THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN IRAN

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Abstract: *This study wants to investigate the role of English Language Teaching and Learning in Iran. This study also wants to investigate the effect of the relationship between the language learning strategies of the students and language teaching strategies of teachers on the academic achievement of the students. The importance of English as a world language, the advance of technology and education reform envisaged by the new Constitution are key determinants for new developments for English language teaching and learning in Iran in this decade. This paper will first focus on the role of English and the problems of English language teaching in Iran. It will also touch on the part of education reform which is related to English language teaching. Then, it will state what has been planned or already done to improve the English language teaching and learning situation in Iran, now and in the future.*
Keywords: *English language Teaching and Learning, Teaching, Learning, Iran, Education*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of English in Iran is quite important as it is in many other developing countries. New technology and the adoption of the internet have resulted in a major transition in terms of business, education, science, and technological progress, all of which demand high proficiency in English. With the economic downturn in Iran a few years ago, a large number of Iranian companies have embraced cooperation regionally and internationally. Mergers, associations, and takeovers are common and English is used as the means to communicate, negotiate and execute transactions by participants where one partner can be a native speaker of English or none of the partners are native speakers of English. (Navidinia et al, 2009)

According to Navidinia et al, (2009) Iran has always been a country with one official language, it called Persian. We are proud that we have never been colonized. Another reason for having been a country with one language is the concept of national stability. There have been proposals to make Iran a country with two languages, Persian and English, but this has never materialized due to the abovementioned reasons. English can, therefore, be at most the first foreign language that students must study in schools. Hence, Iran's level of English proficiency is low in comparison with many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore).

According to Hawkes, L,M, (2011) in recent years, task-based language teaching (TBLT), as a branch of communicative language teaching has attracted considerable interest in L2 learning. There have been a variety of descriptions of what exactly a task is (for a summary, see Ellis 2003), but one shared fundamental factor is that the primary focus should be on meaning. In TBLT, these meaning focused tasks are performed by learners without a predetermined focus on discrete grammar points which is the case in more traditional branches of language teaching, such as the presentation–practice–production (PPP) methodology. Willis and Willis (2009) described how findings in L2 acquisition research have suggested that it is this focus on meaning that allows a learner's grammatical system to progress. Despite these findings, and the growth in its popularity, TBLT has received something of a backlash with some teachers and researchers doubting its effectiveness. Burrows (2008) cast doubt on the appropriateness of TBLT in Asian contexts. Among other concerns, Burrows questioned 'how much students' language proficiency is being extended' due to the predominant focus on task completion. Sato (2010) raised concerns over the ability of TBLT, compared to PPP, to teach specific grammatical forms to Japanese learners, especially to those in compulsory secondary education. Sato described a classroom-based study he undertook in which learners completed the task goals without ever using the target forms the tasks were supposed to encourage use of. However, it is unclear whether Sato considered the possibility of using a post-task form-focus stage to direct the learners 'attention towards the predetermined forms.

Generally, individuals think and act based on their beliefs and conceptions of the world. These conceptions and ideas have been formed through years under the influence of various factors and are greatly impressive in people's actions and decisions in life. As in the context of education, language learners hold

conceptions and beliefs about the whole process of learning. Clearly, finding out these hidden beliefs and views, turning implicit insights into explicit ones for learners to reflect on, is one of the many solutions to the myriad of problems in the English language education in our country. Accordingly, a remarkable advantage of knowing someone's beliefs can be revealed in the factors which are actually promoting or hindering learning for learners at schools or institutes since learners as well as teachers hold some views about teaching and learning which will consequently affect the way and styles they apply in the classroom. Pishghadam et al, (2010)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous Research

Drawing on Halliday's (1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics, a genre based approach to teaching L2 writing focuses on the conventions of a particular text type and attempts to help students understand why they are writing a text (purpose), who they are writing for (audience), and how to write a text (organization) (Widodo 2006). This author also argues that genre-based writing instruction places considerable emphasis on scaffolding (or teacher-supported learning) and collaboration (or peer interaction). He suggests that the teaching–learning cycle of a genre-based approach involves five major stages, which are:

- setting the context: to explore the purposes and setting in which a given genre is normally applied;
- -modeling: to analyze the key discoursal features of a sample text of the genre;
- Joint construction: to provide teacher-guided activities to reinforce the organizational pattern and grammatical features of the genre;
- Independent construction: to withdraw teacher support gradually and to monitor independent writing; and
- comparing: to associate what has been learnt from the given genre with other genres to identify particular social purposes.

