EFL Pre-service Teachers' Concerns: A Reflective Practice

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Abstract

Central to the spirit of reflective teaching is the ability to focus critically on one's own beliefs, cognitions, and concerns. Numerous proposals have been developed for implementing reflective practices in pre-service teacher education contexts with the aim of producing highly competent reflective teachers. However, it is imperative to identify the candidates' beliefs and knowledge base before any interventions could be introduced to effectively trigger a response. This study utilized a reflection oriented model to explore pre-service language teachers' concerns about language learning/teaching. Interview techniques facilitated such an in-depth exploration among a conveniently sampled 13 candidates studying at a teacher college in Iran. The content analysis of the interviews revealed that affective factors, classroom management, language-related fears, and tensions between their beliefs and practices were the candidates' major concerns. On the whole, candidates' preexisting learning experiences seemed to cast a shadow over their cognitions and concerns. Implications regarding reflective practicums in teacher education programs are discussed.

1. Introduction

Recent findings suggest that "educational beliefs of pre-service teachers play a pivotal role in their acquisition and interpretation of knowledge and subsequent teaching behavior and that unexplored entering beliefs may be responsible for the perpetuation of antiquated and ineffectual teaching practices" (Pajares, 1992, p.328). This has stimulated a great number of studies devoted to identifying the nature and origins of such beliefs and concerns. One of the most fundamental issues raised in the field pertains to whether a teacher's way of knowing how to teach exists inside the teacher or outside? Despite the fact that the idea of such knowledge being outside of an individual may seem queer, developments in teacher cognition research have pointed to the conclusion that a teacher's knowledge is embedded in his actions and that it cannot be sought only in his mind. Borg (2015) argues that in teacher education, we cannot make adequate sense of teachers' experiences of learning to teach without examining the unobservable mental dimension of their learning process. On the other hand, in general, teacher preparation, "this line of research has revealed differences between the nature of the knowledge existing in the minds of teachers that really helps them to act effectively, and the knowledge as it is taught in teacher education" (Korthagen, 2010, p. 99). However, second and foreign language teacher cognition research is a more recent phenomenon, and when it comes to pre-service teachers' cognitions, the issue gains more importance for the widely accepted belief that they come to teacher training programs with well-established beliefs. Kagan (1992) argues that "pre-service and first-year teaching appears to constitute a single developmental stage" (p.129), and Zheng (2009, p.77) believes, this stage has the "potential for change". There is also the old adage that student teachers enter training centers with preexisting and sometimes naïve understandings/ beliefs about language learning. This study was

set up to investigate the EFL pre-service teachers' concerns about themselves as prospective language teachers, language learning, and teaching in a practicum setting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Pre-Service Language Teachers' Cognitions and Concerns

In Kagan's (1992) review of pre-service teachers' literature, preexisting beliefs and prior experience play a role in filtering the content of education course work (e.g., Borg, 2015; Debreli, 2013; Misrohmawati, 2016; Yuan & Lee,2014). While these conceptual changes have been taken by cognitive psychologists as accounts for the underlying links between what language teachers do and what they know and believe, eliciting teachers' beliefs and cognitions and exposing them to desirable changes have not been an easy undertaking, due to the invisibility of such cognitions and beliefs which makes conclusive results difficult to achieve. Researchers have sought different models in which they can study teacher beliefs more objectively. One such model has been proposed by constructivist approaches with the emphasis that knowledge cannot be simply "transmitted" to teachers and improve their actions (Korthagen, 2010), and that learning emerges from our own actions in relation to others, as well as their strong conviction that learning outcomes are socially constructed (Lave & Wenger,1991). As an attempt to uncover language teachers' concerns, Richards (1996) tried to explain teachers' decision making in terms of varying maxims or "principles [that]function like rules for best behavior" (p.286) as cognitive influences on their classroom activities., Two maxims among those were, "maxim of encouragement: seek ways to encourage student learning", and "maxim of involvement: follow the learners' interests to maintain student involvement" (p.290). Others were maintaining order, care for accuracy of output, planning,

