

Exploring Teachers' Perceptions of their Role in the EFL Classroom: Some Considerations

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Abstract

Previous researchers have studied learners' beliefs regarding the role of a teacher in an EFL/ESL classroom (Narváez, 2006 & 2007; Chan, 2001; Lizzio, et al, 2002; Kinchin, 2004; Koçak, 2003; Chiu, 2005). Results suggest students highly depend on the teacher to transmit knowledge to them, such as expected in a traditionalist approach. Due to the limited research carried out concerning teachers' beliefs of their role in the EFL classroom, the aim of this study is to identify how teachers perceive their role in this setting. This will provide a basis for a future comparison of the beliefs that both teachers and students have, and how different these may be. An extensive review of previous research carried out in this area, as well as the methodology and instruments to be used will be presented.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that success in language learning depends on the active involvement of both the teacher and the students in their teaching-learning process (Block, 1992; Barcelos, 2000). However, the unwillingness that students may demonstrate due to different factors could be a barrier in this process (Chan, 2001). Needless to say, the rejection that some teachers may have towards an approach that involves a more active role on the students' behalf could also be an affecting factor.

Previous researchers have studied learners' beliefs regarding the role of the teacher in the EFL/ESL classroom (Chan, 2001; Lizzio, et al, 2002; Kinchin, 2004; Koçak, 2003, Chiu, 2005). In Mexico, fewer studies have been carried out in this area (Fabela, 2006; Narvaez, 2006; Narvaez, 2009; Reyes, 2009). In most of these studies, authors have found that students highly depend on the teacher to transmit knowledge to them, such as expected in a more traditionalist approach.

The broad study on which this paper is based aims at comparing and contrasting perceptions of students, teachers, and institutions regarding the role of the teacher in the EFL classroom. However, due to the limited research carried out concerning teachers' beliefs, this part of the study pursues to identify how teachers perceive themselves in their role in a Mexican university setting. In this paper, we will present an overview of previous research carried out regarding students' and teacher's perceptions in different contexts, nationally and internationally. We will then proceed to describe the aims of the study and the research methodology to be used. Finally, in the last section, we will include some considerations we consider must be undertaken in this type of study.

2. Background

As mentioned previously, there are three main phases in this study. The first one, which underlies this paper, focuses on identifying teachers' perceptions of their own role inside the EFL classroom. A second stage will be to identify students' beliefs regarding the role of the teacher. The third phase will include an analysis of what institutional documents from two Mexican universities foresee as the role of the teacher. In what follows, we will present a review of previous research carried out, both inside and outside of Mexico.

2.1 Students' perceptions regarding the role of the teacher in the EFL classroom

Kinchin (2004) highlighted the importance of learners understanding exactly what they are expected to do according to the teacher, such as acting as passive receivers of information (objectivist classroom) or as active builders of understanding (constructivist classroom). Therefore, he investigated secondary school students' preferences towards an objectivist or a constructivist learning environment. Conversations of 'student voiced research' were used among participants, along with cartoons which helped to trigger discussion among students related to their epistemological beliefs. The results indicated an

overwhelming preference among students for a constructivist learning environment. He suggested that the lack of promoting such principles in the classroom would very likely provoke a gap between teaching and learning styles which may impede meaningful learning.

It is well known that investigation into learners' beliefs will help both the learner and teacher build a shared understanding of the language learning process and their expectations of roles in the classroom. Thus, Chan (2001) conducted a research in a university in Hong Kong with a group of 20 undergraduate students. The study aimed at exploring learners' attitudes and expectations of language learning, teacher and learner roles, their learning preferences and perceptions of learner autonomy. A questionnaire-survey was used which included a needs analysis in the following areas: aims and motivation in language learning, students' perception of both the teachers and students role, learning styles and preferences, their perceptions of autonomous learning, as well as the extent to which they considered themselves autonomous learners. The results showed that students were highly motivated to learn English for purposes of communication, rather than to learn the language for its own sake. Regarding the teacher's role, similarly to results found in the Mexican context (Narváez, 2006 & 2007; Fabela, 2006), the teacher is regarded as the person who will make learning happen; he/she is seen as the *sole source of power, authority, and control*.

