

Iranian EFL Teachers' Cognitions of Language Learners: Oral Communication Classrooms in Focus

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Abstract- *The current study aimed to investigate whether a group of Iranian EFL teachers revealed to have cognitions about their language learners in respect to language learners' self-confidence, desire for feedback and desire for instruction. For this purpose, the cognitions of five English teachers in the oral communication classrooms were investigated. The teachers were required to fill out a questionnaire in order to obtain their cognitions about their language learners. The findings revealed that there was an intricate relationship between language teachers' experience and their cognitions about the techniques they applied in classrooms. Implications and suggestions for further researcher were also discussed.*

Keywords- *Second language teachers' cognitions; Oral communication classrooms; Teaching pronunciation; Teachers' knowledge.*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of cognitive psychology, a shift of focus has occurred towards the influence of thinking on behavior in educational settings among teachers and language learners. A significant body of research has been conducted to show the incompetence of the process-product research paradigm in order to truly appreciate epistemological and critical cognitive areas of teaching (Jackson, 1968[16]; Shavelson & Stern, 1981[26]). Soon, educational researchers were informed of the prominent and leading role of teachers' mental lives (Walberg, 1977) [28] in their instructional practices and made a clear-cut distinction between what teachers do and what they know and believe (Borg, 2009)[6]. Little by little, researchers began to look on the process of teaching in an all-embracing and richer mental context than purely portraying it as interactive or proactive behaviors (Elbaz, 1983[9]; Freeman & Johnson, 1998[13]; Lampert, 1985[19]). In the early 1990s, research in language education also broadened its focus to the cognitive aspects of teaching and particular attention was devoted to the central role of teachers in helping to improve language teaching (Freeman, 1991a, 1991b[11][12]; Johnson, 1992a, 1992b[17][18]; Prabhu, 1990[23]). Since that time, teacher cognition inquiry has acquired profound significance and the center of attention in L2 research education has dramatically changed from studying teachers' observable behaviors to teachers' knowledge and beliefs to prop up their instructional practices, reflections and pedagogical decisions (Freeman & Johnson, 1998[13]; Freeman & Richards, 1996[14]; Williams & Burden, 1997[29]; Meijer,

Verloop, & Beijaard, 1999)[21]. Nowadays, scholars have reached to this consensus that findings of teachers' cognitions' studies would help them to extend and improve the theoretical knowledge bases of teachers' educational practices (Bartels, 2005[4]; Carlgren & Lindblad, 1991[7]; Cole & Knowles, 2000)[8]. As revealed in teacher cognition studies, the investigation of teachers' personal responses divulges the reasoning and rationales behind their decisions and practices, and releases their hidden thoughts and pedagogy and practices that can be judged, interpreted, reviewed as well as applied as a universal approach (Borg, 2009)[6].

The focus of most studies into SLTC was placed on second language skills and sub-skills, while some aspects of second language has been under-represented in the literature (Baker, 2014)[2]. One of these areas is pronunciation pedagogy that is in need of further inquiry. According to Baker and Murphy (2011)[3], acquiring pronunciation skills are considered to be a principle element to every English as a Foreign Language (EFL) student's ability to communicate in English. However, developing the ability to produce intelligible and comprehensible language is a critical issue which involves the accurate production of phonemes, connected speech, word stress, rhythm, intonation and chunking amongst other things. Further aggregating the situation, it should be mentioned that pronunciation instruction is an integral component of each oral communication classroom (Baker, 2014[2]), and if the ability of speaking in another language is one of the goal of language learning (Tergujeff, 2012)[27], one cannot ignore the importance of pronunciation pedagogy.

Regarding this need for Iranian learners, teaching pronunciation techniques seems to gain further importance in educational settings, since it is their integral part of English language learning. Taking previous studies in the field as a starting point, the present study was set out to explore language teachers' cognitions about the characteristics of their language learners. This was the time to take a sober look at the way pronunciation is taught in English classrooms in Iran. More specifically, this study tried to answer the following research question:

What cognitions do Iranian EFL teachers have about language learners in respect to their self-confidence, desire for feedback and desire for instruction?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The studies conducted on the issue of cognition among the Iranian teachers and language learners of English are included, but not limited to, the following issues: Rokhsari (2012)[24] investigated the relationships between reading comprehension and reading cognitive, metacognitive and test-taking strategies. The findings revealed that the successful readers used reading strategies more frequent than less successful ones.

In a similar vein, Sadeghi and Bidel Nikou (2012)[25] explored perceptions of Iranian EFL high school teachers and students on the issue of teaching and learning reading skill by using questionnaires. The findings showed that both groups had an agreement upon the fact that reading cognition should be given more attention.