efficiency, conformity, and empowerment. He argues, these "maxims are reflected both in how teachers conduct their teaching as well as in the language they use to talk about it" (p.286). Pajares (1992) believes, pre-service teachers "emphasize and overvalue affective variables" (p.323). He attributes researchers' lack of a clear understanding of the relationship between teachers' educational beliefs, decision making, and planning to overlook the connections between teachers' beliefs and their other cognitive and affective structures. Likewise, Phipps and Borg (2009) studied grammar teaching beliefs and practices of three language teachers and found tensions between the two sets. They argued that teachers may hold core or peripheral beliefs with varying degrees of influence over their practices and instructional decisions. They hypothesize that understanding of tensions in teachers' work needs a clear identification of their beliefs at two levels.

Through a secondary analysis of teachers' diaries during their practicum performance, Numrich (1996, p.134) realized that four major themes recurred: a) the preoccupations (concerns) of novice teachers with their own teaching experience; b) the transfer (or conscious lack of transfer) of teaching methods/techniques used in the teachers' own L2 learning; c) unexpected discoveries about effective teaching; and d) continued frustrations with teaching. In stressing the importance of the first category, she argues that candidates' preoccupations were mostly related to classroom management during their practicum including

- Need to make the classroom a safe, comfortable environment
- Need for control when students talk
- Need to be creative and varied in teaching
- Need to initially experience teaching individually
- Need to clarify the value of a textbook (Numrich,1996, p.135)

There is substantial evidence that prior experience shapes teacher cognition (e.g., Almarza, 1996; Calderhead, 1996; Urmston, 2003; Warford & Reeves, 2003) and that this cognition is 'situated', produced by "activity, context, and culture in which it is developed and used" (Brown, Collins, Duguid, 1989, p.32). According to Borg (2015), some of these studies suggest that the impact of the ' apprenticeship of observation' (the impact of schooling experiences on the development of beliefs about teaching, proposed by Lortie, 1975), may be more powerful on non-native teachers of a language than on native speakers. These beliefs can also be refined through the whole program, in general, and their teaching practices in particular. Finally, Johnson (in Freeman and Richards,1996) reported how the practicum shaped the perceptions a pre-service teacher had of herself as a teacher, of L2 teaching and of the TESOL practicums.

In a similar vein, Ong'ondo and Jwan (2009) reviewed the literature on student-teacher learning, collaboration, and supervision during the practicum. According to them, the research covered such areas as student teachers' main concerns, student teachers' experiences, what and how student teachers learn and how specific innovations by particular universities contribute to teacher learning. They further conclude from the reviewed studies that with time, especially if the practicum session is extended (about one year) and if the student teachers were well supported (worked closely with their cooperating teachers and teacher educators), they were able to make quick progress from a primary concern with survival to thinking about how they could facilitate learning among their own students. Golombek (1998) studied two in-service teachers closely through observation and stimulated recall interviews to find out how their personal practical knowledge informed their practices. She analyzed descriptions of tensions they had faced in their classroom. What she found was

that "personal practical knowledge is an affective and moral way of knowing that is permeated with a concern for the consequences of practice for both teachers and students" (p.447).

2.2. Reflective Practicum (the ALACT model)

The exploration of language teacher cognition is an extremely complicated matter (Barnard & Burns, 2012). One deep-seated belief is that in teacher education studies, tracking prospective teachers' beliefs allows researchers to determine for example, whether their perceptions of teaching and learning change as a result of external factors such as the type of practicum. Believing that learning comes from experience and cooperative reflection, Korthagen (1985) proposed the ALACT model through which teachers follow a five-stage cyclical model when reflecting on their practice (Action; Looking back at the action, Awareness of essential aspects, Creating alternative methods of action, and Trial of new practices). It is assumed that the utilization of this model helps bring the student teachers' cognitions and concerns to the surface and paves the way for more in-depth investigations into the causes of those concerns, the key theme running through the present study. This model has been used to uncover the embedded assumptions in student teachers about teaching and learning (Brandenburg, 2008; Tigchelaar & Korthagen, 2004; Wegner, Weber, & Ohlberger, 2014), emotional dimensions of practice (Williams & Power, 2009), and professional growth (Korthagen & Vasalos, 2005), to discover solutions that can help reshape the nature of teacher education, both in conceptualization and structure. Brandenburg (2008) believes that embedded assumptions are difficult to identify and even more difficult to alter.

