Teacher Beliefs and Self-efficacy of Pre-service Korean EFL Teachers

Allison Bill

(Jeonju University)

Allison Bill. "Teacher Beliefs and Self-efficacy of Pre-service Korean EFL Teachers." *Studies in English Language & Literature* **44.1 (2018): 199-217.** Identity formation, and transformation, is an ongoing process throughout our lives, and in the various parts of our lives (family, work, and play). Professional identity clearly will change over the course of our careers. The importance of supporting pre-service (and in-service) teachers through this identity development process was the impetus behind encouraging students in a pre-service teacher training program to reflect on their beliefs about teaching and their self-efficacy as teachers. A small-scale survey study was done with pre-service Korean EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers, where they were asked about their beliefs with respect to what a teacher is, does, etc., and then asked whether they consider themselves to be teachers, or to be ready to be a teacher. The surveys were given at the beginning and end of a semester, and students were also asked how their beliefs had changed over that period of time. The results reveal five themes in their beliefs about teachers (subject knowledge, transmission of knowledge, teaching methodology, teacher roles, and teachers as role models); generally low teacher self-efficacy at this early stage in their teacher training; and some changes in their beliefs and their knowledge base over the study period. The study reinforces the need to support PSTs as they develop their teacher identity and teacher self-efficacy. (Jeonju University)

Key Words: pre-service teachers, identity, self-efficacy, teacher beliefs, reflection

I. BACKGROUND

Preparing pre-service teachers (hereafter, PSTs) for their future profession is the

main goal of any pre-service teacher training program. There are a number of important factors involved in this process, among them being how the PSTs understand their role as a teacher, and how they get to the point of seeing themselves as teachers (i.e teacher self-efficacy). This study looks at the beliefs PSTs have, how those beliefs change over time, and how those beliefs affect their identity and self-efficacy.

1.1 Teacher beliefs

As young people enter the education field, they often view the right way to teach as the way they were taught. Their theories about teaching are based on their own experiences (Pillen, Den Brok, & Beijaard, 2013). The teachers they observed are their models for what to do (or not to do). PSTs' beliefs have a strong impact on how they believe teachers should teach (Agcam & Babanoglu, 2016). In fact, teacher beliefs have a large effect on how teaching and learning takes place in the classroom (OECD, 2009).

However, what happens when the theories about teaching have changed as PSTs transition from being students into their time as the teacher? The idea of student-centered classrooms is relatively new in Korea, so our students are likely to struggle with this type of "teacher's role in general, and . . . knowledge and skills in particular" (Beijaard, Verloop, & Vermunt, 2000, p. 752). What does it mean to them to be a facilitator or encourager when they are used to teachers as the 'sage on the stage'? And what happens when they head to their practicum only to discover that the theories they have learned in their pre-service training clash with the theories their supervising teachers have held onto for many years. So many stakeholders in education have clear, but distinct, expectations about teachers (Pillen, et al., 2013). The PSTs' actions will be driven by their desires to feel recognized, safe, and part of the community (Norton, 1997).

The tensions they will feel as they try to balance their ideas with the different

viewpoints of co-teachers, their professors, their students, etc., can be very difficult to handle. They are juggling their "beliefs about teaching, learning, and learners; subject matter (i.e. EFL or language); self as a teacher, or the role of a teacher" (Calderhead, 1995, as cited in Borg, 2001, p. 197). Teaching is not a robotic, step-by-step process, but involves "inherent personal, ethical and moral dimension[s]" (Mann, 2005, p. 105) which PSTs will have to learn to negotiate. They need to be allowed the freedom for their teaching beliefs to develop and evolve as they match their training to the reality of classroom teaching. Grijalva and Barajas (2013, as cited in Kavanoz, Yksel, & Varol, 2017, p. 121) found in their longitudinal study that "pre-service teachers steadily became cognizant of the complicated issues inherent in teaching and the teaching preparation process provided them with the opportunities and theoretical basis to understand such complexities". They start with the external beliefs that are taught to them, and as they get the opportunity to practice teaching "pre-service teachers take those beliefs in, confront them, modify them, and they become personally meaningful being internalised as concepts" (Barahona, 2014, p. 117, verb tense changed). This is why they need a strong support network (Pillen, et al., 2013), need to be empowered by as many resources as we can give them (Norton, 1997), and need to be given tools they can use to handle this stress, such as reflection.

