Language Learners as Gatekeepers of Teachers' Cognition: A Case Study of Two Classroom Conditions

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Abstract

In recent decades, L2 teachers' cognition (i.e., their thinking about language, language learning/teaching and practices) has attracted the attention of research circles worldwide. But how is teachers' cognition affected when it comes to learners' own perspective towards language, social phenomenon, or cognitive one (Firth & Wagner, 1997)? Will teachers' perspective towards language learning and teaching be modified by the way learners look at language? In this qualitative case study, we explored the influential factors, on the part of learners, which determine teachers' methodologies and practices. To this end, 3-month diaries of a teacher who was running 2 sets of classes (i.e., regular classes of the Ministry of Education and institutionalized classes) were analyzed. The precise, qualitative analysis of the diaries suggests that depending on the perspective of the learners towards language in different instructional settings, the cognition of the teacher altered accordingly, which led to the emergence of alternative practices.

Keywords: teacher cognition, learners' language perspective, classroom practice, language socialization.

Introduction

The notion of Teacher Cognition (TC) has been extensively discussed in the realm of language teaching and learning since 1990s (e.g. Kennedy, 1991;

Phipps & Borg, 2007), but the mainstream educational research has not come up with clear definitions and models of the term. According to Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, and Cuthber (1988), proliferation of the terms has led to definitional confusion; TC is one of those terms which is not an exception to this claim. As noted by Borg (2003), "language teacher cognition research has inevitably been influenced by concepts established in mainstream educational literature, and consequently a range of different labels appear in the studies" (p. 83). Such studies were extensively reviewed in his influential paper.

Teachers' cognition in general and methodologies in particular are mostly discussed within a framework suggested by more general mainstream educational research "with reference to three main themes: (a) prior language learning experience, (b) teacher education, (c) cognition and classroom practice" (Borg, 2003, p. 86). The past three decades of research on TC has documented the sociocultural processes involved in how L2 teachers learn to teach (Borg, 2003).

As reported in the literature, many studies have chiefly focused on the existence of both teacher's and learners' beliefs in ELT contexts (see Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). Different conceptualizations and conclusions were reached as to what and how the relationships between these two types of beliefs are formed. The evident fact is that different dimensions related to language components, and teacher-learner belief interactions are investigated and discussed. But the main point remains to be intact about the influence of learners' language perspective on teachers' cognition in general and their practices in the classrooms in particular. To the authors' best knowledge, review of literature in this respect is scant.

Nevertheless, during the last two decades, teacher education research has made significant advances in studying teacher beliefs, and its connection with educational practice has already been well established (Borg, 2003). However, there is still paucity in literature reporting the relationship between language teachers' beliefs and their students' beliefs about language learning (Bernat, 2007; Woods, 1996). Other researchers have suggested that this diversity produces a gap and might result in tensions in the classroom (Kern, 1995; Woods, 1996), suggesting that we need to find innovative ideas to deal with the gap. The gap should consequently serve as a catalyst for change.

For that reason, in this qualitative case study, the purpose was to touch upon a new relationship between learner perspective and TC in two classroom situations. Borg's (2003) model has swept away lots of debates and discussions, but to the best of our knowledge, there has not been any research investigating the effect of learners' language perspective on TC in general, and teachers' methodology and classroom practices in particular. We believe that learners' language perspective can influence TC in terms of three aspects of the teaching process, among others, events, planning, and interpretation. These three aspects of the teaching process are put forth in a cognitive model of TC

by Woods (1996), which are (a) events that make the teaching, (b) teachers' planning processes, and (c) teachers' interpretations of the processes. With the aim of investigating this gap (i.e., how the teachers under study learned and changed via theirs classroom practices), the present study addressed the following research questions:

1. Is teacher perspective towards language learning and teaching modified by the way learners look at language?
2. Is teacular cognition affected when it comes to learners' different strategies for learning?

2. Theoretical Background

The term teacular cognition refers to the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching―what teachers know, believe, and think" (Borg, 2003, p. 81) and the relationships of these mental constructs to teachers' practices in the language teaching classroom. It also refers to teachers' beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, knowledge, and principles relating to teaching, as well as judgments and reflections on the teaching practice. An important point to be mentioned is that TC plays an important role in a schematic conceptualization of teaching. It is within this framework, grounded in an analysis of the mainstream educational research, that language TC research has emerged, for example, focusing, among others, on teacher learning in language teaching (Freeman, 1996), teacher knowledge and learning to teach (Freeman, 2002), connecting teacher knowledge with student learning (Freeman & Johnson, 2004) and on examining teacher learning through language teaching (Freeman & Richards, 1996).

