Metaphors Based on Their Rationales

Based on the rationales students provided in their sentences after the word ‘because’ in the form, 15 different categories were created after an elaborate grouping process. The categories and sample metaphors are provided in Table 6.

Table 6. *Categories of metaphors based on their rationales*

Categories and related metaphors	f	%
Difficulty	101	29
Soup, nightmare, black hole, chaos, summer Quran course, deadlock, a high mountain, dead well, night terror, cat, sudoku, torture, swing carousel, wall, prison		
Necessity	54	16
breath, water, basic need, oxygen, telephone, puzzle piece, life, meal, foot, friend, right hand, mother, handkerchief, drug, pasta in a student’s home, book, insect		
Requiring attention/effort	32	9
pet, flower, a little child, a child crying at night, motor vehicle, cat, patient, plant, a delicate lover, woman, grass, doing sports, nature, frozen water		
Communication tool/ cultural contribution	22	6
car, freedom, a full bus ticket, human, world, eye glasses, discovering a new place, bridge, passport, a new life, ship, telephone, pen, train, plane, culture		
Self-improvement	18	5
bread, life, expressing oneself, discovery, a second brain, telephone, walking, horse, knowledge, sea, door, family, tree, computer, riding a bicycle, a new friend		
Dislike	18	5
pumpkin, lumber, lesson, Çorum, Afyon, Aleyna Tilki, baklava, grapefruit, our shadows, torture, insect, Mondays, cigarette, depression, boredom		
A tool with gains	17	5
leadership, golden bracelet, car, step, highway, money, key, gun		
Obligation	15	4
A jumper given as a present, our shadow, prison, boomerang, identity card, organ, torture, human		
Easy to forget	13	4
Fish memory, butterfly, cat, dream, air, pencil, writing on the water, flying off ink, flower		
Fun	11	3
waterfall, fun, raspberry cake, hidden garden, funfair, color, train		
Loving	9	3
literature, dream, a little child, happiness, therapy, tv series		
Disappointment	9	3
love, candy apple, life, doing sports, fruit gum, hot pepper, wind		
Universality	8	3
partnership, water, globe, world, translator		
Futility	8	3
shower gel, communism, nonsense, stone, trouble, an empty box		

Dislike but necessity

7 2

garlic, school, water of the pool, roquette, manure, chicken soup, vegetable dishes

While forming the categories, it was tried to form them as comprehensive as possible. For instance, the categories of ‘repeating’ and ‘obstacle’ were also formed in the first analysis; however, they were included in the category of ‘difficulty’. Similarly, the category of ‘boring’ was added to ‘dislike’ category. Yet, the categories of ‘fun, disappointment, easy to forget, requiring attention/effort’ were not included in other related categories because they were particularly highlighted in the rationales though they overlapped with other categories.

The distribution of categories reveals that the majority of the metaphors created by the students fall into the category of ‘difficulty’ (f=101). This puts forth that a greater part of the students perceives ‘English’ as a difficult language or learning process. Regarding difficulty of ‘English’, some of the quotations of the students are as follows.

“English is like a nightmare because both are scary”.

“English is like getting lost because no matter for how long I have been learning English, I am still getting lost in the sentences”.

“English is like a high mountain because you can never reach to top level”.

“English is like cooked rice in the plate because you start eating but can never finish it”.

‘Difficulty’ is followed by the category of ‘necessity’ regarding frequency of use (f=54). This implies that although students perceive ‘English’ as a difficult language, they are aware of its significance and necessity. Sample quotations in this category are as follows:

“English is like oxygen because it is a language that we should learn and we need just like oxygen”.

“English is like a basic need because it is needed in nearly whole world”.

“English is like a telephone because it is a part of our lives like a telephone”.

On the other hand, seven students stated they did not like ‘English’ but they knew that it was necessary. Samples are provided below. Most of the metaphors in this regard are about food the participants do not like.

“English is like a chicken soup because it is nutritious but does not taste good”.

