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Reflective templates in language teacher education: A pilot study on Hungarian and Turkish pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs[1]

Abstract

As a contribution to research on language teachers' beliefs in various cultural and educational contexts, this pilot study offers insights into the teaching-related beliefs and experiences of Hungarian (n=12) and Turkish (n=17) pre-service EFL teachers gained from a new reflective instrument that was designed specifically for this purpose. The reflective template—consisting of prompts that help language teachers reflect on their beliefs in the form of short, written statements—is presented in relation to a concise theoretical background and three types of results drawn from the sample (a group profile, a comparison of two groups, and an individual profile). In light of the presented results, the study discusses how the exploration of language teachers' beliefs and experiences can be used for assessing and refining the curricular content of teacher education courses in (and beyond) the countries involved, and how the reflective template can be a tool for language teachers to develop new understandings of their own beliefs and dispositions, and for teacher educators to promote dialogic interaction and knowledge construction in their courses.
Keywords: language teacher beliefs, reflective teaching, reflective template, language teacher education

1 Introduction

In line with the widespread adoption of reflective teaching as a standard model for language teacher education (see Bailey & Springer 2013), research in various cultural and educational contexts has consistently shown that most pre-service language teachers, by the time they enter into institutional teacher education, will have acquired a firm set of teaching-related beliefs (Borg 2003, Dudás 2006), which are known to have a considerable impact on their teaching practice and their receptivity to the theoretical and practical content of their professional coursework (Kumaravadivelu 2012). Another important finding from this line of research–especially for teacher educators–is that the reflective activities in which pre-service EFL teachers are engaged (often in formal, supervised educational settings) have the potential to transform their existing knowledge and dispositions in favourable ways (e.g. Levin & He 2008, Peacock 2001, Yuan & Lee 2014), thus enhancing their professional development. Although the rate of teachers' conceptual change showed great individual variation in some studies (e.g. Borg 2011, Kubanyiova 2009, Peacock 2001), the reported findings imply that if

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[1]   A rudimentary first report on this study was published immediately after data collection (Farkas 2016). This paper is a thoroughly revised version re-published on the permission and request of the author.

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teacher educators select the appropriate reflective activities for pre-service EFL teachers during their professional coursework, they can promote the making of tacit knowledge and dispositions explicit through reflection (Korthagen 2011, Lugossy 2006), the understanding of one's teaching in particular social, cultural, political and educational contexts (Johnson 2006, 2009), and the open discussion of teaching-related experiences and dispositions in local communities of practice (Chick 2015, Johnson 2015, Kumaravadivelu 2012).

Based on these findings and my own experience as a teacher educator, my aim in this study is to introduce a reflective instrument which I originally designed for my professional coursework with Hungarian pre-service EFL teachers, and which turned out to produce data that are highly relevant to the study of teachers' cognitions in various contexts and also in larger groups. In short, my reflective template – as I called the instrument in the first report on this study (Farkas 2016) – is a selection of ten sentence-starters that support pre-service EFL teachers in formulating a set of short, written belief-statements related to the roles and responsibilities of language teachers, the nature and purpose of language teaching, personal experiences as language learners and teachers, as well as visions and expectations about one's teaching practices in the future (see also Farkas in press). Besides presenting results gained in the piloting phase of the instrument about Hungarian (n=12) and Turkish (n=17) pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs, in this study I also describe the process of designing my reflective template, and throw light on both the benefits and limitations of using this instrument for data collection or for promoting reflective activity (Feryok 2012) in language teacher education.

2   Theoretical background

As the focus of the current study is on the designing and piloting phase of my reflective template (as a data collection instrument), in this section I introduce some of the literature that influenced my decisions regarding the content and structure of the instrument–rather than going into detail about the role of reflective activity in language teachers' professional development (see Farkas, in press). As for the designing phase of the instrument, the most important decisions to make were: (1) what I want pre-service EFL teachers to reflect on, and (2) how I want them to reflect on that content. In the following, I use these two questions as the backbones of my discussion.

