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*Iranian Journal  
of  
Language Teaching Research*



Urmia University

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## The teacher is a facilitator: Reflecting on ESL teacher beliefs through metaphor analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Metaphors offer a lens through which language teachers express their understanding of their work. Metaphor analysis can be a powerful reflective tool for expressing meanings that underpin ways of thinking about teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language. Through reflecting on their personal teaching metaphors, teachers become more aware of the beliefs that underpin their work. This paper reports the reflections on the prior beliefs of three experienced ESL teachers in Canada through the use of metaphor analysis. The paper attempts to explore the prior beliefs of the three experienced ESL teachers in Canada through metaphor analysis by using the Oxford et al. (1998) framework as a theoretical lens in which to gain understanding of the use and meaning of these metaphors. Results indicated that all three teachers used a total of 94 metaphors throughout the period of the group discussions and interviews, and that the metaphors used most were those related to *learner-centered growth*, followed by *social order*, then *social reform*.

**Keywords:** reflection; teacher beliefs; teaching philosophy; ESL teachers; metaphor analysis

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### ARTICLE HISTORY

**Received:** 14 Dec. 2015

**Revised version received:** 19 Dec. 2015

**Accepted:** 19 Dec. 2015

**Available online:** 1 Jan. 2016

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## Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) teachers have obvious prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs about learning and teaching. These experiences and beliefs often serve as a lens through which many teachers make daily instructional decisions in their lessons (Richards, 1998). However, many teachers are not consciously aware of what their beliefs are or how they impact their instructional decisions; in other words, many of these decisions and resulting images of teaching are of a tacit nature. Because beliefs are held tacitly, intervention of some kind must be implemented in order “to free [teachers] from tacit images of teaching” (Roberts, 1998, p. 70). One method of making teachers more aware of their prior knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions of teaching that guide many of their instructional decisions is to encourage them to examine the metaphors they use to describe teaching and learning. By articulating their metaphors about teaching, ESL teachers can gain more self-understanding of who they are, what they do and why they do it as language teachers. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have noted: “A large part of self-understanding is the search for appropriate personal metaphors that make sense of our lives” (pp. 232-233). Metaphor analysis, whereby teachers talk about teaching in terms of ‘a teacher is a \_\_\_.’ can thus be used as a powerful reflective tool for expressing meanings that underpin our ways of thinking about teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language. Through reflecting on their personal teaching metaphors, language teachers can become more aware of the beliefs that underpin their work. This paper is one such attempt to reflect on the prior beliefs of three experienced ESL teachers in Canada through the use of metaphor analysis. I should point out that the aim of the study was not to test if these metaphors are ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect’; rather, and as Roberts (1998) has suggested, the aim of the study was to get the teachers to reflect on and examine the extent to which these metaphors once articulated remain useful for these three ESL teachers.

## Reflecting On Teacher Beliefs

Kagan (1992) defines teacher beliefs as “tacit, often unconsciously held assumptions about students, classrooms, and the academic material to be taught” (p. 65). These beliefs begin when teachers are students in school as they begin to build up images of teaching and ‘good’ teachers and then develop over a teacher’s career. Additionally, Shavelson and Stern (1981) suggest that what teachers say and do in their classroom are governed by what they think and that teachers’ theories and beliefs serve as a filter through which instructional judgments and decisions are made.

Within the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), there is increasing research evidence that language teachers hold complex beliefs about teaching and learning and that these beliefs have a strong impact on all aspects of their classroom practices (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Farrell & Ives, 2015; Farrell & Mom, 2015). However, many teachers remain unaware of their beliefs because they do not readily articulate them to themselves or others nor do they reflect on how they influence their practice. As Senior (2006) has observed, many language teachers “do not have the inclination to sit down and reflect on the reasons that underlie their classroom decision making” (p. 247). Nevertheless, developing such awareness is important because as Knezdevic (2001) has pointed out, such is the beginning of a “process of reducing the discrepancy between what we do and what we think we do” (p. 10), or the tensions between beliefs and practices. Farrell and Ives (2015) agree and maintain that since language teachers’ beliefs about successful teaching form the core of their teaching behavior, then opportunities should be “provided for practicing language teachers to articulate and reflect on their beliefs and classroom practice” (p. 608).

