

How to Change Students' Perception of Classroom EFL Learning

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Abstract:

This paper describes basic classroom practices that would change and reshape EFL learners' perception of language learning at university level. Additionally, it seeks to reroute EFL teachers to get rid of unnecessary complexities that make classroom language learning difficult. Specifically, the paper attempts to give answers to questions related with ways EFL teachers can use to gear their learners towards a positive change of classroom EFL learning. The classroom practices suggested in this paper are designated to help teachers explore pedagogical alternatives that would improve their learners' performance, and eventually motivate their learners. In order to pinpoint the preferable practices in EFL classroom, the paper used two questionnaires distributed to a sample population of Birzeit University (BZU) EFL teachers and students. Apparently, the findings indicate that there are good practices that teachers need to approach systematically in classroom; on the other hand, the questionnaire results draw the teachers' attention to abandon some of their needless classroom behaviors. Based on these paper findings, alongside other major findings of studies in this respect, it is possible to objectively highlight certain classroom behaviors, if employed, would change our learners' negative attitude towards classroom EFL learning. These behaviors, to be examined in the discussion, are confined to five themes: fostering classroom-centeredness, spoon-feeding elimination, reflecting learners' learning preferences, promoting independent learning, and reconsidering 'wrong' evaluation practices.

Keywords: classroom-centeredness, learning preferences, perception, spoon-feeding

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Introduction

Like too many EFL learners, Palestinian students face serious problems in English learning at almost every level, all through their schooling (IIEP, 1997). Low proficiency in English among Palestinian learners is evident in their inability to communicate in English following many years of learning at university level (see Birzeit University English Placement Exam results 2005-2011). Although learning English has long been the centre of attention of educationalists, linguists and EFL teachers and learners as noticed in the large number of studies geared towards difficulties encountered by EFL learners (Hamdan 1994), much more work is needed to address these difficulties at every level.

EFL teachers agree that language learning, as Allwright (1983) argues, is 'hardly' an easy task. Therefore, there is no need to make this task more complicated. In his classroom-centered research, Allwright (1983) "tries to understand the processes that happen in classroom and why and how they take place that way." (p.191)

This paper is more concerned with our practices, as EFL teachers, that make classroom EFL learning difficult, and it also tries to explore behaviors that can hopefully lead to the elimination of undesired habits through introducing certain ways university EFL teachers can employ in classroom to change their learners' perception of learning English.

It is true that not too many teachers realize that their efforts should be geared towards a more productive trend in teaching, rather than spending too much time on theoretical teaching methods and pedagogical assumptions. Therefore, to avoid being victimized, EFL teachers can reconsider some of their behaviors in classroom and consider '*alternatives*' that may minimize difficulties EFL learners encounter.

The paper discusses five ways – from a teacher's perspective- that may be tried and practiced in classroom to 'promote' language learning. However, the number may go far beyond the stated, as learning in classroom environment varies in terms of teaching quality, teachers' professionalism and learners' motivation among other variables. Still, as Rivers (1992) puts it, it is 'the teacher's work to foster an environment in which effective language learning may occur.' (p. 374)

Research questions

The paper tries to explore '*alternatives*' that may help EFL teachers shift their learners' awareness of learning English so that a better learning could take place. Specifically, the study attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1- How can we, as EFL teachers, help our university learners change their view towards learning EFL?
- 2- What *solutions* can EFL teacher use to overcome classroom English learning complexities?
- 3-

Significance of the study

The significance of this study stems up from the need to overcome classroom complexities and practices performed by some EFL teachers that seriously hinder smooth EFL learning. Not only does the paper try to give an insight into background issues to do with EFL learners' perceptions of the classroom learning, but it also urges EFL teachers to link certain applicable classroom positive behaviors with classroom learning environment that would motivate learners and give them a clear sense of their classroom learning.