Koçak (2003) investigated, among other factors, 186 preparatory students' perceptions of their teachers and their own responsibilities in different aspects of their English learning. A questionnaire "Learner Autonomy Readiness Instrument (LARI)" was employed for data collection. This instrument considered four main areas: motivation, metacognitive strategies, responsibilities, and outside class activities. The findings included that the teacher is seen as responsible for most decisions related to formal learning instruction, such as: content, activities, time limit, and materials inside the classroom.

Narváez (2006 & 2007) used a Voiced Research (VR) approach to portray how students enrolled in an English undergraduate program at a Mexican university make sense of their academic life, as well as their perceptions regarding

the role of the teacher in their learning process. Among the results, he concluded that students tend to perceive the teacher as the central classroom actor; furthermore, the teacher is the dominant figure in the learning process.

These results agree with those presented by Fabela (2006), who aimed at exploring learners' expectations regarding the teacher's role in the EFL classroom. For data collection, Fabela employed Stephenson's (1935) "Q Methodology" with 26 university level students. The results indicated that most students tend to highly depend on the teacher and, furthermore, consider the him/her as the person in charge of transmitting knowledge to learners and responsible for their learning process, attitudes which would very unlikely lead to autonomous learning.

Reyes et al (2009) studied 175 university level students in Mexico in order to identify their perceptions regarding what characteristics a good English teacher should have. A questionnaire "Escala de creencias sobre el aprendizaje del inglés (ECAI)" was constructed based on previous research in the area (Pratt, 1998; Cotteral, 1999; Horwitz, 1988; Sakui & Gaies, 1999; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Ellis, 2002). Once again, the importance of the teacher's role in the classroom is evident since 53.9% of students agreed that an excellent teacher is required in order to learn English well.

So far, it is possible to conclude that previous studies on students' perceptions have employed different methods and data collection procedures. Most learners continue to perceive the ideal classroom situation as one where the teacher is considered the "transmitter" of knowledge and the learner the "receiver". Moreover, the teacher is held responsible for students' success and/or failure in learning a foreign language.

2.2 Students and teachers' perceptions regarding the role of the teacher in the EFL classroom

As we mentioned in the Introduction, there is a notorious lack of research carried out specifically regarding teacher's beliefs of their role in the classroom, as well as institutional perceptions on the teacher's role. Consequently, we will

continue providing an insight into research comparing both students' and teachers' perceptions regarding the role of the teacher in the EFL/ESL classroom.

Researchers have suggested there is a “gap” between students and teachers' perceptions and assume that learning could be affected due to this factor. In 1983, Fisher and Fraser found, in an Australian sample, that there was a gap between students' perceptions of classroom learning environments and those expressed by teachers. They suggested that the gap probably arose because of the different roles teachers and students played in the classroom environments.

Likewise, Tsai (2003) explored the differences between science students' and teachers' perceptions of laboratory learning environments. The Science Laboratory Environment Inventory (SLEI), developed by Fraser, Giddings, and McRobbie (1995) was used for sampling 1012 students and 24 teachers in Taiwanese junior high school. After comparing the results, they found there were basically two major gaps revealed in this study: firstly, between students' actual and preferred learning settings, indicating that students were unsatisfied with the instruction they were receiving, and secondly, between students and teachers' perceptions towards the learning environment. While students preferred a much more student-cohesive, open-ended, integrated, and rule-clear laboratory environment, teachers expected oppositely.

Deemer (2004) examined existing relationships among teacher beliefs, instructional practices and classroom goal orientations in high school science classrooms. The findings indicated that students and teachers differed in their perceptions regarding the goal emphasis in the classroom. Students and teachers differed in their perceptions regarding the goal emphasis in the classroom with teachers reporting the use of more mastery practices.

Campbell et al (2001) compared and contrasted different student and teacher perceptions of teaching and learning in the classroom. Surveys and interviews were used for data gathering. The results indicated that students with deep approaches generally perceived the same learning environments differently from those with surface approaches. The findings also confirmed those reported by Campbell et al (1996) and suggest that students need to be taught very explicitly

how to learn from varied active learning experiences such as collaborative learning and group discussion, and also how to make connections between theory and practice.

Kwok et al (2002) compared the differences between student and teachers' roles in learning. The findings on students' conceptions of their role in learning confirm that not all students welcome a learner-centred approach. While some students prefer it, others prefer a teacher-centred approach. Their desire for a particular form of teaching is related to their beliefs about knowledge. Respondents who have a didactic/reproductive orientation find 'transmissive' type teachers more helpful whereas those who have a facilitative / transformative view appreciate teachers who are facilitators of their learning.

