

# Metaphors Used by Malaysian Teachers-in-Training: Implications for Language Teacher Education

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Over the past 20 years, there has been increasing interest in exploring what language teachers believe (Borg, 2006). Often these beliefs are expressed in terms of metaphors (Richards, 1998; Woodward, 1991), but there has been little recent research connecting the two strands. The present study is based on the personal reflections of a group of 72 trainee teachers in a Malaysian University after a three-month practicum in local high schools. In these reflections, as well as currently fashionable constructs such as facilitator and motivator, these students often described their perceptions of the role of the language teacher using various metaphors. The wide range of metaphors volunteered by these trainee teachers were coded into various categories, such as terms relating to facilitating, mentorship, entertaining and kinship. This presentation will discuss a number of these, and also quote some of the trainees' comments in support of their chosen metaphor, which thereby reveals their underlying beliefs about teaching and learning. Relating their professional activity to other roles illuminates not only what teachers themselves believe, but also reinvigorates notions of (language) teaching itself. One of the implications of this study is that teacher educators, both in the specific setting and in relatable contexts elsewhere, can incorporate such metaphors into their programmes and in this way reimagine, refine and redefine the role of the language teacher for the benefit of their students, and themselves.

*Keywords:* Teachers; Language; Education; Roles; Beliefs

## Introduction

What one does usually emanates from what one believes. Beliefs often exist in theory or in the mind. Nevertheless, if activated they can provide motivation to achieve what one aspires to do. The beliefs that individuals create and develop form the basis of their actions. In most cases, teachers apply what they believe about teaching in their classroom practices. Yoshihara (2012) claims that "teachers' teaching beliefs play a critical role in their teaching practices" (p. 41). Studies (Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Nishino, 2009; Woods, 1996; Yoshihara, 2012) have shown that teachers applied their beliefs about teaching to their classroom practices. These are often expressed by using metaphors (Elbaz, 1983; Handal & Lauvas, 1987; Thornbury, 1991; Michael & Katerina, 2009). Metaphors expressed by teachers provide a means for understanding their thinking (Munby, 1986) about the teaching process (Earle, 1995) and they can play an important role as vehicles for reflection (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2002; Chen, 2003). Metaphors can be used to represent beliefs regarding the various teacher roles. According to Wright, Sundberg, Yarbrough and Wilson (2013: p. 7), "The use of teaching metaphors along with a reflective process can help in-service and pre-service teachers identify conflicts between their beliefs and their roles as teachers". In the light of the above, it was felt to be of great interest to examine the metaphors used by potential teachers in order to understand their attitudes and approaches towards professionalism.

## Aims

The main aim of this research was to identify the use of metaphors among the trainee teachers to reflect their roles as beginning ESL teachers based on their personal teaching experience gained through a 3-month teaching practicum. Hence, this paper tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What are the metaphors used by the trainee teachers to reflect their roles in ESL classrooms?
- 2) To what extent do these metaphors align with conventional conceptions of learning?

## Methodology

A case study method (Duff, 2010) was adopted to investigate the pre-service teachers' perceptions of their roles as language teachers. Data were collected through reflective journal writing (Nayan, 2003; Richards & Ho, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). The qualitative data were subjected to a process of thematic and content analysis (Burns, 1999; Charmaz, 2006; Ryan & Russell Bernard).

## Participants

Participants of this study were 72 trainee teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) who completed their practicum at local Malaysian government schools in the district of Selangor. These trainee teachers received their teacher training at a se-

lected higher learning institution in Selangor, Malaysia, majoring in the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL).

## Research Procedure

For the purpose of this study, the trainee teachers were gathered in a classroom and asked to write an essay of between 500 to 1000 words to reflect on their role(s) as ESL language teachers during their teaching practicum.

## Findings

The findings of the study revealed four main metaphors represented many of the participants' conceptions of teaching and learning: facilitators, motivators, and edutainers and family members. These categories are described further in the following sub-sections.

### Teachers as Facilitators

26 participants adopted "facilitator" as depicting their teaching roles. They realized the role of facilitator by implementing several teaching and learning conceptions that they believed to represent their chosen metaphor. In this case, the trainee teachers conceptualized that teaching and learning in an ESL classroom are collaborative and student-centred in nature, where teacher provides guidance and feedback to let the students be active participants throughout the learning process. The following are some of the excerpts taken from their reflective journals:

*During that stage, I always went from one group to another group and saw their progress while they doing their works. Then, if they found difficulties in completing the activity, I would give them some clues and absolutely, not the answer. Then, based on the clues given, they could generate their own ideas.* (Teacher trainee # 1)

*In terms of teaching and learning, a teacher who facilitates his or her students' learning will guide his or her students to construct their understanding of the lesson. As for me, during my practicum session, I use more group works during my lesson. My role then is to observe and give guidance for them to complete the tasks given. I had implemented more student-centered teaching approach. I want my students to play active role in my lesson.* (Teacher trainee # 21)

*I realized that teaching alone was not enough. My students need to be guided along each lesson was carried out... I would ask a few questions in order to test their understanding. The next step would be providing them with appropriate practice on what they had learned. For example, I would give them task sheets to be completed and normally, I would facilitate and guide my students so that they are on the right track and no one is left out.* (Teacher trainee # 51)

