

The Thorny Issue of Teacher Development in Iran: An Utter Fiasco or an Alternative Function?

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Abstract: This study aims at carrying out an investigation to examine the extent to which the future generation of English language teachers have a critical awareness of the means that have been specified to foster colonization via language. The study was conducted in an English language education program in a non-governmental, non-profit institute of higher education in Shiraz. The data was collected through semi-structured interview sessions in "teaching methodology" class for senior students majoring in English language translation. It aimed to outline the ways in which prospective teachers responded to the hidden social and political agenda which support ELT profession. Specifically, it focused on the students' opinions about the local vs. global beliefs, culture, ideology and ELT profession's status in general. The naïve, simplistic and uncritical reflections of the students, suggested that our language teacher education system is suffering and that it should provide the students with the necessary skills of critical thinking and problem solving. The study also suggested that in order to contribute to the current status of ELT in the country the new generation of English language teachers should be more sensitized toward the sociopolitical issues surrounding language education, via critical pedagogy acting within the realm of teacher development.

Key words: Teacher development • Critical pedagogy • Critical awareness • English as an international language • Linguistic imperialism

INTRODUCTION

English as the world's number one language of politics, science, education and economics, is receiving a considerable attention globally. Having a good command of English language can guarantee getting a wide range of opportunities such as being authorized to enter a high-ranked university, getting employed, being able to use the latest data base available, or doing business worldwide. Besides, an increasing number of English speaking people are contributing to the current status of English as the world's most prestigious language. In the Middle East region in general and in Iran in particular, people admire English which they believe is associated with modernity and internationalism and they keep on learning and/or teaching it unquestionably. Therefore, English is seemingly playing such an important role in Iranian educational system and its significance is escalating at a high rate. This issue has become a concern for ELT

practitioners, scholars, syllabus designers, material developers and even policy makers. As such, a need is felt to detect the issue in more detail.

Significance of the Study: English language teacher education system in Iran is working on satisfying the needs of this society, that is, to "train" rather than "develop" second language teachers, who are able to teach the language per se. English language teaching system is relying on preparing teachers to teach necessary language skills and nothing more. This fact has concerned educators about the necessity to create awareness about the current status of English among the students. The same contrasting issue of teacher training as opposed to teacher development serves as the basic framework of this paper. English language teacher education in Iran is "training" teachers who are able to talk in English, teach the mechanics of language and evaluate their learners in term of their linguistic attainment. This trend is neither sufficient nor desirable.

It seems more suitable to use the term "teacher development" as a substitute for "teacher training" to overcome these deficiencies. Development in the sense used here encompasses some critical elements that will help in-service and prospective teachers, to gain a deeper insight into and solve some ambiguities about English language. Moreover, it can help to develop certain strategies for the perseverance and appreciation of local culture and identity among learners. These are some targets that require necessary skills of critical pedagogy and critical thinking. Seemingly, the solution is to explore language education policy and planning solutions that are locally based and contextually specified. If we are to provide the best kind of EFL instruction which can benefit our students, we have to at least examine the nature of the above mentioned issues in order to provide the curricula with essential changes.

Research Questions: This paper addresses the following research questions:

- What are the dominant beliefs of prospective English language teachers about English teaching and/or learning?
- How is the present English language teacher education system operating in Iranian EFL context?
- Are future teachers equipped with necessary skills required for a language teacher?

Applying a qualitative design, this study examines some senior students' viewpoints about English language teaching and learning. It aims to depict the present state teacher education system in Iran, detect its deficiencies and propose some remedial instructions.

Before going ahead, it seems necessary to define every term concisely, make necessary distinctions needed and provide some clarifications for the purpose of providing the reader with the authors' assumptions underlying this study.

English as an International Language and Linguistic Imperialism: English as an international language has been a matter of concern for many people in recent decades. Everybody has a reason, or is finding a reason, to learn it. This simple argument is behind the valorization of English and its current status in the world. It is consolidating its presence by engaging an increasing number of learners, who are in need of learning the formal aspects of language (grammar, vocabulary, phonology,

etc.), proficient teachers (preferably native speakers), getting acquainted with the target culture (because of the generally accepted view that learning a language requires familiarity with the culture) and also materials and publications (which should be developed by native speaker material developers to feed their economic system). All the above mentioned points, which form the basis of the concept of linguistic imperialism, are believed to be the mechanism that supports the spread of English as an international language [1]. Non-technically speaking, linguistic imperialism deals with the hidden political, social and economic agenda backing the current status of English. Canagarajah [2] argues that teaching the formal aspects of the language is not the only mission of language teachers. Rather, they should develop awareness about the sociopolitical side of the work, which can strongly affect the way they teach and the way their students learn. To reach this target, different educators stress the necessary inclusion of critical pedagogy and reflective teaching in the educational systems [3-6].