This study is an attempt to identify and understand pre-service teachers' concerns and reasons behind those concerns in an Iranian teacher education

context. Such investigation can not only add to the present literature on pre-service teachers, but it can provide insight into the preoccupations of non-native English teachers while fulfilling their practicums which can ultimately broaden teacher education studies. Due to paucity of research on Iranian pre-service English teachers' concerns, findings of this study can shed light on the nature of teachers' concerns and the connections between what they know and what they do, a need which has been mostly felt in previous studies (Borg, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2012; Widdowson, 1990).

To fill this gap, the present study was set up to explore EFL pre-service teachers' concerns about language learning and teaching as well as to investigate the potentials of the ALACT model in promoting cognition refinements about language learning issues in an Iranian teacher education context. It, therefore, addresses the following question:

1. What are major areas of concern about language learning/ teaching in EFL pre-service teachers doing their reflection-based practicums in Iranian teacher training contexts?

3. Method

3.1. Context and Participants

This study took place in the context of a four-year pre-service EFL teacher education program at Farhangian University (the main route for training primary and secondary school teachers in Iran). The university curriculum requires the students to take language teaching courses in the first two years followed by four practicums (Field one to four) and other remaining courses in two subsequent years. These practicums are designed so that pre-service teachers gradually take part in independent teaching practices in schools. Using convenience sampling, a total of 13 pre-service trainees (all females), aged

between 21 and 25, participated in this study. These candidates were studying at one of the branches of the noted university, based in Ahvaz. To reach an in-depth understanding of their experience of the reflective practicum and on the basis of the practicum procedure, these pre-service candidates were divided into groups of 3-4 and were closely observed during their implementing the ALACT stages.

3.2. Instruments
3.2.1. Video-based Freewrites and Field Notes

Bacevich (2010) argues that with video, pre-service teachers can potentially study students, teaching methods, subject matter, and innumerable other aspects that are intertwined within the representation of teaching. Following this lead, all the post-teaching reflective activities assigned to student teachers were based on the video recordings they had provided on their practicums. As the procedure was going on with student teachers doing their practicums in schools, reflection activities were assigned to be done both in private and in class. First, they were required to play their films at home/dorm, reflect upon them the night after each practicum session was over, and write reflective notes. These 'freewrites' (in their L1) which were used as a data-gathering tool enabled the researchers to arrive at a deeper understanding of how pre-service teachers were experiencing their learning about how to teach English. They revolved mostly around the main questions proposed by Korthagen (2001) about various aspects of the situation touching upon the dimensions of wanting, feeling, thinking, and doing, promoting concreteness in the reflective process. (See Appendix I.)

Second, they were inquired about their practice at school, how they felt, etc. in roundtable discussions held at the university campus the day after each practicum was over. During these inquiries, they were free to play/pause their own or peers' videotaped lessons, discuss critical moments, and share ideas

about background reasons or alternatives for their actions. At the end of these individual and group reflections and roundtable sessions, they were given time to jot down their final comments on their own or others' teaching. These notes were collected and used both as data and as prompts for the main stimulated recall interviews and as supports for the codes and themes extracted from the contents. The second author, also their teacher educator, managed the whole procedure including groupings, observations, roundtable discussions, and provision of feedback/assignments. She also took field notes at different stages of observation, reviewing the videos, and other data-gathering steps. These were filed as 'field notes' and were taken as evidence of cognitive changes as well as triggers for the interviews. Following Borg (2015)'s definition, that cognitive change is "a reorganization in content, rather than just changes in the content of what is known", this study was looking for any such evidence which could be linked to the practicums the candidates performed at schools. Since cognitive change is an intangible inaccessible phenomenon which can only be inferred, these in-depth answers were taken as evidence of cognitive changes in this study. All these roundtable discussions were audio-recorded and scrutinized to both triangulate the data and lend credibility to interpretations and inferences obtained through the interviews.

