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## Exploring Effective Foreign Language Teaching from the Eyes of Iranian Learners: Reporting a Qualitative Interview Study

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## Exploring Effective Foreign Language Teaching from the Eyes of Iranian Learners: Reporting a Qualitative Interview Study

### Abstract

This article reports on a qualitative study of the learners' beliefs about effective foreign language teaching in an Iranian setting. A semi-structured interview covering several fundamental issues in foreign language (FL) pedagogy was conducted with 22 upper-intermediate Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Qualitative content analysis of the transcript data yielded several interesting and informative themes. Among the most prominent results of the study, mention can be made of learners' strong penchant for modern, learner-centered approaches to FL teaching such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Among the other notable themes were learners' endorsement of teachers' high proficiency and pedagogical knowledge, positive teacher personality, the integration of culture teaching in the classes, and sustaining learner interest and motivation. The results have implications for knowledge-based teacher education as well as for practicing and prospective FL teachers.

### Keywords

Effective Foreign Language Teaching, Iranian Learners, Semi-Structured Interview, Qualitative Design, Content Analysis

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## Exploring Effective Foreign Language Teaching from the Eyes of Iranian Learners: Reporting a Qualitative Interview Study

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*This article reports on a qualitative study of the learners' beliefs about effective foreign language teaching in an Iranian setting. A semi-structured interview covering several fundamental issues in foreign language (FL) pedagogy was conducted with 22 upper-intermediate Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Qualitative content analysis of the transcript data yielded several interesting and informative themes. Among the most prominent results of the study, mention can be made of learners' strong penchant for modern, learner-centered approaches to FL teaching such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Among the other notable themes were learners' endorsement of teachers' high proficiency and pedagogical knowledge, positive teacher personality, the integration of culture teaching in the classes, and sustaining learner interest and motivation. The results have implications for knowledge-based teacher education as well as for practicing and prospective FL teachers. Keywords: Effective Foreign Language Teaching, Iranian Learners, Semi-Structured Interview, Qualitative Design, Content Analysis*

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### Introduction

Every student has a natural right to get the most effective education.<sup>1</sup> Many factors influence effective education, chief amongst them are the instructional practices and actions of the teacher who is at the very centre of pedagogy. Research shows that the teacher plays an indispensable role in maximizing the efficiency of educational systems and enhancing the quality of student learning as well as the students' academic achievement (Lasley, Siedentop, & Yinger, 2006). Foreign language teaching is no exception in this regard. However, it is qualitatively different from other types of education mainly because, inter alia, the content and the means of education amount to one thing, that is, the language itself (Borg, 2006).

Compared with numerous studies done in the area of teaching effectiveness in general education, there is a dearth of studies on the characteristics of effective FL teachers (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Brosh, 1996; Park & Lee, 2006). This situation is very regrettable because in the first place, foreign language teaching lags far behind general education regarding effective teacher and teacher education. Moreover, as Park and Lee (2006) assert, until recently foreign language teaching has been scrutinized by intuitive rather than scientific approaches.

The construct of effective foreign language teaching is nothing but straightforward in the academic discussions of FL methodology. Several attempts have been made to define this construct, (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Bell, 2005; Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2009; Çelik, Arıkan, & Caner, 2013; Demiroz & Yesilyurt, 2015; Park & Lee, 2006), most of which have been of a quantitative survey type. And to the authors' knowledge few exploratory studies have been done to give a rich, contextualized description of effective FL teaching practices and almost none in the context of Iran.

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<sup>1</sup> It was decided that the terms beliefs and perceptions be used interchangeably throughout this paper, referring to learners' mental constructs, ideas which are felt to be true and stable regarding effective FL teaching practices.

The stimuli for this study first came from Borg's (2006) argument to define the characteristics of effective language teachers contextually rather than globally. Furthermore, the relative fallacy of questionnaire surveys in achieving a situated understanding of the phenomenon under study (Dorney, 2007) was another reason for undertaking this study.

On the other hand, the status quo of English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy in Iran with its teacher-centred approach (Noora, 2008) has limited opportunities for students to have their say about their expectations of a good and effective teacher. Henceforward, delving into the attributes of effective EFL teaching from the students' viewpoints in such a context can modify this transmissive model of language pedagogy and change it into a more democratic, learner-centred one. Moreover, it can function as a kind of needs analysis intended to help teachers improve the quality of their teaching in an attempt to meet their students' needs. In doing so, it is hoped that any mismatch between the beliefs of these two stakeholders regarding effective FL teaching practices in the class will be eliminated (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Brown, 2009).

## **Literature Overview**

### **Characteristics of Effective Teaching**

The concept of effective teaching has been a central point of research and debate among professionals and researchers for teacher development and evaluation across disciplines (Bell, 2005). Research has offered an abundance of definitions of an effective teacher. Clark (1993) stated that, "Obviously, the definition involves someone who can increase student knowledge, but it goes beyond this in defining an effective teacher" (p. 10). Vogt (1984) related effective teaching to the ability to provide instruction to different students of different abilities while incorporating instructional objectives and assessing the effective learning mode of the students.

Koutsoulis (2003) found 94 characteristics of effective teachers based on the beliefs and perceptions of 25 high school students in Cyprus. He classified all those 94 characteristics into three categories: human characteristics such as the ability to show understanding and teacher friendliness, communication characteristics such as the ability to communicate with students and to handle teacher-student relations and teaching and production characteristics such as making lessons interesting and motivating and teacher's subject matter knowledge.

Research into discipline-specific teaching practices and attitudes of teachers has been very scanty (Brosh, 1996; Schulz, 2001). This is partly due to the fact that every teaching and learning situation is context-bound and disciplines vary. As such, some teaching behaviours and attitudes are regarded as more relevant in one discipline compared with another. For example, lecturing may be effective in a history course but not in an elementary foreign language learning class. Therefore, while some teaching practices are considered to be effective in general across various disciplines, there are also other teaching behaviours and attitudes which can be regarded as discipline specific (Borg, 2006; Brosh, 1996; Park & Lee, 2006).

