The investigation of instructors’ attitudes with respect to formal verses informal English teaching/learning contexts in Hamedan province

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Abstract

There are two important poles in Iranian English language contexts: schools or universities (formal contexts) and Language Teaching Institutes (informal contexts). The difference of contexts entails different teaching methods, different attitudes and different students’ needs. Teachers interact differently with these situations to meet these needs because their attitudes toward ELT contexts is not the same; some teachers are more experienced than others, some hold higher academic degrees, in addition, teachers may have been graduated from different universities, i.e., Islamic Azad and state-run universities. What may be the influence of these criteria on their attitudes toward teaching? Do these criteria contribute to their choice of teaching method and class activities in formal and informal teaching contexts? This investigation aims at designating differences among formal and informal language teaching contexts as well as teachers’ perceptions of their roles and practices in these contexts.

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1. Introduction

In countries where people need to learn English as a foreign language the demands of English learners as well as policy makers play a crucial role in creating the appropriate context of English language teaching (ELT) the most familiar of which is known as ‘formal context’.

While the instructional demand is the priori force of learning, English is assumed as a subject to be studied in schools mainly for the purpose of getting a good mark. Out of school there are large numbers of students in institutions of higher and further education who are learning English for a variety of purposes. The common features of formal contexts are: authorities determine the formal situation, teachers are the true implementers of the curriculum, there is no account of context and culture in them, all the students are treated the same and they are of a heterogeneous level of English proficiency, the class is completely at the control of the teacher, and the students don’t take part in conducting the class very much. Other institutions are run taking advantage of an informal context. In this context the learners are nearly homogenous, policy makers do not prescribe the materials, teachers almost

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always talk in English, the students take part in teaching and learning procedures, and teachers use materials recognized around the world in most cases.

Knowing about the learning context is vital to the teachers; so, they need to know the key aspects of this concept before making any decisions on how to teach. This includes coming into grips with a deep understanding of individual students, their learning needs and idiosyncrasies, the course books, local conditions, the classroom culture, national culture, and so on. Then, based on the context, teachers will be able to decide on the congruent teaching method strategy.

The assumption of present paper is that teachers might show different attitudes towards teaching in these contexts. To the authors’ knowledge, this issue has been neglected in former studies carried out on teaching-learning studies up to now. In spite of the other studies which have focused on such issues as teaching-learning, learners’ attitudes, and public school contexts, this investigation is focused on teachers’ attitudes toward teaching in formal and informal contexts which is quite a different viewpoint.

2. Background

From Triandis (1972, p.60) point of view attitude is “an idea charged with emotion which predisposes a class of actions to a particular class of social situations or contexts.” Attitude is divided into three components by Rosenberg and Hovand (1960): cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Based on their model an individual attitude causes an emotional response which leads to the predisposition of an action. Ballachy (1962) describes attitude as an enduring system which contains positive or negative evaluations, emotions, and pro or con actions as well as tendencies with respect to different contexts and situations of learning. According to Larsen Freeman (1989) teachers’ knowledge, skill and attitude can be related through awareness. She defines awareness as the capacity through which the attention given to someone or the attention given by someone to something, can be recognized and controlled. Thus, when an individual is aware of a situation or context, he or she will be able to act on or respond to that situation or context properly. The implication of the above discussion is that one must be aware of the aspects (knowledge, Skill, and behavior) of teaching/learning which require attention in order to be modified professionally for achieving the utmost results in benefit of the students in those situations.

Kennedy (1996) discussed the connections which exist between actions or teaching behaviors and beliefs in different contexts. They believed that personal beliefs might ultimately affect or change a teachers’ behavior. According to them, teaching behavior or actions may be connected to beliefs about the contexts and teaching situations. Based on their study, beliefs orient attitudes and positive attitudes are valued and effective just in context and teaching/learning situations. It has been claimed that teachers’ beliefs on their abilities to teach students and even the beliefs on their abilities to influence the students’ performance will be crucial factors if we care about instructional effectiveness (Bandura, 1977). He suggested that beliefs and the effect of expectations of individuals determine their choices of the classroom activities, their efforts, and persistence. Other studies have claimed that efficacy beliefs affect teacher activity, effort and productivity differently in different contexts of teaching/learning (Ashton and Webb, 1986). Teachers try to achieve the objectives of teaching by applying appropriate learning strategies and they can influence students’ learning by controlling the contexts of learning and confidence that they have in their abilities which have resulted from their beliefs and expectations towards the learning settings with regards to their culture.

Moreover, they reported that cultural and social backgrounds as well as features of some teaching programs influence efficacy of beliefs and learning different materials. They showed that the context of teaching/learning influence the efficacy of beliefs of the students as well as teachers.

