

# Framing EFL preservice teachers' reflections amid the teaching practicum through metaphors

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## Acceptance proof:

Framing EFL preservice teachers' reflections amid the teaching practicum through metaphors, <sup>†</sup>Gang Zhu; <sup>‡</sup>Zhengmei Peng; <sup>†</sup>Li Deng; <sup>†</sup>Matthew James Etchells; <sup>†</sup>Guofang Li; <sup>†</sup>Mary F. Rice

In Session: Interrogating Preservice Teachers' Performance through Feedback and Reflective Practice

In Session Type: Paper Session

Session Unit: Division K - Teaching and Teacher Education

Session Section: Division K - Section 06: Field Experiences: Student Teaching, Supervision, School/Community Collaborations, and Innovative Approaches and Models

Descriptors: Teacher Education - Pre-Service, Student Teaching, Professional Development

Accepted - In Session

## To cite this article:

Zhu, G., Peng, Z., Deng, L., Etchells, M., Li, G., & Rice, M. (2019). *Framing EFL preservice teachers' reflections amid the teaching practicum through metaphors*. Paper presentation at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting. Toronto, Canada, April 5-9, 2019.

## **Framing EFL preservice teachers' reflections amid the teaching practicum through metaphors**

**Abstract:** This paper reports on EFL preservice teachers' instructional reflections during the teaching practicums through metaphors. By eliciting 66 written metaphors from 33 EFL preservice teachers at the beginning and the end of the teaching practicums, respectively, the authors find that the majority of the participants (30 out of 33) improved their reflection level from pre-reflection and surface reflection to pedagogical reflection. Meanwhile, the participants shifted their teaching metaphor orientations from behaviorist/empiricist to cognitivist/constructivist and situative/social-historical. Furthermore, this inquiry confirms that metaphors can act as powerful windows in examining teachers' tactic referential systems and serve as "filters" through which teachers can articulate their reflective practices. Implications and limitations on examining EFL preservice teachers' reflections through metaphors are discussed.

**Keywords:** EFL preservice teachers, teaching reflection, metaphor, teaching practicum

## **Objective**

Reflection, as a constituent element of teachers' professional development, has been widely examined by Dewey (1933/1993), Schön (1987), and Zeichner (2010) more recently. In the context of the L2 teaching practicum, it is understandable that most preservice teachers will encounter a multitude of challenges due to first-time teaching, such as the negative side of the mentorship (Yuan, 2016) and the conceptual, pedagogical, institutional, and ethical dilemmas arising from the transition from university to classroom teaching (Author, 2017; Authors et al., 2018). In this case, EFL preservice teachers are encouraged to continually reflect upon their dynamic professional identities and pedagogical approaches (Author, 2017).

Meanwhile, metaphors have been viewed as effective mediums of reflection (Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007). Since metaphors are individual, idiosyncratic, and context-specific, metaphors act as powerful lenses in understanding student teachers' tacit referential systems and serve as "filters" through which teachers can clarify their own teaching practices (Lynch, & Fisher-Ari, 2017; Saban, 2006). However, there is no specific research dealing with EFL preservice teachers' reflections amid the teaching practicum through metaphors to date. Furthermore, there is no cogent evidence demonstrating improved teacher performance resulting from reflective practices (Akbari, 2007). To address the aforementioned research gaps, the authors endeavor to unpack how the EFL preservice teachers construct the paired metaphors encapsulating their teaching reflections throughout the teaching practicums. In this way, we can gain a more sophisticated understanding about the change in teaching reflections throughout the student-teaching period.

## **Theoretical backdrop**

Two strands of research collectively serve as the backbone of this inquiry: the four-level teaching reflection and the three categories of teaching metaphors. The first framework are the four levels of reflective practice validated by Larrivee (2000; 2008). Being reflective is a deliberate philosophical and ethical code of conduct that weighs underlying, sometimes conflicting, educational beliefs and daily practices (Larrivee, 2000). Drawing upon van Manen's (1977) early hierarchical representation of three-

level reflection, namely, technical, practical, and critical reflection, Larrivee (2008) further conceptualized teaching reflection as a continuum and systematically categorized it into four levels: *pre-reflection*, *surface reflection*, *pedagogical reflection*, and *critical reflection* (Table 1).