### **Effective Foreign Language Teaching**

In order to arrive at a comprehensive definition of effective language teaching, one must acknowledge that the second language (L2) classroom presents learning goals, tasks, and settings that are qualitatively distinct from those of other subject matters (Brown, 2006). For some researchers it is mainly the nature of the subject matter that makes language teachers different from teachers of other fields (Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2006). Unlike other subject matter courses in first language (L1) in which the transmission of conceptual knowledge and facts happens through a mutually intelligible language, foreign language learning poses another. It

not only encompasses the transmission of concepts and facts but usually does so by means of the very subject under examination—namely, the target language. In other words, to quote Brosh (1996), the “means of instruction is also the subject of instruction” (p. 125).

Brown (2006) lists some of the current issues which are idiosyncratic of language pedagogy and which should be taken into account if one is to arrive at a comprehensive notion of effective foreign language teaching. They include grammar teaching, error correction, target language use, culture teaching, computer-based language learning, various approaches to communicative language teaching, and L2 assessment (p. 39).

Borg (2006) conducted an exploratory study aimed at finding the distinct characteristics of language teachers as seen from the eyes of 200 practicing and prospective teachers from a variety of content areas and the opinions of specialists from fields such as history, science, chemistry, mathematics. It was revealed that language teachers were seen to be distinctive in terms of the nature of the subject matter, the content of teaching, methodology of teaching, teacher–student relationships, and areas of difference between native and non-native speakers (p. 3).

In a survey to find the characteristic of effective foreign language teachers on the basis of the opinions of on 998 undergraduate students from a variety of disciplines in Turkey, Çelik et al. (2013) came up with a list of effective FL teacher characteristics. According to their research, an effective language teacher

1. exhibits fairness in decision-making,
2. is successful in reducing students’ anxiety,
3. demonstrates enthusiasm,
4. teaches pronunciation well,
5. teaches speaking skills adequately,
6. has a sound knowledge of vocabulary,
7. teaches reading skills adequately,
8. has a sound knowledge of grammar,
9. is adept at providing explanations in one’s mother tongue),
10. is good at classroom management, and
11. teaches writing skills adequately. (p. 287)

Research into the realm of effective language teaching are mainly of a comparative nature, trying to find out the fit or rather the misfit between students’ and teachers’ perceptions of effective FL teaching. The majority of them are quantitative surveys having used an adapted version of already-constructed instruments (questionnaires) or devising one based on review of literature (e.g., Brown, 2009; Demiroz & Yesilyurt, 2015; Ganjabi, 2011; Katooli & Abdolmanafi-Rokni, 2015; Ramazani, 2014; Shishavan, & Sadeghi, 2009). The only qualitative research in this regard was carried out by Barnes and Lock (2010) in a Korean setting. Using a free-writing instrument, the learners from diverse academic backgrounds were asked to write about the characteristics of effective EFL lecturers. Data analysis revealed that the two attributes of rapport and delivery outweighed other ones, namely fairness, knowledge and credibility and organization and preparation (p. 150).

Therefore, noting the dearth of qualitative, exploratory studies in this regard, the present study attempts to fill this gap using a context-sensitive qualitative design which is truly reflective of the learners’ perceptions of effective foreign language teaching. Thus, the whole research is an endeavour to answer the following research question:

What are effective foreign language teaching practices as perceived by upper-intermediate EFL learners in an Iranian context?

## **Role of the Researchers**

The first author, Alireza Omidi Oskouei, is a PhD candidate of applied linguistics at Isfahan University, Iran. He has experience in teaching various courses in general English, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and English conversation. His primary focus is on teacher education and especially arriving at a model of effective foreign language teaching in the context of Iran. He is the interviewer in this study which is part of his PhD dissertation. In addition, the students selected from the university for interviewing are all his students in interpretation and general linguistics courses.

The second author, Azizollah Dabaghi, is an associate professor of applied linguistics in the department of English at Isfahan University. He teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in applied linguistics and translation studies. His main areas of interest are corrective feedback, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. He is the supervisor of this PhD dissertation.

The third author, Dariush Nejad Ansari, is an assistant professor of applied linguistics in the department of English at Isfahan University, Iran. He does research in SLA, academic writing, and writing assessment. He has published numerous articles both nationally and internationally. He is also the advisor of this dissertation.

## **Method**

### **Design**

The study tried to shed light on effective FL teaching practices as seen from eyes of the EFL learners. To this end, a qualitative interview design and content analysis were employed in order to arrive at a more complete picture of the phenomenon under study. In other words, this exploratory, qualitative design tried to provide a thick description of what effective foreign language teaching means to the Iranian EFL learners. In doing so, it provided an emic (insider), context-sensitive perspective in which the phenomenon is interpreted in the light of the meanings people attach to them (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

### **Context and Participants**

The study was carried out in one university and a private English language institute in a city in Iran. The university offered an English translation program at the BA level and the institute held English conversation classes for adult learners at various levels of proficiency.

A total of 22 Iranian EFL learners participated in this research. Six of them were attending upper-intermediate English conversation classes at a private language institute in the city of Qom with miscellaneous academic backgrounds. They had a background in English learning ranging from 10 terms to 10 years in the institute. The rest (N=16) were junior and senior BA students of English translation at a university in the city of Qom, Iran. Several learners at the institute were simultaneously pursuing English translation as their field of study at the university. A few of the university students had also some English learning background at language institutes. The participants were aged between 20 and 38 with the majority being females (77%). They were selected based on non-probability purposive sampling. The rationale for this type of sampling is that it helps to obtain a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2012). The participants from the university were the interviewer's own students. The interviewer first asked the students in his two classes to voluntarily enlist for the study after having briefed them about the purposes of the research. Some of them expressed their willingness to take part in the study. With regard to the participants in the institute, the

interviewer made contact with the head of the institute, who was also a colleague of his at the university and requested that he introduce an upper-intermediate English conversation class to the study inviting them to participate on a voluntary basis.

