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“Isn’t it our fault?” Teachers Language Knowledge and Skills

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Abstract

No matter where you teach, you are duty-bound to expand your knowledge of language to meet the diverse language needs of students. Junior high school students demonstrate deficits in different domains of foreign language learning, most of which are the result of teachers’ lack of knowledge and skills. A bulk of studies has dealt with different skills and knowledge of language teachers. However, existing studies have rarely made any comparisons between school and language institute teachers. Therefore, in this study, using Brown’s (2001) checklist of good language teaching characteristics, and the teacher self-observation form (Christison & Bassano, 1984), teachers’ skills and knowledge of language in these contexts were evaluated. Language institute teachers were found to have higher levels of knowledge and skills as compared to school teachers. The findings have implications for language teachers, syllabus and curriculum designers, and in-service teacher training programs.

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1. Introduction

Teachers’ language knowledge and skills are the key features of successful foreign language teaching. No matter where and who you teach, if you want to enjoy teaching and feel satisfied with your job, you have to be professional in the true sense of the word, and make foreign language learning a pleasure for your students. Investigations into knowledge and skills are important, in that, an EFL teacher’s knowledge and skills can act as a strong incentive or

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disincentive to language learners. Your linguistic knowledge empowered by your distinctive skills is the first thing that captures learners’ attention, the point from which they may decide whether language learning is worth trying or not. This makes teachers’ knowledge of language and skills a crucial step in teaching foreign languages. If only language knowledge mattered in teaching a foreign language, it would be of little help to teachers, because it would not be sufficient to handle an EFL class effectively. Furthermore, if teachers do not enjoy the required skills of teaching, they cannot put their knowledge into practice.

In the mid twentieth century, research on foreign languages basically relied on teaching methodologies, approaches, and procedures because at that time the advent of diverse schools of thought led to the emergence of new teaching methods with unique characteristics and benefits that made the method popular for some time. However, in the last decades, there has been a growing interest in teachers’ knowledge and skills (Shulman, 1987; Fawns & Nance, 1993; Webb & Blond, 1995; Barnes, 1996; Kenny, 1996; Richardson, 1997; Brown, 2001; Banegas, 2009). Even some researchers, for instance Medgyes (1994), investigated the differences between native and non-native teachers’ knowledge and skills and stated that non-native teachers are well aware of their linguistic deficiencies. Other researchers (Day, 1993; Ur, 1997; Fradd & Lee, 1998; Freeman, 2002; Rahimi, 2008) explored the role of knowledge in teacher education and offered a great deal of preparation programs and materials to enhance student teachers’ knowledge and skills. For example, Rahimi (2008) divided the teaching preparation program into three components of language, science, and practicum which dealt with language proficiency, specialized knowledge and pedagogy, and teaching skills, respectively.

Whether it is true or a misconception, there is currently a perception that language teachers in Iran, especially at guidance schools are not as proficient as is desirable. Furthermore, because of the rapid growth of the field of language teaching and the ever growing teaching aids and materials, merely belonging to the teaching profession does not mean that you are really a professional. As a matter of fact, a good language teacher is assumed to have a number of qualifications (Girard, 1977; Christison & Bassano, 1984; Prodomou, 1991; Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2001). According to Brown (2001), numerous experts have come up with different lists of attributes some of which contain a good deal of grist for the professional growth mills. He offers a self-check list containing a wide range of technical knowledge and skills dealing with different aspects of teaching that can be beneficial to language teachers especially at guidance schools and helps them apprehend their strengths and weaknesses.

Contemporary studies on language knowledge have focused, especially, on the differences between native teachers of foreign languages and non-native teachers, and they have made generous contribution to the teaching profession. But none of these studies dealt with teachers’ perception of their own knowledge and skills at schools or language institutes. Different institutions have distinct teaching aims and conventions (determined by different academic settings, authors, audiences, policy makers, etc.) which have a large impact on language teaching and learning. For example, institute teachers are required to follow the guidelines, strategies, and techniques that are set forth by the language institutes which are usually defined according to the teachers’ guidebooks of different popular language learning series as the essential prerequisite for teaching, whereas school teachers who, except their English textbook, are not equipped with any useful teaching resources, put the theories they have learned during their pre-service programs into practice by trial and error. Therefore, school teachers, despite hard work and great time and energy they devote to teaching, due to lack of support are rarely satisfied with their jobs.

