Appraising Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions Towards the Teachers' Implementation of Classroom Fairness: Focus on the Main Problems

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Abstract

The current research tried to investigate Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as the main problems of their teachers' implementation of classroom fairness. In doing so, the present study used a qualitative procedure, and 30 Iranian EFL learners at the intermediate level from different private language institutes participated in it. They were selected through available sampling from different virtual groups in WhatsApp or Telegram. This study benefited from two semi-structured interviews consisting of five open-ended questions, designed by the researchers. Data were gathered and analyzed through MAXQDA software. The results revealed EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness included using the same techniques and extra teaching activities for all students, showing equal respect to all students, teacher's objectivity in grading, teacher's interacting with all students, obliging all students to observe the classroom rules, etc. Moreover, EFL learners' perceptions of the main problems of their teachers' implementation of classroom fairness were identified as time limitations, diversity of students' needs, differences in the socio-economic level of students and performance, mismatch between teachers and students, students' impoliteness, and inattention to morality. Findings can enrich the attitudes and activities of different groups of stakeholders in ELT, including policymakers, teacher educators, teacher education administrators, and curriculum developers.

Keywords: Classroom Fairness, Classroom Fairness Problems, Perception, EFL Context

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1. Introduction

The notion of fairness has taken the heed of scholars in a variety of branches and fields including basic sciences, social sciences, organizational behavior, etc. (Sabbagh & Resh, 2016). Fairness in the realm of organizational behavior, which is called organizational fairness and is the main focus of the present study, refers to one's conception and assessment of organizational procedures and products in regard with the materialization of fairness (Cropanzano & Greenberg, 2007). Investigating fairness in classroom as connected to students' achievement was launched with Chory-Assad (2002). In so doing, she took advantage of organizational fairness theory and research to study the students' perceptions of and reactions to fairness in the instructional environment. Before that, organizational fairness had not been applied in instructional contexts. Classroom fairness is enacted when students judge the course outcomes, course procedures, and teachers' communications with students as fair. As believed by Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004b), principles of fairness are materialized in instructional environments wherein the teacher and students communicate in a just, ethical, and fair educational framework. Based on this viewpoint, classroom fairness consists of three elements including distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness, each being implemented through a variety of fairness principles.

Teachers' fairness in terms of their relation with the students affects all educational areas, including instruction, evaluation, relationships, or learning that occur in the classroom (Rasooli et al., 2019). This shows that the topic of teacher fairness is worth investigating from different aspects. According to Sabbagh and Resh (2016), fairness in education is a recognized issue which calls for teachers' implementation of fairness principles in relation to educational matters. In fact, students always make conceptions and comment on the amount of their teacher fairness in the classroom (Rasooli et al., 2019). Teachers' fairness is of significance since teaching cannot be imagined as separate from teaching ethics (Kazemi, 2016). As revealed by previous studies, being instructed by fair teachers is one of the great preferences of students in different environments (Mameli et al., 2018).

Students, regardless of their educational background, social status, and culture, repeatedly complain about their teacher's unfairness in the classroom (Gasser et al., 2018). Because teachers' unfair behavior in the classroom can have negative effects on students emotionally, socially, behaviorally, and more importantly academically (Rasooli et al., 2019), teachers should pay attention to this significant dimension of their profession. Obviously, students' perceptions of the teachers'

implementation of fairness in different dimensions of classroom and the amount of their concern with implementing classroom fairness is also very important in generating and keeping a fair classroom (Zhaleh, Estaji & Berti, 2022). It cannot be denied that EFL teachers' classroom fairness heavily affects students academically and emotionally. To be more realistic, teachers' fairness in the classroom can also lead to improvements in their own teaching and behavior (Mercer & Gkonou, 2020; Sabbagh & Resh, 2016).

Reviewing the existing literature shows that most of the studies conducted on teacher classroom fairness have touched the issue mainly from their viewpoints (e.g., Berti et al., 2016; Chory & Goodboy, 2010; Young et al., 2013). This shows that students' perceptions of classroom fairness are among the gaps in the existing literature. Thus, justification of doing more investigations on teacher classroom fairness from students' perception is truly sensed in EFL teaching as a realm wherein the quality of interactions and communication between teacher and students is very important (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020) Another research gap identified by the researchers is that the research approach taken in most of the previous studies is a quantitative one. Since the need for more exploratory studies is felt in the field, the researchers tried to investigate Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as the main problems of their teachers' implementation of classroom fairness which are uncovered. In order to meet the research objectives, two questions have been formed:

1. What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness?
2. What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness?

