Flexible Teachers vs. Rigid Learners: "Opportunities Lost & Found in Iranian EFL Context"

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Abstract – In order to measure or predict an entity, it should necessarily be considered as a static phenomenon, so has been the case with the realm of language teaching and learning so far. But language teaching/learning is dynamic in nature because it is rooted in the dynamic nature of human mind. Introducing a framework for teachers in classrooms is also a dynamic entity, and the notion of flexibility for the teachers covers many explicit and implicit dimensions, many of which have not been touched upon yet. Flexibility for teachers is a unique genre through which teachers are equipped to come up with the opportunities lost due to the rigid learners who are not, consciously or unconsciously, in the mainstream of the common standards of learning a foreign language; and flexible teachers are able to develop unique opportunities for a single group of students, for sure, the results are not generalized completely to any other classroom settings. Here in the present article, the concentration is on the five-most significant aspects of characteristics of a flexible teacher, especially in the Iranian EFL context which is completely a culture-bound setting.

Keywords – Flexibility; flexible teachers; interactionist; independent material developer; opportunist; feeling empathy; breaking the ice

Introduction

Nowadays flexibility is rendering a 'buzz-word' in the domain of language teaching and there are many different definitions proposed for that, but language teaching/learning are an unpredictable experience, every moment something may pop out which facilitates or debilitates the process of teaching/learning. In a nutshell, Flexibility means to be sharp enough to have something ready in mind to react to any of these unpredictable scenes and make the best use of everything at hand and in mind. The term "Sharp" here does not mean being intelligent, it means being aware of every single occurrence which is related to the learners directly or indirectly. What prevails in a classroom as so-called flexibility is just like as an iceberg, the teacher should be much informative and creative instantly to do the right thing in the right time to achieve the right goal. In other words, the teacher should be cautious enough not to deviate from the mainstream of teaching philosophy.

Teacher Flexibility

Teacher flexibility does not have any agreed unique framework or pattern which can be practiced. Teacher flexibility cannot be trained or educated. It is an inborn entity, through which some so-called teachers are not capable to engage or involve the learners in the subjects, but they simply tell the subjects instead. Unfortunately, some misbelieved that a flexible teacher is an effective teacher, as Chester E. Finn Jr. provides a thorough definition for the concept of 'effective teacher', Finn [6] reductionist definition, "*an effective teacher is one whose pupils learn what they should while under his/her tutelage.*" As the teachers provide learners with a plenty of pieces of information, they can achieve the goal of teaching and learning which both are the two sides of the same coin. But the point here is that, a teacher, can achieve just the teaching side, and the learning side cannot be achieved simply.

Domains of Flexibility

Flexibility is not just about the teaching process, it is an umbrella term for everything which a teacher is dealt with such as classroom management, materials, instruments, level of learners, goal of learners, etc., but the main issue which a teacher has to come up with is dealing with learners, especially learners who are not following the rules, or getting involved completely, which in this article are called rigid learners.

Rigid Learners

There are some learners that are not capable to put into practice the instructions which are provided by the teachers or materials. In Iranian EFL context, unfortunately, there are a plenty of examples of such learners, namely the rigid learners, who are doing nothing to achieve the pre-determined goals of language teaching/learning, and once a single problem pops up in the long run, the idea of "learning a language is impossible" will be triggered in their minds. They want their teachers to say jingo, and suddenly an acceptable level of knowledge will be gained. Carter [3] critiques the image of the "teacher-as-saint" (p. 86). The public, he contends, expects teachers to work miracles and blames them when the miracles somehow do not materialize. These learners start many times but they often fail to gain any, because they do not tolerate the pain. Rigid learners have an illusion in their minds that teachers are superstars who can do many things instead of them. Kate Walsh [15] points out that these "superstar" teachers are relatively rare. By showing more flexibility, teachers can save these rigid learners, as we all know, teaching the normal or sharp students is not a tough task, but finding a common language with rigid learners is, honestly speaking, a flexible teacher's art. In this regard, paying attention to the personality traits of learners is of great help to the teachers. Some students are extrovert, others are introverts. But as Fahim and Teimourtash [5] put, there may be some groups as "midtroverts" where their reflections to the world are quite different.

Opportunities Lost & Found

In Iranian EFL context, there exist many needs for leaning a foreign language, especially English, due to two main reasons. The first one is academic purposes, and the other one is for immigration ends. Opportunities for learning a foreign language is much more than enough, but the output, the desired output, is very low, completely disappointing. Every single thing which is required for learning a language is available, but the point is that, teachers and learners, as two sides of this event, should be flexible enough to be their own leader, guide, facilitator, etc.