Borg (2003) is the one who has tried to encompass all the aspects of TC in a model shown here:
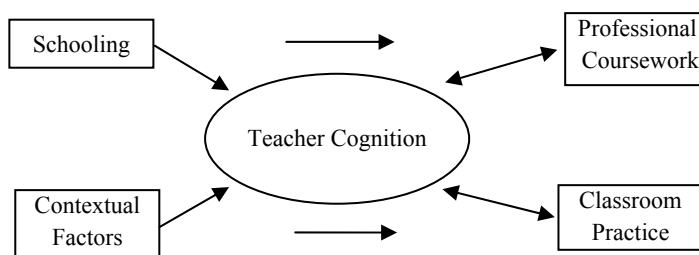
Figure 1. **Teacher cognition, schooling, professional coursework, classroom practice, contextual factor.**

In order to have a crystal-clear picture of the aforementioned model, its main components will be explained here:

- **Schooling**: the extensive experience of classrooms which defines early cognitions and shapes teacher's perceptions of initial teaching.
- **Contextual Factors**: influences practice either by modifying cognitions or else directly, in which case incongruence between cognition and practice may result.
- **Professional Coursework**: may affect existing cognitions although especially when unacknowledged, these may limit its impact.
- **Classroom Practice**: is defined by the interaction of cognitions and contextual factors. In turn, classroom experience influences cognitions unconsciously and/or through conscious reflection.

By definition, TC is about teachers' beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions, and practices (Borg, 1999). It is also concerned with teaching, teachers, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, material, instructional activities, and the self.

There is a paucity of literature about the role of learners' perspective on TC. In fact, the review of literature witnesses a great deal of research on different aspects of TC (e.g. Andrews, 2007; Richardson, 1996; Thompson,1992).

For example, Kern (1995) surveyed 288 students of the French language as a foreign language and 12 instructors in the US. Kern's data revealed that the students' beliefs were often in line with those of their instructors and reflected certain current trends in language pedagogy. However, Kern found somewhat troubling the fact that the learners looked to be over-optimistic or unrealistic about the length of time it takes to become fluent in a foreign language.

Considering both teachers' and learners' thoughts about classroom activities, Peacock (1998) investigated the gap between teachers' and students' beliefs about classroom tasks in Hong Kong setting. He came to conclusion that the learners rated error correction and grammar exercises much higher, and pair work and group work much lower than did their teachers. This confirmed Block's (1994) findings that "teachers and learners operate according to quite different systems for describing and attributing purpose to tasks" (p. 473). As a result of his analysis of obtained data, Peacock (1998) argued that "this wide gap almost certainly had a negative effect on learners' linguistic progress, satisfaction with the class, and confidence in their teachers, and that similar differences probably occur in many other contexts" (p. 233)

In another study by Banya and Cheng (1997), the beliefs of 224 EFL college students and 23 teachers in South Taiwan were investigated. They found that the Chinese students seemed to be more optimistic in language learning than their teachers and regarded English as less challenging than their teachers. The students also regarded grammar and translation to be the most important element of learning English. The teachers, on the other hand, were more likely

to believe in that the females were better language learners, and that intelligence played an important role in language learning.

Furthermore, TC has been affected by other factors than learners. Studies of practicing teachers provide compelling support for the idea that prior learning experiences shape teachers' cognitions and instructional practices. Woods (1996) reported that a teacher's beliefs about L2 learning was influenced not due to his inhabiting in France rather by having some French-speaking friends. Eisenstein- Ebsworth & Schweers (1997) further found that teachers' experiences as language learners were a significant influence in the formation of their cognition.

As noted above, much research has been conducted with respect to TC, but no study has so far considered the issue under scrutiny here. Considering our discussion regarding the problem statement, the authors had in mind to find out whether there would be any relationship between learners' beliefs and teachers' cognition in EFL classrooms. This is because we argue that learner belief and TC about planning appropriate instructions are not mutually exclusive. Taking this relationship into account, Horwitz (1999) believe that "while it is still entirely appropriate to attend to the distinctive characteristics of each language learner, language teachers also have an inherent interest in the more general aspects of learner beliefs" (p. 558).

Accordingly, this study aimed at investigating the effect of language perspective affect teacher's cognition under different classroom conditions. This pursuit was taken seriously in this study because the authors believe, and as noted by Freeman (2007), that how language teachers can learn "(through professional preparation) and change (through professional development) their classroom practices" (p. 894; parenthetical info is in original). For that reason, we focused on the learners as gatekeepers in the title because it is believed that learners are regarded to be among stakeholders since they are both influencing and being influenced by classroom practices and decisions made by teachers. We considered learners as gatekeepers to refer to the fact that they can dramatically change the cognition of teachers in running the classroom activities and making classroom decisions.

