

Exploring Preparatory Students' Metaphorical Perceptions of ChatGPT

Batuhan SELVİ^{1*}  Zelal ÇOBAN²  Süheyla DEMİRKOL ORAK³ 

¹ Yozgat Bozok University, Türkiye

² Fırat University, Türkiye

³ Fırat University, Türkiye

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ABSTRACT

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) has accelerated in numerous fields recently which has initiated an effect on education and the process of language learning and teaching too. One of the most utilized and debated AI tools is ChatGPT, released by OpenAI in November 2022. It has dominated various disciplines, including language education. To that extent, some users appreciate it, whereas others criticize it. The main objective of this research is to reveal the preparatory students' metaphorical perceptions on ChatGPT in the process of learning or developing English. The study is conducted with 123 preparatory school students who currently study at different universities in Turkey. Phenomenological research design was applied for data collection. The data were gathered through Google Forms. The form consists of three parts. The first phase of it provides brief information about the aim of the study and the form itself. The second part touches upon the term metaphor with the help of examples. The last section aims at collecting the participants' metaphorical perceptions. At this part, they need to complete the statement 'ChatGPT is like because.....'. While the first blank clarifies their metaphorical perception, the second one is concerned with the reason for the preferred metaphor. The findings of the study were categorized under four titles, namely, the replies related to tool/resource, companionship, supportive nature, and flexibility and versatility. Some of the most commonly written metaphors are teacher, facilitator, guide, and helper. The result of the study facilitates understanding some young adult learners' beliefs on using ChatGPT in language teaching.

Hazırlık Öğrencilerinin ChatGPT'ye Yönelik Metaforik Algılarının İncelenmesi

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ÖZET

Yapay zeka (YZ) kullanımı, son yıllarda pek çok alanda hızla artmış ve eğitim ile dil öğrenme-öğretme süreçlerinde önemli bir değişim başlatmıştır. Kasım 2022'de OpenAI tarafından piyasaya sürülen ChatGPT, en çok kullanılan ve tartışılan YZ araçlarından biri haline gelmiştir. Kullanıcılarına sağladığı geniş olanaklarla, özellikle dil eğitimi dahil olmak üzere birçok disiplinde büyük bir etki yaratmıştır. Ancak, bu etkiler farklı kesimler tarafından çeşitli açılardan değerlendirilmiştir. Bazı kullanıcılar ChatGPT'yi bir kolaylaştırıcı ve öğrenme sürecini destekleyen bir araç olarak görürken, bazıları ise eleştirel bir yaklaşım sergilemektedir. Bu çalışmanın amacı, hazırlık okulu öğrencilerinin İngilizce öğrenme sürecinde ChatGPT'ye yönelik metaforik algılarını ortaya koymaktır. Araştırma, Türkiye'deki farklı üniversitelerde öğrenim gören 123 hazırlık okulu öğrencisiyle gerçekleştirilmiştir. Veri toplama



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sürecinde, fenomenolojik bir araştırma deseni uygulanmıştır. Veriler, çevrimiçi bir form platformu olan Google Forms aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Form üç ana bölümden oluşmaktadır. İlk bölümde, çalışmanın amacı ve formun kullanımı hakkında kısa bir bilgilendirme yer almıştır. İkinci bölümde, katılımcılara metafor kavramı örnekler üzerinden açıklanmış ve yönlendirme yapılmıştır. Üçüncü ve son bölümde ise katılımcıların “ChatGPT gibidir çünkü” ifadesini tamamlamaları istenmiştir. Bu ifade, katılımcıların ChatGPT’ye dair algılarını metaforlar üzerinden açıklamalarına ve seçilen metaforların nedenlerini ifade etmelerine olanak tanımaktadır. Araştırma sonuçları, katılımcıların ChatGPT’yi araç/kaynak, yoldaşlık, destekleyici doğa ve esneklik/çok yönlülük başlıkları altında değerlendirdiğini ortaya koymuştur. En sık dile getirilen metaforlar arasında öğretmen, kolaylaştırıcı, rehber ve yardımcı bulunmaktadır. Bu metaforlar, genç yetişkin öğrencilerin ChatGPT’yi öğrenme sürecine dahil etme konusunda olumlu bir tutuma sahip olduklarını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, bulgular, ChatGPT’nin dil öğretimindeki potansiyelini anlamak ve bu doğrultuda yenilikçi eğitim yaklaşımları geliştirmek için önemli bir temel oluşturmaktadır. Bu tür YZ araçlarının eğitimdeki rolü, gelecekte daha derinlemesine araştırmalar için bir başlangıç noktası sunmaktadır.

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***Sorumlu Yazar:** Batuhan Selvi, batuhanselvi@outlook.com

INTRODUCTION

Artificial intelligence (AI) has become an integral part of modern life, with its influence expanding across numerous fields such as engineering, healthcare, education, and particularly language teaching (Nemorin et al., 2023; Chan, 2023; Adıgüzel et al., 2023; Güzey et al., 2023). This growing relevance has spurred an increasing number of scholarly studies aiming to investigate AI's functions, benefits, and limitations. While definitions of AI vary, it is (2019) broadly described as machine-generated intelligence, in contrast to human cognition (Siau & Wang, 2020). El Hadi (2023) highlights AI's role as a mechanism of transforming information into action. Nonetheless, its boundaries remain ambiguous; Wang (2019) emphasizes that AI lacks a universally accepted definition.