Alijanian (2012)[1] tried to investigate how variables such as work environment, teachers' experience and their gender influence beliefs about grammar and its teaching. The researcher applied quantitative techniques of data collection (questionnaire) in order to answer the research question. The finding indicated that the above-mentioned variables can significantly influence the teachers' beliefs and cognitions about teaching grammar.

In examining the impact of EFL teachers cognition on teaching English language grammar, Moini (2009)[22], addressed the issue of differences in Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about grammar and teaching grammar. The intended differences lied on the issues of work environment (private school vs. state schools), degree, gender and teaching experience. The results obtained from a grammar belief questionnaire showed that there were significant differences between school teachers and private language institute teachers in their cognition and practice. The observed differences were also significant for teachers' degree and experience. However, the results revealed that teachers' beliefs did not significantly differ regarding teachers' gender. Overall, the findings showed that teachers' characteristics influenced upon some aspects of their cognition and teaching practice as related to grammar.

In spite of its importance as an essential component of oral communication, according to Behzadi and Fahimniya (2014)[5], pronunciation has been under-researched and

neglected among language researchers in Iran. They asserted that Iranian researchers have mostly focused on skills and sub-skills much more than the element of pronunciation in language teaching. For this reason, they had an attempt to explore the effect of two different approaches of teaching pronunciation: intuitive-imitative and analytic-linguistic on students speaking fluency among a group of Iranian non-native EFL learners. The effect of age was considered as a moderating variable in applying the two approaches. The results revealed that the intuitive-imitation approach was more fruitful and effective for the younger participants while the analytic-linguistic approach was more effective for the older ones.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

Five experienced teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes agreed to participate in this project. The teachers were chosen based on their current placement as an oral communication instructor, their teaching experience, and willingness to participate in the research study. All of the teachers had taught their oral communication course at least once in the previous semester, and each teacher had between 5 and 10 years' teaching experience. All of these teachers were working in private English institutes in Najafabad. They had graduated from the field of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), or earned a master's in a TEFL-related field. Regarding their language proficiency, the teachers varied: two of them had passed their TOFEL or IELTS in recent years, two of them were enrolling in pre-IELTS and pre-TOFEL courses in other language institutes and one of them was recently graduated from his/her university, therefore his/her proficiency in English was not as high as others.

3.2 Instruments

A brief questionnaire about teachers' opinions and beliefs about their language learners was administered among teachers. The questionnaire, which was designed by Baker (2014)[2] consisted of both Likert-scale items and some open-ended questions (see Appendix 1).

3.3 Procedure

A quantitative research approach, i.e. questionnaire, was used in order to gather teachers' perceptions and opinions about their language learners. To this end, the teachers were asked to fill out an opinion questionnaire in order to gather more data about the their cognitions about language learners enrolling in their classrooms. This questionnaire was administered among the teachers at the last week of the semester.

4. Data analysis and results

The questionnaire involved issues such as learners' confidence, desire for feedback and desire for instruction the results of which are presented in the following parts.

4.1 Learners' confidence

The answer the teachers gave to the question "how confident do you feel your students are in their English pronunciation techniques" revealed that almost all teachers believed their students' to be confident in this regard. The results appropriately correspond to the findings obtained from students' questionnaire. As Table 4.1 shows, teachers selected "strongly agree" or "agree" in their response to the statement "I am confident about my English pronunciation skills".

Table 4.1. Frequency of teachers' responses to question 1

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | disagree | 1 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 1.9 |
| | maybe | 8 | 14.8 | 14.8 | 16.7 |
| | agree | 18 | 33.3 | 33.3 | 50.0 |
| | Strongly agree | 27 | 50.0 | 50.0 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

As the following figure shows, students who were learning English in the T2 and T5 classes seemed to be more confident in their pronunciation skill. In the interview, T2 explained that some of his students tried to continue their education overseas; therefore, they were working on their pronunciation skills long before enrolling in this class. A number of students in T2 and T5 classes, though, were unsure about their pronunciation skills. Only one student in T4 class seemed to be strongly disagree about his/her pronunciation skills. When inviting T4 to have comments on students' response, she appeared to agree with student comments about his pronunciation abilities.

