

## PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS: STUDENT PORTFOLIOS AS EVIDENCE OF EMERGING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES

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The purpose of the present study is to get a better understanding of the reflection process of pre-service EFL teachers at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš during their theoretical TEFL Methodology course, before entering the EFL classroom. An important element of students' individual work in this course is their portfolio which consists of the students' views and opinions on the most important principles of TEFL, recorded at the beginning and the end of the 12-week course, as well as a reflective essay on how and why their beliefs have changed during the course. This qualitative case study employs an in-depth content analysis of these reflective portfolios collected in 2020 and 2021, aiming to identify the themes pertaining to the participants' emerging teacher identities as well as examine changes in their beliefs about various aspects of language teaching and their own professional development. The findings suggest that reflective thinking should be an essential component of pre-service teacher education courses from the very beginning, and not only during the teaching practice.

**Keywords:** EFL, pre-service teacher education, reflective practice, student portfolio, teacher beliefs

## ИДНИТЕ НАСТАВНИЦИ ПО АНГЛИСКИ КАКО СТРАНСКИ ЈАЗИК КАКО РЕФЛЕКСИВНИ ПРАКТИЧАРИ: СТУДЕНТСКОТО ПОРТФОЛИО КАКО ДОКАЗ ЗА ПРОФЕСИОНАЛНИТЕ ИДЕНТИТЕТИ ШТО СЕ ГРАДАТ

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Целта на оваа студија е да се добие подобро разбирање на процесот на рефлексивност кај идните наставници по англиски како странски јазик на Филозофскиот факултет во Ниш во текот на теоретскиот предмет Методологија на изведување настава по англиски како странски јазик, пред да се влезе во училиницата каде што се учи англиски како странски јазик. Важен дел од индивидуалната работа на студентите на овој предмет е нивното портфолио, кое се состои од гледиштата и мислењата на студентите за најважните принципи на изведувањето настава по англиски како странски јазик, евидентирани на почетокот и на крајот од 12-неделниот курс, како и рефлексивен есеј за тоа како и зошто нивните верувања се смениле за време на курсот. Оваа квалитативна студија на случај вклучува длабинска анализа на содржината на овие рефлексивни портфолија собрани во 2020 и во 2021 година, чија цел е да ги идентификуваат темите што се однесуваат на идентитетите на наставникот, кои се градат кај учесниците, како и да се истражат промените во нивните верувања за различни аспекти на подучување на јазикот и нивниот професионален развој. Сознанијата укажуваат на тоа дека рефлексивното размислување треба да биде основната компонента во наставните предмети на студентите по методика од самиот почеток, а не само за време на наставната практика.

**Клучни зборови:** изведување настава по англиски како странски јазик, образование на студенти по методика, студентско портфолио, верувања на наставникот

## 1 Introduction

The importance of reflective practice (Dewey 1933; Kolb 1984; Schön 1987) is widely recognized in EFL teacher education, as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey 1933: 9). Viewing reflective teaching as “deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement” (Hatton and Smith 1995: 40), reflection is commonly associated with the teaching practicum (e.g., Ončevska Ager 2016). However, reflection could also be used as a tool for enhancing pre-service teachers’ (PSTs’) understanding of their own beliefs even prior to teaching practice, in line with Farrell’s (2013, 2018) view of reflection as any process in which teachers critically analyse their own beliefs, assumptions, and values about teaching and learning. In their longitudinal study of pre-service EFL teachers’ preparation, Reynolds et al. (2021) claim that teachers’ beliefs are shaped by experiences, but also that one of the crucial experiences is their education. In line with Richards and Lockhart’s (1994) view that “teacher knowledge and ‘teacher thinking’ provide the underlying framework or schema which guides the teacher’s classroom action” (29), developing PSTs’ reflective competence should be an important component of student-teacher’s education as a whole, not only during their teaching practicum, but also in the preparatory theoretical parts of the TEFL Methodology courses. If they are to construct a coherent and solid ‘underlying framework’ that would guide their teaching practice, PSTs need time and practice to develop the tools that would help them understand and express their own beliefs and experiences. The present study illustrates one way in which students’ reflection can be used prior to teaching practice.