Thus language teachers should be encouraged to consciously reflect on their teaching beliefs because these are the driving force behind many of their classroom actions (Farrell, 2015).

As Stanley (1998) has noted, teachers reflect on their practice “in order to examine the reasons and beliefs underlying their actions and generate alternative actions for the future” (p. 585). One means of encouraging teachers to reflect on their beliefs is to note the various metaphors they use when talking about teaching and learning (Farrell, 2015). Clandinin (1986) has noted that the metaphors teachers use can be a good indication of the way they think about teaching and also a guide to the way they act in the classroom. Then after they begin to unpack the meaning of these metaphors, they can better understand their classroom practices. If, after conscious reflection on their metaphors (that really reflect their underlying beliefs) their metaphors are not what they intended, they can reconstruct metaphors and develop alternative metaphors that better represent their true reality of teaching.

In English language teaching different representations of metaphors have been suggested. I will just point out two representations: one from Block (1992) and the other one of which this paper makes the most use of by Oxford, Tomlinson, Barcelos, Harrington, Lavine, Saleh and Longhini (1998). Block's (1992, p. 44) representations are useful because he distinguishes between macro and micro-metaphors where ‘macro-metaphors’ cover more general representations of teachers such as *teacher as contracted professional teacher as a providing parent*. However, by far the most comprehensive approach to the study of metaphor in second language teaching is by Oxford et al. (1998). In their analysis metaphors were taken from narrative case studies from various literature reviews, mainly on language learning experiences.

Oxford et al (1998, p. 8) produced a typology of metaphors based on four perspectives of teaching: (1) *Social Order*; (2) *Cultural Transmission*; (3) *Learner-Centred Growth*; (4) *Social Reform*. *Social Order*s where education is viewed as a “production line” where the teacher is seen as a “technician... in the process of social engineering” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 8) and in full control of the classroom. *Cultural Transmission* views education “as a process of enculturation or initiation into the historical practices and achievements of a given society” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 8). Teaching emphasizes “the pursuit of cultural and linguistic knowledge” and the training of the brain (Oxford et al., 1998, p.44). *Learner-Centred Growth* sees a sharing of classroom control between the teacher and students, and “student interests replace discipline as the central focus of schooling” (Oxford et al., 1998, p. 27). *Social Reform*, according to Oxford et al. (1998, p. 44), is where the teacher and students represent “miniature democratic communities” with shared learning processes for a better society. This paper attempts to explore the prior beliefs of three experienced ESL teachers in Canada through metaphor analysis by using the Oxford et al. (1998) framework as a theoretical lens in which to gain understanding of the use and meaning of these metaphors.

## Method

### *Participants*

The three participants (for reasons of anonymity called T1 (teacher 1), T2 (teacher 2), T3 (teacher 3) in the teacher reflection group were all experienced female ESL college teachers in Canada. Each teacher had an initial qualification in teaching ESL (a BA in Applied Linguistics) and a further qualification at the certificate at a more advanced level (Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language). In addition, T1 had an MA degree in Applied Linguistics with a major in TESL. Each teacher had at least fifteen years teaching English as a second language experience. The researcher's

role in the case study was to enter the professional worlds of three ESL college teachers as they reflected on their work in this self-initiated teacher reflection group and then to present these reflections to the wider TESOL community (with their permission).

#### *Data Collection and Analysis*

Qualitative research procedures were used in the collection and analysis of the data in the study outlined in this paper (Bogdan & Bilken, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Data were collected over a two-year period with weekly group meetings during the academic terms of the first year and follow-up meetings during the second year. There were thirteen, two-hour (average) group meetings in total. There were also follow-up interviews (all recorded and transcribed) throughout the first and second years and at the end of the reflective process in order to clarify previous insights gained.

Specifically, a total of 12,200 lines of text (from group discussions, and interviews) were scanned, organized and analyzed for references to issues related to teacher metaphors. The metaphors generated by the three teachers were coded according to the Oxford et al. (1998) classification discussed above to see how they would fit into the four philosophical perspectives of education (see table 2). Of the four aspects used in the Oxford et al. (1998) framework, only one, cultural transmission, did not appear. Therefore I report on the other three in the next section.

