



SHIRAZ UNIVERSITY
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M.A. Thesis In Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

Teaching activity preferences in language institutes in Iran

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July 2009

In the name of god

**In The Name of God
Declaration Form**

I, Mehdi Khodaparast the student of applied linguistics of Shiraz University, the international branch; declare that this thesis is the result of my own research and the works of others if used are precisely mentioned in references. I also declare that the topic of my thesis is not repetitive and I guarantee not to publish the results of this thesis and not let others use the results without the permission of Shiraz University. All rights of this thesis, according to intellectual and ethical by-law, belong to Shiraz University.

Mehdi Khodaparast

July 2009

IN THE NAME OF GOD

**Teaching activity preferences in language institutes in
Iran**

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Mehdi Khodaparast
THESIS**

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Dedication

Dedicated to my wife, and my parents, for all their understanding, patience, and support during my education and preparation of this thesis.

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Abstract

Teaching activity preferences in language institutes in Iran

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This study aimed at investigating Iranian EFL teachers' teaching activity preferences in language institutes and if the chosen activities are related to the objectives of the courses being taught. Also, the study intended to find if there is any relationship between the chosen activities and some of the teachers' characteristics including their age, sex, degree, and teaching experience. To this end, 90 English language teachers (34 males and 56 females) holding different academic degrees (BA: Bachelor of Art and MA: Master of Art), with different ages (23-46) and different teaching experiences (5-20) were selected among different language institutes in Tehran, Kerman and Shiraz. A 30-item teaching activity preference questionnaire adopted from Willing (1988) was employed to elicit information from the participants. The data obtained through the questionnaire were subjected to statistical analysis including factor analysis, correlation, and t-test. The participants of the study were also interviewed to explain the objective of the courses they were teaching. Results of the factor analysis yielded four factors which were named Communicative, Audio lingual, Task-Base and Grammar Translation. Data analyses also showed that different teaching activities and approaches were used and most of the activities were related to the objectives of the courses. Also, results showed that a relationship exists between the age and sex of the teachers and the approach they chose for teaching in their classes. Some implications of the findings are presented to be used by teachers and students.

Key words: Teaching activities, Language institutes, Teacher's characteristics, Teaching approaches.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a background on teaching style, learning style, and the mismatch between the two. It will then present a brief status of teaching and learning English in Iran. This is then followed by the objectives of the study, research questions and the significance of the study.

1.1 Background

Learning a language is a complex process and the reasons for learning a language is varied and depends on different needs and interests. There have been different pieces of research on the subject of teaching and learning a language and till now a fixed method of teaching and learning has not been suggested. Nowadays, different people from different age groups, different social backgrounds and different academic degrees, choose English as their second or foreign language. One of the reasons for learning English is globalization that is happening very swiftly. To cope with the demands that accompany globalization, an awareness has been growing regarding the importance of English language study for both social and economic mobility. For some, it is a career-related necessity in order to move up the corporate ladder. For others, it is like mining for gold especially in consideration of what Krashen (2003) calls as the English fever that looms over a country.

Besides the need for learning English, how to learn and how to teach it is a crucial question for learners and teachers. Current theories and thinking on ESL/EFL language teaching and learning seem to suggest that learner-centered and learner autonomy are very important in all subject areas and particularly in learning English as a second or foreign language.

What is a teaching style then? This is a difficult question to answer as there is as yet no 'definitive' definition of teaching styles widely agreed upon by researchers. However, there have been many attempts to define teaching styles that reflect the developments on thinking about language teaching and learning. For example, Fisher and Fisher (1979, p. 246) described teacher style as "a pervasive way of approaching the learners that might be consistent with several methods of teacher". This definition from the late seventies emphasizes the importance of teaching methods and the ability of the teacher to select the right approach for the class. Teaching styles tended to be equated with teaching approaches, as that was the mainstay of language teacher training at that time (and possibly now as well).

According to Felder & Soloman, 1992, there are four basic teaching styles:

1. **Formal Authority:** An instructor-centered approach where the instructor feels responsible for providing and controlling the flow of content which the student is to receive and assimilate. The formal authority figure does not concern himself or herself with creating a relationship with the student nor is it important if the students build relationships with each other.
2. **Demonstrator or Personal Model:** An instructor-centered approach where the instructor demonstrates and models what is expected (skills and processes) and then acts as a coach or guide to assist the students in applying the knowledge. This style encourages student participation and utilizes various learning styles.

