

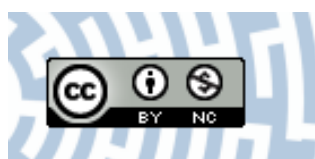


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## Teaching ≠ Learning? A longitudinal Study into the Efl Teacher Trainees' Cognitions

Constructivist view of teacher education implies the relevance of trainees' thinking processes and interaction between personal knowledge of the trainees and the factual knowledge obtained in the course. The article focuses on characterizing the trainees' initial cognition and beliefs about the teaching/ learning process. The data are collected by means of the teacher trainees' self-reports and verbal association tasks. The results indicate that the course had some, yet limited impact on the trainees' perception of the teaching/ learning process, which led to reorganization, re-labelling and reversal of some of the teacher trainees' beliefs. The trainees slightly verified and changed their perceptions about the role of the teacher and the process of language learning.

**Key words:** *novice teachers, teacher cognition, teacher beliefs, implicit knowledge, metaphors.*

### 1. Background

Within the contemporary constructivist view of teacher education, teacher learning takes place through the interaction between what trainees bring to a teacher education programme and the experiences and content they encounter on it. Ignoring the former is likely to hinder the internalization by teachers of the new ideas they are exposed to and practices they are encouraged to adopt (in Borg 1006: 54). Loughran and Russell (1997: 165–166; in Borg 2006: 54) summarize the idea of pre-service constructivist teacher education in the following way:

*The student-teacher is a learner who is actively constructing view of teaching and learning based on personal experiences strongly shaped by*

*perceptions held before entering the program.* Loughran and Russell (1997: 165–166; in Borg 2006: 54)

Crucial for the work, then, is the concept of beliefs, defined as preconceptions and implicit theories; an eclectic aggregation of cause-effect propositions from many sources, rules of thumb and generalizations drawn from personal experience (Crawley and Salyer 1995, in Borg 2006). In the literature, teacher trainees' beliefs may be referred to as "implicit knowledge" (Švec 2006), "implicit theories" (Woods 1996: 192), "personal theory" (Tann, in James 2001) or "practitioner's personal theory of action" (Kwiatkowska 2008: 110). Beliefs have certain functions, namely they "act as very strong filters of reality" (Arnold, 1999, p. 256) and "interpretative framework, according to which a person justifies what is right and appropriate" (Woods 1996).

Learner beliefs as well as teacher beliefs are also crucial for another reason. Augustein (1983, in Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005) stated that beliefs about learner capacity and personal models of their own processes were more central to understanding the individuals' learning performances than universally accepted theories of learning; these personal "myths" explained more about individual differences in learning than such psychometric measures as intelligence or aptitude (Thomas & Harri-Augustein, 1983, in Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005). Interdisciplinary research suggests that learner beliefs about learning are intertwined with factors such as self-concept and identity, self-efficacy, personality, and other individual differences (Epstein, 1990, in Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005).

As far as beliefs of inexperienced teachers are concerned, the research states the following:

- Pre-service teachers' beliefs reflect inappropriate, unrealistic or naive understandings of teaching and learning (e.g. Brookhart and Freeman 1992 in Borg 2006: 54).
- They are based on observation, informal knowledge and folklinguistic theories used to describe pre-service teachers' own experience.
- Teacher trainees' beliefs are characterized by 'presentism,' i.e. teachers adopted a day-to-day outlook on their careers, very few focused on what their in-service experience might be like.
- Pre-service teachers often hold beliefs about language teaching which are unlikely to provide the basis for successful classroom experience (e.g. a prevalent belief that teachers should be learners' friends) (Urmston in Borg 2006: 55).

- Pre-service instructional decisions during a practicum were based on images of teachers, materials, activities and classroom organization generated by their own experience as L2 learners (Johnson (1994 in Borg 2006: 53)
- Pre-service teachers decided to promote or to avoid specific instructional strategies on the basis of their positive or negative experiences of these respective strategies as learners (Numrich 1996 in Borg 2006: 53). It means that implicit knowledge is largely based on the personal experiences of a teacher.
- The impact of apprenticeship of observation may be more powerful on non-native teachers (NNS) of a language than on native speakers, because of the fact that “the NNS, being in an L2 context, are still in the language learning experience) (Warford and Reeves 2003 in Borg 2006: 54).
- While teaching, pre-service teachers are mostly concerned about two things: unexpected students' behaviour and maintaining the flow of activity in the classroom (Johnson 1999 in Borg 2006: 58).
- Inexperienced teachers are characterized by limited episodic knowledge, poor recognition of similarities across contexts and a large repertoire of context-free rules (e.g. general rules concerning teacher's behaviour and reactions, e.g. 'Never criticize a student'; Berliner 2001: 21–22).
- Novice teachers are also said to devote less time to in-depth analysis of various classroom situations than expert teachers (Rollett 2001: 27). For all the reasons, novice teachers experience confusion and trouble with interpreting classroom phenomena appropriately (Berliner 2001: 24).