AI's widespread integration into education has sparked both enthusiasm and skepticism. Advocates cite AI's ability to support learning through task automation, research assistance, and data-driven feedback (Gonzalez Tigrero, 2024). For example, Darwin et al. (2024) argue that AI fosters critical thinking despite limited understanding of nuance. Critics, however, warn of emotional detachment, difficulties in classroom management, and the risk of teacher redundancy (Tao et al., 2023). Moreover, ethical concerns such as data privacy, academic dishonesty, and dependence on automated systems remain prominent (Alhalangy & Abdalgen, 2023).

In the field of English Language Teaching, interest in AI has increased rapidly (An et al., 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023; Hockly, 2023), particularly following the release of ChatGPT. ChatGPT employs a large language model (LLM) and natural language processing (NLP) functions to respond to prompts in coherent, human-like language. Rapid utilization of this tool, with its over a million sign-ups within a very short period post-launch, can be credited to its multilingual translation, grammar checks, contextual dialogues, and academic writing (Deng & Lin, 2022). Studies have indicated that ChatGPT is useful in composing essays, summarizing, and producing teaching materials (Haleem et al., 2023).

Recent studies stress both the advantages and limitations of ChatGPT in language learning. On the positive side, it promotes access to authentic language exposure, personalized feedback, and expanded lexical and grammatical knowledge (Hong, 2023; Coanca, 2023; Kohnke et al., 2023). On the other hand, its limitations include ethical concerns, cultural bias, and the risk of incorrect language production. Zileli (2023) reports that ChatGPT enhances pronunciation, reading, and translation tasks, while Ali (2023) warns of issues such as plagiarism and user overdependence. As Kostka and Toncelli (2023) argue, the tool's effectiveness depends significantly on user competence. Despite concerns, AI platforms like ChatGPT are transforming educational practices by supporting learner autonomy and promoting adaptive learning strategies (Biswas, 2023).

Although perceptions of AI in education are increasingly studied, most existing research centers on language teachers and instructors (Ajlouni et al., 2023; Dinçer & Bal, 2024; Pokrivcakova, 2023). University students' views have also received some attention (Ngo, 2023; Xiao & Zhi, 2023; Nguyen Thi Thu, 2023), while fewer studies focus on the perspectives of secondary-level learners (Mohamed & Alian, 2023). Notably, a gap exists in how learners express their perceptions metaphorically—a method that can offer deep insight into their conceptualizations. Metaphors are powerful cognitive tools that allow individuals to describe abstract or complex ideas by drawing on familiar, concrete experiences. They enable meaning-making through analogy, such as describing technology as a “hero” to suggest its supportive function (Ortony et al., 1978; Grey, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In educational research, metaphors can uncover beliefs, attitudes, and expectations in nuanced ways that traditional surveys may overlook.

Given the increasing integration of AI tools in language learning, this study aims to explore English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' metaphorical perceptions of ChatGPT. Specifically, it

investigates how preparatory students at various universities in Turkey conceptualize ChatGPT in their English learning journey. These students are enrolled in intensive language programs and actively use ChatGPT for assignments and skill development. By analyzing their metaphorical expressions, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of learners' attitudes and the pedagogical potential of AI in EFL contexts.

Studies in the Literature

Artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT, have tremendously contributed to language teaching, learning, and assessment. As a result, the interest of scholars toward these tools has grown very rapidly. This section examines related research.

Akkaya and Şengül (2023) investigated chatbots and found that chatbots improve language learning via individualized instruction, wide-ranging language activities, and real-time feedback. Shortcomings included a lack of naturalness in communication, issues for the system to process sentences with increased complexity, and less emotional involvement. The strengths and weaknesses of personalized learning through AI-based software were explored by Schmidt and Strasser (2022). Divekar et al. (2020) reported that AI promoted a collaborative learning environment. These studies showed that AI can supplement vocabulary development and structured dialogue, hence improving speaking and comprehension skills.

Hou (2020) discussed the shifts in language teaching brought about by AI and recommended that universities increase awareness and training for its effective use. Li (2020) reported on the impacts of such technologies as telephones, computers, and, of course, AI on a student's ability to learn a language. Lou and Cheng (2020) provide evidence in support of the use of AI in foreign language learning by stating its capacity to destroy the time-and-space constraints within which existing language assessments function as well as offering a more contemporary approach to language assessments than traditional methods. Bao (2020) studied the correlation of the use of AI and speaking anxiety. It said AI makes pupils more self-assured rather than anxious.

Liu (2023) indicates positive and negative aspects of AI in education: diversified teaching materials and enrichment of learning would be benefited by AI, but it should never fully replace a teacher, who is essential for pedagogy. Technical challenges might be created during this interaction. Khasawneh and Khasawneh (2023) highlight an improvement in student motivation and performance due to AI involvement. Zhai (2023) reviewed dialogs generated by artificial intelligence in relation to communication skills and concluded that these communications may help support interaction but at the same time lose certain cultural and emotional dimensions.

