The Contribution of Teachers' Classroom Voice and their autonomy in Iranian Context

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the EFL teachers' expectations, voices and their ideas on their dynamic process of teaching. To this end, some discrepancies may have an influence on EFL teachers' beliefs and their practices in teaching which needed to be discovered. Using a semi-structured in-depth interview, the research explored tension faced by EFL teachers while exercising their autonomy. The participants of this study were EFL teachers from Mashhad, Iran. They were interviewed about their jobs, uncovering the job stressors that they faced, the job satisfaction that they found, and the reasons they continued in their jobs. This paper has significant contributions to stakeholders involved in the professional development and teacher education.

1. Introduction

Teachers' voice should be considered as influential factors for teachers in order not to abandon their career. Suitable voices are necessary to maintain professional development to fulfill working life and productive skills. Teachers expressed the general life stress such as a Time-workload pressure outside of institute is too much that demands big effort. Investigating teachers' voices would help not only teachers themselves but also learners, stakeholders and policy makers. A kind of mismatch seems to be existing between teachers' competence (theory) and their performance (practice). The gap between theory and practice is undeniable especially if teachers lack autonomy in teacher education programs (Benson ,2010) Teachers' voices are so fundamental for comprehending and improving educational context. They play a vital role in classroom practices and teachers' professional development. They help teachers and even policy makers and stakeholders to choose the appropriate teaching strategies based on different challenges they have in classroom. Sharing teachers' voices could enhance learners' motivation and shape their environmental context. They influence goals, procedures, materials, classroom interaction patterns, roles, their students and the school they work in (Fauziati, 2015:53). The reasons that some teachers are not satisfied with their job, have variety of reasons, because teachers' role are is complex.in specific content area, teachers not only emit their knowledge and expertise,but also teach cultural and social norms (Vesely, Saklofske, & Leschied, 2013). Some teachers are not aware of students' behavioral challenges which need training (Schaubman, Stetson & Plog, 2011). Lack of enough management put teachers in stressful situations which may lead to burn out and leaving their job. Burn out identified as the most influential factor which causes teachers to abandon their profession (Brown & Roloff, 2011). Teachers encounter classroom difficulties such as methodological implementation, classroom management and learners' engagement which coping with them have significant influence on classroom outcomes. Knowing how to cope with these elements, enhance teaching effectiveness, leaners' authority and teachers' professional development. Moreover, teachers' attitude on their professional development is associated with their commitment and motivation (OECD 2014, 182). Therefore, teachers'' voices about the affective and cognitive engagement are worth examining. it would be interesting to examine how sensitive Iranian teachers are to their career and students' learning process .

2. Statement of the problem

Teachers" attitude and belief in them as efficacious individuals is a crucial factor in developing teaching methods and practices. The concept of teachers" voice may be easy to understand, but it is hard to define, let alone measure. Voices keeps teachers engaged in what they have aimed for and it would be highly effective in maintain teachers" rights even. Although the government put much emphasis on education and English language learning as well as investing in different programs, effectiveness of these programs, problems faced when the use of textbooks from instructors' viewpoint needed to be investigated. Teachers' voice would promote other teachers' interests and preference towards language learning. Teachers' voices play a significant role in influencing other teachers' awareness and a stakeholder decisions as well as classroom conduct (Spratt, 1999). As Cortazzi and Jin (1999) assert, the culture of learning that students and teachers bring to classroom becomes an invisible yardstick for judgments about how to teach or learn, about whether and how to ask questions, and about the role of the textbooks in the curriculum. This study was conducted in order to broaden the scope of studies done in the area of teachers" voice in different kinds of institutes in Mashhad. This study will give information about teachers" perceptions of different activity types and different areas of language learning.

