RESEARCH ARTICLE

INVESTIGATING IRANIAN EFL TEACHERS' COGNITIONS OFLANGUAGE TEACHING TECHNIQUES: PRONUNCIATION TEACHING IN FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' cognition constitutes the lion's share of research in recent years with the aim to understand the complexities underpinning the teachers' cognitions. Such efforts have provided insights into how teachers' cognitions develop over time and how they are reflected in their classroom practices. Although numerous studies have been conducted on the issue of Iranian EFL teachers' cognitions about grammar and reading comprehension, little research study ever exists on their cognitions about the pronunciation techniques they apply in their EFL classrooms. Therefore, the present study was aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' cognition, especially in relation to the pronunciation techniques they use in the oral communication classrooms and their cognitions about their language learners' characteristics. For these purposes, the cognitions of five English teachers in the oral communication classrooms were investigated. The teachers were asked to answer two semi-structured interviews. Moreover, their students were required to fill out a questionnaire. The findings revealed that there was an intricate relationship between language teachers' experience and their cognitions about the techniques they applied in classrooms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' cognition constitutes the lion's share of research in recent years with the aim to understand the complexities underpinning the teachers' cognitions and their classroom practices (Baker, 2014). As defined by Borg (2006, p. 35), second language teacher's cognition (SLTC) is "an often tacit, personally-held practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic—i.e. defined and refined on the basis of educational and professional experiences throughout teachers' lives". The concept of teacher cognition covers a range of notions such as teachers' knowledge, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes towards their actual performances and practices in a specific context. SLTC has received focal attention among the researchers and practitioners in the area of teacher education. Data presented in the literature have provided insights into the components and constituents of teachers' beliefs and knowledge, the way their cognitions have developed and how they are manifested in their classroom practices (Borg & Burns, 2008; Borg, 2006). Research into SLTC, especially in the context of Iran, is in its infancy, however. A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the issue of language learners' cognition (Rahimi, Fallahi&Samigorganroodi, 2013; Riazi&Rahimi, 2005), teachers' cognition about grammar (Alijanian, 2012) and reading comprehension (Sadeghi&BidelNikou, 2012). However, little research study ever exists on the issue of teachers' cognitions about pronunciation techniques they apply in their EFL classrooms. The question raised here was that whether Iranian EFL teachers apply specific attitudes, knowledge or beliefs toward teaching pronunciation and if so what they are. Taking previous studies in the field as a starting point, the present study was aimed to explore the teachers' cognitions especially in relation to the pronunciation techniques they use in the oral communication classrooms. Integral to this line of study, as mentioned by Borg (2006), is the inclusion of interview techniques about the teachers' actual classroom performance and not merely self-reports about their practices in the class.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first strand of the theoretical framework of this study draws on research investigation in the field of SLTC, which has been defined by Borg (2006) as the study of what teachers know, think, and believe. In a review of current trends in language teacher education, Johnson and Christensen (2006) commented on the field of teacher cognition as the area of research, which has made the most significant and valuable contribution in the last 40 years to our perceptions of teachers and teaching in general. This field has been regarded as a very fruitful area of research in language teaching since 1990s and this work has offered a number of insights about the nature of teachers' thoughts and beliefs and the role these beliefs play in the process of language teaching and teacher training (Phipps & Borg, 2009).

