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Examining preservice teachers’ conceptions of language and the development of their teaching beliefs over the practicum

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Abstract

With the purposes of discovering their present professional perceptions and evaluating progress in knowledge acquisition, language and teacher metaphors of 26 English teacher candidates were analyzed before and after the practicum. 50% held functional and interactional views of language, and there was only a 7% increase in the supporters of a learner-centered view in language teaching (61%). Only one (4%) favored a participatory view, while 35% maintained the behaviorist view of teaching. 42% of the participants categorically transformed their teacher metaphors, only about 27% of which could be said to have improved by the end of the practicum.

Keywords: behaviourist; learner-centred; metaphor; participatory; practicum

1. Introduction

Metaphor means finding similarities between two different things in some way, and isobtained by omitting “like”, as in Federico Fellini’s famous remark: “Going to the cinema is like returning to the womb: you sit there still and meditative in the darkness, waiting for life to appear on the screen” (Cardullo, 2008, p. 46). It is usually regarded as a figure of speech, but metaphor is used in language teacher education for awareness raising and reflective practice. It has a profound influence over the content and delivery of our teaching, and can tell much about our actions in the class (Herron, 1982; Martinez et al., 2001). Although metaphorical language is used extensively in teacher trainees’ methodology courses, and numerous studies have been done on different conceptual constructs ranging from teacher,
principal, school and student to technology, social network and textbooks, there are only a few studies that investigated both language and teaching metaphors (Cerit, 2008a; Cerit, 2008b; Gök&Erdoğan, 2010; Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Gurol&Donmus, 2010; Kesen, 2010; Saban, 2010; Saban, 2011). The use of language and teaching metaphors enables teacher trainees to develop awareness of language learning processes (Cortazzi, & Jin, 1999). For this reason, this study aims at examining English candidate teachers’ conceptions of language and teaching, and evaluating the development of their teaching beliefs over the practicum. The research questions addressed are as follows: (1) What type of metaphors do the participants have before the practicum? (2) What type of metaphors do they generate after the practicum? (3) Do their metaphors change over the practicum?, and (4) What are their underlying theories entailed in their metaphors?

In this metaphor analysis, teaching metaphors are categorized according to Oxford et al.’s (1998) educational perspectives: Social Order, Cultural Transmission, Learner-Centered Growth, and Social Reform. In the first one, the school is viewed as a factory, where the teacher shapes learners for the benefit of society (Oxford et al., 1998). In the second, the teacher as the source of information pours knowledge into learners as empty containers (Oxford et al., 1998). In the third case, the teacher is responsible for fostering the right conditions to develop learners’ potentials, whereas in the last view learners and the teacher are engaged in joint problem-solving and work together to develop mental and social skills for the future (Oxford et al., 1998). Language metaphors are evaluated within Richards and Rodgers’ (2002) triad of language views: structural, functional and interactional. In the first one, language is a system of structural elements combined for coding meaning, whereas in the second it is a tool for expressing functional meanings (Richards, & Rodgers, 2002). In the third view, it is a vehicle for performing social transactions (Richards, & Rodgers, 2002).

2. Method

The participants were seven male and 19 female seniors (n=26), aged 21-23, at the Department of Foreign Language Education (METU). Convenience sampling was used in this qualitative study, where each student teacher (ST) was assigned a case number for ensuring anonymity. They completed these prompts in 60 min: “Language/An EFL teacher is like… because…”, and updated their metaphors after ten weeks. STs explained why they changed their ideas or held onto their initial metaphors by citing critical incidents during the practicum. The metaphor analysis was carried out with Cameron and Low’s (1999) methodology: 22 language metaphors were classified into three and 46 teacher metaphors into four categories. The validity was maintained by participants’ confirmation, comprehensive data treatment and thick description, whereby the raw data was presented without correcting the language of the participants (Marshall, & Rossman, 2011; Silverman, & Marvasti, 2008). The intercoder reliability was calculated as 0.91 with Miles and Huberman’s (1994) formula. The qualitative data were quantified through the tabulation of frequencies and percentage to increase reliability, decrease bias and enable comparison between categories (Yıldırım, & Şimşek, 2011).

3. Results

The distribution of language metaphors is presented in Table 1: 10 structural (%46), six functional (27%) and six interactional types (27%). Although functional and interactional metaphors (54%) slightly outnumber structural metaphors (46%), half of the participants (50%) see language as a complex system formed by combining more intricate units according to a specific set of rules as in the following: “A tree consists of its root, body, branches, leaves. The root of language is all our knowledge; body, grammar - we can build language on grammar… If you build well grammar and vocabulary, it’ll yield good communication” (ST1). Those with a functional view of language (%23) believe language is a vehicle used for expressing different meanings: “A ship takes passengers, oil, trade products to desired place, and language is used to intermit/take some ideas, feelings, thoughts, intensions to another human being” (ST2). In the interactional category, language is described by 27% as a communicative device for building up social relationships as in the “cell phone” metaphor: “We carry our language with us to everywhere. We can’t live without our cellphones. Without them, we feel isolated from life. Language ties us with other people and world. Like Nokia’s motto, language connecting people” (ST10).
Table 1. Language metaphors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>black hole, block of flats, factory, human body, lego-game, maths, pool, puzzle, river, tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>book, ball games, pencil of a writer, ship, traffic, voting,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactional</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>cell phone, love affair, magical key, telephone number, theatre play, water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the initial teacher metaphors are classified according to Oxford et al.’s (1998) typology, the results in Table 2 are obtained: six metaphors (27%) in the Social Order, five (23%) in the Cultural Transmission, and 10 (45%) in the Learner-Centered Growth, and only one metaphor (5%) in the Social Reform category.