## **Results**

I now present the metaphors using the framework as outlined in Oxford et al. (1998). Table 1 illustrates the frequency count of the metaphors used by each teacher. For this study metaphors were conceptualized as single ideas rather than as individual words (Ortony & Fainsilber, 1999) and these ideas were then tabulated in terms of their frequency as outlined in table 1. Next, table 2 illustrates specific examples of the most used metaphors that occurred in the Oxford et al (1998) framework.

As can be observed in table 1, the teachers only used metaphors in three of the categories: learner-centered growth, social order and social reform but not any for cultural transmission.

Table 1

*Teachers' Metaphors Frequency in Each Category*

	Social Order	Learner-centered Growth	Social Reform	Total
T1	14	15	7	36
T2	11	23	0	34
T3	10	14	0	24
Totals:	35	52	7	94

All three teachers used a total of 94 metaphors throughout the period of the group discussions and interviews. The metaphors used most were those related to *learner-centered growth* (52), followed by

*social order* (35), then *social reform* (7). T1 used the most metaphors (36) in the group discussions and interviews followed by T2 (34) and T3 (24). All three teachers used metaphors in the learner-centered growth category most followed by social order. I now present some metaphor examples (using the framework as outlined in Oxford et al., 1998) the teachers used and as shown in table 2.

Table 2

Teachers' Metaphor Examples of 'Teacher is a \_\_\_\_\_'

Aspect	T1	T2	T3
Learner-Centred Growth	Friend	Facilitator	Nurturer
	Parent	Mother	Therapist
	Janitor	Coach	Coach
Social Order	Border Guard	King	Army General
	Guard Dog	Competitor	Dictator
	Peacekeeper	Police Officer	Judge
		Production-line Worker	Micromanaging Boss
Social Reform	Learning Partner	N/A	N/A
	Soldier		
	Archaeologist		

### ***Learner-Centered Growth***

Learner-centered growth had the highest frequency (52) category of metaphors the teachers used to describe their work. Of the three teachers, T2 had the highest frequency of usage among the three ESL teachers in this category followed by T1 and T3. Within this category the three metaphors T2 used most were teacher as *facilitator*, *mother* and *coach* with teacher as *facilitator* by far the most popular metaphor used by her. T2 said that she always tries to facilitate her students learning and chooses what to do in class and how much time is necessary for each lesson and that she "has a routine of 'crowd-pleasers' that always capture my students' attention" so that she can help them with their learning. T2 also said that she tries to "facilitate-fun" in all her classes. She also noted that she is sometimes a *mother* to her students because she said that she "worries about all her students and their progress" and that in certain cases she "forces students to carry their own weight and take responsibility." When this does not happen, she said, she reacts as a "worrier" and when one of her male students fell behind the other students in class she said that she "used to worry myself sick about him" just as a mother would. She also noted that sometimes she is a coach because she said that she "sets the bar and encourages students to reach it." In order to carry out her duty as a *coach* she said that she "looks out for weak and wayward students and pushes these students to go on as hard as they can" just like a couch would in a sports team.

T1 used and alluded to the metaphor *friend* many times in the group discussions; this metaphor was used especially when she wanted to get something important across to her students and to show her students that she cared. For example, T1 said that "if some form of communication or point I am trying to make breaks down, I'll find another way to build those bridges and make those bonds and that I feel support their learning." She also said that her policy for her students was to always encourage them with a smile from her; she continued: "Let me give you a smile to brighten your day." Related to the use of the metaphor *friend* was her use of the metaphor of *parent* for the teacher, similar to T2's use of *mother*. T1 said that she noted she sometimes feels her students' pain and also feels their emotions when they are struggling to learn various aspects of English. In one instance

T1 noted that she “almost was in tears when she left the classroom one day after a student had a difficult learning experience.” At that time she said she really felt like a *parent* who was guiding her children and feeling their pain when they felt pain with the struggles of growing up. That said, her metaphor usage for learner-centered growth did not always focus on the positive when dealing with her students and she used one interesting metaphor to sum up her frustrations: *janitor* because sometime she said that she had to “clean up their mess in order to make things right.” Perhaps this is closely linked to the feeling of being a real parent as they too sometimes feel frustrated with their own children.