What Is Teacher Development?: This section makes an attempt to give an account of the term "teacher development" broadly. In his article, Mann [7] has made some overlapping borderlines between terms and expressions that are usually applied interchangeably in the profession. He contends that although it is not possible to define each expression independently, yet there exist some differences between teacher training, teacher preparation, teacher education, teacher development, professional development, etc. We are not trying to quote the exact distinction here (for a thorough review refer to Mann 2005). Yet, he points out that there is a difference between 'development' and 'training':

- "The role of teacher training is to introduce the methodological choices available and to familiarize trainees with... terms and concepts that are the 'common currency' of language teachers. The trainer typically demonstrates the range of models and techniques available. He or she might, for example, demonstrate a range of strategies and techniques for correcting errors. Freeman [8] argued that this kind of knowledge and skill is more 'trainable' than awareness and attitude. ... There is also a common belief that training 'imposes' a received approach to it from the outside. The view taken here is that this is not development at all and forces us to consider whether this is, in fact, appropriate training" [7].

Mann concludes that teacher development is different in nature from both teacher training and teacher education. He maintains that teacher development is an umbrella term which can encompass both "professional, technical and instrumentation" at one extreme and "personal, moral and individual experiences" at the other extreme. Therefore, the expression seems to be more inclusive as compared to its commonly used equivalents. This can supposedly be called "the missing link" in Iranian EFL educational system. Rather than developing "transformative teachers" who are autonomous in their teaching and who can enrich the teaching context with their valuable experiences and knowledge, teacher-to-be students are still being "trained" under the traditional model of teacher education to learn teaching strategies, methodologies and syllabus design. Though we are contrasting teacher training/education with teacher development, we state a word of caution here, that teacher training/education is one part of teacher development and as such it is of crucial importance, but not sufficient. ELT profession in Iran has to notice this issue as one of the crucial challenges on the betterment of educational programs. To meet this highlighted concern, language policy and practice in Iran should make an effort to stress the inclusion of critical pedagogy into educational programs of future teachers. Critical pedagogy can help students and teachers to gain critical consciousness, which is necessary for the development of critical thinking skills. Critical pedagogy is a key term that can contribute to the establishment and achievement of teacher development program via "praxis", by involving the teachers in a connected cycle of theory, application, evaluation, reflection and then again theory" [9]. Teachers can experience meaningful teaching via critical pedagogy, for it is a way of reflecting teachers' mental lives, experience and knowledge. That is, a systematic teacher development system has to add an "individual teaching practice and skills" factor to the "theory-based instruction".

Besides, Mann [7] emphasizes the role of "teaching context" in any kind of instruction. In her 2002 article, she inserts the fact that context bears an extremely important role in a teacher education system. She believes that in order to put the theory into practice, any teacher education system should be sensitive to "the context of teaching". She compares the way "context" has been viewed in ELT over 25 years. She believes that traditionally, classrooms were generally seen as "sites of educational delivery", because the act of teaching by

practitioners was only viewed as a behavior and as such context was believed to be a place through which this certain behavior could have been delivered. But in modern times, as she says, a more egalitarian view of teaching has been taken into consideration. A view in which personal and individual experiences and knowledge of the teachers interplay the act of teaching. Therefore, we see that the concept of context has also changed accordingly. A view in which all participants involved in the educational system (students, parents, administrative parties, as well as teachers) have a role to play in the creation of a whole context of teaching.

The Amalgamation of Theory and Practice: One of the most recent compelling debates in ELT profession is whether the base of knowledge should be rooted in "core disciplinary knowledge about the nature of language and language acquisition" [10, p. 136] or focus on how L2 teachers learn to teach and how they carry out their work [11] and how to include their mental lives in the instruction. Some believe that any kind of repositioning may cause a greater attention to the personal and experiential at the cost of the empirical and theoretical [11]. Others have argued that it would take away the subject matter (i.e., language and how to teach it) that makes L2 teachers and their teaching unique [12] or erode the authority and thus professionalism of L2 teachers [13]. Counterarguments hold that although it is essential for L2 teachers to know about theories of language and second language learning and teaching, it will not suffice for an effective L2 teaching practice [14-15].

The theory/practice dichotomy is not something new in the profession and there exists a great body of literature over whether or not L2 teachers should study theoretical issues of SLA as part of a professional education. According to [11, 14], it is more desirable to focus on creating opportunities for L2 teachers to make sense of those theories in their professional experiences and the educational settings. It is at this point that the construct of *praxis* [9] seems to be more suitable for the preparation of teachers because it captures how theory and practice inform one another and how this transformative process informs teachers' work [16-18].