3. Facilitator: A learner- or student-centered approach where the instructor facilitates and focuses on activities. Responsibility is placed on the students to take initiative to achieve results for the various tasks. Students who are independent, active, collaborative learners thrive in this environment. Instructors typically design group activities which necessitate active learning, student-to-student collaboration and problem solving.

4. Delegator: Again, a student-centered approach whereby the instructor delegates and places much control and responsibility for learning on individuals or groups of students. This type of instructor will often require students to design and implement a complex learning project and will act solely in a consultative role. Students are often asked to work independently or in groups and must be able to effectively work in group situations and manage various interpersonal roles.

On the other hand, with the shift in emphasis in language learning to the learner, the teacher's role has shifted from that of being a provider of knowledge to that of a *facilitator* of learning. As a facilitator, s/he is to provide students with opportunities to develop their knowledge so that they can take greater control of their learning. This is consistent with the current emphasis on self-access, self-instructional, individualized and autonomous language learning. As a facilitator, the teacher is 'a guide on the side' not 'a sage on the stage'. According to Benson and Voller (1997, p. 102), a facilitator provides 'psycho-social support' and 'technical support'. Some salient features of Psycho-social supports are:

- the personal qualities of the facilitator (being caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, empathic, open, non-judgmental)
- a capacity for motivating learners (encouraging commitment, dispersing uncertainty)
- helping learners to overcome obstacles, being prepared to enter into a dialogue with learners, avoiding manipulating, objectifying or controlling them)

- an ability to raise learners' awareness (to 'recondition' them from preconceptions about learner and teacher roles, to help them perceive the utility of, or necessity for independent learning).

Some key features of technical support identified are:

- helping learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning by means of needs analysis (both learning and language needs), objective setting, work planning, selecting materials, and organizing interactions
- helping learners to acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement the above (by raising their awareness of language and learning, by providing learner training to help them identify learning styles and appropriate learning strategies).

Other roles of a teacher are as counselor, motivator and subject expert or resource person. All these developments impact on the teachers who have to cope with the change.

On the other hand, students learn in many ways—by seeing and hearing; reflecting and acting; reasoning logically and intuitively; memorizing and visualizing. Teaching methods also vary. Some instructors lecture, others demonstrate or discuss; some focus on rules and others on examples; some emphasize memory and others understanding. How much a given student learns in a class is governed in part by that student's native ability and prior preparation but also by the compatibility of his or her characteristic approach to learning and the instructor's characteristic approach to teaching. The ways in which an individual characteristically acquires, retains, and retrieves information are collectively termed the individual's learning style. Learning styles have been extensively discussed in the educational psychology literature (see, e.g., Claxton & Murrell, 1987; Schmeck, 1988) and specifically in the context of language learning by Oxford and her colleagues (see, Oxford, 1990; Oxford et al., 1991; Wallace & Oxford, 1992; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993), and over 30 learning style assessment instruments have been developed in the past three decades (Guild & Garger 1985; Jensen 1987).

Serious mismatches may occur between the learning styles of students in a class and the teaching style of the instructor (Felder & Silverman, 1988; Lawrence 1993; Oxford et al., 1991; Schmeck, 1988), with unfortunate potential consequences. The students tend to be bored and inattentive in class, do poorly on tests, get discouraged about the course, and may conclude that they are no good at the subject of the course and give up (Felder & Silverman, 1988; Godleski, 1984; Oxford et al., 1991; Smith & Renzulli, 1984). Instructors, confronted by low test grades, unresponsive or hostile classes, poor attendance, and dropouts, may become overly critical of their students (making things even worse) or begin to question their own competence as teachers.

The general lack of research on the issues surrounding non-English majors has led many language teachers in Asia to assume that all students can be treated with the same standard approach (Warden & Lin, 1998). The reality is that the students in Asia, including Iran, are EFL, as opposed to ESL, and the vast majority of students studying English are non-majors. Can we assume that different majors value the same skills or generally appreciate our efforts in the same way? It is shown that it is not the case (Azam Noora, 2008).