2.1   *What should pre-service EFL teachers reflect on?*

In answering this question, it must be first pointed out that the content of language teachers' reflective activity should, of course, depend on the teachers' current stage of professional development (including maturity, expertise, and previous experience of reflective practice), the micro- and macro-context(s) in which the activity is carried out, and the purpose of the activity itself (see Johnson 2015, Korthagen 2004). Considering that the pre-service EFL teachers in this project were going through the initial stage of teacher education (consisting of introductory courses prior to the teaching practicum) at the time of data collection, the purpose of this particular activity was to take samples of their beliefs about various factors influencing one's teaching practice and experience (cf. Borg 2003, Kelchtermans 2009), and to subsequently involve the participants in dialogic and constructive interaction about the results of the project (cf. Chick 2015).

As for further considerations about the content of this specific reflective instrument (see Figure 1), a major one was the notion that language teachers' reflective activity should focus

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not only on past experiences and the knowledge and dispositions derived from these (cf. Borg 2003, 2006, Korthagen 2011), but also on teachers' visions and expectations about their future selves in the profession (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova 2014, Kelchtermans 2009). Also, besides directing pre-service EFL teachers' attention to how past experience (e.g. Statements 5 & 9) and future visions (e.g. Statements 2, 3, 7) interact with one's presently held beliefs about language teaching (e.g. Statements 4, 8, 10), another assumption was that the reflective activity should touch upon various levels of personal reflection (Korthagen 2004: 80), including the levels of specific teacher behaviours (e.g. Statement 3), the underlying competencies (e.g. Statement 6), or even one's mission as a teacher (e.g. Statement 2). In the same vein, the reflective template was meant to make pre-service EFL teachers more aware of how their personal practical knowledge (see Golombek 2009) is likely to interact with theory- and policy-based, institutionally mandated descriptions and standards of language teacher knowledge and competence (see e.g. Borg & Edmett 2018, McDiarmid & Clevenger-Bright 2008, Varga-Estefán 2011) mediated through teacher education courses. This kind of balanced awareness of both institutionalised standards and personal-experiential knowledge is especially important in light of research that has shown teacher knowledge to be subjective, context-dependent, emotionally and morally loaded, and dynamically formed through the reflective and narrative activity of the individual (as summarised in Golombek 2009: 155–156).

Finally, apart from the theoretical framework laid out so far, my selection of the topics and themes addressed in the reflective template was influenced by studies elaborating on the institutional and wider social discourses about the nature and purpose of language teaching as well as the roles and responsibilities of language teachers (see Moore 2004), to which the participating pre-service EFL teachers were likely to have been exposed throughout their socialization. Empirical research in various contexts (e.g. Clarke 2008, Moore 2004, Ruohotie-Lyhty 2015) has confirmed that such discourses do often have an impact on EFL teachers' beliefs regarding what good (or effective) teaching consists of (e.g. Statements 1, 2, 3, 8, 10), how language teaching might be positioned in relation to the teaching of other subjects (e.g. Statement 7), and what types of knowledge and capacities are required in the language teaching profession (e.g. Statement 6).

1. If I think of a good language teacher, the first thing that comes to my mind is…
2. If I was working as a teacher, the most important thing I would teach my students is…
3. One thing I would never do as a teacher is…
4. If there's one thing that annoys a teacher, it is…
5. If I could give a piece of advice to my old language teacher, it would be to…
6. Besides the subject knowledge, a language teacher needs to know…
7. The job of a language teacher is *harder / easier*, because…
8. A teacher's personality is *also important / not so important*, because…
9. I once had a language teacher who…
10. The ideal teacher is…

Figure 1. The content and structure of the reflective template serving as data collection instrument

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2.2 How should pre-service EFL teachers reflect on that content?

In line with my stated aim of taking samples of beliefs from groups of pre-service EFL teachers as part of their professional coursework, the structure of the reflective template had to provide a controlled amount of space for participants to express their ideas in various teaching-related domains, and also a framework in which responses could be easily compared, categorised, and presented for subsequent discussion. More specifically, my aim was to design a thought-provoking classroom task, feasible and relevant for pre-service EFL teachers (in various contexts) as a group activity, and also ensuring that a variety of beliefs are expressed in a focused and structured way—thus providing a straightforward framework for analysing the elicited responses.

