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Philosophy-based Language Teaching Approach on the Horizon: A Revolutionary Pathway to Put Applied ELT into Practice

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Abstract—As a unique approach in today's language teaching methodology, Philosophy-based Language Teaching (PBLT) engages learners in dialogues using philosophical question and answer activities to tackle the process of language learning in ELT classes. Accordingly, the present study sought to illuminate the practical ways through which PBLT could be utilized to put Applied ELT into practice. In so doing, the key is to redefine the inherent roles of both English learners and practitioners in an Applied ELT classroom. Bringing a bulk of sample philosophical questions, the paper provides the following recommendations to implement PBLT in Applied ELT classes. First, ELT life syllabus can be designed using the principles of PBLT approach. Second, while dealing with language skills, material designers might reshape the common pre and post task activities including life-related philosophical questions. Moreover, as males and females have different points of view towards life issues, materials should provide a platform to augment learners' thoughts through sharing ideas of both genders in the classroom in answering philosophical questions. Third, along with cross-cultural approaches, PBLT can aid life syllabus design which assists learners to consider themselves as an active member of local and global communities all around the world.

Index Terms—philosophy-based language teaching, Applied ELT, life syllabus, ELT practitioners

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known phenomenon in EFL classes that students become eager to take part in discussions whenever a philosophical question related to the topics in their immediate environment is raised. This was confirmed by different studies including Haynes (2002) and van der Leeuw (2004). Such attempts resulted in enforcing language teaching through asking and answering philosophical questions first in native language (Murriss, 1992) and then in foreign language (Shahini & Riazi, 2010), the latter of which was termed Philosophy-based Language Teaching (PBLT). Since different aspects of daily life can be considered as controversial issues which do not enjoy a consensus among people and are often prone to debates and discussions, they can be regarded as appropriate sources for designing philosophical questions in PBLT which consequently offers a platform to initiate and run life-related discussions in classes.

The idea of including life issues in ELT classes which shifted the field from language-only to life and language phenomenon was first proposed in Pishghadam's (2011) seminal paper under the terminology of Applied ELT. This changed the horizons of ELT to highlight its potentiality in becoming the axis of empowering different domains of life such as emotional intelligence (Hosseini, Pishghadam & Navari, 2010), compassion, harmony, generosity, and kindness (Ghahari, 2012), and critical thinking (Pishghadam, 2008). However, attention to the ways by which Applied ELT can be implemented by practitioners and stakeholders seemed to be under investigated in previous discussions of Applied ELT. This article attempts to bridge this gap by suggesting PBLT approach as a benchmark to put Applied ELT into practice.

II. APPLIED ELT AND LIFE SYLLABUS

With the advent of applied linguistics in 1950s, it has been regarded as virtually synonymous to English Language Teaching (ELT). Dealing with language, ELT was forced to be rooted in theoretical linguistics (Berns & Matsuda, 2006; Strevens, 1992). Therefore, to consolidate itself, ELT had to be completely dependent on the concepts proposed by linguistics. In addition, reading ELT methodology literature in the last 70 years or so reveals the heavy reliance of different approaches and methods on the findings from other disciplines related to learning, including psychology, sociology and critical pedagogy (Richards & Rogers, 2014; Pishghadam, Zabihi, & Shayesteh, 2015). In this sense, ELT practitioners were perceived as mere consumers of other disciplines' scientific findings (Schmitt, 2002). This view was criticized by applied linguists like Prabhu (1990), Allwright (1992), and Kumaravadvelu (1994) who called for a more independent role for the practitioners of the field through teachers' sense of plausibility, reflective teaching, and teacher autonomy.

Such new conceptions of language teaching armed ELT theoreticians with a strong foundation which empower them to apply ELT to other disciplines. Stating differently, the field is now observing a shift from employing "other disciplines' findings including psychology, sociology, neurology, linguistics, physics, etc. to enrich language teaching and learning theories" to "taking a more contributory role" in other fields (Pishghadam, 2011, p.13). Doing so, Applied ELT appointed more synergetic roles to language teaching which have been disregarded so far. Investigating ELT classes, different researchers examined this potentiality in terms of enhancing critical thinking abilities (Khaza'ifar, Pishghadam, & Ziai, 2011; Pishghadam, 2008), emotional intelligence (Hosseini, Pishghadam, & Navari, 2010), home culture attachment (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2011; Pishghadam & Navari, 2009) and metacultural competence (Noshadi & Dabbagh, 2015) all of which revealed the positive effects of ELT classes in improving and developing such life qualities and skills.