## 2 The background: The TEFL Methodology courses

In the English Department curriculum at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, the TEFL Methodology courses follow a clear division between the first, preparatory, theoretical course, and the second one, during which the students have their teaching practice. The theoretical component involves extensive reading, and limited practical work, mainly the basics of lesson planning, lesson observation, and peer microteaching. The topics cover two aspects of theoretical preparation. One involves getting well-acquainted with different teaching methods and approaches and the theoretical principles guiding the use of their different teaching techniques (Larsen-Freeman 2011). The other aspect of the course, covered either through individual reading reports or group projects (microteaching or student presentations), includes topics such as Krashen’s hypotheses, as well as learning styles and strategies, motivation, learner differences, Multiple Intelligences theory, language assessment, and the use of language games in the classroom. The notions of differentiation, scaffolding, and authentic input-output are also covered.

## 2.1 Student's portfolio

An important element of students' individual work, which is part of the students' final grade, is Student's Portfolio. This element was introduced in 2020, mainly as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the context of online teaching and learning.

In the theoretical courses, the use of student portfolio may also be questioned, as it cannot contain many examples of students' practical work. However, in terms of Hatton and Smith (1995), students were asked to keep a portfolio as a means of documenting the development of their theoretical knowledge, which consisted of *descriptive writing* (summing up the most important information about various methods) and *reflection* – *descriptive* or, hopefully, *dialogical* and *critical reflection*.

In the first week of the course, students do the *My Principles 1* (MP 1) assignment, i.e., provide their own answers to the 10 questions about methodological principles (Larsen-Freeman 2011), based on their prior experiences as students, before they started TEFL Methodology, and on their overall beliefs about education, learning and teaching. In the last week of the course, students do the *My Principles 2* (MP 2) assignment, and provide their current beliefs and views on the same questions. Lastly, students are offered an opportunity to replace the regular written final exam (on teaching methods), by a reflective essay, as the last step in their portfolio. In the essay, they are asked to focus specifically on how their views and beliefs have changed, and how the coursework has influenced them.

## 3 Aims and methodology

The purpose of the present study was to explore the reflection process of pre-service EFL teachers during their theoretical TEFL Methodology course as well as examine how reflection can promote their professional growth even before being engaged in their teaching practicum.

### 3.1 Participants

The participants were Serbian PSTs taking TEFL Methodology 1 in their third year of the four-year BA program at the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, Serbia. The study was conducted with 31 PSTs (22 female, 9 male) taking the course in 2020 (Group A) and 34 PSTs (26 female, 8 male) taking the same course in 2021 (Group B). Each participant was coded as A1, A2, A3, etc., and B1, B2, B3, etc., for anonymity. While none of the participants had had any formal teaching education before this TEFL Methodology course, a few had some previous teaching experience as online EFL teachers and private English tutors.

### 3.2 Data analysis

The data comprised 65 reflective essays written in English. Guided by the relevant literature (Cabaroğlu and Roberts 2000; Reynolds et al. 2021; Zheng 2009, among others), this study employed a step-by-step thematic analysis of the reflective essays. They were first read repeatedly by the researchers in order to obtain a holistic

sense of the data (Reynolds et al. 2021: 4). This step also involved highlighting the sections relevant to the present study, which were then classified into categories based on the recurrence of particular themes. The researchers compared their analyses multiple times to reach an agreement of the common themes and subthemes. While generating preliminary themes was guided by a series of questions related to the characteristics of different teaching methods from Larsen-Freeman (2011), the analysis of the data revealed a much wider range of recurring topics.