2. Literature Review

Dalbert and Maes (2002) examined overall fairness perceptions of a group of 1537 German secondary school students in relation to their belief in a fairness world, school achievement as represented by the grades they received, and distress in school. To measure the perceived overall fairness, they developed a four-item Likert-type scale to be answered by the students. The results of their research evinced that students' belief in a just world positively predicted students' perceptions of receiving fair treatment. Moreover, the more they perceived to be treated fairly, the greater was their achievement in school and the less distressed they became in their school encounters. Moreover, the results of Paulsel and Chory-Assad's (2005) research on 190 American university students revealed that students' low perceptions of classroom interactional

fairness, when measured by the scale of Chory-Assad and Paulsel (2004), predicted higher possibility of students' resistance, aggression, and hostility toward the instructor. On the other hand, high perceptions of interactional fairness positively influenced students' learning motivation and academic achievement.

Chory (2007), by examining the perceptions of American university students, also have found that students' perceptions of teacher credibility significantly, positively influenced their classroom fairness perceptions. Within the three components of teacher credibility, perceived teacher competence influenced interactional fairness perceptions; teacher character impacted all the three classroom fairness dimensions; teacher caring determined procedural and interactional fairness. On the whole, teacher credibility was most intensely associated with interactional fairness while teacher character was the strongest predictor of overall classroom fairness. In another study, Berti et al. (2010), uncovering Italian secondary school teachers' and students' ideal representations of classroom fairness, students' feelings of unfairness, and the potential relation of students' feelings of unfairness to their psychological engagement. Findings indicated that ideal classroom fairness representations pertained to equality principle, communication, and need/effort principles. It was also found that teachers and students had different representations of the concept. Additionally, students had shared and diverse perceptions of receiving unjust treatment by their teachers which per se affected their school psychological engagement.

Claus et al. (2012) examined American university students' perceptions of teacher argumentativeness, classroom fairness, verbal aggressiveness, and efficacy of and probability of communicating student antisocial behavior alteration techniques. The outcomes proposed that the association between student antisocial behavior alteration techniques and teacher verbal aggressiveness can be mediated by classroom fairness perceptions. In the same vein, Young et al. (2013) examined the perceptions of American university students, maintained that among the relational communication strategies of affinity-seeking, student-teacher rapport, and teacher confirmation, students' perceptions of interactional, procedural, and distributive classroom fairness dimensions were predicted positively by perceptions of teacher-student rapport. Furthermore, perceived teacher confirmation was found to be a positive predictor of perceived interactional and procedural fairness dimensions. Another study by Mameli et al. (2018) also explored the potential role of teacher fairness in students' psychological health by examining the perceptions of Italian high school students. The results of their study uncovered that students'

fairness perceptions had a predictive role in students' individual functioning, social functioning, psychological problems, and somatic symptoms. They reported that this causal relation was mediated by students' perceptions of emotional engagement and classroom connectedness as two components of their school-specific well-being.

A recent study by Sonnleitner and Kovacs (2020), being exploratory in nature, was conducted to look at assessment through the lens of classroom fairness theory. To this end, the newly developed Fairness Barometer, a self-administered scale for enhancing teachers' assessment tendencies in the Austrian university context, was employed to examine how teachers rate their own assessment practices in terms of two aspects informational and procedural fairness. To this end, the Fairness Barometer was filled out by nine teachers and 168 students of them. The results of the study evinced that both teachers and students are able to differentiate between various assessment fairness aspects. Furthermore, it was found that some teachers differed from their students regarding their perceptions of almost every aspect they rated. Some teachers' results demonstrated particular assessment-related behaviors needing enhancement, such as elaborating on the grading criteria for the students, while some other teachers indicated nearly the same responses as their students regarding the aspects of assessment fairness under investigation. In another recent study, Rasooli (2021) scrutinized 97 quantitative studies for assessing the psychometric properties of the classroom fairness questionnaires employed in them regarding the criteria of content validity, internal consistency, construct validity, criterion validity, reproducibility, and replication. The results indicated that only a small number of these studies did rigorous statistical analyses and pursued best practice procedures to support their validity interpretations. Furthermore, none of these questionnaires can be employed across contexts – as none of them is a measure of classroom fairness in a specific field.