“English is like roquette because it is disgusting but has many benefits”.

“English is like vegetable dishes because we need to take it yet it turns my stomach”.

Eight students see English or learning English as a futile activity, as stated in the following quotations.

“English is like a stone because it has never had a benefit for me like a stone on the street”.

“English is like a nonsense because there is no need for English as we have Turkish. Will I work abroad? I will work in Turkey”.

The categories of ‘requiring attention/effort (f=32) and ‘easy to forget’ (f=13) are related to the category of ‘difficulty’. A considerable number of students stated English was easy to forget and it requires hard work for this reason. Sample quotations in the category of ‘easy to forget’ include following.

“English is like a dream because I take it every year and I forget half of what I have learnt at the end of that semester”.

“English is like a butterfly because we forget what we learn in a day like a butterfly”.

Sample quotations in the category of ‘requiring attention/effort’ are as follows.

“English is like a little child because it needs continuous attention”.

“English is like a motor vehicle because just like how a motor vehicle cannot be used without oil and there occurs a problem if we do not carry out its maintenance, we cannot move on with English if we do not memorize vocabulary and do not speak it even if we can”.

“English is like a cat because if you do not care about it shows ingratitude and runs away”.

‘English’ is also considered as a ‘a tool with gains’, ‘communication tool/ cultural contribution’ and a necessity for ‘self-improvement’ by students. There are also students who stated they did not like ‘English’ without providing a reason.

The categories can also be labeled as positive, negative and neutral. The positive category includes the categories of ‘necessity, communication tool/ cultural contribution, self-improvement, a tool with gains, fun, loving and universality’ while the negative category includes ‘difficulty, requiring attention/effort, dislike, obligation, east to forget, disappointment, futility’. ‘Dislike but necessity’ can be considered as neutral.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Identifying first grade university students’ perceptions towards ‘English’ is a significant issue as the compulsory English classes at tertiary level address thousands of students. Despite this fact, the students taking these classes are mostly ignored in the literature. To this end, 342 first grade university students’ metaphors of ‘English’ were analyzed. The most frequent metaphors include ‘water, world, life, cat, obligation, torture, mathematics and basic need’. The analysis reveals that 240 valid metaphors were created by 342 students, 53% of which are negative (146 out of 240). The percentages of positive and neutral metaphors are 41% and 6% respectively. This finding suggests that more than half of the students have negative perceptions regarding ‘English’ and it is in line with Bekdaş (2017) and Limon (2015) while it differs from Gömleksiz (2013). With high school students, Bekdaş (2017) and Limon (2015) analyzed metaphors of ‘English’ and they found out that 52% and 57% of the metaphors were negative. On the other hand, Gömleksiz (2013) reported surprising results as to the metaphors of prospective teachers regarding the concept of ‘foreign language’. He found out that 80% of the participants created positive metaphors. Except for this study, the literature supports the finding in the current research and suggests that the negative attitudes towards English need to be taken into account for an effective foreign language teaching and learning experience.

It was found out in the study that males and females’ percentages of positive and negative metaphors are quite close to each other. 40% of females and 42% of males created positive metaphors while these percentages are 52 and 55 for negative metaphors. This result is also supported by Bekdaş’s (2017) study and suggests that there is not a high level of difference between males and females in this respect.

With respect to faculties, the highest percentages of positive metaphors were created by students at technology, fine arts and law faculties and the highest percentages of negative metaphors belong to faculties of medicine, engineering, veterinary medicine and school of health sciences. This finding poses that the students studying at departments of social sciences tend to create more positive metaphors while students at departments of hard

(quantitative) sciences tend to create more negative metaphors, except for faculty of technology where the instructor talked about the significance of English in the first week and this may have contributed to the high percentage in this faculty. Faculties such as medicine and engineering accept students with quantitative scores from university entrance exam and it can be argued that students in these departments tend to ignore subjects like English, as supported by the findings. These findings are also supported by the analysis of high school types that students had graduated from. The highest percentage of negative metaphors belongs to graduates of medical vocational high schools, which accounts for the high percentage of negative metaphors in school of health sciences. Another surprising finding in this issue is that graduates of vocational high schools created more positive metaphors than graduates of science high schools and teacher training high schools. This unearths that foreign language education at tertiary level cannot be considered as independent of education at former levels. Besides, students aiming high academic achievement, particularly at quantitative departments, do not place emphasis on 'English' and students who have created rationales under the theme of 'futility' are all students at quantitative departments. It should also be noted that no metaphors study analyzing students' faculties and high school types could be found in the literature.