Table 1: Teacher reflection level

[Insert here]

The second study is the function of metaphors in teaching and teacher education (Alger, 2009; Authors, et al., 2018, Authors et al., under review; Lynch & Fisher-Ari, 2017; Saban, 2006). Metaphors generated by preservice teachers grant their narrative authority and provide an avenue for the deliberations on their roles, responsibilities, and pedagogies. After analyzing the current literature on metaphors in teacher education and teaching, Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001) categorized teaching metaphors into three dimensions: *behaviorist/empiricist*, *cognitivist/constructivist*, and *situative/socio-historical* metaphors, which were also confirmed by Leavy, McSorley and Boté's study (2007). For instance, when teachers select metaphors, such as "trainer" and "knowledge transmitter," they are prone to fall into the behaviorist/empiricist category. Teachers within this category hold the belief that students are empty vessels need to be filled up and knowledge as pre-packaged chunks of information externally transferred to students. Metaphors, such as "road guide" and "a hard-working sculptor," more accord with the cognitivist/constructivist orientation, and "butterfly" and "sunshine in the garden" with the situative/socio-historical category. Teachers within this category assume that learning process is a mutual meaning-construction process, which involves the dialectic interactions among the learners, curriculums, and milieus.

Table 2: Metaphor category

[Insert here]

Watson and Wilcom (2000) suggested that preservice teacher reflection should move beyond mere compilations of experiences towards a deeper understanding of the multiple meanings. To remedy this situation, researchers should deeply probe into the change of preservice teachers' dynamic reflections through the multiple data representations. Accordingly, the integration of teacher reflection and metaphors

provide a path for us to examine how the EFL preservice teachers negotiate their self-identities and reflective practices throughout the practicums.

## **Methodology**

Informed by the intimate relationship between professional identities and metaphors, the overarching research question that guided this project was: *How did the EFL preservice teachers reflect upon their teaching practicum experiences through written metaphors and the accompanying reflections?*

### **Contexts and participants**

This study was situated in a four-year university-based EFL teacher education program in Zhejiang Province, Mainland China. The third author, the director of the EFL teacher education program of this study, distributed the metaphoric professional identity written instructions to the EFL preservice teachers. Overall, 33 EFL preservice teachers, who finished their teaching practicums, agreed to participate in this research. Among these participants, seven are male and twenty-six are female. Eleven student-taught in public middle schools and twenty-two in public high schools. The third author collected the metaphor narratives at the beginning and the end of the teaching practicums. With respect to the ethic of this project, the authors received the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from a research university in the U.S. and protected all the participants' private information according to the ethical protocol.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Journal writing, as a method of discovery and reflective analysis, has long been championed an effective tool for reflection (Bain, Ballantyne, Packer, & Mills, 1999; Craig, Zou, & Poimbeauf, 2015). Considering the instrumentality of journal writing (written metaphors in this inquiry), the third author collected 66 pieces of written narratives from 33 EFL preservice teachers who finished their teaching practicums from Fall 2017 to Spring 2018. Then the first author translated all the written metaphors and the corresponding reflections into English. Subsequently, the authors iteratively analyzed the written metaphors and the resulting explanations, which entailed four steps: 1) naming/labelling, 2) sorting (clarification and elimination), 3) categorizing, and 4) analyzing data (Saban, Kocbeker, & Saban, 2007). Over the course of the data analysis, the authors coded the metaphors in a recursive and iterative manner to increase the

trustworthiness of this study. In case of disagreement, the authors double-checked the accuracy of the categorizing process to increase the inter-reliability rate.

## Findings

This research finds that the majority of the participants (30 out of 33) improved their reflection level from *pre-reflection* and *surface reflection* to *pedagogical reflection*. At the beginning of the teaching practicum, the metaphors generated from the participants mainly encapsulate their naïve understandings about EFL teachers' roles and the corresponding instructional responsibilities. The metaphors including “a beautiful Christmas tree,” “sunflowers in the sun,” “a gardener,” and “a colorful flower” embody the EFL preservice teachers' over-simplistic perceptions about EFL teachers' expected roles and duties without rich practical experiences. For instance, S10 and S16 described their reflections, respectively below:

I knew nothing about teaching, and I felt like I was standing at the cliff with my supportive supervisors on one hand and uncertainties on the other hand. Meanwhile, I held a string to keep myself safe. (S10)

At the beginning of student teaching, I likened myself to a trainer in a zoo. I worked as a head teacher (*banzhuren*) during my teaching practicum. I was very strict with my students and lacked adequate communication with them. Therefore, I was a distant manager and created a hierarchy between me and the students. (S16)

However, the authors did not find the participants reach the critical reflection level exemplified by their written metaphors. More in depth, the respondents did not reflect on the ideological or the ethical ramifications of their teaching practices during the teaching practicums, which implies that teachers consciously consider how personal values, family backgrounds, and socio-cultural norms collectively influence their teaching practices and the students' learning (Larrivee, 2008).

