ELT PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION: MAJOR TRENDS AND SHIFTS

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ABSTRACT
This study intends to review the major trends and shifts in approaches to the nature of teacher learning and teacher education to come up with a better understanding of English language teaching (ELT) teacher education in Iran as an English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Current approaches to teacher education admit that learning to teach is not simply a matter of knowledge transmission from experts and teacher educators to student teachers but rather a socially situated act that is the result of teachers’ active and critical involvement in the learning process. Relevant literature on the system of teacher education in Iran shows that some kind of traditional transmission model is currently exercised in the Pre-Service Teacher Education (PSTE) in Iran.

KEY WORDS: ELT- EFL- Pre-Service Teacher Education

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY
The major goal of language teaching is to enhance students’ understanding and learning. Teachers need to be equipped with various kinds of knowledge and skills to establish and maintain effective teaching environments that enable them to achieve that goal. So teachers’ professional knowledge may be considered the single most important characteristic in instruction. Elbaz (1983, p.11) points out that “the single factor which seems to have the greatest power to carry forward our understanding of the teacher’s role is the phenomenon of teachers’ knowledge.” The topic of teacher knowledge and the nature of the knowledge base have emerged as one of the central concerns of research in language teacher education over the last few years. That’s why recent years have witnessed increased interest in evaluating the effectiveness of teacher education processes and how teachers and student teachers interpreted and gave meaning to the teacher education programs they experienced (Zeichner, 1999). This led to emergence of a number of theoretical frameworks. The most influential of these was possibly Shulman’s (1987) formulation of the knowledge base of teaching as comprising a set of different categories of knowledge:
It was not until the mid-1990s, however, that serious thought began to be given to the question of what the knowledge base of language teaching might be. Up until this point, there had been a largely unchallenged assumption that what language teachers needed was declarative knowledge about the language which they were teaching. Under this conception, what teachers “knew” was the structure of the language they taught, and also some largely mechanistic pedagogy for “transferring” that knowledge to students.

Thus, historically, the knowledge-base of L2 teacher education has been grounded in the positivist epistemological perspective. It has been compartmentalized into isolated theoretical courses and separated from teaching, leading to what teacher educator D.L. Ball (2000) has referred to as the persistent dichotomy between subject matter and pedagogy. The content of language teacher education program positioned disciplinary knowledge about formal properties of language and theories of SLA as foundational knowledge for the professional preparation of the teacher. Thus, viewing L2 teaching as a matter of translating theories of SLA into effective instructional practices (how L2 teachers should teach), L2 teacher educators historically defined the knowledge base of language teacher education largely in terms of how language learners acquire a second language and less in terms of how language teaching is learned and how it is practiced (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

A serious re-evaluation of this view of teacher knowledge did not really begin until researchers such as Freeman (1993), Johnson (1992), Woods (1996), and others started to conduct research based on empirical data from actual language teaching. Gradually the central tenets of teacher knowledge base began to change. Perhaps Woods’ (1996) construct of BAK (beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge) was the first major formulation which paved the ground for new orientations in the field. He proposes BAK as a set of interrelated propositions which is analogous to schemata but incorporates more value-laden elements of beliefs and assumptions.

Consequently, the growing body of research focuses on how practitioners make sense of the disciplinary knowledge they are exposed to in their professional development programs. Some have examined this through classroom-based research studies that examine how L2 teachers enrolled in professional coursework make sense of and take the knowledge base (Bartels, 2005). Such studies support the usefulness of such disciplinary knowledge in shaping teachers’ conceptions of language but highlight a general lack of transfer of this knowledge to classroom language teaching. Others have documented the complex ways in which teachers actively link
theoretical knowledge to their own experiential knowledge as they reframe the way they describe and interpret their lived experiences (Sharkey and Johnson, 2003). Burns and Richards (2009) also, in line with others, admitted that teachers in fact often fail to apply theoretical and disciplinary knowledge in practice. Thus, the greatest challenges in foreign language teacher education is implementing theoretical knowledge about language and learning into classroom in order to promote successful learning. Randall and Thornton (2001) questioned if teaching is purely theoretical activity or it can be considered only as practical process, as well as if the training of teachers should be focused only to teaching behavior in the classroom, by observing teachers in practice, or those superficial routines should be incorporated into the theoretical perspective of methodological knowledge. They offered a classification that comprises the three models of teacher education. The first model was traditionally accepted until the middle forties of the last century. Such a model is conservative and static and considers teacher education as a craft. It is based on imitation (Wallace, 2001). Prospective teachers learn by observing experienced older teacher and follow their advice and experience to become independent in teaching.

