

Teacher Perfectionism and Iranian English Language Learners' Motivation and Achievement

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Educational psychology has recently reflected a policy shift from focusing on “what goes wrong” in schools, including psychological, physical, and educational disabilities, to recognizing and promoting strengths and positive aspects of students and their environments. Within this scope, some lines of research have examined the extent to which setting personal high standards influences such positive outcomes as educational achievement and high level of motivation. The present study was motivated by the concern that Iranian English language teachers' setting high standards, i.e. perfectionism, may predict English language learners' motivation and language achievement. Through cluster random sampling, a total of 30 English language teachers with more than one year of experience and 300 elementary English language learners were selected from English Language Institutes in Fars province, Iran. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism scale and Motivations Underlying English Language Learning questionnaire were used to measure teachers' perfectionism and learners' language learning motivation, respectively. The learners' final scores in the English courses were collected as a measure of their language learning achievement. The result of simple regression analysis revealed that the teachers' perfectionism did not predict English language learners' motivation and language achievement. In other words, Iranian English language teachers' perfectionism did not account for any variance in these two variables of interest.

Keywords: Perfectionism, Motivation, Language Learning Achievement

Introduction

Learning English is viewed to be a multifaceted phenomenon affected by a host of cognitive, affective, and social factors. Thus far, much of what was carried out by researchers and accordingly employed by teachers within the realm of English language teaching (ELT) have been massively directed by a cognitive-driven perspective that tries to provide a clear picture of what takes place in learners' brains and of how the brain processes and internalizes the information. Following that, affective and social factors start to receive attention with the

emergence of new paradigms such as constructivism. Some social factors pertain to teacher-related issues such as teacher identity, teacher efficacy, and teacher perfectionism that are thought to influence the labyrinth of the foreign/second language learning process. Teacher perfectionism, the primary concern of the present study, was first viewed and addressed as a unidimensional concept that was mainly self-oriented. Such a perspective is evident in the definition proposed by Burns (1980). He defined perfectionists as people "whose standards are high beyond reach or reason...who strain compulsively and unremittingly toward impossible goals and who measure their own worth entirely in terms of productivity and accomplishment" (p.34). Other researchers, however, proposed that perfectionism be viewed from a multidimensional perspective. Unlike Burns (1980) who understood perfectionism merely based on a self-oriented perspective, Hewitt and Flett (1990) believed that perfectionism has other dimensions. They argued that perfectionism is not only self-oriented but also other-oriented and socially prescribed. Self-oriented perfectionism is concerned with setting high standards and perfectionism motivation for oneself. Other-oriented perfectionism refers to setting high standards and expecting perfect performance from others. Socially prescribed perfectionism deals with the perception that others define unrealistic standards for oneself, and that others expect one to be perfect.

In the past decade, perfectionism was investigated mainly in clinical psychology and the researchers were curious to find out whether there was any association between perfectionism and other affective factors. There were two groups of researchers with conflicting views. Some personality psychologists found that perfectionism is healthy and can be regarded as a salient part of human development (Lazarfeld, 1966; Maslow, 1970). Other researchers, however, did not view perfectionism positively and argued that perfectionism is associated with trait anxiety (Hewitt & Flett, 1991a,b), depression and social anxiety (Downey & Chang, 2007, Hewitt, & Dyck, 1986, Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 1999, Rosser, Issakidis, & Peters, 2003) as well as low self-esteem and low self-efficacy (Dunkley, Zuroff & Blankstein, 2003; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

In addition to the clinical studies on perfectionism, the educational researchers explored perfectionism from different angles and tried to find out whether perfectionism influenced students' performance negatively or positively. Some research has linked perfectionism with achievement motivation in higher education settings. Neumeister (2004) investigated how socially prescribed and self-oriented perfectionism was developed within gifted college students and influenced their achievement motivation and their attributions for successes and failures. He found that the socially prescribed students perceived their perfectionism to be developed due to pressure they received from their perfectionism teachers. In the same vein, other researchers found positive correlation between perfectionism and academic achievement and test performance (e.g., Bieling, Israeli, Smith, & Antony, 2003; Stoeber & Kersting, 2007; Stumpf & Parker, 2000). Further, it was found that perfectionism has been associated with a number of positive adaptive qualities, including self-efficacy and good academic performance (Blankstein & Dunkley, 2002; Burns & Fedewa, 2005).

Other researcher, however, argued for the negative influence of perfectionism on the performance of learners. Pishghadam and Akhoondpoor (2011) indicated that perfectionism teachers make students afraid of making mistakes and taking risks. This will make the

learners remain silent and wait for the proper chance; otherwise they do not try to express themselves when they are not sure about the correctness of what they want to say. This striving for perfection would cause many serious problems in learners' performance. In such situations, learners have high levels of fear and anxiety in English classes. Teachers set high standards and overemphasize on correctness and this results in error phobia and learners may have an unpleasant experience in language classes (Akhoondpoor, 2008). As Fahim and Pishghadam (2009) argued, language classes have become "sites of fear and anxiety". In such circumstances, learners prefer to avoid performance as they have fear of being criticized by the teacher so they refrain from involving themselves in the class, and this will reduce risk-taking in them.