1.2 Reflection

Reflection is an inner dialogue that increases awareness (Mann, 2005), in this case awareness of theory and practice. It can be done individually, or as part of a group. Research has shown that teachers who reflect are better at tracking what's happening in their classrooms, making choices of what to do next, and knowing how to handle challenging learners (Mann, 2005). Patterson and Seabrooks-Blackmore found that using a combination of classroom management training and self-reflection improved PSTs' self-efficacy (2017).

It isn't just about reflection, however. There must be a balance between offering "frameworks based on theory and research findings" (Beijaard, et al., 2000, p. 752) for students to try out, and encouraging them to reflect on why something works or doesn't. They need to balance reflection and theory with practice in a real world context (Freese, 2006, Mann, 2005, Patterson & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2017). They need to acquire knowledge of various kinds, such as "received knowledge, personal knowledge, experiential knowledge and local knowledge" (Mann, 2005, p. 106). And they need to start doing it more independently, through 'self-direction' (Mann, 2005), moving towards their identity as educators.

1.3 Identity

What is identity? Norton defines it as "how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future" (1997, p. 410). In fact, in some ways it is not only constructed, but also negotiated (Subtirelu, 2011). If we consider that one's identity is formed as part of "an ongoing process that involves the interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences as one lives through them" (Kerby, 1991, as cited in Beijaard et al., 2000, p. 750), then at least in terms of their teacher identity, PSTs can be seen to be at the beginning of this process. We can see our teacher training students' identity as a 'product' of where they've come from, and a 'process' they are just starting to go through (Pillen, et al., 2013). It is also important to remember that identity will vary depending on who is asking the questions, and what the purpose of the questions is perceived to be (Vasquez, 2011). For those helping to train PSTs, the hope is that they will develop an identity of a confident, capable teacher.

1.4 Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy can be defined as "the belief that one holds about one's capability with regard to the domain of teaching. Self-efficacy beliefs are a powerful predictor of behavior" (Bandura, 1977, as cited in Pfitzner-Eden, 2016, p. 241). Those with stronger self-efficacy are more able to overcome stressful situations in the teaching context (Uztosun, 2016). There are a number of factors which can have a strong impact on teachers' self-efficacy. According to Cansoy and Türkoğlu, these factors may be personal or environmental, including linking previous positive life experiences to their competence as teachers, choosing good teacher role-models and learning from them, creating a support network for themselves, and maintaining good physical and emotional health (2017, p. 25).

One issue which is particularly relevant to teacher trainees is the struggle some non-native speaker teachers have regarding the interaction between their less-than-perfect English ability and their teacher self-efficacy – leading them to reduced confidence in their ability to teach English (Choi & Lee, 2016). Students' and colleagues' expectations of what an English teacher is may also affect their growing sense of self-efficacy (Subtirelu, 2011). Pre-service teacher training plays an important part in developing teacher self-efficacy (Choi & Lee, 2016).

PSTs have so much to face as they progress toward the identity of teacher. They have to develop teacher knowledge. They have to reflect on how that knowledge matches past and present experiences. They have to aim for self-directed development. If students (in this case PSTs) are expected to be willing to learn new ways of doing, shouldn't their instructors be willing to do the same? The hope for this study was to learn from the participants' reflections. What are they struggling with? How can the teacher training courses be readjusted by those with the "role as a teacher educator [to] better understand the barriers to learning that some preservice teachers encounter" (Freese, 2006, p. 101).

As a result of the students' journey through personal and professional identity

development, using self-direction as they learn to reflect on both theory and practice, the goal was to better understand this process. Here are the research questions which guided this study:

RQ 1: What are the participants' beliefs about teachers and teaching?
RQ 2: Do the participants have self-efficacy as teachers?
RQ 3: Does their self-efficacy change over the course of the semester?
RQ 4: Do they think their beliefs about teaching have changed over the course of the semester?

II. METHOD

In this study, it was decided to introduce pre-service Korean EFL teachers to the idea of reflecting on teaching. Most of the participants did not seem familiar with this idea. They were regularly encouraged on the importance of reflection, and were asked twice to write about their developing concepts and self-concepts. These writings were analyzed for themes, and for changes over the period of a 15-week semester.

