Research Paper

A Qualitative Assessment of Supervisors' Views Towards Examiners' Perceptions: Fair Justice or Not?

Ehsan Rayani[1], Neda Fatehi Rad[*2]

[1]Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran
Englishtutor.rayani@gmail.com
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran
Nedafatehi@gmail.com

Abstract
This study aimed at exploring Iranian thesis supervisors' views on examiners' fair in examining M.A. Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)thesis in Iran. In so doing, a phenomenological design was used. 20 M.A. thesis supervisors participated in the study who were selected through purposeful sampling. To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was used. Data analysis was conducted via manual thematic analysis. According to the results, the following views were among those extracted for M.A. theses supervisors about examiners' fair: Examiners' unfair in Examining Theses; Inattention to the Standards of Thesis Writing; Judgment Based on Personal Mood; Examiners' Personal Problems with Supervisors; and Examiners' Relation with Students. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that according to the perceptions of Iranian TEFL thesis supervisors, examiners are not just and fair in examining theses. They pay attention to the issues such as previous relations, personal problems, practicing power and such matters which are non-relevant to thesis itself. It can also be concluded that Iranian TEFL thesis examiners, at least according to thesis supervisors' views, are illiterate or unknowledgeable in terms of statistics and some research topics. This is a reason for their unfair in examining theses. The results have some implications for M.A. thesis examiners, students, higher education administrators, and researchers.
Key Terms: Qualitative Assessment, Classroom Fair, Distributive Fair, Procedural Fair,Teaching English as a Foreign Language(TEFL)

ارزیابی کیفی دیدگاه اساتید راهنما پیرامون نظرات داوران در پایان‌نامه‌های کارشناسی ارشد پرستاری: منصفانه یا خیر؟
این مطالعه با هدف بررسی دیدگاه اساتید راهنما در مورد انصاف داوران در بررسی پایان‌نامه‌های کارشناسی ارشد رشته پرستاری در ایران انجام شد. برای انجام این کار، از طرح پدیدارشناسی استفاده شد. 20 استاد راهنمای پایان‌نامه پرستاری مقطع کارشناسی ارشد در این تحقیق شرکت کردند که به روش نمونه‌گیری هدفمند انتخاب شدند. برای جمع‌آوری داده‌ها از مصاحبه نیمه ساختاریافته استفاده شد. تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها از طریق تحلیل موضوعی دستی انجام شد. با توجه به نتایج، دیدگاه‌های زیر برای اساتیدراهنمای پایان‌نامه‌های کارشناسی ارشد در مورد انصاف داوران استخراج شد: منصف نبودن داوران در بررسی پایان‌نامه‌ها؛ بی توجهی به استانداردهای پایان نامه نویسی؛ قضاوت بر اساس خلق و خوی شخصی؛ مشکلات شخصی داوران با اساتید راهنما؛ و ارتباط داوران با دانشجویان. بر اساس نتایج این تحقیق می توان نتیجه گرفت که بر اساس برداشت اساتید راهنما پایان نامه های پرستاری ایرانی، داوران در بررسی پایان نامه ها منصف نیستند. آنها به مسائلی مانند روابط قبلی، مشکلات شخصی، تمرین قدرت و مواردی از این قبیل که به خود پایان نامه مربوط نیست توجه می کنند. همچنین می توان نتیجه گرفت که داوران پایان نامه پرستاری ایرانی، حداقل بر اساس دیدگاه استاد راهنما، از نظر آمار و برخی موضوعات پژوهشی بی سواد و یا ناآگاه هستند. این دلیلی بر عدم انصاف آنها در بررسی پایان نامه هاست. نتایج این تحقیق کاربردهایی برای داوران پایان نامه‌های ارشد پرستاری، دانشجویان، مدیران آموزش عالی و محققان دارد.
کلید واژه ها: ارزیابی کیفی، انصاف کلاسی، انصاف توزیعی، انصاف رویه‌ای

Introduction

Higher education students always conceive the level of examiner fair differently (Rasooli et al., 2019). Examiners' fair in examining students' theses and dissertations is of high importance since examining cannot be treated as separated from moral issues (Kazemi, 2016). As unveiled by the previous studies, being examined by fair examiners is one of the big wants of students in different settings (Mameli et al., 2018). However, Ph.D. and M.A. students usually are not happy with examiners' fair level (Gasser et al., 2018). Since examiners' unfair behavior can adversely impact students in emotional, social, behavioral, and academic dimensions (Rasooli et al., 2019), they should pay heed to this significant dimension of their job.