Method

Participants

The participant was a teacher, a Ph.D. student of TEFL, in one of rural parts of Zanjan, Iran. Playing the role of a participant observer, the teacher was experiencing his first year of teaching in the Ministry of Education. However, he had some years of teaching experience in other private English institutes. As far as the teacher under study was plausible enough to be called a teacher researcher Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001), finding a problem to solve in his teaching context was something expectable.

Because the context of this study was so particular, it is needed here to fully elaborate on the 20 students of the target class. The students were high school students with the average age of 15. Due to the monotonous nature of English classes, they were basically unwilling to take steps towards English language learning. The level of these lower-intermediate students was not as expected as it had to be. They had not had oral/written proficiency in English language. Besides, their compulsory attendance in high school was due to passing the English course.

A Diary-based Study

The incentive of this research started with the comprehensive and critical diary writings of the teacher under study about his classes. The teacher used to write his diaries exactly after his teaching activity. Right after a month or so, when the teacher had started his teaching career within school disciplines, his students asked him to hold some out-of-school classes, namely Kanoon Classes. At first, the teacher was completely shocked by what his students offered him. The reason was that most of the students in his class were under threshold level of proficiency, and their status was really disappointing and disastrous. After a long run insistence of the students, he managed to arrange for the kind of class the students were asking for.

It looks to be essential to define two types of classes under study. By regular classes, we mean mandatory classes which have their own rigid rules and regulations. In these classes, the teachers have to follow the administration policies one by one. The nature of teaching methodologies in these contexts is purely Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and teacher-student relationship is monologic. Therefore, many frustrating features of GTM are clearly common in regular classes. On the other hand, Kanoon classes are those out of curriculum classes, usually proposed on the part of school officials for the purpose of improving learners' current status quo. The point is that Kanoon classes do not have any impact on the overall average of students. They solely have an empowerment purpose for the learners, usually voluntarily attending these classes, and the relationship between the teachers and students are typically dialogic.

Procedure

The underlying incentives for holding Kanoon classes was completely vague for the teacher as he was already burnt out by his students and did not have any energy to go on with the current situation. Although at first he was a young, energetic, and ambitious teacher, the passage of time had made him make a second thought about language teaching and learning practice, at least, in his context and domain. One of the researchers of this study who is a teacher claims that the dominant English teaching methodology is GTM and partly

Reading Method (RM). The underlying principles and tenets of these kinds of classes, not completely but partly, are based on the cognitive perspective, the activities of which are in the form of learning linguistic items, translating and having lots of mechanical drills; to put it in a more comprehensive term, a whole lot of Mental Activities. Eventually, having run these two classes, the teacher came to the realizations of some patterns in his diaries. As a result, he tried to go through a regular 3-month- length diaries of the above-described teacher to see how his performance had undergone some changes; and if so, what has brought about this change.

After the teacher felt some modifications of the nature of his teaching, extracted through his own diaries, he asked his learners to keep diaries distinguishing the two aforementioned types of class situations. The procedure for getting the learners' diaries was precisely set. The students were asked to hand in the assigned diaries which were all based on preordained topics weekly. The students were already made aware of the procedure; hence, there were on illusions for them to complete the diaries. The students' diaries were written in Persian, and the researcher did not want to come up with bias in word choice when converting the Persian words into English. But this word-to-word translation could cause some subjective ideologies. So, it was decided to rely on the Persian diaries.

One of the common techniques for analyzing diary data is metaphor analysis (Johnson & Lakoff, 1980). The procedure was that the metaphorical expressions in the texts were identified and then their frequency was reported. Then, the source and target domains of the metaphors were identified. On the basis of this analysis, main metaphors, conceptually related theme whose frequency were important for the researchers, were identified. These metaphors are considered to be conceptual (i.e., reflect ways in which the subjects view and interpret their world). The entailments of each main metaphor were finally identified. Ultimately, the raters, two applied linguists in this study, were used to determine if the expressions relating to each conceptual metaphor were metaphorical. As we said, we had two sets of diary-based data: one for the teacher and the other, serving a triangulation purpose, for the students. The tables in the following section illustrate the frequency of the metaphors extracted from both the teacher's and the students' diaries.