3. Methodology

The present study used qualitative procedures in data collection and analysis. The participants of the study consisted of 30 Iranian EFL learners (15 males and 15 females) at the intermediate level from different private language institutes in Iran. Selecting the participants was based on available sampling in which the participants (EFL learners) were chosen based on their availability. It is one of the major forms of nonprobability sampling that was applied in the current research (Ary et al., 2014). That is to say, the participants were selected through available sampling from different virtual groups in WhatsApp or Telegram. This group was interviewed to extract their perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as their perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness.

This study benefited from two semi-structured interviews aimed at extracting EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as their perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness. Each interview consisted of five open-ended questions which were designed by the researchers consulting the existing literature and his supervisor and advisor. The language of the interviews was English and there was no time limit for each interview session. Moreover, each interview was taken in a one-on-one format through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram applications for the convenience of the interviewees. All the interviews will be taken by the researchers and transcribed to create verbatim written data for analysis. To establish the dependability and credibility of the interview data, low-inference descriptors, and member checks were used. Using low-inference descriptors means quoting from the interviewees. Member checking involves checking interpretations with the interviewees to see whether their sayings have been correctly interpreted.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software and manual thematic analysis to identify the recurring patterns, themes, categories, and sub-categories among the obtained data. The rationale behind supporting analysis by the MAXQDA software with the manual thematic analysis was to enhance the robustness of the findings. For the manual thematic analysis, in the first step, the researchers get a thorough overview of all the data that were collected. In the second step, the data was coded. It involved making some phrases and sentences of the text bold and coming up with some codes that represented the content of the bold parts. That is some codes were extracted which allowed the researchers to get an overview of the recurrent points and meanings in the data. In the third step, the codes were looked over to identify the recurrent patterns in them and extract the themes. To this end, the related and similar codes were combined to reach a single theme since themes are usually broader than codes. In the fourth step, the extracted themes were reviewed by the researchers to ensure about their accuracy and usefulness. To this end, the researchers returned to the data to compare the themes against it. If any problems were identified with the themes, they were broken down, combined, or omitted. In sum, in this step, the researchers tried to make themes more useful and accurate.

4. Results

Concerning the first research question "What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness?", the following themes were identified:

A. Obliging all students to observe the rules of the classroom

Discipline of class must be obeyed by all the students. I can see that our teacher is just rigid about a few students. He does not intentionally notify some students. (Participant 6)

Rules of the classroom should be for all the class. All the class should come to class before the teacher. All the class should respect each other. If a teacher ignores the impoliteness of some students, she or he is unjust. (Participant 9)

B. Having good performance expectations from all students

A fair teacher is one who predicts good scores for all the students. All the students should be expected to have a good performance in exams even lazy ones. (Participant 23)

Class fairness is violated when teachers just expect good students to get high scores. All students should be seen as good students and worth getting good results. (Participant 17)

C. Showing equal respect to all students

Being just in class means being respectful to all students. A teacher who only respects smart students is not fair, I think. All students are equally respectful according to fair instructors. (Participant 13)

The teacher should respect students even those who give wrong answers to questions or have low scores. It is unjust to just be respectful to clever students. (Participant 27)

D. Teacher's objectivity in grading

Fair teachers do not score students based on their personal ideas. They exclusively concentrate on exam sheets and what has been written in them. I had a teacher who always gave good scores to his son. (Participant 10)

When a teacher grades students based on other factors than the test, we can say that the classroom is not fair. Teacher fairness is proved by ignoring irrelevant factors in grading students. (Participant 2)

E. Teacher's interacting with all students

Teachers should call for all the students to have participation in class activities. It is the right of each student to have interaction in the classroom. A fair teacher interacts with all the students and does not remove some students from interaction for any reason. (Participant 25)

Most of the classes I have seen are not fair in the classroom interaction. In such classes, the teacher just discusses with few students. Other students remain inactive and silent during class. These cannot be considered as fair classes. (Participant 18)

F. Teacher's loving all the students

If a teacher shows passion toward all students equally, he is really just. I appreciate a just teacher who calls all students by their first name or family name. it is not just to call some students by their first name and others by family name. (Participant 14)