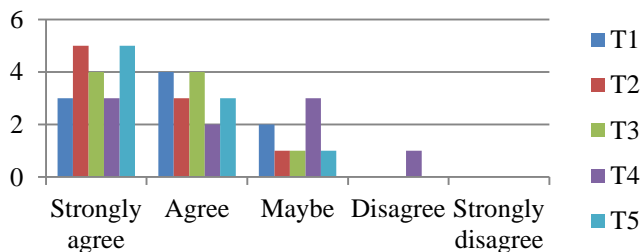


Figure 4.1. Students' response to question 1

Although the results obtained from students' questionnaire showed that there were variety in students' response to the first statement, all of the students answered "strongly agree" to the statement "I want to improve my pronunciation skills in English". Along with the students' response, teachers believed that the majority students were eager to improve their pronunciation abilities. The exception to this was T4 who believed that the students in her class were reluctant to work on their pronunciation skills. She expressed the attitude that "students in my class believe they know everything about English, and they do not care about my recommendations of practicing English more".

Table 4.2. Frequency of students' responses to question 2

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | agree | 10 | 18.5 | 18.5 | 18.5 |
| | Strongly agree | 44 | 81.5 | 81.5 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

The distribution of students' response to this statement is illustrated in Figure 4.2 even though a number of students were fairly agree about their desire to improve their pronunciation abilities, on the whole, students wanted to work on their skills.

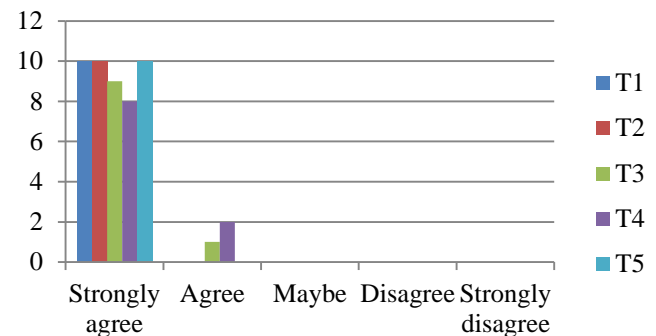


Figure 4.2. Students' response to question 2

4.2 Desire for instruction

All teachers showed to have cognitions about students' desire of their teachers to teach pronunciation in the classrooms. In answering the researcher questions about the reason why they thought so, T5 remarked:

I think students like to improve their pronunciation abilities. I think what they need is an extra class for teaching pronunciation features widely and effectively. In that course, students would be familiar with even tiny differences between different English accents, such as British and American accents. They should be provided with some pronunciation-oriented courses which, subsequently, lead to improvement of their listening and speaking skills.

As illustrated in the following table, students had the same opinion with their teachers and believed there should be instruction on English pronunciation techniques. Table 4.3 and the following figure illustrate the results of students' responses to the statement "I want my teacher to teach pronunciation"

Table 4.3. Frequency of students' responses to question 3

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|----------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | agree | 19 | 35.2 | 35.2 | 35.2 |
| | Strongly agree | 35 | 64.8 | 64.8 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

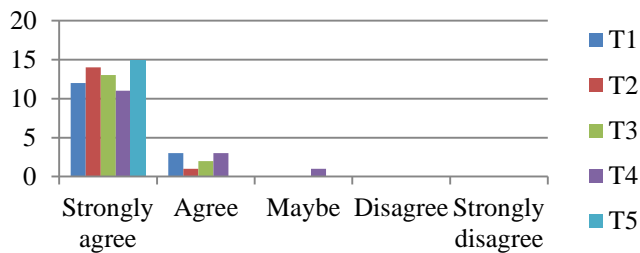


Figure 4.3. Students' response to question 3

These results clearly showed the agreement between teachers' cognitions and students' beliefs about pronunciation instruction.

When the teachers were required to give comments on the time they usually spent on teaching pronunciation in their classrooms, they complained that this time was very limited. According to the T2 and T5 beliefs, pronunciation was not appropriately addressed in these courses. The reason for their comments was that students were provided with different communicative activities and tasks, therefore, no time would be left for teachers to focus on teaching pronunciation. T1 and T3 also believed that they did not spend sufficient time on teaching pronunciation in their classes, whereas their views contradict with their students'. According to the comments these T3 gave the researcher, *"Quite surprisingly, my students imagine I spend more time than needed on teaching, practicing and checking their pronunciation abilities"*.

4.3 Desire for feedback

The next three questions which were asked from the teachers in the form of questionnaire, aimed to explore teachers' cognition about students' desire for feedback. As the findings revealed, nearly all students in these five classes expressed desired for receiving feedback from their teachers. In order to determine the methods of giving feedbacks to students, the researcher asked them to choose whether they wanted to give feedback 1) in front of the class, 2) privately, or as a group in the class. T2 and T3 thought that their students would receive more benefit from the feedback when it would be given in the group. Quite surprisingly, students in these classes like to be provided with feedback privately. One reason for this can be the fact that students in this class were proficient learners, therefore, they would not like to be corrected in front of other students.