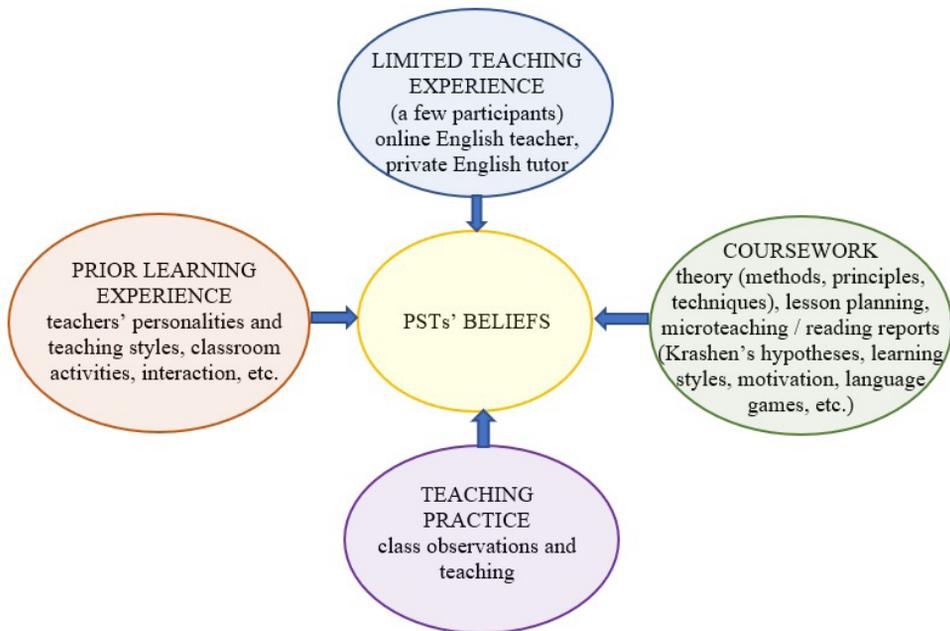
Two broad themes with five subthemes were identified (see Table 1). It should be noted here that it was sometimes difficult to categorize PSTs' statements as there was a degree of overlap among certain themes, which was expected given that PSTs' beliefs are often interconnected (Zheng 2009: 77).

**Table 1.** Main themes and subthemes identified in the data

Reflective essay content	Teacher	Reflections on the teacher's role
		Reflections on an ideal teacher
		Reflections on the teacher's goals
	The Self	Reflections on PSTs' professional development within the course
		Reflections on teaching as PSTs' future profession

#### 4 Analysis and discussion

This section of the paper presents how PSTs' beliefs developed from MP 1 to MP 2, as described in their reflective essays. The term *teacher beliefs* is used "to embrace the complexity of teachers' mental lives" (Zheng 2009: 74), since it is often stressed that teacher beliefs, knowledge, attitudes are difficult to distinguish (Borg 2003; Farrell 2018; Reynolds et al. 2021; Zheng 2009) and represent "three points along the same continuum of meaning" (Farrell 2018: 5). The analysis of the data revealed that several factors might have had an influence on PSTs' beliefs in the present study (see Figure 1). It seems that PSTs' initial beliefs were mostly shaped by their own positive and negative learning experiences, which is in line with the relevant literature (Borg 2003; Reynolds et al. 2021; Roberts 1992, among many). Changes in beliefs mostly emerged due to their coursework, especially the theoretical part of the course and lesson planning, as well as peer microteaching. Several PSTs also had limited teaching experience, which was reflected in some of their beliefs. It can be expected that upon completing their teaching practice in the spring semester, PSTs' beliefs would undergo further change.



**Figure 1.** Factors influencing PSTs' beliefs

## 4.1 Teacher

One broad theme identified in the data is related to the characteristics of a teacher. It incorporates three subthemes which focus on the teacher's role and goals, as well as the characteristics of an ideal teacher.

### 4.1.1 Reflections on the teacher's role

A recurring subtheme in PSTs' reflective essays is related to the teacher's role. Based on some of PSTs' statements on this topic, it becomes clear that before the course they were unaware of how many different roles a teacher can assume, *from the teacher who almost does not speak at all trying to be the students' counselor (silent way), to the teacher who is students' authority and a model of a good language (audiolingual method)*<sup>1</sup>, as B25 emphasizes. Clearly, their new views are rooted in theory (different methods they read about in the course textbook, in particular) as well as their new experience of *creating several lesson plans* (A22).

