Investigating the Relationship between Reflective Teaching and Teacher Autonomy among Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract

The present study sought to probe the relationship between EFL Iranian teachers’ reflective teaching and teacher autonomy. To this end, the study adopted a descriptive correlational design. The participants of the study included 83 Iranian teachers selected based on convenience sampling due to manageability and availability reasons. A reflective teaching (Akbari, Behzadpour & Dadvand, 2010) and teacher autonomy questionnaire (Moomaw, 2005) were distributed among the participants the scores of which were drawn on to investigate the research question of the study. The results of statistical analyses indicated that there was a significant and positive correlation between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy. The findings of the present study have implications for both teacher educators and teachers. The obtained results can be used to enhance teacher educators’ and teachers’ level of awareness in terms of teacher autonomy and reflective teaching.

Keywords: Teacher autonomy, Reflective teaching, Teacher education

INTRODUCTION

Quite recently, the field of teaching in general and language teaching in particular have been subject to newly evolved theories of learning. As Akbari (2005), Kumaravadivelu (2001) and Pica (2000) assert, language teaching, learning and teacher education have recently witnessed a great amount of change. Crandall (2000) contends that, this change has been more of “a shift from transmission, product-oriented theories to constructivist, and process-oriented theories of learning, teaching, and teacher learning” (pp. 34-35). Highlighting this view, Brown (2000) asserts that, constructivists posit that reality is constructed in social contexts. As a consequence of this new paradigm the concept of learning and its process gained a new definition. In the same context, Cunningham (2000) notes that, “constructivism views learning as an active process where learners reflect upon their current and past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts” (p. 2). Based on this newly emergent view of learning and considering the fact that teachers have experienced learning at various stages of their lives and are always involved in an ongoing learning process, Crandall (2000) maintains that in the light of constructivism teachers are considered the main source of knowledge about teaching. Two of the primary concepts in the
realm of teacher education and teacher learning which are in line with the constructivist views of learning are reflective teaching (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 2002) and teacher autonomy (Pearson & Moomaw, 2006). According to Tabachnick and Zeichner (2002), reflective teaching is consistent with constructivist learning theories in that, it emphasizes the concept of reflection as a source of knowledge for teachers. Along the same lines, teacher autonomy lies in congruence with constructivism since it provides the teacher with more opportunities of exploration as a consequence of which efficient and effective learning can take place (Friedman, 1999; Crawford, 2001).

Given the importance of teacher autonomy in educational settings (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Charters, 1976; Chauvin & Ellett, 1993; Crawford, 2001; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Friedman, 1999; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Short & Rinehart, 1992; Wilson, 1993) and the significant role of reflective teaching (Clarke and Otaky, 2006; Griffiths, 2000; Jay and Johnson, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Richards, 2000; Vieira and Marques, 2002) the present study aimed at exploring the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers’ reflective teaching and autonomy. In line with the goal of the current study the following question was formulated:

RQ: Is there any significant relationship between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy of Iranian EFL teachers?

THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK

In recent years, educators have devoted a great deal of their attention to the notion of reflection and the expansion of reflective practice. Reflective teaching was first raised by Dewey (1933) who believed that, “teachers are not just passive curriculum implementers, but they can also play an active role in curriculum design and educational reform” (p. 49). He suggested that teaching needs to be a process comprising the following components: Hypothesizing, investigation, reasoning, testing and evaluation. Reflective action, is in essence “the dynamic, continuous and in-depth consideration of any belief or any form of expertise and knowledge by drawing on the grounds that reinforce it (Dewey, 1933, p. 9, cited in Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 74). These components will lead to adaptations and modification, if needed, leading to a teaching method which will take account of the class dynamics. Bartlett (1990) defined reflective teaching as a practice in which the individual recalls, considers, and evaluates an experience often in relation to a broader purpose. Reflective teaching has recently received much attention from scholars in the field. According to Akbari and Behzadpour (2010), scholars have currently begun to investigate the relationship or the effect of reflective teaching on other variables. In the Iranian context of ELT, Rezaeyan and Nikoopour (2013) investigated the relationship between reflectivity of language teachers with Iranian students’ achievement. The findings of the study indicated a significant relationship between teachers’ degree of reflectivity and students’ achievement. In
a study on the relationship between reflective teaching and teachers’ burnout Javadi and Khatib (2014) concluded that teachers’ reflection was significantly and inversely related to their feeling of burnout.