In English Language Teaching, research specifically concerning ChatGPT has rapidly gained momentum and has exceeded other topics concerning artificial intelligence. Yağcı and Yıldız (2023) analyzed the dialogues produced by ChatGPT and discovered that it affected English learning, contributing to hard gains in language proficiency. Fitria (2023) found that ChatGPT greatly contributed to better writing. Koraishi (2023) articulated the contribution of ChatGPT in materials design. Javier and Moorhouse (2023) studied its effect on students' critical thinking ability. Hockly (2023) discussed advantages and disadvantages regarding the potential of ChatGPT in language education, as well as perspectives from teachers, students, and institutions, in addition to ethical issues. Similar to Baskara and Mukarto (2023), who emphasized personalized learning and instructional design but pointed out ethical dilemmas, the authors commented on the tool's role in higher education.

Stepaneckho and Kozub (2023) provided an alternative view by focusing on the concerns that English teachers had. They also reported that ChatGPT would impede creativity, critical thinking, and slow learning and support academic dishonesty. Young and Shishido (2023) reported questioning

whether ChatGPT-generated dialogues should be allowed in classrooms. On the other hand, Lashari et al. (2023) focused on the potential of ChatGPT as an effective edtech tool for language learning, since its content preparation, assignments, and learning activities can be supported by it.

Another prominent research theme is the perception of ChatGPT among language teachers. Ulla et al. (2023) investigated the views of 17 English teachers, finding general satisfaction with ChatGPT, albeit with ethical reservations. Limna et al. (2023) examined both teachers' and learners' beliefs, noting overall positive attitudes. Nguyen et al. (2023) also focused on teachers' perspectives. Mohammed Ali (2023) reported that while instructors appreciated ChatGPT's speed, some expressed concerns about misinformation. Allehyani and Algamdi (2023) studied instructors from various disciplines and concluded that although ChatGPT can be beneficial, effective usage requires digital literacy. Shakil and Sidiq (2024), as well as Maburan (2024), also explored educators' views on ChatGPT.

Beyond educators, language learners' perceptions have also been widely studied. Ajlouni et al. (2023) found that most university students favored ChatGPT. Roza and Zulhirawati (2023) evaluated the views of 75 students on its translation capabilities and found that 57% endorsed it, while the rest had reservations. Har (2023) investigated both teacher and student beliefs. Abd Rahim et al. (2023) collected responses from 181 undergraduates, who generally felt that ChatGPT enhanced their language proficiency. Xiao and Zhi (2023) reported similar findings among Chinese students. Farhi et al. (2023) also examined learner perceptions, contributing to a growing consensus on ChatGPT's educational value.

The latest research shows ChatGPT's increasing significance in language instruction and its potential in promoting self-directed learning, real-time feedback, and development in writing. Li et al. (2024) reviewed early studies on ChatGPT and found that it has been primarily used for content generation and instructional assistance. However, they do indicate some gaps in feedback evaluation and long-term effectiveness. In Southeast Asia, the studies conducted by Vo and Nguyen (2024), Slamet (2024), and Pham and Le (2024) reported mostly positive learner and teacher perceptions, giving caution against addiction and its effects on critical thinking. In addition to this, Punar Özçelik and Yangın Ekşi (2024) assessed ChatGPT's effect on writing register and identified its effective formal writing strength and weakness in informal tone. To deal with these issues, Li et al. (2025) applied self-determination theory to emphasize the role of the teacher in promoting student autonomy while guiding students toward responsible use of artificial intelligence. Recently, Pang et al. (2024) explored the possible pedagogy of ChatGPT-4o, promising hybridization of the adaptability of AI and capacity of human emotional and critical instruction in teaching. The collective contribution of these studies is a call for balanced, cautious integration of ChatGPT in English language teaching.

In summary, ChatGPT is a widely discussed and debated topic across language education research. Scholars have explored the perspectives of teachers, students, and institutions across various contexts, including Turkey. However, despite this growing body of literature, there is a notable lack of studies exploring learners' metaphorical perceptions of ChatGPT. Because metaphors allow individuals to express complex ideas in intuitive and relatable ways, examining them can yield valuable insights. Investigating such perceptions can help researchers and educators better understand how learners conceptualize AI-based tools and how these perceptions shape their educational experiences. In the study, answers to the following research questions were sought:

- 1) What are the metaphorical perceptions of preparatory students on ChatGPT in the process of learning English?
- 2) Which metaphors do they prefer for positive views?
- 3) Which metaphors do they use for negative opinions?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a phenomenological research design, a qualitative approach aimed at exploring individuals' lived experiences and personal interpretations of a specific phenomenon. Phenomenology seeks to derive meaning from a participant's subjective account; it helps to grasp the essence of common experiences (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015, p. 1). Patton (2001) explains that phenomenology focuses on how individuals clarify their experiences and express them in their languages. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation is metaphorical perceptual constructs of ChatGPT as conceived by EFL learners. The research design in question essentially affords an in-depth understanding of how participants conceptualize ChatGPT via metaphor—a cognitive and expressive medium for articulating core beliefs, attitudes, and values.

