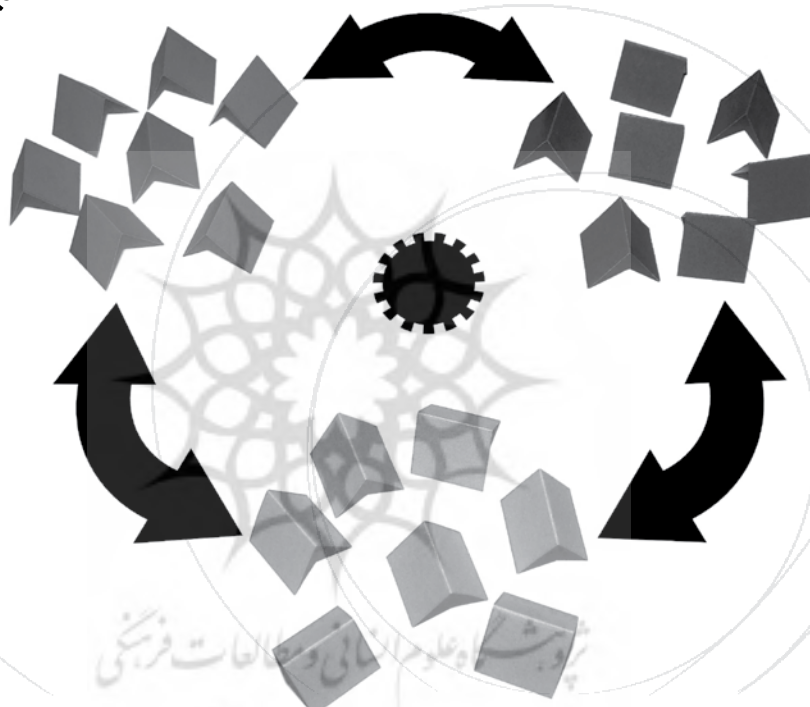


Knowledge
Improvement

Underlying Foundation of Education with an Emphasis on the Role of Teachers



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چکیده

«آموزش» فرایند پیچیده‌ای است که با عوامل شناختی، عاطفی، اجتماعی و سیاسی در محیط‌های مختلف درهم تنیده شده است. گستره‌ی وسیع این مفهوم، انگیزه‌ای برای محققان و پژوهشگران آموزش و پرورش بوده است تا موضوع را از دیدگاه‌های مختلف مورد مطالعه قرار دهند. یادگیری زبان اول به طور کلی، و زبان دوم به عنوان یک زبان خارجی، به‌طور اخص و به دلیل وقوع تغییرات عمده در نظریه و عمل، در طول سال‌های اخیر، مورد توجه قرار گرفته است. نونن (۱۹۹۹) معتقد است که این تفاوت به علت تغییر در نظریه‌های آموزش، عقاید مربوط به زبان و یادگیری و پیشرفت در تحقیق بوده است که دیدگاه‌ها و ایده‌های مهمی را برای معلمان فراهم کرده است. اشمیت (۲۰۰۲) معتقد است نباید به فراگیران به عنوان ظرف‌هایی نگاه کرد که می‌توان دانش زبان را در آن‌ها ریخت. به نظر وی یادگیری به شبکه‌ی پیچیده‌ای از متغیرهای درهم

تنیده بستگی دارد که میزان و کیفیت آن را تعیین می‌کنند.

هدف این مقاله، مورد بحث قرار دادن سه بعد سیاست‌گذاری و برنامه‌ریزی زبان، تهیه و تدوین مطالب درسی و نقش معلمان و دانش‌آموزان به عنوان پایه‌های زیربنایی آموزش می‌باشد. اگرچه این بحث، به آموزش و یادگیری انگلیسی به عنوان یک زبان خارجی در ایران محدود شده است اما می‌توان آن را به حوزه‌های دیگر نیز تعمیم داد. از آن جایی که پرداختن به چنین موضوع گسترده‌ای به طور عمیق در یک مقاله نمی‌گنجد، ابتدا نگاهی اجمالی به دو عنصر تعیین‌کننده اول خواهیم داشت و سپس به تفصیل به نقش معلمان خواهیم پرداخت.