As teacher education is not merely about the accumulation of new ideas, the foremost objective of training courses seems to capture initial cognition (beliefs) of pre-service teachers and trigger their reflection, or at least, raise trainees' awareness about their beliefs and personal theories and professional developments during teacher training courses. Additionally, the goal is to equip trainees with tools or means for self – monitoring and self – evaluation.

## **2. The study**

The aim of the study was:

1. To identify teacher trainees' cognition (beliefs) at the beginning and at the end of the teacher training course (a course on language pedagogy).
2. To observe the change in the cognition and establish some tendencies of this change.

To achieve the research objectives a questionnaire with 2 tasks was distributed twice: at the beginning of the academic year (**October 2008**) and at the end of it (**May 2009**).

The first task in the questionnaire was based on Teachers' Beliefs Inventory (Johnson 1992 in Richards & Lockhart 1996: 48–49, cf. App. I). The students were requested to read 15 statements and select 5 that best reflect their opinions on teaching/learning English. The second task consisted of four sentence heads to be completed. The students were supposed to provide their associations and images related to the teaching/ learning process as well as teacher and learner (ex. **Teaching is like...**; **The teacher is like...**; **The learner is like.....**; **Language learning is like.....**; cf. App. II).

The selection of the second task was determined by the opinions of Elbaz. According to her (cited by Thornbury 1998:36), a teacher's 'knowledge' is structured at at least three levels: rules of practice, practical principles and images. Images, she argues, 'constitute the main ordering feature' of practical knowledge." The image is a brief, descriptive and sometimes metaphoric statement which seems to capture some essential aspect of oneself, one's teaching, situation in the classroom or the subject matter, and which serves to organize one's knowledge in the relevant area. The image is generally imbued with a judgement of value and often expresses a purpose in a clear way" Elbaz (in Thornbury 1998:36).

Thornbury (1998) points out that teacher educators can use imagery and metaphor to gain deeper understanding of what motivates their trainees' classroom decision, help trainees to raise their awareness and talk about their experience. As images of teaching slightly differentiate the teachers, analyzing them provides a useful platform for discussion at the initial selection stage and an idea of a productive theme for a seminar early on in the course programme. Bulloch suggests that the metaphors should be identified and then monitored as the course progresses (cited by Thornbury 1998: 37).

The study was conducted among 35 teacher trainees attending a teacher training programme (second year students of the English Philology Department). The students then were exposed to theoretical classes in language pedagogy, methodology of ELT and teaching practices.

### **3. The outcomes**

On entering the training course the subjects represented a very traditional, teacher-centred and accuracy – oriented approach to language teaching. After a year, they still focused their attention on the teacher and the role of grammar, however, the course made them reconsider their attitudes towards grammar and error correction, which resulted in the rearrangement of some beliefs. After a year, more trainees recognized the importance of fluency, the role of interaction and students' productivity in foreign language learning. The time spent on the teacher training course also contributed to the abandonment of some beliefs, esp. about the role of error correction. Detailed data are displayed below (sections 3.1 and 3.2 respectively).

#### **3.1. The statements**

##### **TEACHERS' BELIEFS INVENTORY: PRE - TREATMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (06.10.2008)**

1. ESL students generally need to understand the grammatical rules of English in order to become fluent in the language. (63 %)
2. When ESL students make oral errors, it helps to correct them and later teach a short lesson explaining why they made that mistake. (54%)
3. As long as ESL students listen to, practise, and remember the language which native speakers use, they are actually learning the language. (54%)
4. Language can be thought of as meaningful communication and is learned subconsciously in non – academic, social situations. (51 %)

##### **TEACHERS' BELIEFS INVENTORY: POST - TREATMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (21.05.2009)**

1. If ESL students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own. (71% as compared to 46% in the pre-treatment questionnaire)
2. ESL students generally need to understand the grammatical rules of English in order to become fluent in the language. (62% as compared to 63%; initially the most frequent answer)
3. As long as ESL students listen to, practise, and remember the language which native speakers use, they are actually learning the language. (62% as compared to 54% position maintained)
4. As long as ESL students understand what they are saying, they are actually learning the language.(57%)