A fair classroom is a place where the teacher loves all the students equally. Students feel the teacher's love very easily. They even know when the teacher loves someone more or less than others. (Participant 19)

G. Using the same techniques to make learning for all students easier

Some techniques can make learning more comfortable for students. To make a class fair, all students should benefit from these strategies. To delimit these strategies to few students is not consistent with class fairness. (Participant 8)

Some teachers recruit specific strategies to make the learning experience easier. Fairness can be claimed to be implemented if all students are provided with these strategies. An opportunity should be generated so that all students can take advantage of such strategies. (Participant 29)

H. Using the same extra teaching activities for all students

Extra teaching activities are rights that should be given to all students. Classroom fairness can be more guaranteed if all the class members are given this right. No student, even weak ones, should be bereaved of this right. (Participant 3)

Teaching practices, drills, or such things are suggested to be employed for all the students as a part of instructional programs. These practices are effective in learning quality. To use them just for some students means manipulation of learning opportunities for students. This is not compatible with classroom fairness. (Participant 1)

I. Using the same announcement procedures to announce the scores of students

The scores of all students should be announced in the same way. Publicizing the scores of some students and keeping the scores of other students confidential is unfair. To be just involves using the same methods of score announcement for all the students. (Participant 11)

Processes employed to proclaim the scores of students should not be differentiated for different students. Equally should be observed in proclaiming the scores. This may seem unimportant to some teachers, but

students are affectively influenced by the method their scores are announced. (Participant 21)

As far as the second research question "What are Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness?" is concerned, the following themes were identified:

J.   Time limitations

Because class time is finished soon, teachers cannot pay attention to all the students. Even if they want to be fair, they cannot. Maybe class time can be regarded as a big problem in this regard. (Participant 7)

Short class times prevent our teacher from being fair. In each class time, at most 5 students can be engaged in class activities. To help teachers to be fair, class time should be extended. (Participant 3)

K.   Diversity of students' needs

Because students' needs in any English class are not the same, teachers cannot fulfill them equally. This leads to teachers' unfairness. Teachers cannot afford to fulfill the various needs of all the students. (Participant 15)

Each student has his own language-learning needs. Addressing the needs of each individual student is impossible. This variety of needs causes some students' needs to be neglected unintentionally. The product of this is the violence of class fairness. (Participant 2)

L.   Differences in the socioeconomic level of students

I think that my teacher loves high-class students more than other students. Even when they get low scores, the teacher increases their score. In compensation, they bring expensive gifts to the teacher. (Participant 10)

The family of our classmates plays an important role in teacher behavior. Those students whose father is doctor or engineer are the focus of teachers' attention. Their family becomes friends with teachers and they have better relations with teachers in the class. (Participant 4)

M. Differences in students' performance

A matter which distorts teacher fairness is that student's performance is not at the same level. students with higher performance are more active in the class. Naturally, the teacher rewards them more. (Participant 1)

Students' ability is different. Therefore, their class activity is not the same. The students with high ability absorb teacher more. They arrive at

intimate relations and it is inevitable that the teacher gives them good scores and has better interaction with them. (Participant 30)

N. Teachers' busy mind

Teachers have many concerns. Their mind is busy with many things. They don't have a comfort zone of mind to be devoted to fairness. They don't care about fairness. (Participant 18)

Preoccupations of teachers make them unattended to class fairness. Several personal and working problems fill their mind. They are nervous most of the time. Fairness is among the least important things for them. (Participant 23)

O. Mismatch between teachers and students

Students who don't think like teachers are not noticed by teachers. When my teacher doesn't like my dresses, she doesn't have a good relationship with me and I understand this well. All students understand this. (Participant 6)

Teachers, unfortunately, try to impose their views on students. They do not accept differences between themselves and students. They welcome sameness. (Participant 11)

P. Students' impoliteness

Impolite students don't let our teachers remain fair. They are a reason for teacher unfairness. Teachers have no way but to punish them. When just some students are punished, class fairness is questioned. (Participant 20)

A polite student calls for a different behavior from the teacher than an impolite student. Not all students in a class are polite. Therefore, teachers should behave differently with different students. This generates class unfairness. (Participant 16)

