Metaphors Used by Malaysian Teachers-in-Training: Implications for Language Teacher Education

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Over the past 20 years, there has been increasing interest in exploring what language teachers believe (Borg, 2006). Often these beliefs are expressed in terms of metaphors (Richards, 1998; Woodward, 1991), but there has been little recent research connecting the two strands. The present study is based on the personal reflections of a group of 72 trainee teachers in a Malaysian University after a three-month practicum in local high schools. In these reflections, as well as currently fashionable constructs such as facilitator and motivator, these students often described their perceptions of the role of the language teacher using various metaphors. The wide range of metaphors volunteered by these trainee teachers were coded into various categories, such as terms relating to facilitating, mentorship, entertaining and kinship. This presentation will discuss a number of these, and also quote some of the trainees’ comments in support of their chosen metaphor, which thereby reveals their underlying beliefs about teaching and learning. Relating their professional activity to other roles illuminates not only what teachers themselves believe, but also reinvigorates notions of (language) teaching itself. One of the implications of this study is that teacher educators, both in the specific setting and in relatable contexts elsewhere, can incorporate such metaphors into their programmes and in this way reimagine, refine and redefine the role of the language teacher for the benefit of their students, and themselves.

Keywords: Teachers; Language; Education; Roles; Beliefs

Introduction

What one does usually emanates from what one believes. Beliefs often exist in theory or in the mind. Nevertheless, if activated they can provide motivation to achieve what one aspires to do. The beliefs that individuals create and develop form the basis of their actions. In most cases, teachers apply what they believe about teaching in their classroom practices. Yoshihara (2012) claims that “teachers’ teaching beliefs play a critical role in their teaching practices” (p. 41). Studies (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Nishino, 2009; Woods, 1996; Yoshihara, 2012) have shown that teachers applied their beliefs about teaching to their classroom practices. These are often expressed by using metaphors (Elbaz, 1983; Handal & Lauvas, 1987; Thornbury, 1991; Michael & Katerina, 2009). Metaphors expressed by teachers provide a means for understanding their thinking (Munby, 1986) about the teaching process (Earle, 1995) and they can play an important role as vehicles for reflection (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Chen, 2003). Metaphors can be used to represent beliefs regarding the various teacher roles. According to Wright, Sundberg, Yarbrough and Wilson (2013: p. 7), “The use of teaching metaphors along with a reflective process can help in-service and pre-service teachers identify conflicts between their beliefs and their roles as teachers”. In the light of the above, it was felt to be of great interest to examine the metaphors used by potential teachers in order to understand their attitudes and approaches towards professionalism.

Aims

The main aim of this research was to identify the use of metaphors among the trainee teachers to reflect their roles as beginning ESL teachers based on their personal teaching experience gained through a 3-month teaching practicum. Hence, this paper tries to answer the following research questions:

1) What are the metaphors used by the trainee teachers to reflect their roles in ESL classrooms?
2) To what extent do these metaphors align with conventional conceptions of learning?

Methodology

A case study method (Duff, 2010) was adopted to investigate the pre-service teachers’ perceptions of their roles as language teachers. Data were collected through reflective journal writing (Nayan, 2003; Richards & Ho, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). The qualitative data were subjected to a process of thematic and content analysis (Burns, 1999; Charmaz, 2006; Ryan & Russell Bernard).

Participants

Participants of this study were 72 trainee teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) who completed their practicum at local Malaysian government schools in the district of Selangor. These trainee teachers received their teacher training at a se-
lected higher learning institution in Selangor, Malaysia, major-
ing in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL).

Research Procedure

For the purpose of this study, the trainee teachers were ga-
thered in a classroom and asked to write an essay of between
500 to 1000 words to reflect on their role(s) as ESL language
teachers during their teaching practicum.

Findings

The findings of the study revealed four main metaphors re-
presented many of the participants’ conceptions of teaching and
learning: facilitators, motivators, and edutainers and family mem-
bers. These categories are described further in the following
sub-sections.

Teachers as Facilitators

26 participants adopted “facilitator” as depicting their teach-
ing roles. They realized the role of facilitator by implementing
several teaching and learning conceptions that they believed to
represent their chosen metaphor. In this case, the trainee teach-
ers conceptualized that teaching and learning in an ESL class-
room are collaborative and student-centred in nature, where tea-
cher provides guidance and feedback to let the students be ac-
tive participants throughout the learning process. The following
are some of the excerpts taken from their reflective journals:

During that stage, I always went from one group to another
group and saw their progress while they doing their works.
Then, if they found difficulties in completing the activity, I
would give them some clues and absolutely, not the answer.
Then, based on the clues given, they could generate their own
ideas. (Teacher trainee # 1)

In terms of teaching and learning, a teacher who facilitates
his or her students’ learning will guide his or her students to
construct their understanding of the lesson. As for me, during
my practicum session, I use more group works during my les-
on. My role then is to observe and give guidance for them to
complete the tasks given. I had implemented more student-
centered teaching approach, I want my students to play active
role in my lesson. (Teacher trainee # 21)

I realized that teaching alone was not enough. My students
need to be guided along each lesson was carried out... I would
ask a few questions in order to test their understanding. The
next step would be providing them with appropriate practice on
what they had learned. For example, I would give them task
sheets to be completed and normally, I would facilitate and
guide my students so that they are on the right track and no one
is left out. (Teacher trainee # 51)