Apparently, the enhancing effects on different life skills mentioned above rest on the different atmosphere of ELT classes, compared with other school classes, in which some life qualities can be developed due to the unique features of ELT classes, specifically in EFL contexts where language learners do not have direct contact with English language outside the class. These particular characteristics are related to specific opportunities provided in ELT classes for (a) discussing various social, scientific and political issues, (b) holding pair / group works, (c) comparing and contrasting L1 and L2 cultures, (d) knowing lexis and grammar of L2, (e) showing learners' real self via speaking in L2, (f) taking language learning seriously, and (g) experiencing an enjoyable learning atmosphere.

Such features of ELT classes make it possible for language teachers to go beyond centering teaching / learning activities on linguistic analysis and taking into account life-related issues such as safety, physical health, emotional abilities, job satisfaction, freedom, human rights, etc. as the core of classroom discussions. The idea of moving beyond the content area in teaching to improve life issues has also been acknowledged by philosophers of education such as Dewey (1897), Freire (1998), Krishnamurti (1981), and Walters (1997) who ascertained that the true function of education is to make people ready to face life challenges and be autonomous in seeking personal gain. In addition, educational researchers have tried their best to accentuate the development of different aspects of individuals' lives as the commitment of education including autonomy (Winch, 1999), self-determination (Walker, 1999), happiness (Noddings, 2003), and emotional abilities (Mathews, 2006).

Relying on this background in education and considering the features of ELT classroom, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) introduced life syllabus in that "ELT practitioners should design their linguistic syllabus around the life syllabus so that, unlike in previous trends, the ELT profession becomes a life-and-language enterprise, giving priority to the quality of learners' lives in advance of enhancing their language-related skills" [original emphasis] (P.26).

The two features of an ELT class which is prone to the realization of Applied ELT and life syllabus principles more than the others are discussing various social and political issues, and holding pair / group works. These features enable language learners to communicate their ideas and beliefs about different life issues and hence exchange different life qualities. Therefore, applying teaching techniques which can motivate students to have life-related talk inside the class might be a benchmark in actualizing Applied ELT. One such approach can be the use of philosophy, as a discussion-bearing field, in child education.

III. PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN (P4C) APPROACH: A DIFFERENT VIEW ON EDUCATION

According to Vygotsky (1978), higher levels of thinking skills, specifically abstract thinking, can be achieved using mediated tools such as language. The type of language use that can lead to knowledge discovery is dialogic question / answer. In other words, as Barners (1992) indicated, it is the exploratory talk that can involve learners in expanding their knowledge via trying out new ideas and receiving feedbacks from the interlocutor rather than the well-shaped, pre-arranged presentational speech, specifically if the topic of the dialogue is about fundamental philosophical issues. In this sense, the term philosophy, following Lipman, Sharp, and Oscanyan's (1980) paradigm, refers to small 'p' philosophy which tries to help learners construct a critical view to the central concepts in life and not assume whatever being exposed to them as truth.

Dialogic philosophical questioning in education dates back to Socrates around 2500 years ago (Shaw, 2008). Inspired by Dewey's (1933) ideas on "reflexive inquiry", Lipman, Sharp and Oscanyan (1980) revitalized Socrates' philosophical questioning through proposing use of philosophy for children with the primary goal of teaching young children to think critically. This is done by creating a community of enquiry (see e.g. Kennedy, 2004) in that people are participants of knowledge production through deep thinking about different life issues with the help of question and answer (Cam, 1995). More specifically, participants cooperate to build and answer their own philosophical questions out of a certain input resource which can encourage them to take the responsibility for their own learning. Using higher-order thinking skills coupled with cooperation, learners build their own social understanding of fundamental, assumed beliefs and concepts in life, and consequently, strengthen their reasoning skills and self-esteem (Lipman, 2003). Haynes (2002) supported making community of enquiries in the classroom since "children should be encouraged and given room to participate in society from an early age and in contexts that are meaningful to them such as families, schools and other settings where they have a stake" (p. 46).

It should be emphasized that philosophical dialogues within the community of enquiry differs from conversation in that the latter deals with participants' personal ideas while the former tries to construct ideas out of peers' comments to solve problems. As Gardner (1995) stated, the only factor that motivates participants in a community of enquiry to keep on with their talk is the search for truth which is absent in mere conversation.

Although the learners lead the classroom discussions and philosophical question / answer activities, the teacher is not inactive and mediates learners in clarifying and simplifying learners' ideas but does not lead the discussion. As Smith (1995) stated, the mediator values the learners' ability in creating knowledge and interpreting reality hidden in the dialogues.