Study Group

The participants consisted of 123 preparatory school students enrolled at various universities across Turkey. Among them were 80 females, 41 males, and two preferred not to specify their gender. Criterion sampling was used for participant selection, a method of purposive sampling type common with qualitative research. The only criterion was enrollment in an English preparatory program at the university level such that all participants had comparable exposure to language learning, thus potential interactions with ChatGPT. Participants came from diverse academic backgrounds, including English Language Teaching, English Language and Literature, and Engineering. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 years ($M = 20.3$, $SD = 1.85$), representing a wide spectrum of young adult learners. The selection aimed to ensure heterogeneity in academic focus while maintaining homogeneity in language learning context, which is essential for meaningful phenomenological analysis. This sample size is considered sufficient for phenomenological studies, which typically emphasize depth over breadth and rely on thematic saturation rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1
Demographic Information of the Participants

Characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Female	80	65.04
Male	41	33.33
Prefer not to say	2	1.63
Age	20.3 ± 1.85	
Minimum Age	18 y	22.14
Maximum Age	30 y	46.74
Language CEFR levels		
C2	3	3.69
C1	19	23.37
B2	46	56.58
B1	32	39.36
A2	17	20.91
A1	6	7.38

Data Collection Tool

Data were collected through a structured online survey through Google Forms and disseminated to preparatory students in various universities in Türkiye. The survey consisted of three consecutive

sections that would lead the participants clearly and purposefully through the procedure. The first part introduced the study, making essential information regarding its objectives available to the participants and assuring them of the confidentiality and voluntary nature of their responses. The second part then gave a brief explanation of the metaphor phenomenon with some illustrative examples to help students understand how metaphors can be constructed and used in expressing abstract ideas. The last section was the core data elicitation phase, where the participants were invited to complete an open-ended prompt: “ChatGPT is like _____ because _____.” The first part of the sentence invited them to create a metaphor for ChatGPT, while the second asked them to explain the reasoning behind their choice. All responses were original and unprompted, ensuring the authenticity of each participant’s perspective. To ensure ethical compliance, participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, and their voluntary participation was emphasized. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection, and ethical approval was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Firat University (Decision No: 2024/11, Date: May 30, 2024)

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed according to Braun and Clarke's thematic content analysis (2006), which is recognized in qualitative research studies for its methodical approach in the identification and interpretation of recurring patterns. This method was combined with metaphor analysis techniques situated within the phenomenological paradigm, following the guidance of Willig and Rogers (2017). Analysis started with getting immersed in the data through a careful reading of the responses of participants to familiarize oneself with and note possible metaphorical expressions. This expression was then coded and classified on the basis of similarities and conceptual links. Emerging codes were then compared and organized into broader thematic categories. Only full responses that clearly evoke a metaphor are retained; incomplete, blank, or not relevant responses are excluded further.

A total of 114 valid metaphorical expressions were ultimately analyzed. Coding and theme development were independently performed by two researchers. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis and reduce individual bias, the researchers had regular debriefing meetings to compare interpretations and ensure consistency. The analysis was grounded in some of the salient criteria that Sundler et al. (2019) proposed for phenomenological validity, such as credibility, transferability, and reflexivity themselves. Throughout this evolution, the researchers critically reflected on whether the meanings defined were clearly derived and whether they had direct quotations that support their construction of meaning. Further, interpretations were constantly questioned with regard to whether they were influenced, but consensus was ensured on thematic classification. Integrity has been adopted through the analysis to cater to the multifaceted nature and variety of metaphorical data. A visual representation of the analysis process is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Summary of the Data Analysis Steps***1. Stage:**

- Each author reads the participants' responses
- Investigating and evaluating the understanding of meanings that are metaphorical in the data

2. Step:

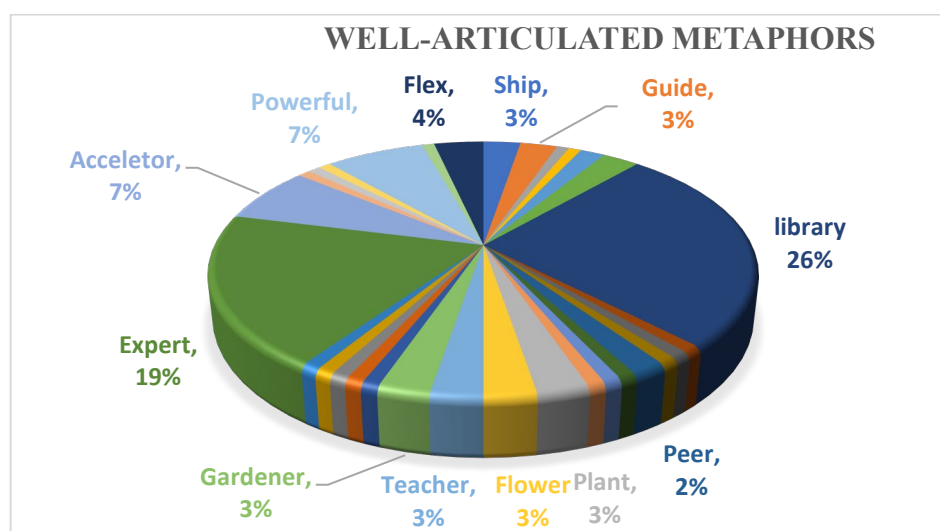
- Clarifying or interpreting a few terms or metaphors in the responses
- Highlighting the outcomes that were found
- Contrasting the variances and convergences in the interpretations of the authors' assessments
- Identifying the categories from the outcomes