In Chory-Assad' s (2002) definition, fair was defined as learners' views about fair in the outcomes, processes, and interactions that take shape in instructional settings. Based on this definition, fair is operationalized when students feel that the course results, processes, and teachers' class behaviors are fair. Extrapolating this discussion to the realm of higher education wherein students' theses are examined, examiners' fair influences students' fate remarkably (Rasooli et al., 2019). Thus, the subject of examiner fair is worth treating from different angles. Fair research has been conducted by some researchers in recent years. The researchers jointly have concluded that the students' interpretations of teachers' (in) fair have a key role in uncovering the nature of (in)fair implementation in instructional places. Accordingly, several studies have tackled students' interpretations of classroom fair along with its role in students' success (e.g., Argon & Kepekcioglu, 2016; Berti et al., 2016; Molinari et al., 2013; Peter et al., 2012). But the research on examiners' fair in examining theses of students is an area which suffers from research parsimony. Many M.A. students are not satisfied with examiners' judgement in examining their theses. They, according to field observations, believe that examiners' judgement is subjective and seriously influenced by their personal views rather than academic principles. This is while the review of the existing literature shows that the extent of fair of examiners enacted in judging theses written by MA students in the field of TEFL is a missing link in the previous studies (e.g., Ehrhardt et al., 2016), Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018; Sonnleitner & Kovacs, 2020). Considering that the quality of examining TEFL theses is of high importance due to recently increased interest of EFL students to higher education studies, this research gap is not advantageous for different groups of stakeholders including M.A. students. Therefore, this gap is worth filling as a research topic. Regarding the above discussion, this study sought to explore Iranian thesis supervisors' views on examiners' fair in examining M.A. TEFL theses in Iran. In order to meet the research objective, the following research question has been designed:

RQ. What are Iranian thesis supervisors' views on examiners' fair in examining M.A. theses in Iran?

Literature Review

In a more recent study, Estaji and Zhaleh (2021) carried out a qualitative study on examining Iranian teachers' views of classroom fair and its dimensions in EFL setting. Findings of thematic analyses of the data done indicated that the participants considered classroom fair as a necessary element of their instructional practice. Besides, procedural, interactional, and distributive dimensions of fair were highlighted in the definitions that the teachers provided for classroom fair. Moreover, the teachers conceptualized the classroom fair dimensions in relation to the various domains of classroom learning, teaching, assessment, and interactions. Another recent study, being exploratory in nature, was conducted by Sonnleitner and Kovacs (2020) to look at assessment through the lens of classroom fair theory. To this end, the newly-developed Fair Barometer (Sonnleitner & Kovacs, 2018), being a self-administered scale for enhancing teachers'

assessment tendencies in the Austrian university context, was employed to examine how teachers rate their own assessment practices in terms of two aspects of informational and procedural fair. To this end, the Fair Barometer was filled out by nine teachers and 168 students of them. The results of the study evinced that both teachers and students are able to differentiate between various assessment fair aspects. Furthermore, it was found that some teachers differed from their students regarding their perceptions of almost every aspect they rated. Some teachers' results demonstrated particular assessment-related behaviors needing enhancement, such as elaborating on the grading criteria for the students, while some other teachers indicated nearly the same responses as their students regarding the aspects of assessment fair under investigation.