For these reasons, the reflective template combines the structural features of narrative frames designed by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) and explicit belief-statements elicited in the study of Levin and He (2008). In the former study, Barkhuizen and Wette (2008) aimed to collect uniformly structured narrative data from a large number of EFL teachers in a short period of time, and therefore designed various narrative templates in which the length and the elements of participants' written narratives were determined by six or seven carefully placed sentence-starters on a page. As for the latter approach, Levin and He (2008) analysed the content and sources of pre-service teachers' beliefs (and personal-practical theories) by asking them to explicitly "list, define, elaborate, and justify the beliefs…that guide their teaching" (p. 57), and thus gained relevant and varied data.

Inspired by these approaches and results, the chosen form of my reflective template was a set of ten separate sentence-starters intended to elicit written belief-statements in a randomised sequence, including a focus on both reflective (e.g. Statements 6, 7, 8) and narrative (e.g. Statements 5 & 9) content, as well as a freedom of choice between options in some of the statements (see Statements 7 & 8). Regarding the elicitation of belief-statements in a written form, my choice was influenced–besides practical reasons–by advocates of reflective and narrative writing as a tool in teachers' professional development; more specifically, as a tool that can help teachers (1) connect phenomena and infuse them with interpretation (Johnson 2006), (2) organise their experiences and connect them into a unified identity (Ruohotie-Lyhty 2015), (3) display their experiences and their understandings of these (Barkhuizen & Wette 2008), and, ideally, (4) develop an attitude for continuous engagement in reflective activity (Dutra & Mello 2008).

3   Methodology

3.1 Participants

As indicated earlier, the participants of the pilot study were Hungarian and Turkish pre-service EFL teachers, who filled in the reflective template presented in Figure 1 as part of their professional coursework at their home universities (two different contexts), and agreed to their responses being used anonymously as research data. More specifically, the data presented in the study were collected from one group of 12 Hungarian pre-service EFL teachers in 2015, and one group of 17 Turkish pre-service EFL teachers in 2016–in collaboration with Dombaycı (2016), who analysed the same dataset on a separate project. The age of the participants ranged between 20 to 24 years in each group; gender distribution was not specifically observed (though each group consisted of both male and female participants). As the cultural and educational contexts of the participating groups were

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different, readers are advised to consult Medgyes and Nikolov (2014) and Medgyes (2015) for information on EFL teaching and teacher education in Hungary, and Toköz Göktepe (2015) for information on EFL teaching and teacher education in Turkey.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

Although my data collection instrument was piloted in two consecutive stages and in two different contexts (see previous section), participants' responses were analysed through the same procedure in both groups. After collecting pre-service teachers' belief-statements in paper-and-pencil format, the data of both groups were entered into a separate electronic datafile, in which the statements were grouped under the ten sentence-starters presented in Figure 1. Then, in a process of qualitative content analysis similar to Barkhuizen and Wette's (2008), the belief-statements were further categorised along the themes and patterns emerging from the data itself (Creswell 2007, Dörnyei 2007). Subsequent to this, comparisons within and across the participating groups, and interpretations of the results were made, some of which are presented in the upcoming sections. The codes next to the quoted belief-statements refer to the personal number of the participant and the group from which the participant came—thus, HA#12 refers to a specific pre-service teacher in the Hungarian group, whereas TA#17 is a pre-service teacher from the Turkish group. Considering, once again, that the underlying aim of this study was to pilot the data collection instrument itself, my discussion of results will include a focus on the potential of the reflective template in providing insights into pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs and experiences.