It is proved that in no area of English-language proficiency can non-native teachers emulate the natives (Medgyes, 1994). But they stand a better chance of sensitizing their students to the employment of strategies than the native teachers. However, the knowledge diversity within the non-native teachers has not been explored in the existing literature. Therefore, this study aims to address school and institute teachers inspecting the characteristics commonly found in each group to see if they meet the important requirements of good language teaching. Hopefully, this study may help pre- and in-service teachers, syllabus and curriculum designers, and those who wish to help teachers grow in their profession. The following questions, targeting teachers’ language knowledge and skills, are thus posed in this study:

1. Do junior high school and language institute teachers differ in terms of their language knowledge?
2. Are language institute teachers more skillful than junior high school teachers?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Forty English teachers from different cities in Khuzestan (a province in Iran) participated in this study. Four groups were considered for this research which comprised 20 school teachers with the average age of 34, and 20 language institute teachers with the average age of 31 (equal number of each gender was selected) all of whom were teachers holding a Bachelor's Degree. To ensure uniformity all other university degrees (13 emails from Master's and Associate's Degree holders) were excluded from the study.

2.2. Instruments

To assess teachers, the checklist of Good Language Teaching characteristics developed by Brown (2001, p. 430), and the teacher self-observation form (Christison & Bassano, 1984) were used, which are rich with items covering a wide range of abilities. Participants rated themselves on a scale of 1 – 4 (1= unsatisfactory, 2= average, 3= above average, and 4= excellent). A comparison was made between school and institute teachers to arrive at their perceived level of knowledge and skills. According to Brown (2001), the good language teacher is defined by technical knowledge (6 items), pedagogical and interpersonal skills (12 and 7 items, respectively), and personal qualities (5 items). The second questionnaire consisted the following categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning environment</th>
<th>The individual</th>
<th>The activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to students</td>
<td>Physical health</td>
<td>Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 items)</td>
<td>(6 items)</td>
<td>(7 items)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The classroom (3 items)</td>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation (7 items)</td>
<td>Aptitude and perception (3 items)</td>
<td>(5 items)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and adjustments</td>
<td>Reinforcement (4 items)</td>
<td>(3 items)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3 items)</td>
<td>Development (3 items)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.3. Procedure

The qualitative method of data collection was utilized through sending the questionnaires via emails to more than 100 school and institute teachers who were asked to fill in and send the questionnaires back, and in case they did not mind, they were demanded to forward the questionnaire to any other teacher they knew. Four groups were considered which consisted of male/female school teachers, and male/female language institute teachers (equal number of each group and gender was selected). Only 86 emails were answered and in order to have a random sampling the first 10 emails of each group were chosen for the study. Teachers’ self-rates of different items and categories were calculated and percentages were derived to arrive at the similarity and differences of the groups.

3. Results

After analyzing the questionnaires, it became evident that institute teachers claimed to possess 86.58 percent of the Good Language Teachers characteristics of Brown’s checklist, while school teachers only reported 66.41 percent of the required knowledge and skills (Table 2).
Table 2. Teachers’ total self-rate percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Teachers</td>
<td>66.41</td>
<td>77.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute Teachers</td>
<td>86.58</td>
<td>88.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These results were in line with the results of the self-observation form (Christison & Bassano, 1984) in which institute teachers claimed to consider all aspects of the learning environment, language and activities by 88.64 percent in their teaching; whereas school teachers’ total percentage was 77.36. As a whole; institute teachers in both cases perceived themselves as better language teachers who are committed to most aspects of language teaching and learning. However, there were more items in which school teachers rated higher than institute teachers compared to Brown’s questionnaire. Teachers’ self-rates based to Brown’s (2001) checklist are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Teachers’ self-rate of the good language teaching characteristics (Brown, 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Technical Knowledge (%)</th>
<th>Pedagogical Skills (%)</th>
<th>Interpersonal Skills (%)</th>
<th>Personal Qualities (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>67.08</td>
<td>53.95</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>75.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60.41</td>
<td>56.45</td>
<td>82.14</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>63.75</td>
<td>55.20</td>
<td>82.32</td>
<td>74.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91.66</td>
<td>82.91</td>
<td>90.35</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>88.33</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>86.42</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>82.70</td>
<td>87.5</td>
<td>89.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen, in most instances, the institute teachers rated themselves higher than school teachers. School teachers tended to rate themselves by the second scale that is “average” more than other scales, while institute teachers chose “more than average” and “excellent” for most of the items. In all categories institute teachers rated higher than school teachers. In terms of technical knowledge, school teachers’ score was 63.75, while institute teachers’ total score was 90 percent. In the technical knowledge category, in all cases, institute teachers rated themselves higher than school teachers except in the following item where male school teachers had the highest self-rate.