After the necessary arrangements with the heads of the institute and the university in order to obtain permission for conducting the study, the interviewer administered a pen and paper version of the Oxford Placement Test (OPT; Allan, 2004) to the upper-intermediate conversation class in the language institute as well as to two junior and senior university classes of his own, amounting to 40 in total. All the students had expressed their willingness for voluntary participation in the test before the administration of the test. In addition, the interviewer conducted an informal mini-interview in English with the selected students to remove the probability that the participants' performance on the test was not influenced by their prior familiarity with the test so that they truly possessed a high level of language proficiency. It also served to make sure they were willing to provide relevant information in the interviews. Interestingly enough, several students who had been placed at an upper-intermediate level based on OPT results were excluded from the study because they did not seem to offer relevant information for research purposes or they were unwilling to take part in the interviewing. In the end, 20 university students and 10 learners from the institute were considered appropriate candidates and expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews.

The rationale behind selecting the upper-intermediate learners was that the elementary and intermediate learners may not be well-aware of the intricacies of FL learning. Therefore, their different and unrealistic expectations, according to Horwitz (1988) and Kern (1995), might have biased their beliefs about effective FL learning and classes.

## **Data Collection**

The semi-structured interview technique was utilized for data collection. This is a compromise between the form of interviewing, namely open-ended or unstructured and structured interviews. It is also popular technique for gathering in-depth data in applied linguistic research (Dorney, 2007). Although there is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions (interview protocol), the format is open-ended, and the interviewee can explain the issue in more detail.

After an extensive study of the related literature about current and controversial topics in foreign language teaching and second language acquisition (Brown, 2009), the following items were identified and used in the interview protocol. They included issues such as (a) FL teaching practices; (b) grammar teaching; (c) corrective feedback; (d) L1 use; (e) teacher knowledge; (f) culture; (g) computer-based technology; (h) evaluation; and (i) teacher personality. Then, two practice interviews were done with two similar students from the selected participants in order to remove any unclear points in the interview protocol as well as the upcoming interview process. This yielded some modifications and the addition of one more item to the protocol namely, teacher interest and motivation (see the Appendix for the interview protocol).

After finalizing the interview protocol, the participants attended separate, one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted by the interviewer. The interviewer set an appointment with the individual participants in a quiet room either in the university or the language institute in which they were studying. The interviews were done in L1 (Persian) to keep homogeneity across data and avoid any risk in performance of learners due to possible proficiency concerns. The interviews were audio-recorded by a digital recorder with a built-in microphone and usually lasted from 15 to 25 minutes. The interviewer then transcribed the recorded the interviews verbatim on paper using broad transcription conventions in which the content of the

message rather than the detailed features of the interviewees' speech (e.g., tone, intonation, stress) was taken into account (Mackey & Gass, 2005).

### Data Coding and Analysis

Data were analysed on the basis of qualitative content analysis (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Mackey & Gass, 2005). Dorney (2007), maintains that a typical qualitative content analysis includes four steps of analytical processes: (a) data transcription, (b) pre-coding and coding, (c) drawing ideas (e.g., memoing), and (d) interpreting data and drawing conclusions. Henceforward, great caution was taken in following the procedures of the qualitative data analysis in this study.

In the first step or data management step, the recorded interviews were carefully transcribed by the authors onto paper. After that in the pre-coding step, the transcripts were read several times in order to get a general sense of the whole data base. This was accompanied by reflecting on the data and writing down memos in the margins of the transcripts, which helped the researchers shape their thoughts about the way the data were to be coded. These memos were short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occurred to the researchers upon the initial readings of transcripts which helped the authors in data analysis and display later in the research.

It is often said that in qualitative research enquiry, coding or category-formation is the most integral part of qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2007; Dorney, 2007). There are two kinds of codes in this regard. The first one is the a priori (Creswell, 2007) or pre-figured codes determined in advance because of the researcher's familiarity with the phenomenon or the existence of sufficient background information in literature. The other type refers to those categories or codes which are arrived at while coding the data. These are called the emergent codes or themes pertinent to the research questions (Creswell, 2007). However, in this study a hybrid type of coding including both pre-determined categories and emergent ones was utilized. That is, due to the nature of interview protocol which consisted of some pre-determined or pre-conceived items (Dorney, 2007) as mentioned above, certain categories were determined in advance. They included issues which were already known in the literature namely (a) FL teaching practices; (b) grammar teaching; (c) corrective feedback; (d) L1 use; (e) teacher knowledge; (f) culture; (g) computer-based technology; (h) evaluation; and (i) teacher personality. But in the other case, the researchers had to draw new categories and themes such as teacher appearance and raising student interest and motivation after the two practice interviews and during data analysis or to quote Dorney (2007), "finding them in the data" (p. 254). In other words, our analytic categories consisted of a combination of non-emergent and emergent codes. The former were arrived at by a thorough review of literature, while the latter emerged during the analysis of transcripts.

The first round of coding included determining and highlighting the major themes which emerged upon the first readings of the data (Dorney, 2007). In other words, the researcher read the transcripts several times and highlighted any interesting and relevant information to the topic, adding descriptive labels to them on the margin. Then, in the second phase or "second-level coding" (Dorney, 2007, p. 254) these data segments were categorized into more abstract, mid-level categories based on commonalities among them. That is, after several readings of these first level descriptions, the researcher arrived at more abstract, similar patterns across the data. These similar or closely related themes were, then, clustered under a broader, more abstract label or over-arching category. This coding process resembles a kind of hierarchy in which the top level category shows the most abstract information, those at the middle becoming less abstract and at the bottom are the least abstract or concrete themes (Creswell, 2007). As an example, in one interview the theme of relating *teaching to real*



*contexts and learners' experiences* was identified in the transcript. Moving one level upwards, this theme was categorized under the sub-category of *instructional style and practices*, itself being a subcategory of the broad category *methodology*. After all transcript data were coded in this way, the first author (the interviewer) translated all categories, subcategories, themes and the related excerpts into English and then the second author back-translated them into Persian. The differences between the two versions were discussed and resolved. Hence, the data were ready for category display and interpretation.