3.2.2. Stimulated- recall Interviews

The use of stimulated recall interviews – interviews based on the analysis of video-recorded practices (Borg, 2015) – has been widely reported in language cognition studies. This phase was conducted by one of the researchers after practicum sessions. Using the prompts obtained from the freewrites and field notes, candidates were inquired about their teaching experience through having

them recall or play/pause their videos. Candidates' responses were audio-taped, transcribed, and content-analyzed too. This part of the procedure which was carried out at the end of the program tended to elicit verbal responses about their emotional and cognitive involvement in their teaching after critical moments of the films were played, discussed, and analyzed in roundtable discussions.

3.3. Data Analysis

The data preparation process used with this qualitative study was transcription. A professional transcriber was employed to transcribe the interviews, field notes, and freewrites. The researchers reviewed the audio-recordings and the typed transcripts for accuracy and to make sure that the information was typed verbatim. The next step was determining meaning units, including organizing the transcripts, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and recoding (Creswell, 2009). Major themes and patterns in the content of all the data were identified and the obtained propositions and themes were studied and compared both individually and in groups. The Nvivo (version 10) software was utilized in these analyses along with manual searching procedures as a control for computerized analyses.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the obtained themes and propositions were checked by an expert in the field of ELT and another one in the field of content analysis, followed by discussions to reach "intercoder or crosschecking agreement" (Creswell, 2009). Results reflected major propositions and themes as well as what the nature/source of such concerns could be. This paper reports four major areas of concern related to student teachers' cognitions about foreign language learning and teaching in terms of

their class experience. These themes include affective considerations, class management concerns, language-related concerns, and tensions.

4. Results

4.1. Major Concerns

Results of the content analyses of the semi-structured interviews and field notes, together, reflected major propositions and themes as well as specific concerns found in student teachers' written or verbal utterances. These themes include affective considerations, classroom management concerns, language-related concerns, and tensions, which constitute the bulk of what the candidates were more likely to reflect upon or were mostly occupied with while fulfilling their practicum assignments.

Table 1.*Summary of Major Concern Areas Extracted from Transcripts*

General Dimensions	Specific Concerns
1 Affective dimension of learning and teaching EFL	Concern for students' feelings
	Enthusiasm for fun in class
	Catering for individual needs
	Extreme enthusiasm for creativity
2 Classroom management	Fear of a noisy class
	Concern for time management
	Concern for task management
	Concern for behavior management
3 Language- related concerns	Concern for own command of English Insufficient communication ability
	No proficiency in classroom discourse
	Concern for the provision of feedback
	Confusion about using students' L1/ L2
4 Tensions	Between (not) presenting grammar
	Between mentor and teacher's lead
	Between real and ideal (theory/practice of CLT)
	Between acting like a student/ like a teacher Need to a model

4.2. Affective Dimension of Learning and Teaching EFL

Student teachers frequently expressed concern for affective dimensions of teaching. They seemed to be constantly preoccupied with care for students' feelings, searching for ways to be loved by most. They felt this would give them the confidence to implement their lesson plans and work more effectively. One candidate (S5) mentioned, "We should be careful not to teach monotonously or they'll get bored and will hate our class". Another participant wrote, "we should do all we can to keep learners satisfied, and see teachers are always on their side, ready to help, like a real friend" (S8). These beliefs stimulated them to look for activities that seemed to add fun and creativity to their teaching. Field notes and observations confirm this concern as evidenced in their extensive use of games and songs to prevent students' discouragement, coldness, or inattentiveness.

4.3. Classroom Management

Another prevailing theme emerging from transcripts was candidates' chief preoccupation with aspects of classroom management including their concern for handling learners and learning tasks, managing class time, presenting their lesson plan, handling group activities, etc. Several references were made to their fear of noisy classes, losing control of the class situation, running short of time, managing tasks and establishing order, coping with misbehaviors, and handling disruptive behavior.