- “Knowing from experience what it is like to learn a foreign language.”

A key feature in the scholarship of teaching is having an understanding of how people learn, knowing what practices are more effective and having knowledge about what we have learned about teaching (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010). It seems that, male school teachers are more concerned about this matter than other teachers. These results both confirm (in the case of school teachers) and contradict (in the case of institute teachers) Medgyes’ (1994) findings where non-native teachers were found to have problems in speaking, fluency, pronunciation, and listening. There was a great difference between the institute and school teachers’ rate in these items:

- “Having fluent competence in speaking, writing, listening to, and reading English.”
- “Keeping up with the field through regular reading and conference or workshop attendance.”
Considering the pedagogical skills, 55.20 percent was the school teachers’ perceived pedagogical skill, and 82.70 was the institute teachers’ pedagogical skills self-rate. In this category, institute teachers again rated themselves higher than school teachers, especially in this item:

- “Effectively design and execute lesson plan.”

An interesting result was that most of the male school teachers didn’t use any lesson plans at all while having a lesson plan is obligatory at schools but not at institutes. In both groups of teachers, most of the teachers didn’t bother to adapt textbook materials and other audio, visual, and mechanical aids. Despite the fact that using and adapting textbooks is an important part of teaching, teachers didn’t create brand-new materials when needed. They were also less likely to use interactive, intrinsically motivating techniques to create effective tests.

With regard to the interpersonal skills section, school and institute teachers’ rates were somehow close with 82.32 and 87.5 percent, respectively. The difference lies in the fact that school teachers’ self-rate was less than institute teachers in the two final items, which shows that, school teachers have less cooperation with their colleagues, and less than institute teachers seek opportunities to share thoughts, ideas, and techniques with them. However, all school teachers chose the final rate (e.g. excellent) for the item on valuing students’ opinions and abilities.

As for the personal qualities, the institute teachers with 89.25 percent of language knowledge and skills were again higher than school teachers with 74.25 percent. This category included items on being well-organized and flexible, having inquisitive mind in trying out new ways of teaching, maintaining high ethical and moral standards, and setting goals for continued professional growth. Medgyes (1994) argues that a successful teacher is by definition a successful learner. Apparently the reason underlying the success of institute teachers is that they constantly try to learn new things about the language because, in this category, the ratings were to some extent the same in all items except in the following item in which institute teachers were more willing to progress in their field.

- “Set short-term and long-term goals for continued professional growth.”

With regard to the second questionnaire, the “Learning Environment” category included the subcategories of “relationship to students, classroom, presentation, and culture and adjustment”. In terms of the relationship to students 87.81 and 94.25 were the perceived skills percentages of school and institute teachers, respectively (Table 4). Institute teachers used more group work. According to Medgyes’ (1994), group and pair work often create unpredictable situations full of linguistic traps, therefore, non-native teachers favor more secure forms of class work, and adopt a more controlled and cautious pedagogic approach. This finding is line with the results of the present study regarding school teachers while institute teachers made their best to be more native like.
Table 4. Teachers’ self-rate of the self-observation form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Learning Environment (%)</th>
<th>The Individual (%)</th>
<th>The Activity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Teachers</td>
<td>86.40</td>
<td>89.21</td>
<td>87.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>72.63</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>75.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>67.91</td>
<td>66.25</td>
<td>67.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institute Teachers</td>
<td>90.93</td>
<td>91.56</td>
<td>94.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>90.26</td>
<td>88.15</td>
<td>87.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>87.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More importantly, institute teachers were more inclined to arrange seating in the class to suit the class activity for the day and set the teaching materials or equipments before the class begins. It seems that institute teachers tend to use a more learner centered approach with various arrangements while school teachers due to different reasons stick with the same arrangement.