Iranians are not an exception among all the people who try to learn English. English is formally taught as a foreign language to Iranian students from the first year in junior high school. Students have about three hours of formal instruction of English language every week. Teachers use a combination of grammar-translation method and audio-lingual method in most schools. At the university level, students mostly study English for academic purposes (EAP) and therefore, reading is the most emphasized skill. The first course university students have to take is "General English" and then they take more ESP courses related to their field of study. The curriculum in high schools is a top-down curriculum in the sense that the Ministry of Education dictates all the decisions regarding the textbook selection and the exams. However, not much control is exerted on teaching

methodology. The culture of teaching is basically a teacher-centered one in Iran. Contrary to secondary education, at the university level, instructors have the freedom to choose the textbooks and activities for their classes. Compared to EFL learners in other contexts, Iranian EFL students do not have much exposure to English outside the classroom. Very few English programs are broadcasted on TV or radio. Of course, through advancements in technology and the more frequent use of the Internet, satellite, and rapid growth of private language institutes in Iran, the opportunities for English language learning have greatly improved (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2002).

One of the opportunities for learning English in Iran is language institutes that have had a great growth in recent years. Different textbooks and different methodologies are used for different age groups in these institutes to teach them general English proficiency. While some of them are grammar-based, the others are skill-based and focus mainly on speaking. Although the institutes that teach through new methodologies, like communicate approach, are more successful, but there are some other institutes that continue using the old approaches. For sure, the aims of learners are different but the role of teachers and preferences of them in selecting the teaching activities is a subject that must be considered for improving English language teaching in our country.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the teaching activities that are selected by the teachers to be used in their classes. It also investigates the relevancy of these activities to the objective of the course that they are teaching. Moreover, and the study intends to find out if there is a relationship between these activities and some aspects of teachers' characteristics such as age, sex, degree and experience.

The study, therefore, seeks answers to the following questions:

1. What kind of teaching activities do EFL teachers use in their classes?
2. Is there a relationship between the activities used and the course objective?
3. Is there any relationship between the activities used by the teachers and their personal characteristics including their age, sex, degree, and teaching experience?

1.3 Significance of the study

These days in every society one of the most important subjects that is discussed is teaching and learning English. This process involves some elements that are the learner and the learning style of the learner, material that is used and the teacher and the teaching activities and approaches of the teacher. Different research studies have been done on the first two elements in our society, but there seems to be a paucity of research on the last one, i.e., teachers' approaches to teaching. So, one of the most important instruments that a teacher uses in his or her class is the activities that he chooses for the class or the course book is suggesting to be used in the class. The results of this study will hopefully reveal different types of methods that are used in different English institutes in Iran and will be very useful for the authorities if they are interested to know about the status of the language institutes, if they want to design a fixed syllabus for these classes and if they want to suggest a specific course book for such classes. Another item that this study investigated is, if the characteristic of the teachers such as age, sex, degree and experience have any relationship with the choice of the activities that are used in the classes, the results of this part can be interpreted in different ways and the usage of such relations can have a great effect on design of a curriculum for teaching English in different institutes. They also present how flexible and creative the teachers are for adapting the

activities of the course books to the objective of the course that they are teaching, this can be a model for the other teachers with little experience in teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0. Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the related literature, the works previously done on teaching style, learning style, the mismatch between them as well as different methods of teaching. Also, the current status of English teaching in Iran is briefly discussed.

2.1. Review of the related literature

Teaching is tremendously complex work (Cohen, 1989) and classrooms are complex social organizations (Jackson, 1968). In addition, teaching practices are difficult to change (Cohen, 1990; Shen & Ma, 2006). they require both learning and unlearning by practitioners (Cohen & Ball, 1990; Shen, 1994, 2002). Beyond that, both the culture and structure of schools militate against changes in teaching (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Sarason, 1982).

To Kaplan and Kies (1996, p. 2), 'teaching style consists of a teacher's personal behaviour and the media used to transmit data to or receive it from the learner'. This definition stresses the teacher's behaviour and media use which affect the delivery of the instruction. Terms such as 'initiating and responsive behaviour' (Flanders, 1970) and 'progressivism and traditionalism' (Bennett, 1976, Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1968) have also been used to refer to teaching styles. Each of these terms refers to a particular set of teacher behaviour and media use, which elicits different reactions from the learner. Within this