RAINNING OVER A DESERT; a critical view to language teaching and learning in Iran.

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ABSTRACT. As with language teaching and learning, many factors are at work disregarding of which makes teaching absolutely futile. This introspective paper shows that teaching is bound to many other factors not normally regarded within the framework many teachers apply. Practicality of teaching methods is highly dependant on the kind of learners; that is, their being ESL or EFL. Regarding Iranian learners, who are EFL learners, methods to teach ESL learners would be of low achievement and fruitfulness. There will soon be a call for an approach or a method for Iranian language learners.

The Definition of Learning;

A popular notion about education [teaching and learning] is that something carried out by one person, a teacher, standing in front of a class and transmitting information to a group of learners who are all willing to absorb it. This view, however, simplifies what is a highly complex process involving an intricate interplay between the learning process itself, the teacher's intentions and actions, individual personalities of the learners, their culture and background, the learning environment, and a host of other variables (Williams and Burden 1997: p. 5). This surely shows that teaching is bound to many variables like culture, background, and environment. When a baby is born, they receive an intensive immersion of what their ancestors have; cultural thoughts, religious viewpoints, social inputs, etc. Thus, bound to these and many others, one will and for certain learns in a specific learning style. Plus, this would definitely be of various sorts due to a greater scale named as geographical boundaries. Then, as a result, teaching methodology would be culture-bound.

A Brief Look at Teaching Methodology;

Teaching methodology is newly introduced to the world. Previously, language teaching was done in order to be able to read the literature of the target language through an approach called *Prussian Approach* or *Ciceronian Approach*—first observed in the United States. But since 1880s, the world on the move demanded proficiency in foreign languages; that is, communication with people around the world. This led to innovations and improvement of some approaches in language teaching and learning. The Frenchman C. Marcel (1793-1896) and the Englishman T. Prendergast (1806-1886) were two of the pioneers in the Reform Movement occurring in those years. The later, T. Prendergast, proposed the way children learn language. This seemed to be logical in case the difference between language learning and language acquisition was ignored.

Teaching methodology falls on a continuum which is divided into 3 major parts: (1) Pre-scientific, (2) Scientific, and (3) Post Method Condition. The Reform Movement, fallen on the second part, was an era to give scientific basis and philosophy to language teaching approaches. Thus, Grammar Translation, having no scientific basis is to be regarded as an approach rather than a method. As with the goal of foreign language use to communicate, during the nineteenth century, some scholars, one of whom was Gouin, started to give psychological basis to child language learning; the outcome of their effort was *the Direct Method* with no recourse to the learner's native language.

Although fallen into three eras, the last two eras have also observed rise and fall of

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approaches as well as methods; of those are *Communicative Language Teaching*, *Competency-Based Language Teaching*, *Lexical Approaches*, *Multiple Intelligence*, *Whole Language*, *Neurolinguistic Programming*, *etc*. most of which had a brief lifespan and others are still alive.

As mentioned above and presented in teaching books, most of methods and approaches have been developed through observation and based on a defined need. These two will be elaborated in later parts.

Learning Process and Methodology Improvement;

In order to develop a how-to-learn procedure, an approach, or a method, sociolinguists along with psycholinguists adopt a psychological framework which best fits the circumstances of the society; they then improve a so-called psycho-sociological framework based on which they believe a child learns or learning can occur best. The next step is to apply it within language learning. Over and over revisions, editions in basis, and piloting it in a language course, all go hand in hand to judge the effectiveness of teaching and learning procedures. This proves it true that variables mentioned in earlier paragraphs bound the application of a given teaching and learning procedure.

Methodology Application;

The application of teaching methodology is bound to variables such as culture, society, and genetics. Although most fruitful in their own origin, methods can gain much less if applied inappropriately; that is, in wrong place, time, and unfit goal.

Culture, the customs and beliefs of a society, bring about a standard of living; this makes people of that culture take a special path in their lives including the path they take to learn. This learning path, learning a language as focused here, will then be bound to this culture. That is, to apply procedures—teaching and learning procedure improved in another setting—would fulfill much less than what expected.

Societies, developed or developing, Western or Oriental, modern or traditional, grow society-specified needs. That is why, for instance, the Chinese learn just listening and speaking of a foreign language—English mainly—as a survival tool in tourism industry; or a short talk with a tourist—a non-native speaker of English of course—shows how well they know English; and they have learned just in school when asked why. As societies grew extensive need for going beyond geographical boundaries, communication turned out to be the leading goal of target language teaching; thus, linguistic-competence-centered approach altered to communicative approach—still based on already mentioned society-specified needs (Widdowson 1990) (Cited in Larsen-Freeman 2000: p. 121).

