The Relationship between Iranian EFL Teachers´ Classroom Management, Critical Thinking Skills, and their Years of Experience

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Abstract: In recent years the importance of promoting critical thinking skills and creative thinking in education has been widely acknowledged. More specifically, it is believed that the successful incorporation of these skills in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language has a central role. The purpose of the present study was to identify if there was any relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ classroom management, critical thinking skills, and years of experience. To this end, scores out of the classroom management and critical thinking skills questionnaire were collected and correlated with the years of experience of 30 Iranian EFL teachers who were selected as the sample of the study. The results showed significant correlation between classroom management, critical thinking skills, and their years of experience.

Index terms: classroom management, critical thinking, teachers´ years of experience

1. INTRODUCTION

Good classroom management has several characteristics, including student commitment to class work in a safe environment, students’ knowledge about their teachers’ expectations in the learning process, and little time spent on distracting events (Sanford, Emmer & Clements, 1983, as cited in Yilmaz, 2004). Creating classrooms where students are not afraid of participating in discussions or asking questions is important. In such classrooms, if teachers are careful about explaining exercises or activities to be done and returning students’ papers with comprehensible corrections quickly, students are more committed to learning (Yilmaz, 2004).

Although there is no agreed-upon definition of classroom management, the framework offered by Evertson and Weinstein (2006) represents a current and widely accepted view. According to Evertson and Weinstein (2006), classroom management has two distinct purposes: “It not only seeks to establish and sustain an orderly environment so students can engage in meaningful academic learning, it also aims to enhance student social and moral growth” (p. 4). Fuller and Clark (1994) remarked, what really matters is the teacher knowledge of the subject. Elaborating the importance of teacher knowledge as Criterion for producing better results in the teaching learning process, Fawns and Nance (1993) state that ’teacher knowledge, reason and judgment rather than teaching behavior should be emphasized as the basis of an account of exemplary teaching’. Wilkins (1974) is of the view that a poor command of English language puts the teacher in a critical situation due to the unpredictable nature of the classroom situation. In communicative language teaching the knowledge of
the target language is of paramount importance.

The way we think affects all aspects of our private and social life and education is not an exception. Human beings think differently and teachers who have key roles in education do so. Recently proper attention has been given to the ways teachers think (Calderhead, 1987) and now teaching is more characterized as a thinking activity (Richards & Farell, 2005). Critical thinking is an important concept in education and is generally defined as the ability to think rationally and make good decisions in doing something or believing something (Ennis, 2011). Critical thinking includes special skills to identify a problem, analyze it, and make inferences to solve it. It also requires judging the validity and reliability of assumptions and sources of data, making decisions based on specific reasoning criteria, and applying inductive and deductive logic (Diestler, 2001; Pithers & Soden, 2000). Huiit (1998) asserted that critical thinking is a very important element of schooling in the 21st century since in the information age, thinking plays a significant role in one’s success in life. Wright (2002) seeks an appropriate definition by means of clarifying the concept of critical thinking and determining what problem the definition should help to solve. For the purpose of teaching, for example, the definition should help the teachers teach and assess critical thinking in school classrooms. Thus, the definition is intended to" Preserve the core meaning of the original concepts used to define critical thinking."(p. 41). A person who thinks critically can ask suitable questions, gather relevant information, and come to reliable conclusions about the world and thus live more successfully . As Freeley and Steinberg (2000) state critical thinking is "the ability to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas; to reason inductively and deductively; and to reach factual or judgmental conclusions based on sound inferences drawn from unambiguous statements of knowledge or belief" (p. 2). Critical thinking is ability essential for successful performance in not only educational but also professional and social contexts.

The importance of promoting higher-order thinking skills in language classrooms has also been the focus of interest among language experts (Chamot, 1995). As students learn critical thinking skills through content course instruction (Fisher, 2001), integrating problem solving activities that need critical thinking in language classes is of vital importance. In this way, how to think rather than what to think is emphasized and students are encouraged to participate actively in language classes. Research shows that critical thinking skills are related to English overall proficiency (Rashid & Hashim, 2008), reading comprehension ability (Fahim, Bagherkazemi, & Alemi, 2010), vocabulary knowledge (Fahim & Komijani, 2010).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 CRITICAL THINKING

Critical thinking is a key term that has been developing throughout the past 2500 years. The term "critical thinking" has its roots in the mid-late 20th century. We offer here overlapping definitions, together which form a substantive, trans-disciplinary conception of critical thinking. Ennis (1987) suggests that "critical thinking is reasonable, reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do." However defined, critical thinking refers to a way of reasoning that demands adequate support for one's beliefs and an unwillingness to be persuaded unless the support is forthcoming.