The results of data analysis were organized around the main categories bearing on the purpose of the research which is the effective foreign language teaching. That is, the results were presented in the form of several main categories and subcategories along with the relevant discussions and quotes of the participants.

### **Evaluative Criteria and Ethical Considerations**

Some evaluative criteria were employed in order to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study. The interviewer had a diary in which he wrote his ideas and the rationale for the descriptions to foster reflexivity and increase the trustworthiness of the research (Malterud, 2001). Furthermore, data collection continued until saturation, at which point additional data did not add to the themes and categories already identified (Dorney, 2007, p. 244).

Later on, the interviewer discussed the analyzed categories, interpretations, and conclusions with some of the interviewees in some informal sessions in order to understand and evaluate their intended meanings and modify any possible misinterpretations. Often, the learners confirmed the interpretations though sometimes their comments made the interviewer modify the interpretations made. Moreover, an expert in qualitative research was asked to examine the accuracy the processes of data collection, analysis, and the interpretations of the research. The results of this external audit did not lead to further data collection; instead, it helped the researchers make some changes to codification or category naming.

Several ethical considerations were observed during the study. Before data collection, the interviewer briefed the participants about the purpose and the nature of the study. They were also guaranteed that their personal identity, privacy, and any information they would provide later would be kept confidential and that they were free to withdraw from the study for whatever reason they might have. They expressed their willingness to participate in the research and in doing so an oral consent was taken from them. In addition, the participants were allowed to decide on the time of the interview. It should also be mentioned that since this was a part of PhD dissertation, there was no ethical code, or third party agreement provided by the University of Isfahan.

At the outset of the interviews, the interviewer attempted to build rapport and a friendliness with the interviewees, thus creating a trustworthy environment. He also refrained from asking questions which might disclose any information about the participants' personal identity or life. Throughout the interviews, the interviewer tried to elicit only the participants' views and avoid imposing any personal bias and misinterpretations.

### **Results**

The analysis of data yielded eight broad categories, with their relevant subcategories and themes or attributes of effective foreign language teaching. What follows is a detailed discussion of the findings. To facilitate reporting, however, each participant, otherwise respondent was given a reference number: for example, respondent number 7 is referred to as "R7."

## Methodology

The first broad category found in data analysis was methodology. It is an umbrella term in the field of FL teaching including the study of practices and procedures in FL classes and the accompanying beliefs and principles underlying them. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define methodology in language teaching as the pedagogical issues involved in FL teaching including lesson plans, materials, text books, the nature of language skills and subskills, and procedures for teaching them (p. 320).

**Selecting appropriate and modern teaching method and practices.** Regarding the most effective FL teaching method, the majority of the learners (N=17) were in favour of mainstream communicative language teaching (CLT) or Task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches. Five respondents stated that the current book-based methods per se were not appropriate for Iranian contexts. They opined that a modified version of those methods if adapted to contextual factors including the students' learning styles and language levels would make those methods more suitable. As one of them observed,

I like these modern conversation books with the new methods in them. Of course they are very good and we learnt a lot from them. But you know the teacher somehow should change some parts in the book. I don't understand some of the issues in the book. They are really difficult for me. (R3)

However, it should be mentioned that no further explanations were provided by the respondents as to the reason for their favouring CLT/TBLT methods.

Next came the actual FL teaching practices and styles employed by the FL teacher in the classroom. This topic was the first dominating discussion in the data. Data analysis showed that the learners preferred those teaching practices and techniques as recommended by modern methods to FL teaching, namely communicative and task-based language teaching approaches as was discussed above. They opted for activities centering on learners' active involvement in communication, that is, tasks and group activities. Almost all learners agreed with the usefulness of authentic material in the FL classroom. R14 for example said:

When we listen to original audio files and watch movies, our pronunciation and accent are improved, because they are native and their accent and pronunciation are better than our teacher's.

**Grammar teaching.** One of the most important and controversial issues in the field of FL instruction and second language acquisition is the role of grammar and the way it should be covered (Brown, 2009; Schulz, 2001). As regards the role of grammar in FL learning, a great majority of respondents (N=21) believed that grammar is very important in language learning and the teaching process like other language skills and sub-skills. R3, for example said:

It (grammar) is absolutely necessary ... if you know the dictionary by heart but do not know the structure, what would you do? Because with a small change in the sentence, the whole meaning is distorted.

However, those respondents thought that grammar should be covered inductively (that is, moving from examples to general rules) in FL classes. For example, R2 stated:

Direct grammar teaching is the worst approach. This can be useful for those who are doing a PhD in English. For other learners, at first examples should be presented along with their functions, then they can move to the structure itself ... starting with direct grammar instruction makes the task of language learning very difficult for them.

**Corrective feedback (CF).** Another controversial issue in the field of FL teaching and SLA pertains to the issue of corrective feedback (Brown, 2006; Schulz, 2001). It particularly deals with whether or not the FL teacher should react to the errors committed by the learners in the process of learning an FL and the manner in which he/she should correct or deal with them (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Interestingly, all 22 respondents saw a positive role for providing corrective feedback by the teacher in FL classes. They believed that providing corrective feedback was an integral part of EFL learning. Regarding corrective feedback in speaking tasks, the majority of respondents favoured a more indirect and delayed type of corrective feedback in FL classes in the forms of recast, repetition, elicitation. They thought that this type of feedback without interrupting their flow of speech would help prevent any harm to their personality and ego. These learners believed that error correction should be carried out in a proper and friendly manner, since this is a sensitive area of language learning and proper error correction would facilitate or hinder FL learning. R14 stated that this is a very high risk area.

