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More conscientious look at teachers' praxis: A culminative balance

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Abstract

Enacted in any pedagogy is the tension between what teachers know and what they can do. Long has been written about the head starts of teacher empowerment in education, but less has been dealt with the possibility of the notion. The paper attempting to achieve a culminative balance between teachers' praxis and phrones claims that education is per se political; thus, its pedagogy is hardly bottom-up. Furthermore, the present writers assert though education, in Iran, is culturally-bound, no one can claim the teachers are not potential to employ the pedagogy hidden in a variety of educational perspectives inspired by different philosophical underpinnings. To achieve this end, teacher education should aim at achieving a balance between what teachers know and what they can do. On the necessity of culminative balance, it is worth mentioning that teachers' praxis will remain barren if it is not well supported with theoretical background. In fact, praxis, per se, is concerned with a give-and-take link between thought and action—between theorizing practice and practicing theory. As Freire (1985, cited in Monchinski, 2008) warns "cut-off from practice theory becomes a simple verbalism and separated from theory is nothing but blind activism" (pp. 1-2). Moreover, the present writers compatible with several scholars (e.g., Gholami & Mirzaei, 2013) claim that the traces of postmodernism in Iran has been the real reason of many breakthroughs in all fields of science and technology in which Iran cannot be an exception.

Keywords: culminative balance; phrones; postmodernism; praxis; reflective teaching; teacher education

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1. Introduction

The last decade has been an explosion of interest in global issues and global education. Altering demands and objectives of the new generations and the irrefutable actuality of global village let English language become more and more versatile and erratically affect the nations all over the world (Gholami, Mirzaei, & Bonyadi, 2012). Ramanujam (2011) rationally interprets that English language today is almost an obligatory second language, and as the result the non-native nations should adjust their understandings and attitudes about this language.

Indeed, education is per se political; in other words, its pedagogy is hardly bottom-up. However, claiming that teachers can be granted full power in the development of curriculum development and their approach though is seldom tangible, not impossible. In this regard, the paper makes an attempt to pave the way towards *culminative balance* in order to necessitate the importance of the juxtaposition of praxis and phrones in Iran educational system. Put differently, for a teacher's action to be informed by reflection, we need to take *phrones* into consideration. Hillier (2005), in defining phrones, refers to "practical knowledge that is defined as rightness for action" (p. 16). In fact, it is necessary for teachers to know that their practice is prudent.

Moreover, the present paper makes an attempt to put forth that though education in Iran is necessarily culturally-bound, no one can claim the Iranian teachers are not potential to employ the pedagogy hidden in a variety of educational perspectives inspired by different philosophical underpinnings. In fact, now is the time to cynically re-conceptualize the existing paradigms regarding language teacher education.

2. Review of the related literature

To be prepared for a thorough going analysis of the role of English language and consider the range of perspectives and discussions regarding the spread of English language in our time, it is better to start with the following six frameworks of comparisons proposed by Pennycook (2000): *(1) colonial celebratory* in which the flourishing spread of English language is regarded highly good and necessary for all people, *(2) laissez-faire liberalism* where the language is not idolized and people have the freedom to choose to learn it or not, *(3) linguistic imperialism* by which English language is constituted as colonizing and homogenizing the minorities, depriving them from their identity and culture and languages, *(4) language ecology and language rights* that as stated by Van lier (2004) is the framework in which the language should be adopted and modified with respect to realities of the adopting context at the same time emphasizing the idea that human rights should be prioritized and the spread of English language should abide with them, *(5) linguistic hybridity* concerned with this reality that there are many English languages which can co-exist under the umbrella of world Englishes, and *(6) postcolonial performativity* which insists that, in the postmodern era, in coordination between local and global forces the resistance and appropriation of English language are integrated as the accepted norm useful for periphery communities without encumbering their entrance into global community.