3. Stage:

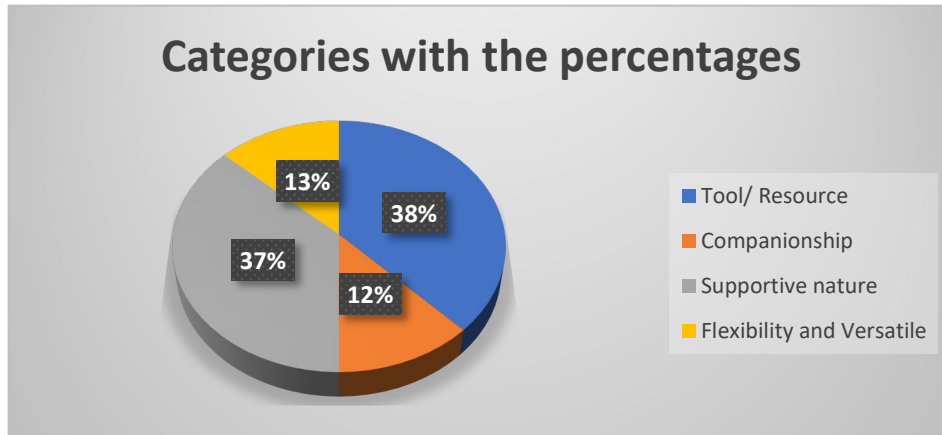
- Outlining the primary and secondary ideas in a significant work
- Displaying the main categories that were all in agreement with the metaphors

FINDINGS

Out of the 114 metaphorical expressions provided by the participants, the study reveals four important conceptual categories through which ChatGPT is understood for English learning. The metaphors were, therefore, categorized holistically using a phenomenological approach and thematic analysis: Tool/Resource ($n = 43$, 37.72%), Supportive Nature ($n = 42$, 36.84%), Flexibility and Versatility ($n = 15$, 13.16%), and Companionship ($n = 14$, 12.28%). As illustrated in Figure 2, these categories reflect the various functional, emotional, and pedagogical roles that students attribute to ChatGPT in their academic lives.

Figure 2*Pie Chart of Well-Articulated Metaphors*

Each category captures a distinct dimension of how learners perceive ChatGPT's role in their English language development. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and in some cases, the metaphors reveal overlapping functions, such as a tool that is also supportive or a flexible aid that acts like a companion. The following sections present a detailed discussion of each category, enriched with illustrative examples and participant quotes to convey the underlying meanings attributed to ChatGPT by Turkish EFL learners.

Figure 3.*Breakdown of the Emerged Categories***Category 1: Tool/Resource**

The first major category, Tool/Resource, reflects participants' conceptualization of ChatGPT as a functional aid that facilitates goal achievement in the English learning process. This theme includes metaphors that describe ChatGPT as an instrument or platform used to accomplish specific language tasks—ranging from error correction to content generation. Though some responses, such as "robot," "computer," and "smartwatch," were not fully elaborated, they suggest a perception of ChatGPT as a dependable and technologically advanced assistant.

Table 2*Breakdown of Tool/Resource Category*

Category	Metaphors	f	%
Tool /Resource	Ship	3	2.63%
	Guide	3	2.63%
	Compass	1	0.88%
	Garden	1	0.88%
	A Fruit Tree	2	1.75%
	Educational Aid	3	2.63%
	Library	30	26.32%

More elaborate metaphors under this theme show how students relate ChatGPT to navigation, direction, and finding information. Metaphors such as "ship," "guide," and "compass" show how ChatGPT directs students to the determination of language goals. These comparisons reveal how useful such a technology would be for tracking progress, detecting errors, or keeping track in the course of study. One participant wrote,

"ChatGPT is like a ship in the ocean of language and aims to take the passengers to the port safely."

Another stated:

"ChatGPT is like a compass for me since it always shows me where to find my mistakes and study more."

Such metaphors suggest that students view ChatGPT not just as a tool but as a strategic facilitator of their learning journey.

Other metaphors emphasized resources and ease of access. Responses like "Garden," "Fruit Tree," "Educational Aid," and particularly "Library" suggest that ChatGPT is a knowledge repository for

academia, providing a continuous source of help to students for tasks like homework, presentation, and research. For example, a participant explained:

“ChatGPT is like a fruit tree because it presents us with fruitful, beneficial, and correct information all the time.”

Another noted:

“ChatGPT is like a library because I can reach every kind of information regarding my homework and my departmental studies apart from my daily inquiries.”

