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WHAT DOES INSTITUTIONAL ACCREDITATION MEAN TO THEM?: METAPHORICAL CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF THE TERTIARY LEVEL EFL LEARNERS AND INSTRUCTORS

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and instructors conceptualize institutional accreditation through metaphorical expressions in a Turkish tertiary education context. Using Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Framework, this research investigates stakeholder perceptions of quality assurance mechanisms in language education. The study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages of an accredited state university in Türkiye involving 70 participants (58 EFL learners and 12 instructors). Data were collected through a discourse-completion task where participants completed the statement "Accreditation is like... because..." The responses were analysed thematically to identify dominant metaphorical patterns. The analysis revealed five major themes: Quality Assurance (24.3%), emphasizing trust and standardization through metaphors like "warranty" and "seal of approval"; Guidance (20%), portraying accreditation as a navigational tool with metaphors such as "compass" and "GPS"; Improvement (21.4%), depicting accreditation as a growth mechanism using metaphors like "a trainer"; Stress/Challenge (18.6%), capturing emotional burdens through metaphors such as "doctor's appointment"; and Critique/Limitations (14.3%), questioning efficacy through metaphors like "social media filter." The findings reveal that stakeholders simultaneously value accreditation for ensuring quality and fostering improvement, yet critique it for bureaucratic demands and potential superficiality. This research contributes to understanding quality assurance mechanisms in educational contexts, providing insights for developing more effective and stakeholder-responsive accreditation processes in language education.

Keywords: Accreditation, quality assurance, EFL, metaphorical conceptualization, tertiary education.

Kurumsal akreditasyon onlar için ne anlama geliyor?: Yükseköğretim düzeyinde İngilizce öğrenci ve öğretim elemanlarının metaforik kavramsallaştırmaları

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türk yükseköğretim bağlamında İngilizce öğrenenlerin ve öğretim elemanlarının kurumsal akreditasyonu metaforik ifadeler aracılığıyla nasıl kavramsallaştırdığını araştırmaktadır. Lakoff ve Johnson'ın Kavramsal Metafor Çerçevesi'ni kullanan bu araştırma, dil eğitiminde kalite güvence mekanizmalarına yönelik paydaş algılarını incelemektedir. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin batısında bir devlet üniversitesinin akredite edilmiş Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu'nda 70 katılımcı (58 öğrenci ve 12 öğretim elemanı) ile yürütülmüştür. Veriler, katılımcıların "Akreditasyon... gibidir çünkü..." ifadesini tamamladığı bir ifade tamamlama görevi aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Yanıtlar, baskın metaforik örüntüleri belirlemek için tematik olarak analiz edilmiştir. Analiz beş ana tema ortaya koymuştur: Kalite Güvencesi (%24,3), "garanti" ve "onay mührü" gibi metaforlarla güven ve standardizasyonu vurgulamaktadır; Rehberlik (%20), "pusula" ve "GPS" gibi metaforlarla akreditasyonu yönlendirme aracı olarak göstermektedir; Gelişim

(%21,4), "antrenör" gibi metaforlarla akreditasyonu büyüme mekanizması olarak tasvir etmektedir; Stres/Zorluk (%18,6), "doktor randevusu" gibi metaforlarla duygusal yükleri yakalamaktadır; ve Eleştiri/Sınırlılıklar (%14,3), "sosyal medya filtresi" gibi metaforlarla etkinliği sorgulamaktadır. Bulgular, paydaşların kalite sağlama ve gelişimi teşvik etme açısından akreditasyonu değerlendirirken, aynı zamanda bürokratik talepler ve potansiyel yüzeysellik nedeniyle eleştirdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu araştırma, eğitim bağlamlarında kalite güvence mekanizmalarının anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunarak, dil eğitiminde daha etkili ve paydaş-duyarlı akreditasyon süreçlerinin geliştirilmesi için içgörüler sağlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akreditasyon, kalite güvencesi, İngilizce öğrenenler, metaforik kavramsallaştırma, yükseköğretim.

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INTRODUCTION

Education systems worldwide serve as critical institutions for developing human capital, fostering social mobility, and preparing individuals for participation in increasingly complex and competitive global societies (Coleman, 2006; Ledwith & Seymour, 2001). Within these systems, higher education occupies a central role, functioning not only as a site of knowledge transmission but also as a mechanism for credentialing, innovation, and workforce development. As higher education has become more accessible and diverse, stakeholders including students, employers, governments, and educational institutions themselves have demanded greater accountability and assurance that educational programs deliver quality outcomes and meaningful learning experiences (Nguyen et al., 2021). This demand has given rise to systematic approaches for monitoring, evaluating, and enhancing educational quality across institutions and national contexts.

Language education holds a particularly significant position within higher education, given the increasing importance of multilingual competencies in an interconnected world (Gotti, 2020). The ability to communicate across languages has become essential for academic success, professional advancement, and international collaboration. Consequently, tertiary-level language programs have proliferated globally, serving diverse student populations and operating across multiple institutional and geographical contexts (Jenkins & Panero, 2024; Marlina, 2013). This expansion has brought about the challenge of maintaining consistent quality and ensuring that language learners develop the competencies necessary for success in their academic and professional futures.