Teacher cognition research, as an all-embracing research field, attempts to investigate pre- and in-service teachers' beliefs, self-reflections and knowledge about students, the act of teaching, content and awareness of problem-solving strategies regularly found in the context of classroom teaching. This line of research might include the study of teachers' thoughts and reflections during the stage of planning, interactive thoughts throughout teaching process, attitudes and opinions about students, learning, education, and contemplations about their own decisions and performance (Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1990; Peterson & Clark, 1978). Teacher cognition researches search for capturing concepts "characterized as implicit, tacit, practical, systematic, dynamic, and contextually grounded, and can be related to the subject matter being taught, to learning, the learners, the curriculum, and to syllabuses and the goals of education" (Andon&Eckerth, 2009, p. 289).Principally, studies done in the area of teacher cognition are in pursuit of describing the 'mental lives' of teachers (Borg, 2006; Clark & Peterson, 1984), i.e., what they think, know and believe, and how these factors relate to what they do in the classroom (Borg & Burns, 2008; Woods &Çakır, 2011). As stated by Borg (2003, p. 81), teachers are "active, thinking decision makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs". Therefore, the research on teachers' cognitions and thought processes encompasses a range of topics, containing research on teachers' interactive, thought processes, teacher planning and decisions and teachers' beliefs and theories, as well as the process of teaching planning. Teacher cognition studies can be quite abstract and complex seeing that it undertakes to perceive and notice the "unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching" (Borg, 2003, p. 81). In the effort to observe the unobservable dimensions, researchers place reliance on a vast variety of research methods in teacher cognition studies. The issue that needed to be addressed here was the investigation of EFL teachers'

HadiSalehi, HojatAmini

cognitions about the techniques they apply in oral communication classrooms. More specifically, the study tried to answer the following question:

What cognitions do Iranian EFL teachers have about techniques for teaching English pronunciation in their oral communication classrooms?

3. METHOD

3.1. PARTICIPATION

Five experienced teachers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes agreed to participate in this project. The teachers were chosen based on their current placement as an oral communication instructor, their teaching experience, and willingness to participate in the research study. All of the teachers had taught their oral communication course at least once in the previous semester, and each teacher had between 5 and 10 years' teaching experience. All of these teachers were working in private English language institutes in Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran. They had graduated from the field of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), or held a master's degree in a TEFL-related field. Regarding their language proficiency, the teachers varied: two of them had passed their TOFEL or IELTS in recent years, two of them were enrolling in pre-IELTS and pre-TOFEL courses in other language institutes and one of them was recently graduated from his/her university; therefore, his/her proficiency in English was not as high as others.

3.2 INSTRUMENT

Contrary to previous studies conducted on SLTC which gathered a large amount of data from a small number of participants (Farrell & Lim, 2005), the current study conducted three SSIs with each of the teachers. The interviews were carried out in three phases: one at the beginning of the semester, one in the middle of the semester and one at the end. See Appendix 1 to see the semi-structured interview questions.

3.3. PROCEDURE

In this study, the researcher used interviews in order to gather in-depth data about the teachers' cognitions (knowledge, beliefs, perception and attitude) towards the pronunciation techniques they used in their classrooms. For this purpose, five EFL teachers were asked to participate in this phase of the study. The teachers were selected based on two criteria: their current placement as an oral communication instructor and their teaching experience of more than five years. As it was mentioned before, the interviews were conducted in three phases: beginning, middle and end of the course.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

In order to answer this RQ, the teachers were invited to an interview session in which the interviewer asked them to mention some of the techniques they regularly use in their teaching pronunciation, especially those which improve language learners' pronunciation skill.Table 4.1. provides a summary of these techniques.

Table 4.1. Distribution of techniques used by the teachers

		T1	T2	T3	T4	T5
Controlled activities						
1.	Plan and purpose (PP)	•	•	•	•	•
2.	Explanation and examples (EE)	•	•	•	•	•
3.	Production and practice (PPr)	•	•	•	•	
4.	Kinesthetic/tactile practice (KT)	•			•	
5.	Checking (Ch)	•	•	•	•	•
6.	Question-answer display—knowledge verification (KV)		•	•		•
7.	Question-answer display—knowledge exploration (KE)		•	•		•
8.	Repetition drill (RD)	•	•	•	•	
9.	Visual identification (VI)		•			•
10.	Audio identification (AI)		•			•
11.	Visual recognition (VR)		•			•
12.	Audio recognition (AR)		•			•
13.	Review (R)	•		•	•	•
14.	Testing (T)	•	•	•	•	•
Guided activities						
1.	Question-answer referential	•	•		•	•
2.	Production—student feedback practice		•	•		•
3.	Production—audio identification		•			•
4.	Production—audio recognition		•			•
5.	Mutual exchange		•			
6.	Preparation	•		•	•	
Free activities						
1. Game				•	•	
2. Drama		•			•	
3. Presentation			•			•
4. Discussion			•			•
TOTAL		11	21	13	12	20

