

Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions and Beliefs about Their English Teachers: A Psycholinguistic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perceptions and beliefs concerning their English teachers. Through a mixed-methods research design and using descriptive statistics, 146 Iranian adult EFL learners were probed on different aspects of their interaction with English teachers. In addition, their objectives as language learners were investigated to discern how their perceptions and beliefs could be related to the learning goals they aimed at. The findings revealed that the participants generally believed English teachers were not competent enough as language users and the teaching materials they used, were not appropriate. Concerning the relation between EFL learners' beliefs and their learning objectives, the findings indicated that communicative, occupational and academic objectives for male participants and communicative, cultural and academic objectives for female participants were the three most important learning goals they had. It is recommended that EFL teachers direct their focus of teaching to more communicative language teaching approaches. This way, in addition to fulfilling their learners' primary objective, they are better able to create an interesting, diverse atmosphere in language classrooms. Such learning environment may also serve as a solution to the learners' lack of motivation and their perception of language class as a boring place.

Keywords: Iranian EFL learners; Learners' perception and beliefs; English teachers; affective variables

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research on affective variables and the role of individual learners in language learning and teaching (Abdolazadeh & Rajaei Nia, 2014). Such studies have produced invaluable insights for language teachers and material developers. For example, it is generally agreed upon that EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs have a profound impact on their learning styles and their interaction with English teachers (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005).

An EFL learner, for example, who believes language learning is mainly a matter of reading and translation, expects a teaching method which is based on such skills and will not interact successfully with a teacher who follows a communicative language approach (see White, 1999). Therefore, as Horwitz (1988, p. 283) indicates gaining insight into learners' perceptions and beliefs help EFL teachers learn about their students' "expectations of,

commitment to, success in and satisfaction with their language classes". This, in turn, paves the ground for teachers to make informed choices and develop a fine-tuned curriculum for EFL learners (Reiger, 2009).

In SLA research, learners' beliefs and perceptions are most often associated with learner metacognition, and metacognitive knowledge (Abdolazadeh & Rajaei Nia, 2014). Wenden (1999), however, makes a distinction between beliefs and metacognitive knowledge, asserting that beliefs are "value-related and tend to be held more tenaciously" (p. 439). Within an EFL or ESL context, learners' beliefs (or rather metacognitive knowledge) entail "the common assumptions that learners hold about themselves as learners, about the nature of language learning, the learning process, variables influencing their learning" (Öz, 2007, p. 54). Therefore, it is of primary importance for teachers to take such assumptions into account.

To date, research on learners' perceptions and beliefs has mainly focused on learners' metacognition and strategy use (as mentioned above). Therefore, learners' beliefs about their English teachers is an area which needs further research. Moreover, the present study, takes EFL learners into account as its participants.

Therefore, the findings can be of interest to teacher educators and curriculum developers to see how learners of English may be different from or similar to other samples of learners.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study, through a mixed-methods research design and using descriptive statistics, explored a sample of Iranian EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs regarding their English teachers. Using a survey as the data collection tool, learners were probed on different aspects of their interaction with their English teachers.

In addition, as a part of the survey, their goals and objectives as language learners were investigated to discern how their perceptions and beliefs could be related to the learning goals they aimed at. The present study is a part of a larger research project which in addition to learners' beliefs about their English teachers investigated their self-concepts.

The findings on self-concepts are to be reported in near future. Two research questions guided the study:

1. What are EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs regarding their English teachers?
2. How are these perceptions and beliefs related to their learning objectives?

2. 1. Participants

The participants of the study were 146 EFL learners at an Iranian language institute (see Table 1). They included 68 males and 78 females. They were all young adult learners and had almost at the same age (average age = 21.5). Prior to the study, to select the final participants, English records of 293 students in University Entrance Examination (UEE) were taken into account and those students who could achieve a mid-band score of 45-65 were identified.

Afterward, using Oxford Placement Test (OPT), their current level of language proficiency was determined. Following this test, those learners who had fallen into the category of 'intermediate' were labeled as final participants.

Table 1. Participants of the study.

| Total Number | Age | OPT level | UEE score |
|-----------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------|
| 146 | 21.5 | intermediate | 45-65 |
| First language | Foreign language | Gender | Occupation |
| Persian | English | 68 m, 78 f | student |

2. 2. Material & Instruments

To gain insight into the participants' perceptions and beliefs about their English teachers, the researcher composed a survey. Using a survey seemed appropriate because as Mackay and Gass (2005) points out: "The survey, typically in the form of a questionnaire, is one of the most common methods of collecting data on attitudes and opinions.... Questionnaires allow the researchers to gather information that learners are able to report about themselves, such as their beliefs and motivations about learning or their reactions to learning and instruction and activities- information that is typically not available production data alone."