According to Hadley (2003), learners must eventually know how to use the language in authentic communication situations. He continues saying that this aim will be achieved if the forms of language are presented and practiced in communicative contexts. Communicative contexts are those in which the focus is on meaning and content. Of course the concept of contextualized language learning is not new. Widdowson (1978), has pointed out that
communication is not producing separate sentences, but is using those sentences to create discourse. Based on this theoretical point of view, one can assume that context will certainly affect the teaching and learning process. Context was an independent variable for this study, thus it seems worthy to have a look at its features, essentials of teaching/learning, and teachers’ attitudes about it in Iran.

Lightbown and Spade (1999) characterized three types of settings (contexts) in language acquisition or learning. These three types are natural acquisition context, traditional instructional context (formal context), and communicative instructional context (informal context). Based on the types of settings (contexts) which were introduced by Lightbown and Spada (1999), the Iranian classrooms can be compared to one of these three contexts. Because English is not a foreign language in Iran, there is no palace for learners to speak out of classroom; therefore, the first type of context mentioned above would not be seen in Iran. Iranian language contexts were characterized as schools and institutions. In this study it is assumed that formal context exists in schools and universities and informal one in private language institutes. By a simple comparison, one can find out that the characteristic of Iranian formal contexts are similar to those that Lightbown and Spada (1999) describe as traditional context. In other words, formal contexts in are mostly conducted according to the structure-based approach of teaching. Another point to be mentioned here is that informal contexts in Iran are conducted according to the communicative approach. Structure-based approaches emphasize language form through either metalinguistic instruction (for example, grammar translation) or pattern practice (for example, audio-lingual). This is exactly what one can see in Iranian schools. Although some characteristics of structure-based approaches seem to exist in Iranian informal contexts, these language teaching centres benefit most from the tenets of communicative approaches.

With increasing interest in learning English in Iran it is necessary to know different contexts of teaching/learning because better instruction depends much on the context where teaching/learning happens, something which is the subject of the present paper.

3. Design and procedure

In order to elicit the teaching attitudes of teachers 187 teachers who worked both in formal and informal contexts were selected then the teacher questionnaires were administered. Teacher questionnaire made it clear whether teachers have the same perceptions in the two contexts or not. In addition, teacher questionnaire depicted how teachers perceived the students in the contexts under investigation and implicitly it showed how teachers perceived the English courses they thought in these contexts. The different steps of statistical analyses were conducted on the data collected through the teacher questionnaire (using SPSS 12.0 software). Finally descriptive analyses were done on the collected data.

4. Data analysis and Conclusion

By doing data analysis it was revealed that subjects showed different attitudes towards their students in formal and informal contexts. Based on these differences students in different contexts seem to be treated differently due to different attitudes of the teachers. The analyses of the data also showed that the subjects’ attitudes both towards their courses and students, were not influenced by their university degrees (MA/BA), and their level of experience. It seems worthy to note that the gender of subjects (male, female) did not have any influence on their attitudes. According to data analysis, it cannot be said for sure that teachers’ attitude is without exception a determining factor for all kinds of activities done in formal and informal contexts. In other words, although in most cases the teachers’ attitudes led them to do different activities in both contexts, some activities were not context-dependent and were the same in the two contexts. For example, reading texts for language analysis, planning exam answers (e.g., analyzing
questions, and organizing answers), and working on the etymology (suffix, prefix, and root) were the activities which showed no differences in schools and English institutes. Other results showed that the activities of male subjects were different from female ones in doing language games, working in groups, writing short passages in class, listening to others, doing projects and taking part in role plays. This investigation introduced the context of teaching as an important factor which influenced the teacher's attitudes toward their courses and their students attending those courses. Moreover, teachers' activities compared in terms of their degrees (MA, BA) showed no differences except for doing informal unassisted tests. A significant difference in doing this activity was reported between teachers with MA and teachers with BA degrees. According to this investigation, in reading texts for language analysis and doing reading comprehension activities, there were differences among low, medium, and high experience teachers.

5. Implication for teaching methodology and syllabus design

The results of this study can help teachers adjust their methods of teaching to the context. When teachers find their teaching context, their courses, and their students different, it will no longer be reasonable for them to use just one method of teaching. They have two options, first to adjust themselves to differences between school and English institution contexts in order to gain similar attitudes towards those contexts and to introduce one method for both environments which seems very difficult to do because schools are state-run and English institutions are mostly administered by private or personal departments. The second choice is to accept these contexts as two separate entities with different needs and try to introduce their methods based on the learners' needs. Syllabus designers should prepare teaching materials in such a way as to increase the teacher's motivation in teaching processes; teachers, in turn, should take into account their attitude toward the context while choosing the course books and texts and select the congruent material designed for formal or informal teaching contexts.

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