Motivation has been greatly agreed upon as the impetus for driving people to learn, directing and reinforcing them to invest some effort to reach their goals (Gardner, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998). Dörnyei (2003) proposed a dynamic picture of motivation affected by diverse factors ranging from the context of classroom, teaching materials, and different tasks to the role of teachers. Attitudes taken by teachers toward language learning, teaching methods and practices, and their personality traits are likely to influence learners' motivations variably. As for the association between perfectionism and motivation, Stoeber and Rambow (2007) found that perfectionism in school students is correlated with positive characteristics such as motivation, well-being, and a pursuit of excellence. In another study, Neumeister (2004) came to this conclusion that perfectionism that was characterized by underlying motive to avoid failure influenced the students' achievement goals and behaviors. These studies focused on the extent to which perfectionism exercised by students influenced their disposition, achievement, and motivation. The association between teacher perfectionism and students' achievement and motivation to learn, however, has not been adequately addressed.

The present study was motivated by the concern that Iranian English language teachers' setting high standards, i.e. perfectionism, may predict English language learners' motivation and language achievement. The study sought the answer to the two following research questions:

1. Does EFL teachers' perfectionism predict Iranian elementary EFL learners' language learning motivation?
2. Does EFL teachers' perfectionism predict Iranian elementary EFL learners' language achievement?

Methods

Participants

The participants that took part in the study were selected from among English language teachers and learners. To choose the participants of the study, a list of 50 English language Institutes in Fars province, Iran was made first. Then, through random sampling, 10 institutes and 30 Elementary classes were chosen for the purpose of the present study. The teacher participants included a total of thirty EFL teachers (16 male and 14 female) with at least one year experience of teaching English at English language institutes in Fars province, Iran. Fourteen of the selected EFL teachers have majored in TEFL, thirteen teachers had studied English literature and three of them majored in English translation. The student participants were 300 Elementary English language learners (151 male and 149 female) learning English at language institutes.

Instruments

The data were gathered through the two instruments. Frost Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Frost et al., 1990) was used to evaluate the perfectionism propensities of the teacher participants in the study. Participants responded to the items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) through 5 (strongly disagree). The FMPS yields six subscales: Concern Over Mistakes (9 items), Personal Standards (7 items), Parental Criticism(4 items), Parental Expectations(5 items), Doubts About Actions (4 items), and Organization(6 items). Support for the reliability and validity of the subscales has been established by Frost et al. (1990, 1993) in several studies. The reliability index of the questionnaire was 0.90.

Motivations Underlying English Language Learning (MUELL) developed by Khodadady and Ashrafborji (2013) was utilized to collect the data on learners' language learning motivation. The student participants were asked to read the 25 items and indicate whether they 'completely disagreed', 'disagreed', 'disagreed somewhat', 'had no idea', 'agreed somewhat', 'agreed', or 'completely agreed' with them. Cronbach's alpha for MUELL was 0.83.

The student participants' achievement scores in the elementary level were used as a measure of their language learning achievement. The achievement score for each participant was the average of the midterm and final exams he or she took during the term.

Data Collection

At the very beginning of the study, permission was gained from the principals of the targeted English Language institutes. To guarantee a positive participation, the subjects were informed that their answers would be confidential and they were not required to write or give their names at any stage of the study. The perfectionism questionnaire was administered to the thirty EFL teachers at the beginning of the term. EFL teachers were assured that the main objective of the study was to find out whether their perfectionist view could affect their EFL learners' language learning motivation and achievement. The student participants' achievement scores in the elementary level (midterm and final exam scores) were collected as an index of their language learning achievement and at the end of the term they were asked to fill in the MUELL questionnaires.

Results

The first research question concerned the effect of EFL teacher perfectionism on the EFL learners' language learning motivation. The purpose was to pinpoint the prediction of EFL learners' language learning motivation as the dependent variable by EFL teacher perfectionism as the independent variable. To test the prediction a simple linear regression was conducted with one independent variable, that is EFL teacher perfectionism, and one dependent variable, say, EFL learners' language learning motivation. The analysis lead to an R square value of .002 showing that EFL teacher perfectionism accounts for 0% of the variance in EFL learners' language learning motivation. Table 1 reveals that EFL teacher perfectionism with a standardized coefficient of .043 did not predict EFL learners' language learning motivation.

Table 1.

Linear regression between teacher perfectionism and learners' motivation

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	T	Sig
(constant)	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Perfectionism	81.182	3.770	.058	21.534	.000
	1.014	1.002		1.011	.313

The second research question addressed the prediction of EFL learners' language learning achievement by EFL teacher perfectionism. The result of linear regression showed an R square value of .003 indicating that EFL teacher perfectionism did not account for the variance in EFL learners' language learning achievement. Table 2 indicates that EFL teacher perfectionism with a standardized coefficient of .058 was not a statically significant predictor of EFL learners' language learning achievement.