Indeed seen from this stance, the paper inspired by Pennycook's sixth framework, postcolonial performidity, goes on to hold that Iran educational system, though deeply rooted in perennialism (Maftoon & Shakouri, 2013) is not an exception and can be potentially integrated with the accepted norms of the global community, in general, and postmodernism, in particular. Moreover, in the third millennium attempts have to be made towards upcoming effectuality since teachers alone may stand frustrated in the face of new challenging issues in postmodernity.

Additionally, the next issue which is of paramount importance to be mentioned here is to consider the implications of postmodernism in ELT. In this regard, Finch (2008) astutely asserts the following six deaths:

- **The death of native speaker**: the idea that there are other newly developed acceptable accents and pronunciations.
- **The death of structuralism**: the idea that learning language is for communication rather than translation and grammar.
- **The death of the teacher**: the advent of student-centered class and teaching based on learners' needs put an end to teacher dominated education.
- **The death of imperialism:** the time of colonialism is over, and we are in globalization era in which there is different voices to be heard.
- **The death of method**: the search for the ideal method suitable for all times and all learners in all places is over.
- **The death of EFL**: English language has gained new status as international and Lingua Franca language; it is not foreign language any more but the international language.

Finch believes these findings led researchers to claim that postmodernism cannot be understood as the closure and an end to method but an appreciation and understanding of the limitations and pitfalls of method and replacing them with newly developed post-method solutions to transcend these obstacles.

Cheng (2003) also outlines three waves in teacher educational reforms that are based on three different paradigms: (1) internal effectiveness, (2) interface effectiveness, and (c) future effectiveness. The first wave, internal effectiveness, places emphasis on the internal process improvement through external intervention. In other words, efforts are made to improve internal performance; that is, the methods and processes of teaching and learning in educational centers (Cheng, 2004). Interface effectiveness, as Cheng (2003, 2004) goes on to hold, is investigated in terms of school-based management, quality assurance, accountability, and stakeholders' satisfaction. In fact, the inclinations towards meeting stakeholders' needs in order to improve the existing structures and practices have become the linchpin of interface effectiveness. Cheng (2004) asserts "in facing the challenges of globalization, information technology, and knowledge-driven economy in the new century, the third wave is moving towards pursuit of future effectiveness" (p. 3). No wonder, teachers will stand helpless in the face of new challenges in the third millennium if they only rely on their prepackaged methods. Now knowledge is not considered as property; knowledge is constantly changed through new insights gained through individual experiences.

What has to be brought into consideration is that generally there is a paradigm shift from positivist perspective to pragmatic perspective in second language teacher education that each is fed by its deeply-held ideology. The knowledge base grounded in the positivist epistemological perspective considers teachers as transmitters of knowledge; the primary goal of language teacher education is to make teachers ready for their profession; this preparation is achieved if teachers get familiar with skills and skills to control the class. In contrast, from a pragmatic perspective, teachers are supposed to get involved in the process of developing theories of teaching. In a nutshell, teachers are respected as transformers of intellectuality rather than as transmitters of knowledge.

In fact, it is a striking fact that what is tangible in the dichotomy between positivism and pragmatism is the contrast provided between mimetic learning and experiential learning. To better appreciate the concept of mimetic learning, Wulf (2009) makes a contrast between Plato's and Aristotle's views. According to Plato, young people's education and learning is made possible by their mimetic desire to follow a role model. The philosophy behind this model is that human shortcomings will be overcome and improvement will be achieved if individuals follow this model. Aristotle, in contrast, held that negative role model must also be available. In fact, he believed it is only in dealing with negative role models that resistance to them and personal strength can develop.

On the other hand, in experiential learning, knowledge is seen as a personal acquisition, obtaining by learning from experience. In fact, in this type of learning, learners' immediate personal experiences are taken as the focal of departure for deciding how to organize the learning process (Nunan, 1999). Kolb (1984) also asserts that experiential learning builds a bridge from the old to the new information by taking the learners' experience as the point of departure. To Kolb, experiential learning is defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 41). Along the same vein, Kohonen (1992) holds that in experiential learning, immediate personal experience is respected as the focal point for learning. Kohonen (1987, cited in Nunan, 1999) goes on to hold that experiential learning facilitates personal growth, helps learners to adapt to social change, takes into account differences in learning ability, and is responsive to learners' needs and practical pedagogical.