Literature review

EFL teachers' teaching classroom practices may unintentionally make EFL learning difficult. In fact, EFL teachers are largely responsible for English learning/teaching process. In her review of principles of interactive language teaching and learning, Rivers (1992) argues that,

It is imperative in the present period of rapid change that language teachers study the language learners in their classes- their ages, their backgrounds, their aspirations, their interests, their goals in language learning, their aptitude for language acquisition in a formal setting. (p. 376)

The argument here focuses on preventable habits practiced in classroom, rather than spending too much time studying the rival methods of teaching English as a foreign language. Presumably, Palestinian EFL teachers have spent too much time of their schooling in colleges and universities studying methods of TEFL, alongside other subjects in education, educational psychology, and teacher training. Nevertheless, EFL learning in Palestine encounters serious problems reflected in the poor linguistic proficiency among our EFL learners. However, our university learners' EFL learning preferences indicate that there is a bad need to introduce ways that may change their attitude towards EFL learning. One of these ways is related with encouraging classroom-centered approach to language learning. Allwright (1983), Senior (2002) and Abu Ayyash (2011) agree that a major critical issue in teaching EFL is not the teaching methods that language teachers employ in class, neither it is the classroom management in terms of discipline or physical setting, but teachers' ability to intertwine learners' social needs with their learners' pedagogical wants. This assumption gives a rough definition of what is known as *classroom-centeredness* approach which explores and studies the actual daily behaviors and practices teachers perform in classroom. In his article on this approach in the Palestinian context, Abu Ayyash (2011) argues that EFL teachers at home need to give responses to questions such as: Why do teachers find some classes easier to teach than others? Why do teachers believe that no two classes are identical, while they have the same teacher with the same course syllabus? What experience, other than pedagogical, makes learning more effective? How can experienced teachers deal with individuals as learning communities that share more than they differ?

Introducing classroom-centeredness approach partly answers these queries which ultimately aim to create effective learning. Senior (2002) believes " that teachers are sensitive to the social needs of their class groups, and that their pedagogically and socially-oriented behaviors are closely intertwined." (p. 399)

Another way that EFL teachers have to reconsider is getting rid of spoon-feeding. EFL teachers at home agree that one way of making classroom EFL learning difficult is spoon-feeding. This way is conceived, in a way, as a technique through which teachers plan their lessons to minimize the learners' mistakes. Spoon-feeding is not found in strict aural-oral approach (Doggett.1986), but it is anywhere teachers correct their learners by telling them what they you should have said. By doing so, teachers must be unable to understand that the significance of the learner's mistakes is part of the learning process. Corder (1978), Brown (1994) and Hamdan (1994) agree that errors significantly give an indication on EFL learning progress and feedback on the effectiveness of teaching. On the other hand, spoon-feeding makes learning so easy that it is entirely hampered as the learners will not be given the chance to learn from their errors, and to look for alternatives. In fact, spoon-feeding is an obvious implementation of teacher-centered teaching standard denied by the communicative approach that stresses the role of the teacher that

ranges from an organizer to a facilitator of learning (Littlewood 1986, Hutchinson and Waters ,1997).

A third way an EFL teacher can employ to motivate learners is reflecting their learning preferences practices. Some teachers may argue that it looks naïve to consult inexperienced learners on what they want to learn, how and why? Learners can be easily consulted by means of, for example, questionnaires on all the previous issues before teachers start classes. Hutchison and Waters (1997) insist that identifying and analyzing learners' learning preferences are cornerstones of any *successful* learning/teaching process, as this learner-centered approach will deeply consider the principle of teach each according to his/her abilities. The previous way would develop autonomous and independent learning needed to create motivating classroom learning. On the other hand, fostering learner's dependence is responsible for undermining critical thinking and exempting learners from taking responsibility for their learning. Learner's dependence emerges in the first place from the fact that we rarely take learners' needs and wants into consideration when we design a syllabus. The basis of any course design is the target group's needs analysis (Hutchison and Waters, 1997) which we do not often conduct. Therefore, our learners depend on what we, as teachers, want them to learn. How often do we 'ask' or consult our learners on the content of their textbooks, or the approach to be employed in classroom, or their needs of English? Definitely, the answer is not too often or never. However, some may argue that teachers have to abide by a syllabus externally imposed on both teachers and learners by, for example, ministry of education or departments/centres of English. In this case, teachers definitely have to adapt themselves and curriculum to the learners' needs. (Abisamra, 2003).