Skills needed to begin to think about issues and problems do not suddenly appear in our students (Tama, 1986, 1989). Teachers who have attempted to incorporate higher level questioning in their discussions or have administered test items demanding some thought rather than just recall from their students are usually dismayed at the preliminary results. Unless the students have been prepared for the change in expectations, both the students and the teacher are likely to experience frustration. In the context of language teaching, Dubin and Olshtain (1986) present a scale for assessing the cognitive potential of language learning processes drawn upon in the classroom as follows, beginning with the most through to the least cognitively demanding; of course, these processes are not exclusive to language learning and can be applied to all kinds of learning such as:
What Paul deems as central to the concept of critical thinking are those that Dubin and Olshtain view as the most cognitively demanding. Accordingly, developing the ability to think critically is on a par with directly engaging one’s cognitive resources. Brookfield (1987, p. 229) takes a similar path when he states that critical thinking involves two inextricably interrelated processes: “identifying and challenging assumptions, and imagining and exploring others.” This definition highlights the significance of original and creative thinking in an attempt to unearth hidden agendas and judge them on the basis of one’s own designated standards and he believes that critical thinking encompasses two interconnected processes, namely, identifying and challenging assumptions, and imagining and exploring others (p.229).

2.2 CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Teaching is complex of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes. The general abilities and dispositions, which Ennis has identified with critical thinking, do seem to connect closely with the results of the research on teacher thinking. It is probably no exaggeration to say that classroom management has been a primary concern of teachers ever since there has been teachers in classrooms. Arguably, the first high-profile, large-scale, systematic study of classroom management was done by Kounin (1970). He analyzed videotapes of 49 first and second grade classrooms and coded the behavior of students and teachers. In 1976, Brophy and Evertson reported the results of one of the major studies in classroom management, up to that point, in a book entitled Learning from Teaching: A Developmental Perspective. Their sample included some 30 elementary teachers whose students had exhibited consistently better than expected gains in academic achievement. The comparison group consisted of 38 teachers whose performance was more typical. Brophy and Evertson's(1976) study, then, might be considered a comparison of exceptional teachers with average teachers. Although the study focused on a wide variety of teaching behaviors, classroom management surfaced as one of the critical aspects of effective teaching.

A series of four studies conducted at the Research and Development Center for Teacher Education in Austin, Texas, marked a milestone in the research on classroom management. The first study involved 27 elementary school teachers. The second involved 51 junior high school teachers. Results from the elementary school study were reported in Emmer, Evertson, and Anderson (1980) and Anderson, Evertson, and Emmer (1980). Results from the junior high study were reported in Evertson and Emmer (1982) and in Sanford and Evertson (1981). Both studies were descriptive and correlational in nature and identified those teacher actions associated with student on-task behavior and disruptive behavior. Again, Kounin's earlier findings were strongly supported. One of the more significant conclusions from these studies was that early attention to classroom management at the beginning of the school year is a critical ingredient of a well-run classroom. The third and fourth studies, also conducted in the elementary and junior high schools, respectively, examined the impact of training in classroom management techniques based on findings from the first two studies. The findings from these studies were reported by Emmer, Sanford, Clements, and Martin (1982); Emmer, Sanford, Evertson, Clements, and Martin (1981); and Evertson, Emmer, Sanford, and Clements (1983). In the latter two studies, the interventions occurred at the beginning of the school year and resulted in improved teacher behavior in many, but not all, management areas and also in more appropriate student behavior in experimental group classes as compared to control group classes.
2.3 YEARS OF TEACHING AND MANAGEMENT

Experienced teachers are believed to have combined years of service and a repertoire of classroom skills and strategies. They typically have the ability to prioritize tasks and to attend selectively to a number of key classroom matters (Hagger & McIntyre, 2000). They generally are able to manage the dynamic nature of a classroom setting and to deal effectively with the most salient aspect of a classroom—unpredictability (Doyle, 1986). Compared to beginning teachers, experienced teachers tend to be less hesitant (Carter, Cushing, Sabers, Stein, & Berliner, 1988) and more flexible and adaptable (Kerrins & Cushing, 2000). In addition, beginning teachers are sometimes less able to work with speed, fluidity, and flexibility or to have mental models that permit large amounts of information to be accessed and handled effectively (Sabers, Cushing, & Berlinder, 1991). According to the literature, it takes between four and seven years of experience for an individual to develop into a competent teacher (Carter & Doyle, 1995; Gonzalez & Carter, 1996; Varrella, 2000).