Here in the present article, the focus is on the teachers because they can make the learners more flexible. In Iranian context, the necessity of being flexible is more demanding, due to the Culture-Gap existing between Iranian learners and that of English speaking countries. The golden key to success in this contest is the concept of flexibility. The notion of flexibility is in line with the humanistic approach to language teaching as well, because it is regarded as the backbone of teaching as Mehrgan [14] states "*One of remarkable movements in the realm of language teaching was the type of language education approach which was called Humanistic Language Teaching (HLT).*"

Necessity of Flexibility

As mentioned above, the learners' achievement can be facilitated by applying flexibility spectrum. Flexibility spectrum means everything which helps to provoke

learners understanding of the use of that desired language which is required to be learned. Teachers' flexibility can be considered as a shortcut to uptake the use of language. Here are some guidelines, which should be taken into consideration, for being on the right track and becoming more flexible, flexible in a sense that results in a better education for the next generation. As Khatib and Teimourtash [11] state: "*the aim of each and every educational system is to prepare a generation for experiencing a better life in general and to bring up individuals with a better command of their own lives in a way that they be able to make the right choice at the right time.*"

The notion of flexibility has been considered in two versions, namely as the strong version and the weak one. The strong version is applied to teaching realm as a prerequisite, i.e. the teaching profession does involve flexibility as one of the main components of its practitioner. In better words, if a teacher is not flexible enough in this view, s/he is not a teacher in nature. Here in this paper, the weak version of flexibility is focused. In the weak version, flexibility does not follow any predetermined framework, i.e. flexibility is rooted in chaos/complexity and it should be considered as a dynamic phenomenon in nature.

Here, the authors have tried to provide a schematic diagram below:
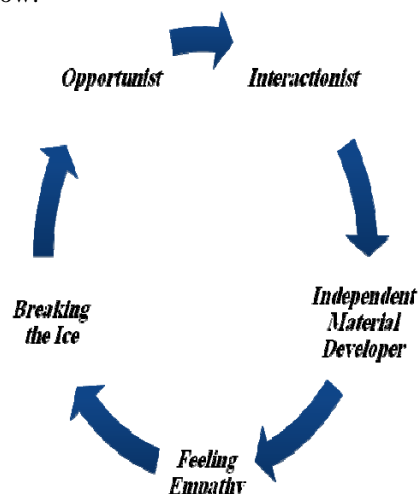
Interactionist

Teachers should be interactionist, frankly speaking, they can interact and communicate easily unless they could teach. The importance of interaction is not hidden to anyone.

> "*In the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about (Brown, [2])*"

The main reason of learning another language is interacting with the speakers of that particular language. But generally speaking, the language learners, especially in the Iranian EFL context, are not capable of interacting outside of the classroom settings, because they are not

interacting actually; they are just pretending to interact unwontedly, they are just using some clichés. The teachers should devote each and every moment in the class to practicing and preparing the learners for the real contexts. This needs teachers to show more flexibility, they should be interactionist in nature. If they are not ready to interact in any unpredicted situation, how would they be able to transfer this ability to the learners, especially the rigid learners?

But one important issue in being interactionist is that, by noticing the first signs of interaction, it is unlikely that the learners can perform effectively in the real world context easily. So evaluating their performance, in better words, evaluating the level of their interaction, is a very crucial task. According to Wenden [16] (p. 28), evaluating involves three steps: 1) learners examine the outcome of their attempts to learn; 2) they access the criteria they will use to judge it; and 3) they apply it.

Independent Material Developer

No one can claim that there exists one brilliant magical series of books in any language which is the most perfect one. Teachers are mostly perfectionists, but every day a new system is introduced in the TEFL world. Nowadays, the *Continuing Education Fund* (*CEF*) system is widespread and focused, in Iranian EFL context as well. A good example is "English Result" series. Although it provides a good exposure for language learners, but it is completely culture bound. For instance, Iranian EFL learners/teachers are interested in it but it is full of European names and also full of very uninteresting topics, and that is where the problem exists. So this can be, or it is better to say, it should be compensated by the teachers. They should be flexible enough to be ready in every moment in order to fill in the cultural gap or some other mismatches in the book in order for the learners to be able to adapt themselves with the context of learning. By providing many available supplementary materials in the market, it would be much easier to put them in practice and make the classroom settings much favorable for the learners. Of course such adaptation demands a critical approach towards the materials. Teachers should be critical thinkers about materials as Khatib and Mehrgan [10] define critical thinking as: *"Critical Thinking is the process of using reasoning to discern what is true, and what is false"*.