Generation after generation, human being fixates instinctively what his ancestors have; that is, the way they learned and what they learned is genetically coded in their mind. This makes their cognition giving it a definite pattern to be. This pattern is genetically handed down to other generations. Thus, language learning has its own pattern to take place. To sum up, children in different genetic circumstances grow different pattern of language learning; so, to apply one method or approach in two genetic circumstances might end in completely different series of outcomes

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because of different language learning patterns that are genetically coded in one's cognition.

The last, but not the least, is time; time is another indispensable variable which sets how long a teaching and learning procedure can last. As time elapses, increasing demand for methodology betterment is felt more and more. Therefore, to persist in one method or a series of approaches, applied in wrong setting would end nowhere.

Grammar Translation; the Only World-Wide Applicable Approach

Also known as *Prussian Approach* or *Ciceronian Approach* posed in a book by B. Sears, an American classics teacher in 1845 (Richards and Rodgers 2001: p. 5), Grammar Translation is not newly introduced. But since 1880s, there has been a great progress in teaching and learning procedures. Methods and approaches, ever since then in their rise and fall, showed that to learn a foreign language means to enable one to communicate. But before that, foreign languages were taught to appreciate the literary works, especially those of the classics—Greek and Latin. So, it goes without saying that such an approach to teach a language the goal of which was to appreciate the written works would be applicable anywhere to a large extent. But with the goal of foreign language learning to communicate, this approach would gain nothing compared to what it did when used to appreciate written works. That is why scholars like Gouin, L. Sauveur, and F. Frank, in the nineteenth century proposed a teaching framework with no recourse to the learners' native language. Ever since then, methods and approaches have used native language as a survival tool to save time in respect of giving hard definitions, introducing class procedure, and sympathy when needed.

Translation and its Role in Teaching and Learning Procedures of the EFL Learners;

Translation is extensively avoided to keep a given-language atmosphere. On the one hand, it is said to use learners' native language is a means to let them feel secure; that is, to use utter target language might give learners a sense of confusion that in many cases ends in learner's withdrawal. Native language use, to a large extent, eliminates this risk. On the other hand, it is widely believed that to use learners' native language is a hindrance on their way of language learning. The same withdrawal might go true here; that is, learners see a contradiction, or a hindrance as mentioned earlier, with what they are to learn through native language use.

It has been observed that those exposed to utter target language within a language course, with no recourse to native language, get used to hearing and recognizing target language after some sessions due to all clichés used in class instructions. But alas, translation is not avoidable in case the target language is a *foreign language* to learners not a *second language*. It has also been observed that learners translate teacher's utterance while getting target language input. It is most unsafe regarding basic learners as wrong input fossilizes and correct language habit is not formed. Here comes the need for a target language native speaker with expected fluency and accuracy. To abolish this sort-of-impossible best, a series of sentences, called *common language* between learner and teacher, including what a basic learner may need is necessary to primitively steer clear of learners' native

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language use; as teachers should make explicitly clear what is to be taught (B. F. Skinner 1957, 1987) (cited in Williams and Burden 1997: p. 9), common language is a shortcut to gain sooner what may take a longer time.

As with language concepts being concrete and abstract, the later group may take a long time to be explicitly clarified, thus, a simple translation is for sure time-saving—bound only to basic and pre-intermediate learners. But should translation mean native language use, it is recommended in minimum amount in times of sympathy (i.e. to assure the learner and make them feel confident and secure.)

Eclecticism or Eclectic?

Teaching is claimed to be done based on *Eclecticism* in Iran. As a language teacher, one claims to have selected a number of procedures most prominently taken into account in each method or approach. Thus, it is assumed that by the time one starts teaching, they have this collection of best procedures to apply when needed. That is, they are of a pre-supposition to perfectly act or react in a given situation. This brings about two very controversial points for discussion;

To begin with, there lies the fact that in this regard, there would be no teaching system cohesion as each teacher grows their own framework to some extent inapplicable in another's eyes. This lack of cohesion bares some devastating results the most incurable of which is learners' discouragement.

It is not unexpected, as the ending variable, if little is gained as *Eclecticism* is no more than a school; that is, -ism indicates a school of thought. A teacher gathers what seems best in his mind; a collection of utter theories to apply of which might bring about a failure; in other words, a simple try and err to see what fits best. Should it change to *Eclectic*, rather than *Eclecticism*, one, a teacher, practically uses a variety of ways, ideas, methods, and approaches to do their job as perfect as possible.