کلید واژه‌ها: برنامه‌ریزی زبان، تهیه و تدوین مطالب درسی، اصالت، ساختار، ارزشیابی، اعتبار، روایی، نمرات واقعی

Abstract

Education is a complex and delicate process interwoven with cognitive, affective, social and political factors surrounding it in various contexts. The breadth of the concept has been an impetus for scholars and educationists to scratch the surface from different perspectives. The acquisition of L1 in general and learning L2 in particular have not been escaped thorough consideration in recent years because of the major changes in theory and practice. According to Nunan (1999), these changes have been driven by changes in educational theory, thoughts about language and learning, and the development of research which have provided important insights and ideas for classroom practitioners. Schmitt (2002) contends that learners should not be viewed as somehow a container into which language knowledge could be poured, but there is an intricate web of variables spun together to affect learning. The aim of this paper is to elaborate on three dimensions of education namely policy making and language planning, material development, and teachers and students as the underlying foundations of education. Although the topic has been restricted to teaching and learning English as a foreign language in our country, it can be generalized to other disciplines. Due to the fact that it is unlikely to deal with such a broad topic in depth in a single paper, we shall have a glance at the first two determinant elements and provide more space to the central role of teachers.

Key Words: language planning, material development, authenticity, context, evaluation, validity, reliability, true scores

Policy Making and Language Planning

The issue of language policy involves decisions by some political entity like the ministry of education to offer education in a designated foreign language. According

to Thomas (1996), a tremendous clash of value systems including cultural pluralism, ethnicity, race, power, status, politics, etc. is brought to bear on ultimate decisions about the official language of a country and this sometimes leads to segregation tendencies

in a society. It is evident that the choice of a FL would be more controversial than the former case. Policy makers determine a foreign language in regard with its global status, the key goals of its teaching and learning, and the amount of time spent on it. Clark (1987) argues that any decision made can be either bottom-up or top-down. In the former, the authorities garner information from various sources, e.g. pertinent conferences, questionnaires filled by professors, teachers and students, needs analysis, etc, for any judgement. However, in the top-down category a team of policy makers make subjective judgements based on their own impression of the current situation. It is deemed relevant to mention that none of the above extreme decisions are made in isolation. They are rather operationalized in an integrative manner. At this stage, the authorities specify the foreign language, English or any other language, the pedagogical objectives, the age of the learners, the allotted time to teaching it and budget. For example, the inception of teaching English at elementary schools in Japan (Richards and Renandya, 2002) and in Syria (Kotob, 2006) are manifestations of policy making and language planning.

Material Development

Syllabus design and the development of textbooks are the most tangible aspects of policy making and language planning.

They reflect the skills and elements as the content of teaching and the teaching method(s) to be used to teach the content. It is evident that the content and method, should be consistent with the respective approach(es) concerning the function of language and the way it is learned. Therefore, teaching materials are a key component in most language programs since they serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive. According to Taylor (1994), materials need to be 'authentic-like' in the sense that language is not artificially constrained. The more realistic the language, the more easily it can cater for the range of proficiency levels found in many classes. O'Neill (1982) argues that textbooks can provide only a core of materials as a jumping-off point for the teacher and the class, so a great deal of work in a class may start with the textbook but end outside it.

Teachers and Students

There is no doubt that teachers and students are the most active and adaptable building blocks in any educational context, through whom all objectives are fulfilled. No language planning and syllabus design per se guarantee success in learning a foreign language. Teaching experience reveals that on the one hand teachers in cooperation with students can make the best use of poorly developed materials and on the other hand well-known communicative

textbooks can be spoilt by uninterested and inefficient teachers. It is right in assuming that on many occasions teachers put the blame on English textbooks, the lack of time for teaching them and so the like, but reflective teachers need to put their own behaviour under scrutiny to see how they themselves can become more efficient in the process of instruction. Taking the view that students have the potentiality to adapt to new conditions created by teachers, we should focus on teachers' forms on teachers' dynamism and responsibilities in the hope that we can come to a number of attributes which can be considered as crucial for effective teaching.