5. Language can be thought of as meaningful communication and is learned subconsciously in non – academic, social situations. (57% as compared to 51 %, position maintained)

### 3.2. The metaphors

Relabelling. At the beginning of the courses the subjects perceived teaching as guiding and showing the right way. At the end of the course they still believe that teaching means guiding in the unknown area, however the subjects are more aware and precise about different aspects of teaching. They notice various shades of the teaching profession (i.e. presenting language and cultural points, establishing appropriate relationships with students, bringing them up or sharing the knowledge). Additionally, they realize the unpredictability of the process.

The most observable change is noticeable while defining the role of the teacher. Certain beliefs are abandoned and redefined. For example, at the beginning of the course the teacher is perceived as a person equipped with some supernatural power and extensive knowledge (i.e. God, saint, master, prophet). These metaphors are abandoned at the end of the course. It seems that after a year of training the subjects concentrate more on what the teacher does rather than who s/he is (i.e. guide, farmer, gardener, captain instead of God, saint). Another observed tendency is to use terms describing strong, yet contradictory roles of the teacher (e.g. judge, parent, friend), requiring from the teacher different degrees of involvement and formality. Teacher training contributed to the rearrangement of this set of metaphors in terms of intensity. They are still applied by the subjects, however they are not so popular.

As far as learners are concerned, the prevalent metaphors used to describe learners indicate their passive role (learners as sponges, raw material to be shaped, children). Interestingly, at the beginning of the course, the subjects provided the metaphors of explorers or people craving for knowledge to indicate their curiosity, need and willingness to learn a foreign language. These metaphors declined in force at the end of the course and were replaced by the metaphors of a pioneer and inventor.

When discussing the metaphors concerning language learning, some tendencies can be observed. Metaphors presented at the onset of the course stressed the subjects' attitudes and expectations (e.g. discovering new lands, widening horizons), the pragmatics and necessity of knowing the language (e.g. a mission, duty, a key to success) and features describing the command of language (e.g. communication with others). After a year, the collected metaphors stress the personal experience of learning a foreign language, the subjects' involvement and change (e.g. rebirth,

entering a different world but also climbing mountains). The metaphors also indicate the uniqueness of experience, probably due to the intensity of the training and language practice at university. Another set of metaphors refers to the stages or elements of the language learning process (e.g. building a language system, repetition). The data obtained from the subjects are presented in Table 1.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The study allowed to draw the following conclusions:

1. Images and metaphors are group specific and context specific, closely reflecting the needs and perceptions of a particular group of trainees. Some metaphors frequently mentioned in the literature, e.g. the teacher as a gardener (James, 2001); actor (Janowski 1998) were not popular in this group. On the other hand, quite a lot of metaphors were idiosyncratic and showed the uniqueness of the subjects (e.g. the teacher as a guard, politician, mother cell).

2. In the similar task I did with the other group of pre-service teachers, the amount of verbalization at the end of the course greatly outnumbered the metaphors offered at the beginning of the course, showing the trainees' prolific contribution but also intensive reflection over the content. Here, in this study group, the participants offered a similar number of images at the beginning and at the end of the course, which may also be due to the group-specific characteristics.

3. Theoretical training is said to have little influence on teacher beliefs as reported by many studies (e.g. Urmston, Farrell in Borg 2006). This tendency is also observable in the study I carried out. There is small but gradual verification and redefinition of some of the issues, for example, the role and place of grammar, which is perceived as important, but not essential. The trainees gradually tend to move from the didactic approach, largely based on grammar teaching to the communicative approach, focusing on communication and the learner. The subjects also reconsidered the position of error correction, which at the end of the course is not perceived as crucial. Moreover, they rearranged and specified their expectations concerning the role and position of the teacher. And finally, they redefined the ideas about the process of learning the language. In other words, the course had some, yet limited, impact on the trainees' perception of the teaching/learning process:

- reorganization and rearrangement of beliefs
- relabelling
- reversal of some of the beliefs



4. The impact of the theoretical training does not necessarily imply change, as Borg (2006: 65) states, but can also take the form of reinforcement in prior cognition. This tendency was observable in the beliefs the trainees held at the beginning and at the end of the training. Some of them were maintained (e.g. learning English by interactions with native speakers and in social contexts). Here, the increase in the percentage of the trainees claiming so was observed. Another example comes from the data gathered by means of a sentence completion task. Certain images/metaphors were retained, i.e. teaching and the teacher perceived as guiding and a guide, respectively.