IV. PHILOSOPHY-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A NEW APPROACH TO TEACH LANGUAGE

Lipman's (2003) approach discussed above, found its place in different fields in education such as mathematics (Daniel, La Fortune, Pallascio & Schleifer, 1999) and first language acquisition and literacy (Haynes, 2002; Murriss, 1992; Ofsted, 1997; van der Leeuw, 2004). However, it was first proposed as a communicative approach to second / foreign language teaching by Shahini and Riazi (2011). In their proposition, ELT class is viewed as "a social community" where "students work together to complete a philosophical task" and "use language to learn it" (p. 171) [original emphasis]. They also highlighted the significance of this approach in L2 education as (a) enhancing thinking skills, and (b) improving L2 proficiency, specifically productive skills through asking and answering small 'p' philosophical questions. In Philosophy-based Language Teaching (PBLT), like Philosophy for Children Approach (P4C), by philosophy it is "meant to encourage ordinary students to think critically and creatively about the world around them, to delve deeper into subjects, and not blindly accept or memorize whatever is fed into their minds" (p. 171).

Inspired by Lipman (2003), Shahini and Riazi (2011) proposed a procedure to apply PBLT in ELT classrooms as follows. At first, the learners are given a source of input including an unseen text, a video or an audio track. Then, the instructor invites the learners to make some challenging and small 'p' philosophical questions about something that the content of the input has made them wonder or think about, individually or in peer groups. These questions are read aloud to the whole class so that the most interesting ones are chosen by learners themselves and be set for classroom discussion. Code switching is allowed during the philosophical dialogue. As mentioned above, the role of instructor is only to facilitate, monitor and help learners communicate their comments. More specifically, the instructor "takes some personal notes, writes down the main points raised and the important words used, and translates the L1 words used by students into L2" (Shahini & Riazi, 2011, p. 173). At the end of the discussion, the instructor works on the linguistic points raised up within the philosophical dialogue exchange among learners and puts them on the board.

To date, very few researchers probed the effectiveness of PBLT in language classes. In a pioneering study, Shahini and Riazi (2011) investigated the effect of PBLT on improving writing and speaking skills of EFL learners. Applying experimental design on two groups of 17 students, they found a significant difference regarding writing and speaking enhancement between experimental group who were exposed to 17 texts the content of which were prone to deep philosophical questioning and the control group who followed their normal classroom practice.

In a more recent study, Hemmati and Hoomanfar (2014) whose results highlighted that introducing PBLT can enhance EFL learners' speaking ability and willingness to communicate. The observed speaking performance improvement and willingness to talk was regarded by these researchers as evidence in support of setting PBLT as an alternative to the traditional IRF (Initiation – Response – Follow up) condition for speaking activities.

Considering the aforementioned, it seems that not enough attention has been paid to the practical side of Applied ELT and the ways to put this paradigm into practice in actual English classes. Noting the features of PBLT approach which signify and direct the improvement of classroom discussions on the one hand, and provide opportunities for language learners to discuss diverse social, scientific and political issues through holding pair / group works on the other, the rest of the current paper tried to clarify the ways PBLT can be implemented in an Applied ELT class.

V. PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TO IMPLEMENT PBLT IN A TYPICAL APPLIED ELT CLASSROOM

A. *Suggestions for Material Developers and Life Syllabus Designers*

Current trends in Applied ELT postulate that the brainwave of teaching life skills in an EFL or ESL classroom context has gone a far distance from practice in the field. Directing the interdisciplinary and scientific nature of ELT as well as thematic links to other subjects across the intended curriculum, the theory of Applied ELT has assigned the field a large role to contribute to other fields of study including psychology, sociology, and philosophy to mention a few. That was the rationale behind the introduction of life syllabus in ELT curriculum by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012). It should be noted that the primary objectives of such syllabus include the enhancement of learners' whole-person and intellectual development in addition to other life skills critical to learners' real lives. Accordingly, the syllabus should be designed around not only the idea of making meaning out of life but also the optimal holistic development of learners. To this end, the PBLT approach can be set as the fundamental basis in designing ELT life syllabus. More specifically, the teaching topics can be chosen from the fundamental life-related themes, including the development of social and personal skills, family responsibilities, citizenship, and occupational skills, out of which some philosophical questions can be drawn. Such questions can challenge language learners and provide them with food for thought for classroom discussions the result of which is a new vision towards life and life style. This becomes more effective if syllabus designers incorporate a unified approach to education for life which is centered on a paradigm of learner-centered education that ascertains a desired learning quality provided that learning is developed with understanding and learners are actively involved in the learning process and construct knowledge via gathering and synthesizing information along with its integration into general skills of inquiry, communication, critical

thinking, problem solving, etc. (Huba & Freed, 2000). In addition, this approach to syllabus design can encourage open communication between learners, teachers, and the society.