3. Review of Literature

Humammed N. K. (2011) stated that professional development can be understood in different ways.it is about learning how to learn, transforming competence to performance and teachers learning. Teacher professional learning is complicated and demands emotional and cognitive teachers" involvement. According to Hayes Mizell (2010) professional development is ongoing process of practicing, feed backing and providing follow up support. The role of Successful programmes is significant here; the more similar it is to students" activities, the more encouraging it would be for teachers. Also Adem Bayar (2014) clarifies "that the teachers define any professional development activity as effective if it is organized based on teachers" needs and provided for a long time" (p. 322). Professional development can be improved if teachers" voices are taken into account. Teachers" voices are valuable resources for educational development Eisner (1991). Teachers" voices are key components for teachers" and learners" development. To deeply understand this issue, teachers" perspective is fundamental factors for developing their professional career. John Merrow (2001) explained teaching as "the noblest profession" and "the heart and soul of a school. Most researches reveal that quality of teaching is one of the most essential factors in increasing student progress. Teachers must have help in the form of "more intensive teacher training, more meaningful licensing systems, and more thoughtful professional development." effective professional development only happens if the process of developing continue over time. Insights gained from nearly two decades of research in second and foreign language (L2) development in natural as well as formal scope have make us aware that language learning is primarily a learner -and learning-oriented activity (Brown, 2001; Nunan, 1988a; Wright, 1990). As a result, there are more emphases on the function of the learner in the language learning growth. Teachers" voice about language learning is one of the most recent topics which should be taken into consideration. Learners have got greater role in teaching and learning unconscious process, based on a learner -centered approach, and this can be a resolution in promotion of their preferences toward communicative learning (Makarova, 1997). Moreover, Rifkin (2000) asserts that learners" beliefs about process of learning are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student"s efforts to master a foreign language" (p. 394). According to Nunan (1988a, p. 177), "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learner"s subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into consideration." as Allwright (1984) says, "very many teacher s seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with a positive contribution to design the instructional process" (p. 167), unfortunately. Many teachers acknowledge the need to understand learners" preferences, but they may not actually consult learners in conducting language activities (Bada and Okan, 2000). Some Teachers believe that several learners are not able to express what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn. Learners have an awareness of what goes on in classes and that teachers should therefore make an attempt to align their undertaking orientation to learning process. Block (1994, 1996).Breen (cited in Block, 1996) expressed that students were able to identify particular techniques adopted by the teacher that they preferred and believed that it helped them with understanding the new language. It should be noted that curriculum developers, programme designers, and instructor should become aware of their students" preferences. Once they come to know them, they can, "if necessary," take into consideration those preferences and plan and implement alternative behaviors and body process in their course of instruction (Barkhuizen, 1998). Even if preferences are in contrast with each other (e.g., teachers emphasize communicative activities and learners" tend toward traditional activities), they can shift to a negotiated course of study procedure and come to reasonable agreements (Jordan, 1997). Teachers" awareness and preferences plays a significant role in classroom behaviors (Spratt, 1999). Several studies reveal that there are different kinds of opinions between learners and teachers. A divergence of opinions between them has been noted in relation to what they prefer, what learners need, and the nature of language and language learning (Kern, 1995; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Nunan, 1988a, 1988b). Teachers bring their ideological dimension into classroom which influences process of language learning and teaching (Kumaravadivelu ,1991). Spratt (1999) investigated the opinions" of divergent groups among learners and teachers in Hong Kong. The results indicated that "teachers were able to gauge their learners" preferences with accuracy for 54% of activities" (p. 141) which is highly significant. In line with this study, Barkhuizen (1998) found that South Africa ESL teachers surprised by their students" thoughts, feelings and indications. Norms of sociocultural societies play a crucial role in learners" attitudes towards instructional strategies. In some top-down curriculum of societies, learners and teachers" roles are not determining in classroom decision-making. the culture of learning that students and teachers bring to classroom becomes an invisible yardstick for judgments about how to teach or learn, about whether and how to ask questions, and about the role of the textbooks in the curriculum (Cortazzi and Jin,1999). The value of teacher voice is in many ways deeply admirable. Policy makers repeatedly ignore or exclude teachers' voices. Teachers who could be inclined to change in and of them ironically become deeply resistant to change imposed insensitively and seemingly incoherently from above (Richardson, 2003). Likewise, some teachers resist imposed educational change because they have the good sense to see through their thin veneers of plausibility (Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). Giving more credence to the teacher's voice in educational research and policy is a good idea then; but it is by no means an unproblematic one.