Within this category the three metaphors T3 used most were teacher as *nurturer*, *therapist* and *coach*. T3 said that she always tries to nurture her students by caring for them, which is similar to T1’s teacher as *parent* and T2’s teacher as *mother*. She said that she even tries to care for them after her classes by taking them shopping to the Mall if she thinks they may need help speaking English to help with their basic living needs. This she said “helps them in their real learning of English” and as she said, “helps get students through the course.” For teacher as *Therapist*, T3 noted that she always tries to “build up” her “students’ attitudes” and “open their eyes to new ideas and new ways of thinking.” For teacher as *Therapist*, T3 mentioned that she is concerned a lot with the emotional well-being of her students but that this of course brings mixed feelings from within her students and her own thought processes and she noted this when she said that she was mindful of “feelings and causes of feelings with students.” Like T2 she used the metaphor of *coach* when she said that she tries to “encourage my students to try hard and do their best.”

### ***Social Order***

Social order followed learner-centered growth as the most popular category of metaphor used by all the teachers. Within this category of social order, T1, the most frequent user, made use of the metaphor of teacher as *Border Guard* to indicate how she controls her students. T1 noted that she controls her students by: “creating the line and stops students from crossing it.” Related to the border guard metaphor, T1 also used the metaphor teacher as *Guard Dog* to suggest that although she thinks she controls the classroom, she also notes that she has to be “fierce and intimidating to protect what’s valuable to her in her classroom.” In a more conciliatory tone however she also used the metaphor teacher as *Peacekeeper* to indicate how she tries to keep her classroom and all that is in it (students) close to her as she says that she “can’t take things too personally.” T1 continued: “Generally, I think we are very forgiving of our own gaps and faults as well as our students’ gaps and faults.”

For Social Order, T2 used teacher as *King* a lot in the group discussions. For example, T2 used teacher as *King* when she said: “Everybody’s dragging their feet sometime in class so it is better to lay it on the line because as teacher I’m the king.” T2 also used the metaphor *police officer* to augment what she was saying for teacher as *King* as she said she “sets the rules in class and then enforces them strictly” and she also said she “lays it on the line for them.” A related metaphor she used within social order was teacher as *competitor* in the sense of competing with her students for control of the classroom when she mentioned more than once that the classroom and teaching are in her domain and not the students; she said: “it’s my game. I made the rules and you can’t have the points.” She also used the metaphor *Production Line Worker* to describe herself as a teacher when she repeats things over and over in class without thinking about them; T2 noted this when she said: “especially, I know I’m on autopilot because I’m just doing and it goes along and I’m not really thinking about it.”

Within Social Order, T3 used the metaphor *Army General* to say that she “calls the shots on what goes in the classroom” and that she “assigns tasks and send students on their way” to do them. She said that when some of her students “whine and don’t try their best” she becomes a *Dictator* because she said that she does not allow students to dictate what happens in the class; “I have a firm foothold on the class” and she said that she always “stands her ground.”

T3 also used the metaphor of *Judge* as she says she “judges her students’ actions and behaviours” because some “students attack teachers from all angles, creating misery and more work” and that she “tries to be fair, but has moments of frustration and emotional outbursts.” So she said she acts as a *Micromanaging Boss* sometimes because she watches students and thus makes sure they “do all the small things.”

### **Social Reform**

Social Reform was only used by T1 and not at all by the other two teachers. T1 used three interesting metaphors almost interchangeably; teacher as *learning partner*, *soldier* and *archaeologist*. For *learning partner*, T1 noted that she always “works together with the students and puts in effort into learning together” so that they all (both teacher and students) can “pull their weight together.” In order to accomplish this, T1 said that she sometimes acts as a *Soldier* because she “fights for her students’ rights and well-being” and this occurred in one occasion when she had to stand up for her students in front of some other teachers; she said: “I had to get ammunition so I could deal with those teachers.” She also said that she acted as an *Archaeologist* sometimes because she is “always digging up more information to help her students.” When asked after the reflection period if the metaphor *advocate* would better represent her belief of fighting for her students, T1, responded “perhaps but I will still *soldier* on for my students”.