Q. Inattention to morality

Moral things are not important for some teachers. They just consider teaching a subject in the class. They are not attentive to moral issues. They do not pay attention to students' emotions. They are indifferent. (Participant 13)

Teaching requires knowledge of ethical matters. If a teacher does not know these things, their acts are not fair. They behave unfairly as a result. If they increase their ethical knowledge, they can implement class fairness more easily. (Participant 10)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher-classroom fairness consisted of using the same techniques to make learning for all students easier, using the same extra teaching activities for all students, showing equal respect to all students, having good performance expectations from all students, teacher's loving all the students, teacher's objectivity in grading, using the same announcement procedures to announce the scores of students, teacher's interacting with all students and obliging all students to observe rules of the classroom. Moreover, the Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness were identified as time limitations, diversity of students' needs, differences in the socio-economic level of students, differences in students' performance, teachers' busy mind, mismatch between teachers and students, students' impoliteness, and inattention to morality.

In the same line with the present study, the perceptions that revolve around students' voice and role have been supported in procedural fairness principles. Additionally, interactional fairness encompasses the perceptions tied to care, attention, and emotion (Rasooli et al., 2019). Furthermore, in line with the argument by Tierney (2016) and Rasooli et al. (2018), fairness, in addition to assessment procedures, involves macro-level classroom elements such as interactions and relationships that take shape between teacher and students. Further, in line with the findings of Chory et al. (2017), the participants of the present study reported fair behaviors of teachers as an indication of classroom fairness. Also, consistent with Frymier et al. (2019), teaching processes were found to constitute a main dimension of classroom fairness in the present study. Moreover, in the studies by Chory et al. (2017) and Derakhshan et al. (2020), shortage of time, behavior of students, and personal feelings were pinpointed as the main challenges experienced by teachers when practicing classroom fairness. Monetary problems, students' low performance, teachers' feelings, and incongruity between teachers and students were consistent with the results of Rasooli et al. (2019). The diversity of students' wants was also similar to the results reported by Kazemi and Tornbolm (2008).

According to the results of the first research question, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners perceive the provision of equal opportunities for all the students in different aspects including teaching techniques, teacher love, expectations, support and respect, and evaluation techniques as the gist of classroom fairness. This reveals that according to Iranian EFL learners, no discrimination related to the students and the

conditions wherein they are put is welcomed in implementing teacher-classroom fairness. To the Iranian EFL learners, to be fair means to treat students equally in different respects. Based on the results relating to the second research question, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners conceive student-related factors as having a high blocking power in their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness. It can also be concluded that limitations of time, teachers' mentality, and morality inconsideration can make English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness problematic. Finally, it should be mentioned that classroom fairness implementation is more important for students in EFL settings since success in EFL teaching/learning is built on the effective relations between teacher and student, teachers' fair assignment of available classroom resources among students, and the effective interplay between the main classroom parties. In such a situation, teachers' fairness creates a tie of trust between the students and the teacher and conveys to students the message of fair behavior in the classroom. From the opposite direction, if teachers behave unfairly in the classroom, students perceive their teacher and his/her behavior negatively and it is likely to lead to negative emotions such as sadness, rudeness, passiveness, distress, lack of satisfaction, and aggressiveness (Zhaleh et al., 2022).

The findings of the current study give useful insights to those involved in EFL teaching on how to enact classroom fairness in different settings. The results of the current study also make prominent the priority of exploring teacher classroom fairness as a missing link in the previous studies. In addition, the results of this study may broaden readers' knowledge of teacher-classroom fairness by exploring EFL learners' perceptions of this construct. This is of high importance since EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness was a research area that suffered from scarcity as revealed by reviewing the extant literature. By uncovering EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness, this study presents a more complete view of what teacher classroom fairness is. More importantly, the findings of the current study can enrich the attitudes and activities of different groups of stakeholders in ELT, including policymakers, teacher educators, teacher education administrators, and curriculum developers, so that they can take appropriate measures to enhance prospective and in-service teachers' knowledge and practice in classroom fairness and consequently, pave the ground for the implementation of teacher classroom fairness.

Like any other study, there were some limitations in the present study. In this study factors unrelated to classroom fairness such as the researcher's personal bias, thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs may have

influenced the results. Furthermore, finding the target sample was associated with some problems and challenges due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the study.

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