The survey included a part on EFL learners' participants in which the participants were asked to identify their learning goals as language learners based on five general themes of a) occupational; b) communicative; c) academic; d) cultural and e) recreational. The second part of the survey, focused on the primary purpose of the study which was EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs about their English teachers. This part contained 12 general themes which probed various aspects of learner-teacher interaction and learners' attitudes and perceptions.

2. 3. Procedure

First of all, the participants were sufficiently informed of the scope of research. It was clarified that their participation in the study was voluntary and a decision to leave the study would not result in any penalty or would not affect their relationship with their teachers at the institute. After this oral consent, the survey sheets were distributed among the participants during their regular class time. There was no time limit. Nevertheless, it took about half an hour for the participants to hand in the sheets.

2. 4. Data Analysis

After collecting the participants' answers through the survey, the researcher analyzed the collected data based on a number of qualitative themes to draw significant patterns of the learners' perceptions and beliefs. As for the second part of the survey, the participants' answers were first categorized based on three scales of agreement, undecidedness and disagreement and, then, further analysis was exercised. Moreover, the data was also scrutinized based on the participants' gender. To simplify the interpretation of the data, descriptive statistics were also used.

3. RESULTS

3. 1. Part One: EFL Learners' Learning Objectives

As Figure 1 indicates, communicative objective (89.5 %) is the most important learning goal for the participants. This objective is followed by cultural, occupational, academic and recreational objectives respectively (75.5 %, 71.5 %, 64 % and 29.5 %).

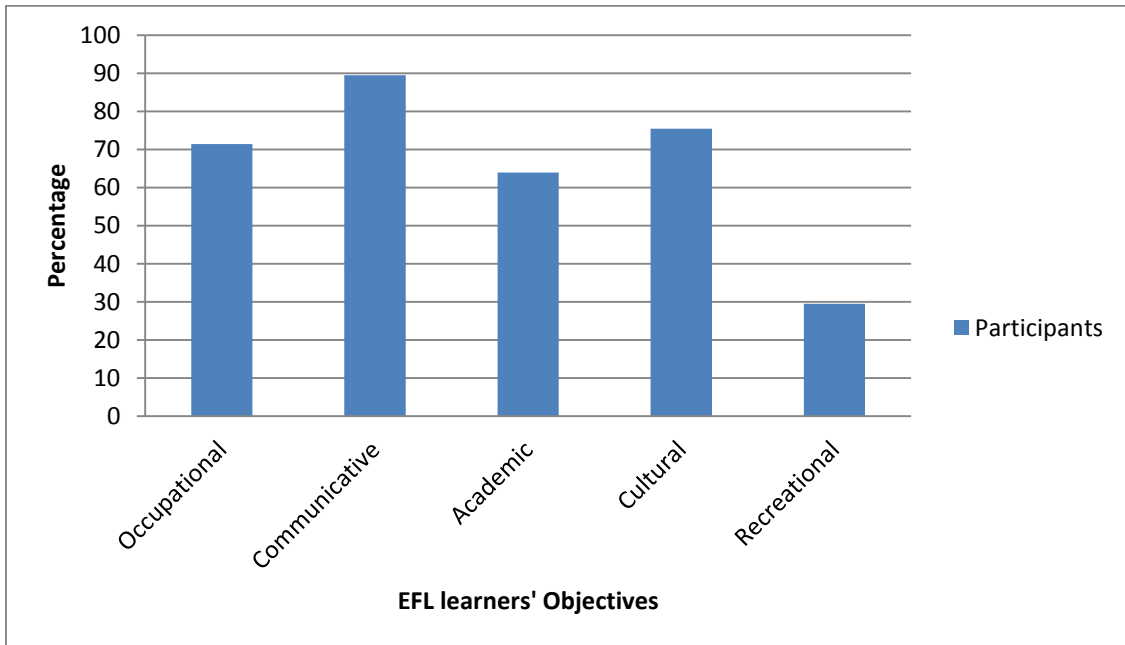


Figure 1. EFL learners' learning objectives.