### **Discussion**

As the results from the teacher discussions showed in this paper, a teacher is not only a teacher in the general sense, but also a *Facilitator*, *Mother*, *Coach*, *Nurturer*, *Border Guard*, *Guard Dog*, *Peacekeeper*, *King*, *Competitor*, *Police Officer*, *Production Line Worker*, *Army General*, *Dictator*, *Judge*, *Micromanaging Boss*, *Friend*, *Parent*, *Janitor*, *Therapist*, *Learning Partner*, *Soldier*, and *Archaeologist* to name but a few. Metaphor analysis allows teachers to reflect on who they are and why they act the way they do in their professional lives. By reflecting on their metaphors, teachers are able to discover what positive and negative influences they may have on the classroom and the students in terms of providing opportunities for learning. Reflecting on metaphors also allow teachers to understand how they might be seen through the eyes of a student because by taking a step back and looking through the eyes of another person teachers can self-reflect from a different perspective. As T2 reflected when she reflected on her use of metaphors to express her beliefs about teaching and learning: “I can now see that I may not always do myself what I ask my students to do in class. In fact, I realize that I’m not always practicing what I preach.” T2 went on to note that for her, analysis of metaphors made her really think about her beliefs about not only the teaching act but also herself as a teacher.

Metaphor use can also be an indication of how much influence an individual’s personality may have on what they do and in what manner they do things in the classroom. For example, a teacher might be able to look at the metaphors generated from discussions about teaching and see whether or not the way they behave in the classroom matches their “real-life” personality. It may be common

for a teacher, or anyone taking part in the language learning process, to adapt and alter their personality to fit the style and needs of a class or student. Though this may be useful at times, many teachers (and students) want to “be themselves” and want their teaching to reflect their personalities. For T1, this was certainly the case as she remarked in a meeting that “many times I even fake being funny” because she noted that she “cannot keep it up all the time during her classes because it is not my real personality”. T1 reflected further on her personality: “I’m not bubbly all the time. I’m not social all the time.” Thus when there is a gap between who a teacher really is outside the classroom and who he or she is inside the classroom, teaching can become stressful because of these differences.

However, by reflecting on their metaphors, teachers can become more aware of any differences between their “classroom personality(s)” and their “real-life” personality to see what they need to adjust so that they are not working too hard at being a different person in the classroom. For example, when T1 further reflected on her quest to find more of a balance between her real self and her personality as a teacher, she said that she now realizes that when she teaches she will always try to be true to her [real]self; T1 continued: “When I’m more myself [in class] I have to trust that whatever is going to happen is going to happen in the class. I am not-over prepared as is my style, and I prefer to just trust in the process” [of allowing things to happen in her classes].

As mentioned previously, a connection can be made between teachers’ use of metaphors and their beliefs, personalities, judgements, and feelings as human beings. For example, T1 seems to have a well-balanced and seemingly neutral belief about teaching and herself as a teacher as the metaphors generated by her data are balanced in terms of negative and positive metaphors. She generally seems to see herself as a kind and compassionate person who wants to work together with the students and help. T2 seems to have a more emotional attachment towards her belief of self and teaching as many of her metaphors are more emotionally-charged and somewhat negative, as seen by the higher amounts of metaphors in the Social Order category (higher power and authority) and the many metaphors with negative connotations, like ‘police officer’ and ‘production line worker’. T3’s metaphors are mostly associated with the ideas of community and helping students as she seems to think of herself as a ‘nurturer’ and ‘therapist’ whose job it is to make sure students feel comfortable in class and feel like they can depend on the teacher for help. Indeed, the metaphors expressed by all three teachers represent the fact that being a language teacher is not a linear, one-dimensional job. In fact, being a language teacher requires that one is able to adjust to different teaching and learning situations as well as be able to react in different ways to accommodate various learning styles and cultural backgrounds of their students while also trying to respect the individuality of all students.

## Conclusion

This paper has suggested that reflecting on metaphor usage can reveal a teacher’s teaching philosophy and belief system and when then teachers can decide if these metaphors still hold true for their present context and conditions of teaching. They can be challenged as to their current relevance and then they can begin to develop alternative and more appropriate metaphors that best represent their practice if they so desire. This is important because when challenged, the teacher makes the decision rather than following previously held beliefs that have been entrenched over time. These findings have limitations in terms of their generalizability because of the relatively small number of teachers (three) studied. However, it should also be noted that because of the in-depth two-year study and work-intensive nature of this type of analysis, it is hard to undertake larger databases. Future studies in different contexts with different teachers such as English as a foreign language teachers (EFL) can address this issue by using a comparative approach to demonstrate



the similarities and differences across a number of settings. Indeed, much of what is described and discussed in this case study may have relevance for an individual language teacher's practice and context.

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