5. Some changes were observed in the perception of learners and language learning. Initially, the learners were not described by means of images, but by enumeration of some features and presenting students' attributes, e.g. people who want to learn, notice the necessity and have a positive attitude. The course enabled the trainees to define their own learner's identity more precisely, they used some images at the end of the training. A similar thing can be observed in terms of language learning. Before the course it was described as a process, the students focused on the process and noticed the instrumental reasons for learning a language. At the end of the course, they concentrated more on the effort that is required and new possibilities that knowing a language offers.

6. As the trainees still continue their teacher training course, there is a need for further inquiry into the process of FL teachers' identity formation.

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## **Appendix I**

K. Johnson 1992 (in Richards & Lockhart 1996: 48–49)

### **TEACHERS' BELIEFS INVENTORY – APPROACHES TO ESL INSTRUCTION**

1. Language can be thought of as a set of grammatical structures which are learned consciously and controlled by the language learner.
2. As long as ESL students understand what they are saying, they are actually learning the language.
3. When ESL students make oral errors, it helps to correct them and later teach a short lesson explaining why they made that mistake.
4. As long as ESL students listen to, practise, and remember the language which native speakers use, they are actually learning the language.
5. ESL students generally need to understand the grammatical rules of English in order to become fluent in the language.
6. When ESL students make oral errors, it usually helps them to provide them with lots of oral practice with the language patterns which seem to cause them difficulty.
7. Language can be thought of as meaningful communication and is learned subconsciously in non – academic, social situations.
8. If ESL students understand some of the basic grammatical rules of the language they can usually create lots of new sentences on their own.
9. Usually it is more important for ESL students to focus on what they are trying to say and not how to say it.
10. If ESL students practise the language patterns of native speakers they can make up new sentences based on those language patterns which they have already practised.
11. It is important to provide clear, frequent, precise presentations of grammatical structures during English language instruction.
12. Language can be described as a set of behaviours which are mastered through lots of drill and practice with the language patterns of native speakers.
13. When ESL students make oral errors, it is best to ignore them, as long as you can understand what they are trying to say.
14. ESL students usually need to master some of the basic listening and speaking skills before they can begin to read and write.
15. It is not necessary to actually teach ESL students how to speak English, they usually begin speaking English on their own.

## Appendix II

Finish the following sentences using up to three metaphors:

Teaching is like...

The teacher is like...

The learner is like...

The classroom is like...

The textbook is like...

Language learning is like...

**Table 1.** The subjects' responses from the questionnaire distributed twice:  
in October 2008 and May 2009.

Pre-treatment questionnaire – October 2008	Post-treatment questionnaire – May 2009
<p>TEACHING IS LIKE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• guiding / showing the right path/ (11×)</li> <li>• sharing your knowledge / transferring knowledge and experience (8×)</li> <li>• lesson of life / hard work (6×)</li> <li>• creating something new / making good bread rolls / sculpturing (6×)</li> <li>• adventure / an extreme sport / a way in high mountains difficult to pass (4×)</li> <li>• improving something that is in ourselves</li> <li>• an enterprise</li> <li>• a concert</li> <li>• a craft</li> <li>• a gift</li> <li>• eating a cake</li> <li>• growing trees</li> <li>• a river</li> </ul>	<p>TEACHING IS LIKE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• guiding people in the unknown area/ giving prompts (5×)</li> <li>• opening the door of the foreign culture and language/ making the students enter a different world / giving a new outlook (5×)</li> <li>• bringing up / breeding (3×)</li> <li>• sharing knowledge the teacher has in a creative and interesting way (2×)</li> <li>• cooking – you never know what the results will be</li> <li>• a long and tiring process that may bring a lot of satisfaction</li> <li>• a challenge to cope with</li> <li>• learning to ride a bike</li> <li>• an exhibition in a gallery or a play in the theatre</li> <li>• no answer</li> </ul>

