'The Teacher Is an Octopus':

Uncovering Preservice English Language Teachers' Prior Beliefs through Metaphor Analysis

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Abstract ■ Preservice teachers come to any teacher education course with prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs about learning and teaching. Additionally, the belief systems of preservice teachers often serve as a lens through which they view the content of the teacher education program. Consequently, it is essential that teacher educators take these prior beliefs into account because any new material taught will have to compete with these existing beliefs and theories. However, these beliefs are usually held tacitly. One method of making this prior knowledge explicit is to examine the metaphors preservice teachers use during their practice teaching. This paper outlines a case study of the metaphors three preservice English teachers used before, during and after a six-week practice teaching experience in Singapore. Results showed that metaphors used can be classified within the following three-part typology: social order, cultural transmission and learner-centered growth.

Keywords ■ belief systems, learner-centered growth, metaphors cultural transmission, preservice teacher education.

Introduction

It now accepted in general education that students come to any teacher education course with prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs about learning and teaching (Lortie 1975). Lortie (1975) has maintained that these prior beliefs can have more influence on preservice teachers' future teaching methods than any information they have received from the various courses they take during the teacher education program. In fact, Richards (1998: 71), has suggested that the influence of these prior beliefs, which are usually held tacitly, can be so strong that they 'often serve as a

lens through which they view both the content of the teacher development program and their language teacher experiences'. This is problematic for language teacher educators because any new information taught in these courses 'will have to compete with, replace or otherwise modify the folk theories that already guide both teachers and pupils' (Joram and Gabriele 1998: 176). Roberts (1998: 67) suggests that the main problem is not that preservice teachers' prior beliefs are 'inherently wrong but because they are tacit' and that 'working from tacit images imprisons the teacher in a single frame of reference, which may be inappropriate' to their future teaching contexts. Thus, and as Roberts (1998: 70) suggests, language teacher education programs should provide interventions 'to free [teachers] from tacit images of teaching'. One method of making preservice teachers more aware their prior beliefs is to encourage them to examine the metaphors they use to describe teaching and learning (Bullough 1990). For preservice language teachers the identification and analysis of metaphors they use can be a basis of achieving coherence of thought and action in a teaching practicum (Bullough 1990). Furthermore, a close examination of these metaphors may not only provide them with some insight into their prior beliefs, but also provide language teacher educators with the same awareness which in turn can be an important starting point to initiate change in such metaphors if they conflict with material they are presented in their teacher education courses. This paper outlines a case study of how preservice English language teachers were encouraged to examine their prior beliefs and practices by reflecting on the various metaphors they used during a six-week practice teaching experience in Singapore. The purpose of this exploratory study is to not only attempt to understand the nature of the metaphors used by the preservice teachers, but also to ascertain to what extent these metaphors were maintained or changed as a result of this process of reflection and discussion with the language teacher educator. The paper starts with a discussion of metaphors. Next, an outline of the study is presented and followed by a presentation and discussion of the results.

Metaphors and Language Teaching
A metaphor can be defined as Dickmeyer (1989: 151) suggests, 'the characterisation of a phenomenon in familiar terms'. In other words, people use metaphors to simplify their experiences. According to Senge (1990: 175) metaphors, or mental models, are what humans carry in their heads

'in the form of images, assumptions and stories…and not only determine how we make sense of the world, but how we take action'. The essence of metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 5), 'is the understanding and experiencing of one kind of thing in terms of another'. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 232-33), further suggest that a large part of self-understanding is the 'search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives… The process of self-understanding is the continual development of new life stories for yourself.'