4   Results

The purpose of this section is to illustrate three ways of looking at results gained from the reflective templates of Hungarian and Turkish pre-service EFL teachers–namely, (1) looking at themes emerging in one group of participants, (2) comparing themes emerging in two participant groups, and (3) looking at the individual profile of one specific participant on the basis of the reflective template. Presented in this sequence, the selected results are interpreted in relation to the relevant background literature, but–due to space limitations–the sections do not provide an in-depth reflection on all the statements that make up the reflective template (Figure 1), only an insight into the components used for illustration (but see also Farkas in press).

4.1 Emerging themes in the Hungarian group of pre-service EFL teachers

To get an insight into some group-specific results, let us first look at the Hungarian participants' responses to Statement 5 of the reflective template (see Table 1), which presupposes a capacity of pre-service EFL teachers to use their current knowledge of language learning-teaching for reflecting critically on teacher behaviours and competences that they observed as part of their own language learning experience in the past (cf. Borg 2003, Korthagen 2011).

	If I could give a piece of advice to my old language teacher, it would be to…
Theme 1.1	• be more helpful and open-minded. (HA#1) • be more tolerant, give more help, and more time to study. (HA#8) • be more patient with the ones who struggle with the language or are just not as talkative. (HA#10) • be more open-minded. Adolescents have a great set of new emotions, so they cannot be chilled all the time. (HA#3)
Theme 1.2	• be more practical. (HA#11) • practice communication in class a lot, and to put words in a meaningful context. (HA#6) • develop all skills continuously: not only grammar and reading, but also speaking, listening, vocabulary, and culture. (HA#4)
Theme 1.3	• use other materials as well, not only the textbook, which is boring and doesn't support language development. (HA#7) • be more organized and creative regarding tasks. (HA#9) • bring interesting tasks for the lessons. (HA#5)
Theme 1.4	• teach me language and not just about the language, and to use the L2 in class instead of the L1 only. (HA#12)
Theme 1.5	• relax, breathe, but don't take the constant abuse that she got from students. (HA#2)

Table 1. Emerging themes in the Hungarian group

As Table 1 shows, three of the five emerging themes in this group (Themes 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) were relatively frequent even in a small sample of participants, thus pointing at potentially salient patterns in beliefs about a language teacher's roles and responsibilities. Among these, the first (Theme 1.1) was an emphatic concern about the (in)appropriate functioning of the teacher-learner relationship (Ehrman & Dörnyei 1998), or, more specifically, about teachers' capacity for adapting their teaching to learners' needs and individual differences (Varga-Estefán 2011), and for communicating an awareness for "the learner's educative well-being in the learning process" (La Ganza 2008: 66). The two other recurring themes (Themes 1.2 & 1.3) were related to the content and methods of language instruction, and displayed many participants' awareness of concepts such as the simultaneous development of various language skills, the role of contextualisation and communicative tasks in foreign language acquisition, as well as the role of authentic materials in motivating learners to be engaged in the learning process (see e.g. Harmer 2007, Nunan 2015).

What also has to be pointed out here is that–as in most qualitative research–infrequent themes (such as Theme 1.5) may also capture important 'truths' (Golombek 2009, Johnson 2006, 2009) about the topic being studied, thus providing invaluable substance for further reflective discussion within communities of practice (e.g. Kumaravadivelu 2012). In this case, the remark of HA#2 (Theme 1.5) about the language teacher's vulnerability (see Kelchter-mans 2009) threw light on a less frequently exposed 'problem' that teachers may encounter in

this profession–a problem which, if given more attention during professional coursework, can be discussed and potentially resolved through continued dialogue and problem-solving activity (Chick 2015, Johnson 2015).

4.2 Emerging themes in the Turkish group of pre-service EFL teachers

In order to create space for the comparison of themes emerging in the two participating groups, in this section I present the Turkish participants' responses to Statement 5 of the reflective template (see Table 2), thus providing insight into a group profile similar to the one presented earlier.