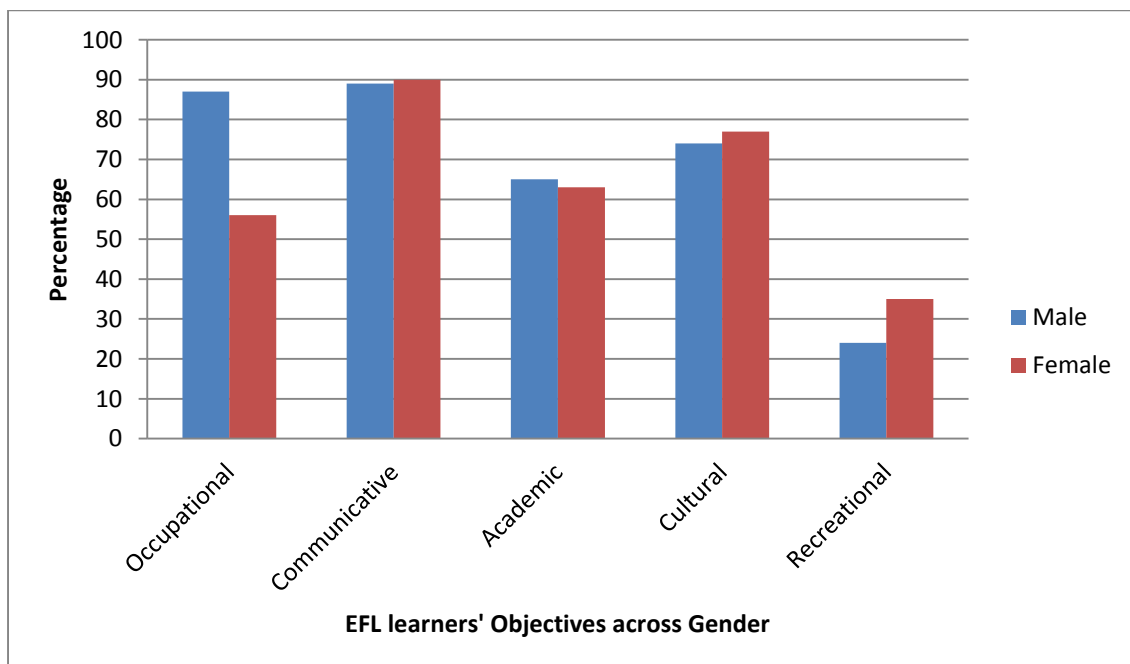


Figure 2. EFL learners' learning objectives across gender.

The researcher was also interested to know whether or not the observed pattern of objectives held true across gender. Thus, the data was also analyzed with respect to two groups of male and female participants. As Figure 2 shows, gender does not seem a decisive factor for communicative, academic, cultural and recreational objectives. For the occupational objective, however, it seems male participants tended to be more interested (87 % males vs. 56 % females).

3. 2. Part 2: EFL Learners' Perception of Their English Teachers

After having looked into the participants' learning objectives, the data was analyzed to see how, based on such observed incentives, the participants perceived about their English teachers. As a part of data analysis, the twelve themes used to elicit answers from the participants in the second part of the survey, were classified into two categories of a) teaching themes, and b) affective themes. The data was then, analyzed accordingly. As shown in Table 2, the participants' perceptions and beliefs about their teachers' teaching skills and strategies are not positive especially for items one, three and five. For these themes more than half of the participants had a negative attitude toward their English teachers (62 %, 55 %, 61 % respectively).

Table 2. EFL learners' perception of their English teachers: Teaching themes.

| Item | Teaching themes | Agreement | Undecidedness | Disagreement |
|------|---------------------------------|-----------|---------------|--------------|
| 1 | language proficiency | 28 | 10 | 62 |
| 2 | provision of materials | 44 | 7 | 49 |
| 3 | assignment of homework | 28 | 17 | 55 |
| 4 | use of textbooks | 54 | 20 | 26 |
| 5 | use of learning activities | 26 | 13 | 61 |
| 6 | involvement in learning process | 46 | 16 | 38 |

Table 3. EFL learners' perception of their English teachers: Affective themes.

| Item | Affective themes | Agreement | Undecidedness | Disagreement |
|------|---------------------------------|-----------|---------------|--------------|
| 1 | hard on students | 20 | 12 | 68 |
| 2 | not sociable & friendly | 32 | 10 | 58 |
| 3 | boring atmosphere | 87 | 5 | 8 |
| 4 | heedless of students feelings | 56 | 11 | 33 |
| 5 | not energetic & cooperative | 49 | 9 | 42 |
| 6 | not patient to students' errors | 51 | 13 | 36 |

Regarding the affective themes, the findings revealed that a significant number of the participants felt that their learning environment was boring (87 %). In other words, in their opinion, their teachers failed to create an interesting learning atmosphere (see Table 3).

4. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

The first research question was concerned with EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs about their English teachers. The findings revealed that the participants generally believed their English teachers were not competent enough as language users and the teaching materials they used, were not appropriate. In this regard, the teaching themes: language proficiency, assignment of homework and use of learning activities were notable which indicates that, first of all, the learners do not perceive their teachers as competent speakers of English and subsequently they do not regard them as models of target language (i.e. English). This is in contrast with the traditional view of language teachers as models whom their learners should follow. As for the issue of assignment and learning activities, it seems EFL teachers need to justify their choice and amount of homework and activities for their learners. This notion is line with more recent approaches to language teaching which view learners as active participants of decisions made for language class (see also Abedini, Rahimi, & Zare-ee, 2011).

Concerning the affective themes, the participants had a better attitude on their English teachers. Nevertheless, they notably felt that their learning atmosphere (i.e. language class) was boring. While the characteristics of language classrooms are dependent on various factors that only part of which pertain to language teachers, it seems EFL teachers need to pay attention to how learners perceive and interact with their learning environment (Abdolazadeh & Rajae Nia, 2014). Surveys, as used in the present study, are helpful in this regard to find a way to EFL learners' realm of perceptions and beliefs (see Pan & Block, 2011). EFL teachers can run such surveys (either in oral or written format) on a regular basis to trace their learners' perception of the teaching and learning tasks.

Concerning the relation between EFL learners' beliefs and their learning objectives, the findings indicated that communicative, occupational and academic objectives for male participants and communicative, cultural and academic objectives for female participants were the three most important learning goals. As for the first objective (i.e. communicative), it is recommended that EFL teachers direct their focus of teaching to more communicative language teaching approaches. This way, in addition to fulfilling their learners' primary objective, teachers are better able to create an interesting, diverse atmosphere in language classrooms. Such learning environment may also serve as a solution to the learners' lack of motivation and their perception of language class as a boring place (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005).

The second common objective among male and female EFL learners in this study was academic learning goal. This priority may come from the fact that the participants were students themselves and needed English as a (university) student regularly. In this regard, it is recommended that EFL teachers expand their teaching scope to encompass their academic needs. English for academic (EAP) purposes can also be implemented for those learners who feel urgent academic needs (see Neumann & McDonough, 2014).

As any piece of research, this study was also limited in some ways. Firstly, the participants of the study came from only one language institute; interested researchers may follow the same line of research by incorporating a larger sample of participants from a more representative number of institutes. Secondly, other levels of language proficiency and age groups may be used to compare and contrast to what extent the observed results repeat

themselves. Finally, using interview as a data collection tool may be a helpful complement to gain more insights into EFL learners' perceptions and beliefs.

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Appendix 1: The survey

Here is a survey designed to evaluate your learning preferences, feelings and the kind of teacher you like as the students of English. Please follow the instructions carefully and respond to the items sincerely. Your cooperation is greatly appreciated.

Part One

Read each item carefully. Circle 'Yes' if the objective mentioned is of primary importance to you and 'No' if it is of no or secondary importance.

I would like to learn English...

- | | | | |
|----|--|-----|----|
| 1. | to promote in my profession(or to find a better job) | Yes | No |
| 2. | to be able to communicate with English speakers. | Yes | No |
| 3. | to succeed in academic courses requiring English proficiency. | Yes | No |
| 4. | to expand my knowledge of English language and culture. | Yes | No |
| 5. | to amuse myself (<i>just</i> as a hobby or pleasurable activity.) | Yes | No |

Part Two

Read each item carefully. Circle 'agree', 'not sure' or 'disagree'.

I think most English teachers...

- | | | | | |
|----|--|-------|----------|----------|
| 1. | are competent enough in English language | Agree | not sure | disagree |
|----|--|-------|----------|----------|

| | | | | |
|----|---|-------|----------|----------|
| 2. | provide appropriate learning materials | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 3. | assign enough homework to students | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 4. | use appropriate textbooks to teach in class | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 5. | Use appropriate activities to teach English | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 6. | Participate in learning tasks in class | Agree | not sure | disagree |

I think most English teachers...

| | | | | |
|-----|---|-------|----------|----------|
| 7. | are hard on their students. | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 8. | are not friendly and sociable. | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 9. | teach English in a boring manner. | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 10. | do not pay attention to students' feelings. | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 11. | are not energetic and cooperative enough | Agree | not sure | disagree |
| 12. | are not patient to students' errors. | Agree | not sure | disagree |