Opprtunist

As it is mentioned above, when the teachers focus on doing all sections of the books one after the other, it means they are providing the classroom setting with a cliché style. After a while, learners can get used to the styles and predict the sequence of the tasks and situations, or the learners may lose their motivation totally. The proposed remedy is that the teachers should use every single second of the classroom to make the situation ready and suitable for learners to interact efficiently. "Talk is one of the major ways that teachers convey information to learners, and it is also one of the primary means of controlling learner behavior (Allwright & Bailey [96])."

Drills are usually practiced in the formats of T-S (teacher-student) or S-S (pair work) in the Iranian EFL context, but S-S-S (group work) style is deemphasized because of culture-sensitive issues. Generally speaking Iranian EFLs and teachers are highly individual oriented. The teacher should be opportunist to provide many opportunities of learning in S-S-S (group work) format, as it is more near to observe authenticity and also it is far from following clichés which are mostly practiced in the S-S (pair work) tasks. According to Harmer [8]:

> *".... group work is more dynamic than pair work: there are more people to react with and against in a group and, therefore, there is a greater possibility of discussion."*

By being opportunist, teachers can provide a situation for learners to mirror the learners' real ability of performing. As Law and Singleton [12] argue, 'performances are difficult to put on unless they build on the networks that are already in place'. But clichés should not be considered as the sign of performance.

Feeling Empathy

Teachers should put themselves in the learners' shoes. Leaning a language, especially a foreign language, is a real tough task. Teachers should not forget their own first days of learning a foreign language and the hardships they had tolerated. Adapting to the new context should be done smoothly in a way that learners have enough time to adapt themselves to the new context. They need time to make their own autonomy in the foreign language. In Little [13] terms, learner autonomy is

> *"… essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action."*

Breaking the Ice

Many learners may have a high self-confidence outside of the classroom settings or they may have high social level, but inside the classroom, they become someone else, they get afraid of engaging in the mainstream of the classroom. The teachers' role is highlighted here. Each methodological book would deal with this problem in its own way, for example, shy or introvert students.

Classroom participation is also a critical issue, as Johnson [9] points out that the patterns of communication in most classrooms are not explicitly taught, but they are implicitly enforced through teachers' use of language; second language students may find it difficult to infer the norms for participation in classroom events.

There are many affective filters in front of EFLs, especially in Iranian EFL context as the notion of culture gap exists. As we know, the affective variable, if ignored or downgraded, will hinder communication or interaction definitely. Gardner and MacIntyre [7] define 'affective variables' as the "emotionally relevant characteristics of

the individual that influence how she/he will respond to any situation".

The notion of "Breaking the ice" means something more than the warm-up time in every session, and it embraces more in the emotional and logical domain of handling the class. In EFL context, especially in the Iranian context, the difference between the outside and inside of the classroom setting is very distinguishable. Maybe some time at the beginning of the class is lost, just due to this existing difference. By breaking the ice and letting learners feel free in their minds, the undeniable affective filters are pinned down, and their destructive effects will, dramatically, get decreased.

Final Remarks

The notion of "teachers' flexibility" can neither be trained nor formed, just because it is impossible to propose a static framework for it. It should be noted that it is neither restricted to any teaching style. That is to say, the notion of teacher flexibility can be applied to teacher-centered classes as well as learner-centered or learning-centered ones. The point here is that, this notion is an awareness, by which showing more flexibility, from the teacher's side, would motivate learners to get involved in the process of language learning. According to Gardner and MacIntyre [7], motivation is comprised of three components: 'desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task'. As learners get motivated, every single problem can be come up with, and the flexible teacher as the knowledge source could best manage the issue just because s/he could establish a proper link in this regard. As Fahim & Mehrgan [4] artistically explain: "*that sociocognitive view to learning makes attempts to link the social and affective side of learning with what happens in the human brain*".

One last point that authors want to emphasize is that the schematic framework provided above can be considered in two levels. In the first level, it is better to be considered as a circular framework, in which case, it would result in reinforcement of the knowledge both on the part of teachers and learners. In the second level, it is better to be considered in a spiral schematic framework, in which case, both teachers and learners take full command of their teaching and learning, and they are conscious about their progress from one layer to another.

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