The last way that EFL teachers can employ to change the learners' negative attitude towards classroom learning is reconsidering some of their 'wrong' evaluation practices. EFL teachers always tend to uncover what their learners do not know or cannot remember at once, instead of giving them the chance to show what they are able to do. One of the most common evaluation tools is testing. Teachers should agree with Rivers (1992) that testing is an aid to learning, not punitive. Unfortunately, some evaluation practices we employ in classroom make EFL learning difficult. Testing is only a way of guiding both learners and teachers to what has been achieved throughout a course. In addition, a test should reflect the course objectives. Sadly, we often teach our learners one thing, but we test them on another. This partly explains the learners' nervousness about tests, instead of viewing tests as ordinary classes that have pedagogical aims. In short, we should test what we teach. Lantolf (2006) states that there is a recent call among researchers to bring teaching and testing into a closer connection. In this case, as we care to make teaching more exciting and interesting, it is our duty to make students enjoy the test which should be interesting as well. With tests being 'motivating', learners will get rid or reduce stress that discriminates against learners with certain temper.

Methodology

The study target population is EFL teachers and university learners at the Palestinian universities of the West Bank. To highlight both EFL teachers' and learners' current learning and teaching preferences inside language classroom at university level, the study used two questionnaires distributed to a sample population of EFL teachers and learners at Birzeit University- Ramallah- Palestine. The first questionnaire (14 items) serves as a basic tool to get first-hand information from EFL teachers on their language classroom behavior preferences and practices (see Table 1), while the second questionnaire (13 items) targets university EFL

learners in order to conclude their learning preferences and classroom learning attitudes. (See Table 2).

Results

The two questionnaires below were distributed to the sample of 17 EFL teachers and 70 learners at BZU. The questionnaires have come up with the results shown in the tables below.

Table 1. Percentage of EFL Teachers' Current Classroom Teaching Practices

No.	Item	Agree	No opinion	Disagree
1	I always manage to identify my learners' learning needs.	83.33	8.33	8.33
2	My learners' errors are significant indicators for my teaching preferences	58.33	16.67	25.00
3	I always help my learners do the textbook exercises.	75.00	25.00	0.00
4	I can easily explain why I feel relaxed when teaching certain classes	75.00	25.00	0.00
5	My learners' favorite learning style is the use-learn method.	75.00	16.67	8.33
6	Meeting my learners' pedagogical needs is my ultimate goal of teaching.	100.00	0.00	0.00
7	My learners' actual language competence decides on the teaching approach I use in class.	83.33	8.33	8.33
8	Immediate correction in class is part of my classroom teaching techniques.	50.00	8.33	41.67
9	The best workable and fair evaluation tool is exam.	8.33	16.67	75.00
10	My learners learn better when they do the textbook practices each on his/her own.	33.33	8.33	58.33
11	Some of my classes are pedagogically frustrating.	25.00	33.33	41.67
12	I follow different teaching approaches for similar classes.	91.67	0.00	8.33
13	Meeting my learners' social demands help me overcome teaching obstacles.	83.33	8.33	8.33
14	Getting good grades is my learners' top priority in L2 learning	66.67	8.33	25.00

Table 2: Percentage of EFL Learners' Current Classroom learning Practices

No.	Item	Agree	No opinion	Disagree
1	I feel that my EFL teacher realizes my learning needs.	81.82	9.09	9.09
2	My errors are helpful in deciding my learning preferences.	90.91	0.00	9.09

3	I always ask for help from my teacher to do the textbook exercises.	54.55	9.09	36.36
4	I can easily explain why I feel relaxed in my English classes.	68.18	22.73	9.09
5	My favorite learning style in English courses is the use-learn method.	63.64	13.64	22.73
6	I feel that having my pedagogical needs met is my ultimate goal of EFL learning.	40.91	4.55	54.55
7	I learn better when my teacher employs the teaching approach in accordance with my actual language competence.	81.82	4.55	13.64
8	I prefer immediate correction in class because it helps me realize my errors.	59.09	9.09	31.82
9	I think that the exam is a fair evaluation tool.	9.09	9.09	81.82
10	I learn better when I do the textbook practices on my own.	72.73	4.55	22.73
11	Getting a good grade is my top priority in L2 learning	27.27	18.18	54.55
12	My EFL teacher uses different teaching approaches in class.	72.73	27.27	0.00
13	I learn much better when my EFL teacher meets my social demands.	90.91	9.09	0.00

Discussion

Ways of changing university students' perception of classroom EFL learning

The results of the two questionnaires above (Table 1 and Table 2) indicate that there are ways, from a teacher's perspective, that are expected to positively change EFL learners' view of classroom learning. These can be summed up in the following five ways:

1. Fostering classroom-centeredness

Abu Ayyash (2011) concludes that effective learning is realistic once EFL Palestinian teachers and their learners establish friendly ties in classroom. In their response to the significance of meeting social needs on their learning (see Table 2, item 13), the majority of university EFL learners agree that positive response to their social concerns make their learning much better. Likewise, 83.3% of EFL teachers think that realizing their learners' social needs help in overcoming teaching obstacles.