Although the oldest model of teacher education, teaching as a craft still today is considered an irreplaceable model even with highly educated people. The other model considers the education as an application of science in that teacher education programs are informed by achievements of empirical researches. Knowledge transfer is the core of this model of teacher education. So it is one-way, experts introduce scientific achievements to prospective teachers to apply in practice later. This attitude has emphasized the difference between the theory and the practice in teaching foreign languages and has led to partition of experts in this area to those who create and think and teachers to those who apply the theories handed down by experts. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) rightfully stated such divisions of labor are not acceptable in current pedagogic environment in which teachers increasingly adopt multiple roles of researcher, syllabus designer, and materials producer. The third, reflexive model of teacher education is the most adequate for the contemporary moment. Training future teacher for self-education by formal and empiric knowledge gained in a reflexive manner. Formal knowledge is theoretical and is based on scientifically based facts, while empiric knowledge is gained not only by practice but also by thinking on practice. The contemporary idea about autonomy in teaching, about training students for independent learning is the heart of this reflexive model, which gives equal significance both to theoretical knowledge and to practical experience. These three models show how our understanding of the nature of knowledge base required for successful language teaching changed during the last century. In fact these models stem from the attempts to conceptualize teacher learning. As such conceptualizations may overlap and may be understood differently, they can lead to different views to teacher education.

Reviewing the related literature, one can notice four views regarding the nature of teacher learning: 1) Teacher learning as skill learning view sees teacher learning as the development of a range of skills or competencies which underlie successful teaching. Teaching can be broken down into separate competencies that can be mastered one at a time. The skills targeted with this approach are those identified with a model of effective teaching. Teacher training involves modeling and presenting the skills and providing opportunities to master them. 2) Teacher
learning as a cognitive process approach views teaching as a complex cognitive activity and focuses on the nature of teachers’ beliefs and thinking. This view emphasizes that “teachers are active, thinking decision makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex practically-oriented, personalized, and context-specific networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs” (Borg, 2003; p.81). In teacher education, it encourages teachers to explore their own beliefs and thinking processes and to examine how these are practiced in their classroom. Processes used include self-monitoring, journal writings, and analyses of critical incidents.

3) Teacher learning as personal construction is based on the belief that knowledge is actively constructed by learners not passively received. Learning is seen as involving reorganization and reconstruction and it is through these processes that knowledge is internalized. New learning is fitted into learner’s personal frameworks. In teacher education this has led to emphasis on teachers’ individual and personal contributions to learning and to understanding their classrooms, and utilizing activities that focus on the development of self-awareness and personal interpretation through such activities as journal writing and self-monitoring.

4) Teacher learning as reflective practice view is based on the assumption that teachers learn from experience through focused reflection on the nature and meaning of teaching experience (Richard and Lockhart, 1994). Reflection is viewed as the process of critical examination of experiences, a process that can lead to better understanding of one’s teaching practices and routines. In teacher education this has led to reflective practice, that is, teaching accompanied by collecting information on one’s teaching as the basis for critical self-reflection, through such procedures as self-monitoring, observation, and case studies.