Empirical studies (for example Kongpetch 2006; Cheng 2008) have shown that a genre-based approach can enhance students' abilities in constructing narrative, expository, and argumentative essays. It is therefore assumed that such an approach might similarly benefit students' summarization performance in relation to narrative, expository and argumentative source texts. If students have an explicit understanding of how a source text is structured, it should be easier for them to distinguish between major and minor points and to synthesize ideas in a more effective way. (As demonstrated by Chen 2011)

Roever, (2011) believed that the formulae can in principle be learnt in the foreign language classrooms well, but the necessity for learners to use them is much greater in the target language setting, which leads to accelerated learning. Where study abroad is a possibility as a component of a programme, it provides a quick way of learning these important expressions for a large group of learners. At the same time, there will always be learner variability and even some learners in the foreign language setting may achieve surprisingly high knowledge of formulae.

Furthermore, his study shows that learning of routine formulae is related to length of residence in the target language country but this is certainly not the only place where routine formulae can be learnt. Some knowledge of routine formulae can be acquired in the classroom, so they are learnable outside the target language context but they seem to be more quickly learnt within the target language context: the number of formulae that is known to the vast majority of learners more than doubles by the end of two months and increases again during the third month. (Roever, 2011)

Based on this study, there are various concepts incorporated in English language teaching and learning e.g. focuses on learners and for communication. Communicative Approach is still used but with more focus on listening and speaking. Integrated, cooperative, holistic learning, content, task-based and problem-based learning are also applied.

In another study Young's stated that English learning should cease to be segregated into separate LI and L2 'boxes':

While the ESL label is in keeping with international trends in most countries where English is taught and learned, is it not perhaps time that we, in South Africa, begin to consider how socially and politically divisive it is to continue using the ESL label? (Young 1995)

Several studies have investigated the metaphors SLA researchers use to discuss L2 acquisition. Kramsch (1995) refers to the 'input-black box-output' metaphor which is dominant in SLA and makes it easier for researchers to talk about teaching and learning process. Ellis (2002) analyses some articles written by several SLA researchers to identify the metaphors they use such as 'learner as machine' metaphor which is widely used by researchers. Oxford (2001) used some personal narratives kept by language learners to identify the metaphors by which they characterize three teaching approaches (cited in Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Oxford et al. (2001) gathered the metaphors used by learners to talk about their concept of teacher. These metaphors were then organized under four philosophical perspectives of education to provide a typology for the language teaching field.

Actually, in education research, metaphor analysis has been often used as a cognitive tool to raise awareness about assumptions and beliefs held by teachers and learners alike.

Ellis (2002) examined the metaphors in diaries of some beginner learners of L2 to find out what their belief system reveal about the language they are learning, their teacher and themselves. Nikitina and Furuoka (2008), using the context of Malaysian education, gathered some metaphors from language learners in perception of their language teachers, then categorized and analyzed these metaphors based on the typology of metaphors on education developed by Oxford et al. (1998). While most of the studies deal with the learners' attitudes toward their teachers, Swales (1994) conducted a study on the learners' perceptions of language learning. In the study, the learners were asked to describe their perception of learning a foreign language by drawing cartoons, which the results were closely related to the learners' social and political experiences in the countries they came from (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008).