Although proposed as *Eclectic*, the selection of ways and ideas should be done under the supervision of a team of experts. As it was mentioned earlier, to develop a how-to-learn procedure—specifically about EFL learners in Iran—a group of sociolinguists and psycholinguists should in a close co-ordination study how an Iranian child learns. Then, it should be generalized to language learning. Furthermore, cultural, social, and genetic variables, all plus timed ones should be taken into account. Finally when a procedure is developed, it is to be carried out within a language course to undergo possible revisions. It, for sure, will be time consuming; it will then follow some betterment as time goes by.

Each class is a different file. Each file includes some folders called learners. But this is not the side mostly observed. Class materials such as books, supplementary books, curriculum, term syllabus, quizzes, exams, and even timing and sessions are already set. As a teacher, one should, in the most perfect circumstances, keep with what is set; plus, learners should, in the same chain of circumstances, absorb whatever target language input. Alas, this is not always the case. It is frequently observed that class variables cannot be fixed. Neither can they be fixed about class and learners, nor about the teacher and his performance.

Class variables cannot be fixed regarding class and learners. That is, there are many

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factors which simply stop on-going flow of teaching and learning procedure. Of those can be absentees, emotional atmosphere of the class, sudden needs (i.e. situational rise of need for information for specific functions), and so many other unforeseen factors. Frequent occurrence of these factors may distract a class from its main path notwithstanding the fact that there are many ways an experienced teacher can take to even use these situations to teach the learners, according to their level, what meets the end best. These can disturb class consistency.

One of the leading reasons making inconsistency happen in class is that learners are different from person to person; different characteristics, feelings, viewpoints, cultures, family backgrounds, and there would be no doubt they act and react differently in a given situation.

To lessen or even abolish this, inconsistency, Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was developed. Some of the advocates like Willis (1996) claimed it a logical approach to meet language needs of learners. As posed in Richards and Rodgers (2001), it draws on several principles that formed part of communicative language teaching movement from the 1980s. For example:

-Activities that involve real communication are essential for language learning.

-Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.

-Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

Again these are all set; already set. No doubt that they meet language needs, but what was mentioned about the learners is ignored. TBLT facilitates language teaching and learning seeing that it includes real world language use.

As Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000: 150) observes, "By encouraging students to move out of the classroom and into the world, project work helps to bridge the gap between language study and language use."

Real world language use activities are not designed based on learners, but based on language learning goal. That is, learners' feelings are dealt with positively based on language learning goals. Therefore, this ignorance may happen to bare the same withdrawals, feelings, gains and losses of the learners, but more or less since language is learned easier.

This ignorance is inevitable because it is sort of impossible to assort learners who are psychologically and sociologically the same, especially regarding the earlier variable. Variables like, culture, viewpoints, characteristic, family background, feelings, and genetics are person-specified. As a result, learning style and language tasks are to be person-specified; that is, special style and tasks should be designed in accordance with the learner's needs founded on mentioned variables. In other words, one's series of language tasks cannot be assigned for another.

Should learners be assorted based on the above variables, classes are grouped into several groups of almost the same language tasks; that is, as many as the number of the groups, styles and tasks are required. This might have its own proponents and

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opponents, but the matter is still open to question.

Coherence of teacher's performance is relative. As a teacher, one may not have absolute consistency in their performance. A teacher is not a rigid creature to do what he is supposed to; he may experience very similar ups and downs as others. But a teacher is not professionally expected to happen to do whatever deed.

A teacher is defined a person who carries out the process of education. This definition brings to light two major components of the matter;

First and most importantly, is the concept of education. In education process, a teacher conveys already set pieces of information to learners. In this phase, teacher's knowledge is of supreme significance. To have a good command of to-be-taught materials is a must, for a teacher is to bring to light not to lead into darkness. This brief sentence, on the whole, points toward significant role of teacher's language proficiency including that in the four skills (i.e. Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing).

Besides language proficiency, a teacher should bear in mind all the time that teaching is not the only job a teacher does. A teacher should be an excellent knower, a great psychologist, a brilliant director, and a good politician. Learners are always complaining about things which apparently seem small, but have deep effects on them; lack of respect, discrimination, monotony of the class and teacher's behavior, inattentiveness or egotism of the teacher, incapability in class management, etc. are all permanent parts of complaints—regardless of the teacher's insufficient knowledge. To be fair, such events are mostly unintentional

on teacher's behalf, but they should be decreased to the least—if complete removal is inaccessible. But alas, in most cases a teacher takes policies to evade such situations not to shoulder them prudently.