What is plausible is that the shift from positivism to experientialism can be represented in the movement from the unilateral transmission of knowledge to a view of teaching and learning as reciprocal teaching. In effect, in reciprocal teaching, teachers are not yet respected as a jar that pours knowledge into students' mugs. Knowledge is collaterally produced. Nevertheless, the lack of congruity between what the teachers know and what they can do in the class has always been a source of tension. In fact, the truism is that teachers are not mere consumers of other's products. They take an innovative role-a theorizer. In a nutshell, as we implement innovations in our own programs, courses, and teaching strategies, we need to find out how teachers respond to these innovations, and how they affect teachers' practices. In sum, what makes a teacher critical in experiential learning, is the critical features of innovation and efficiency in the role of teachers.

Along the same line, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005) argue that teachers should be adaptive; to them, adaptive teachers are able to balance efficiency and innovation. In other words, the teachers have to be able to master skills and strategies, to plan, manage, carry out, and assess the activities of teaching and learning while at the same time adapting and adjusting to the complexities that are embedded in those activities in order to make sound instructional decisions within the contexts in which they teach.

Similarly, Dewey (1933) makes a distinction between routine action and reflective action. According to Dewey, routine action is affected by factors such as tradition, habit, and authority. Such an approach to education is more or less static and unresponsive to students' needs and dynamic priorities of educational settings. Reflective action, in contrast, involves willingness to constant evaluation. In fact, in reflective approach, teachers' sense of plausibility or subjective understanding is conducive to the development of their knowledge base, and as Schon (1987) contends reflective teaching will contribute to thinking on one's feet. Along the same line, Dewey (1933) holds that reflection entails not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consequence- a consecutive ordering in such a way that each idea determines the next as its proper outcome, while each outcome in return leans back on, or refers to, its predecessors. Accordingly, Dewey maintains that reflection involves a chain of thoughts, which "are linked together so that there is a sustained movement to a common end" (p.45). For Dewey, three attitudes: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness, characterize reflective practice. Dewey defines *open-mindedness* as an active desire to listen to more sides than one; *responsibility,* to him, is viewed as being a deliberative consideration of the consequences of actions; and he equated *wholeheartedness* with an abiding commitment to open-mindedness and responsibility.

Zeichner (1993, cited in Pittman & O'Neil, 2003) also takes the notion of reflection a step further and has identified four paradigms in relation to the concept of reflection and a number of views on the goals of teacher education: (1) behavioristic paradigm emphasizing the development of observable teaching skills, (2) personalistic paradigm focusing on the psychological maturity of teachers, (3) traditional-craft paradigm considering teacher education as a process of apprenticeship, and (4) inquiry-oriented which prioritizes the development of inquiry about the teaching about the contexts in which teaching is carried out. In the same vein, Pittman and O'Neil (2003) hold that neither in the behavioristic nor in the traditional craft paradigms does reflection play a vital role. As a matter of fact, the content of educology for teacher education can be determined and defined in advance in both of these approaches. What's more, there is an obtainable body of knowledge related

to a specified educational context and its teaching strategies; therefore, this knowledge can help teachers to achieve certain required competencies. However, as Pittman and O'Neil assert, it is worth highlighting that in the construction of the educological content in the personalistic and inquiry-oriented paradigm teachers are considered as dynamic members. Indeed, the instrument by which experiences are translated into dynamic knowledge is reflection. Moreover, personalistic and inquiry-oriented paradigms focus on a continuing process including experience, while looking back on experience, scrutiny, and restructuring (Pittman & O'Neil, 2003).