Results and Discussion

Tables 1 and 2 illustrate the data extracted from both the teacher and the students. As noted before, the theme of this data collection is based on learner belief and its impact on the teacher belief in particular and TC in general:

Table 1. *Extracted Metaphors of the Diaries of the Teacher and Their Frequencies*

Key word (metaphor)	Citation example	f
Syllabus	I am getting away from my main syllabus in Kanoon classes (supposed to be GTM-based).	5
Activities	I am doing different types of activities in Kanoon classes, compared with regular class of school.	6
Textbook	I am not dependent on the textbook in Kanoon classes anymore.	4
Cognitive activities	I am unintentionally doing more communicative tasks in kanoon classes whereas I do none in regular classes.	7
Motivation	In my view, due to social activities of Kanoon classes students are more motivated than the regular classes.	3
Job satisfaction	In Kanoon I am more satisfied than in regular classes.	5
Poise and Confidence	When I speak with foreigners, I am so confident, but in regular classes I am always worried	2
Learning	To my surprise students are learning better in Kanoon compared to regular classes.	3
Change of practice	I am not teaching what I was supposed to teach due to different request of learners.	6
Perspective	I think, although students of Kanoon and regular classes are the same, I am teaching differently in both classes.	4

Table 2. *Extracted Metaphors of Students' Diaries and Their Frequencies*

Key word (metaphor)	Citation example	f
Live	I'd love to live in an English language speaking country.	19
Bored	I am really bored when sticking to the book.	15
Social	I'd like to utilize English in my social life.	21
Work	I learn English to be able to work in the mine. (Where German and Japanese engineers work)	17
University Entrance Exams	I think school classes are good for universities entrance exam not for speaking with foreigners.	12
Mistakes	Sometimes when I speak with foreigners (here, those engineers), they can understand me; my mistakes do not matter.	10
Poise and Confidence	When I speak with foreigners, I am so confidence, but in regular classes I am always worried	15
Travel Abroad	I like to travel to many foreign countries and speak with foreigners.	21
Learn Better	I learn English better when I use it in out-of-school setting	11
Grammar	Grammar classes must be different from speaking classes.	15

Based on the metaphors found in both the teacher's and the students' diaries, it can be concluded that the more frequent a metaphor, the more likely each side (either the teacher or the students) were conceptually involved. As far as the frequent metaphors of teacher diary table were concerned, some patterns and themes can be realized.

According to the metaphors related to syllabus, activities, textbooks and cognitive activities, we can conclude that teachers' cognitive-based practices in the class have been converted into social-based practices. An example will help clarify the point:

Teacher: 'I am getting away from my main syllabus in Kanoon classes.'

Or, somewhere else, it was reported:

Teacher: 'I am doing different types of activities in Kanoon classes in comparison with regular class of school.'

The metaphors related to *Syllabus* and *activities* had the frequencies of 5 and 6 respectively, meaning the teacher was altering his syllabus and activity type in Kanoon classes. This observation depicts that the teacher made a shift in his planning processes as mentioned in Woods's model (1996). This change in the syllabus and classroom activities is in turn assumed to be resulted from the teacher's shift in the interpretation of the processes.

The second pattern is with respect to teacher's perspective towards the two class conditions. Due to the metaphor related to *perspective*, having the frequency of 4 in the diaries of the teacher, teacher's perspective and attitude more probably underwent a complete shift from cognitive towards social. The last pattern coming out of the teacher's diary is the learning process. Based on the metaphors related to *learning* and *activities*, the teacher shifted his orientation to different activities and learning channels. That is to say, depending on the perspective of the learners, and having affected by that, the teacher came up with different performances in the two mentioned classes of this study. This observed pattern also confirms the fact that the planning and interpretation processes of the teacher have changed.

As far as the students' diaries were of importance, there were some patterns extracted. The very first patterns were their tendency towards *socialization*, *traveling abroad*, *living* and *working in English speaking countries*. The items mentioned all can go under the umbrella term of 'Socialization'. Review of literature is full of works related to language learner socialization (see Ochs, 1988). A quick conclusion here can be the effect of learner belief change (tending to be socialized) on the teacher's practice in particular and his cognition in general. Undoubtedly, the consequence of these beliefs can manifest itself in learning style of the same students. That is why some frequent patterns on *learning better* can be spotted in the Table 2. For the sake of illustration, it is worth to bring an example here:

Student: 'I learn English better when I use it in out-of-school setting.'