Since uncovering the beliefs and ideas language teachers and learners hold regarding language teaching and learning process in an indirect way can be truly rewarding, this study took a look at the learners' role in language learning and teaching system. For this and, due to the scarcity of research about learners in formal (high schools) and informal contexts (private language institutes) of L2 education in Iran, this study hopes to clarify and categories the language learners' metaphors in the light of metaphor analysis.

2.2 The relationship between the language learning strategies of the students and language teaching strategies of teachers

Strategies are defined as the specific methods of approaching a problem or task, the modes of operation for achieving a particular end and the planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information (Brown, 2007:119). Similarly, Chamot (2004:14) describes learning strategies as the thoughts and actions that individuals use to accomplish a learning goal. From the definitions of learning strategies offered by different researchers, Lessard-Clouston (1997) concluded that learning strategies are involved in all learning, regardless of the content and context.

Good language learners use a variety of strategies to assist them in gaining command over new language skills (O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzaranes, Russo and Küpper, 1985:557-558). However, Hişmanoğlu (2000) claims that there is always the possibility that bad language learners can also use the same language learning strategies while becoming unsuccessful. These authors emphasize that using the same good language learning strategies does not guarantee that bad learners will also become successful in language learning since other factors may also play an important role in success.

In his study, Alptekin (2007) investigated the tutored language learning of English in a formal setting and the non-tutored acquisition of Turkish in a non-formal setting by international university students and concluded that compensation as a direct learning strategy seems to be the one most frequently deployed in both tutored and naturalistic learning. A similar study conducted by Yapıcı and Bada (2004) to examine the use of individual met cognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies among postgraduate students. The results of their study indicated that regardless of their educational background, all postgraduate students needed to be trained in the use of language learning strategies and the educational background can be a factor affecting the preference of language learning strategies (LLS).

Bekleyen (2006) investigated the language learning strategy levels of the English teacher candidates in terms of their gender, class levels and high schools. It was concluded that female students use more language learning strategies than male students and a statistically significant difference was not found between the school types and the students' use of language learning strategies. Moreover, a significant difference was found between the strategy use of 1st grade students and the strategy use of 4th grade students, which led to the conclusion that the use of strategy generally improves through the 4th grade.

It is seen that the classification of language learning strategies differs from one researcher to the other. The classification of O'Malley et al. (1985) includes cognitive, met cognitive and social/affective strategies. Different from the others, Brown (2007) divides the strategies into two groups as learning strategies and communication strategies. While learning strategies consist of cognitive, met cognitive and social/affective strategies, compensation and avoidance strategies are seen in the communication strategies group.

The classification used in most of the studies is the classification of Erhman and Oxford (1990). In this classification, from which we have also benefited for our study, strategies are first divided into two as direct and indirect strategies. Indirect strategies include met cognitive, affective and social strategies while direct strategies involve cognitive, memory and compensation strategies. Oxford and Crookall (1989:404) describes the strategies as in the following;

Cognitive Strategies–skills that involve manipulation or transformation of the language in some direct way through reasoning, analysis, note taking, functional practice in naturalistic settings, formal practice with structures and sounds, etc.

Memory Strategies–techniques to help store new information in memory and retrieve it later

Compensation Strategies–behaviors used to compensate for missing knowledge of some kind such as inferencing (guessing) while listening or reading, or

using synonyms or circumlocution while speaking or writing.

Metacognitive Strategies–behaviours used for centering, arranging, planning, and evaluating one's learning. These "beyond-the-cognitive" strategies are used to provide "executive control" over the learning process.

Affective Strategies–techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations related to language learning.

Social Strategies–actions involving other people in the language learning process. Examples are questioning, cooperating with peers, and developing empathy.

3. METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study consisted of 50 learners from high schools and 50 learners from language institutes in Mazandaran, Iran. The school students were studying in the third grade of high school and the language learners at the institutes had different educational background but both groups were truly eager in taking part in the study. The average age of the students at the schools were 16 with no experience of studying English at private institutes but having studied English at schools for almost 6 years, while the average age of the students at the language institutes were 18 who had several years of studying English at different institutes.