Thus, recent views acknowledge the situated and the social nature of teacher learning and emphasize that learning takes place in a context and evolves through the interaction and participation of the participants in that context. Learning to teach is not viewed as translating knowledge and theories into practice but rather as constructing new knowledge and theory through participating in specific social contexts and engaging in particular types of activities and processes. Teacher cognition perspectives also contributed a great deal to our current understanding of the nature of teacher learning. From this perspective, teaching is not simply the application of knowledge and learned skills. Thus, teaching is viewed as a much more complex, cognitively driven process affected by the classroom context, the teachers’ stated or unstated instructional goals, the learners’ motivation and reaction toward the lesson, and the teachers’ management of the critical moments in the class (Borg, 2009). Teacher cognition is concerned with understanding what teachers believe, know and behave.

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE KNOWLEDGE BASE OF TEACHER EDUCATION

Most traditional systems of teaching and language teacher education are considered to adhere to what is called transmission approaches as they seek to transmit a set of pre-specified and pre-sequenced body of knowledge from teacher educators to student teacher. Kumaravadivelu (2012) pointed out:

These models and approaches have several characteristics in common. First, they often limit the role of teacher educator to that of conduits who pass on easily digestible bits and pieces of
personal and professional knowledge to student teachers. Second, they entail a master – pupil relationship in which student teachers are expected to learn some of their master teacher’s pedagogic knowledge and skills, and try to apply them in their classrooms. Third, they rarely enable or encourage student teachers to construct their own visions and versions of teaching. Fourth, they are essentially top-down approaches that depend on externally produced and expert generated professional knowledge to influence teacher behavior. Finally, they create a debilitating dichotomy between the expert and the teacher, that is, experts are expected to produce knowledge, and teachers are expected to consume knowledge (p.8).

Given the five features outlined above, such transmission approaches generally end up with teachers more like passive technicians transferring information from one end of the educational spectrum (i.e., experts) to the other (i.e., learners), without in any significant way manipulating the content of information and critically questioning their validity or relevance to specific learning and teaching context. Such knowledge-transmission educational system towards teacher education has been under consistent scrutiny and criticism for its many flaws and limitations. This is primarily due to the fact that the knowledge base of university-based teacher education is incapable of filling the gap between theory as it is treated in teacher education programs and what teachers actually need for effective classroom practice. Drawing on research-presented evidence, educators have redefined professional knowledge and the relationship between theory and practice within the context of teacher education (Korthagen, Loughran, and Russell, 2006).

Dissatisfactions with flaws and drawbacks of the traditional models of teacher education have convinced the professionals to take a substantially different view of what teachers do in the classrooms, and how they learn to teach. As a result, a combination of shifting epistemological paradigms of human learning and the accumulation of more than three decades of research on how teachers learn to teach and how they carry out their work in classrooms have contributed much to our understanding of the nature of this somewhat new and complex field of inquiry. Critical pedagogy, post-method and sociocultural perspectives have characterized revolutionary steps in this regard.

CRITICAL APPROACHES TO PEDAGOGY
Critical pedagogy which is directly concerned with social acts and educational change seeks to empower people to challenge and question oppressive conditions in their lives. One central principle of Freire’s work is praxis: where theory and practice come together to create action that leads to social and political change. He, in fact, is in favor of some kind of dialogic interactions to make ideologies and power relationships visible (Freire, 1974). Criticality then refers to how dominant ideologies in society influence the construction of meaning in ways that groups within the society become either advantaged or disadvantaged.

The concept of critical pedagogy is essentially more tangible for language teachers when they try to address educational inequality. Language, identity and culture form the language teachers’ schemata assisting them to question the dominant power relationships, both because of the particular learners they teach and because of the particular language they teach which can itself
serve to empower and marginalize. They play a vital role in the construction of learners’ understanding of unfamiliar and ambiguous belief systems, values and practices and their negotiations of new social relationships. So, a key concern of critical teacher education is to improve critical awareness in prospective teachers by raising consciousness about the ways through which power relations are constructed and function in society, and the extent to which cultural, social, and political beliefs and actions structure educational inequality. However, teachers’ critical self-reflection is a prerequisite for their critical awareness. The main duty of teacher education is to encourage prospective teachers to critically reflect on their own identities and positioning in society. Self-reflection opens a window on the relationship between the individual and the social world, highlighting both constraints on and possibilities for social change.

**SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE**

The tenets of sociocultural perspective are derived largely from Lev Vygotsky’s ideas (1978, 1986) and others who have recently extended his theories, including Wells (1999), and Lantolf (2006). The sociocultural theorists assume that human cognition is formed in a process of engagement in social activities, and that it is the social relationships and the culturally constructed materials, signs, and symbols, referred to as semiotic artifacts, that mediate those relationships that create uniquely human forms of higher level thinking. Thus, cognitive development is an interactive process, mediated by culture, context, language, and social interaction. They also postulate that learning is not a direct and straightforward appropriation of skills or knowledge from outside in, but the progressive movement from external social activity to internal meditational control by individuals, which leads to transformation of both the self and activity (Johnson, 2009). A sociocultural perspective on human learning has offered 5 changing points of view in L2 teacher education.

First, it changes the way we view teacher learning. Teacher learning emerges out of and is constructed by teachers themselves within their work circumstances and settings. Second, it changes our views about language. One of the tenets of sociocultural theory is that language functions are not only a psychological tool which is used to make sense of experience, but also a cultural means in that it is used to share experiences and to make sense of those experiences with others, thereby transforming experience into cultural knowledge and understanding. Third, a sociocultural perspective views language teaching as a dialogically mediated process in that the character and quality of interactions between learners and teachers in their learning environments have the potential to create opportunities for development. So social construction is central in this view. Fourth, it also changes our views regarding the broader social, cultural, and ideological macro-structures that are ever present and ever changing in the L2 teaching profession. Finally, it changes our perceptions of professional development. A sociocultural perspective goes beyond visible professional development activities such as coursework, workshops, and seminars, to include teachers’ informal social and professional networks and to what extent their classrooms are sites for professional development (Johnson, 2009).
So, the educational researchers influenced by the sociocultural school of thought began to uncover the sociocultural processes that determine how second/foreign teachers learn to teach and carry out their work as teachers which led to a casting doubt on the traditional knowledge-base of teacher education. According to Johnson (2009), the knowledge base informs 3 broad areas: what L2 teachers need to know, how they should teach, and how they learn to teach.

**POST-METHOD PERSPECTIVE**

The top-down nature of the transmission models of teacher education which is closely linked to the limitations of the concepts of methods both in general education and in L2 education has led to teachers’ inability to develop a valuable, internally-derived sense of coherence about language teaching, in part, because they do little more than transferring to L2 teachers a pre-determined package of methods and methods-related body of knowledge. Such a fixed methods-based teacher education is found to be woefully inadequate to meet the challenges of the practice of everyday teaching. As Pennycook (2004) pointed out:

Mainstream approaches to teacher education in TESOL have frequently lacked a social or political dimension that helps locate English and English language teaching within the complex social, cultural, economic, and political environments in which it occurs. (p. 335).

That is because most models of teacher education are designed to transmit a set of pre-specified body of knowledge from the teacher educator to the student teacher. In such top–down approaches teacher educators offer student teachers suggestions on the best way to teach, model appropriate teaching behaviors, and finally evaluate their mastery of such pedagogical behaviors. Such a transmission model of teacher education is hopelessly inadequate to produce autonomous and creative teachers who constitute the backbone of any post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

In post-method pedagogy, however, the responsibility of the post-method teacher educator is to create conditions for prospective teachers to acquire necessary authority and autonomy that will enable them to reflect on and shape their own professional experiences, and in certain cases transform such experiences. In other words, it becomes necessary to have teacher education that does not merely transmit a body of knowledge, but rather one that is dialogically created by participants who think and act critically. According to Bakhtin (1981), dialogic interaction in which all the participants have the opportunity and the autonomy to express their voice and exhibit their identity facilitates an interaction between meanings, between belief systems; an interaction that produces what Bakhtin calls, “a responsive understanding.” Thus, the primary responsibility of the teacher educator is not to provide the teacher with a borrowed professional knowledge, however enlightened it may be, but to provide opportunities for the dialogic construction of meaning out of which L2 teachers’ identity or voice may emerge.