Another recurring salient theme pertains to the participants' inadequacy in knowledge and professional competency in language teaching. The metaphors, such as “a lost lamb,” “a frog in a well,” “a yacht without the propelling power”, and “a transfer student,” demonstrate the participants' insufficient capability and the transition difficulty regarding their professional identity construction when they undertook the student teaching assignments. The participants acknowledged that they did not garner enough theory to support their professional practices, although they learned for about three years from the EFL

teacher education program. For example, S26 and S30 shared their respective inadequacy experiences below:

I did not know how to work as a student and a teacher simultaneously. I could not apply what I learned from the university, and I had to start from scratch. (S26)

I had a sense of uncertainty, which mainly arose from passivity. At the beginning of the teaching practicum, I was in a state of passivity. I did not understand the new incoming teaching life. Sometimes, I waited for the wind to stir me up and push me forward. (S30)

At the beginning stage of the teaching practicum, most of the participants' reflection level fell into the category of pre-reflection and surface reflection. The pre-reflection level implies that the participants only developed general images on teaching without supporting evidence from experience, theory, or research. Meanwhile, the participants could not interpret classroom situations without thoughtful connections to other events or circumstances. The surface reflection level means that some of the participants initially developed tactical strategies regarding language teaching in order to achieve the predetermined goals. However, their beliefs are narrowly supported with limited experiences without theory or research. They also found the necessity of catering to students' various learning needs. The metaphors "watering pot", "bird feeder," "a clumsy parrot", and "nestling" embody that the EFL preservice teachers developed over-simplistic perceptions on EFL teachers' roles and responsibilities. A case in point is S13, who reflected that:

After observing my cooperating teacher's open class (one type of teacher professional development routine in Chinese K-12 schools) on reading English newspapers, I came up with some innovative ideas on how to design my English classroom instruction. After discussing them with my cooperating teacher, she said that my proposed teaching activities were only useful for igniting the classroom atmosphere while inhibiting the attainment of the teaching objective. After that dialogue, I realized that the effectiveness of one class hinges on the degree of achieving the teaching objective. (S13)

Most of the participants changed their metaphors from behaviorist/empiricist orientations to cognitivist/constructivist and situative/social-historical after the teaching practicums, typically exemplified by shifts from "a trainer in the zoo" to the "sunshine in the garden" (S16) and "bird feeder" to "road guide" (S21) below:

Towards the end of the practicum, I considered myself as sunshine in the garden. In terms of the head teacher responsibility, I could enter the students' heart in an amiable manner. I also realized that each student has different characters and learning styles. Therefore, it was necessary for me to cater to students various cognitive and emotional needs with differentiated instruction. I also underscore mutual understanding between the students and me. As for my English language teaching, I more adjusted my pedagogical approach to students' preference and integrated some activities in my English teaching process. (S16)

After my student teaching, I found an English teacher should be a road guide. Whilst guiding the students, I should show the direction, provide necessary materials, and support the students whenever the unexpected issues happen. Learning should essentially be a process of discovery, and teachers should guide the students' discovery in the forest. In this way, I can cultivate students' learning passion. (S21)

The change of the teaching metaphor from behaviorist/empiricist to cognitivist/constructivist and situative/social-historical orientations shows that the participants gradually discarded the belief that the learners are passive knowledge receptors and more readily viewed knowledge as actively constructed between teachers and learners by mediating the learning materials in specific contexts. Accordingly, the participants realized that it is more viable for EFL teachers to work as learning facilitators in an active approach. In this study context, S16 realized the importance of accommodating students' various cognitive and emotional needs with differentiated instruction. S16 also underscored mutual understanding between the students and her. Furthermore, S21 reflected that learning should essentially be a process of discovery, and teachers should guide the students' discovery in the forest. These two examples persuasively demonstrated they changed their role perceptions and behaviors evidenced by the written metaphors.

### **Conclusions**

This inquiry reveals that EFL preservice teachers' metaphorical teaching reflections not only display the fine-grained perceptions regarding "role one fulfils or activities one engages in" ("the what"), but also the "multiple-I positions" they think about "the self as a professional" ("the who") (Thomas & Beauchamp, 2001, p. 762-764). This paper contributes to the newer literature on how EFL preservice teachers develop their reflective practices and the accompanying teaching assumptions via the paired metaphor narratives. The vicissitude of the reflection level and the teaching belief confirm that metaphors can act as powerful windows in examining student teachers' tactic referential systems and serve as "filters"



though which teachers can clarify their own teaching practices (Saban, 2006). Specifically, metaphors can be constructed as psychological modeling experiences, allowing reification of teachers' prior experiences, leading to new forms of conceptual knowledge. Meanwhile, metaphors can reduce teachers' complex educational philosophies and actions into a comprehensible image, thus entailing knowledge about teachers (Martinez, Sauleda, & Guenter, 2001).