One mechanism that has gained prominence as a response to these demands for quality assurance is accreditation, which is a formal external evaluation process designed to validate institutional and programmatic quality (Staub, 2019a). While accreditation systems are widely established across higher education and are generally viewed as beneficial for maintaining standards and enhancing credibility, the actual experiences of teachers and learners who are most directly involved in educational processes remain underexplored. Understanding how these key stakeholders perceive and interpret accreditation processes is essential for developing quality assurance systems that are not only rigorous and accountable but also meaningful and supportive of authentic educational improvement. This paper addresses this gap by investigating how EFL learners and instructors conceptualize accreditation, employing metaphorical analysis to access the deeper perspectives and mental representations that shape their engagement with quality assurance mechanisms.

Quality assurance and accreditation in language teaching programs

The contemporary era presents both opportunities and challenges for higher education institutions, propelled by technology breakthroughs, globalization, and changing labor market dynamics that compel universities to modify their educational strategies (Yin, 2024). As part of the higher education systems, the landscape of language education at the tertiary level has also undergone significant transformation in recent decades, driven by globalization, technological advancement, and the increasing demand for multilingual competencies in professional and academic contexts (Gotti, 2020). As language teaching programs have expanded both in number and scope, the need for robust quality assurance mechanisms and standardized accreditation processes has become increasingly critical. The global expansion of higher education has been facilitated by the proliferation of technologies that have increased access beyond traditional campus

boundaries, with this growth being followed by an equally substantial increase in the number of institutions offering language instruction.

Recently, assuring a desirable level of quality has been an essential requirement in universities all around the world (Nguyen et al., 2021). Depending on the country, various quality assurance procedures, such as accreditation, benchmarking, and audit have been in practice in order to provide quality control, further enhancement of quality, and accountability (Martin & Parikh, 2017). In this regard, as described by the European Commission (2018), quality assurance is composed of the systematic review of educational programs and processes to improve and maintain quality in these programs. Similarly, quality assurance in language teaching programs encompasses a comprehensive framework of standards, procedures, and evaluation mechanisms designed to ensure educational excellence and maintain consistency across diverse institutional contexts. This multifaceted approach involves systematic assessment of curriculum design, pedagogical methodologies, instructor qualifications, learning outcomes, and institutional resources. However, some studies (e.g. Osobajo & Oke, 2022) caution against an over-reliance on technology alone, highlighting issues such as the digital divide and the need for quality assurance and digital literacy training for both students and faculty.

The concept of accreditation in language education serves as a formal recognition system that validates the quality and effectiveness of educational programs through external evaluation processes. The accreditation systems provide stakeholders, including students, employers, and educational institutions, with reliable indicators of program quality and institutional credibility. This diverse range of stakeholders need to interact and cooperate meaningfully and effectively in order to ensure the success of the quality assurance process (Visakorpi et al., 2008).

The significance of quality assurance and accreditation in language teaching has been further amplified by recent global challenges, particularly those arising from the COVID-19 pandemic (Hou et al., 2021). The pandemic necessitated an unprecedented and rapid shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to emergency remote teaching and hybrid delivery models across educational institutions worldwide. This abrupt transition exposed critical gaps in existing quality assurance frameworks, which were primarily designed to evaluate conventional classroom-based language instruction. As language programs struggled to maintain the interactive and communicative nature of language learning in virtual environments, accreditation bodies faced the challenge of reassessing quality standards that had long relied on physical classroom observations, in-person assessments, and traditional pedagogical approaches. This disruption has highlighted the importance of flexible yet rigorous quality assurance mechanisms that can adapt to changing educational delivery modalities while maintaining educational standards (Ülker, 2023).

In the literature, quality assurance procedures are classified as accreditation, assessment, external moderation, and audit (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Though all these four mechanisms have been in use, the accreditation is the most commonly practiced one in the higher education quality assurance procedures. In accreditation, the entire higher education institution or a specific program is expected to meet certain criteria determined by an accrediting body, and earn recognition upon successful completion of the requirements (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007). The graduates of the accredited programs are believed to be more competitive in their prospective career paths (Shah, 2012), and this assumption increases the popularity of the accredited programs. Besides, accreditation contributes to the local and international recognition of the programs and the universities.

For EFL programs, accreditation by recognized bodies such as the Commission on English Language Program Accreditation (CEA), Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality Language Services (EAQUALS), and Pearson Assured provides legitimacy and recognition, which can enhance the institution's reputation and attract more students (Al'Abri et al., 2019; Reeves, 2019; Staub, 2019b). Along with these international bodies of accreditation, the Association for Language Education Evaluation and Accreditation (DEDAK) has been recognized by the national accreditation body by the Council of Higher Education in Türkiye, and since then, numerous language teaching programs have been accredited or still monitored by DEDAK.