3.1 Instrumentation

Two instruments were employed in this study in order to address the research questions. First, in order to measure and determine the learners' level of general English language proficiency and ensure their homogeneity, the learners at the schools and institutes were required to do the standard Nelson's intermediate level test. Thus, test 200 D of Nelson test battery was used as the language proficiency test in this study (Fowler & Coe) Each of the 40 tests in this battery is consisted of 50 items in the form of multiple choice questions and students are supposed to choose the correct answer from among the alternatives. The required time to complete the test was 50 minutes. At each level, the passing score is intended to be 30 (60%). As for the second type of instruments, a checklist was adapted by the researchers. The checklist constitutes 27 items for the teachers and 18 items for the learners. The checklist constitutes three types of metaphors, exhibiting three important paradigms in psychology: Behaviorism Cognitive, and Simulative learning. The checklist for the teachers comprised 8 behaviouristic metaphors, 7 metaphors for Cognitive, and 12 ones for

situtaive learning; and for the learners, the checklist are composed of 9 behaviouristic metaphors, 6 cognitive metaphors, and 4 ones for situative learning. The learners were required to select the metaphors which showed their attitudes towards both teachers and learners in current and ideal situations. The checklist was made based on the guidelines laid out by Nikitina and Furuoka (2008), Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007), Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001. The metaphors were taken from a study (Nikitina & Furuoka, 2008), by which described the language teacher as a *parent, mother, magician, book, sunshine, entertainer, gardener, travel guide, candle*, and *policeman.* In yet another study, Saban, Kocbeker, and Saban (2007) collected some metaphors about language teachers which compare them to a *leader, provider, challenger, comedian, friend, computer, nurturer, innovator, artist,* and in the same study they discussed that a language learner can be considered as a *recipient, raw material, plant, pottery, building, mechanic, friend, constructor,* and *parent.*

The reliability of the checklist was computed by the Cronbach's Alpha which was found to be 0.75 for the whole sample. It shows that the results of the checklist are satisfactorily reliable in terms of their internal consistency.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection process started in October (2010) and continued until December (2010) to gather all the data in the high schools and language institutes. Both high school and language institute learners received a checklist about teaching and one about learning which has been driven from some metaphor analyses on English language education. Each participant was asked to select the metaphors that reflected to the highest degree her view about her present and ideal situations of teaching and learning English in her specific context of education. The metaphors collected by the checklists displayed the learners' beliefs and views about the current and ideal situation of English teachers and learners in Iran. As for the first step, the metaphors that have been used randomly in the checklist were categorized under the three educational perspectives suggested by Martinez, Sauleda, and Huber (2001). Finally, the frequency and percentage of the metaphors of each group in both contexts were computed and Chi-square was run to find out whether the differences are meaningful.

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to carry out a theoretical study on the role of English Language Teaching and Learning in Iran. The main contribution of this paper was to persuade teachers to take a serious attention on the relationship among Teaching and Learning in the

Iran. Investigating the relationship led us to lucrative outcomes. Due to lack of studies on above addressed problem in the country, attempts were made to investigate the role of English Language Teaching and Learning in Iran. This study theoretically reviewed prior literatures on same problem in other countries. The aim was to shed some light on the research problem.

It can be said that up to now English language teaching in Iran has not prepared for the changing world. Iran will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved. Here are some comments concerning the importance of English and the problems of English language teaching in Iran. Dr. Rom Hiranyapruek, specialist at English language stated that English is as important to the domain of information technology as other infrastructures. Thais have high proficiency in technology but because of our below average English competence, we cannot make much progress in terms of science and technology.

Future research should consider developing a more culturally-related nonverbal immediacy behaviors measurement while investigating the impact of teachers' nonverbal immediacy behaviors in relation to students' motivation for learning English. Future research should further identify and contrast the impact of teachers' gender on their nonverbal immediacy as well as its impact on students' motivation for learning English. Researchers should also consider what factors contribute to Taiwanese students' de-motivation so that teachers can avoid these behaviors.

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