Autonomy is no longer a new idea in the history of education. Changes in the twentieth century in social sciences, psychology, philosophy, and political science have led to growth of interest in autonomy as an educational goal (Finch, 2000). There has been a proliferation of terms regarding the concept of autonomy in the literature, some of which are used synonymously while others are attributed a number of separate meanings. The concept of autonomy as defined by (Benard, 1995, p. 1) refers to “having a sense of one’s own identity and an ability to act independently and to exert some control over one’s environment, including a sense of task mastery, internal locus of control, and self-efficacy”. A review of the literature related to teacher autonomy indicates that there is no consensus on the definition of autonomy. In the words of Sacks and Eisenstein (1976) autonomy is “self-rule,” or “self-determination” (p. 7). In the field of psychology Piaget (as cited in Peck & Havighurst, 1960, p. 17) defines autonomy as “ego-directed behavior, free from arbitrary outer pressures or from irrational inner pressures”.

According to Street (1988), teacher autonomy refers to “the independence teachers maintain in exercising discretion within their classrooms to make instructional decisions” (p. 4). Little (1995, p.176) defined teacher autonomy as the “teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching.” In the words of Smith (2000) teacher autonomy is “the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others” (p.89). As Smith (2003, p. 1) maintains “definitions of teacher autonomy have tended to advocate one aspect to the exclusion of others, from teacher autonomy as a generalized ‘right to freedom from control’ to teachers’ capacity to engage in self-directed teaching to teacher’s autonomy as learners”. Barfield et al. (2002) define teacher autonomy as “a continual process of inquiry into how teaching can best promote autonomous learning for learners” (p. 3). Most recently, Jing Huang (2005, p. 4) interpreted teacher autonomy as “teachers’ willingness, capacity and freedom to take control of their own teaching and learning”. Shaw (2002) believes that, the amount of autonomy perceived by teachers is dependent on their capabilities and characteristics, which can vary not only in terms of internal factors but also regarding external causes such as, policy factors, institutional elements, as well as teachers’ conceptions of language, and language teaching methodologies.

Several empirical studies have so far investigated the concept of teacher autonomy and other variables. In a study Person and Moomaw (2005) found a close relationship between teacher sense of autonomy and their job satisfaction and commitment. Pearson (1995) and Pearson and Hall (1993) in their investigations studied the relationship between salary, workload, paperwork, and levels of stress. Veugelers, (2004) explored the impact of
educational policies on teachers’ responsibilities and accountability. Ingersoll (2003) in his study showed how teacher control is affected by organizational factors.

METHOD

Participants
The participants were 83 teachers teaching in different branches of Safir Language Academy in Tehran. Their age ranged from 18 to 47. In order to minimize the role of gender, as an intervening variable, care was taken to invite a roughly equal number of male and female participants to take part in the study. Convenient sampling was used for choosing the participants; that is, the participants were chosen on the basis of their availability at the time of data collection (of course, if they were willing to participate). Therefore, there were no random sampling or stratified random sampling. Those teachers who had fewer than 5 years and more than 5 years of teaching experience were considered novice and experienced participants of the study, respectively.

Instrumentation
Reflective Teaching Questionnaire. The instrument used for measuring reflective teaching in this study was a reflective teaching questionnaire devised by Akbari, Behzadpour and Dadvand (2010). The questionnaire includes 42 items on a five-point likert scale, consisting of five options of never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. This questionnaire was chosen for the purposes of this study because it was developed for measuring teachers’ reflection in the context of Iran and enjoys a high reliability of 0.90 as a measuring instrument for teacher reflectivity (Akbari et al., 2010).

Teacher Autonomy Questionnaire. The instrument used for assessing teacher autonomy level of the participants was teacher autonomy questionnaire developed and validated by Moomaw (2005). This questionnaire has 18 items on a four likert scale consisting of some statements which should be checked by participants with the four options of definitely true, more or less true, more or less false and definitely false. The questionnaire enjoys an acceptable level (r = 0.81) of internal consistency (Moomaw, 2005).