Not surprisingly, the participants expressed concerns about their ability to handle group activities and to make proper use of audiovisual aids during their practices. One candidate wrote, "I was exhausted because better students were bored with my repetitions while weaker students were still not learning. I decided to use the board instead, but I felt I was in the center of students' attention and

this made me embarrassed" (S5). Several others stressed that a teacher should use the board to help students classify information and to enhance learning by engaging more senses of the learner in the learning process. Evaluating peer's practice, one student teacher wrote, "I think the class became a mess because she didn't inform them how to do the group task; she should have clarified the instructions before commencing" (S8). Still another participant was occupied with the tradeoff she had to handle between some tasks and classroom discipline: "Giving them time to see what they are going to present and how is very important, we shouldn't be hasty in class". She added, "some tasks make me so unable to maintain order in my class. I think teachers sometimes need to be less formal than usual" (S7).

4.4. Language- related Concerns

The third major concern of these candidates pertained to language-related issues. They were worried about their own command of English. Language proficiency confidence was what many of them said they totally lacked. One student teacher complained she feared to initiate a simple conversation with students because she felt many were more competent than her due to the private language courses nowadays students attend. She further expressed fear of speaking English in anticipation of committing pronunciation or grammatical mistakes (S4). In line with their methods classes' emphasis on CLT, one candidate wrote, "I know that vocabulary should be presented in context rather than in isolation, but many times I feel I'm unable to do that when I'm in front, giving vocabulary explanations" (S12). What became evident from the interviews was that these candidates were, theoretically, aware of the need to master classroom discourse in English, to use techniques of questioning/ answering, to utilize different techniques of vocabulary presentation such as definition,

synonyms/ antonyms, etc. in their teaching. But their insufficient knowledge of English forced them to resort to their L1. One candidate wrote "I know my biggest problem is with my English and my little teaching knowledge. Sometimes, when trying to define a word, I use more difficult words and this confuses them more" (S6).

Candidates also expressed uncertainty about giving feedback to students. They seemed not to be fully aware of the technique of giving negative or positive feedback to students' errors or correct utterances. "Sometimes we need to react differently because of a certain situation or they will not learn," S12 commented. Many others expressed doubts about whether direct/ indirect, individual/ group feedback was more effective in language classes. They believed that the guidelines in their methods courses were not helpful in real situations, leading them to conclude that any and every student's attempt to use English should be rewarded, no matter how correct or proper it was.

4.5. Tensions

The final theme that emerged in the data constituted several tensions student teachers appeared to grapple with. These candidates frequently expressed tension over (not) presenting grammar or presenting it in students' L1 or in English.

This tension is worsened when there are conflicting forces from either the mentor or the school teacher to make the candidates take their leads. One candidate complained that she was using Farsi (students' L1) explanations just because her associate teacher wanted her to. She was unsure whether the experienced teacher, as they would call school teachers, was giving her the right advice or her mentor who was insisting on using English explanations. In many cases, this tension was a realization of a much bigger dilemma between theories

and methods taught in pre-service programs and the realities of life in the classroom. A candidate wrote, "in the end, I think I will have to resort to the teachers' technique to use L1 explanations all the time because they say these things out of their experiences" (S4).

The final common theme pertained to their fully expressed need to a model to "teach in front of them", and to show them how to "use simple language", "manage the class and establish discipline", even to behave "like a real teacher", commented some. Many said they would not have acted this way if they were supplied with qualified mentors from the start of their education.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to uncover the EFL pre-service teachers' concerns about different areas of language learning and teaching while doing their ALACT- based practicums. The ALACT model was used as a means of explicating what Freeman (2002) calls the hidden side of teaching.

Candidates' concerns revolved mostly over their future careers as English teachers. Their overemphasis on affective aspects led them to express extreme concern for students' feelings as shown by several references made to their fears of losing students' interest in them, being hated or at least disliked by the class, making the class bored, etc. This finding is in line with what Richards (1996) believed to be ruling principles for language teachers, namely maxims of encouragement and involvement and their attempt to keep the students interested and attentive to class. Also, this conclusion is in agreement with what Pajares (1992) finds in his pre-service teachers, i.e., overemphasis on affective factors. One plausible explanation can be their own "fun-less rigid language

classes" (S5) and willingness to create 'a better world' in which English is learned through fun-based activities, giving pleasure and joy to learners. In fact, they harbored ambitions to create what they themselves had never experienced in their language classes. Pre-service teachers seem to believe that they will not face practicing teachers' problems if they can find a place in students' affections.