PSTs' reflective essays further suggest that their initial perception of the teacher's role was influenced by their previous schooling experience and their 'author-

<sup>1</sup> Following Yeşilbursa (2011: 108), all extracts provided in this paper are original in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar.

itative' teachers. They initially thought of teachers only as authority figures who should be *respected and listened to* (A17) and who *created an insurmountable gap that prevented the students from even asking questions, let alone trusting the teacher* (A19). As A18 notes, at first, they thought that the teacher's role was *to simply lead the class*. However, their initial assumptions were gradually adjusted based on the methods and principles they learned during the course. The powerful effect of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) on PSTs' new beliefs can be observed in the following statements: *I view the teacher as a mediator and a partner in the process of learning* (A17); *The role of the teacher should be a facilitator; the teacher facilitates communication in the classroom* (B23).

PSTs' reflections also show that before the course, they had a vague idea of what being a teacher involved or they often *underestimated the role of the teacher* (A22). However, at the end of the course, their views on this topic became much more concrete and specific and they were able to go into detail when describing what the teacher's role assumes, such as *composing a lesson plan, picking interesting and creative activities suitable for their students, as well as facilitating and monitoring the class, and dealing with different problems that might arise during the class* (A10). Several PSTs emphasized that the teacher's role was more complex than they initially expected *because the teacher needs to think about many different things* (B25). For instance, a teacher has to *prepare effective lessons, grade student homework and most importantly the teachers offer helpful feedback to their students which helps them improve their skills and abilities* (B24). Reading and learning about different TEFL methods and principles, doing peer microteaching, and completing their reading reports has led to the integration of PSTs' new beliefs regarding the teacher's role and its components.

#### 4.1.2 Reflections on an ideal teacher

PSTs further reflected on the qualities that an ideal teacher (or at least a good one) should have. This kind of thinking about an ideal teacher is seen as a powerful way for novice teachers "to move toward an identity they envision as positive for their future practice" (Beauchamp and Thomas 2010: 634). The data show that our PSTs' initial views were again sometimes drawn from memories of the teachers from their youth. Ideal teachers were the ones who made their language learning experiences positive. For instance, it was someone *who would replicate those things that helped [them] achieve this so-called 'native fluency'* (A1) and *someone who helps the students learn* (B24).

Throughout the course, PSTs' beliefs underwent some changes. In their reflections, they mentioned some personal and professional characteristics they now considered important for teachers. For instance, teachers are now seen as *the most careful people* (A18). Being a good teacher takes *a lot of patience and persistence* (A2) and it involves being *a good pedagogue, psychologist, sociologist* (A8). One way of making PSTs become aware of whether they possess these qualities or whether they need to work on improving them is reflection, which can help them in the construction of their future professional identities based on their ideal. Reflecting on an ideal teacher permits PSTs "to envision a future teaching self that would

inform their development” (Beauchamp and Thomas 2010: 634). As A18 wrote, *this is what I will be striving for if I ever get a chance to be a teacher.*

Finally, some PSTs concluded that *there’s no correct way of teaching* (B22) or that *there is no ultimate recipe to teaching whatsoever* (A23), even though some had expected to find it. In other words, our PSTs realized that the image of an ideal teacher is not a fixed concept. It changes as teachers gain more knowledge and experience. In other words, *as one grows into the role of a teacher, their principles will change and develop* (B22).

#### 4.1.3 Reflections on the teacher’s goals

Issues of what the teacher’s goals are also emerged as important content of PSTs’ reflective essays. As Vosniadou et al. (2020) note, novice teachers often believe that “teaching mainly involves the transmission of knowledge and that the teacher is the dispenser of that knowledge” (3). This was true of several PSTs in this study at the beginning of the course. They initially believed that the teacher’s goal was *to pass on as much knowledge on to his/her students as possible* (B24). Teachers were seen as *mere vessels – used to transfer knowledge to the students* (B32). While PSTs had perceived teaching as a mere transmission of knowledge at the beginning of the course, they understood teaching to be a constructive activity at the end. Learners are not seen as *passive observers* (B24) anymore and the teacher’s goals become oriented towards encouraging learners *to learn on their own outside of the classroom* (A3). In other words, *teaching is not about the ‘transmission’ of knowledge from teacher to student, it is about creating conditions in which, somehow, students learn for themselves* (B23).