The third subcategory, i.e. “Presentation”, was the only section in which school teachers’ ratings were higher than institute teachers. School teachers were more concerned about these items:

- “I am prepared to give a variety of explanations, models, or descriptions for all students.”
- “I help students form principles and generalizations.”
- “I plan for thinking time for my students so they can organize their thoughts and plan what they are going to say and do.”

In the second category of Christison’s and Bassano’s questionnaire which deals with items covering “physical health”, “self-concept”, “aptitude and perception”, “reinforcement”, and “development”, once again institute teachers rated better than school teachers with 89.21 and 75.06 rates, respectively. But in items like the following, school teachers rated much higher than institute teachers.

- “I’m aware that a student’s attention span varies from day to day, depending on mental and physical health and outside distractions. I pace my class activities to accommodate the strengths. I don’t continue with an activity that may exhaust or bore them.”
- “I know which students have visual or aural impairments and seat them as close to my usual teaching positions as possible.”
- “I speak loudly enough to be heard in all parts of the classroom, and I enunciate clearly.”

After analyzing the three items of the “Development” subcategory, it became evident that there was a great difference between school and institute teachers. Similar to what was found in Brown’s questionnaire, school teachers were less willing than institute teachers to keep up to date on new techniques in the ESL profession by attending conferences and workshops and by reading pertinent professional articles and books. Besides, they observed other ESL teachers less than institute teachers. While institute teachers were found to be more interested in observing others and getting several new ideas for teaching one concept.

The sum of the rates in the third category which covers the activities in the classroom with the two subcategories of “interaction” and “language” showed a greater difference between school and institute teachers. Institute teachers leave more room for error to make the activity more interesting and choose appropriate amount of correction, and try to maximize involvement, spontaneity, or experimentation on the part of the learner. They also tried to organize the activities to encourage real interactions among students. School teachers’ score, on the other hand, was in line with
Medgyes’ (1994) finding where non-native teachers are believed to be more notorious for penalizing errors probably because they regard English primarily as a school subject to be mastered and only secondarily as a medium of genuine communication. Institute teachers tried more to be native-like, and cared more about interaction and communication and ignored errors in most instances, in spite of the fact that their classes and books were more challenging and led to more errors than school teachers’ books and classrooms.

According to the findings of the present study, in terms of male/female analysis, as can be seen in tables 3 and 4, the results of Brown’s good language teaching characteristics questionnaire showed that in both language institutes and junior high schools, male English teachers’ self-rate was higher than females, whereas based on Christison’s and Bassano’s self-observation form which covered a wider range of skills this superiority was evident in institute teachers’ self-reports but not the school teachers. At schools, female teachers’ surpassed males in most cases.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating teachers’ knowledge and skills. Results of self-reports showed that school teachers have a lot of strengths but institute teachers try more to be knowledgeable, skillful, and consequently good language teachers. Schulman (1987) stated that “Good” teaching is hard to define and describe and there will always be room for discovering, reflecting and refining one’s teaching. Teachers should consider themselves as ‘scholars’ who should possess ‘scholarship’ in all these categories in order to be classified as ‘effective’. It seems that institute teachers try their best to be scholars and effective language teachers, as they looked more for opportunities to increase their knowledge of language and skills in different ways. Professional teachers, according to Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2010), focus on change. They develop their practice through a cycle of action, reflection and improvement. This is a finding which is in line with the findings of the present study regarding institute teachers.

Since the purpose of learning English is mainly an attempt to communicate with individuals, effective language teaching is based on communication and aims at developing students’ ability to communicate with people in a new language in real world situations (Brown, 1987; Ommagio, 1986; Oxford, 1990; Widdowson, 1978). Speaking is perhaps the most important, yet the most complex and challenging skill in language learning, especially in language institutes where speaking English in the classroom is considered a requirement for teachers. They, therefore, feel the need to enhance their language proficiency to suit the demands of their language institutes which in turn provides the grounds for more interest and motivation on the part of the learners. In such a way, they can build a good reputation and establish credibility in their institutes. On the contrary, there’s no such pressure on school teachers in terms of using the language in the classroom and the social component of language seems to be missing there. As Arsene (2010) pointed out, researchers are still unable to point out the teaching behaviors that are unequivocally conducive to learning outcomes. As a result, effective teaching means different things to different people. But, a positive teaching behavior that was observed in this study was that language institute teachers take their jobs more seriously and feel compelled to enhance their language knowledge and teaching skills.