While it is apparently easier for learners to set up good social relationship within their classmates through language pair-tasks or group ones, teachers are the best people to set as examples for their learners, to show respect to the members of their learning groups, to be good listeners to them, to stand at the same distance from each learner, and basically to treat them in a humanistic way. The social demands are best realized in classroom everyday behavior through teachers' employment of a humanistic teaching context which cultivates values that foster learner's self-esteem, self-confidence, respect, participatory trend in the learning community (class), sense of belonging, democracy, and equality-oriented practices. Classroom research has shown that pedagogical experience is only one part of the 'complicated' learning process. In summing up her major findings of classroom observations she conducted for different EFL teachers' performance in classes, Senior (2002) believes that there is a correlation between

quality of class groups & quality of learning; she concludes that “language teaching is a highly complex business that not only involves teaching effectively, but also attending to the social well-being of their class groups.” (p. 402)

2. Eliminating spoon-feeding:

If we understand spoon-feeding as doing for learners what they could and should do, then learning is often time-wasting with too little outcome. We, as teachers, usually check and practice our skills and linguistic competence, forgetting that our learners' competence and previous knowledge should be a priority. Teachers who speak for more than twenty-five to thirty-five minutes in a 50-minute class must know that they have deliberately taken the right of their 25 learners (as in most classes) to practice their skills, and eventually have created 'passive' recipients who never promote critical thinking in its simplest form. More than 72% of the respondents to the students' questionnaire (see Table 2, item 10) think they learn better when they do the textbook exercises on their own. Apparently, this result indicates that learners are ready to take responsibility for their learning, away from their teachers' help. Responsible learners usually employ their different learning strategies that they find appropriate for their actual competencies and linguistic repertoire. They may practice and train themselves on strategies that range from high-order thinking to critical and creative thinking.

Unlike the learners' preference of 'doing-it-yourself' learning strategy, 75% of teachers (see Table 1, item 3) agree that they always help their students do the textbook exercises. Although the notion *help* in this context may indicate that teachers are spoon-feeding, it may refer to teachers' interference in clarifying and/or simplifying the language tasks in the textbook. Unfortunately, more than half of teachers disagreed that their learners would learn better when they do the textbook exercises on their own (see Table 1- item 10). The obvious contradiction between our learners' learning preference and teachers' teaching inclination over doing textbook exercises may trigger the need for reconsidering some teaching practices on the teachers' part. Another response to spoon-feeding is avoiding what Mcleod (1986) describes as 'search and destroy method of correction.' (p. 9) She adds that reformulating and reconstructing 'acceptable' language production can be a very efficient way to avoid immediate harmful correction. Although 59% of the respondent learners (see Table 2, item 8) prefer immediate correction, more than 40% of the teachers have another view (see Table 1, item 8).

When a teacher is not happy with a learner's answer, for example, it is a good idea that he/she asks for another response by saying, “Let's try another answer.” After all, a good learner is necessarily a risk-taker, and this makes it unacceptable to let learners feel exempted from responsibility for their learning.

3. Reflecting learners' learning preferences practices

In their response to the issue of their ultimate goal of teaching, all respondent teachers agree that meeting their learners' pedagogical needs is their main purpose of teaching (Table 1, item 6). Surprisingly, more than half of the learners disagree with their teachers' response to the same issue (see Table 2, item 6). The learners state that having their pedagogical needs met is not their ultimate goal of EFL learning. Therefore, there are needs and preferences that need to be fulfilled—at least from learners' perspective. These wants presumably go beyond teaching/learning approaches employed in class, and definitely it is the teacher's role to identify and analyze these needs. Failing to do so is a way that confuses learners as they expect to learn in a way that is contrary to their expectation. One example of conflicting needs of both teachers and learners is

that when teachers talk about the language, while asking their learners to use this language. Lantolf (2006) agrees with the argument that learning and use are intertwined as components of the same process. He believes that language is learnt through using it.