Contrary to these two teachers' beliefs, T5 guessed that it would be more embarrassing to correct students in front of the class, thus private or in-group correction would be more beneficial. As commented by T5,

"Correcting the students on the spot and in front of the class give them bad feeling, I think. When I was student, I didn't really like to be corrected by my teachers. Sometimes if he/she remind me of my pronunciation mistake after the class would produce more fruitful results!"

The results obtained from students' questionnaire also confirmed teacher knowledge of students' preferences.

The two teachers who believed that students would not feel embarrassed about correcting their mistakes in front of the class were T1 and T4. For example T1 commented:

If they (the students) know me well, they will understand that I correct students' pronunciation mistakes without feeling as if they are disappointed or shy! This feedback would give other students benefit as well! So why not correcting them in front of others? This approach is more beneficial than the other two!

The students' responses to this statement in the questionnaire varied, though. Students in T1 class liked to be provided with feedback mostly in the form of private or in-group correction, while students in T4 agreed with their teacher's comments.

T4 commented that, *"students are more comfortable in the classroom environment and therefore they are not afraid of error correction"*. The overall results indicated that students did not like to receive feedback in front of class. The following tables clearly illustrate the findings obtained from question 4 to 6 of students' questionnaire.

Table 4.4. students' responses to question 4

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|-------|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | strongly disagree | 42 | 77.8 | 77.8 | 77.8 |
| | disagree | 9 | 16.7 | 16.7 | 94.4 |
| | maybe | 3 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 100.0 | 100.0 | |

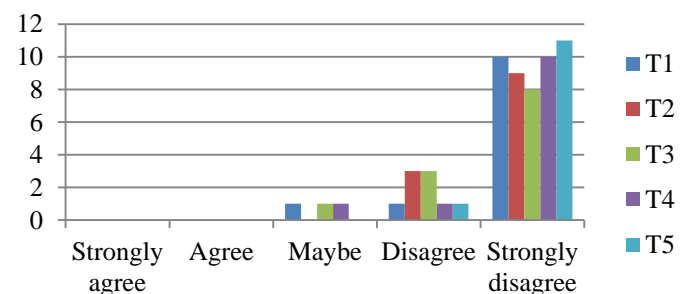


Figure 4.4. Students' responses to question 4 (in front of class)

Table 4.5. students' responses to question 5

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|-------------------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | Strongly disagree | 1 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 1.9 |
| | maybe | 3 | 5.5 | 5.6 | 7.4 |
| | agree | 11 | 20.0 | 20.4 | 27.8 |
| | Strongly agree | 39 | 70.9 | 72.2 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 98.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 1 | 1.8 | | |
| Total | | 55 | 100.0 | | |

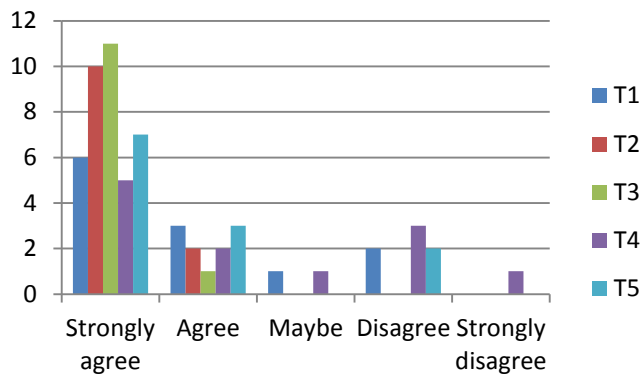


Figure 4.5. Students' responses to question 5 (private)

Table 4.6. Students' responses to question 6

| | | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent | Cumulative Percent |
|---------|--------|-----------|---------|---------------|--------------------|
| Valid | 1.00 | 24 | 43.6 | 44.4 | 44.4 |
| | 2.00 | 2 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 48.1 |
| | 3.00 | 1 | 1.8 | 1.9 | 50.0 |
| | 4.00 | 2 | 3.6 | 3.7 | 53.7 |
| | 5.00 | 25 | 45.5 | 46.3 | 100.0 |
| | Total | 54 | 98.2 | 100.0 | |
| Missing | System | 1 | 1.8 | | |
| Total | | 55 | 100.0 | | |