Contemporary research in language education emphasizes the multistakeholder nature of quality assurance, recognizing that effective programs require active participation from institutions, educators, and learners (Visakorpi et al., 2008). Furthermore, the internationalization of higher education such as the Bologna Process in the Turkish higher education system has created new challenges and opportunities for quality assurance in language teaching programs. As institutions increasingly operate across national boundaries

and serve diverse student populations, the need for internationally recognized standards and accreditation frameworks becomes paramount (Ince & Gounko, 2014). Research on language teaching quality has gained prominence as the momentum of higher school teaching reforms continues to grow. Although accreditation has frequently been favored for its value in standardization, accountability, transparency, and recognition, there is also research questioning its impact on improving the educational quality of the programs. To exemplify, institutions might become too focused on complying with the criteria of the accrediting bodies rather than increasing the overall quality of teaching (Engebretsen et al., 2012; Harvey, 2002). Such determination to attain the ultimate outcome, the accreditation, might easily undermine the underlying purpose of continuous improvement of quality. As Shah (2012) concludes, quality improvement remains questionable unless students' learning experiences are improved during the accreditation process. Therefore, higher education institutions and programs need to adopt a cautious approach in accreditation processes in order to balance the process and the product of the quality improvement endeavors.

Metaphors and their use in educational research

As a commonly utilized figure of speech, a metaphor is a word or phrase that describe another word with no direct reference to its literal meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; McGlone, 2007). In other words, unlike dictionary meanings, metaphors act like similes that are formed on the basis of common features and similarities (Miller, 1993). To exemplify, a student saying that "a school is a prison" actually constructs a subjective mental representation of the school which does not literally correspond to a place where criminals are captivated as punishment. In this sense, it can be argued that a student using such a metaphor to describe a school has negative feelings about it or reflects their unpleasant experiences with the school. In this regard, the prison represents the school due to the commonalities of the two for the speaker (Glucksberg et al., 1992; McGlone, 2007).

Metaphors are especially useful for verbalizing mental representations of complex notions, which would otherwise be considerably challenging to express. Abstract concepts such as love can easily be conceptualized using metaphors (Lakoff, 1993). This ease of using concrete correspondences for abstract concepts through metaphors stems basically from the close relationship between language and thought (Fauconnier & Turner, 2003). Apart from being literary concepts conveying underlying perspectives and opinions, metaphors also shape behaviours by influencing the perception of events (Bailey, 2000; Martinez et al., 2001).

Dating back to ancient Greek philosophers, metaphor studies have followed a number of paths since their first introduction and the most frequently utilized framework has been the "conceptual metaphor framework" developed and further improved by Lakoff and his colleagues (Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Lakoff & Turner, 1989). So far, numerous studies have adopted this framework and made use of metaphorical conceptualizations to gain deeper insight into abstract concepts in the field of English as a foreign language teaching and learning (Cameron & Maslen, 2010; Erdem, 2018; Kalay & Keçik, 2023; Karahan, 2015; Kartal & Uner, 2017; Öztürk et al., 2025; Seferoğlu et al., 2009; Thornbury, 1991; Yasuda, 2010). Similarly, as the aim of the present research is to uncover the key stakeholder perspectives about a relatively new and abstract notion, it utilizes the conceptual metaphor framework to elicit data regarding the EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions of accreditation in a tertiary Turkish EFL setting.

While quality assurance and accreditation have become increasingly important in higher education programs globally, with few exceptions (e.g., Öztürk et al., 2025; Semerci et al., 2021), little is known about how the stakeholders of tertiary education such as faculty members and students actually perceive and understand accreditation processes. As for language teaching programs at the same level, there is an even more notable scarcity of research on the issue (e.g., Ataman & Adıgüzel, 2020). Given that effective quality assurance depends on stakeholder participation, exploring how these key stakeholders conceptualize accreditation is essential. Therefore, the present study investigates EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions of accreditation in tertiary Turkish EFL settings through metaphorical conceptualizations, utilizing the conceptual metaphor framework to uncover how these stakeholders understand and experience quality assurance mechanisms. The research addresses the following question:

1) How do EFL learners and instructors conceptualize accreditation through metaphorical expressions?

METHODOLOGY

Setting and participants

This study was conducted at the School of Foreign Languages of a state university in Türkiye. The institution represents a typical public university setting where English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction is delivered to tertiary-level students. The School of Foreign Languages serves as a preparatory unit within the university structure, providing intensive English language instruction to students before they proceed to their undergraduate programs conducted in English.

The selected institution holds particular significance for this research as it has already undergone the institutional accreditation process and maintains accredited status through the national accreditation association, DEDAK (Board for the Evaluation and Accreditation of Language Education) in Türkiye. This accredited status ensures that the institution meets established quality standards and follows prescribed educational practices in language instruction. The DEDAK accreditation process involves multiple stages of stakeholder engagement that directly affect both instructors and students. During the evaluation phase, instructors participate in curriculum review committees, provide documentation of teaching practices, and contribute to the development of quality improvement plans. Students are involved through comprehensive surveys assessing their level of satisfaction with educational services, course content, and learning outcomes. The site visit phase includes classroom observations where instructors' pedagogical practices are evaluated, and student focus group interviews where learners provide direct feedback to the accreditation committee regarding their educational experiences, resource adequacy, and institutional support systems. Additionally, both instructors and students experience the ongoing effects of accreditation through modified curricula, revised assessment procedures, enhanced facilities, and quality improvement initiatives implemented as a result of accreditation requirements and recommendations. Therefore, the presence of an existing accreditation provides a crucial foundation for the study, as it means that both instructors and students within this setting have direct experience with accreditation processes and their implications for educational practice.