Our PSTs also emphasized the importance they placed on establishing effective relationships with learners and creating a safe and supportive classroom. They recognized the need to build a caring community as paramount for motivating learners to engage in the classroom activities. For instance, a teacher’s job is *to make the learning process as enjoyable as possible* (B21), thus making sure that learners *connect learning and school to something positive rather than something they dread* (A5). When describing their views regarding the teacher’s goals, PSTs expressed their desire to connect with learners by being aware of their *individuality* and catering to their *emotional needs [in order for learners] to feel comfortable, secure and relaxed in their learning environment* (B2). *An attentive teacher who respects, supports and understands [their learners]* (B2) is seen as central to the establishment of a warm and conducive atmosphere in the classroom.

Finally, when writing their reflective essays, some PSTs were quite idealistic, suggesting that the teacher’s goals should go beyond simple language teaching. Their goals should be reflected in providing guidance and counseling for their learners. Namely, a teacher should focus on *leading [their] students to the right life path [by helping their] students to achieve some bigger goals in life* (A24). As Maaranen et al. (2016) observe, such beliefs characterized by “inevitably idealistic notions of a good teacher, the ideal classroom and justice, all high aims and beautiful values” (80) are typical of novice teachers with no or little experience.

## 4.2 The Self

Another theme identified in our PSTs' reflections is *The Self*. This theme includes statements related to PSTs' professional development within TEFL Methodology 1 and their considering teaching as the future career.

### 4.2.1 Reflections on PSTs' professional development within the course

This subtheme revolves around PSTs' perception of the progress they made in developing teacher beliefs during TEFL Methodology 1 and changes in their ideas of what really constitutes a teacher's job.

Thinking back about MP1, our PSTs first were unpleasantly surprised by *how* they expressed themselves. Their negative reactions were directed at the length, style and terminology used: the answers *were too short and less formal* (A12); *too broad, too general* (A24); *the language and terminology [...] were not appropriate* (B12). A similar dissatisfaction was expressed as to the quality of the answers. In the beginning, PSTs found the questions in Larsen-Freeman's (2011) framework difficult. In retrospect, they stated the reasons they had felt that way: due to *the lack of experience in MP1, lack of knowledge about these methods and also lack of overall view of the learning experience in a real-life situation* (B11), or because they relied on the *previous experience in the role of the student and [the] idea about how one teacher (future me) should behave* (B12).

However, at the end of the course, PSTs were more satisfied with their answers, aware of the progress they had made: *... after a couple of months filled with hard work, I realized how much I actually had to say* (A24). Their answers were *more formal and professional* (A24). The better 'form' of the answers is attributed to the knowledge they acquired during the course: *Writing MP2 was easier than writing MP1 because I have learned a lot and formed my opinions about these questions* (A15). Similar changes in the format and content of statements have been documented in Dumlao and Pinatacan (2019).

Our PSTs' beliefs about what constitutes a teacher's job also developed (see Section 4.1.1.), at the same time contributing to the development of their own professional self. In the beginning, their ideas were mostly influenced by their previous schooling or lay beliefs. Teaching was described as an easy job full of improvisation and vague plans: *activities were chosen at random, based on what the teacher wanted to do or what they found easy to do* (B16). Such "inappropriate, unrealistic or naïve" (Borg 2003: 88) beliefs are not uncommon in teacher trainees.