A similar approach can be taken by material designers via adding some life-related philosophical questions as pre and post tasks in dealing with different receptive and productive language skills. For example, for the reading passage (see Appendix 1), the following philosophical questions may be incorporated in the material as pre and post tasks to enhance learners' reading. Learners are going to discuss the provided philosophical questions either in pair or group arrangements.

Philosophical questions as pre-task:

Answer the following questions.

1. How important is it for you to join a book club?
2. Do you think that the social aspect of book clubs is more important than the intellectual facet? Why or why not?
3. Do you agree that starting your own book club is better than joining an existing one? Explain your ideas.
4. Is a casual approach risky when starting and running a book club?

Philosophical questions as post-task:

After reading the passage, answer the following questions.

1. What makes you introduce a book club to others?
2. Why is kick-off meeting required to hold a book club?

Moreover, as males and females have different points of view towards life issues, a very important point to be taken into account by material developers in this regard is the subject of gender differences. Accordingly, materials might be designed in the way they enrich learners' thoughts via sharing ideas of both genders in the classroom in answering philosophical questions. This means that material developers should not incorporate male- or female-specific issues in the materials for the classes run in PBLT to the extent it does not impair linguistic side of the course. In other words, issues which have nothing to do with one gender are better not to be added into the materials. This pertains to the fact that in a PBLT class, learners should have a full understanding of the content they are going to discuss with each other. In this regard, if some learners have no idea of the content, the discussion flow may break down and learners lose their self-confidence in sharing their ideas.

In addition, since materials are going to be designed based on authentic life-related issues and problems, learners' immediate environment and community must be considered in material development, life syllabus design, and curriculum planning. Stating it differently, the philosophical questions in an Applied ELT class should be chosen from the locally significant ones for learners which can include planning and managing money, staying healthy, and problem solving, among other issues in the Iranian context. Thus, developing materials in this way would provide the ground for learners to practice philosophical questions around the topics familiar for learners which helps them go beyond superficial questions and seek for more detailed philosophical ones.

Finally, considering the collaborative and cooperative nature of culture in Applied ELT on the one hand and the role of life syllabus in globalization (Azizi, 2012) on the other, the implementation of PBLT through the use of the cluster of cross-cultural approaches in the design of a life syllabus could undoubtedly provide the ground for learners to be considered as active members of local and global communities all around the world. Through such implementation of culture-related philosophical question and answer, the learners will develop their critical understanding of the very complicated nature of social and cultural identity. Also, the skills that learners accomplish through this approach make it possible for them to be successful in cross-cultural communications in outside the class and international contexts. As Noshadi and Dabbagh (2015) stated:

"Designing tasks that can raise awareness of English learners of the differences between English and other cultures' conceptualizations provides a benchmark for Applied ELT to advance its horizons of life syllabus and include cultural issues as a facet in life qualities in the present globalized world" (p.60).

B. Suggestions for English Language Practitioners

Along with the introduction of Applied ELT as a super-ordinate and scientific field for contribution to other knowledge areas, English teachers were expected to be experts in both ELT and other disciplines (Pishghadam, Zabihi, & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2012). In other words, it was highly advocated that English teachers were simply educational language teachers. That is to say such practitioners are to address a majority of life skills through inviting the learners to make philosophical questions in the class about life issues including critical thinking, problem solving, presentation skills, interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship skills, free time activities, influencing others, decision making, health education, etc. For the case of critical thinking and problem solving, for example, the practitioner can ask the learners to break down the concepts under discussion and analyze their component parts so as to gain better understanding of them. In this way, the learners can raise questions about situations and the way the items are related to each other. In addition, for intrapersonal relationship which calls out the inner monologue and happens within an individual for the sake of clarifying ideas or analyzing a situation, the practitioner may concentrate on various facets of the relationship such as self-concept, perception, expectation, and motivation. Therefore, due to the difficulties the learners encounter in running a philosophy-based discussion in an applied ELT classroom, specifically for lower-intermediate language learners, in order for the English teacher to appropriately implement PBLT in the class, he or she must decide on the best way to directly convey the content in the classroom so that the learners could properly perceive the objectives of the content under discussion.