### **Scholarly significance**

This paper has some implications for EFL teacher education, especially for the improvement of EFL preservice teachers' teaching practicum. Articulating the metaphors during the student teaching period is instrumental for school-based mentors and teacher educators to bring preservice teachers' tacit knowledge and beliefs into awareness. Metaphors provide alternative mediational tools to explore preservice teachers' dynamic belief system and practice. In this way, language teacher educators can better identify the obstacles arising from the field experiences, especially the deep-rooted schism between theory and practice. Through the analysis of the clusters of the metaphors, language teacher educators can also examine how the contexts of the field placements and preservice teachers' professional agency intersect to contribute the evolution of their professional identity construction. That said, teacher educators can design more coherent and stimulating student teaching experiences.

### **Limitations**

There are two limitations in this article. First, the authors did not probe into the distinctions of "deep metaphors" and "surface metaphors", as coined by Schön (1979). According to Schön (1979), generative metaphor is a metaphor that accounts for 'centrally important features of the story' (p. 267). However, deeply embedded in language, generative metaphors often limit our perceptions of issues and methods to resolve problems (Vadeboncoeur & Torres, 2003). Surface or explicit metaphors provide us with clues to unveil the deep generative metaphor and might generate 'new perceptions, explanations and inventions' (Schön, 1979, p. 259). For the future research direction, the authors will frame how the EFL

preservice teachers elucidate the contradictions and tensions of their beliefs along the learning-to-teach process by incorporating “deep metaphors” and “surface metaphors.”

Second, the authors did not collect the written documents on EFL preservice teachers’ teaching reflections from the school-based mentors and the university supervisors. If we collect the narratives from the two stakeholders stated above, we might not only enrich the trustworthiness of the data, but also further examine the EFL preservice teachers’ practicum reflections from multiple perspectives. For the next research step, the researchers will collect written summaries on how the mentor teachers and university supervisors evaluate the EFL preservice teachers’ reflection levels from their respective angles.

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## Appendix:

Table 1: Teacher reflection level

Levels	Explanations
Pre-reflection	At this level the teacher interprets classroom situations without thoughtful connection to other events or circumstances. The teacher's orientation is reactive, believing that situational contingencies are beyond the teacher's control. Beliefs and positions about teaching practices are generalized and not supported with evidence from experience, theory, or research. The teacher's perspective is undifferentiated and general regarding the needs of learners.
Surface reflection	At this level the teacher's examination of teaching methods is confined to tactical issues concerning how best to achieve predefined objectives and standards. Beliefs and positions about teaching practices are supported with evidence from experience, not theory or research. The teacher's view of learners is somewhat differentiated, acknowledging the need to accommodate learner differences.
Pedagogical reflection	At this level the teacher is constantly thinking about how teaching practices are affecting students' learning and how to enhance learning experiences. The teacher's goal is continuously improving practice and reaching all students. Reflection is guided by a pedagogical conceptual framework. Beliefs and positions about teaching are specific and supported by evidence from experience, as well as being grounded in theory or research. The teacher's view of teaching and learning is multidimensional, connecting events within a broader framework.
Critical reflection	At this level the teacher is engaged in ongoing reflection and critical inquiry concerning teaching actions as well as thinking processes. The teacher holds up both philosophical ideologies and teaching practices for continuous examination and verification. The teacher consciously considers how personal beliefs and values, assumptions, family imprinting, and cultural conditioning may impact on students. The critically reflective teacher is concerned with promoting democratic ideals and weighs the ethical and social implications of classroom practices.

Table 2: Metaphor category

Category	Explanations
<i>Behaviorist/empiricist</i>	The learner is passive and knowledge is developed by forming associations or by the subdivision of learning tasks into small and logically sequenced components.
<i>Cognitivist/constructivist</i>	Knowledge as actively constructed by the learner through transforming old schemata into new schemata. Metaphors reflecting such perspectives define learning as individual construction of knowledge and refer to the teacher as a facilitator and the learner as an active agent in the learning process.
<i>Situative or socio-historical</i>	Learning is situated in the context in which it is constructed. Knowledge is situated, and is a by-product of the activity, context and culture in which it is used.