Metaphors are also an important part of teachers' personal practical knowledge that shapes their understanding of their role as teachers (Pajak 1986; Clandinin 1986). Pajak (1986: 123), for example, maintains that metaphors can be a means for teachers to verbalize their 'professional identity'. While Clandinin (1986) suggests that metaphors are indications of the way teachers think about teaching and also guide the way they act in the classroom. In English language teaching different representations of metaphors have been suggested (e.g., Block 1992; Oxford *et al.* 1998). Block (1992: 44), for example, uses the term 'macro-metaphors' that cover general representations of the role of the teacher. He says two most common of these macro-metaphors used are the *teacher as contracted professional* and *teacher as a providing parent*. By far the most comprehensive approach to the study of metaphor in second language teaching is by Oxford *et al.* (1998). Oxford *et al.*'s (1998) results (in the form of a typology of metaphor usage) and analysis of metaphor usage was generated from narrative case studies from various literature reviews on language learning experiences. Oxford *et al.*'s (1998) typology covers four perspectives of teaching: (1) Social Order: for example, teacher as manufacturer, teacher as competitor; (2) Cultural Transmission: for example, teacher as conduit, teacher as repeater; (3) Learner-Centred Growth: for example, teacher as nurturer, teacher as lover, teacher as scaffolder, teacher as entertainer; and (4) Social Reform: for example, teacher as acceptor, teacher as learning partner.

Case Study

Context and Participants
The study took place at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. The three preservice teachers that the case study focuses on were taking a course in English Education as part of their postgraduate diploma in Education (PGDE) course. In this course, preservice teachers have to take

theory classes and experience teaching practice. For the teaching practice experience, called Pupil Experience (Skuja 1990), groups of three preservice teachers teach remedial-type learners in the secondary schools in Singapore each Saturday morning for six classes. These classes are usually two hours long, and the participants use a package containing a unit plan and prototype lesson plans. They also have to write weekly (six) journals. In these journals the preservice teachers explore teaching and learning process from each class they are involved with in the secondary school. These three preservice teachers simultaneously attended lectures and classes in 12-hour modules in each of the following areas: speaking/listening, reading, writing and grammar.

Method

The three preservice teachers were first asked to write one 'journal' before they went on teaching practice in which they were asked to answer the following questions: 'What is the teacher's role in the classroom? How should learning take place?' Additionally, they were asked to complete the statement: 'A teacher is_____'. The reason for this 'journal' was to ascertain if in fact they used metaphors to make sense of their prior experiences and beliefs about teaching and learning English. These journal entries did produce a rich usage of metaphors to describe their beliefs, experiences and conceptions of practice. Following this journal entry, each teacher's journal (six journal entries during their teaching practice) was also examined for use of metaphors which were later categorized according to Oxford *et al.*'s (1998) typology. In order to 'make sense of the comments made by an individual' (Cameron and Low 1999: 89) and account for the necessity of multiple sources of evidence, the three preservice teachers were also asked to participate in a focus group interview (Wilson 1997) at the end of teaching practice in order to discuss the metaphors they had used in their journals. During this interview they were asked to reflect on, and make interpretations of the meaning of the metaphors they used in their first journal entry before they went on teaching practice, and also to reflect on their later journal entries written during and after their teaching practice.

Results

Table 1 provides a summary of the most frequently used metaphors used by the three preservice teachers, Angie, Eddie, and Flow (all pseudonyms).

These metaphors were obtained from the journals, the post-teaching practice interviews.

Table 1. *Preservice Teachers' Metaphors*

Aspect	*Social Order*	*Cultural Transmission*	*Learner-centered Growth*
Angie	Classroom as battleground/ teacher as General		Teacher as mother, facilitator, motivator
Eddie	Classroom as battleground		Teacher as mentor
Flow	Teacher as missionary/ special calling	Teacher as culture broker	Teacher as mother

Results show that the three preservice teachers used metaphors to explain their perspectives of teaching and learning that were encompassed within the following three-part typology: *social order*, *cultural transmission* and *learner-centered growth*. I now outline details of each preservice teacher's metaphor usage.

Angie

Angie's initial perceptions of teaching (as outlined in her first journal entry) were shaped by the following metaphor she used: *A classroom is a battleground.* She also expressed the following metaphors in her later journals: *teacher as a motivator*, *teacher as a facilitator* and *teacher as mother.* She classified students as: *planners* and *plungers*. In the focus group interview, Angie explained the metaphor *classroom as battlefield* as follows: She said that the classroom was 'a place of tension' between the teacher and the student 'with both waiting to do battle'. Angie continued: 'It is a battle between the students and the teacher. In the beginning, both parties do not know a lot about each other. The teacher has to fight to make the students receptive towards him/her.' For Angie the meaning of the word battle included an 'internal struggle for both teachers and students' to use appropriate strategies within the classroom. Angie remarked:

> There is a constant battle of making the right choices. The teacher has to decide what materials are suitable for the students. The students, on the other hand, have to choose among the choices and come up with a correct answer. In a battlefield the General has to decide what strategies to use to defeat the enemies. Similarly, the teacher has to think of ways to finish the syllabus in time and also to make it interesting and captivating (Focus-group interview).