Similarly, Tarone and Allright (2005) refer to two fallacies concerning language teacher education: the academic fallacy and the non-interface fallacy. In the former, teachers are respected as empty receptacles waiting to be filled; in fact, the academy fallacy appears to us to rest on the belief that novice teachers can work effectively if they master a set of content courses. In brief, the teachers are supposed to develop a body of declarative knowledge about language teaching and learning. The pedagogy enacted in this fallacy-the academy fallacy-is reductionist. Accordingly, "in a reductionistic pedagogical context meanings need to be discovered, rediscovered, and copied" (Kincheloe, 2003, p. 9). Critically speaking, Kincheloe maintains "a reductionistic paradigm discourages the preparation of inquisitive, knowledge-producing, critical students and teachers" (p. 9). In contrast, the non-interface fallacy maintains that "language teachers can only acquire the ability to teach languages in the context of the language classroom itself" (Tarone & Allwright, 2005, p.12). The given fallacy somehow is compatible with Krashen's (1981) input hypothesis that consciously learned information about language does not have any beneficial impact on the process of acquisition of that language.

3. An attempt to achieve culminative balance

Having a closer look at the above mentioned literature shows no one denies that a teacher's professional growth does not take place in isolation. Teachers' professional growth is a form of social process and is the result of collaboration. To the present writers, the two fallacies, academic fallacy and non-interface fallacy, contribute to a *culminative balance*; that is, effective teachers not only need to have a comprehensive knowledge of the subject but also require to be put in the related context to employ their potentials in order to theorize their own practice. In other words, effective teachers should be the theorizers of their own practice, and at the same time, the practitioners of their own theory. In much the same way, Kicheloe (2003) asserts "to produce smarter teachers and high-quality education, critical teacher researchers [need to] push the conceptual envelope" (p. 20). In effect, men are by nature question askers and answer seekers. Chances always favor the prepared mind. Undeniably, the prepared minds always challenge with what is going on. In fact, "when the teacher as researcher connects with other teachers as researchers, contradictions, tensions, a dynamic process ensues" (Kicheloe, 2003, p.39).

Importantly, the primary purpose of culminative balance for the purpose of teacher empowerment entails providing teachers with the skills and resources that enable them to reflect on educational practice. Empowering teachers in education involves letting teachers as researchers gain the skill to interrogate their own practices in order to hypothesize new assumptions to consolidate more theories. This will not be achieved unless the education becomes bottom-up oriented. However, this is less than a realistic wish. Although education, per se, is not neutral, making an attempt to achieve the symbiosis between reality and ideality is not far-fetched.

It can be considered a rightful rationale to bear in mind that the emphasis on a reflective approach in teacher education implies that the quality of teacher education is evaluated in line with the criteria attributed to what makes education reflective (Vieira & Marques, 2002). Nevertheless, as to Kemmis (1999, cited in Vieira & Marques, 2002), several propositions can be attributed to reflection:

- Reflection is neither biologically nor psychologically determined;
- Reflection is not pure thought;
- Reflection is oriented towards action and is concerned with the relation between thought and action;

- Reflection is neither individualistic nor mechanistic; it is social.
- Reflection is not value-free or neutral as regards values; it expresses and serves concrete human, social, cultural and political interests.
- Reflection is constructed actively and consolidates the practical ideologies that support social order.

It is worthwhile to recall that in educational reforms, teachers are seldom disempowered and treated as mere consumers of the available approaches. In such reforms, teacher education is inclined toward emancipation. The emancipatory goal of reflective teaching relies upon the notion of transformation that the quality of teacher education is qualified by (Harvey & Knight, 1996).

4. Teacher education in Iran

It is an undeniable fact that English teaching in a country like Iran, which according to Kachru (1991) belongs to the expanding circle of World Englishes Model, is an arduous task. Regardless of this fact, it is worth considering that learning English in Iran deems crucial because of a variety of reasons. To better appreciate the importance of English, Razmjoo and Riazi (2006) assert that English is supposed to be the language of international technological and technical data, business, communication, and financial or cultural transaction through various devices such as Internet.