From a post-method perspective, teacher education is treated not as the experience and interpretation of a predetermined and prescribed pedagogic practice, but rather as an ongoing, dialogically constructed entity involving critically reflective participants. Dialogic teacher
education, through purposeful interactions, opens up channels of communication between student-teachers and teacher-educators. Student teachers actively and freely use the linguistic, cultural and pedagogic repertoire they bring with them. Teacher educators show a willingness to use the student teacher’s values, beliefs, and knowledge as an indispensible part of the learning process. When all this happens, the entire process of teacher education becomes reflective and promising. Thus, post transmission perspective adopts a substantially different view of what teachers do in the class and how they learn to do it. Such views are mainly based on recent explorations on teacher cognition, teacher beliefs and other related issues. Johnson (2006), in line with recent trends, explains:

Research findings depict L2 teacher learning as normative and lifelong, as emerging out of and through experiences in social context: as learners in classrooms and schools, as participants in professional teacher education programs, and later as teachers in the settings where they work. It describes L2 teacher learning as socially negotiated and contingent on knowledge of self, students, subject matter, curricula, and setting (p.239). In a review of the changes in teacher education programs taking place in both developed and developing countries Raoof (2000) has come to the conclusion that many countries have come to notice the necessity of revising their teacher training programs. In a study by Vivienne and Ono (2001) a comparison was made between two countries of Japan and the United States. The study revealed that there was a need to improve and revise the teacher training programs in these two countries.

Villegas and Reimers (2000) compared fifteen countries including the UK, Germany, Holland, Spain, Sweden, Portugal, Ukraine, Japan, China, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Israel, North America, and Canada in terms of their teacher education systems and the ways the teachers in these countries learn to teach in the system. The results of the study revealed that a decent teacher training program is the one that starts in pre-service teacher education and is well designed, supported, and budgeted, and continues in a consistent way throughout teachers’ professional life. They also recommended that the pre-service programs needed to be accompanied with practical courses that improve the teachers’ knowledge of language and training. Teacher training in Iran has had its revisions and changes during time. However, there are a few studies investigating the teacher training programs in Iran. Estiri (1995) stated that the applicants to teacher training centers claimed that what they had learned in these centers were not of much help in their teaching. Kashef (1999) reported that the applicants studying Physical Education stated that the lack of educational hours and practical courses were two of the most important problems in teacher education centers. Abedi (1998) proposed that the course content of books taught in Association of Arts/Science (AA/S) lacks the required skills for efficient teaching. Considering evaluation and assessment, Tavana (1994) reported that evaluation is conducted in more theoretical rather than practical ways. The same is proposed by Liyahaghatdar (2002) who stated that the way teaching applicants are evaluated is mostly theoretical and the practical courses are not helpful in their practice as teachers.

CONCLUSION
The current prevalence of sociocultural and post-method accounts of teacher knowledge and
teacher education has originated from the growing inefficiency of traditional approaches in training teachers who can act creatively in response to contextual demands of particular teaching and learning situations. In fact, recent research on the characteristics of successful language teachers has supported the reflective and situated nature of learning how to teach a foreign language, a process which is actually unique for each and every language teacher. Although teacher educators in Iran are well aware of new trends to second/foreign language teacher education, it seems that the practical applications of such views in Iran are far from reality. Mismatches at micro and macro planning levels and the sociocultural ideologies of the community in Iran are the two most noticeable reasons for the lack of improvement on the practical side of the continuum.

REFERENCES