Congruent with the findings of this study, Debreli (2013) concludes from her review of pre-service literature that foreign language pedagogy candidates are said to have more affective concerns than native language pedagogy candidates, which thus affects their perceptions of language teaching. She maintains, "such differences in perceptions affect the findings of the studies conducted in these contexts, thus making it difficult to compare one finding with another" (p.83). Likewise, the findings of this study, are in line with the identified concerns in pre-service teachers by Numrich (1996), wherein candidates were expressly preoccupied with classroom management and desired for a safe classroom atmosphere, a comfortable environment, and the ability to control the class when students talk.

Participants were concerned that the teacher training program did not provide them with the type of procedural knowledge that would come handy in their actual language teaching classes. Kumaravadivelu (2012) believes learning procedural knowledge (knowing how to manage classroom learning and teaching) along with professional knowledge would be most beneficial for prospective teachers, and lack of this knowledge may be a significant factor in teachers' difficulty in applying the professional knowledge gained through teacher education programs to the practice of everyday teaching (p.29). This discrepancy between the content of teacher training programs and the procedural knowledge that can be exercised in the classroom is consistent with Zheng's (2009) finding that EFL pre-service teachers spend much more time

studying the language than on how to teach it. Finally, classroom management and language-related concerns constitute the third and fourth categories in Calderhead's (1996) list of EFL pre-service teachers' beliefs about teaching; about subject; about learning to teach; about self, and about teaching role.

The final recurrent theme identified in this study is the pronounced tension these candidates experienced while doing their practicums. Phipps and Borg (2009) highlighted a number of tensions between the teachers' stated beliefs and their practices, mainly related to an inductive and contextualized presentation of grammar, meaningful practice, and oral group-work. Contextual factors such as classroom management concerns and student expectations can cause tensions between teachers' beliefs and their practices and that engaging teacher in talking and thinking about these tensions can raise their awareness of them. What stimulated the candidates in this study to put these tensions forward may be again relatable to the way they have been taught at secondary school coupled with what they have learned about more communicatively-based student-centered CLT-oriented principles they are to implement in their practicum settings. Mentors and associate teachers available to these candidates often contribute to perpetuating these tensions and thus trainees may leave the campus and start their teaching career with such unresolved problems.

In explaining the sources of such tensions in practicum settings, Johnson (in Freeman and Richards, 1996) points to trainees' insufficient knowledge about the students which leads them to focus on themselves rather than on their students. Rather, he suggests, they need to come to terms with their own images of teachers and teaching for which they will need to experience some sort of dissonance during the practicum. This can be taken as what Korthagen (2010, p.101) referred to as 'situated learning in action' or what Golombek (1998) called, 'personal practical knowledge', or as Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989)

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termed, 'situated cognition'. If student teachers have not visualized their role as foreign language teachers, attempts to implement innovations in teacher education and related change efforts are not highly likely to bear fruit. Through the ALACT phases, the images, feelings, and behavioral tendencies, triggered by small teaching experiences were brought into awareness (Korthagen, 2001), and inner conflicts and concerns about how to deal with teaching surfaced in the student teachers. These confrontations were regarded as more powerful learning points than theories taught or imposed on them from the outside. The cooperative reflection, peer learning, and evaluation activities inherent in following the ALACT cycle tended to help the candidates face their tensions and build bases for not only individual but whole-group learning.

The findings from this study suggested that the ALACT model as a framework for reflection in and on the action, accompanied by videotaping activities, was a valuable tool for the participants in seeking to understand their practice and to improve their pedagogy, and in turn, to improve their cognitions about language teaching contexts. Implementing such models in teacher training institutes requires alterations to both the campus programs and meetings, and the schools' teaching days and personnel.

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Appendix I

1. What did you want?

2. What did you do?

3. What were you thinking?

4. How did you feel?

 5. What did the students want?

6. What did the students do?

7. What were the students thinking?

8. How did the students feel?