2.1 Context

This study took place in a mid-level private university in a provincial area of Korea. The university has an English Education department and an English Language and Culture (L&C) department, and both departments offer courses that lead to certification as English teachers (allowing graduates to write the government teachers exam). The English Education program is for their own department students, while the courses in the English L&C department attract not only eligible English department students, but also students wishing to earn their English teaching certificate as a double major.

English L&C department teaching certification students take a variety of courses from their second to their fourth year of university. Two of those courses are teaching methodology courses, taught in English by the researcher over consecutive semesters. The remaining courses are taught in Korean by members of the School of Education. Students have some flexibility over when to take the courses, so the English department methodology courses always have a mix of students who start in the first or second semester.

The Korean education system (both public school and university) is still closer to the knowledge transmission end of the teacher-centered/student-centered continuum. As such, the idea of encouraging students' self-awareness of what they still want or need to learn about teaching might be new for some students. It may help the students to become "teachers who are problem posers, problem solvers, and ultimately, reflective practitioners" (McEwan, 1996, as cited in Freese, 2006, p. 102).

2.2 Participants

The participants were nine undergraduate students in their third and fourth year of university. Six were eligible for the track to teaching certification: three English majors, two Special Education majors, and one English Education major who was auditing the class. The other three were taking the course out of interest, but weren't eligible for certification as teachers: two English majors, and one Romanian automotive engineering major. Seven of the students were taking their first English methodology course, and one was auditing the course. The remaining student (one of the Special Education students) was taking the second of the English methodology courses, having started halfway through the previous year.

2.3 Data Collection

In the first and final weeks of the spring semester of 2017, students were asked

to answer a self-reflective survey about their beliefs on teaching. The first week's survey asked 1) about their beliefs regarding what a teacher is, does, etc., and 2) whether they consider themselves to be teachers or to be ready to be teachers. The final week's survey added a further question 3) about whether their beliefs had changed over the semester. Students were also asked to give permission for their answers to be included in this study.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed inductively, based on Miles and Huberman (1994)'s sequence of steps, whereby the themes identified came from sifting through the participants' reflections, rather than being established before reading. The participants' responses were read and re-read, exploring the ideas they shared, and finding common themes related to teacher beliefs and self-efficacy. Out of this analysis came the results shared here.

III. FINDINGS

As this study looked at answers to three survey questions, regarding PSTs' beliefs about teaching and teachers, regarding their beliefs about their preparedness to be teachers, and regarding changes in their beliefs, the findings have been divided into those three sections.

3.1 Teacher Beliefs

The PSTs were asked to think about teaching and being a teacher. "What is a teacher? What do they do? What do they know?" (survey question). It is likely that if fifty people on the street were asked to define what a teacher is, there would be

fifty answers, such as "a profession which requires expertise, academic study, professional formation and a university degree" (Agcam & Babanoglu, 2016, p. 21). However, it is also likely that there would be some clear themes in those answers. The participants in this study provided a wide variety of answers to this section of the survey which were analyzed and classified into categories. Five themes came out of the students' responses: subject knowledge, transmission of knowledge, teaching methodology, teacher roles, and teachers as role models.

3.1.1 Subject knowledge

Several of the PSTs in the study mentioned the need for teachers to have a good grasp of the subject they are teaching, with statements such as, "teachers have a knowledge of his or her major or subject they will teach" (pre-semester survey, Seongmin[1]), "I think a teacher is a person who has a lots of information about her/his subject" (pre-semester survey, Eunji), "a teacher would know many things which he or she [is][2] going to teach" (pre-semester survey, Hyunwoo), and "to teach a knowledge, the teacher should know it" (post-semester survey, Juyoung). These beliefs about the need for a good knowledge of English (as the subject matter these PSTs will teach as in-service teachers) will reappear in their answers to the second part of the survey, about their teacher self-efficacy.

3.1.2 Knowledge transmission

Six of the nine participants brought up the belief that it is a teacher's job to transmit knowledge to students. "Teaching and helping to know to the students" was the first statement Seongmin wrote (pre-semester survey). In fact, teachers should be

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[1] This and all participant names are aliases.