When a student makes a mistake while speaking in the class, the teacher should not make fun of him and disrespect his personality ... if so the learner will not speak any more in the class and this will hinder him rather than advance his language learning.

For them, immediate error correction was a type of hazard to their personality, which could have severe consequences for them in their FL learning, leading ultimately to their embarrassment and discontinuation of learning. As R2 said,

If the teacher always interrupts and corrects learner's errors, the learner in turn will be marked in the class, which may make him say that why am I paying for the class? I have come here to learn language, but am being humbled like this ... It is better for me to stop this.

However, the discussion about feedback in writing was not as rich as that in speaking. Respondents favoured a direct feedback with the teacher marking the errors and providing the correct forms either on the paper (N=15) or explaining them to the whole class rather than to the individual learner (N=7).

**L1 use.** The other finding is the role of the learners' first language in FL instruction. While some scholars believe that L1 plays a facilitating role in FL learning and teaching (Cook as cited in Brown, 2006), others cast doubt on the usefulness of L1 and tend to prohibit its use in the classrooms (Macdonald, 1993).

In this regard, almost all respondents (N=21) had a positive attitude toward occasional L1 use in the class. They considered L1 a useful resource at FL teacher's disposal, the occasional use of which especially at elementary classes removed barriers to learner comprehension and facilitated EFL instruction. R4 said,

I believe that L2 classes should be held in English but there are times in which the students will not be able to learn the points unless the teacher explains them

in Farsi. So L1 can be used at a single word level but not to the extent that the learners become conditioned to it.

Several respondents believed that the teaching of grammar is better to be conducted in learners' native language since it is difficult for them to understand grammatical concepts in a foreign language. However, they warned against using L1 abundantly in conversation classes.

**Computer-based technologies.** One of the off-shoots of CLT approach has been the introduction of computer-based technology in FL learning and teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Asked about the usefulness of computer technology in FL classes, all of the respondents perceived a positive and useful role for moderate use of computer-based technologies in a FL class such as language laboratories, playing multi-media files, power-point slides, software dictionaries, and web searches that would facilitate language teaching and learning. However, they were unanimously of the opinion that traditional methods to FL teaching were far more effective than modern computer technologies in FL classes. As one of them put it,

Of course computer technology is very good in the class. You can look up any word in online dictionary. You can play and watch original video clips. But I think this is not all. I prefer learning language by the teacher speaking to us rather than only by the computer. (R21)

### Teacher Knowledge

The second broad category found in data analysis relates to FL teacher knowledge as comprising their command in L2 and pedagogical knowledge.

The majority of the respondents (N=19) believed that the FL teacher should possess a high command in the target language at every proficiency level. They maintained that a high L2 command was necessary to meet learner needs and questions. They were of the opinion that being highly proficient in FL was also necessary to face learner challenges, the lack of which could severely damage teacher prestige and acceptability by the learners in the class. R20 stated,

There are some students who ask challenging questions. I think it shows the weakness of a teacher if he cannot answer that question. If I don't know a word that's ok for me but for a teacher, it is not proper. His authority and greatness will be lowered in the students' views.

Regarding the teacher's pedagogical knowledge, the majority of respondents (N=15) believed in the possession of effective teaching and presentation skills and strategies by the FL teacher. The learners approved of teachers who were equipped with lesson plans, could teach with appropriate delivery or presentation skills such as having a clear quality of voice and good body language. With regard to teacher preparation, R4 said,

A teacher who enters the class without any preparation is always anxious and perturbed. And if learners ask a question he loses his self-confidence takes a defensive position, which decreases the effectiveness of teaching.

Another issue mentioned by three respondents was the possession of world knowledge by a FL teacher. For them, having enough background knowledge and prior experience about a topic in the class was conducive to effective teaching. As one respondent observed,

Those successful teachers have a lot of background knowledge about the topic. If it was about travelling, the teachers knew a lot about geography, they talked about the environmental issues of traveling such as roads, tourism attractions. (R3)

Endorsing class management skills and disciplinary measures, several respondents (N=6) deemed them to be more effective than high L2 command of the teacher. R1, for example, that

We had a teacher who had a higher command in language but since he was rather self-conscious and didn't have enough teaching experience; he could not manage the class. This was the cause of his failure in the class.

### **Teacher Personality**

There is strong consensus on the roles of positive teacher personality and personality attributes in successful teaching (Barnes & Lock, 2010; Park & Lee, 2006). As such, all 22 respondents placed a great emphasis on the role of teacher personality in FL learning and teaching process. For some it was even the key to their success in the FL learning enterprise, some deeming it even more important than teacher knowledge. As one respondent said,

Teacher's manners and personality are very important . . . I once had to drop a course and fall behind my classmates in order to not have a particular teacher because he had treated me badly before although he was very knowledgeable in English. (R11)

The respondents believed in good manners and behaviour of the teacher in ensuring the success of FL learning and teaching. Notable among these attributes were being friendly, down-to earth, caring, humorous, energetic, patient, encouraging, and respectful towards learners. For them, FL classes were different from other content classes, which required a different approach to teaching and personality attributes and behaviour, the most important of which was building rapport with learners. R2, for example, stated,

Language classes are different from other content classes like math or philosophy which require a totally different approach. In language classes the teacher should be friendly with learner humour like a showman like they do in TV shows, establishing a friendly relationship with learners is very important.

Several respondents (N=7) complained of some teachers who used to favour some specific students for one reason or another. They emphasized that a good language teacher was the one who treated all students fairly and impartially in the class. Otherwise, it would demotivate students and would lead to their disillusionment with FL learning. According to R17,

The teacher must act fairly in the class and avoid favouritism, while I can see that this is not the case in classes and some particular learners are the teacher's apple of eye. And this affects all the learners negatively.