Some studies like Fahim et al. (2010) have been conducted so far to throw some light on the importance of critical thinking in English language classes. Grosser and Mirna Nel (2013) report on the relationships that exist between the critical thinking skills and the academic language proficiency of a group of first-year prospective teachers at a South African university (n = 89). The white Afrikaans-speaking and English Home Language-speaking students, who took part in the study. The results revealed the nature of the critical thinking skills as well as the academic language proficiency of the students. Significant correlations between academic language proficiency and making inferences, as well as between academic language proficiency and critical thinking as a general competency.

Good classroom managers are teachers who understand and use specific techniques. Awareness of and training in these techniques can change teacher behavior, which in turn changes student behavior and ultimately affects student achievement positively. Again, research evidence supports this assertion. To illustrate, consider the research by Walter Borg and Frank Ascione (1982). In a study involving 34 elementary school teachers who were randomly assigned to experimental and control conditions, they found that (1) teachers who had been trained in the use of effective classroom management techniques (the experimental group) improved their use of those techniques when compared to a group of untrained teachers (those in the control group), and (2) the students of the teachers in the experimental group had fewer disruptions and higher engagement rates than those in the control groups.

One of the most promising findings from the research on becoming a skilled classroom manager is that apparently it can happen relatively quickly. For example, in their study of some 40 junior high school teachers randomly assigned to experimental and control groups, Emmer, Sanford, Clements, and Martin (1982) found that teachers' skills at classroom management could be significantly improved even by the simple intervention of providing them with a manual and two half-day work-shops. As described by Emmer and his colleagues,

Martin, Yin, and Baldwin (1998) developed the Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom Control (ABCC) Inventory and later improved and renamed it as Behavior and Instructional Management Scale (BIMS) (Martin & Sass, 2010). Martin and Sass (2010) defined the term classroom management with two broad dimensions: instructional management, behavior management. This study also follows the same definition of multifaceted construct that includes two broad dimensions: instructional and behavior management. Instructional management includes aspects of classroom life such as establishing daily procedures, allocating materials, and monitoring students' independent work (Martin & Sass, 2010). Well-planned lessons that provide for a smooth flow of instruction delivered at a sustained pace help to prevent off-task behaviors. The manner in which tasks are managed contributes to the general classroom atmosphere and classroom management style (Burden, 1995; Weinstein & Mignano, 1993). Behavior management is any pre-planned intervention aimed at preventing misbehavior. It is a means of preventing misbehavior rather than a reaction to misbehavior. Specifically, this facet includes setting rules, establishing reward structure, and providing opportunities for student input (Martin & Sass, 2010).

In accordance to what has been stated so far, the present study seeks to find appropriate answer to the following research question:
Is there any relationship between classroom management, critical thinking, and years of experience?
3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 PARTICIPANTS

Regarding the participants, 30 teachers (20 females and 10 males) ranging in age from 24 to 40, and varied in their ELT experience from 1 year to 20 years participated in this investigation. Teachers (50%) had BA degrees and (50%) had MA degrees in English Translation and English Language Teaching. Iranian teachers of pre-intermediate and intermediate adult EFL learners from private language institute in Sari and Babol cities participated in this research.

3.2 INSTRUMENTATION

The researchers employed two kinds of instruments to conduct this research, a questionnaire of critical thinking and a questionnaire of classroom management. Critical thinking questionnaire including 30 five-option items (Honey, 2000) was administered to the participants to evaluate the skills of analysis, inference, evaluation, inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. Also, classroom management questionnaire by Yilmaz (2004) was used which had 36 Likert-scale items.

3.3. PROCEDURE

Subjects (N=30) were given a critical thinking test to check their thinking ability and classroom management to find if critical thinking, classroom management, and years of experience have any relationship with each other. Both questionnaires were administered among EFL teachers who worked in high schools, institutes, and universities in Sari and Babol. Thirty questionnaires for each were filled completely and were used for the final data analysis. Following the administration of these instruments, necessary modifications were made based on the feedbacks received from the participants and experts.