Based on the rationales provided by the students, categories were formed. The most frequent category is 'difficulty'. A great number of students perceive 'English' as a difficult language, which interferes with learning process. Despite seeing it as a difficult language, a considerable part of the students accepts English as a necessity, which is good for language learning. 'Water', the most frequent metaphor, includes rationales in the 'necessity' category. Related to the 'difficulty' category are the categories of 'requiring attention/effort' and 'easy to forget'. The repetition of the subjects every year, forgetting what has been learned in a short time, the lack of speaking skills and focusing on the teaching of grammar are present in the rationales. Analyzing all categories together, it can be deduced that students are aware of the necessity in learning English and they even see it as a communication/ cultural contribution tool with gains; however, the majority of students regard it as a difficult language. This percentage gets bigger when the categories of 'requiring attention/effort, easy to forget and disappointment'. This perception of difficulty also seems in parallel with public opinion (Limon, 2015), which should be taken into account by the practitioners.

Though any study on the university students' metaphors of 'English' could not be found, the categories in similar studies seem to overlap with the categories created in this study. High school students' metaphors of 'English' (Limon, 2015) and prospective teachers' metaphors of 'foreign language' (Gömleksiz, 2013) were analyzed by the researchers and their categories are compared. Firstly, it should be noted that, as explained in detail in findings section, the categories in this research were formed comprehensively; however, certain categories which are also related to other categories are kept as separate if it is highlighted by the students in the rationale sections. Therefore, this study has a more elaborate set of categories. The categories of 'a difficult and complicated language', 'necessity', 'a hard and dull process', 'result of accumulation', 'a functional tool', 'a funny activity', 'a valuable language' and 'a futile and ineffective process' in Limon's (2015) study corresponds to the categories of 'difficulty', 'necessity', 'requiring attention/effort', 'communication tool/cultural contribution', 'a tool with gains', 'fun', 'loving' and 'futility' in this study respectively. Similarly, the categories of 'difficulty', 'necessity', 'power', 'future', 'pleasure and travel', 'despair' and 'colonialism' in Gömleksiz's (2015) study corresponds to the categories of 'difficulty', 'necessity', 'self-improvement, a tool with gains', 'fun', 'disappointment' and 'futility' in this study respectively. The categories of 'difficulty',

‘necessity’, ‘a tool with gains’, ‘fun’ and ‘futility’ are common in all three studies. This reveals a similar pattern in students’ perceptions of English.

5. Recommendations

This study puts forth university students’ perceptions of English through metaphors, which has yielded significant results, particularly for practitioners. They can take various precautions taking the categories into account. For instance, the study identified that the majority of students perceive English as a difficult language or a number of them do not like the language itself. Therefore, the instructors can try to break down these prejudices with appropriate activities. In the context of this study, the instructors in the faculties of medicine, engineering, veterinary medicine and school of health sciences need to try to eliminate negative perceptions towards the language. In addition, it should be noted that the use of metaphors is an easy to implement and analyze method to be used by teachers or instructors of a foreign language. Using this method at the beginning of a semester would help them guide the learning process efficiently. More studies are needed in this respect to better understand university students’ perceptions of English or any other foreign language with respect to different concepts and variables to better manage foreign language education at tertiary level. Curriculum development and instructional design studies can also benefit from the results of these studies particularly in selecting and organizing contents of the curricula by aligning the contents with students’ perceptions.

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