[2] Participants' English grammar and word choice mistakes have only been fixed when they block understanding.

able to "explain tough topics to understand with simple words" (Yohan, pre-semester survey). This should be done professionally (Mingi, pre-semester survey) by giving "lots of information to students and students learn from it" (Mingi, post-semester survey).

3.1.3 Teaching methodology

The PSTs also had beliefs about the teaching skills that should be developed, though some were a little vague, perhaps due to their novice status in the field. Seven of the nine students had not completed a teaching practicum, so they are still near the beginning of the "cumulative and gradual" (Cabarolu & Roberts, 2000, as cited in Kavanoz, et al., 2017, p. 121) process of developing their understanding of teaching from the perspective of the teacher rather than of the learner (a role they are more familiar with). Seongmin simply states that teachers "should teach the students in the most effective way, as they learnt and studied about that field" (pre-semester survey), while Yohan believes that teachers "can make everything look easier than it is" through the art of teaching (pre-semester survey). By the end of the semester, Juyoung believed that a teacher not only "knows *that* s/he should teach and lead students, but also knows *how* to teach and *what* s/he would teach" (post-semester survey, emphasis added). Only one PST gave specifics on methodology, clarifying that in their estimation "a class shouldn't be a teacher-led. In the class, all of students should participate" (Eunji, pre-semester survey).

3.1.4 Teacher roles

Another topic which came up in the PSTs' writing was the variety of roles that teachers can take on. Some of those mentioned by the participants were teachers as surrogate parents (spending a lot of time "with students in their childhood" (Eunji, post-semester survey)), motivators (Hwayoung & Jihye, pre-semester survey),

correctors and supporters (Yohan, post-semester survey). Hyeri (post-semester survey) shared her belief that teachers are not supposed to be just focused on knowledge delivery, and Jihye also touched on this, suggesting that teachers "should teach not only a school curriculum, but also invisible things like courage, confidence, hope, effort, and so on" (pre-semester survey). The saddest observation about the role of teachers came from Hwayoung in her reflection on the self-sacrificial role of the teachers on the Sewol ship as it sank. "They are self-giving teachers" (pre-semester survey).

3.1.5 Teachers as role models

One role in particular that eight of the nine participants alluded to was that of role model to their students. "They are responsible for being a good model to the students, which means being moral, being diligent, and living a clean life" (Seongmin, pre-semester survey). Words that were mentioned included professional, humane, dedicated, patient. Yohan felt that teachers should be "someone you can look up to,... not violent, racist or sexist" (pre-semester survey). Mingi believed that teachers should teach students "how to live in the society" (pre-semester survey) and later clarified that this includes encouraging students "to find their own way, like a guardian" (post-semester survey). Hyeri went into even greater detail: a "teacher should be always ready to listen to students' voice, their happiness, sadness and anger and share their worrying things, give wise advice. That's a teacher job I think, 'understanding'" (post-semester survey).

In terms of the first research question, RQ 1: What are the participants' beliefs about teachers and teaching?, a wide variety of beliefs were mentioned by participants, but the five previously mentioned themes were the most commonly discussed topics.

3.2 Self-Efficacy

The second section of the survey asked the PSTs to reflect on whether they see themselves as teachers. "Do you think of yourself as a teacher? Are you ready to be a teacher? Are you nervous about it?" (survey question). One common theme in the responses was a connection made between English ability and teaching ability.

> I like English but to be a English teacher, I have to know more about English. My main field of interest is vocabulary. So I need to learn about listening, speaking, writing, grammar and more specific pronunciation. When I'll be well-versed in that English parts, I'll be ready for being an English teacher. (pre-semester survey, Ji-hye)

The danger comes when it is believed that linguistic ability means someone is automatically a good teacher. "English teachers in Korea equated competent English teachers with proficient English users" (Hiver, 2013, as cited in Choi & Lee, 2016, p. 52). Some of these PSTs' future students will even have "strong opinions about teaching quality, style, and other factors based purely on the speaker's 'native' or 'non-native' accent" (Subtirelu, 2011, p. 2). Though English linguistic ability is important for teaching English (Choi & Lee, 2016), one participant came to the realization that perfection is not a realistic or helpful goal:

> I thought a teacher should be perfect because many Koreans are forced to do so and the teacher is a model for students. However, now I changed my mind that being perfect is also important but sometimes not being perfect can make a better teacher. (post-semester survey, Juyoung)

Another common, but perhaps less surprising theme, is a generally low self-efficacy about teaching. These are, after all, PSTs, most of whom are in the early to middle stages of their teacher training coursework. They need to learn to handle the "professional identity tensions regarding their changing role from student

to teacher" (Pillen et al., 2013, p. 86). Their comments included statements such as, "I really didn't think of myself as a teacher." (Hyunwoo, pre-semester survey), "I don't think I'm ready to be a teacher yet." (Seongmin, pre-semester survey), or "I still need to learn lots of things to teach students" (Mingi, pre-semester survey). Eunji's survey answers reveal her growing anxiety: "At first, when I thought 'I'll be a teacher!', I was confident. I thought that I could be that. But, more and more studied to be a teacher, I realized that it is really hard" (post-semester survey).

Thankfully, these PSTs seem to have their future learners in mind as they consider whether they are ready to teach.

> One thing that I worry about is influence on student. Honestly, I'm just little afraid of causing bad effect on kids. Teacher is as important as parents to kids or students. Students 'learn' from teacher. Even in Korea, students spend more time with teacher than parents. So, teacher should be careful with behavior and words. (pre-semester survey, Hyeri)

Hyeri later revisited this worry, "I always worry about 'hurt' thing. I don't really want to hurt to students" (post-semester survey), while Seongmin revealed his growing desire to improve as a teacher: "I need to study more about what I have learnt so that I can teach them effectively" (post-semester survey).

One unique, and perhaps perceptive, comment came from a student who has spent several years abroad. "The world is changing, so some or more than some students have gone abroad to study and some of them may have better skills or knowledge than the existing teachers in the aspect of speaking and writing" (pre-semester survey, Seongmin). These pre-service English teachers likely have better English than many of their childhood English teachers, so perhaps they worry that their future students will be more competent than they are.

There was a clear distinction between the one student (Hwayoung) who was taking this course as the second half of the program, and those who were just beginning. Hwayoung completed her four-week teaching practicum during this

semester. In her pre-semester survey, she shared,

> I'm not a teacher yet. But I ready to be a teacher. Last year I don't have confident.
> Because I always thought that I have to study more and more⋯. But now I really
> want to be a special [education] teacher.

On the post-semester survey, her response to the question, 'Do you think of yourself
as a teacher?' was "Yes. I do. This semester I do teaching training. So I met many
students with various disabled. When I taught them first, I was really nervous. But
it was very interesting. And I thought, teacher is a my job."

Hwayoung's growing confidence and teacher self-efficacy reinforce Pfitzner-Eden's
findings that "increases in [teacher self-efficacy] during the practicum were
associated with decreases in preservice teachers' intention to quit" (2016, p. 240).
The participants need to give themselves a chance to get to the practicum stage of
their training, to hopefully get past feelings like Yohan's. He started the semester
thinking of being an engineer, a teacher, or an entrepreneur (pre-semester survey),
but his post-semester survey included the statement that "I do not think I am ready
to be a teacher and I will probably never be a teacher".

In terms of the second and third research questions, RQ 2: Do the participants
have self-efficacy as teachers?, and RQ 3: Does their self-efficacy change over the
course of the semester?, most of the PSTs in this study do not have strong
self-efficacy, and their self-efficacy remained stable or worsened over the course of
the semester. The one exception, as previously noted, is the PST who is almost
finished her teacher training, and who completed her practicum during this semester.

3.3 Changes in Beliefs about Teaching

The third question on the post-semester survey asked the students about changes
in teacher beliefs. "Do you think your beliefs about teaching have changed this
semester? Why/why not?" (survey question). This question is important to consider

because "beliefs mediate preservice teachers' learning,… they can potentially develop into concepts, [and they] are shaped and reshaped as preservice teachers engage in the activity of learning to teach English" (Barahona, 2014, p. 116).