Procedure
The present study adopted a descriptive research design in the sense that there was no manipulation in the research context. In fact, the data on the two variables (i.e. reflective teaching and teacher autonomy) were collected through the use of two questionnaires and no changes were made in the environment. Therefore, the answer to the research question was sought in the natural context of language learning. To meet the purpose of the study, the individuals who met the criteria mentioned in the Participants section were contacted by the researcher. A brief description was provided about the nature of the study and the purpose of
data collection. Upon teachers’ agreement to participate in the study, a package containing a copy of the two questionnaires measuring reflective teaching and teacher autonomy was distributed among them. The teachers were invited to take their time and answer the items in each of the questionnaires carefully. During the process of data collection, care was taken to consider the ethical issues of the research. For example, the teachers’ participation in the research was voluntary. Moreover, they were assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. Also, they were informed that the collected data would be used for research purposes only.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Before answering the research questions of this study, it deemed necessary to check the Normality of the distribution of variables. The following section will check this assumption which is pertinent to the normality of the overall reflective score of all the participants. Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of reflective teaching and autonomy questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Teaching</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>99.00</td>
<td>194.00</td>
<td>147.1807</td>
<td>20.37283</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher autonomy</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>32.00</td>
<td>59.00</td>
<td>47.0241</td>
<td>5.47049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (list wise)</td>
<td>36</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To select the appropriate statistical analysis for the research questions, it was important to check the normality distribution of the different available sets of data. To this end One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was employed. Table 2 illustrates the results of this test for all the variables required in the current experiment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Most Extreme Differences</th>
<th>Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z</th>
<th>Asymp. Sig. (2tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Absolute</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective Teaching</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>-.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher autonomy</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>.066</td>
<td>-.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 2 illustrates all the significant levels calculated by One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test are higher than the confidence level of 0.05 which indicates that all sets of data are normal. Since the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test supported normality of distributions, the researcher concluded that the data meet the assumptions of parametric
statistical techniques. Therefore, the research questions were answered through employing these tests.

To explore the research question of the study as whether there is any significant relationship between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy level of Iranian EFL teachers, Pearson Correlation Coefficient formula which is a parametric test was utilized. Table 3 shows the results of this analysis.

Table 3

| Pearson’s Correlation between Overall Reflective Teaching Level and Teacher Autonomy |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Overall Reflective Score        | Pearson Correlation | Teacher autonomy |
|                                 | Sig. (2-tailed)  | N               |
|                                 | I               | 83              |
|                                 | .264*           | 83              |
|                                 | .016            |                 |

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As it can be noticed in Table 3 the significant level is 0.016 which is lower that the confidence level of 0.05. Thus, it could be concluded that there is a positive correlation of 0.264 between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy. Therefore, there was a positive correlation of 0.264 between overall reflective and teacher autonomy. The present study is in line with many studies seeking to investigate the role of teacher autonomy (Archbald & Porter, 1994; Charters, 1976; Chauvin & Ellett, 1993; Crawford, 2001; Forsyth & Danisiewicz, 1985; Friedman, 1999; Pearson & Moomaw, 2006; Short & Rinehart, 1992; Wilson, 1993) and reflective teaching (Clarke & Otaky, 2006; Griffiths, 2000; Jay and Johnson, 2002; Johnson & Johnson, 1999; Richards, 2000; Vieira and Marques, 2002) in the realm of education in general and the ELT context in particular.

CONCLUSION, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The present study sought to investigate the relationship between reflective teaching and teacher autonomy. The results of the parametric test of Pearson Correlation Coefficient indicted that, there was a positive correlation of 0.264 between overall reflective and teacher autonomy. Given the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that, teacher’s reflection is related to teacher autonomy. Reflective practice aims at assisting teachers in selecting and planning of the curriculum materials and consequently fostering teacher autonomy. The results of the present study can be drawn on by scholars, teacher educators and teachers so as to pay more attention to the important concepts of reflectivity and autonomy. The findings can provide a level of awareness regarding these concepts which can lead to a better understanding of the roles of these variables in the realm of education.
Researchers are encouraged to investigate other important constructs e.g., burnout, personality types, cognitive styles etc. and their relationship with learner autonomy and reflective teaching.

REFERENCES


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