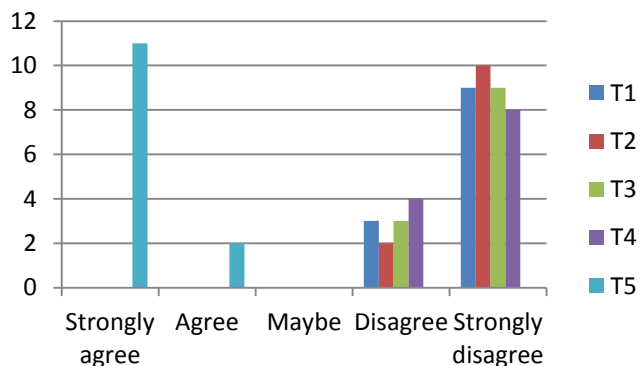


Figure 4.6. Students' responses to question 6 (as a group)

5. Discussion, implication and suggestions for further research

5.1 Discussion of main findings

This study examined the general cognitions of teachers about their language learners, with respects to three factors of learners' confidence, learners' desire for feedback and learners' desire for instruction. The major finding of this component of the study was that teachers' education played an essential role in shaping their cognitions about regular practices of pronunciation pedagogy. Without such education, neither their knowledge about pronunciation instruction was in-depth and up-to-date nor was their

confidence enormous enough to direct classroom practices. In this study, for instance, those teachers who were taking upper graduate courses in English teaching appeared to be more knowledgeable about their students' different characteristics which, consequently, resulted in their showing confidence in teaching this skill area. This finding is in accordance to Fraser (2000)[10] and Macdonald (2002)[20] who found that teachers without enough guidance and training in instructing pronunciation seemed to have less confidence in teaching this sub-skill.

The findings also released that teachers had different cognitions about assessing their students' pronunciation either in front of the class, in-groups correction or privately. A group of teachers believed that it would be embarrassing for language learners to be evaluated in front of their peers. Actually, they were hesitant about this fact that whether they correct their students in front of class might be damaging to the students' emerging identities. This finding is in line with the ongoing discussion about pronunciation instruction and feedback. According to Golombek and Jordan (2005)[15], pronunciation instruction can even be considered a threat to language learners' identity, especially when non-native English teachers instruct it. As pronunciation instruction and feedback are concerned, therefore, language teachers are left to their own abilities in order to decide if they should ever correct their students' errors or give them instructions. The pressing issue here is that Iranian EFL teachers must understand the sensitive nature of pronunciation instruction, on one hand, and the cognitions about their learners' special characteristics, on the other hand, in order to help them better improve their communication skills.

5.2 Implications for SLTC Research

The findings obtained from this study can also enrich the current literature about SLTC. Although the study suffers from some data collection methodologies, including data collection methods such as observation of teachers' actual practices, it provided fruitful results about the representation of a group of teachers' cognition. If possible, further research in the area of language teachers' cognitions could be conducted based on the current study's findings in order further enhance the teachers, practitioners and specialists knowledge about teachers' beliefs and perceptions in teaching pronunciation.

5.3 Suggestions for further research

Further research in dealing with teachings' cognitions in pronunciation pedagogy will ideally incorporate a triangulation of different data collection methods in order to present a more vivid picture of teachers' knowledge than any conclusions drawn from single method alone. Classroom observation, for example, can best be practiced in order to explore what teachers believe to be the most effective techniques they can use in pronunciation instruction and the conditions under which language learners can best learn the pronunciation features.

The current study explore teachers' knowledge as regards techniques they used in language classrooms learners'

characteristics and preferences of these techniques. Other studies can also gather more information about teachers' attitude, beliefs and perceptions, as other components of teachers' cognitions (Baker, 2014)[2], about pronunciation pedagogy.

Data collection can be carried out with more numbers of teachers. Greater and more active participations of teachers more likely result in better understanding of their attitude, knowledge, perceptions and beliefs about their pedagogical practices.

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APPENDIX

The study's questionnaire

Please respond to each statement below using a check (×). Choose from: Strongly agree, Agree, Maybe, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree)

| | <i>Strongly agree</i> | <i>Agree</i> | <i>Maybe</i> | <i>Disagree</i> | <i>Strongly Disagree</i> |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------------------|
| I am confident about my English pronunciation skills. (I think other people can understand my pronunciation.) | | | | | |
| I want to improve my pronunciation skills in English. | | | | | |
| I want my teacher to teach pronunciation. | | | | | |
| I want my teacher to correct my pronunciation. | | | | | |
| I like it when my teacher corrects my pronunciation in front of the class (when the class can hear what she says). | | | | | |
| I like it when my teacher corrects my pronunciation privately (e.g., in her office, or quietly in class). (The class can NOT hear what she says). | | | | | |
| I like it when my teacher corrects our pronunciation as a group in class. (She does NOT focus on me individually). | | | | | |