A total of 70 participants provided data for this study, representing a comprehensive cross-section of the School of Foreign Languages community. The participant group consisted of 12 lecturers and 58 students, ensuring representation from both primary stakeholder groups within the accredited institution without an intended comparison between the groups. The participant profile of the study is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Demographic profile of the participants*

Participant Group	Subgroup	n	%
EFL Learners	Total	58	82.86
	Pre-intermediate	20	28.57
	Intermediate	32	45.71
	Upper-intermediate	6	8.57
	Female	48	68.57
	Male	10	14.29
EFL Instructors	Total	12	17.14
	Female	8	11.43
	Male	4	5.71
	Experience < 10 years	3	4.29
	Experience ≥ 10 years	9	12.86
Total Participants		70	100.00

Conceptual Metaphor Framework

The analysis of metaphorical expressions in this study is grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), which posits that metaphors are not merely linguistic ornaments but fundamental cognitive mechanisms through which people understand and structure abstract concepts through more concrete, experiential domains. As McGlone (2007) notes, metaphors describe concepts with no direct reference to their literal meaning, allowing participants to express nuanced understandings of accreditation

that might otherwise be difficult to articulate. According to this framework, metaphors reveal systematic mappings between a source domain (the concrete concept used for comparison) and a target domain (the abstract concept being understood—in this case, accreditation). The analytical process involves identifying these source domains, examining the specific attributes and entailments mapped onto the target concept, and categorizing metaphors into thematic groups that reveal underlying conceptualizations. This approach has been widely applied in educational research to uncover stakeholder perceptions of complex institutional processes (e.g., Ayna & Deniz, 2022; Çakmak, 2021; Kalay & Keçik, 2023; Yasuda, 2010).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for the present research were collected through a brief discourse-completion task in the form of an online survey. The participants were provided with several dictionary definitions and explanations of metaphors in the first part of the survey. They were also presented with several metaphor samples and explanations to create a concrete picture of the concept. Afterwards, they were requested to complete the statement "Accreditation is like ……. because ……". There was no word count limit for both responses in order to let the participants express their perceptions as freely as they wanted. Both the students and instructors were allowed to give their responses in either English or Turkish, depending on which language they felt more comfortable to express their perspectives in a creative way.

Following the conceptual metaphor framework, the analysis proceeded through several systematic stages. First, all metaphorical expressions were compiled and translated into English where necessary, with back-translation procedures employed to ensure semantic equivalence. Second, each metaphor was analyzed to identify its source domain and the specific attributes to the concept of accreditation as the target domain. Third, metaphors sharing similar source domains or conceptual mappings were grouped into thematic categories. To minimize subjective bias in the interpretation of metaphorical meanings and thematic categorization, the research data were analyzed by both researchers and afterwards, a third coder with substantial experience in qualitative research coded 20 % of the data. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached.

RESULTS

The data analyzed for the present study have revealed a number of intriguing results. As seen in Table 2, most of the participants had positive perspectives regarding the notion of accreditation in English as a foreign language programs at the tertiary level in Türkiye.

Table 2. *Perspectives regarding the accreditation*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Frequency	Representative Examples
Quality Assurance	Trust/Safety	12	P3 (seal of approval), P11 (warranty), P20 (lock), P50 (promise), P61 (quality control)
	Standardization	5	P51 (dictionary), P52 (grammar rules), P65 (CEFR badge)
Guidance	Direction/Planning	10	P5 (compass), P27 (Google Maps), P53 (GPS), P51 (lighthouse)
	Clarity	4	P22 (subtitles), P36 (window cleaning), P57 (cleaning glasses)
Improvement	Growth/Development	9	P9 (fitness trainer), P21 (sunlight), P29 (marathon coach), P55 (gym)
	Feedback/Reflection	6	P7 (mirror), P34 (therapist), P67 (teacher's feedback)
Stress/Challenge	Rigor/Discomfort	8	P4 (parent checking homework), P40 (doctor's appointment), P47 (studying for finals)
	Performative Pressure	5	P39 (first date), P42 (stage performance), P45 (photo filter)
Critique/Limitations	Superficiality	6	P13 (social media filter), P26 (school uniform), P45 (photo filter)
	Restrictiveness	4	P26 (uniform), P38 (Rubik's cube), P52 (grammar rules)

As shown in Table 1, metaphors clustered most frequently around the themes of "quality assurance" (24.3% of total metaphors) and "improvement" (21.4%), highlighting accreditation's dual role as a marker of trust and a lever for growth. However, the prevalence of "stress/challenge" metaphors (18.6%) –particularly those invoking performativity (e.g., 'first date') –signals institutional anxieties about the process's novelty. Notably, critiques of superficiality (e.g., 'social media filter') comprised 8.6% of metaphors, suggesting gaps between accreditation's ideals and experienced realities in EFL contexts.