Table 2. Initial teacher metaphors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Metaphor</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Order</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>baker, brewer, carpenter, chef, circus trainer, writer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Transmission</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>basketball coach, choir leader, orchestra leader, protagonist, ring-bus driver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-Centered Growth</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>basketball coach, chef, driver of a snow-cleaner, parent, scout leader, seller, spring, soil, tourist guide, train</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Reform</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>flatmate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>22 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of those who initially preferred conventional images of the teacher (42%) cannot be underestimated, as they have produced half of all the metaphors (50%), and still believe the all-knowing teacher is responsible for moulding his ignorant students into beneficial individuals for society by transferring information: e.g. “A carpenter shapes woods according to customers’ wishes, converts raw wood to a table, bookshelf, an effective material. An EFL teacher needs to shape, enlighten students that doesn’t know anything about English” (ST25); “An orchestra leader is the controller of art, source of information and production, so he transfers his knowledge to musicians. An EFL teacher controls learning environment, where students learn, practice and produce” (ST3). The remaining STs (58%) generated more modern metaphors like the “scout camp leader” and “flatmate”: in the former, the teacher is viewed as a non-interventionist facilitator caring about learners’ needs and interests, whereas, in the latter, the teacher is another member of the community of learners working together for improving their cognitive and social skills. ST13 wrote: “The scouts don’t know how to light a fire or set up a tent, but the experienced leader guides the group, gives necessary knowledge and practice… not an extreme authority… The teacher models and cooperates with students, both friend and leader respected, followed”, while ST9 wrote: “Your flatmate, a friend but knows more. You respect her and have good relations… other hommates all working cooperatively… You’re becoming competent in a warm, friendly atmosphere, as you find solutions with your teacher that listens to your problems of all kind”.

As can be seen from Table 3, two of 24 final teacher metaphors (8%) are classified as Social Order, six (25%) as Cultural Transmission, 15 (63%) as Learner-Centered Growth, and one (4%) as Social Reform. Almost a quarter of 26 STs seem to break up with traditional images (35%), and opt for a more facilitative and democratic conception of an EFL teacher. In Martinez et al.’s (2001) terminology, behaviorist metaphors (corresponding to Social Order and
Cultural Transmission categories) were reduced from 50% to 33%, whereas constructivist and situativemetaphors (corresponding to Learner-Centered Growth and Social Reform categories) increased by 17%.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Student Metaphor</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Order</td>
<td>2 8</td>
<td>circus trainer, cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Transmission</td>
<td>7 27</td>
<td>actor, animator, chef, orchestra conductor, protagonist, superhero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-Centered Growth</td>
<td>16 61</td>
<td>actress, ballet master, basketball coach, chef, choir leader, doctor, frame, ignorant master, manager of a holiday center, match, scout leader, ship captain, thriller movie, travel guide, theatre director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Reform</td>
<td>1 4</td>
<td>flatmate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26 100</td>
<td>24 100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When their responses are studied more closely, it is found that 11 STs categorically changed their metaphors, while 15 STs hold their previous views. Seven of the changers improved their metaphors categorically, but the rest switched into a more traditional view of teaching. Both ST24 and ST25 had metaphors reflecting the Social Order perspective, but ST24 changed the “carpenter” metaphor into the “actor” (in the Cultural Transmission), whereas ST25 converted his “brewer” metaphor to the “theatre director” (in the Learner-Centered Growth). ST24 noticed that she “didn’t include the learner factor much”, and regarding them as “raw materials” was wrong, because “in the real situation, students are at the center and decide what they want”. Realizing “she shouldn’t ignore learners’ feelings”, ST24 resembles the teacher to “a performer of a theatre”, whose audiences watch all plays, applaud and contribute it by laughing”. ST25 is aware that his brewer metaphor was “very strict and dominating”, as “producing beer out of barley seems very dependent on the brewer himself”. In his “theatre director” metaphor, actors (learners) are guided by the director (the teacher) on “what and how to play”, but “it is up to the actor to put more things on his performance or sometimes use improvisation”; likewise, “a good EFL teacher lead the way, shows general rules, decides on materials and organizes lessons, while students decide how and where to use language”. As for the waning metaphors, ST18’s change from the constructivist “soil” to behaviorist “superhero” metaphor, and ST19’s change from the constructivist “parent” to behaviorist “animator” metaphor will be exemplifying. Like ST18, ST19 touched upon the deadening experience of worksheet lessons, and argued “an EFL teacher should have the same flexibility” as an animator turning into “a clown, a juggler, an acrobat or a dancer” “to make students [guests in a hotel] enjoy lesson and learn”.