Mameli et al. (2018) dealt with the role of teacher (in)fair in students' psychological states by unveiling the views of a group of Italian students. To achieve this end, the Teacher Fair Scale developed by Dalbert and Stoeber (2006) was employed. The findings unconcealed that students' fair views could predict their individual performance, social activities, and psychological complexities. They concluded that students' views of emotional engagement and classroom connectedness mediated this predictive relation. In other related study, Ehrhardt et al. (2016) tackled teachers' perceptions of their just behavior with students. To this end, they developed, besides other measures of fair, low and high inference rating instruments to assess fair based on the rating of observable indicators of fair-relevant situations in the classroom. The results showed that teachers perceived themselves as fair in the classrooms.

In the same vein, Young et al. (2013) examined the prediction power of students' views on teacher-student rapport in predicting students' perceptions of interactional, procedural, and distributive classroom fair dimensions. 124 participants completed measures about relational communication strategies and classroom fair. The results showed that students' perceptions of interactional, procedural, and distributive classroom fair dimensions were significantly predicted by students' views on teacher-student rapport. The same was true about the perceived interactional and procedural fair dimensions.

Method

Given that the current study collected and analyzed the qualitative data through semi-structured interview to unravel people's views, a phenomenological design was used. The phenomenological design is the best choice for this study since this approach is the best one for exploration of people's views and perceptions (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). In this type of design, the researcher seeks to understand the meaning constructed for a phenomenon or situation by people involved in it. As the statistical population, Iranian teachers with experience in supervising M.A. TEFL theses were considered. 20 M.A. TEFL supervisors (10 males and 10 females) who held Ph.D. in major were picked up through purposeful sampling.

Instruments

Data collection of this study was done via a semi-structured interview. The interview aimed at unveiling Iranian thesis supervisors' views on examiners' fair in examining M.A. theses in Iran. For the establishment of the dependability and credibility of the interview data, low-inference descriptors and member checks techniques were used. To use low-inference descriptors, some quotations from the interviewees were presented when reporting the results. To use member checks, interpretations of the interviews were checked with the interviewees to see whether their sayings have been correctly interpreted.

The interview was implemented individually and audio-recorded by the researcher via social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram. There was no time limitation for the interviews so that the interviewees could uncover their views freely. The researcher transcribed the audio-recorded files verbatim for further analysis.

Data analysis was conducted through manual thematic analysis. In the first step, that is familiarization step, the researcher sought to know the data, get a thorough overview of all the data that were collected before he started analyzing the data. More specifically, he tried to be familiar with the data through taking notes or looking through the data. In the second step, that is coding step, the data were coded. In this way, some codes were extracted which allowed the researcher to get an overview of the recurrent points and meanings in the data. In the third step, that is generating themes, the codes were looked over to identify the recurrent patterns in them and extract the themes.

In so doing, related and similar codes were combined to reach a single theme since themes are usually broader than codes. Moreover, the codes which were non-relevant were omitted. In the fourth step, that is reviewing themes, the extracted themes were reviewed by the researcher to ensure about their accuracy and usefulness.

Results

Concerning the research question 'What are Iranian thesis supervisors' views on examiners' fair in examining M.A. TEFL theses in Iran?', the following themes were extracted from the data:

1) Examiners' Unfair in Examining Theses

According to this theme, examiners are not just and fair in examining M.A. theses in Iran. The following quotations show this:

In my opinion, examiners are not fair in their judgments of M.A. theses. However, it is not true about all the examiners. Some examiners are really just but they are not a significant part of the community of examiners. I think the thesis itself is not the basis of examiners' judgment.some other factors affect their judgement. This is why I think that examiners are not just. (Participant 6)

2) Inattention to the Standards of Thesis Writing

According to this theme, examiners do not pay attention to the thesis writing standards when examining M.A. theses in Iran. The following quotations show this:

Unfortunately, examiners intentionally or unintentionally, do not pay heed to the standards. Their judgment is not principle-based. I do not understand their rationale. (Participant 5)

3) Judgment Based on Personal Mood

According to this theme, examiners' personal mood determines the way they examine M.A. theses in Iran. This is evident in the following quotations:

I deadly believe in the subjectivity of examiners' judgment. Their emotional state influences their judgment. One of my colleagues is lenient in his examination in some defense sessions, but he his strict in some other sessions. (Participant 8)

4) Examiners' Personal Problems with Supervisors

According to this theme, examiners' personal problems with supervisors influence their judgment of M.A. theses in Iran. This is understood from the following quotations:

The quality of the relationship between examiners and supervisors is an element with a high effect on examiners' examining M.A. theses in Iran. When examiners have a friendly relation with the supervisor of the thesis, they give a high score to it. (Participant 20)

5) Examiners' Relation with Students

According to this theme, examiners' relations with students impact their judgment of M.A. theses in Iran. This is clear in the following quotations:

Previous acquaintance of examiners with students makes their judgment unjust and unfair. If examiners are not familiar with students, they act more strictly in examining their thesis. (Participant 3)

I have seen several cases of unfairness in judging theses that are rooted in examiner-student relations. A weak thesis is evaluated positively just because the student has had some courses with the examiner previously. (Participant 17)

To me, the only thing that is not the criterion of judgment of examiners is principles of research and thesis. They pay the least weight to the principles in their evaluation (Participant 12)

6) Low Knowledge of Examiners in the Thesis Topic

According to this theme, examiners' low knowledge in the topic of the thesis leads to unfair in their examining M.A. theses in Iran. This is uncovered in the following quotations:

One source of unfair in examiners' examining M.A. theses in Iran is that they don't have good knowledge of the topic of the study. For instance, discourse analysis is a research area which needs expertise. Lack of knowledge in this area causes unfair in examining theses. (Participant 14)

7) Examiners' Low Statistical Literacy

According to this theme, examiners' low statistical literacy is a cause of unfair in their examining M.A. theses in Iran. This is revealed in the following quotations:

Many unfair comments of examiners are due to statistical illiteracy of examiners. Statistical issues are important parts of M.A. theses. When the statistical parts are unfairly questioned, the whole thesis is unfairly questioned. (Participant 1)

Some examiners are not knowledgeable regarding statistics. They even don't know popular statistical tests, their assumptions and purposes. Accordingly, they examine theses erroneously. (Participant 19)

8) Examiners' Showing Power

According to this theme, examiners want to show their power. This contributes to unfairness in their judgment. This is clear in the following quotations:

I'm so sorry to say that some of our colleagues don't perform based on fair just to show that they have power over students. This means that they purposefully exert unfair on their examination. (Participant 10)

To speak realistically, I think that imbalanced power distribution is a main reason for examiners' unfair. Yes, examiners are more powerful than students and both parties are aware of this. The product of this situation is unfair in examination of theses by examiners. (Participant 7)

9) Examiners' Overemphasis on Quantity

According to this theme, examiners put much emphasis on quantity in examining M.A. theses in Iran. This is evident in the following quotations:

Anyone knows that quality is more important than quantity in thesis writing in any field. TEFL is not an exception. But we see that most of the examiners reject theses based on its quantity. This is a negative point and makes the judgment unjust. (Participant 14)

A source of unfair in examining M.A.theses is giving priority to the volume of thesis instead of its quality. In foreign countries, a thesis in 50 pages is well-accepted but in Iran, less than 80-90 pages is not accepted. Quantity-based judgment is not fair. (Participant 8)

Discussion

Concerning the research question, the following views were extracted from the data: Examiners' Unfair in Examining Theses; Inattention to the Standards of Thesis Writing; Judgment Based on Personal Mood; Examiners' Personal Problems with Supervisors; Examiners' Relation with Students; Low Knowledge of Examiners in the Thesis Topic; Examiners' Low Statistical Literacy; Examiners' Showing Power; and Examiners' Overemphasis on Quantity.