Teachers as Motivators

“Motivator” was another metaphor used by 18 of the trainee
teachers to display their conceptions of teaching and learning.
Below are some of the excerpts taken from their reflective
journal writing:

I adopted the student-centred learning approach in my
classroom and I encouraged more student participation in the
classroom. My role during the teaching and learning session is
as a motivator. (Teacher trainee #2)

The word that best describe my role as teacher when I was at
school is motivator. In order to help them to boost their motiva-
tion, I had varying the activities, tasks and materials. This is
because same routines, patterns and format will increase the
students’ boredom. Varying the activities, tasks and materials
can help increase students’ interest level. I also use cooperative
learning activities. I found that this technique help to increase
the self-confidence of the students, including the weaker ones.
(Teacher trainee # 16)

For me, the best word to describe teacher role is “motivator”.
Teachers give motivation and spirit to their students that can
build the confidence from the students. A teacher as did not
give a punishment if their student made a mistake in answering
or doing exercise. But the teacher will continue to support and
motivate students to repair the mistake. Teachers must be able
to build the character their students through a variety of activi-
ties that can enhance student creativity in building self-motiva-
tion in students. (Teacher trainee # 18)

Teachers as Entertainers

Below are some of the excerpts that described the teachers’
conceptions.

My role as a teacher is best described with the noun “edu-
tainer”… My role was to teach in a fun and creative way. One
of the ways was to use action songs in my teaching. I used
songs mostly as set induction to capture student’s attention and
set their focus on the topic of the day. (Teacher trainee # 72)

... as a teacher, we need to be good in making “tricks”. In
other words, we need to be very flexible and creative in our
teaching style and should make the classroom “alive”. In my
opinion, the best way to make students to fall in love with Eng-
lish language is by using stories such as fairytales and fables.
(Teacher trainee # 49)

I could entertain my students with a lot of interesting activi-
ties, jokes and games as planned in my lesson plans. ... you
must be natural and confident. I could act as a doctor to treat a
patient (Occupation), I could wear a Cheongsam to introduce
Chinese New Year (Beautiful Malaysia) and I could dress up
like a bee and show them what a bee does (Plants and Insects).
(Teacher trainee # 35)

Teachers as Family Members

A number of the participants used ‘occupational’ metaphors,
such as captain, manager scientist and planner, but many others
used family metaphors. For example:

I would regard my role as a big sister rather than a teacher
when I had my teaching practicum as I was teaching in a girls’
school. The reason why I said so was because a sister is the
best friend a girl can have. (Teacher trainee # 4)

I view myself as a brother. A brother who is always there to
help, to assist, to facilitate and to guide the young ones within
his reach. Let the students embrace the language by feeling the
comfort of home-like learning as family. Both parties benefit
the most out of this brother-like relationship. Students will not
be afraid to approach the teacher and the teacher will find it
easier to communicate with them. (Teacher trainee # 60)

We know that mothers always look for the best for their
children. This situation is also applied to teacher. (Teacher
trainee # 70)

As for me, the best role that can refer to a teacher in school
is parent. Why? It is because a teacher can do everything like a

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parent does to their children. A parent is a motivator who always motivates their children, a doctor who treats the children well when they are sick, a facilitator who always facilitates their children and many more. (Teacher trainee # 37)

**Discussion**

The metaphors used by teachers can be incorporated into the design of professional development programs because, as it is shown in Table 1, metaphors can be connected to conventional theories of teaching and learning. In the first place, such metaphors provide insights to teacher developers as to how teachers, whether novices or more experienced professionals, perceive their roles as teachers in terms of other relatable roles. Secondly, these metaphors can be shared and discussed by teachers to further develop their own theories and insights; this may be particularly interesting when unusual metaphors (for example, “edutainer”) are used. Thirdly, teachers can be encouraged to think of metaphors for other aspects of teaching: for example, students (adventurers?), learning (a difficult journey?), and the classroom (a prison?)—And thus extend the range of possible ways of freshly conceiving and theorising the profession. It could be useful to compare the metaphors used by Malaysian language teachers with those of teachers of other subjects, or in other countries, to see the extent to which they converge or diverge. Finally, teachers might discuss the extent to which they can encourage their students to use metaphors as a way of expressing their perspectives on language learning; if they were to do this, it would be enlightening to compare the learners’ metaphors (for the teacher, for example) with their own.

**Conclusion**

The results of the study indicated the changing trends of the teachers’ conceptions of teaching and learning. A steady shift from teacher-centred classrooms to student-centred learning was revealed. The elements of collaborative, participatory, and co-operative learning are the key principles toward successful teaching and learning. In addition, the freshness and flexibility indicated in the metaphors they used to illustrate teaching and learning are highly conducive to motivating students.

Table 1. Summary of metaphors and teaching & learning conceptions.

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<tr>
<th>Metaphors</th>
<th>Teacher Conceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Conceptions of teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facilitators</td>
<td>● Facilitate and guide learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Flexible</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Cooperative learning</td>
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<td>Motivators</td>
<td>● Motivating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Variety of tasks</td>
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<td>● Innovative</td>
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<td>Entertainers</td>
<td>● Creative</td>
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<td>● Flexible</td>
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<td>● Communicative</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>● Facilitate and guide learning</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Communicative</td>
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<td></td>
<td>● Informative</td>
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**REFERENCES**