To solve the problem of the conflict in goals between teachers and their learners is very important. In the first place, we should make sure that our textbooks have authentic content that would help our learners know more about how the target language is used. In certain occasions, teachers can adapt some content to make it easier for learners to interpret and use. Secondly, we should avoid as much as possible making our learners talk about the language, instead they should be encouraged to use it, even with some minor inaccuracies. (Littlewood 1986). Finally, it is more productive to teach language rules inductively without the need for teachers to deductively explain such rules vaguely or insufficiently. The procedures for such teaching/learning tasks are best described in the approaches and methods of teaching EFL.

4.Promoting independent learning:

In theory, most EFL teachers claim that pedagogical studies, educational and linguistic theories guide us in the teaching/learning process. Upon this claim, it is not surprising to see that more than 80% of respondent EFL teachers think that they manage to identify their learners' learning needs (see Table 1, item 1). Although a similar percentage of the learners (81%; see Table 2, item 1) show that teachers realize their learners' wants, both teachers and learners have different outlooks over the ultimate goal of learning English. While two-thirds of the teachers see that the learners' top priority of EFL learning is getting good grades (see Table 1, item 14), more than 54% of the learners do not agree (see Table 2, item 11). The apparent conflict in learning priorities between teachers and learners is a serious issue that needs to be addressed objectively. In addition, fostering learner's dependence can be noticed through our claim that we are the only source of linguistic and pedagogical knowledge in classroom. This is practiced through many ways of which immediate correction and quick answering of our learners' questions are most prominent. Some may argue that learners need a reliable linguistic resource; otherwise, they will go astray. Again, learners need to be responsible for their learning with its merits and demerits. That is, let our learners realize and be responsible for their linguistic mistakes, as this will teach them to be more independent, which is considered an ambitious goal education seeks to achieve. Unfortunately, we do not often teach our learners the principle, 'learn how to learn'.

5.Reconsidering 'wrong' evaluation practices:

Both teachers and learners apparently share the same view towards the unfairness of exam as an evaluation tool, where 75% of the teachers (see Table 1, item 9) and 81% of the learners (see Table 2, item 9) disagree that the exam is a fair evaluation tool. It is true that good evaluation would provide helpful information to teachers and feedback for the learners.

EFL teachers realize that the exam is an evaluation tool used as a part of the teaching/learning process, and it is subject to the same criteria followed when planning teaching. In short, an exam is a learning experience that is used to check how the process is proceeding and what has been achieved. However, teachers can practically employ other evaluation tools that most of some educational institutions use, such as portfolio, class work, participation and accumulative evaluation.

Conclusion:

The paper has presented five ways- from an EFL teacher's perspective- that could give answers to questions like: How can we help our university learners change their view towards learning EFL? What solutions can EFL teacher use to overcome classroom English learning complexities? The answers have dealt with ways that teachers can promote and motivate university learners towards EFL learning through changing their views towards classroom learning/teaching quality. The 'ways' described here are definitely part of other classroom habits discussed by too many applied linguists, educationalists, teachers and learners all through their work on EFL and ESL.(Allwright,1983, Gardner (1991)). One way, for example, is fostering class-centeredness which can be best realized through providing learners with continuous classroom social roles tasks that get all learners involved in activities no matter how small the role may be, as this will stimulate the perception of a positive learning environment. Class-centeredness means that each class has its own atmosphere and chemistry; therefore, it is the teacher's role to study this environment through identifying all the learners' needs and wants, either social or pedagogical.

Another way discussed is the elimination of spoon-feeding habit which ultimately aims at reducing the learner's mistakes through correcting them by teachers. With the emergence of learner-centered methods, focus has shifted to which directly state that the learner is the core of the teaching/learning process. (Doggett, 1986, Lantolf 2006). The paper also discussed that promoting independent learning, fostering learner's independence and considering learners' needs and wants in EFL course design are major characteristics of learner-centered approach which is currently advocated by language learning and teaching theories. To foster the learner's independence in learning, we should help EFL to be responsible for their entire learning right from the very beginning. EFL teachers are also strongly asked to change their role in classroom from an authority to a learning facilitator; from the only source of knowledge to an organizer and consultant of knowledge; and from a lecturer to a skill capacity-builder.

Finally, this paper has examined five applicable ways that could motivate EFL learners to have better classroom learning environment; still, further study on other motivating ways is needed to be addressed.

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