◆ Imprecise Evaluation and Scoring

Students at some high schools and universities pass some courses with so divergent grades that responsible teachers are shocked. For instance, a student at a university fails an exam, but when he takes it again with another instructor at the same or at another academic centre, he gets an excellent score. This phenomenon indicates a serious problem with the testing procedures. This should make us think whether we need a real test or a ceremony. According to Baker (1989), if an institute holds a test without failing any student due to the need for their fees or any other policy, it can be considered a ceremony and not a test. Why should not a student

fail if he has not acquired the materials acceptably? It is our conviction that the illiteracy of the present generation would lead to academic failure in the future and if teachers let this process go on, the vicious circle of illiteracy will be more and more deeply rooted in society. Suppose that some students are not qualified enough to pass a test but a teacher gives them passing grades, what will be its consequence for teachers instructing the same students at higher levels? Will not they be discouraged from trying hard? We have actually met some knowledgeable and devoted teachers who have been disappointed by encountering a mass of weak students due to indifference of the previous teachers to students' failure. If different teacher-made language tests are analyzed in the light of principles and theories of testing, it will be revealed that the majority are devoid of the quality of a good test, that is, validity and reliability. The conclusion is that teachers should be conscious of the quality of their tests and their responsibility to make sure students deserve the grade they achieve.

◆ Reflective Teaching

When students are asked about their failure in learning English, they often attribute it to inappropriate teaching. On the other hand, teachers pass the buck to students. Assuming that students are downright wrong and teachers' claims are right, but when we teach remedial

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and general English in universities and higher education centres, we realize that the majority of students have not learnt the rudimentary points. This raises the question why using up so much time, energy and budget results in little achievement. For example, out of about sixty thousand students admitted to technical-and-professional institutes in Iran in 2008, about fifty per cent of students' English grades in the entrance examination held by the state measurement and evaluation organization was zero. Shouldn't teachers bear at least some of the responsibility of these disastrous failure?

◆ Teachers' Tasks

It is taken for granted that teaching English as a foreign language is not an easy task; it is very similar to teaching first grade children at elementary schools. Primary school teachers utilize any moment in class, monitor students' involvement, give dictation, administer formal and informal tests, interact with students and so on. What adds to their sacrifice is their weekly construction of different tests and taking students' papers and notebooks

home for correction and giving comments. Furthermore, the intimate relationship they have with students is really appreciated in as much as they learn the student's names in the first few weeks of the new school year and adapt themselves to different personality types. What about teachers of English language? How much time do we really spend on students' activities and working outside the classroom? It seems that the higher the students' level of education, the more distant educational and social relationship develop between teachers and students. While we as teachers can discuss theoretical issue of affective filter hypothesis (Krashen, 1985), we are probably the first group violating it in practice.

◆ Paradoxical Complaints about the Lack of Time

Many times we as teachers complain that there is not sufficient time to cover English textbooks or to teach them in details, but we often finish teaching them before the term ends and give our class time to other colleagues teaching mathematics, physics, etc. How many teachers review materials, hold quizzes and classroom tests, give remedial assignments, make students practice English spirally if they finish the books earlier than due time? The paradox lies in the fact that we often suggest students they are free not to attend classes since the textbook has been apparently covered. What occurs if teachers attend

their classes late and terminate them early or waste student's time in the classroom? If a teacher shortens his class time un/intentionally or miss it because of some trouble, does he make an effort to compensate for it? What will be our outlook to a teacher behaving similarly toward our children? Unfortunately, some teachers deal with peripheral matters in the classroom at the exclusion of doing their jobs in the real sense of the word.

◆ Punctuality and Discipline

Considering the Persian proverb, 'time is gold'. one might think that Iranians are sensitive to time; nevertheless, the readers can use their judgment in this connection. If a teacher is not punctual, he cannot advise students to be punctual, This easy going attitude toward time will be transferred to students very quickly. The observation that some students attend their classes late at all time might indicate this attitude toward time.