The most important justification for the findings is that there is no explicit guideline or template for examiners to examine TEFL theses based on that. Accordingly, examiners judge theses subjectively in the absence of any objective plan. Moreover, no supervision is done over the performance of examiners by higher education departments. All the parties including the representative, the thesis examiner, and the thesis supervisor know this well. Therefore, the examiner is fully aware of the lack of formal supervision over the defense session and performs as he/she likes. Another factor which is present in almost any problematic area in different fields including teaching English as a foreign language is money that examiners are not paid a high amount of money for examining theses. Thus, they are not externally motivated to examine theses meticulously and accurately.

In addition to the mentioned factors, the educational system does not ask for accountability on the part of thesis examiners. Therefore, examiners do not feel that they are required to perform well and standard, otherwise they will be questioned. Unfortunately, any protest on the part of students is part of formalities and their voices are not heard at all.

The findings are implicitly consistent with the studies by Falch and Naper (2013), Angelo (2014), Kumar et al. (2015), Aryadoust (2016), Parker et al. (2017), Bygren (2020), and Worrell (2021) according to which students' performance is often assessed as contaminated with some degree of unjustness and unfairness under the effect of different factors other than the performance itself. Among these factors, teacher-student relations, personal mood of teachers, literacy level of teachers, and contextual factors can be mentioned.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that according to the perceptions of Iranian thesis supervisors, examiners are not just and fair in examining theses. They pay attention to the issues such as previous relations, personal problems, practicing power and such matters which are non-relevant to thesis itself. It can also be concluded that Iranian thesis examiners, at least according to thesis supervisors' views, are illiterate or unknowledgeable in terms of statistics and some research topics. This is a reason for their unfair in examining theses.

The other conclusion is that in Iran, thesis writing is more potentially a bed for discrimination than a tool for improvement. This is while it is expected that writing thesis helps students develop academically, learn dynamically, and act vigilantly. As a big sorrow in the field of TEFL in Iran, in spite of the hope that students should learn new academic points from examiners, they complain about clear unfair in their evaluations. Finally, it is concluded that students' fate in academic arenas is negatively affected by thesis examiners' unfair profoundly. Consequently, student' s total score comes lower than that of his/her competitors for nothing but unfair of his/her thesis examiner.

Theoretically speaking, this study is associated with several advantages for both teachers and students at the M.A. level. Moreover, this exploratory study on Iranian supervisors' views on

examiners' fair in examining M.A. TEFL theses in Iran bridges a research gap and adds to the knowledge base in the field of TEFL . In addition, this study follows an innovative approach by following a qualitative method. Practically discussing, since examiners' (in) fair influences M.A. students' academic fate seriously, this study can have positive effects on students' academic life by its practical implications for different groups including thesis examiners, higher education administrators, and researchers. A practical implication of the results is that thesis examiners should devote more time and care to evaluation of theses. They should increase their statistical literacy and knowledge. Moreover, they should accept examination of theses whose topics are interesting and familiar for them.

References

Angelo, C. S. (2014). *Is there a bias towards girls in non-anonymous evaluation?* Unpublished work. https://2014.economicsofeducation.com/user/pdfsesiones/166.pdf

Argon, T., & Kepekcioglu, E. S. (2016). The relationship between university students' instructors' credibility and perceptions of fair in the classroom. *The Anthropologist, 24*(1), 347-353. https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2016.11892024

Aryadoust, V. (2016). Gender and academic major bias in peer assessment of oral presentations. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 13*(1), 1–24. https:// doi.Org /10.1080/15434303. 2015.1133626

Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorensen, C. (2010). *Introduction to research in education* (8th ed.). Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Berti, C., Mameli, C., Speltini, G., & Molinari, L. (2016). Teacher fair and parent support as predictors of learning motivation and visions of a just world. *Issues in Educational Research, 26*(4), 543-560.

Bygren, M. (2020). Biased grades? Changes in grading after a blinding of examinations reform. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 45*(2), 292–303. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2019.1638885

Chory-Assad, R. M. (2002). Classroom fair: Perceptions of fairness as a predictor of student motivation, learning, and aggression. *Communication Quarterly, 50*(1), 58-77.