Assessment which has always been an integral part of any teaching context has a decisive effect on the teaching process. Because of the importance of assessment in the educational system and the backwash effect of tests, much more time is devoted to the aspects of the language that improve students’ exam-taking strategies which, as a result, encourages the negative surface approach to learning (Biggs, 1996); hence, language is merely dealt with as a school subject rather than the combination of essential language skills that should be mastered in order to be a successful foreign language learner. Institute teachers, on the other hand, are not too concerned about exams and what really matters to them is the real use of language, i.e. communication. Therefore, the first crucial step which fortunately has commenced in the primary levels of education is to change the system of assessment so that teachers are not forced to sign contracts with the school principals for the outcome they are expected to have at the end of the academic year! A negative aspect of restricting the teaching process to successful passing of tests is that teachers might not feel the need to keep up with their field or try to enhance their knowledge, because experience would suffice and the primary aims of language learning would be consigned to oblivion.
Another important facet of our educational system is the kinds of textbooks used at school levels. Textbook evaluation and design has turned into a very important area in teaching English (Shatery & Azargoan, 2012). In this regard, a plethora of checklists each comprising a set of categories has been developed to evaluate the appropriateness of textbooks for a particular teaching-learning situation (e.g., Sheldon, 1988; Skierso, 1991). As a whole, a number of studies (Shahedi, 2001; Ansary & Babaii, 2002; Yarmohammadi, 2002; Jahangard, 2007; Darali, 2007; Azizifar, 2009) which have evaluated the school textbooks at different levels in Iran imply that school textbooks should contain more demanding and practical lessons that motivate teachers to effectively enhance their language knowledge and skills. Azizifar (2009) stated that the textbooks used in Iran do not meet the learners’ and teachers’ needs because they still emphasize structural methods and ignore the communicative role of language.

Contrary to schools, language institutes are equipped with imported EFL textbooks that are accompanied by CDs, teacher’s guidebooks and other resources. They define the work of the foreign language teacher according to a specific theoretical and practical basis and make explicit the elements of high-quality, effective teaching that will improve students’ language learning. According to Golpour (2012), the junior high school English textbook series in Iran lacks a valuable workbook, CD, and teaching based tests. The framework through which teachers’ knowledge, skills, and other requirements of language teaching are made clear seems to be missing in our educational system and, unfortunately, teachers are not supported in this regard.

The opportunity to enhance teachers’ language knowledge and skills, through different motivational programs and application of new strategies and techniques in managing teacher training courses by experienced experts in the field of teaching must be part of every in-service teacher training program in the education department. Activities that promote such courses include discovering teachers’ weak points, classifying their linguistic and technical needs, analyzing the classes, and enhancing teachers’ awareness regarding different aspects of their profession. In this fashion, the in-service teacher training programs would be more fruitful.

Finally, teacher training colleges and departments of foreign languages at universities should highlight the importance of enhancing teachers’ knowledge and skills. They should be aware of the fact that even after graduation, learning has to be present in all stages of their professional life. As a member of the large teaching community, each teacher should feel responsible to have a share in the improvement of his profession. Teacher education is a relatively unexplored field in both second and foreign language teaching. The literature on teacher education in language teaching is slight. Therefore, a thorough and detailed understanding of the teachers’ required language knowledge and skills is indispensable, because novice teachers might have a lot of challenges to face in their classes once they start their professional lives. The findings of this study relied on teachers’ self-reports of their abilities. The biggest problem with self-report inventories is in their validity because participants might exaggerate their qualifications in order to seem more knowledgeable and skillful. For this reason, it is suggested that other researchers, use the self-report inventories along with more valid data collection methods. For instance, if researchers have the opportunity to devote considerable amount of time to replicate this research, participants can take tests or be observed in their real classes by experts in this field. Moreover, this study covered a limited number of school and institute teachers. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized and projected onto other school or institute teachers.

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