These metaphors reflect the fact that the students not only find ChatGPT useful and handy but are also increasingly dependent on it to offset other local educational resources, like limits in actual access to libraries or native-speaking collaborators. In this sense, ChatGPT is understood as a virtual knowledge repository that offers personalized and instant academic assistance, the kind that traditional classroom settings may not always afford.

Overall, the Tool/Resource category illustrates how ChatGPT is seen by many EFL learners as an essential academic companion—a technologically mediated means of navigating and enriching their English learning experiences.

Category 2: Companionship

The second category, Companionship, captures participants' perceptions of ChatGPT as a supportive partner in their language learning journey. Although it was the least frequently represented category in the data ($n = 14$, 12.28%), the metaphors grouped here reveal a significant emotional and interpersonal dimension to how some students view their interaction with the tool. Rather than simply seeing ChatGPT as a functional resource, these learners conceptualize it as a collaborator, confidant, or peer—a presence that accompanies them throughout the learning process.

Table 3

Breakdown of Companionship Category

Category	Metaphors	f	%
Companionship	Friendly presence	1	0,88
	Consultancy	1	0,88
	Right hand	1	0,88
	Peer	2	1,75
	Learning partner	1	0,88
	Facilitator	1	0,88
	Collaborator	1	0,88
	Plant	3	2,63
	Flower	3	2,63

The metaphorical expressions in this category draw heavily from themes of connection, support, and trust. Metaphors such as “friendly presence,” “peer,” “learning partner,” and “collaborator” suggest that students do not view language acquisition as an isolated experience but rather as a social and cooperative endeavor in which ChatGPT plays an active, even human-like, role. One student wrote:

“ChatGPT is like my best friend because it tells me my mistakes and even corrects them.”

Such metaphors indicate a strong affective dimension, where the tool is appreciated not only for its instructional help but also for its perceived reliability and constant availability. Interestingly, several participants used organic or nature-based metaphors such as “plant” and “flower,” which may at first appear unrelated to companionship. However, these metaphors were framed in ways that emphasized

ChatGPT’s consistency, presence, and benefits over time. For instance, one participant stated:

“ChatGPT is like a flower because it is with us during the process with its colors.”

Another added:

“ChatGPT is like a flower because it provides us with various profits.”

These expressions reflect a gentle, nurturing perception of the tool—one that contributes to the learning environment much like a quiet, helpful companion.

A smaller subset of students described ChatGPT as a consultative or advisory figure, using metaphors such as “consultancy,” “right hand,” and “facilitator.” These point to the belief that ChatGPT can be trusted for guidance, reassurance, and personalized feedback. One participant articulated this clearly:

“ChatGPT is like an upper brain to consult because I trust her advice and feedback more than my knowledge.”

Here, the metaphor conveys not only utility but also a deep sense of dependence and intellectual partnership.

Overall, while less frequent, the Companionship category offers important insights into how some learners anthropomorphize ChatGPT—assigning it emotional and relational roles that extend beyond its technical functions. These metaphors reflect a growing trend in digital education: the emotional integration of AI tools into students’ academic routines, where the tool becomes a learning companion, not just a support system.

Category 3: Supportive Nature

The third category, Supportive Nature, was one of the most frequently observed themes in the data, appearing in 42 of the 114 valid metaphorical expressions (36.84%). Regardless of students’ CEFR levels, there was a clear consensus that ChatGPT provides valuable support throughout the English language learning process. The metaphors in this category, though varied in terminology, consistently reflected ChatGPT’s role as a reliable assistant, guide, or mentor—a figure that students turn to when they need help understanding, producing, or refining language.

Table 4
Breakdown of Supportive Nature Category

Category	Metaphors	f	%
Supportive Nature	Teacher	3	2,63
	Gardener	3	2,63
	Helper	1	0,88
	Supporter	1	0,88
	Doctor	1	0,88
	Superhero	1	0,88
	Assistant	1	0,88
	Expert	22	19,30
	Accelerator	8	7,02
	Building column	1	0,88

Many participants likened ChatGPT to a teacher, expert, or assistant, signifying their perception of the tool as capable of providing instructional feedback and language corrections. These metaphors suggest that ChatGPT is viewed as a facilitator of both learning and academic performance. For example, one student wrote:

"ChatGPT is like an expert because it supports me in every field of language apart from my private queries."

The prominence of the "expert" metaphor ($f = 22$, 19.30%) suggests a strong belief in ChatGPT's comprehensive knowledge base and its perceived competence in language-related tasks. Other metaphors highlighted ChatGPT's nurturing or stabilizing qualities. Comparisons to a gardener, building column, or even a doctor reflect a belief that ChatGPT not only instructs but also cares for learners' academic well-being. One participant shared:

"ChatGPT is like the building columns in a structure because I feel safe even when I have hard assignments."

In this context, ChatGPT is also construed as offering emotional solace and academic support. Metaphors such as helper, supporter, or superhero expand on the idea that it has the capacity to "rescue" students from difficulties associated with learning that may involve grammar, vocabulary, or the actual creation of content.

These analogies demonstrate almost more than appreciation for the technology. They hint at the possibility that students see ChatGPT as one more personalized approach to meeting individual needs and providing a sense of confidence when met with a personalized coaching experience. Such emotionally evocative metaphors as "doctor" and "superhero" further imply that the tool plays a soothing psychological role, especially when students are under academic pressure.