	If I could give a piece of advice to my old language teacher, it would be to…
Theme 2.1	• know about us better. (TA#11) • be aware of the needs and motivation of your students. (TA#13)
Theme 2.2	• there are others in language, do not stick with grammar. (TA#9) • let us talk. (TA#10) • change nothing but the amount of students' talking time. It should have been more. (TA#16) • make use of communication more with each other. (TA#6) • take notice of pronunciation. (TA#12)
Theme 2.3	• use different but new methods to teach language. (TA#15) • use more pictures, visual things in primary school. (TA#4)
Theme 2.4	• do not every time use L1 in the classroom! (TA#3) • use English as much as you can in the lesson. (TA#8) • please use English in the classroom. (TA#14)
Theme 2.5	• keep it up! (TA#7) • I have no advice because he is perfect. He is my model. (TA#1)
Theme 2.6	• learn English and smile more. (TA#17) • quit teaching. (TA#5)

Table 2. Emerging themes in the Turkish group

The sequence of themes in Table 2 is intentional: its function is to indicate a remarkable correspondence between some recurring beliefs and experiences (i.e. Themes 1.1 & 2.1, 1.2 & 2.2, 1.3 & 2.3, and 1.4 & 2.4, respectively) in two groups that were from characteristically different (as one would expect) cultural and educational contexts. What this implies, on the one hand, is that the knowledge, beliefs, and discourses that pre-service EFL teachers relied on when reflecting on their experiences were not only similar, but also in line with language teachers' beliefs and discourses in multiple contexts (e.g. Borg 2011, Clarke 2008, Kubanyiova 2009, Yuan & Lee 2014) as well as with the content of instruction (e.g. Harmer 2007, Nunan 2015) and the teacher standards (e.g. Borg & Edmett 2018, Varga-Estefán 2011)

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mediated in teacher education programmes. On the other hand, considering that the responses above were meant to reflect what some language teachers supposedly *did not do well*, the emerging common themes might also serve as indicators as to what curricular content should be better mediated in (and probably also beyond) the countries involved. In this regard, many of the emerging themes in the two groups–including the extreme remarks in Theme 2.6–seem to call for continued research on and observation of what happens in the language classroom (cf. Medgyes 2015, Toköz Göktepe 2015).

4.3 The belief-statements of one specific Hungarian pre-service EFL teacher

As mentioned earlier, the third type of result gained from the reflective template–besides a profile of a specific group or a comparison of more than one groups–is an individual profile of specific participants. To see an example of this type of result, let us now look at the belief-statements of HA#8 (see Figure 2), a Hungarian participant whose profile was randomly selected from the larger sample.

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1   If I think of a good language teacher, the first thing that comes to my mind is ***that he/she keeps students' expectations in mind; tries to fit his/her teaching methods to the relevant age-group, class type.***

2   If I was working as a teacher, the most important thing I would teach my students is ***to be confident and hard-working, because with these two they can achieve anything.***

3   One thing I would never do as a teacher is ***being aggressive with my students.***

4   If there is one thing that annoys a teacher, it is ***the laziness of students. Teachers don't mind a wrong answer in the lesson, but they hate when children just don't care.***

5   If I could give a piece of advice to my old language teacher, it would be to ***be more tolerant, give more help, and more time to study.***

6   Besides the subject knowledge, a language teacher needs to know ***basic knowledge.***

7   The job of a language teacher is ***harder*** / *easier*, because ***they have to teach students how to think in another language.***

8   A teacher's personality is ***also important*** / *not so important*, because ***it has a huge influence on classroom work and on students' attitude.***

9   I once had a language teacher who ***let some students cheat during tests. I found it unfair.***

10 The ideal teacher is ***doesn't mind repeating herself when students don't understand something.***

Figure 2. The belief-statements of one Hungarian participant (HA#8)

In interpreting these findings, the most salient feature to notice is HA#8's heightened awareness of an appropriate (see Ehrman & Dörnyei 1998) relationship between learners and the teacher (Statements 1, 3, 9, 10), which clearly stemmed from the participant's own negative learning experience (Statements 5, 9). Besides highlighting the need for teachers to be empathic (Statements 1 & 5) and to treat students fairly (Statement 9), the participant also displayed a belief (see Statement 2) in the language teacher as a charismatic subject (Moore 2004), whose task is not only to teach the foreign language, but also to raise motivated, self-reflective, and autonomous learners, for whom the foreign language is only a tool to achieve success in other fields of life. Together with Statements 7 and 8, however, Statement 2 might

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be seen as a manifestation of self-handicapping beliefs (Farkas in press, Peacock 2001), which many pre-service teachers tend to hold due to a lack of expertise in the profession, and which teacher educators are supposed to filter out and potentially deconstruct through dialogic reflective activity with the teachers involved (Chick 2015, Johnson 2015, Peacock 2001, Yuan & Lee 2014).