## The Importance of Teacher Appearance

Although Penner (1992) includes physical appearance within the category of personality, it was decided that teacher appearance be taken as a separate category due to the rather separate discussions on this issue by most of the respondents.

The majority of the respondents (N=20) had a positive opinion about the role of teacher appearance in teaching effectiveness. They maintained that learners usually did evaluate language teachers based on their first impression, which was greatly influenced by physical appearance and manner of dressing. R6 stated that,

Especially teacher's appearance is very important, if I first enter the class and see that my teacher's appearance is not good, I will not be attracted by him ... before starting to speak, the students first evaluate your appearance.

Most respondents believed that a neat, presentable appearance was a pre-requisite for a typical FL teacher. They maintained that a good physical appearance would increase and sustain learner interest and motivation for learning. R1, for example, said that,

I remember we had a teacher who was not tidy, and I clearly noticed that students did not value him as they should and were not interested in his class ... They said that this teacher doesn't look like a teacher. How can he care about his teaching if he doesn't care about his appearance?

## Raising Learners' Interest and Motivation

Various researchers (e.g., Brosh, 1996; Horwitz, 1985; Park & Lee, 2006) have testified that it is mainly the teacher's responsibility to increase the learners' interest and motivation for learning a foreign language. The respondents believed that the teacher could raise their interest and motivation for learning an FL in three ways.

**Teachers' role in selecting appropriate teaching practices.** To begin with, the foremost discussion on the teacher's role was about the selection of effective and modern FL teaching methods and techniques, especially a learner-centred approach focusing on active participation of all learners in class activities.

Providing positive feedback to learners in the form of verbal encouragement, marks, and rewards (for young learners) was another contributing factor in sustaining learners' interest and motivation for FL learning. As R17 stated,

Giving marks encourages the students. Because giving marks motivates them. I mean the student likes the mark and wants to get a better score. If there is no score, the student will be demotivated. He will say "what am I doing all this for?"

For several respondents (N=6) choosing appropriate and interesting instructional material and textbooks was another determining factor for increasing their interest and motivation. According to R7,

In my opinion, even the font-type of the text book, the way it explains the lesson the structure of the book ... is important. The book must be at the level of the learners, neither too high nor too low.

**The role of positive personality and presentable appearance of the teacher.** Twenty respondents unanimously saw the role of teacher personality as a major factor in raising learners' interest and motivation for FL learning. As R16 put it,

This is the first thing (manners). You know there are even some uninteresting and dull courses. But the teacher's manners and behaviour are so nice that one likes to always attend his class.

They also believed that teachers' positive manners such as friendliness, humour, care, supportiveness, fairness, reliability, and enthusiasm were influential in learners' interest and willingness to learn English.

And finally, six respondents believed that learners became more motivated to learn English when their teacher's appearance was neat, tidy, and presentable.

### **The Inseparability of Language Learning and Culture Learning**

Scholars have always been interested in the relationship between culture and language learning leading some to propose that cultural knowledge and skills be included in FL teaching programs (Kramsch, 1983). Data analysis showed that the majority of the respondents (N=20) believed there is a very close and direct relationship between FL learning and culture learning, sometimes amounting to the inseparability of these two. They thought that learning a target language (TL) culture, that is, the social knowledge, ways of behaviour, and interactive skills of the people speaking a language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002), is a pre-requisite to fully learn a foreign language and that language was a means to learn about the TL culture. Some even added that when we learn another language, we would unwittingly learn its culture like its own native speakers and that the teacher is someone who introduces that culture to the learners. R5, for example, stated that

Every language carries its own culture with it ... a language learner somehow becomes similar to the native speakers of that language and learn the culture of that language.

As to the issue of culture teaching in FL classes, again the majority of respondents (N=20) emphasized the necessity of covering cultural points by a FL teacher in the classroom. Regarding teaching controversial cross-cultural points in the class, most of these respondents (R=13) thought that FL teacher should create a sense of cultural awareness among the learners by comparing and contrasting the two cultures. One of them opined that

It'd be better to teach foreign culture in the class. Of course there are some cultural differences, but the teacher should try to compare and contrast the two cultures until the learners get to understand ever culture has its own specific features. (R11)

### **The Priority of Formative over Summative Assessment**

Evaluation or assessment of language skills is one of the most fundamental issues in the field of FL instruction (Bachman, 1990). There are usually two types of language assessment. One is formative assessment which is usually based upon observation of student performance during the educational period and the other is summative or end-of-term

assessment which is conducted at the end of an educational program (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Based on data analysis, the majority of respondents (N=20) opted for a formative assessment rather than a summative one in FL classes. They maintained that a constant observation of learners' active participation in language learning activities during the educational term was more effective than an end-of-the-term exam which fell short of truly assessing their language learning abilities. R18 for example<sup>3</sup> stated that

We cannot actually evaluate a student in one day and with one exam. Because he will study just for the sake of exam ... and that something may happen to the student on the night of the exam which may prevent his full preparation ... a final exam cannot be comprehensive.

### **Teacher/Learner Role(s)**

And finally comes the category dealing with the roles of the FL teacher and learner in the classroom. The history of FL teaching methods has witnessed many shifts regarding the respective roles of teachers and learners in FL classes with each teaching method ascribing a particular role for each of these two groups (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Considering the role of the FL teacher, the majority of the respondents (N= 21) saw multiple roles for the teacher but chiefly regarded the teacher as a guide and facilitator who was a friendly person in the class on a similar footing with the learners to help and direct them at every level of the language learning process. R12 said,

I think he is a guide and a friend ... Otherwise it will lead to subordination of the students, therefore the students will be afraid to speak in the class and will lose their self-confidence.