Table 2.

Linear regression between teacher perfectionism and learners achievement

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	T	Sig
(constant)	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Perfectionism	4.731	.264	.043	17.915	.000
	.052	.070		.744	.458

Discussion

Perfectionism behaviors are characterized by tendencies for flawlessness and setting high standards beyond reach or reason. Perfectionism teachers are excessively concerned over mistakes in students' performance, doubtful about the quality of students' performance, and have an exaggerated emphasis on precision, order, and organization. It is assumed that if teachers incorporate such features, students may have to put a great deal of time and effort into learning in order to meet the high standards set, thereby enhancing their motivation and achievement. This assumption, however, was not supported by the findings obtained from the present study. The current study found that the teachers' perfectionism behaviors failed to predict the rise in the students' motivation and achievement levels.

The results from the linear regression analysis provided a support for the idea that teachers' perfectionism did not account for any variance in learners' language learning motivation and achievement. Such findings can be attributed to the change we have witnessed in the educational goals, assessment and teaching practices in Iranian elementary education. The first dramatic shift that took place in the educational system of Iranian elementary

education in 2002 was related to the assessment and evaluation practices. It is over twelve years that the quantitative orientation in assessment has been abandoned and a qualitative perspective has been followed in elementary education. That is to say, students' performance is evaluated and reported qualitatively rather than numerically or quantitatively. Under the aegis of the qualitative assessment policy, there is scant emphasis on precision and flawless performance on part of students. What the educational researchers and teachers agree on is that the current crucial goal of elementary education is to enable students to move toward learning and mastery rather than toward getting perfect grades in school subjects. In this regard, the role of schooling is to promote knowledge and learning rather than advocating numerically-driven assessment practices that trigger the unhealthy competition among the students and expect flawless and perfect performance. This trend is in striking contrast with the traditional assessment policy which did not emphasize the act of ongoing learning process but sought the perfect performance by the end of the year. In the light of this consideration, it can be argued that perfectionism exercised by teachers might not be beneficial to students owing to the fact that there is less emphasis on precision and impeccable performance in the current educational system.

Thus far, contradictory results have been obtained regarding the role played by perfectionism behaviors in educational contexts. Some researchers believe that perfectionism can lead to students putting more time and effort into learning, hence contributing to and enhancing achievement (Bieling, Israeli, Smith, and Antony, 2003; Neumeister, 2004; Stoeber & Kersting, 2007; Stumpf & Parker, 2000). Other researchers, however, argue against the prevalence and persistence of perfectionism behaviors in learning and teaching contexts. They found that perfectionism teachers make students afraid of making mistakes and taking risks (Pishghadam & Akhondpoor, 2011). The current study extended the literature, revealing that English language teachers' perfectionism did not predict any variance in language motivation and achievement level of Iranian English language learners. One possible explanation for the contradictory results within the area of perfectionism and its effect on different aspects of teaching and learning can be referred to antecedents of perfectionism behaviors. As pointed out by Hewitt and Flett (1990), the antecedents of perfectionism behaviors are different. They argued that in some cases the source of perfectionism originates from self, i.e. self-oriented perfectionism. In this case, an individual sets high standards and perfectionism motivation for oneself. The second antecedent includes high standards socially prescribed by others. In this case, an individual has to meet the standards and conditions set by others. Thus, in interpreting results and discussing implications of studies on perfectionism, it is important to clarify the antecedents of perfectionism behaviors.

In the present study, teacher perfectionism, which was a socially prescribed phenomenon for the learners, did not account for any variance in language learning motivation and language achievement. Thus, it is pedagogically important for Iranian English language teachers to balance their perfectionism view in order to avoid the negative consequences stemming from perfectionism behaviors and practices. Setting demanding standards and expecting perfect performances from the learners might lead to decrease in their motivation and achievement level. Since setting unrealistic high standards and expecting perfect and precise performance is fading away in the new qualitatively driven educational system of Iranian elementary education, it can be concluded that perfectionism practices and

behaviors employed by teachers may not pedagogically benefit learners. As a result, it is important for elementary teachers to make a shift in their perfectionism tendencies because, as far as the results of the present study are concerned, they do not give rise to the increase in language learning motivation and the achievement of learners.

Conclusion

In other words, instead of focusing exclusively on pathology and remediating students' weaknesses, educational psychologists and researchers have embarked on exploring positive personal and environmental factors that not only lead to high levels of achievement and motivation of students but also enhance their optimal health and subjective well-being. Based on the results, Iranian English language learners may not benefit pedagogically from the perfectionism practices and behaviors employed by their teachers. Thus, English language teachers should make a shift in their perfectionism tendencies as they do not give rise to the increase in language learning motivation and achievement.

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