This praxis encompasses both teachers' understandings of theory populated with their own intentions and in their own voices [19-21] and also become their active use of theory by themselves, for their own objectives and for their own instructional contexts [22].

English Language Teacher Education Program at the HSIHE: The research that provided the basis for this report was conducted with senior students of ELT at Hafez-e-shiraz Institute of Higher Education (HSIHE). These students, who could be called a part of the next generation of English language teachers, were studying in the last semester to get their bachelor's degree in ELT. This program intends to prepare students as prospective English teachers for schools and language institutes. This four-year study at the university aimed at training English language teachers and offering related job opportunities that matched their expertise. Besides, it seems that foreign language teaching planning and policy in Iran aims at training local teachers who are more sensitive and aware of the local culture of the society and local needs of the students learning English as a foreign language. Yet, seemingly this policy is not an overt one, because as we will read later in this report, the future generation of English language teachers in Iran, have little or no awareness toward this hidden side of their work, which stresses sociopolitical aspects of their profession. This unawareness, can potentially bias their act of teaching in favor of globalization via language, which is in contrast with promoting a culturally-bound curriculum.

This program at HSIHE has one interwoven objective, i.e., to train and educate prospective English language teachers who know enough about the nature of language, the formal system of the language (which stresses language grammar, phonology, semantics and discourse), the related linguistic structure and a limited scope of teaching methodology. The findings of this study, will suggest that this one-dimensional objective of such programs, as a point of departure from the significant "social aspect" of teaching, is the missing link in the Iranian teacher education system. And this fact highlights the importance of developing the above-mentioned "teacher development" rather than "teacher training/education" system.

The Study

Participants: Among a total number of 27 students enrolled at "English Language Teaching Methodology" course, 12 volunteers (male and female) willingly wished to take part in the interview for this study. Five students, 2 male and 3 female, were chosen randomly from the volunteers. These students attended 3 sessions of semi-instructed interviews and reflected their beliefs and viewpoints about English language, its present status in Iran and in the world and teaching/learning resources.

Procedure: The focus group discussion session aimed at examining the extent to which the prospective English language teachers had a critical awareness about the general status of English language, the means of its spread, cultural sensitivity, localization vs. globalization issues in the profession and their overall attitude toward their future profession as English language teachers. The transcription of the students' recorded opinions revealed a naive, simplistic, uncritical celebration of English and the vital need to teach and learn it unconditionally. All of the respondents, had the same attitude of praise toward English and stressed the ubiquitous presence of English, not only in the context of Iran, but also in every other place in the world. Let's take a glance at the summary of some selected parts of their elicited reflections and then justify:

The Prospective Teachers' Voices and Visions:

Question 1: Talk about the present status of English language and its teaching/learning system in Iran.

Reflections

Farshad: English is the international language. Everywhere you go, you should know English. Otherwise, you are an illiterate person.

Sara: English is the international language and the most prestigious one in the world. I think it is essential for every person to know English. If you do not know English, you cannot see and enjoy movies, you cannot travel and you cannot surf the net. It is a key to every thing.

Majid: I agree with my friends. It is something clear. It is an international language and we should learn and teach it.

Mina and Najmeh: Nodding their heads to indicate they do agree with their friends.

Researcher: So, one main reason that you decided to study English language is the fact that it is the international language, right?
All of them: Yes. Of course.

Researcher: Would you choose to study another language, like Urdu, if it were the international language?

All of them: No (emphatically).

Researcher: Why not?

All of them: (silence)

Question 2: You are going to be English language teachers in near future. Tell me what do you think about your future role? What characteristics do you think an ideal English language teacher should possess?

Reflections

Majid: Well, the most important thing for a language teacher is that he/she should be able to talk well. Just like a native speaker. Most of the teachers we have, cannot talk well. And, I think because our teachers were not proficient enough, we also, cannot be good teachers. Whatever we do, we cannot succeed to talk like a native speaker. The English language that we learn and we talk is not standard. Then, how can we become successful language teachers?

Researcher: What is standard English?

Majid: It is the version that is talked by native speakers.

Researcher: Who is a native speaker?

Majid: mmm... well,... a native speaker...

Farshad: I think a native speaker is somebody who is originally from America or England.

Sara: Or somebody who is grown up in an English-speaking country.

Researcher: Do you think that any native speaker can be a good language teacher?

All of them: yes,,,,sure,,,,,definitely....

Researcher: Najmeh? What is your idea?

Najmeh: I do not know why you are asking this! You know the answer. It is as clear as crystal.

Question 3: Now, let's talk about English textbooks and other resources that are available in the market. How do you see them? Do you think they respond to your future students' needs?

Reflections

Farshad: Yes. Most of them are very good, if well-trained teachers teach them.