If a teacher's mobile phone is on and he uses it frequently in the classroom, he cannot tell students to switch theirs off. This sense of disrespect to rules and mores can be generalized to any aspect of behavior; for example, the lack of interest to ask students questions on the part of

the teacher can lead to the escalation of some sense of passivity and laziness on the part of the students. It is right to think that all jobs are important and complementary of each other; thus, they should be applauded on the condition that they are fairly actualized. Assume that someone is building a house and a civil engineer responsible for supervising its construction does not control the process of its development at all. What will be the people's reaction to this person's expertise and commitment and what sort of hatred will his behavior invoke among them?

Being a physician may be the most popular profession in today's world; however, if a physician is not ready to spend enough time on having a close look at a patient's medical test taken with a lot of problems, examining him carefully, or at least listening to his complaints psychologically, what will be the patient's reaction to that physician? In many official gatherings teachers' job is likened to that of prophets, but the question is to



what extent we are really loyal to the ups and downs of the task.

◆ Teacher's Advice

Advising students in many ways, e.g. telling them in a friendly manner to follow social norms and mores, not smoking and not imitating extreme fashions blindly is of paramount importance. Teachers may be drastically influenced by a few students' radical behavior, but their advice can actually be more effective than that addressed even by their parents. If a teacher witnesses a student behaving wrongly or smoking in the school yard or university campus, his appropriate advice in context can be more useful than a psychologist's consultation. According to Curran (1976), teachers and students must have trust in one another, otherwise their cycle of equilibration is doomed to failure.

◆ Teacher's Experience, Tolerance and Flexibility

As long as we are students, we may honour and thank teachers neglecting to carry out their duties like bestowing generous grades, acting carelessly, etc, but when we graduate and become teachers, we shall adopt a completely opposite attitude to them. If at the outset of a term a teacher claims that nobody would fail in his exams, most of the students would assess him positively just on the grounds of blind benefit since they are not so mature and far-sighted to distinguish

right from wrong. As a matter of fact, we must enlighten the students in this respect and make them aware of the fact that they are supposed to run the country in the future. A successful teacher is one who makes use of his previous faults and errors and has the courage to be flexible in teaching instead of insisting on his dogmatic ideas.

Teachers' tolerance as an asset should not be escape out minds. Are teachers tolerant enough to react appropriately to students' criticisms and suggestions or do they take revenge on students by failing them or scoring their papers in a prejudiced way? A successful teacher is the one who makes students express their ideas freely about the teacher's management and knowledge so that s/he can remove his/her weak points in the course of time.

Beebe (1983) argues that flexibility and risk taking are important characteristics of successful learners of a second language. However, this should not be restricted only to students; teachers who venture to take risks in their approaches to teaching and testing also gain the upper hand. For example, no end of a continuum is recommended in testing: neither too strict and tough nor too mild and lenient. If a testee gets nine or so on an exam, teachers should not think that it is his/her true score. All measurements are prone to errors, so teachers should be realistic in their judgment and it is not blasphemous to recover a student's grade like that aforementioned.

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◆ Cause and Effect

Teachers and students affect one another. None of them is the absolutely pre-established cause or effect of the other's behavior. We should not attribute a student's failure to his teacher's teaching and vice versa. At large, we often criticize the low quality of English textbooks and language planning; nevertheless, we may never have written to the authorities in the ministry of education about their policies. We as teachers are guilty as well and to play our roles, we should first change ourselves, our approaches and the like to take measures to improve others. With reference to oriental sociology, we are too conservative to react to many adversities around which are of no use to us. To achieve great goals, we must primarily begin reforming ourselves.

◆ Financial Problems

Everyone knows that teachers as well as other employees have financial problems. There may not be space for initiative, creativity and motivation if teachers overload themselves with extra work. Some teachers may occasionally claim that since their salaries are low, it is not necessary to

do their best in classes. However, this is not justifiable because financial issues are not limited to teachers in one country. In a profession like teaching self-actualization might be a strong motivation compensatory for low salary.

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