As to the role of the learner, similarly 21 respondents regarded FL learners as active agents involved in the process of FL learning who were learning a language under the supervision of their teachers.

## **Discussion**

This investigation established what learners believed were effective foreign language teaching practices. What follows next is a discussion of the findings in the order by which they were presented above.

First it was revealed that learners unanimously believed in more modern methods of foreign language teaching or a modified version of them, namely communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT) approaches. It appeared that these learners were familiar enough with the current methods in instructed SLA or FL pedagogy, which is a promising sign.

In a similar vein, the majority of the learners favoured a learner-centred pedagogy with an emphasis on authentic material, carrying out real tasks as well as tailoring teaching to learners' individual styles and preferences. It seems that these learners' beliefs were guided by what the field at large recommends for ideal CLT-based classrooms. It is in line with the findings by Demiroz and Yesilyurt (2015), and Kern (1995), that according to students' perceptions an effective foreign language teacher should teach communicatively. However, this finding is in stark contrast with several researchers in this field, for example, Brown (2009), Ganjabi (2011), Katooli & Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015), and Schulz (1996, 2001), who found



that students were inclined towards more traditional grammar-based approaches in language classes compared with CLT-based ones. Apparently, the learners in this study were familiar with recent trends in FL pedagogy, which may be partly attributed to the fact that they were all at upper intermediate language proficiency levels and thus seemed to have more realistic expectations from FL classes compared with the beginning level ones. This finding implicitly corroborates Horwitz' (1988) and Kern's (1995) claims that beginning-level L2 students might have unrealistic expectations for L2 learning, which will change with time and proficiency level.

The strong beliefs of the majority of the learners about the indispensable role of grammar in FL learning along with their favorable opinions regarding formal grammar instruction was another noteworthy finding of this study. This finding concords with those of Brown (2009), Ganjabi (2011), Katooli and Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015), and Schulz (1996, 2001), in that their students, like the learners in this research, endorsed explicit grammar instruction. However, it is different from those studies because most of the learners in this study preferred inductive grammar instruction mostly via examples, situations, and communicative activities rather than deductive instruction. This finding is in agreement with that of Kern (1995), in which learners were aware of modern CLT-based approaches.

The item that provoked one of the most dominating discussions in this study and does so in the profession at large is the issue of corrective feedback. All learners saw a positive role for CF, the majority of whom were opting for more indirect and delayed forms of CF used in a non-threatening manner by the FL teacher in speaking. This finding is also in line with the tenets of the CLT approach. However, it is in contrast with the findings from several research projects done in this area, such as Brown (2009), Katooli and Abdolmanafi-Rokni (2015), and Schulz (1996, 2001), in which students perceived that the teacher should correct their oral errors immediately. One explanation for this is that the actual learning experiences of these learners might have convinced them of the facilitative role of indirect error correction in FL learning.

Most learners ascribed a facilitative role to L1, especially when used at elementary classes as well as in teaching grammar. For them, the occasional use of L1 was seen as a useful resource at a FL teacher's disposal in removing barriers to learner comprehension. This finding supports the results of Antón and DiCamilla (1999), Levine (2003), and Macaro (2001), who saw L1 use as a positive factor in FL pedagogy.

Although the majority of learners believed that the moderate use of computer-based technologies would facilitate FL language pedagogy in the class, they did not regard it as a determining factor in FL teaching effectiveness or success. Instead, they prioritized traditional FL teaching methods and techniques over computer technologies and even computer-assisted language learning (CALL), an interesting finding which somehow runs counter to modern CLT practices.

Another topic or category which invoked much discussion by the respondents was teacher knowledge as an integral attribute for effective FL teaching, consisting of a teacher's L2 command and pedagogical knowledge. The majority of the respondents were of the opinion that an EFL teacher should be equipped with a high command or proficiency in the target language. High L2 command was deemed necessary for the purposes of meeting learner needs, facing challenges as well as increasing teacher self-confidence and image. This finding parallels the results by Brosh (1996) and Wichadee (2010), who found that students' first perception of an effective FL teacher was an adequate command of the subject matter, that is, language proficiency.

Learners' prioritizing pedagogical knowledge over L2 command shows the significance of teachers' pedagogical skills in the class. According to them, the subject matter,

or English proficiency, cannot be transmitted to learners unless teachers are equipped with germane pedagogical knowledge.

This finding is similar to that by Park and Lee (2006) and Ramazani (2014) who found that students ranked pedagogical knowledge below English proficiency as the attributes of effective EFL teachers in Korean and Iranian contexts, respectively. Likewise, Barnes and Lock (2010) concluded that students found the category of delivery or methodology to be more important than a teacher's L2 command.

The one category which invoked much discussion and drew unanimous beliefs from learners as one of the major contributing factors in effective FL teaching was teacher personality. Endorsing positive manners and behavior of the FL teacher such as being caring, friendly, respectful, humorous, fair, lively, patient, and able to build rapport as most salient, were seen as significantly influential factors in the success of the FL learning enterprise, and some even ranked it the most important attribute of effective language teachers.

The results of other research support this finding. For example, Brosh (1996) found teacher fairness and impartial treatment of students as one of the most important effective FL teacher characteristics. Moreover, Çelik et al. (2013) ranked personality attributes such as being fair and just, showing enthusiasm, friendliness, and being loving as the most important factors contributing to FL teacher effectiveness (p. 292).

Although the majority of the learners had a positive opinion regarding the role of teacher appearance in FL teaching effectiveness, it did not extract much heated discussion on their part. They simply believed in a neat and presentable physical appearance much like a typical teacher in the class.

Rousing and sustaining learner interest and motivation for FL learning is another interesting discussion, with the teacher playing the most important role in this regard. This finding is in line with that by Horwitz (1985) in which methods students strongly believed that it was the teacher's responsibility to motivate students. Likewise, Brosh (1996), Park and Lee (2006), Ramazani, (2014), and Salahshour and Hajizadeh (2013) found that the teacher's ability to rouse and sustain student interest and motivation, *inter alia*, characterized an effective language teacher.