The analysis of 70 metaphors revealed five dominant themes characterizing how tertiary-level EFL learners and instructors perceive institutional accreditation. The most prevalent theme, "quality assurance", encompassed 17 metaphors (24.3% of total), emphasizing accreditation's role in establishing trust and standardization. Participants frequently likened accreditation to a "seal of approval" (P3) or "warranty" (P11), framing it as a guarantee of educational safety and consistency. This theme also included metaphors like "dictionary" (P51) and "CEFR badge" (P65), highlighting accreditation's function in standardizing language education across institutions. Below are the sample responses from the participants

> Accreditation is like a warranty: it doesn't guarantee perfection, but it gives you confidence in the school because it has accreditation. [P11]

> Accreditation is like a seal of approval on a food label because it tells others it's safe, trustworthy, and good quality. [P3]

> Accreditation is like a promise kept: it tells us the institution is serious about quality and it promises to do certain things to increase quality. [P50]

The second major theme, "guidance", appeared in 14 metaphors (20%), portraying accreditation as a navigational tool for both programs and learners. Comparisons to a "compass" (P5) and "GPS" (P53) dominated this category, suggesting that stakeholders view accreditation as essential for maintaining direction toward learning objectives. Sub-themes of clarity, such as "cleaning glasses" (P57) and "subtitles" (P22), further underscored its role in making educational expectations transparent.

> Accreditation is like a compass because it keeps the program heading in the right direction. [P5]

> Accreditation is like a GPS, because it ensures the program stays on course toward its language learning goals, helping students reach their desired proficiency levels without getting lost in ineffective teaching or outdated materials. [P53]

> Accreditation is like a good recipe, because a language program needs balanced "ingredients" like grammar, vocabulary, speaking practice, and feedback –just as a well-accredited program ensures no essential component is missing or overused. [P54]

"Improvement" emerged as another key theme, represented by 15 metaphors (21.4%). Here, accreditation was depicted as a mechanism for growth, with metaphors like "fitness trainer" (P9) and "going to the gym" (P55) illustrating its role in driving continuous development. A subset of these metaphors, including "mirror" (P7) and "therapist" (P34), framed accreditation as a reflective practice that exposes institutional weaknesses, albeit uncomfortably.

> Accreditation is like a mirror because it forces the school to look at itself honestly. [P7]

> Accreditation is like a therapist because it helps uncover problems that aren't easy to admit. [P34]

> Accreditation is like going to the gym regularly, because consistent checks and improvements in a program ensure learners develop strong language skills over time –not just cramming for exams, but achieving long-term fluency and accuracy. [P55]

However, the data also revealed significant tensions. The "stress/challenge" theme (13 metaphors, 18.6%) captured the emotional and logistical burdens of accreditation, with comparisons to a "doctor's appointment" (P40) and "studying for finals" (P47). A sub-theme of performativity, including metaphors like "first date" (P39), suggested that some stakeholders perceive accreditation as a superficial performance rather than a meaningful evaluation.

> Accreditation is like studying for finals because you may question the process, but you value

the results. [P47]

> Accreditation is like a first date because everyone tries to look their best, even if it's not the full truth. [P39]

> Accreditation is like a parent checking your homework. It is annoying and stressful, but usually for your own good. [P4]

Finally, "critique/limitations" appeared in 10 metaphors (14.3%), with participants questioning accreditation's efficacy and flexibility. Metaphors such as "social media filter" (P13) and "school uniform" (P26) critiqued the process as overly restrictive or cosmetic, masking deeper issues without resolving them.

> Accreditation is like a school uniform because some people think it creates unity, others find it limiting. [P26]

> Accreditation is like grammar rules. It is sometimes annoying, but they make communication clearer and more correct. [P52]

Collectively, these findings reveal a nuanced landscape where accreditation is simultaneously valued for ensuring quality and fostering improvement, yet critiqued for its bureaucratic demands and potential to prioritize appearances over substantive change. The prominence of guidance-related metaphors suggests that EFL stakeholders particularly rely on accreditation to navigate the complexities of language education, while the recurring critiques highlight areas where the process may fall short of its ideals.

DISCUSSION

The metaphorical analysis of stakeholder perceptions reflects a multifaceted comprehension of accreditation in a Turkish EFL setting, in which the program has already been accredited by a national body of quality assurance and accreditation. The analysis reveals that stakeholders in tertiary EFL contexts hold nuanced and sometimes contradictory views of accreditation. While they value its role in ensuring quality, providing guidance, and fostering improvement, they also recognize its potential to create stress, promote superficiality, and impose excessive standardization. This complex understanding supports Vlăsceanu et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of accreditation as a process where institutions or programs must meet certain criteria determined by an accrediting body, while also revealing the human experiences behind these formal requirements.

First of all, the predominance of quality assurance metaphors underscores the fundamental role that accreditation plays in establishing institutional credibility and educational reliability. Participants' consistent use of metaphors such as "warranty," and "seal of approval," reflects their recognition of accreditation as a mechanism that aligns with the European Commission's (2018) definition of quality assurance as "the systematic review of educational programmes and processes to maintain and improve their quality, equity and efficiency". This finding supports Nguyen et al.'s (2021) assertion that assuring desirable levels of quality has become an essential requirement in universities worldwide. The emphasis on standardization within this theme is particularly significant given the internationalization of English language education.

The frequent presence of "guidance" metaphors (20%) reveals how stakeholders conceptualize accreditation as an essential navigational tool in the complex landscape of language education. The recurring use of directional metaphors like "compass" and "GPS" suggests that participants view accreditation not merely as a quality marker but as an active force that provides orientation and direction. This finding is particularly relevant to what Martin and Parikh (2017) describe as the various quality assurance procedures that provide quality control and further enhancement of quality in educational contexts.