Barcelos (2000) investigated how students and teachers' beliefs related to each other. To this effect, teachers and students' language learning beliefs and their actions in the classroom were analysed. For collecting data among participants, class observations, interviews, and stimulated recall were used. The results indicated there was a significant difference and conflict between teachers and students' beliefs of their roles in the classroom. While teachers expected students to be more actively involved in their participation, students expected teachers to be the dominant role in the classroom.

It is clear that most studies on perceptions have been centred on two main aspects: 1) students' beliefs regarding their learning process and the role of the teacher and the student in the classroom; and 2) the importance of studying teachers' perceptions of the interaction that takes place among teachers and students in the classroom. Since most research has been carried out in different contexts, educational levels, and disciplines, we intend on finding if these results could apply to EFL students in Mexican universities.

3. Methodology

3.1 Aims of the study

The broad study on which this paper is based aimed to discover how university teachers and students perceive their role to be in the foreign language classroom. The aims of the study were to:

- Provide a state-of-the-art account of how teacher's roles are conceived in the ELT literature
- Identify teachers' conceptions of their own role
- Reveal students' perceptions of their teachers' role
- How these roles are depicted in official documents

As mentioned previously, in the Background, the study of teachers' perceptions and beliefs has been approached from different angles using different methodological positions. Yet, little is known as to how Mexican university EFL teachers regard their roles. Thus the aim of this ongoing research is to study EFL teachers' perceptions regarding their role in two Mexican universities. This will provide a basis for a comparison of the expectations that both teachers and students have, and how different these may be. Furthermore, the context of what each university considers the teacher's role inside the classroom will also be analysed.

3.2 Research participants

The participants in this study include a group of English teachers working at two public universities in Mexico. All teachers are full time professors; the least experienced teacher has been teaching for 8 years while the most experienced has been in the TEFL field for more than 25 years. Most of the teachers have completed post-graduate qualifications in the field. All teachers have participated in some form of in-service training courses and/or professional development related to EFL.

The students they taught are all members of BA in English programs; that is, Mexican students in their early twenties studying to be English teachers. Most of them arrive at university with scarce knowledge of English but expected to reach an English requirement established by their University (which ranges from B2-C1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages after 5 years of study).

3.3 Data generation

As this study is concerned with creating understanding from the perspective of the teachers' own frame of reference, we decided to use a qualitative approach. More specifically, a Voiced Research approach was employed (Narvaez, 2006) in search of exploring teachers' perceptions of their role in the EFL classroom. A brief description of Voiced Research follows.

Voiced research is a relatively new way of bringing to life perspectives that would otherwise be excluded, muted, or silenced by the dominant discourse. Numerous commentators have devoted time and effort to the discussion and dissemination of this particular approach to research (Stevenson and Ellsworth 1991, Herr and Anderson 1993, Lincoln 1995, Johnston and Nichols 1995, O'Loughlin 1995, Shacklock and Smyth 1997, Herr and Anderson 1997, Smyth 1998, Martinez and Munday 1998, Smyth 1999, Smyth 2000, Smyth and Hattam 2001, Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001, Krishnan and Hwee 2002).

Shacklock and Smyth (1997) claim that 'in the telling of stories of life, previously unheard, or silenced, voices open up the possibility for new, even radically different narrations of life experience'. In that category we can place students and teachers, who are seldom consulted on matters that intimately attain to them such as syllabus reforms or methodological issues. Voiced research is expected to reveal hidden realities, to initiate discussion (Holliday 2002); to reveal the under life of schools. Smyth & Hattam (2001) argue that the concept of 'voiced research' has been identified as being epistemologically committed to a democratic research agenda and so needs to be constructed in such a way that a genuine space within which research participants are able to reveal what is real for them is

created. Research questions can only emerge out of 'conversations with a purpose' (Burgess, 1988) since trust and rapport between the researcher and the researchees must be established.

The use of purposeful conversations instead of a more structured form of interview is advisable because 'it is important to build into the normal patterns of interaction within the [researched] group, and probably getting better evidence as a result' (Drever, 2003:16). It is important to establish friendly communication patterns with informants in order to generate data; in the EFL field this is very natural. The justification for using this method of data collection is succinctly put forward by Drever (2003:1), who writes: "in the teaching profession, when you want to get information, canvass opinion or exchange ideas, the natural thing to do is to talk to people". Furthermore, qualitative interviewing allows the researcher to capture people's language and behaviour, a way of articulating their worlds.