Mina: I think the writer of the book is very important. If we choose books that are written by experts, we can have a better outcome.

Researcher: Can you elaborate more, Mina?

Mina: Well, for example, we learnt almost nothing at high school (she is talking about English course at the high school), because the writers of these books know nothing about English. But when we study "new interchange" series, for example, we learn a lot about English, the people, their way of life and the culture. We learn what to say when we want to do shopping in a foreign country, how to order food and other things.

DISCUSSION

The data collected by these students (or prospective teachers) were used to answer the research questions of this study.

- What are the dominant beliefs of prospective English language teachers about English teaching and/or learning?

These reflections indicate the teacher-to-be-students' accepting and approving attitude toward the English language unquestionably. They are also an indication of a phenomenon known as "linguistic imperialism" [1], a process through which the English language spreads. Their comments show that they praise this language, for no clear reason. They see something unique in this language; some inherent merit in its nature. It seems that they do not have a clear idea of what they are doing. There is no trace of sociopolitical awareness toward the policies that support the spread of English in the world and the origins of the so-called "prestige" of this language.

These reflections also show other important concepts that play a crucial role in critical studies: native speaker fallacy and the notion of standard English (both of which have roots in the linguistic imperialism notion). This is another indication of the fact that our future teachers have little or no critical awareness. They have accepted the "self/others" dichotomy, which is a way of colonizing

disenfranchised people. This is done through injecting an ideology that stresses the idea of "ownership of the language" at one extreme and making all other versions of English inferior to the so-called "standard English", at the other side of the extreme. And these teacher-to-be-students have taken this for granted (Najmeh's comment).

The last interpretation is about ELT materials and course designing and developing. Again, due to their uncritical way of thinking, they believe that it is more important to get to know another culture. This shows a move toward accepting a global culture and there exists no attempt toward the preservation of the local culture. This sort of opinion is contributing to the current status of ELT profession in two ways. First, by expressing resistance toward the inclusion of the source culture, they are fast-forwarding the colonizing movement and second is the fact that they are fueling the ELT publishing engine, in favor of countries located in power centers.

- How is the present English language teacher education system operating in Iranian EFL context?

The researcher tends to refer to the above mentioned discussion and the distinction made between teacher training vs. teacher development to answer this research question. The system of teacher education in Iran seems to be nothing more than a simple training in terms of mechanics of teaching and some guidelines as how to approach teaching language skills and very little else.

Freeman [23] points out to other critical factors that can enrich a desirable teacher development program. She asserts:

"... teacher education will need to organize and support new relationships between new and experienced teachers. If knowledge in teaching belongs fundamentally to teachers, then it makes sense that teachers must be able to communicate what they know about their work to those who are learning it. A critical role of new teacher education designs will be to make that happen, through well-crafted mentoring programs and similar social arrangements that connect new and experienced teachers in learning teaching across a career span..." [23]. There is a need for teacher education system to encompass theories of language teaching and make them sound sense via practice as well as the intuition, knowledge and the experience of the teacher. This is the missing link of a good functioning teacher education system In Iranian EFL context.

- Are future teachers equipped with necessary skills required for a language teacher? The answer to the last research question is obviously negative. As it can be inferred from the uncritical reflections, it can be concluded that they need to develop further skills, especially critical thinking skills, to be able to act desirably in the education system. The teacher education system in Iranian EFL context has to get more sensitized toward the inclusion of these critical skills, if it is to act optimally.

The Final Word: As it was mentioned earlier, the main purpose of this study was to investigate whether student teachers have the ability to think critically about such issues as the status of English language teaching, the hidden social and political agenda backing English Language Teaching profession and their general impression about local vs. global curricula. The analysis of the subscribed focus group discussion revealed that these prospective teachers lack the necessary skills of critical thinking. This is due to the fact that our English language teacher education system is malfunctioning. The findings suggest that mere focus on the linguistic aspect of the profession is not enough. Teaching English as a foreign language is not just the act of transmitting the knowledge of skills and sub-skills of language (such as grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, etc.). Teachers of English should know that beside these basic skills, they have an agency role to play. There exists a hidden side, which may refer to issues of marinating ideological hegemony by those theoreticians and material developers acting at the peak of the power hierarchy. In other words, there is a need to change this routine act of teaching via "praxis". English language teachers should gain an egalitarian perspective about their profession. In this paper, it is suggested that it is vital to equip and empower the teachers with a critical lens. We, also have to make a distinction between the terms of " teacher education" and "teacher development", with the latter encompassing such concerns as gaining critical awareness toward the profession, specific teaching contexts necessities, striving for the inclusion of local culture in the curricula, getting the teachers to know such concepts as linguistic imperialism, an interwoven amalgamation of theory and practice and developing a meaningful understanding of the profession.

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