HadiSalehi, HojatAmini

As the table shows, teachers almost applied all types of techniques in their classrooms. Overall, the results obtained from teachers' interview suggested that controlled activities were dominant in OC classrooms comparing to other types of activities. All teachers started their teaching by providing objectives for their lessons in which pronunciation instruction was included in this preparation section (plan and purpose). As expected, explanations and examples, activity set-up, and checking activities were the integral part of teachers' instruction. At some point during the instruction, teachers spent some times of explaining English pronunciation features, followed by giving instruction of an activity which involved listening or producing that feature. Students were also provided with feedbacks about their pronunciation by their teachers (checking activities). Other controlled activities used by the teachers were "production and practice", where students were required to practice the new feature they have just instructed, "repetition drills", which were mostly favored by the institutes where teachers were working, and "reviewing" and "testing activities".

Other controlled activities were used in various degrees by teachers. T1 and T4 showed approval of using "kinesthetic/tactile practice", i.e. using whole body movement when teaching different features of English pronunciation. "Display questions", which were designed either to examine students' prior knowledge of a pronunciation feature (knowledge exploration activities) or to determine if students had acquired previously-taught information (knowledge verification activities), served a role in T2, T3 and T5 classrooms. The two sets of "identification" (visual and audio identification) and "recognition" (visual and audio) activities were only done in T2 and T5 classrooms. According to the bio-data questionnaire, these two teachers were taking upper graduate courses in English, and that is the reason they applied a wider repertoire of teaching pronunciation techniques than three other teachers.

The variety of guided techniques, notwithstanding, was considerably more limited compared to controlled activities. Apart from "question and answer referential" and "preparation" techniques, which were used by all five teachers, "production" techniques (both audio identification and audio recognition) appeared to be the integral part of T2 and T5 classroom instruction. "Mutual exchange", which was the type of information gap technique, only was utilized in T2 teaching pronunciation.

As far as free techniques are concerned, the results of teachers' interview revealed that, overall, those teachers who were in the lower level classrooms employed techniques such as "game" (T3 and T4) and "drama" (T1 and T4), while T2 and T5, who were both teaching in higher level classrooms and were majoring in upper-graduate courses in TEFL, adopted techniques such as "presentation" (T2 and T5) and "discussion" (T2 and T5). Figure 4.1 represents the distribution of techniques employed by five teachers in their OC classrooms.
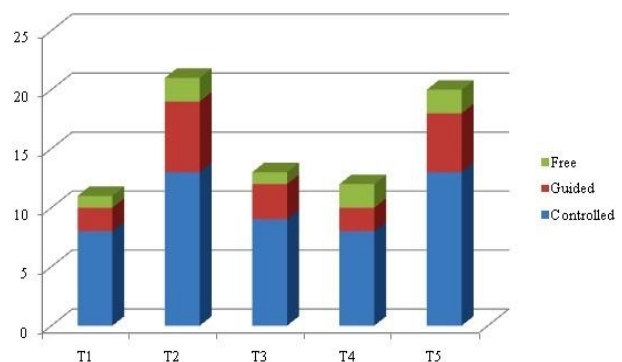

Figure 4.1. Distribution of techniques used by the teachers

By and large, the teachers in this study seemed to apply a variety of controlled, guided and free pronunciation-oriented techniques in their classroom instruction, while the controlled techniques played a dominant role in their teaching in all the classes. The next section summarized the results of students' questionnaire about the type of techniques their teachers applied in their classroom.