It is worth highlighting that educational system in Iran is claimed to be traditional or what Freire (1970) called the banking system of education (Abdollahi & Shahi, 2012). According to Freire (1970), in banking system of education, students are regarded as vacant vessels waiting to be filled with information by educated instructors. Metaphorically, students are viewed as passive sponges waiting to soak up facts. Interestingly he believes that in this model teachers are seen as “bank-clerks” who invests on students’ blank minds. He clearly expresses that the banking system of education is a mechanistic formation of education. He took this idea a step further by mentioning that this issue fits well with the assumptions of behaviorist learning theories. In contrast, several researchers (Gholami & Mirzaei, 2013; Maftoon & Shakouri, 2013) believe in some traces of modernity even post modernity as problem posing situations in contrast to banking system in this scheme, and they don’t accept that the Iranian educational system is merely traditional.

In this regard, Maftoon and Shakouri (2013)’s comment is quite illustrative and illuminating; they state that the philosophy behind curriculum in Iranian educational system was earlier based on collecting facts whose reliability was determined by a group of elites. Maftoon and Shakouri assert that this philosophical trend was in line with Perennialism that follows more or less an idealist path. Although to several scholars (e.g., Abdollahi & Shahi, 2012), "the situation of Iranian educational system has some distance with the globalized level and post modernism and is more aligned with traditional indicators and is stagnant (Abdollahi & Shahi, 2012, p. 172), Maftoon and Shakouri (2013) maintain that it is a fallacy to claim that insights derived from traditional philosophies are in conflict with those of modern philosophies and postmodern thinkings. To Maftoon and Shakouri, most of the current challenges in Iranian educational system are rooted in the contradiction between tradition and modernity.

Nevertheless, assuming that Iranian educational system is in conflict with the tenets of modernity and post-modernity is not legitimate. Iranian teacher education, though deeply rooted in perennialist philosophy, is interested in experiential learning inspired by Dewey's (1933) constructivism. In this regard, in a study conducted by Atai and Mazlum (2012), regarding Iranian teachers’ views towards the educational philosophies of Aristotle, Dewey, and Rousseau, the scholars concluded that teachers were more or less interested in some aspects of Dewey’s and Rousseau’s philosophies of education. Henceforth, it is a fallacy to claim traditions and modernity are in conflict in Iranian's educational system. Accordingly, Gusfield (1967) maintains “the acceptance of a new product … does not necessarily lead to the disappearance of the older form [;] new forms may only increase the range of alternatives (p. 355).

In sum, what several scholars (Fahim & Pishghadam, 2009; Abdollahi & Shahi, 2012) insist is that Iranian Educational system may be distant from the traces of postmodernity. But the sheer truth is that education is culturally-bound; nevertheless, no one can claim the assumption that the teachers are not potential to employ the pedagogy hidden in a variety of educational perspectives inspired by different philosophical underpinnings. What follows is the findings of some studies conducted in Iranian educational system which indicate the traces of modernity and post modernity as the legitimate and rightful rationales to prove the fact that this Iranian educational system is mistakenly believed to be merely traditional by some scholars (Abdollahi & Shahi, 2012). Therefore, it has to be specified that align with traditional education in Iranian system of learning, some hints of modernity and even post modernity can be viewed.

Regarding post modernity, Gholami and Mirzaei (2013) claim that postmodernism has been the real reason of many breakthroughs in all fields of science and technology in which Iran cannot be an exception. It has to be mentioned that post-method pedagogy has been the research topic of many studies conducted in EFL contexts including Iran. Related to this issue, the findings of the survey recently done in Iran by Gholami and Mirzaei show that EFL teachers in Iran, whilst aware of the achievements of post-method era, encounter some difficulties and barriers in implementing teaching based on all of its criteria. But this doesn't mean that post method pedagogy and post method teacher respectively is completely ignored in this system. The results of the study conducted by Gholami and Mirzaei showed that teachers believe in the implementation of post-method pedagogy in Iranian educational system if the barriers to its implementation are removed. Therefore, it can be seen that several studies (Gholami, Bonyadi & Mirzaei, 2012; Gholami & Mirzaei, 2013; Maftoon & Shakouri, 2013) conducted specifically in Iranian context show teachers' curiosity and eagerness to see the realization of postmethod pedagogy in Iranian educational system regardless of challenges and barriers.