When asked to explain her later journal entries that had the somewhat milder metaphors of the *teacher as mother*, *teacher as motivator*, and *teacher as facilitator*, Angie maintained that in order to motivate the students to learn English, the teacher has to facilitate the process by being a 'mother type' to the students. Indicating that this was in fact her prior belief about the role of teachers, she linked her use of *teacher as motivator* to her time as a student in the school system in Singapore when she noticed these qualities in her English language teacher. Angie continued:

> As a motivator, I want to interest my students about the wonders of English language. I want them to enjoy English lessons (like I did) and not hate them. My English teachers have made my lessons interesting by teaching them with such zest. I will strive to be like them. When the students are motivated and interested, they would want to learn more about English. This will help them master the language even faster (Focus-group interview).

Regarding the connection of *teacher as motivator* to *teacher as facilitator*, she explained:

> While I strive to motivate the students, I want to play the role as a facilitator. I will teach the students necessary skill and knowledge. As the saying goes, 'teach a man to fish and he will be able to feed himself'. I want my students to be able to express themselves better both in writing and speaking. English is a so important that one cannot do without it (Focus-group interview).

Angie clarified the *teacher as a mother* metaphor as the umbrella metaphor for her as a teacher. She says:

> I see myself as a mother to all my students. I do not want to be just their English teacher. I want to be a listening ear, a friend and someone they can turn to when they are in trouble. I will be shaping the minds of these 'budding' adults. I am not only responsible for their intellectual development. I feel I am also responsible for their emotional development. Teenagers are the most susceptible to influences. I want to be the one to block out the bad influences. I know that this will be an extremely difficult task but I really hope I succeed (Focus-group interview).

She also explained that the metaphors she used for describing the students, the *planner* and the *plunger*, as follows: 'The planner takes about five to eight minutes thinking about an assignment. The students in this group were quite in the beginning. They were thinking hard in the begin-

ning. In contrast, the plunger goes straight into the task when they were told they could do that.' It is interesting to note that when asked if she saw an conflict now between her metaphors *teacher as General* that she used in her first journal entry, and *teacher as mother* that she wrote in her later journal entries, she replied that she saw no conflict in these; rather, she maintains that sometimes the teacher has to be 'firm like a General to enforce certain strategies in the classroom while at the same time remain as a mother'.

Eddie

Eddie wrote in his first journal that his perceptions of teaching were shaped by the following metaphors: *The classroom is a battleground*, *the classroom is a playground* and *the classroom is a haven*. He also coined 'negatively' phrased metaphors which begin with *teacher not as*…such as: *teacher not as…teacher not as a mouthpiece, teacher not as transmitter of information*, teacher *not as facilitator*. He also came up with the following metaphors for the teacher's role: *teacher as a mentor to inspire, teacher as a guide, teacher to stimulate* and *teacher as a culture broker*.

Eddie used the metaphor *classroom as playground* in his first three journals to describe his ideal learning environment. Eddie remarked:

> The classroom is a playground in that it is a place in which the students will be encouraged to be creative. Pre-school kids are found to learn best when they are at play. So I feel it is very important for the classroom to provide this function of play as a means to stimulate creative and independent thinking (Focus-group interview).