4. Method

Participants

In the present study, the sample population consists of EFL teachers and supervisors. They were chosen randomly. The participants are 31 both female and male English teachers working in different institutes of Mashhad during the academic year 2018.

The Instruments of the Study

The instrument used for the purpose of data collection is a semi-structure interview

Procedure

This is a descriptive qualitative study with a randomly selected sample to reveal the voices of the English teachers toward teachers" professional development, to identify the needs of English teachers for more professional development and to convey the voices of English teachers" toward the teachers professional development. The current study uses qualitative methods that describe and analyze the needs of English teachers for teachers" professional development .The study design constructed here is based on the study of questions. These questions have been raised from the researcher"s knowledge and the conducted literature review.

5. Results

Research Question

To what extent, are teachers" voices could be influential in revolutionizing the traditional system of education and professional developing?

The general purpose of this project was to collect data, the analysis of which would enable policy makers and heads to develop and put forward policy recommendations aimed at the enhancement of the teaching profession. The data was to be essentially qualitative, collected through a survey. The questioning and discussion explored both the current environment as well as teachers" expectations as to the scope of their professional roles. Semi-structured interviews with teachers and supervisors were conducted by the researcher herself. All data collection activities were guided by a common set of themes.

1. How do you prefer to take your class, I mean, by strictly following the syllabus or recommended textbooks; Or, you sometimes go beyond the textbooks assuming students will learn better by doing this (e.g. newspaper, audio/video clippings)?

For the first question the teachers and supervisors mentioned that they try to follow the syllabus and textbook instructions and whenever necessary they would bring some more material to classes which could be helpful and enjoyable for students. They use variety of tools to enhance learning and not just stick to some rigid instructions. For them engagement is a kind of priority. Some teachers expressed that they are between; sometimes they go beyond the syllabus of course. Other teachers expressed that they would select materials based on individual differences and learners" level of proficiency.

2. How often you use other teaching aids/materials other than textbooks?

Regarding the second question, they cannot provide exact answer but they would use additional material whenever possible or the students are getting bored. Some stated that they bring additional material Every 2 or 3 sessions, depending on the level of learners and some bring them every session.

3. Do you think that it is better for meaningful teaching/learning to change teaching techniques according to student"s conditions and needs? How do you decide when to change technique?

When they think that a technique no longer works for specific groups of students, they change their techniques. We live in postmodern world and deal with postmodern students. We should adjust teaching strategies according to Learners needs. Some teachers stated that as a professional teacher, it is necessary to evaluate learner's needs, individual differences and expectations. Teachers cannot stick to one specific method for all classes; they should be flexible whenever needed. When the students get bored or when they get near to exams, they do change it.

4. How do you evaluate your teaching? Why do you think it is important to evaluate class teaching?

In teacher's opinion, evaluation is highly necessary. They declared that as a teacher ask students opinions and expectations at the beginning and end of the semester. Also they find weaknesses themselves bye evaluating Learners scores. They evaluate their teaching by recording my sessions and by asking my colleagues for peer observation and peer coaching. Because teachers need to reflect on their own teaching in order to be able to be better problem solvers and to lead students through meaning learning. Some mentioned that what students reveal and also evaluation forms that institute provide, could be effective for evaluating themselves. Evaluation is the rudimentary for change and without it; teacher gets stuck in a loop of boredom.

5. Do you discuss/consult with your colleagues?

Teachers highly believe in teamwork and group work especially working with those who are at higher level and more knowledgeable and with ones who they believe and also the ones they consider as creative.

6. Do you encourage your students to critically examine texts in English? Can you give an example?

Teachers explained that most of the time they encourage students to have a critical review on different aspects of learning in order to be autonomous and Independence of teacher because books are not necessarily free from mistakes. On the other hand, some teachers said that they do not encourage Learners to be critical in all levels. But mostly they encourage them to find the differences between the text and our own culture.

7. Do you some time find yourself in such a state that despite your all efforts you fail to make the learners interested in the class or you fail to make them understand the topic? In such a situation what you usually do? Why it happens?