Dalbert, C., & Stoeber, J. (2006). The personal belief in a just world and domain-specific beliefs about fair at school and in the family: A longitudinal study with adolescents. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 30*(3), 200-207. https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025406063638

Ehrhardt, N., Pretsch, J., Herrmann, I., & Schmitt, M. (2016). Observing fair in the primary school classroom. *Zeitschrift Für Erziehungswissenschaft, 19*(1), 157-190. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11618-015-0664-0

Ehrhardt-Madapathi, N., Pretsch, J., & Schmitt, M. (2018). Effects of unfair in primary schools on students' behavior and joy of learning. *Social Psychology of Education, 21*(2), 337-369. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-017-9416-8

Estaji, M., & Zhaleh, K. (2021). Exploring Iranian Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Fair and Its Dimensions in EFL Instructional Contexts. *Language Related Research, 12*(2), 277-314. https://doi.org/10.29252/LRR.12.3.10

Falch, T., & Naper, L. R. (2013). Educational evaluation schemes and gender gaps in student achievement. *Economics of Education Review, 36,* 12–25. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2013.05.002

Gasser, L., Grütter, J., Buholzer, A., & Wettstein, A. (2018). Emotionally supportive classroom interactions and students' perceptions of their teachers as caring and just. *Learning and Instruction, 54*, 82-92. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2017.08.003

Kazemi, A. (2016). Examining the interplay of fair perceptions, motivation, and school achievement among secondary school students. *Social Fair Research, 29*(1), 103-118. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-016-0261-2

Kumar, R., Karabenick, S. A., & Burgoon, J. N. (2015). Teachers' implicit attitudes, explicit beliefs, and the mediating role of respect and cultural responsibility on mastery and performance-focused instructional practices. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 107*(2), 533–545. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037471

Lind, E. A., & Tyler, T. R. (1988). *The social psychology of procedural fair*. Plenum.

Mameli, C., Biolcati, R., Passini, S., & Mancini, G. (2018). School context and subjective distress: The influence of teacher fair and school-specific well-being on adolescents' psychological health. *School Psychology International*, *39*(5), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034318794226

Molinari, L., Speltini, G., & Passini, S. (2013). Do perceptions of being treated fairly increase students' outcomes? Teacher–student interactions and classroom fair in Italian adolescents. *Educational Research and Evaluation, 19*(1), 58-76.

Parker, L., Reid, C., & Ghana, T. (2017). Challenging defcit default and educators' biases in urban schools. *Race and Pedagogy Journal: Teaching and Learning for Fair, 2*(3), 1-18.

Peter, F., Dalbert, C., Kloeckner, N., & Radant, M. (2012). Personal belief in a just world, experience of teacher fair, and school distress in different class contexts. *European Journal of Psychology of Education, 28*(4), 1221-1235. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10212-012-0163-0

Rasooli, A., DeLuca, C., Rasegh, A., & Fathi, S. (2019). Students' critical incidents of fairness in classroom assessment: An empirical study. *Social Psychology of Education, 22*(3), 701-722. https://doi.org/10.1080/0969594X.2019.1593105

Sonnleitner, P., & Kovacs, C. (2018). *How fairly am I assessing my students? Equipping teachers with a tool to learn about their own assessment practices: Theory and development of the Fairness Barometer*. Paper Presented at the 11th Conference of the International Test Commission.

Sonnleitner, P., & Kovacs, C. (2020). Differences between students' and teachers' fairness perceptions: Exploring the potential of a self-administered questionnaire to improve teachers' assessment practices. *Frontiers in Education, 5*, 1-14. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00017

Worrell, F. C. (2021). Who will teach the teachers? Examining implicit bias in the educator workforce. *Learning and Instruction, 78*(45). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2021.101518

Young, L. E., Horan, S. M., & Frisby, B. N. (2013). Fair and square? An examination of classroom fair and relational teaching messages. *Communication Education, 62*(4), 333-351. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2013.800216