A teacher, in addition to teaching as the main axis of his profession, deals with many lateral situations in which careful reaction is demanded. In deed, a teacher should observe virtue; that is, to observe some ethical dos and don'ts. Iranians are generally very sensitive people. From Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) point of view, they habitually take far and more often than not negative aspect of one's speech. Thus, with such sensitivity, a great care is to be taken when a teacher speaks. Derived from the same truth, rises some other. Especially considering Iranian language learners, a teacher is a model for his learners. It is widely seen that learners simply take for granted whatever their teacher says or does. They use the teacher's catch phrases, his speaking style and intonation, his social communications with others, and even his walking style. This proves it true that how extreme leading role a teacher has apart from the knowledge he conveys. Teachers are, therefore, more influential than parents. Hence, a teacher sets some limits for himself to begin the job. If so, punctuality, professional discipline, personal discipline, verbal and nonverbal behavior, etc. are all indispensable features of a good teacher; learners learn easily.

Above all, the most significant job of a teacher is to teach "to learn how to learn." I remember a learner of mine who once told me, "A teacher is no more than a bridge between knowledge and learners; it is not enough because he cannot force them across alone." This signifies the importance of "to learn how to learn" besides knowledge and

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all lateral features of a teacher; a teacher is to put learners on the right path.

If a teacher is capable of making an impenetrable wall between inside and outside of class and dedicating himself utterly to class when teaching, then the factor of consistency is not that difficult to get to. This does not mean that a teacher should block the way to express his feelings or just teach; but it means that he should as an ordinary person express his feelings of happiness, anger, and so on, but with a great care not to do this at a price of suppressing a learner's feelings or utterance; because it creates nothing, but hatred of the learner or even learners toward the teacher and even the subject matter.

Language Learning Pace and Variable of Age;

There is a tight correlation between language learning pace and variable of age; this rises to its highest importance regarding classes with considerable range of ages. It goes without saying that older learners learn at a longer time in comparison with young learners as the later are of more capability and brightness of brain—left hemisphere as focused here which does the job of language acquisition or learning.

As posed in teaching methodology books, learning should and does occur at one's own pace. It is not logical to expect equal language outputs from learners of a class. This is most obvious in private language institutes. Private language institutes are not that much age-bound; that is, learners of a class are of the same level, but fall on an age continuum, usually with a large age gap between learners. Regardless of all side effects that such groupings may bare, process of learning is not basically to occur at a same pace in all learners. Young learners generally internalize language habits whereas old learners often, if not always, fossilize language habits. To internalize or fossilize language habits mean to form correct or wrong language habits respectively. The earlier group learn to quench their thirst of knowledge; learners of this group are, on average, ten to twenty years of age. On the contrary, the later are forced to learn to obviate a desperate need; they are, on average, twenty five plus years of age.

In this regard, a teacher should be flexible toward learners considering expectations. Thus, teacher-learner communications, teacher's expectations, language of demonstration (i.e. verbal behavior a teacher uses to demonstrate to-be-taught materials), gestures, and all in all every other feature of a teacher should be person or group-specified. Variables as culture, family background, and genetics, which are specifically defined for each learner, are to be archived within a teacher's mind like pieces of information to be retrieved when necessary.

Conclusion;

Issues presented in this introspective paper demonstrate that language teaching methodology should be defined in terms of culture, society, genetics, and other person-specified features as well as its design and procedure. The Reform Movement, since 1880s onward, took place based on the rise of a need in foreign language teaching and learning—a betterment in teaching and learning. Scholars, ever since then, have made adorable endeavors to improve language teaching methodology. But Iranian learners of English need an Iranian how-to-learn procedure. The same framework to

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have improved methods and approaches seems to be universal in basis; that is, it can be applied in Iran as well.

Besides this, a language teacher should have some special features not having of which makes teaching fruitless. So, before one starts teaching, they have to know what they are supposed to have and do.

Although seemingly inaccessible, grouping learners, this brings about the need for group-specified tasks, may facilitate learning if teaching keeps in balance regarding its effectiveness; it is recommended since to apply person-specified teaching and tasks is a sort of impossible—although still open to question.

Drops of rain are sentenced to bare naught if they rain over a desert.

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