This comes from an ontological position in which people's knowledge, views, understandings, interpretations, experiences, and interactions are meaningful properties of the social reality that qualitative research questions are designed to explore. We should start from the assumption that teachers have important stories to tell about their experiences at school, the school itself and the structures that foster or restrain learning. In addition, it should be kept in mind that 'Natural language is studied ... because it reveals something about the social situation in which talk takes place' (Brewer, 2000:74).

Using interviews as the main means of data generation implies that the researcher plays the role of the research instrument.

Our role as teacher-researchers is primordial since "[he or she] is the primary instrument of data collection and data analysis" (Merriam, 2002:5). Mason also highlights the qualitative researcher's role by saying that "the researcher is seen as actively constructing knowledge about that world according to certain principles and using certain methods derived from, or which express, their epistemological position" (Mason, 2002:52).

The following methods of data generation will be used:

- Involvement and Participation. Being teachers at the site of investigation, the researchers will constantly be involved with and participants of the 'culture' in which these teachers work; therefore, it will be able to obtain rich 'experiential data'.
- Purposeful Conversations. Successive conversations with the participants will give the researchers invaluable oral accounts of teachers' perceptions of their role in the language classroom.
- In-depth conversations. These are more targeted discussions of the issues brought up at initial conversations; these conversations intend to seek for details and to clarify issues.

These conversations will be recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Thus, the data informing this study will include the following:

- 'experiential data'
- oral accounts of teachers' perceptions

There is a plethora of books and articles which discern about the use of 'interviews' for research purposes (for instance: Kvale 1996, 2004; Drever 2003; Gilham 2000) so there is no need to explain or provide the theoretical foundations of such a method of data recollection. Suffice will be to mention that 'interviews' have been recognised as one of the most prominent methods of data collection in the ethnographic tradition. The ethnographic 'interview' has been recognised as the most direct method of gaining knowledge on and about the research setting (Drever 2003). Interviews have been classified into formal or informal, requested or unrequested considering the length and type of contact made, context, types of questions and so on. Qualitative research literature has also tended to differentiate between different kinds of interview strategy such as structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews (Hammersly and Atkinson, 1995; Gillham, 2000; Roberts, 2002) which indicate the level of control the interviewer takes over the

content and direction of the interviews. This method was selected in order to infer perceptions from teachers' statements and intentions.

4. Conclusions

Through the extensive theoretical presented in this paper, it is possible to conclude that analyzing both students' and teacher's perceptions regarding their role in the classroom is fundamental. Moreover, it has been suggested by several authors that the misconceptions and/or differences they have could affect the teaching-learning process.

Internationally, most studies in this area have focused on comparing students' and teacher's perceptions on their own role. However, it is surprising to find out that in Mexico no research has been carried out likewise. The few studies available have focused on identifying students' perceptions, which is why the results obtained from this study will be of great benefit.

We also found that the institutional context is not included as a variable in any of the studies presented in this paper. Therefore, we consider that this research will provide insight into this perspective, which until now has remained unstudied.

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Biodata

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Appendix 1

Teacher Interview Guide

1. Para los propósitos de esta investigación no utilizaremos los nombres de los participantes. ¿Qué seudónimo te gustaría?
2. ¿Cuál es tu área de formación? ¿Dónde estudiaste?
3. Cuando eras estudiante, ¿Cómo eran tus clases? ¿Cómo eran tus profesores?
4. ¿Por qué decidiste ser Profesor?
5. ¿Cuánto tiempo tienes de dar clases en el nivel universitario?
6. Desde que ingresaste a la Institución, ¿Cuáles han sido tus experiencias como profesor?
7. ¿Qué opinas respecto a la Institución? ¿Se preocupa por el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje?
8. ¿Qué materia(s) impartes?
9. ¿Cómo te describes como profesor? ¿Qué tan parecido/diferente eres respecto a tus profesores cuando eras estudiante?
10. ¿Qué tipo de relación mantienes con los estudiantes? ¿Se acercan los estudiantes para hablarte de sus preferencias y/o inquietudes respecto a su proceso de aprendizaje?
11. ¿Cuál crees que es el rol del profesor de inglés en el aula?
12. ¿Cómo describirías un buen profesor de inglés?