The metaphors in this category depict ChatGPT as more than a machine or AI-powered assistant. It presents as a trustworthy education partner to the students—they perceive it as an ally not only for skill development but also for an effective reduction in stress and the enhancement of motivation. This particular category points out the affective nature of digital learning tools, indicating that learners are now demanding an emotional component along with their instructional experiences in learning from AI-supported systems.

Category 4: Flexibility and Versatility

Flexibility and versatility covered the final category, which appeared in 15 of the 114 valid metaphors (13.16%). Although less prominently than in the Tool/Resource and Supportive Nature categories, metaphors in this group provide insight into how students picture ChatGPT as adaptable, multi-functional, and responsive. These students picture ChatGPT not merely as a resource or authority but as an instrument potentially adaptable to a multitude of contexts, needs, and purposes.

Table 5
Breakdown of Flexibility and Versatility Category

Category	Metaphors	f	%
Flexibility and Versatility	Aladdin's magical lamp,	1	0,88%
	Dynamic,	1	0,88%
	Powerful,	8	7,02%
	Swiss Army knife,	1	0.88%
	Flex,	4	3,51%

Various participants resorted to metaphorical expression, stressing the agility of ChatGPT in assisting in a multitude of situations. The most frequently mentioned metaphor was "Powerful" ($f = 8$, 7.02%), which indicated technological strength and broad functionality. Other metaphors, including "Aladdin's Magic Lamp," "Swiss Army Knife," "Dynamic," and "Flex," connote the idea that ChatGPT can respond to changing conditions, perform multiple roles, and provide timely assistance across. One participant stated:

“ChatGPT is like one-for-all because I feel that I can adapt it to every circumstance.”

Another commented:

“ChatGPT is like a Swiss Army knife because you can use it for evil purposes and good purposes—it depends on the user.”

These statements indicate an understanding of the wide-ranging abilities of this tool while highlighting an ethically questionable dimension in the sense of what it brings or adds to the system as well as the responsibilities that come with its use.

The metaphors within this theme indicate that the students appreciated ChatGPT's flexible functionality of doing several tasks such as writing, editing, translating, researching, and even creative thinking. This flexibility made it attractive not only for purely assignment completion but also for independent, on-demand learning, and that which would suit the user perfectly. Though not the most massively populated theme, the metaphors it houses indicate a very strong appreciation of the potential adaptability and personalization of AI in contemporary language learning.

Overall, the Flexibility and Versatility category demonstrates that some students perceive ChatGPT not just as a static tool but as an intelligent, responsive companion that can serve multiple purposes simultaneously. These metaphors point to a vision of AI not merely as a passive assistant but as an active, customizable agent—one that aligns with the evolving and diverse demands of 21st-century learners.

DISCUSSION

Artificial intelligence has recently become a central topic across a wide range of academic disciplines (Crompton et al., 2024; Kartal, 2023; Hockly, 2023). Among current AI tools, ChatGPT stands out as one of the most widely discussed, with its influence explored in various fields—including language education—from multiple perspectives (Topsakal & Topsakal, 2022; Law, 2024). In this context, the present study examined preparatory students' metaphorical perceptions of ChatGPT as part of their English learning experience. Conducted with 123 preparatory school students from several universities in Turkey, this phenomenological study invited participants to complete the prompt, “ChatGPT is like... because...,” allowing for metaphor-based insights into how learners conceptualize the role of this tool. Through qualitative analysis, student-generated metaphors were categorized into four overarching themes: tool/resource, companionship, supportive nature, and flexibility/versatility.

A significant number of participants associated ChatGPT with tools or resources, using metaphors such as ship, guide, compass, garden, educational aid, and library. These metaphors reflect students' belief that ChatGPT helps them reach academic goals efficiently, acting as a bridge to success in their language learning journey. Similar patterns appear in previous studies. Aydın et al. (2021) explored pre-service teachers' metaphorical views of technological change and reported tool-oriented metaphors such as clock, train, calendar, and book. Likewise, Uçar (2023), in a study of pre-service ELT teachers, found entity-based metaphors including tool, light, study aid, and key. Aydoğmuş and Arslantaş (2020), investigating metaphors for Web 2.0 tools, noted frequent references to smartphones, puzzles, and magnets. These consistent findings suggest that learners across educational contexts often perceive technology—including ChatGPT—as a practical means to facilitate learning, and these perceptions are generally positive.