Scrutinizing our two situations of teaching for the teacher, we can point out that facilities and utilities of the school did not let the teacher go beyond his casual routines; hence, for Kanoon classes, he used the same material, syllabus, and even the same methodology. Moreover, Kanoon classes were held in the same places. The precise analysis of the diaries shows that in Kanoon classes as the time passed, there were some slight changes observed. These changes were due to the learners' changes in terms of needs, motivations and, in a higher level, perspectives towards language. The way the students behaved and performed in Kanoon classes was quite interesting for the teacher. In school-hour classes, the students were pursuing the same learning activities and strategies (e.g., translation, reading, rote learning, and GTM activities). At this point, one might ask: Were the students free to choose the type of methodologies and activities in both classrooms? The answer to this question is a big 'no'. But reviewing the diaries of 3-month period, one can understand that the teacher's methodology was not GTM and RM anymore; it had turned into a communicative one. The very important point to note is that at the beginning points of Kanoon classes, the teacher used the same methodology of the regular school-hour classes and did not intend to alter his practical strategies.

Admittedly, the nature of the two classes had witnessed drastic changes on the part of the teacher. The teachers' attitude towards Kanoon classes changed, too. The day he embarked on running this class, he was so reluctant to involve himself in some repetitive tasks like that of the regular school-hour. But later on he had turned into an enthusiastic person; he was not burnt out anymore. He provided the students with more authentic and real-life materials; all in all, he performed differently in Kanoon classes from the regular classes. This observation typically reveals the fact that the classroom events changed the teacher's cognition and beliefs about his planning processes so that he could bring in more interesting and authentic materials.

The logic behind the learners' change of attitude of language could be found in the work of Firth and Wagner (1997), where they talked about the social-cognitive debate of second language acquisition. According to Nasiri (2009), the learners act differently in different contexts depending on what they need from the language. In our case study, in the regular school-hour setting, the students were pursuing educational purposes, so they wore the cognitive look towards language, whereas in Kanoon classes due to existence of some Japanese engineers in their village, they started to sound native-like and be socialized, wearing the social look. Thus, these two language perspectives were the backbones and building blocks of our two classes under investigation.

The results coming out of the frequency tables confirm our assumption regarding the nature of the two class conditions. Although there was not a red line between the expectations of the students in the two classes, the majority of

the students in Kanoon classes were after the communicative aspect of language, being able to be socialized. But rather, in the regular classes, the students were taking steps towards their educational purposes, namely Konkoor—the regular entrance examination held in Iran annually.

All in all, it can be concluded that the teacher was observed, based on what we witnessed, to improve his learning about teaching via professional relationship with the students in different situations and change by experiencing classroom practices.

Conclusion

Concluding this study, we can say that the overall review of the results in response to the first research question reveals that, as the nature of the school-hour changed, the way the teacher looked at language teaching and learning was changed, too. We must say that in Kanoon environment, the teacher was gradually gaining another face. *The teacher tried to be a more easygoing person* is a wrong claim because the influence of the students' language perspective had caused the change, and this process was not intentional and determined by the teacher; rather, it was a complete chronological and gradual change. On the other hand, in response to the second research question, according to the frequency of the metaphors, our target teacher was fully affected by the alternation of the strategies the learners pursued for their career; consequently, he had to come up with changes regarding how to practice his methodologies in the classroom.

Similarly, the role of context should not be taken for granted where in the school-hour setting the teacher might have been attempting to run a communicative methodology with its underlying principles (e.g., humanistic psychology). Interpretation of the diaries revealed that the teacher at the very first stage of the teaching career was inclined to follow kind of attitude and methodology which was mode of the day, but different factors had not let him do so. Back to the social-cognitive debate of SLA, we can conclude that in the educational system under study, in the school-hour context, the primary aim seems to be making professional university exam candidates, in line with the cognitivists' view of language. Under these kinds of circumstances, expecting communicative setting, for sure, is far-fetched. So, we think that the system itself is unconsciously drifting the learners towards different views of looking at language which ultimately leads to changes in teachers' attitudes, practices, and the overall understanding of the whole business of language teaching and learning.

The conclusion is the point that learner language perspective has some effects on TC in one way or another. Surely, more research is needed to be done to discover all the dimensions of changes which teachers undergo. The close analysis of the diaries suggested some very interesting hints about the

teacher's attitude. We claim that the cause of this change could be sought in different natures of the two class situations. Our findings show that what the learners pursue as language socialization (Osch, 1988) or educational purposes can significantly influence TC leading to reorientation of teacher education programs.

To sum up, this study is not an exception of the rule that all studies have their own limitations. The most outstanding limitation of this study is that more of teachers are required to be scrutinized so that the opportunity to freely generalizing the results is obtained. A single teacher is not sufficient for this purpose. Since the nature of the work was case-sensitive and qualitative, the focus was on just one teacher. Future studies should widen their views regarding taking into consideration more sample and digging different dimensions of the research topic at hand.

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