Even though he sees the classroom as a playground, Eddie also simultaneously used the seemingly conflicting metaphor, *classroom is a battleground*. In fact, he used this metaphor in five of his journal entries. Eddie clarified this seeming contradiction in the focus-group interview as follows: 'It [the classroom] is a place to fight laziness and apathy that slows the learning process, and low self-esteem and insecurity that prevents it'. Eddie said that this image of the classroom was formed as a result of his past experience as an 'untrained part-time teacher' for one semester in a secondary school, an experience that he said had left a strong impression. Eddie continued: 'I had three classes of difficult to control students and I saw myself going into the classroom to 'fight it out' to get them to listen to me or at least to stop the rowdy ones from being disruptive' (Focus-group interview). Now, however, at the end of six-weeks of practice

teaching he said that he had further refined this metaphor to include a battle waged by both the teacher and the students 'together to fight for learning'. On reflection, he said he realized that his strong Christian beliefs may have influenced his usage of metaphors:

> Now I see the classroom as a battleground, whereby it is not me versus the students, such as hate the sinner, or me versus their weaknesses, such as hate the sin, but me and the students versus their weaknesses, such as hate the sin, love the sinner, and teach the sinner to love himself and hate his own sin (Focus-group interview).

Eddie further critically reflected on his usage of metaphors which resulted in new interpretations of the *classroom as playground* metaphor and what it now means for his teaching. He remarked:

> In my early vision of the classroom at the beginning of practice teaching, I had said that I saw the classroom as a playground where I can encourage the pupils to be creative and have fun, and as a battleground to fight apathy and disruption. What I was not certain then, however, was how to go about doing so. I am now more aware.

After the six-week teaching experience he remarked that he had acquired techniques that he could use to make the students become more involved in the English lessons which include 'role-play, games, peer-conferencing, and predicting exercises'. In the focus-group interview he also came up with a new metaphor for the role of a teacher: *teacher as a cultural broker*; however, he explained this metaphor in terms of what a teacher should not do. He also remarked that he did not agree with the *teacher as facilitator* metaphor explained this as follows:

> I see myself not as a mouthpiece or transmitter of information that was traditionally the primary function of many teachers, nor as facilitator either. I see myself as a teacher, a mentor to inspire, guide and stimulate the students to learning, giving them a measure of autonomy over the learning process but yet at the same time being a cultural *broker in determining what and how they learn.*

Flow

In her first journal entry, Flow noted that for her teaching is more than just a job; it is a mission. She wrote: 'I, as a teacher, must touch lives. Teaching is a calling, a special vocation'. Additionally, Flow wrote that she hoped not just to impart knowledge, 'but to go beyond that, to enkindle in my students a passion for learning. I must touch lives to show them

that I am listening and that I want to help them develop their full potential.' Flow's image of teaching did not change after six-weeks of practice teaching. However, she also articulated a physical metaphor to explain her actual teaching during practice teaching. At the focus-group interview she talked about how a teacher 'carries herself' in class is the way in which she presents her whole attitude and demeanour; she continued: 'I think that the students are affected positively or negatively from the way the lesson is conducted by the teacher'. Additionally, she added the metaphor of *teacher as mother* as a result of her practice teaching. She added this metaphor to her idea that teachers have to 'touch the lives of their pupils' and that this can be done in a motherly way.

Discussion

Language teacher educators have recognized that preservice teachers come to their programs with prior experience and beliefs about learning and teaching (e.g. Almarza 1996; Richards 1998; Thornbury 1996). Also there has been a general acceptance in many programs that these prior beliefs have a major influence in the development of these preservice language teachers (Almarza 1996). Indeed, Almaraza (1996: 73-74) has even recommended that English teacher education courses formally focus on the prior beliefs of preservice teachers and 'should aim to provide space and means by which student teachers can bring up and examine their pre-training knowledge in order to see how it relates to teacher education knowledge, so that learning is more meaningful'. However, as Johnston (1992: 125) has indicated, these prior beliefs 'are not usually consciously articulated without some assistance'. So these prior beliefs need to be made explicit, and identifying, analysing, and critically reflecting on metaphors helps this process of making them explicit. As Berliner (1990: 86) has noted, for teachers, 'Metaphors are powerful forces, conditioning the way we come to think about ourselves and others'. When preservice language teachers reveal the metaphors they use, they can then be challenged as to their relevance given the material they have been presented with in the language teacher education program. Thus, this is really a two-step process of achieving awareness conceptions of teaching before any change can be considered. As Thornbury (1996: 284) has noted, without adjustments at the level of awareness of prior beliefs, 'the effects of training may only be superficial'.