The second major theme in this study, companionship, also emerged in prior literature. Participants described ChatGPT using metaphors such as peer, facilitator, consultant, collaborator, and learning partner, signaling a high degree of trust in the tool. This is consistent with earlier research on technology-related metaphors. For example, Kurt and Özer (2013), analyzing pre-service teachers'

views on technology, found metaphors such as friend, hand, and arm. Similarly, Karakoç Öztürk and Dağıstanlıoğlu (2018) reported metaphors like right hand and friend among Turkish teachers when describing instructional technologies. Küçük and Yalçın (2014) also noted friend as one of the most frequently used metaphors for technology. These shared patterns reinforce the idea that learners often anthropomorphize educational technologies, attributing them with social or interpersonal roles that extend beyond simple functionality. The findings of the current study contribute to this body of literature by showing that even among current AI tools, ChatGPT continues to be perceived not only as effective but also as a trustworthy and emotionally supportive presence in the learning process. The third classification of this study is the supportive nature of ChatGPT, reflecting the deep belief in ChatGPT's teaching ability. Some of the mentioned metaphors are teacher, helper, supporter, assistant, and expert. In a study conducted by Lim (2024) on discovering pre-service teachers' metaphors on AI, the majority of the teachers articulated the 'teacher' metaphor for AI. In a similar perspective, Tartuk (2023) delved into middle school students' metaphorical perspectives on AI. According to the findings, metaphors like assistant and scientist were preferred. Moreover, Yaman (2016) also conceptualized metaphors like helper, wise man, and assistant for technology. Briefly, the concept of ChatGPT is related to knowledge, wisdom, and teaching.

The final category identified in the study was Flexibility and Versatility. The statements from the participants underscored adaptability, prolixity, and multifunctionality on the part of ChatGPT. Metaphors such as 'dynamic,' 'powerful,' 'flexible,' and 'Aladdin's magical lamp' articulated learner perception of ChatGPT as a responsive instrument and an area of utmost applicability. This notion fits in with previous works wherein Dedeşali (2020) discussed independence-related metaphors, while Gök and Erdoğan (2010) mentioned comparisons to flowing water and the human brain, both of which demonstrate the flexibility and cognitive scope of these tools. Thus, the findings contribute towards the understanding that, unlike technical tools, ChatGPT is an adaptive system that satisfies the varying needs of the learner.

A key finding from this study is the absence of negative metaphors. In response to the third research question, the participants did not use black negative metaphorical terms for ChatGPT; instead, they constantly characterized it as supportive, reliable, and goal-oriented. Many also directly associated ChatGPT with teaching and learning processes, thus solidifying its value. This is in contrast to some of the literature, which documents both positive and negative perceptions of AI and educational technology. For example, Karacam and Aydın (2014) reported negative metaphors such as rubbish bin and crazy man. Similarly, Demir and Güraksın (2022) identified terms like mindless, threat, and laziness, while Tartuk (2023) recorded more extreme expressions such as the end of humanity and the reason for brainless lineages.

While the findings of this study diverge from these studies, they are in line with research that has emphasized predominantly positive metaphorical perceptions. Hurteienne and Blessing (2007), for instance, reported only favorable metaphors such as library, office information management, and presentation of comics in the context of technology and interaction. Several factors may explain the exclusively positive framing observed in our study. First, participants may have had largely favorable experiences with ChatGPT, particularly if it helped them navigate academic tasks efficiently. Second, there may be an element of selection bias, with more tech-positive students choosing to participate. Third, the study design, which framed ChatGPT as a language-learning support tool, may have inadvertently foregrounded its advantages. Finally, the novelty of ChatGPT—being a relatively recent innovation—may contribute to a kind of “honeymoon phase,” where learners are still exploring its potential and have not yet encountered significant drawbacks.

Together, these findings suggest that learners, particularly those in intensive English preparatory

programs, tend to conceptualize ChatGPT in overwhelmingly functional, supportive, and even relational terms. The study expands on previous metaphor research by offering a focused view of student perceptions, rather than teacher perspectives, and by using metaphors to uncover deeper cognitive and emotional associations with AI-based learning tools. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in the literature, especially within the context of EFL education and the use of generative AI.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the metaphorical perceptions of preparatory school students in Türkiye regarding ChatGPT in the context of English language learning. While recent research on ChatGPT in applied linguistics has examined a wide range of topics—including teacher and student perspectives (Ulla et al., 2023; Ali, 2023; Har, 2023; Farhi et al., 2023), the tool’s influence on specific language skills (Fitria, 2023; Yağcı & Yıldız, 2023), materials development (Koraishi, 2023), and communicative competence (Young & Shishido, 2023)—the current literature has paid little attention to how learners conceptualize ChatGPT metaphorically. This study directly addresses that gap by investigating how students perceive ChatGPT not only as a learning tool but also as a companion, support figure, and flexible aid, using metaphor as a lens to uncover deeper cognitive and emotional associations. To date, few—if any—studies in applied linguistics have applied metaphor analysis to uncover learners’ symbolic and experiential views of generative AI tools in language education. By doing so, this research contributes a novel methodological and conceptual perspective to the growing body of literature on AI in education. The findings offer valuable insights for EFL teachers, instructors, and educational stakeholders by revealing how students relate to ChatGPT in their learning processes. Understanding these perceptions may help educators more effectively integrate AI tools into curricula, anticipate learner expectations, and foster more meaningful interactions between students and digital resources. In sum, this study provides original empirical evidence on students’ metaphorical perceptions of ChatGPT, filling a significant void in the current literature and opening new avenues for research at the intersection of language learning, learner psychology, and artificial intelligence.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Social and Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Fırat University (Decision No: 2024/11, Date: May 30, 2024).

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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