By the end of the course, their beliefs were drastically different. Having read substantial literature and done some teaching, PSTs realized that *it is work, and hard work* (A14) behind a successful class and that the teacher has to put a lot of time and effort into it – sometimes even at the expense of *all the other obligations in private life* (A8):

*[L]anguage teaching is a hard and demanding process which requires thorough planning combining with various methods, procedures, activities, interactions,*

*monitoring, organizing, performing, predicting, and many other things a teacher goes through. (A6)*

This change in the understanding of a teacher's job is recognized by our PSTs as a huge step in their professional development. However, they had different ideas as to what this change could be attributed to. Some believed that their development was influenced by the knowledge of methods. Most of them stressed that CLT taught them *to facilitate communication as a teacher, provide the students with activities and bring them close to real life situations so that they can feel that their language learning has a purpose (B3)*, while 'designer methods' taught them *to pay a lot of attention to student's feelings and finding the right environment for language learning (B13)*. Most frequently mentioned themes were motivation and learner differences: *Now, I am aware of the great role which motivation plays in the process of learning (A22)*; *Every student is unique. They differ in terms of age, aptitude, personality, cultural background, and capacity (A12)*.

Others, however, stress the practical activities (lesson planning and peer microteaching) as crucial for their development: *[I] realized the purpose of lesson planning when we started doing microteaching, it was something real, not just theoretical (B3)*, although they recognize that theory had some impact as well: *I have learned many useful things and concepts related to the teaching profession, but creating lesson plans made me realize how to use all of those things in practice (A3)*.

All these statements indicate that PSTs made considerable progress in their professional development. Starting with beliefs based on previous schooling (see 4.1.1.) and lay opinions, they changed their perspective completely basing new beliefs on the newly-acquired knowledge and the little practice they had.

#### **4.2.2 Reflections on teaching as PSTs' future profession**

Our PSTs reflected not only on the changes they had made during TEFL Methodology 1 but also on teaching as their future profession and what kind of teacher they would be, which Conway (2001) refers to as *anticipatory reflection*.

Quite a few PSTs admitted that they considered teaching as a career even before this course, while a number of them who had disliked the idea earlier started playing with it: *Before this course, I would never imagine myself being a teacher, but this course made me realize that it is nice to be able to teach (A15)*.

Describing themselves as future teachers, PSTs often mentioned the segments of the course that would inspire their teaching. They *would like to incorporate [Silent Way, Desuggestopedia, CLT] (B34)*. After realizing the role of motivation, they say they *would try to understand [their] students, to let them speak their minds and to try to overcome any of the difficulties they encounter while learning a language (A22)* and let them *experiment with different learning styles and strategies (B10)*.

Occasionally, PSTs state that becoming a teacher is a process and requires continuous professional development. They express hope that they will grow in the future, though it is not always clear whether they refer to future courses at university: *I will continue improving with time and practice (A13)* or once they get a job: *teaching and learning of the target language, is a process that will always need*

*improvement. Even after we finish and get our bachelor's degree, that doesn't put a full stop to our journey* (B8). Interestingly, only one PST mentions the importance of being *a part of a larger community of L2 teachers* (A17) for future development.

Most PSTs in our sample seriously considered teaching as a career and already had an idea of themselves as teachers. They stressed that different segments of the course had moulded that idea.

## 5 Limitations of the study and conclusion

The main aim of our study was to get “a more holistic picture of [PSTs'] belief structures” (Debreli 2012: 367). The corpus consisted of over 100 pages of *Reflective Essays* written by 65 PSTs, in which they described their own development from October to January.

The nature of the task (reflective essay) and the freedom given to PSTs to refer to what they found most significant seem to have provided the researchers with truthful and valid data, but at the same time posed two challenges: one, the form of the reflective essay made the classification of statements difficult since many topics overlapped (see 3.2.), and two, it was difficult to investigate what factors had crucially influenced the development of PSTs' beliefs (previous schooling, the course or something else).

As for the implications for teaching, the most important insight is how strong the beliefs developed by PSTs as learners are. Therefore, Niš English Department Methodology instructors should spend more time with PSTs discussing and (re) evaluating their previous schooling experiences in line with the objectives of the program.

Finally, the present study implies that changes in PSTs' beliefs were supported by their reflective practice. Reflection allowed PSTs to evaluate what they had learned during the course, critically analyse their previous learning experience, identify the qualities they considered important for teaching, examine their own professional growth, and provide clear justifications for their new beliefs. The study, therefore, shows that reflection should be incorporated in the curriculum before PSTs start their teaching practicum since it can facilitate their professional development even at that early stage of teacher education.

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