If compared with the group profiles presented in Tables 1 and 2, the profile of HA#8 shows remarkably little attention to the technical aspects of language teaching, such as the balanced treatment of language skills or the appropriate choice of teaching methods, materials, and tasks. This, arguably, is yet another indication that the reflective activities in which pre-service teachers are engaged should not only focus on externalising and reflecting on their own beliefs and dispositions, but also expose them to the ideas of other members in their professional community (Johnson 2015, Kumaravadivelu 2012) and thus raise their awareness of alternative (yet equally realistic) understandings, which may serve as cues to conceptual change and professional growth (Yuan & Lee 2014).

5   Discussion

5.1   *Reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the reflective template*

In light of the pilot results presented so far, I now turn to reflecting on the strengths and limitations of the reflective template as an instrument for professional coursework and for data collection about language teachers' beliefs and experiences. Although these reflections are largely based on my inferences from the results of the pilot study, the number of responses to sentence-starters in the template suggests that the face validity of the instrument (Mackey & Gass 2005: 107) can be considered stable and sufficiently high. More specifically, the fact that each sentence-starter was completed by at least eleven participants in the Hungarian group (n=12) and at least 16 participants in the Turkish group (n=17) supports my assumption that the instrument is relevant and feasible–both in content and form–for pre-service EFL teachers in various contexts. Considering that the pilot results did provide insight into various domains of language teachers' beliefs (cf. Borg 2003, Korthagen 2004), the content validity of the instrument (Mackey & Gass 2005: 107) is also supported.

At the same time, similarly to the limitations identified by Barkhuizen and Wette (2008), it must be pointed out that the length and elaborateness of participants' responses is somewhat limited by the form of the instrument itself. In other words, while some belief-statements (e.g. Statement 6 in Figure 2) can be considered vague and inconclusive compared to others, the instrument as a whole provides little space for exploring *why* the participants gave the responses they did. What this means, therefore, is that the reflective template only serves the function of providing an overview of beliefs that characterise a sample of language teachers or a specific individual, and it is better to be complemented with other data collection instruments and methods—such as interviews or classroom observation (Borg 2006)—if more in-depth reflection is desired.

As for some further strengths of the instrument, it should be emphasised once again that the reflective template, as a thought-provoking classroom task, is a feasible tool for promoting teacher reflection and awareness in relevant domains (see Theoretical background), and for engaging the participating pre-service or in-service teachers in subsequent dialogic interaction and knowledge construction (Chick 2015, Johnson 2006, 2009, 2015, Kumaravadivelu 2012) as part of their professional coursework.

6   Conclusion

As a contribution to research on language teachers' beliefs in the framework of reflective teaching (and of professional coursework in language teacher education), the aims of this pilot study were (1) to devise a new data collection instrument through which an overview of teaching-related beliefs and experiences can be gained from individuals as well as from larger groups, and (2) to explore some aspects of pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs in a group of Hungarian and a group of Turkish participants. By focusing on emerging themes related to the roles and responsibilities of language teachers and the nature and purpose of language teaching, the study produced results with crucial implications for assessing and refining the content of teacher education courses to better fit the needs as well as the existing knowledge and dispositions of pre-service or in-service language teachers. In light of the results, the study is also meant to encourage teacher educators to use the reflective template as a tool for promoting individual teacher reflection and opening up possibilities for dialogic interaction among language teachers (Chick 2015, Johnson 2015), thereby creating a basis for conceptual change (Kubanyiova 2009, Yuan & Lee 2014) and professional growth.

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