The more experienced teachers declared that they always have been successful in encouraging and motivating learners. Moreover, they try to be up to date and be like 21st century teachers to be motivating enough for learners. Some declared that Depending on students' learning styles it is inevitable. If they as a teacher get to know their students and

provide tasks to engage different kinds of them, learning will happen. Several teachers claimed that it happens. They think because they didn"t put

themselves in students' shoes. Sometimes they are trying to do their best but it''s not the suitable place and time for students. They try to overcome this issue by knowing their students'' personality types, respecting their individualism and engaging them in their required class activities as much as possible.

8. How do you usually introduce the cultural elements/norms of English speaking countries to the students?

Teachers stated that they introduce cultural norms in English and they never make comparison between English and other cultures and they introduce it as what it is in reality. Some others said that they start by talking about same/different cultural issues/norms in their own culture and then explain it is the same or quite opposite in English speaking countries. Several teachers claimed they use News, Short stories; Documentaries, Novels and the most popular ones would be films.

9. What change do you think should be made to how you teach? What changes are possible in given time for example in next 5 years?

By the 21st century teacher they expressed that they would update themselves frequently based on new Learners needs. It is necessary to work on their professional development much harder. They are trying to shift their attention from teaching to learning.

10. As a teacher, how much do you think that you are given a value?

A few teachers express that they are satisfied with their job and always try to be remain respectful and be in a safe Zone. The others mention that the supervisors, stakeholders and policymakers do not considerate much respect upon them. What students react to them as a teacher is what they expected somehow but on behalf of the institute, all teachers need more.

11. How much are you sensitive to the societal, political, economic, and educational environment?

They said that always they try to be street smart; it means that they include every aspect of society such as economic, political, educational and family issues to raise students'' consciousness as well as improving speaking skills. They feel strongly sensitive to the community as a whole. Rarely do they get touchy however the atmosphere of a class is of great value. Some other teachers explain that they used to discuss about different topic but recently they don't do it that much, since it leads to endless arguments.

12. Why some learners claim that they don''t learn English after a while?

Teachers stated that there are several reasons exist that learners don't learn English after a while. It could be because of the classroom atmosphere, maybe they are not at the appropriate level or it could be because of teachers'' methods and strategies. Sometimes it relates to learners that how much they practice at home. Perhaps learners couldn''t find the ways by which they are able to learn English effectively; they need to learn some new learning strategies before they start to learn English.

13. Are you passionate to observe the classes of teachers?

Teachers claimed that to the ones they trust and believe in their capability as a teacher they feel passionate to observe and change their own teaching. It''s helpful for both sides and also fun for the observer. Most of them declared that they really like to be observed and at the same time observing.

14. Have you ever noticed any changes happening in the learners'', their families'' or government''s attitudes or language policies regarding English language and its role in our life? Please give examples?

Nowadays learning English is more important for individuals and also for the families and societies in comparison to even 5 years ago. We are living a postmodern world when boundaries are vanishing. While we respect local cultures and languages, we need a lingua franca. For example in the past few years many young people immigrated to other countries for higher education and almost all of them needed IELTS or TOEFL. A teacher said that she has been teaching English for 17 years. Long ago families were concerned with just their

children's scores at school or entrance exam but now they think about IELTS, PTE and TOEFL, since the structure of tests are changed the method for teaching needed to be changed, too.

15. Have you ever conducted needs analysis of your participants? How much do you know their expectations?

Some teachers said that they just did need analysis for their private classes but not for in group classes or institute classes because it is difficult to do so. The Institute expects us as teachers to be in line with the syllabus and x which prepared for teachers beforehand and because of this, teachers are not flexible that much to do need analysis. They believe that needs analysis should be done by the Institute and supervisors not teachers. As a teacher some of them try to find what is best for the students by listening to their voices in the classroom. And some of them said that they do not do it very formally, But orally at the beginning of each term and after midterms.

16. Are you satisfied with the current salary and your career situation or feel oppressed? Why?

A few teachers, especially the more experienced ones declared that they satisfied with their salary. But the majority said the salary is not satisfying at all, Feeling oppressed, and all others do their bests hoping to make a change in their life.

The main aim of this project was to able teachers to share their voices about their current process of practice as well as enabling them to express their views about the conditions in which teachers'' voice could be influential, the extent to which teachers are consulted, and the strategies and policies that would enhance self-confidence.