Seen in this light, Manteghi (2008) asserts "fulfilling the educational innovations across the education system, not only depends on changes in some of the existing strategies…and allocation of the necessary investments, but also demands the creation of necessary cultural grounds as well for acceptance of innovations" (p. 58). However, it is undeniable that in any educational system "there will be groups of persons who will resist the innovations, which can cause the investments to be wasted. These groups include a set of higher rank managers in the education system" (Manteghi, 2008, p. 58). This case can be considered as one of the barriers for impracticality of post-method in EFL context of Iran.

Conceiving the importance of post-method practicality obstacles, Gholami and Mirzaei (2013) inspired by Kumaravadivelu (2006), underline two barriers in Iranian educational system: pedagogical and ideological barriers. Evidence shows at least some traces of post method pedagogy in Iranian educational system can be linked to the various types of materials particularly books written by Iranian (nonnative) speakers. So it seems that the ideological barriers to implementing post method pedagogy are going to be removed progressively. As it is astutely mentioned by Kumaravadivelu (2006), ideological barriers are in two categories. The first one is *marginalization*, reflecting the idea that unfortunately the local knowledge and experience gained are regarded back warded in the field of language teaching and learning or is tried to be deemed as less important. "This colonial strategy of power, for instance, purposely projects the image of western knowledge, and deliberately diminishes the value of local knowledge" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 220).

The second type is *self- marginalization* considering the actuality that in most periphery contexts the language teachers and, in particular, the experts wittingly or unwittingly admit the native norms, their supremacy and centrally produced textbooks and other materials uncritically which causes self-marginalization authority. Pedagogical barriers, in contrast, mainly include the educational systems which are based on transmission methods, based on preselected and predetermined theories and knowledge packages from method-based teacher education system. While there is less prominence for students and teachers to have the chance of expanding or approving critical standing for what they consider as their own perceptive of language teaching and learning, they are obliged to accept their teacher masters as well as of wisdom (Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Henceforth, it is worth investigating whether these pedagogical barriers exist or not in our educational system.

Regardless of all abovementioned facts considering challenges and problems in implementing post method pedagogy in Iran, as it was pinpointed at the outset of this paper, there are at least some hints showing non traditionality of Iranian system of education. Seen in this light, Gholami and Mirzaei (2013) in their paper enumerate some teaching strategies as traces of post method pedagogy in Iranian system of education. These strategies are as follows:

- Existence of Internet and social networks like: Email, chatting, face book.
- Combination of all four language skills i.e. listening, reading, speaking, and writing.
- Books, articles, and CDs as well as textbook are accessible.
- Doing needs analysis for teaching.
- Discussions and group work.
- Enhancing learners' decision making process.
- Learners' familiarity with a variety of cultures.
- Self-study, autonomous learning are encouraged for learners.

5. Conclusion

As it was mentioned in the literature, the traditional system of education as opposed to modernity and post modernity considers teachers as people who know and students as those who don't. Enterprise is not likely in traditional education. What's more, the traditional system is dehumanizing and students are objects of the educational process, not subjects. However, considering pieces of evidence mentioned in this paper knowledge is always negotiable. And traces of this negotiation can be seen in Iranian educational system regardless of the barriers and challenges. Seen in this light and considering the ways to remove these barriers and to achieve culminative balance, modernity and post modernity rather than traditionalism should be viewed as those concepts that can be taken under more scrutiny in Iran.

To put it in a nutshell, teacher education should aim at achieving a balance between what teachers know and what they can do. On the necessity of culminative balance, it is worth mentioning that teachers' praxis will remain barren if it is not well supported with theoretical background. In fact, praxis, per se, is concerned with a give-and-take link between thought and action—between theorizing practice and practicing theory. As Freire (1985, cited in Monchinski, 2008) warns "cut-off from practice theory becomes a simple verbalism and separated from theory is nothing but blind activism" (pp. 1-2).

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