5. DISCUSSION IMPLICATION AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

5.1. DISCUSSION

After analysis of teachers' interview comments, it was found that although teachers had cognitions about all three types of techniques, "controlled techniques" where their knowledge base in teaching pronunciation. Notably, teachers preferred to use some limited numbers of "guided techniques", especially those which can be called "semi-controlled techniques". The findings additionally revealed that the teachers in the lower level classrooms employed some "free techniques" (such as drama and game), while other types of these techniques (such as discussion and presentation) were only used for upper level students. These

HadiSalehi, HojatAmini

results directly mirrored the status of pronunciation pedagogy in language teaching. As asserted by Baker (2014, p. 153), for decades, pronunciation instruction "was considered synonymous with imitative-intuitive and analytic-linguistic approaches in which controlled techniques formed the foundational core of teaching". Although traditional approaches were criticized of their "learning-that" attitude they had towards language teaching, and more recent communicative approaches adopt "know-how" attitude instead, still, controlled techniques and activities are evaluated (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), as demonstrated by teachers in this study. Notably, "controlled techniques" are more favored by students since, as a couple of studies show, these techniques have marked influence on the development of students' intelligibility (Reed & Michaud, 2011) and their phonological enhancement (Saito, 2001). Yet, the controlled activities have significant shortcomings as well. Research has indicated that the use of semi-controlled and free techniques, comparing to focus-on-form and controlled techniques, have substantial influences on learners' uptake and consequently, automatic application of targeted features of pronunciation (Saito &Lyster, 2012). Similarly, Khatib and Nikouee (2012) found that the combination of controlled and communicative techniques could have a noticeable impact on Iranian EFL learners' retention and automatization of some grammatical features than the application of controlled and mechanical drills alone.

5.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

The results of the study reported here could influence the way language teachers are prepared in teacher training courses (TTC). Unlike grammar, vocabulary and communication skills, which are at the core of attention in TTCs, pronunciation seems to be rarely taught. Therefore, without any preparation, teachers are left on their own to decide how to teach pronunciation and how to deal with their language learners' characteristics. Indeed, language teachers might be unaware of the complexity of English pronunciation and different techniques and approaches for teaching this sub-skill. In this regard, one of the significant implications of this study was

that TTCs in Iran need to be equipped with better pronunciation pedagogy.

5.3. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although every possible effort was made to avoid research design flaws of previous research studies, this study cannot claim to be totally free from limitations. This section foregrounds a few of these limitations.

As noted by other researchers (Baker, 2014; Borg, 2003), exploring teachers' cognitions (beliefs, thoughts, knowledge and attitudes) is technically challenging. Delving into the cognitions of teachers requires more than one technique and research methodologies, and if appropriate methodologies were applied in order to study this issue, one cannot claim that the insight gained is complete for sure. The current study collected related data in order to create a complete picture of teachers' cognitions in pronunciation pedagogy. However, we were only capable to investigate those processes and area which teachers articulate into words. Teachers could not always outline their reasons for what they do in the classrooms, even when students claim their teachers behave in a particular way.

This study also suffers from limited number of teacher participants. Although the study provided a clear picture of Iranian EFL teachers' cognitions in their pronunciation instruction, the limited number of teachers who accepted to take part in the data collection procedure of this study impose further limitation to this research project.

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APPENDIX

SAMPLE SSI QUESTIONS

1. Do you typically teach pronunciation in your classes? Why? Why not?

2. When you teach pronunciation, what do you normally do?

3. Which linguistic aspects do you usually focus on (vowels, rhythm, intonation, etc.)?

4. Up until this point in the semester, what features of English pronunciation have you focused on?

5. What features do you plan on addressing during the remainder of the semester?

6. For each of those features you listed, what activity do you use that is the most helpful for improving students' pronunciation?

7. How do you normally assess students' pronunciation?