The sub-theme of clarity within the "guidance" category, exemplified by metaphors such as "cleaning glasses" and "subtitles," indicates that participants value accreditation's role in making educational expectations transparent. This transparency function addresses the multistakeholder nature of quality assurance that contemporary research in language education emphasizes (Visakorpi et al., 2008), facilitating communication between institutions, educators, and learners about program standards and expectations.

The "improvement" theme (21.4%) captures accreditation's transformative potential, with metaphors like "trainer" and "going to the gym" emphasizing its role in driving institutional development. This conceptualization aligns with the comprehensive framework of standards, procedures, and evaluation

mechanisms that quality assurance in language teaching programs encompasses, including systematic assessment of curriculum design, pedagogical methodologies, instructor qualifications, learning outcomes, and institutional resources. The reflective subset of metaphors, including "mirror" and "therapist," suggests that participants recognize accreditation's capacity to expose institutional weaknesses, even when this process proves uncomfortable. This finding is particularly significant in light of Hou et al.'s (2021) observation about global challenges amplifying the importance of quality assurance in language education. The emphasis on continuous improvement reflects what Ülker (2023) describes as the need for flexible yet rigorous quality assurance mechanisms that can adapt to changing educational delivery modalities while maintaining educational standards, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic disruption.

The prevalence of "stress/challenge" metaphors (18.6%) reveals the emotional and logistical burdens associated with accreditation processes. Metaphors such as "doctor's appointment" and "studying for finals" capture the anxiety and preparation that accreditation demands generate within institutional contexts. As exemplified by the "first date" metaphor, some stakeholders perceive accreditation as prioritizing appearance over essence, potentially undermining its intended purpose. In such cases, the desire to create a good first impression by meeting the criteria (Vlăsceanu et al., 2007) can turn out to be a source of stress. This tension reflects broader concerns about the implementation of quality assurance mechanisms in higher education. The findings suggest that while stakeholders recognize the value of accreditation, they also experience it as a source of institutional stress that may prioritize compliance over genuine improvement. This aligns with Osobajo and Oke's (2022) caution against over-reliance on standardized processes, highlighting the need for balanced approaches that address both quality assurance requirements and stakeholder well-being.

The "critique/limitations" theme (14.3%) reveals important concerns about accreditation's efficacy and flexibility. Metaphors such as "social media filter" and "school uniform" suggest that some participants view accreditation as potentially superficial or overly restrictive, masking deeper concerns without dealing with them effectively. As Shah (2012) also highlights, this critical perspective indicates that while accreditation serves important functions in quality assurance, it may not fully address the comprehensive framework of standards and evaluation mechanisms that effective language teaching programs require. In this regard, the finding is in line with the criticism that the institutions might become too much focused on the result – obtaining accreditation rather than pursuing and overall improvement which emerges as a serious concern (Engebretsen et al., 2012). Besides, in line with the critiques revealed in this study, previous research also indicate that accreditation process can be perceived as a "make-up" to compensate for flaws and weaknesses (Öztürk et al., 2025). The critique of accreditation as potentially "cosmetic" resonates with broader debates in higher education about the balance between accountability and authentic improvement. These findings suggest that stakeholders are sophisticated in their understanding of accreditation's limitations, recognizing both its value and its potential shortcomings in achieving meaningful educational change. This aligns with Harvey and Newton's (2004) classification of quality assurance procedures, where accreditation represents just one mechanism among several approaches to ensuring educational quality.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

The analysis reveals that stakeholders in tertiary EFL contexts hold nuanced and sometimes contradictory views of accreditation. While they value its role in ensuring quality, providing guidance, and fostering improvement, they also recognize its potential to create stress, promote superficiality, and impose excessive standardization. These findings have important implications for how accreditation bodies and institutional administrators design and implement quality assurance processes in language teaching programs.

The presence of critique and stress-related metaphors suggests that accreditation bodies should consider reducing administrative burdens that contribute to performative compliance rather than genuine quality improvement, while institutions need to create supportive environments that help instructors and students engage meaningfully with accreditation processes. The findings indicate that accreditation functions as more than a simple quality marker; it serves as a multifaceted tool that shapes institutional behaviour, stakeholder expectations, and educational outcomes. However, when stakeholders conceptualize accreditation through stress-inducing or critique-oriented metaphors, their engagement with quality assurance mechanisms may become defensive or superficial rather than constructive and authentic.

The metaphorical lens reveals both the aspirational and problematic dimensions of accreditation, suggesting that how stakeholders conceptualize these processes through metaphors may influence their response to

and participation in quality assurance activities. This has practical implications for institutional implementation, as understanding these underlying conceptualizations can help administrators develop more effective communication strategies and support mechanisms that address stakeholder concerns while maintaining rigorous quality standards. Furthermore, the methodology itself demonstrates value for ongoing quality improvement efforts, as metaphor analysis provides institutions with a tool to regularly assess and understand stakeholder perceptions in ways that traditional feedback mechanisms may not capture.