Results from the case study presented in this paper have indicated that although Angie and Flow, after six weeks of teaching practice, held onto the initial metaphors they described for teaching and learning, Eddie found that his actual experiences on teaching practice were different than his initial use and interpretation for the metaphor *the classroom as battlefield*. He said that he realized during practice teaching that his *battlefield* metaphor was not a fact he observed in the real classroom. Although the formulation of this metaphor was originally based on Eddie's prior experiences as a student and as a part-time teacher, he said that he now realized that this was no longer the case. Thus, by a process of first encouraging him to articulate the metaphors he held before, during and after practice teaching and to reflect on their meaning, Eddie became more aware of the influence of his prior experiences and beliefs (no longer tacit) about teaching and learning. Additionally, when challenged about the reality of his present teaching experiences, Eddie acknowledged that some of his previously stated metaphors were no longer appropriate. This important realization resulted in Eddie creating a new reality of teaching.

Thus, it is only by a process of critical reflection on metaphors (old and new), can language teachers understand and combine the unknown into what they already know (Provenzo *et al.* 1989). Language teachers may now be able to restructure previously entrenched beliefs by becoming more aware of the metaphors they use and it may also be possible to trigger a repackaging of old beliefs according to new structures via the consideration of a different metaphor. Changes in metaphors may signal changes in conceptions of teaching, so it is imperative that language teacher educators not only have student teachers reveal and analyse the metaphors they normally use, the beliefs they use to make sense of their experiences when they enter the language teacher education program, but also to critically reflect on their origins and if they are still relevant given the curriculum they have been presented in the teacher education program.

Language teacher education programs should therefore provide activities for preservice teachers that can enable them to articulate their prior beliefs about teaching and learning. One such activity is to solicit journal entries that require them to use metaphors to represent these prior beliefs and experiences. I recommend that this be accomplished in two stages: the first stage, for example at the beginning of teaching practice, requires preservice teachers to answer questions that encourage metaphor use such as:

- A teacher is_____?
- A classroom is a place where_____?
- Language learning means_____?

At this stage of the reflection process, and as Roberts (1998: 67) suggests, the test of the teachers' metaphors is not whether they are 'right or wrong' according to an outsider's perceptions, but 'the extent to which they are useful for the teacher'. The second stage can take place after teaching practice (as outlined in the case study presented in this paper) in which the same participants are required to answer the same questions as above, and following this, they are presented with their original journal entries for comparison purposes. In addition, in order to stimulate critical reflection they should attempt to answer the following questions:

- Has your use of metaphors changed between your first journal entries and your later journal entries?
- If yes, what differences have you noticed?
- What experiences have led to the change you noticed?
- If no changes have occurred in your metaphor usage, what experiences have resulted in this confirmation of your original metaphor usage?

Although the case study outlined in this paper focused on metaphor use as an indication of preservice English language teachers' prior beliefs about teaching practice, it should be possible to encourage preservice teachers to reveal the metaphors they use when taking any course in their language teacher education program in order to gauge the impact of these courses on their prior beliefs. I must caution, however, that it is quite possible that the identification and analysis of metaphors may not result in change in preservice language teachers' conceptions of teaching; however, I strongly suggest that the very act of having to revel these metaphors may help these student teachers become more critically reflective teachers. In addition, the metaphors that preservice teachers reveal can also provide teacher educators, as Calderhead and Robson (1991: 3) suggest, with an indicator of their 'knowledge and enable us to examine the knowledge growth attributable to different training experiences and the relationship between knowledge and observed practice'.

Conclusion

The metaphors revealed and later analysed by the preservice English language teachers in the study outlined in this paper suggest that they aided them to achieve some coherence of thought when they were attempting to reflect on their conceptions of practice. These metaphors were organized around three perspectives of teaching and learning of English language in Singapore: *Social Order*, *Cultural Transmission* and *Learner-Centered Growth*. These metaphors provide some insight into the images that a select group of preservice English language teachers hold about teaching and learning English language in Singapore, and as such may not provide the basis for prescription for all language teacher education programs. What we may conclude, however, is that when language teachers are encouraged to articulate their beliefs about teaching and learning by the use of metaphor, they can become more aware of the origin of these beliefs and can then decide whether these metaphors remain valid and useful for their particular context.

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