6. Discussion

One of the aims of current study is to identify teachers'' preferences on following recommended sources for teaching or using sources beyond the classroom framework. The findings to this question have revealed that Teachers follow the pre-determined sources and whenever necessary they adopt new sources to liven up classroom atmosphere. They put more emphasis on quality of teaching which in line with Hirsh (2001) finding that teachers increase the teaching quality by improving their professional development. Also this finding has consistency with what Hayes Mizell (2010) investigated; the more similar it is to students'' activities, the more encouraging it would be for teachers. Another aim is to understand whether it is possible to change teaching techniques according to student''s conditions and needs or not. Some teachers see themselves as creative ones who can implement any kind of techniques for teaching process, but the important question is that how much their thoughts are valid? We need to measure the degree of their reassurance. Also there is a need to train teachers to present the latest and more effective strategies in order to overcome class difficulties or routineness. The findings

of the study are consistent with Adem Bayar (2014) who clarifies "that the teachers define any professional development activity as effective if it is organized based on teachers" needs and provided for a long time" it shows that teachers" professional development needed to provide curricular guidance, training on classroom discipline and management. Teachers expressed that they ask learners" expectations at the beginning and end of the classroom but they don"t receive any feedback from the supervisors; they explained that when they evaluate learners "expectations, some needs arise in learners which needed to be taken to account on behalf of the institute and when learners see no change, they find fault of teachers not supervisors. On the basis of this result, it is necessary not only for teachers but also supervisors to attend training courses. As Eisner (1991) mentioned that Professional development can be improved if teachers" voices are taken into account, Teachers" voices are valuable resources for educational development and policy makers. Teachers highly believe in teamwork, collaboration and cooperation, but they declared that finding suitable partner is difficult. Supervisors and policy makers may detect eager and enthusiastic teachers then join them with each other to reach the better outcome. This finding is in line with John Merrow (2001) who explained that teaching is the noblest profession and Teachers must have help in the form of "more intensive teacher training, more meaningful licensing systems, and more thoughtful professional development." In this way the process would be fruitful. Teachers expect change in every aspect of teaching. It"s a long and endless story which needs considerations. Most teachers claimed that they lack update knowledge and professional development. They mentioned that many courses have fee to pay and since institute teachers" payment are low, it is not possible to attend these various courses. They expect supervisors and stakeholders to attend these sessions and share the knowledge freely or provide a situation for teachers to attend these sessions. Mistakenly some supervisors assume that they are needless to learner but this finding is in line with Brown (2001), Nunan (1988) and Wright (1990). They found that language learning is primarily a learner -and learning-oriented activity, not only learners but also teachers and stakeholders should be updated. Another point is that trainers should raise critical teachers and teachers would able to create critical learners, especially for evaluation exams process. Some teachers said that they got fear of negative evaluation if they let learners to evaluate them. Teachers bring their ideological dimension into classroom which influences process of language learning and teaching (Kumaravadivelu ,1991). As Kumaravadivelu (1991) found that Teachers bring their ideological dominance into classroom and influences process of language learning and teaching, teachers in this study expressed the same. They said that as a teacher they don"t considered as important as they should be and some values are missing. They bring their ideological dimension into classroom and it is important that how the institute shape their ideological expectations. Teachers should be street smart and aware of different aspects of society and select the ones which appropriate for learners level and expectations.

7. Conclusion

Professional development for teachers is essential nowadays. Teachers" teaching quality should increases and fulfills their expectations. Teachers" preparation courses should shift from training to development. It is necessary to take teachers" perception and voices into account to provide effective teacher education and professional development. The findings of this study revealed that teachers needed to be heard and more importantly, considering their voices. On the whole, besides the conclusions mentioned above, the present study gives a comprehensive view of teachers" needs in Iranian context. Teachers should be involved in teachers" professional development processing curriculum development. Teachers needed to be informed about the underlying aspect of the program in advance. The lack of autonomy and agency feel in classrooms and it seems that teachers are tools in hands of some old methods, policy makers and curriculum developers.

8. Acknowledgment

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