CONCLUSION

This study explored EFL learners' and instructors' perceptions of accreditation in tertiary Turkish EFL settings through metaphorical conceptualizations, revealing complex and multifaceted understandings that extend beyond simple binary judgments. The metaphorical analysis uncovered both positive aspects –viewing accreditation as a quality assurance tool, guiding framework, and catalyst for improvement –and critical dimensions –perceiving it as a source of stress, promoter of superficiality, and imposer of rigid standardization. These differing conceptualizations highlight the tension between the formal objectives of accreditation systems and the lived experiences of those who participate in and are affected by these processes. Ultimately, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on quality assurance in language education by foregrounding stakeholder voices and demonstrating that effective accreditation systems must balance the need for standardization with attention to the human dimensions of educational practice.

Limitations and Further Research

While this study provides valuable insights into stakeholder perceptions of accreditation in tertiary EFL contexts, several limitations should be noted. First, the research was conducted at a single DEDAK-accredited institution in Türkiye, which may limit the generalizability of findings to other institutional contexts, accreditation systems, or national settings. Second, the study's reliance on discourse completion tasks, though efficient for data collection, may have limited the depth of participants' metaphorical expressions; follow-up interviews could yield richer explanations of stakeholder reasoning and experiences. Additionally, while the study included learners and instructors, their perceptions were analysed together without making any empirical comparison. Besides, other stakeholder voices such as administrators and accreditation committee members were not represented in the present research. Future research can address these limitations by exploring metaphorical conceptualizations across multiple institutions and accreditation frameworks, employing mixed-method designs that combine metaphor elicitation with in-depth interviews, and expanding participant groups to include diverse stakeholders and comparing the metaphor data obtained.

Ethical Statements

This study was reviewed and approved by the Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional ethics committee and with the principles of research and publication ethics in the social and human sciences. The authors of the current article declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Bu çalışma, yükseköğretim kurumlarında giderek daha fazla önem kazanan kalite güvence mekanizmaları ve akreditasyon süreçlerini, yabancı dil öğretimi özelinde ele almakta ve bu süreçlerin paydaşlar tarafından nasıl algılandığını incelemektedir. Küreselleşme, teknolojik ilerlemeler ve değişen iş gücü dinamikleri, üniversitelerin eğitim politikalarını yeniden gözden geçirmelerini zorunlu kılmaktadır (Yin, 2024). Bu bağlamda, özellikle yükseköğretim düzeyindeki yabancı dil öğretim programlarının nicelik ve nitelik açısından artış göstermesi, kalite güvence ve akreditasyon süreçlerinin önemini artırmıştır (Martin & Parikh, 2017; Nguyen vd., 2021). Akreditasyon, kurumların eğitim kalitesini belirli standartlara göre dış denetime açarak, öğrencilere, işverenlere ve topluma güvence sağlayan bir mekanizma olarak öne çıkmaktadır (Martin & Parikh, 2017). Ancak literatürde, akreditasyonun eğitim kalitesini geliştirmedeki etkisinin tartışmalı olduğu da vurgulanmaktadır (Engebretsen et al., 2012; Harvey, 2002).

Araştırmanın kuramsal arka planı, kalite güvencesinin sistematik inceleme süreçleri aracılığıyla eğitim programlarının niteliğini korumak ve geliştirmek üzere tasarlandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle Avrupa Komisyonu (2018)'nun tanımıyla, kalite güvencesi eğitim süreçlerinin sürekli iyileştirilmesini amaçlayan bir mekanizma olarak değerlendirilmektedir. Bu noktada akreditasyonun en yaygın kullanılan yöntemlerden biri olduğu görülmektedir. EFL (İngilizcenin yabancı dil olarak öğretimi) programlarında, uluslararası düzeyde CEA, EAQUALS ve Pearson Assured gibi akreditasyon kuruluşlarının yanı sıra Türkiye'de Yükseköğretim Kurulu tarafından tanınan DEDAK'ın rolü ön plana çıkmaktadır. Bu kurumlar, hem yerel hem de uluslararası düzeyde programların görünürlüğünü artırmakta hem de mezunların kariyer fırsatlarını güçlendirmektedir.

Çalışmanın çıkış noktası, kalite güvencesi ve akreditasyon süreçlerinin yalnızca kurum ve dış paydaşlar açısından değil, doğrudan sürece dâhil olan öğrenciler ve öğretim elemanları açısından da nasıl algılandığını anlamaktır. Zira kalite güvencesinin etkinliği, çok paydaşlı bir süreç olmasına bağlıdır ve öğrencilerle öğretim elemanlarının deneyimleri, sürecin başarısı için belirleyici unsurlardır. Bu doğrultuda araştırmada, Türk yükseköğretiminde akreditasyon süreci tamamlanmış bir devlet üniversitesinin Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu'nda, öğrencilerin ve öğretim elemanlarının akreditasyonu nasıl kavramsallaştırdıkları metaforlar aracılığıyla incelenmiştir.

Çalışmaya 12 öğretim elemanı ve 58 öğrenci olmak üzere toplam 70 katılımcı dâhil edilmiştir. Katılımcılar, çevrim içi bir anket aracılığıyla "Akreditasyon … gibidir, çünkü …" ifadesini tamamlamışlardır. Veriler hem Türkçe hem de İngilizce toplanabilmiştir. Bu yöntem, katılımcıların akreditasyona ilişkin algılarını metaforlar üzerinden serbestçe ifade etmelerine olanak tanımıştır. Verilerin analizi sonucunda katılımcıların akreditasyona dair çok katmanlı ve kimi zaman çelişkili algılara sahip oldukları ortaya çıkmıştır.

