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Studying power relations in an academic setting: Teachers' and students' perceptions of EAP classes in Iran☆

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ABSTRACT

Informed by critical EAP theory, this study included a "rights analysis" (as opposed to "needs analysis") of Iranian students and teachers in EAP classes in the Iranian higher education system. More particularly, this study examined to what extent the EAP curriculum is informed by students' and teachers' feedback. Data for this study came from a survey and follow-up interviews with a number of Iranian EAP students and teachers. Analysis of the data reveals that there is little or no interaction among students, teachers and department officials in constructing the EAP curricula and classroom practices. Students were seen to be powerless and passive recipients who had to enact the institutional requirements defined a priori by the departments or curriculum developers. We discuss implications for EAP teachers as well as curriculum developers who can encourage students to ask questions and make suggestions for pedagogical change.

1. Introduction

It has been argued that one of the fundamental principles on which EAP courses should be based is the consideration of learners' *needs*, *wants*, and *lacks* (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, p. 108) or a needs analysis. Previously Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) and Robinson (1991) have suggested that needs analysis has been the principal method for determining what to include in EAP curricula, providing descriptions of academic skills and genres EAP students may encounter in future courses or that they will encounter in particular contexts. In other words, the focus of EAP courses is on "the language, skills, and genres appropriate to the specific activities the learners need to carry out in English" (Johns, 2013, p. 2). In simple terms, the greatest strength of EAP is the provision of instruction tailored to students' needs and aims. In other words, based on students' reasons and purposes for language learning, EAP courses could sufficiently address the appropriate academic requirements. However, many EAP programs have now gained a monologic nature due to the absence of dialog between students and teachers over students' reactions to classes, assignments, and textbooks, and the exclusion of possible participation by students in curriculum development and pedagogical decision-making processes. This monologic nature of EAP "is best revealed in the absence of students' voices in the literature. Their reactions to assignments, classes, and texts have, for the most part, not been reported" (Benesch, 2001, p. 48). This reflects the fact that students' reactions and feedbacks have not been taken into account in selecting course contents and teaching methods, thereby making institutional and departmental requirements the primary determinants of EAP courses. This goes against Freire's (1970) central tenet of *situatedness*, which

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requires that teaching be built on what he calls students' "thematic universe" (p. 77). According to Freire, education which does not pay attention to students' conditions of life in and outside the classroom and solely focuses on transferring knowledge dehumanizes students.

Drawing on Freire's insights towards education, Benesch (2001) argues for dialogic teaching in which both students and teachers decide on content requirements and class regulations. Further, according to Bakhtin (1981), interaction is "dialogic" when all the participants to an interactional exchange possess the authority and the autonomy to express their voice and exhibit their identity. This belief has led to the emergence of critical EAP which, according to Benesch (2001), offers alternatives to students' "unquestioning obedience, assuming that students have the right to interrogate the demands they face" (p. 49) since "classrooms and the various tasks (e.g., lectures, assignments, examinations) associated with following an academic course are sites of contention, or struggle" (Benesch, 2001, p. x). In fact, critical EAP is an answer to the calls for greater attention to the wider social context that have been made by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998), Master (1998) and Swales (1994).

In relation to Iranian higher education one might argue that a monologic teaching style may still be prevalent and students as well as teachers' suggestions and opinions are rarely sought in making decisions about content requirements and class regulations. Students may still be seen as recipients who have to enact the institutional requirements defined a priori by the teachers as well as departments or curriculum developers. Today the current escalating spread of the English language academy offers a ripe moment for Iranian EAP teachers as well as curriculum developers to reconsider some of the critical ideas emerging from ELT research in English. This would certainly allow the Iranian EAP curriculum to emerge out of dialogic negotiation among students, teachers and academic curriculum developers.

Of similar importance are the concerns raised by feminist educators when they argue for equal authority for women teachers. According to Weiler (1994), two issues have to be taken care of in critical feminist teaching. First, since students and teachers possess multiple identities in ways which overlap and contradict each other, feminist teachers should take notice of the complexities of varying subject positions in the classroom (i.e., students as well as teachers may possess different identities depending on the context in which they need to operate).

Secondly, they need to promote democracy in the classroom and work to maintain their hard-earned positions of authority in hierarchical institutions. Weiler (1994), Gore (1992) and Luke (1992) argue that female teachers have been marginalized, and call for "greater situatedness in accounts of critical pedagogy to take students' and teachers' subjectivities and histories into account" (cited in Benesch, 2001, p. 53). Moreover, Cameron (2005) assumes that upon entering institutions and professions, women are obliged to "assimilate to a masculine norm of language use" (p. 497) which in turn puts some into a disadvantageous position.

To address all these issues, Benesch (2001) proposes a "rights analysis", which she believes "is a theoretical tool for EAP teachers and students to consider possible responses to unfavorable social, institutional, and classroom conditions" (p. 102). It examines how power is exercised and resisted in various aspects of an academic situation, including pedagogy and curriculum. In simple terms, how the authority of the teacher is established and how the students can resist or negotiate her/his authority in various ways is the object of rights analysis. According to Benesch (1999a), the term "rights" brings to attention the power relations and theorizes EAP students as potentially playing active roles rather than being passive observers. She points out that

> rights are not a set of pre-existing demands but a conceptual framework for questions about authority and control, such as: what are students permitted to do in a particular setting? How do they respond to rules and regulations? How are decisions about control and resistance made? (p. 315)

According to Benesch (1999a), rights analysis highlights the importance of the possibility for engagement rather than assuming that students are entitled to certain rights or that they should engage in particular types of activities. With regard to Iranian higher education, students may still not be provided the possibility for engagement in Iranian universities in the kinds of interactions called for by critical EAP perspectives. This would deprive Iranian EAP students of opportunities for making suggestions about institutional and pedagogic control and resistance as well as of the possibility for engagement in constructing the EAP curricula and classroom practices. In such a case, critical EAP perspectives are needed for the development of Iranian students who wish to engage in academic work in English.

Thus, in order to study how students in an EAP course respond to institutional and pedagogic control, their power relations with their teacher need to be analyzed. One way to carry out such research is by examining how teachers and students negotiate control in the classroom, what Gore (1992) calls "the micro-dynamics of the operation of power as it is exercised" (p. 59). The focus on power offers a tool for studying how students react to faculty expectations, whether they comply or resist, and why. Previous literature (Fox, 1994; Leki, 1995, 1999; Leki & Carson, 1997; Prior, 1995, 1998; Smoke, 1994; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1995) has given attention to how student feedback can actually inform classroom practice. For example, Leki (1995) investigated the academic literacy experiences of 5 ESL visa students in their first semester of study in the U.S. in light of the strategies they brought with them to their first academic experience, and found that the strategies of the participants in this study were well-developed. However, she suggests that it is important we know what students already know, thereby not attempting to teach them something already mastered, nor something too difficult for their current knowledge. She recommends we "consult with students to learn what strategies they already consciously use, help them bring to consciousness others that they may use and not be aware of using, and perhaps suggest yet others that they had not thought of before" (p. 259). What this means is that teachers and language program educators seek students' suggestions and comments