In addition, the teacher should be patient enough to let learners discover or explore philosophical questions themselves out of the material exposed to them through pair work or group discussion. Also, the teacher must always be available for learners'

reinforcement or follow-up process on the progression of life skills both inside and outside of an ELT classroom. Moreover, through a close examination of interdisciplinary areas in other syllabi than English in the curriculum, such as ethics, geography, physics, etc., the English teacher could decide on the appropriate time that the learners are ready to be allowed to find their own answers to the teacher-made philosophical questions or design the questions themselves related to the topics they have covered in those courses other than English. Finally, to take linguistic difficulties into consideration, the instructor explains the problematic issues brought about within the philosophical dialogue upon completion of the pair or group work.

It should be mentioned that the suggestions above are in line with humanistic education which supports the idea that “education should empower people to lead a meaningful and purposeful life by boosting their intellectual and emotional abilities as well as their other types of relationships, attitudes, values and thinking styles” (Ketabi, Zabihi, & Ghadiri, 2012, p. 2).

Finally, using philosophical questions on the part of English practitioners, learners involvement in the process of learning is enhanced which in turn results in higher-order cognitive processes required for their continual development and building confidence in language learning.

C. *Suggestions for English Language Learners*

In an ELT class held in PBLT, learners are expected to develop personal-social, daily life, and occupational skills at the end of the course taken. One way to gain the skills mentioned is through an active engagement in discussing philosophical questions as well as raising challenging life related issues in dialogues. In order to manage their immediate environment and community, learners need to develop critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills. Being aware of such requirements make learners mentally ready for the progress within the whole classes. In addition, learners are expected to acquire the capability to relate the issues which are addressed in the ELT class to career affairs too. This necessitates them to have prior understanding and awareness of the carriers of their own interest.

Learners can also involve English language practitioners by asking for help in connection to the questions raised on the issue under discussion, which is a unique way of including practitioners while crating collaborative environment between learners and teachers.

VI. CONCLUSION

The current paper was an initial movement in the utilization of PBLT as an innovative approach to put Applied ELT into practice. As was already stated, introducing small ‘p’ challenging philosophical questions into ELT classes can motivate language learners to participate actively in classroom tasks and activities. This is specifically so if the philosophical questions are about life-related issues which students are in contact with in their everyday lives. This may combine the procedure suggested for PBLT (Shahini & Riazi, 2011) with life syllabus principles which sets a benchmark for a better implementation of Applied ELT in ELT classes.

The application of the approach not only encourages the learners' development of critical thinking but also makes classroom discussion easier and promotes learning among learners.

The overall outcome of the present study reveals that the actual versus perceived effectiveness of the PBLT approach is to be determined by the researchers in the field. Future studies will expand the efficiency of PBLT approach to include the attitudes of the English language practitioners on the approach and determine which type of philosophical questions would help students make better improvement in the process of language learning. Other considerations in this regard include gathering data about how small ‘p’ philosophical questions are utilized to promote critical thinking and decision-making as two key life related issues of English language learners.

Creation of focus groups comprising syllabus designers, material developers, practitioners, and learners, to determine pros and cons on the use of the approach as well as to delineate the extent of the use of the approach would also be beneficial to all the stakeholders in the field.

APPENDIX

Book clubs are a great way to meet new friends or keep in touch with old ones, while keeping up on your reading and participating in lively and intellectually stimulating discussions. If you’re interested in starting a book club, you should consider the following options and recommendations. The first thing you’ll need are members. Before recruiting, think carefully about how many people you want to participate and also what the club’s focus will be. For example, some book clubs focus exclusively on fiction, others read nonfiction. Some are even more specific, focusing only on a particular genre such as mysteries, science fiction, or romance. Others have a more flexible and open focus. All of these possibilities can make for a great club, but it is important to decide on a focus at the outset so the guidelines will be clear to the group and prospective member. After setting the basic parameters, recruitment can begin. Notify friends and family, advertise in the local newspaper, and hang flyers on bulletin boards in local stores, colleges, libraries, and bookstores. When enough people express interest, schedule a kick-off meeting during which decisions will be made about specific guidelines that will ensure the club runs smoothly. This meeting will need to establish where the group will meet (rotating homes or a public venue such as a library or coffee shop); how often the group will meet, and on what day of the week and at what time; how long the meetings will be; how books will be chosen and by whom; who will lead the group (if anyone); and whether refreshments will be served and if so, who will supply them. By the end of

this meeting, these guidelines should be set and a book selection and date for the first official meeting should be finalized. Planning and running a book club is not without challenges, but when a book club is run effectively, the experience can be extremely rewarding for everyone involved.

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