Bulgular beş ana tema altında toplanmıştır: kalite güvencesi, yol gösterme, gelişim, stres/zorluk ve eleştiri/sınırlılıklar. Katılımcıların yaklaşık dörtte biri akreditasyonu kalite güvencesiyle ilişkilendirmiştir. "Garanti belgesi", "onay mührü" ya da "söz" gibi metaforlar, akreditasyonun güvenilirlik ve standart sağlama işlevine vurgu yapmaktadır. Diğer yandan, "sözlük" veya "CEFR rozeti" gibi metaforlar, standartlaştırma boyutunu öne çıkarmıştır. İkinci en yaygın tema olan yol gösterme ise, akreditasyonun yön belirleyici rolüne dikkat çekmektedir. "Pusula", "GPS", "deniz feneri" gibi metaforlar, akreditasyonun programların doğru hedeflere ulaşmasını sağlayan bir rehber olarak algılandığını göstermektedir. Ayrıca, "gözlük temizleme" ya da "altyazı" gibi metaforlar, sürecin şeffaflık ve netlik sağlayan bir işlev üstlendiğine işaret etmektedir.

Gelişim teması altında yer alan metaforlar, akreditasyonun dönüşüm ve iyileştirme potansiyeline vurgu yapmaktadır. "Spor salonu", "fitness antrenörü" gibi metaforlar, sürekli gelişimi simgelerken; "ayna" ve "terapist" metaforları sürecin kurumsal eksiklikleri görünür kılan yansıtıcı bir işlev üstlendiğini göstermektedir. Bu bulgu, kalite güvencesi mekanizmalarının sadece denetim değil, aynı zamanda öz değerlendirme ve iyileştirme aracı olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Buna karşılık, stres ve zorluk teması sürecin paydaşlarda yarattığı kaygı ve yükleri öne çıkarmaktadır. Katılımcılar akreditasyonu "final sınavına çalışmaya", "doktor randevusuna" ya da "ilk buluşmaya" benzetmişlerdir. Bu metaforlar, sürecin kimi zaman özünden çok biçimsel hazırlıklarla ilişkilendirildiğini göstermektedir. Performans kaygısı ve denetim baskısı, paydaşların sürece yönelik olumsuz duygular geliştirmelerine yol açabilmektedir. Son olarak eleştiri ve sınırlılıklar teması, akreditasyonun yüzeysel ya da kısıtlayıcı yönlerine işaret etmektedir. "Sosyal medya filtresi" veya "okul üniforması" metaforları, akreditasyonun derinlemesine kaliteyi geliştirmekten çok görünüşe odaklandığı algısını yansıtmaktadır. Bu bulgular, literatürdeki eleştirilerle (örn. Harvey, 2002; Osobajo & Oke, 2022) paraleldir; zira bazı araştırmalar kurumların asıl amacın kaliteyi artırmak yerine yalnızca akreditasyon belgesini edinmeye odaklanabildiklerini vurgulamaktadır.

Tartışma bölümünde elde edilen bulgular, akreditasyonun çok boyutlu bir şekilde algılandığını göstermektedir. Katılımcılar, akreditasyonu hem güven ve gelişim sağlayıcı bir mekanizma hem de stres, yüzeysellik ve aşırı standartlaşmaya yol açabilen bir süreç olarak değerlendirmişlerdir. Bu durum, kalite güvencesi mekanizmalarının insan deneyimlerini göz ardı etmeden daha esnek, katılımcı ve sürekli iyileştirmeye odaklanan bir yapıya kavuşturulması gerektiğine işaret etmektedir.

Çalışmanın kuramsal boyutta katkısı, Lakoff ve Johnson (1980)'un kavramsal metafor kuramını yabancı dil öğretimi bağlamında akreditasyon olgusuna uyarlamasıdır. Çalışmada metaforların paydaşların zihinsel temsillerini ve deneyimlerini açığa çıkarma gücü sayesinde, karmaşık bir olgunun daha anlaşılır hale geldiği görülmektedir. Pratik anlamdaki katkı ise, akreditasyon süreçlerinin yalnızca kurumların dış denetime uyum sağlamasıyla değil, öğrencilerin ve öğretim elemanlarının algıları ve deneyimleriyle de şekillendiğini ortaya koymasıdır.

Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma Türkiye'deki yükseköğretim kurumlarında yabancı dil öğretimi bağlamında akreditasyonun paydaşlarca nasıl algılandığını, metaforik kavramsallaştırmalar aracılığıyla ortaya koymuştur. Bulgular, akreditasyonun güven ve gelişim açısından değerli görüldüğünü, ancak aynı zamanda kaygı, yüzeysellik ve kısıtlayıcılık gibi olumsuzluklar da barındırdığını göstermektedir. Gelecekte yapılacak araştırmaların, farklı kültürel ve kurumsal bağlamlarda paydaş metaforlarını karşılaştırarak daha kapsayıcı bir anlayış geliştirmesi faydalı olacaktır. Böylece, kalite güvence mekanizmaları ve akreditasyon süreçleri daha etkili, esnek ve paydaş odaklı bir yapıya kavuşabilir.