The category of language and culture is another topic worth consideration here. The great majority of the learners believed in a very close relationship between language and culture, even regarding them to be synonymous. Stressing the point that FL teachers should be tasked with raising cross-cultural awareness among the learners, the learners endorsed the integration of culture teaching in FL classes, which is in agreement with the results by Çelik et al. (2013) who concluded that according to students' perceptions, an effective FL teacher should teach target culture adequately.

Notwithstanding the fact that the category of evaluation or assessment did not excite much discussion among the learners, their rather high penchant for formative assessment and dissatisfaction with the summative, end-of-the-term exam needs due consideration. The majority of learners favored that type of evaluation based on the constant observation of their active participation and performance in the class during the educational term. This finding corroborates the claims of Brown (2004), in which formative assessment seems to be more facilitative of student language learning.

And finally comes the discussion on teacher/learner roles in the classroom. As to the role of the FL teachers, the majority of the respondents saw multiple roles for the teachers such as friend, guide, facilitator, role model, and knowledge source, but chiefly regarded them as guide and facilitator who were there in the class on a similar footing with the learners to help and direct them at every level of the language learning process. Likewise, the learner was mainly regarded as being an active agent in the process of FL learning. This finding is

reminiscent of the CLT approach which ascribes an active role to the learners regarding the teacher as a facilitator and guide in the class (Richards & Rogers, 1986).

## Implications

A number of issues need to be addressed and discussed here with regard to these general findings and the ramifications they might have on FL pedagogy at large. First, the present study showed that learners' perceptions of effective teaching methodology resembled more modern approaches such as communicative language or task-based language teaching approaches, which shows their awareness of more modern methodological issues in the field.

This finding may help prepare teachers to confront a population of students who, for the most part, prefer to have communicative activities and exchange of information take precedence over traditional grammar-based approaches in the FL classroom. Knowledge-based teacher education programs in language institutes and university curricula, especially in Iran, might include more courses in SLA theories and FL methodology such as the importance of output, interaction, negotiation of meaning, and corrective feedback.

A word of caution is in order regarding the proficiency level of the prospective EFL teachers. Regrettably, in most Iranian universities there is no general English course beyond the first 2 years of BA programs. Two solutions are proposed here if language teachers are to achieve an advanced level of English proficiency, which is in line with the recommendations by the [American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages](#) (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines (Lafayette, 1993). In the first place, it is strongly recommended that general English language courses are comprised of the four skills be introduced throughout the curricula of bachelor programs, instead of being confined to the first 2 years. Furthermore, teacher evaluation programs in language institutes should conduct some occasional checks on their practicing teachers in order to monitor and make sure of their adequate linguistic proficiency.

If the ultimate goal is to prepare highly knowledgeable FL teachers, the curricula offered at the university level for prospective teachers should include more courses in SLA theories, FL methodology, and testing than theoretical linguistics, English literature, and translation theories. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Iranian universities. Many English programs at the bachelor level in Iranian universities offer more courses in theoretical linguistics, translation theories, and English literature than in English pedagogy. In-service teachers in the institutes can also enrich their repertoire of pedagogical knowledge via taking short-term training courses in English methodology, participating in related conferences and seminars, and pursuing higher academic degrees in English language teaching.

The irrefutable role of positive teacher personality characteristics and to some extent physical appearance of teacher in teaching effectiveness has some repercussions for teacher education programs and curricula developers, especially in Iran. Courses in educational psychology and SLA theories with a focus on humanistic approaches to FL teaching may be introduced to practicing and prospective EFL teachers in order to increase their awareness of the vital role of personality in FL pedagogy.

Regarding teaching TL culture in the classes, the practising and prospective EFL teachers should endeavour more than ever to include cultural issues in the classes by comparing and contrasting the two cultures. Since according to Kramsch (1983) learners can successfully understand and interpret a target culture's attitudes and values only when they are conscious of their own culture.

One final implication of this study concerns the less experienced FL teachers. Students might have different expectations and perceptions from those of their teachers' regarding what should go on in the FL classroom. This mismatch between the perceptions of these two groups may lead to student frustration with FL classes and possible discontinuation of their study.

Therefore, in an effort to remove this expectational conflict, language teachers might conduct some sort of investigation into their students' perceptions of ideal pedagogical methods and practices early in the semester. It might also help transform the authoritative teacher-centred FL pedagogy in Iran (Noora, 2008) into a more democratic student-centred one.

### Limitations

It should be mentioned that the findings of this research are based on respondents' beliefs and not on samples of actual classroom practice. Therefore, any curricular decisions on the basis of these findings should be made with caution. It is, therefore, suggested that similar studies be conducted in other FL settings both in Iran and other countries using other sources of data such as and class observation (data triangulation) as well as a mixed-methods design in order to provide a more complete picture of the effective FL teaching. However, the results of this research are open to replication across various proficiency levels and educational contexts as well as with the other group, namely teachers.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

- 1- Generally speaking, what are your beliefs about effective FL teaching practices?
- 2- Do you believe grammar should be taught in effective FL classes? If yes explain how? In any case elaborate.
- 3- How do you believe learner errors should be treated in effective FL classes?
- 4- Should L1 be used in FL classes or not? If yes, to what extent? In no elaborate on your reason.
- 5- What are your beliefs about the impact of teacher personality on the effectiveness of FL teaching?
- 6- What are your beliefs about an effective FL teacher's knowledge base? How much should it be?
- 7- How can learner motivation and interest can be increased in an effective FL class?
- 8- How should an FL teacher deal with L2 culture in the class? Should it ever be taught? In any case elaborate on your answer?
- 9- What are your beliefs about the best assessment in an effective FL class?
- 10- What are your beliefs about the use of computer technology in effective FL teaching?

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