The italicized metaphors indicate that six STs chosenot to update their metaphors, and nine, though changing the wording, stick to the same perspective. For example, ST8 (basketball coach), ST10 (travel guide), and ST21 (chef) preserve intact their constructivist metaphors, because their former beliefs were confirmed by classroom experiences at the practicum school. ST8 wrote: “In my teachings, I understood every student needs personal attention, so we must build a good relationship to increase their participations… They enjoyed working together in pairs and groups… they become more eager and feel more relaxed”. In addition to building rapport, ST21 drew attention to motivation: “Students are willing to learn but teachers make them feel they teach for exams and only working here at the school… they always remind the exam to students” (ST21). ST1 is also critical of his mentor, who “was always threatening students with grades, writing everything on board, and never getting their attention”, and in his reworded, constructivist metaphor, “thriller movie”, stresses the importance of creating interest and providing variety in increasing motivation: “A good teacher keeps students on the edge of their seats with varied, attractive, discovery activities by arousing interest, as I saw that motivation and eagerness are more important aspects of teaching that applying the best method”.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The metaphor analysis revealed that 50% of STs adopted the structural, 23% functional, and 27% interactional view of language. It is overt that the majority produced structural and functional metaphors despite the conscious focus on the communicative role of the language in departmental courses. In Cortazzi and Jin’s (1999, p. 164-165) study, structural and functional themes dominated, with similar responses like: “(part of) a building, body parts”. The predominance of structural and functional themes were related to the task difficulty for the first-year students and their lack of background in Cortazzi and Jin’s (1999) study, but in the present study, it can be attributed to the overrated grammar education they received as foreign language learners, and the absence of communicative contact with the language in their classes.

When their pre- and post-practicum metaphors were analyzed, it was found that conventional teacher images in the Social Order perspective were reduced from 23% to 8%, whereas the supporters of the Learner-Centered Growth view increased from 54% to 61%, and 4% advocated the Social Reform view. It is promising that more than half of STs indicated a more modern, humanistic and participatory view of language teaching. A parallel evolutionary pattern was also identified in Farrell’s (2006) case study, where the initial perceptions of the teacher as a commander and missionary were replaced at the end of the six-week practicum by the final conceptions of the teacher as a facilitator and motivator keeping a low profile in the class.

In Nikitina and Furuoka’s (2008) study of the Malaysian context, 27 metaphors were attained, the majority of which were again found to be in the Learner-Centered Growth (66.7%). Although the numbers of metaphors in the Cultural Transmission (22.2%) and the Social Order (11.1%) perspectives are very close, the two analyses differ in that the opposition to the current metaphor analysis, where there is only one metaphor in the Social Order perspective, there was none in theirs. Yet, it is admitted that the participants could have produced more metaphors reflecting a more positive, desirable, cooperative atmosphere of learning. Nikitina and Furuoka (2008) argued that this situation might be culturally-determined because the participants might not be familiar with a democratic mode of interaction in their hierarchical classes, where they have past learning experiences with the teacher as a superior, not a friend.

Martinez et al. (2001) merged the Social Order and Cultural Transmission categories into the behaviorist view, and named Oxford et al.’s (1998) two other categories as constructivist and situative. When they analyzed 50 experienced teachers’ metaphors about teaching and learning, 57% belong to the behaviorist, 38% to constructivist, and 5% to situative perspective (Martinez et al., 2001). In the same way, Leavy et al. (2007) worked with 124 prospective teachers from an Irish and American institution, and found that the behaviorist metaphors amounted to 49%, constructivist metaphors to 24%, situative metaphors to 9%, and self-referential metaphors to 18% of all the entry metaphors. It is interesting that although the participants in the present study were student teachers with very little practical experience in language teaching, the distribution of their teacher metaphors displayed a similar pattern to those of the experienced teachers in Martinez et al.’s (2001) study, and their Irish and American counterparts in Leavy et al.’s study (2007): 50% of the initial metaphors were behaviorist, 45% constructivist, and 5% situative in the current study. When Leavy et al. (2007) elicited post-practicum metaphors, they found 42% of all final metaphors were composed of the behaviorist, 44% of constructivist, 6% of situative, and 8% of self-referential type. The increasing trend of constructivist metaphors is valid for both studies: a rise from 24% to 44% in Leavy et al. (2007), and from 45% to 63% in the current study.

It is evident from their responses that their experiences and observations of the mentors at the practicum school led them to abandon the idea of an EFL teacher as an all-knowing authority delivering information, shaping and controlling learners. Can et al. (2011) regarded such improvement as a leap in their understanding and expression of foreign language teaching. They also seem to have ascertained that boredom was the main reason for disruptive behavior, and can be avoided by only providing variety and building rapport with learners. Compared to 46 of 37 sophomores in a previous study by Şimsek (2014), where the behaviorist metaphors of teaching resided, the majority of the senior students in the current study were no longer under the influence of the apprenticeship of observation, but rather benefited from the practicum course to correct their preconceptions (Borg, 2004; Kagan, 1992).

References