Pre-treatment questionnaire – October 2008	Post-treatment questionnaire – May 2009
<p><b>THE TEACHER IS LIKE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a guide who tries to show the best path through the nebula/ a person carrying light (14×)</li> <li>• a leader/ a captain (of a team) / a personal mentor (5×)</li> <li>• a judge (4×)</li> <li>• a parent but outside the house because s/he also teaches something new/ life (3×)</li> <li>• a baker / a sculptor /God who creates (3×)</li> <li>• a master – who is supposed to know everything but have a human side /a well-educated person / a figure(3×)</li> <li>• a shepherd/ a farmer (3×)</li> <li>• a saint (2×)</li> <li>• a helper who creates conditions (2×)</li> <li>• a policeman who prevents you from making mistakes / a guard (2×)</li> <li>• a prophet with his mission (education of course)</li> <li>• a friend who can help with solving the problems, who can understand you (2×)</li> <li>• a singer/ vocalist (2×)</li> <li>• a mother cell</li> <li>• a politician</li> <li>• a medium between the learners and the institution</li> </ul>	<p><b>THE TEACHER IS LIKE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a guide who helps students to understand grammatical rules and structures/ a guide who instructs, helps, corrects if needed and provides feedback (8×)</li> <li>• a shepherd / a farmer / a gardener who seeds plants and then watches them grow (3×)</li> <li>• the supporter and at the same time, provider of knowledge / an advisor, s/he helps you master the needed skills (2×)</li> <li>• an omnibus – s/he has to know a lot whether asked or not / a master who knows almost all the rules (2×)</li> <li>• a guidebook /the visual version of the language which students are taught (2×)</li> <li>• a father/ a parent holding your back (2×)</li> <li>• a medium between the learner and the process of teaching</li> <li>• s/he sets an example</li> <li>• an actor on the stage</li> <li>• a person who has a job to do</li> </ul>
<p><b>LEARNERS ARE LIKE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dry sponges, they absorb knowledge pretty fast/ the receptors/ receivers of knowledge (11×)</li> <li>• travelers / tourists / explorers (6×)</li> <li>• people who crave, desire to learn something new (5×)</li> <li>• unaware children/ children waiting for instructions (4×)</li> <li>• rolls / clay / untouched diamonds (3×)</li> <li>• no answer (3×)</li> <li>• sheep (2×)</li> <li>• a white piece of paper/ tabula rasa (2×)</li> <li>• warriors</li> </ul>	<p><b>LEARNERS ARE LIKE:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• spectators who are waiting for a wonderful show / the audience (4×)</li> <li>• children who must trust their father/ children on the bike (4×)</li> <li>• sheep /cows / birds of one kind which have to live with others (4×)</li> <li>• tabula rasa (2×)</li> <li>• inventors who invent a new language</li> <li>• pioneers – they are exploring new lands</li> <li>• travellers</li> <li>• instruments in the orchestra</li> <li>• a sponge which absorbs the knowledge</li> <li>• people who should be taught</li> <li>• seeds – they are to become trees of knowledge</li> </ul>

Pre-treatment questionnaire – October 2008	Post-treatment questionnaire – May 2009
<p>LANGUAGE LEARNING IS LIKE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• discovering new lands/ sailing and stopping at different islands / an exciting journey / adventure (11×)</li> <li>• a never – ending duty that must last if someone wants to be perfect /an important mission ( 6×)</li> <li>• learning to communicate to a wider branch of people, communication learning / learning how to feel and perceive / getting to know others / gaining new friends (9×)</li> <li>• opening yourself to a wholly new dimension of knowledge / widening your horizons to the spheres of a better comprehension of the world/ (3×)</li> <li>• becoming a new man (2×)</li> <li>• an extreme sport / playing a game (2×)</li> <li>• a key to success / a method gate to better life (2×)</li> <li>• singing a song in this concert</li> <li>• revising our mother tongue</li> <li>• following parents in something new</li> <li>• helping the travelers to find different ways of the language</li> <li>• no answer (2×)</li> </ul>	<p>LANGUAGE LEARNING IS LIKE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• entering a different world / opening eyes to new experience / rebirth / becoming a new person / acquiring new identity (10×)</li> <li>• learning how to live, think, feel, behave in a way that a baby does/ mastering the ability to keep your balance, steering and not crashing into a tree / unique experience, different from learning other things (4×)</li> <li>• trying to achieve the top, the highest peak / climbing mountains (2×)</li> <li>• ruminating the grass / eating, drinking (2×)</li> <li>• getting stages of acquisition and different levels</li> <li>• building a new language system in mind</li> <li>• repetition all the time/ repeating structures, using new vocabulary in a meaningful context</li> <li>• watching the play</li> <li>• no answer</li> </ul>