### Teachers as Motivators

"Motivator" was another metaphor used by 18 of the trainee teachers to display their conceptions of teaching and learning. Below are some of the excerpts taken from their reflective journal writing:

*I adopted the student-centred learning approach in my classroom and I encouraged more student participation in the classroom. My role during the teaching and learning session is as a motivator.* (Teacher trainee #2)

*The word that best describe my role as teacher when I was at*

*school is motivator. In order to help them to boost their motivation, I had varying the activities, tasks and materials. This is because same routines, patterns and format will increase the students' boredom. Varying the activities, tasks and materials can help increase students' interest level. I also use cooperative learning activities. I found that this technique help to increase the self-confidence of the students, including the weaker ones.* (Teacher trainee # 16)

*For me, the best word to describe teacher role is "motivator". Teachers give motivation and spirit to their students that can build the confidence from the students. A teacher as did not give a punishment if their student made a mistake in answering or doing exercise. But the teacher will continue to support and motivate students to repair the mistake. Teachers must be able to build the character their students through a variety of activities that can enhance student creativity in building self-motivation in students.* (Teacher trainee # 18)

### Teachers as Entertainers

Below are some of the excerpts that described the teachers' conceptions.

*My role as a teacher is best described with the noun "edutainer"... My role was to teach in a fun and creative way. One of the ways was to use action songs in my teaching. I used songs mostly as set induction to capture student's attention and set their focus on the topic of the day.* (Teacher trainee # 72)

*... as a teacher, we need to be good in making "tricks". In other words, we need to be very flexible and creative in our teaching style and should make the classroom "alive". In my opinion, the best way to make students to fall in love with English language is by using stories such as fairytales and fables.* (Teacher trainee # 49)

*I could entertain my students with a lot of interesting activities, jokes and games as planned in my lesson plans. ... you must be natural and confident. I could act as a doctor to treat a patient (Occupation), I could wear a Cheongsam to introduce Chinese New Year (Beautiful Malaysia) and I could dress up like a bee and show them what a bee does (Plants and Insects).* (Teacher trainee # 35)

### Teachers as Family Members

A number of the participants used 'occupational' metaphors, such as captain, manager scientist and planner, but many others used family metaphors. For example:

*I would regard my role as a big sister rather than a teacher when I had my teaching practicum as I was teaching in a girls' school. The reason why I said so was because a sister is the best friend a girl can have.* (Teacher trainee # 4)

*I view myself as a brother. A brother who is always there to help, to assist, to facilitate and to guide the young ones within his reach. Let the students embrace the language by feeling the comfort of home-like learning as family. Both parties benefit the most out of this brother-like relationship. Students will not be afraid to approach the teacher and the teacher will find it easier to communicate with them.* (Teacher trainee # 60)

*We know that mothers always look for the best for their children. This situation is also applied to teacher.* (Teacher trainee # 70)

*As for me, the best role that can refer to a teacher in school is parent. Why? It is because a teacher can do everything like a*

parent does to their children. A parent is a motivator who always motivates their children, a doctor who treats the children well when they are sick, a facilitator who always facilitates their children and many more. (Teacher trainee # 37)

## Discussion

The metaphors used by teachers can be incorporated into the design of professional development programs because, as it is shown in **Table 1**, metaphors can be connected to conventional theories of teaching and learning. In the first place, such metaphors provide insights to teacher developers as to how teachers, whether novices or more experienced professionals, perceive their roles as teachers in terms of other relatable roles. Secondly, these metaphors can be shared and discussed by teachers to further develop their own theories and insights; this may be particularly interesting when unusual metaphors (for example, “edutainer”) are used. Thirdly, teachers can be encouraged to think of metaphors for other aspects of teaching: for example, students (adventurers?), learning (a difficult journey?), and the classroom (a prison?)—And thus extend the range of possible ways of freshly conceiving and theorising the profession. It could be useful to compare the metaphors used by Malaysian language teachers with those of teachers of other subjects, or in other countries, to see the extent to which they converge or diverge. Finally, teachers might discuss the extent to which they can encourage their students to use metaphors as a way of expressing their perspectives on language learning; if they were to do this, it would be enlightening to compare the learners’ metaphors (for the teacher, for example) with their own.

## Conclusion

The results of the study indicated the changing trends of the teachers’ conceptions of teaching and learning. A steady shift from teacher-centred classrooms to student-centred learning was revealed. The elements of collaborative, participatory, and cooperative learning are the key principles toward successful teaching and learning. In addition, the freshness and flexibility indicated in the metaphors they used to illustrate teaching and learning are highly conducive to motivating students.

**Table 1. Summary of metaphors and teaching & learning conceptions.**

Metaphors	Teacher Conceptions	
	Conceptions of teaching	Conceptions of learning
Facilitators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate and guide learning</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Cooperative learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Hands on</li> <li>• Student-centred</li> </ul>
Motivators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivating</li> <li>• Variety of tasks</li> <li>• Innovative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Fun learning</li> <li>• Student-centred</li> </ul>
Entertainers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creative</li> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Communicative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun learning</li> <li>• Participatory</li> <li>• Student-centred</li> </ul>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate and guide learning</li> <li>• Communicative</li> <li>• Informative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory</li> <li>• Fun learning</li> <li>• Student-centred</li> </ul>

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