4. RESULT

In the following two tables, the result of the data analysis will be shown. For the data analysis the SPSS software 18 was used. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics, and Table 2 presents the result of the correlation test.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Three Variables of Classroom Management, Critical Thinking, and Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Sum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom-Management</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.02</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>84.59</td>
<td>2.8197</td>
<td>.36117</td>
<td>.130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical-Thinking</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.97</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>114.24</td>
<td>3.8080</td>
<td>.44090</td>
<td>.194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>26.00</td>
<td>40.00</td>
<td>896.00</td>
<td>29.8667</td>
<td>3.39100</td>
<td>11.499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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The above Table shows that classroom management, critical thinking, and years of experience had the mean scores of 2.81, 3.80, and 29.86 respectively. The correlation test result is presented in the following table.
Table 2. The Result of the Correlation Test for the Variables of Classroom Management, Critical Thinking, and Years of Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>CM</th>
<th>CT</th>
<th>Y-E</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom-Management</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation: <strong>.632</strong></td>
<td>.817**</td>
<td>.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical-Thinking</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation: <strong>.632</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.847**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Experience</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation: <strong>.817</strong></td>
<td>.847**</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>30</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that there was a meaningful relationship between classroom-management and critical-thinking (P = .002, r = .632). Also, there was a meaningful relationship between classroom-management and years of experience (P = .000, r = .817). It was also found that there was a meaningful relationship between critical-thinking and years of experience (P = .000, r = .847).

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, when teachers step into a classroom, their language proficiency should be so well-developed that they can continuously stimulate and enhance learners’ thinking abilities. As a teacher, it is also important to be open and honest with students and be willing to compromise with them when they voice their concerns over grades and assignments. Students should understand that the teacher is the authority, but teachers should also be willing to admit their faults and correct mistakes when possible. Excellence in thought must be purposefully and systematically cultivated. Therefore, the development of critical thinking abilities and academic language proficiency at Higher Education Level sets a challenge for both students and lecturers to ensure that when leaving a Higher Education institution language abilities and critical thinking abilities are intact to ensure a successful life and career.

Classroom management and management of student conduct are skills that teachers acquire and hone over time. These skills almost never “jell” until after a minimum of few years of teaching experience. To be sure, effective teaching requires considerable skill in managing the myriad of tasks and situations that occur in the classroom each day. Skills such as effective classroom management are central to teaching and require “common sense,” consistency, an often undervalued teacher behavior, a sense of fairness, and courage. These skills also require that teachers understand in more than one way the psychological and developmental levels of their students. The skills associated with effective classroom management are only acquired with practice, feedback, and a willingness to learn from mistakes. Sadly, this is often easier said than done. Certainly, a part of this problem is that there is no practical way for education students to “practice” their nascent skills outside of actually going into a classroom setting. The learning curve is steep, indeed.

We tend to receive knowledge passively at many stages of education, although we can be highly critical in other aspects of life. Critical thinking and analysis is an everyday activity, even if we don’t think of it as that. Every time you have to make a decision, the process you go through involves critical thinking, and this process can become almost automatic. Investigating the previous studies, researchers were able to discover that there is certain path that teachers follow through their career. In other words, teachers have a tendency to change their classroom management beliefs at different levels of experience following a certain path. While preservice teachers prefer non-interventionism (minimum teacher control), they support interactionism (shared control) during internship and early career years, and finally they seems to favor complete teacher control more than others as they gain more teaching experience. The study suggest that the
constant change of teachers' classroom beliefs over time indicates that there is a disconnection between education students' beliefs toward classroom management during their coursework and the time they begin to gain real experience in schools. This study offers suggestions for teacher education programs to consider changes regarding the need for program revision, offering stand alone classroom management courses rather than integrating with other classes, teaching research-based curriculum, helping preservice teachers focus more on unfamiliar strategies and encourage the application during the field work, and framing classroom observations and evaluations as process rather than summative evaluation. Thus, the results of this study can be useful to teacher educators helping them understand the concerns of beginning teachers and experienced teachers alike. Such understanding should lead to changes in teacher education programs, better preparation of preservice teachers, better assistance during their beginning years of teaching, and the improved professional development for teachers at all experience levels. Some questions still remain unasked and unanswered. How do personality variables effect classroom management? Do teachers' beliefs about classroom management styles match their behaviors in the classroom? These questions should be answered in future studies. Such research findings can help teacher education programs and educators in revising their program or practicum experiences, resulting in enhancing teachers' conceptual understanding of management for successful teaching. In this sense, we believe that the teaching of English should be geared towards more meaningful experiences in which the learners can bring their cumulative, personal, and academic experiences. These experiences can be further explored and refined through the guidance of the teachers.

REFERENCES


[38] Martin, N. K., Yin, Z., &Baldwin, B. (1998). Construct Validation of the Attitudes and Beliefs on Classroom