Some of the PSTs felt that the course had reinforced previous beliefs. As Seongmin said, "I learnt more consciously about what I didn't recognize, even though I experienced it through my school years" (post-semester survey). Hyeri's revelation was that it was "not changed but it's more completely complete" (post-semester survey).

Yohan spoke for several of the students when he said,

> It changed my view about teaching. It is a lot harder than I expected and it involves too much work sometimes. It can be fun for some persons, but not for me. I do not think I was made for teaching (post-semester survey).

His classmate Mingi added to this theme by saying, "Before I learn how to teach the students, I thought that it won't be to hard and fun to teach students. However, from this class, I learned many thinks that I didn't think about as a teacher" (post-semester survey).

A few PSTs felt that they had become aware of things they didn't know, but made complete sense. Hyeri commented on a class discussion on written feedback, where the researcher explained her use of pink, purple, and green pens for giving feedback, instead of red. Hyeri said, "It's just a simple thing, but I can feel the love or mind for respect students. I was very impress[ed]" (post-semester survey).

In terms of the fourth research question, RQ 4: Do they think their beliefs about teaching have changed over the course of the semester?, five of the seven students who answered the question did perceive some change in their teacher beliefs, and the remaining two felt that their knowledge base had improved over the semester.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study reinforced the idea that the PSTs are in the process of developing their beliefs about teaching and learning, as well as their identity as a (future) teacher.

4.1 Participants' reactions

4.1.1 Teacher beliefs

Five themes emerged from the data. The PSTs expressed teacher beliefs related to teacher subject knowledge, transmission of knowledge to students, teaching methodology, various teacher roles, and in particular the importance of teachers as role models.

4.1.2 Self-efficacy

Other than the participant who completed her teaching practicum during the study, the PSTs expressed a generally low self-efficacy about teaching. One area they worried about was how their English ability will affect their teaching ability, which is a common worry for non-native speaker teachers of English (Choi & Lee, 2016).

4.1.3 Changes in beliefs

Seven of the nine participants in this study did feel that their beliefs had changed over the course of the study. The remaining two expressed that though their beliefs had not changed much, their knowledge base about teaching had improved.

4.2 Recommendations

With the shallow and generalized belief statements about teachers, it is clear that

the PSTs still need to learn more about their future profession. As they continue in their training as pre-service teachers, they will learn more about teaching procedures, how to balance teacher-centered and student-centered time, etc. It is important to balance the trainer's perception of what the trainees need with allowing the PSTs to reflect on the areas they lack knowledge. Trainees should be encouraged to pursue knowledge according to their individual needs.

In terms of self-efficacy, PSTs need to be able to construct a confident teacher identity which overcomes any negative perceptions with regards to their non-native speaker status (Subtirelu, 2011). In particular, it will be helpful to continue to train the PSTs in the use of reflection as a tool. Regular opportunities for individual and group reflection will help in this process (Flórez & Basto, 2017).

With respect to the teacher trainer's role, this study reinforced the need for trainers to continue to support their students as their teacher identity and teacher self-efficacy continue to develop. In particular, PSTs need to be reminded that they don't need to be completely ready to be teachers today, nor will they be perfect teachers on the day they start their first teaching job. In addition, trainers need to encourage them to be self-directed in their learning of teacher knowledge and skills, and to continue to reflect on what they choose to do as teachers and why they choose to do it.

Some practical suggestions for improving the PSTs' self-efficacy include encouraging them to: develop good classroom management skills and practice reflection (Patterson & Seabrooks-Blackmore, 2017); share and discuss their ideas and beliefs with their peers (Chong & Kong, 2012; Oddone, 2016); pursue professional development as they transition from PSTs to novice in-service teachers (Althauser, 2015); stay motivated (Chong & Kong, 2012); and seek out a mentor (Lyne, 2013).

Further research will compare these results with data collected from other cohorts of PSTs. The students who answered this survey will also be followed as they complete the teacher certification program. In addition, follow-up interviews with

graduates of the program will reveal how their beliefs about teaching have evolved, and how their teacher self-efficacy has changed.

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Allison Bill

Address: (55069) Department of English Language and Literature, Jeonju University
          303 Cheonjam-ro, Wansan-gu, Jeonju, Jeonbuk, Republic of Korea

E-mail: allison.bill1@gmail.com