

The Interplay among EFL Teachers' Teaching Experience, Critical Thinking, and Classroom Management

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to seek the possible relationship between the classroom management, critical thinking, and years of teaching experience of Iranian EFL teachers. A total of 85 teachers (50 female and 35 male) ranging in age from 20 to 38 and varied in their ELT experience from 2 to 18 years were invited to participate in this research. The researchers employed two kinds of instruments to conduct this correlational research: (1) a questionnaire on critical thinking by Honey (2000), and (2) a questionnaire on classroom management by Martin and Sass (2010), both of which were of Likert-scale type. The result of the data analysis showed that there was an almost strong positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers classroom management and critical thinking, which was also statistically significant, $r_s = .722$, $P < .05$. The result of the Mann-Whitney U test for the second inferential statistics showed that there was a statistically significant difference between the teachers with different teaching experiences, $U=611.50$, $p = .008 < 0.05$. Hence, it was concluded that more experienced teachers had better classroom management ability.

Keywords: Classroom management, critical thinking, teachers' experience

1. Background

Classroom management, often called classroom discipline, has been a priority for teachers for as long as there have been opinion surveys of educational priorities; effective classroom management focuses on preventive rather than reactive procedures and establishes a positive classroom environment in which the teacher concentrates on students who behave appropriately (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). According to Evertson and Weinstein (2006), classroom management has two distinct purposes: (1) it seeks to establish and sustain an orderly environment, so students can engage in meaningful academic learning, and (2) it aims to enhance student social and moral growth. Recently, EFL researchers/teachers have concentrated on the identification of such teacher characteristics and investigation of their effects on the process, progress, and growth of teaching. One of the intellectual abilities which have been recognized as determiners of learning/teaching is critical thinking (Vaughn, 2008).

Before English teachers adopt interventions to foster their students' critical and creative thinking, it is important that they bear in mind that a friendly, supportive, and non-threatening classroom atmosphere can have a positive impact on students' motivation and language performance and that a positive climate for learning has been identified by many practitioners as a critical factor in effective learning (Little, 1997). Critical thinking helps teachers make a shift from using mechanical activities to problem-solving types in their classes (Bessick, 2008). Developing critical thinking on the part of the teachers (especially in higher education) may assist them to become more creative, efficient, and successful language teachers, thereby leading to better classroom management abilities (Hamidi, 2016).

Classroom management has been widely used in the research studies related to EFL teachers. For example, Hamidi and Khatib (2016) investigated the interplay among emotional intelligence, classroom management, and language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers. Their findings showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the classroom management and language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers. The findings of Unal and Unal

(2012) demonstrated that experienced teachers were more likely to prefer to be in control in their classrooms than beginning teachers while interacting with students when making decisions. However, even though many studies have reported positive relationships between years of experience and classroom management abilities in classroom atmosphere (Hagger & McIntyre, 2000; Kerrins & Cushing, 2000; Unal & Unal, 2012), and also between critical thinking and language proficiency (Grosser & MirnaNel, 2013), there has been very little research, especially in an Iranian context, reported on the role of critical thinking skills in classroom management. Regarding the importance of critical thinking skills, years of teaching experience, and classroom management ability in the success of foreign language teachers and EFL teaching, the researchers seek to find the possible relationship among the three mentioned variables. In line with the purpose of the study, the present research aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between classroom management and critical thinking of Iranian EFL teachers?

RQ2. Do EFL teachers' years of experience have any statistically significant role in their classroom management ability?

1.1. Classroom Management

Classroom management refers to the ways in which student behavior, movement, interaction, etc., during a class is organized and controlled by the teacher (or sometimes by the learners themselves) to enable teaching to take place more effectively. Classroom management includes procedures for grouping students for different types of classroom activities, use of lesson plans, handling the equipment, aids, etc., and the direction and management of student behavior and activity (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Teaching is complex of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes. The general abilities and dispositions, which Ennis has identified with critical thinking, do seem to connect closely with the results of the research on teacher thinking. It is probably no exaggeration to say that classroom management has been a primary concern of teachers the moment they have entered the classrooms. However, the systematic study of effective classroom management is a relatively recent phenomenon (Brophy, 1996).

Classroom management is not a gift bestowed upon some teachers and though it is true that some teachers adapt to classroom management techniques easily, classroom management is a skill that can be gained through training and many years of experience in the field (Bosch, 2006, as cited in Unal & Unal, 2012). Experienced teachers identify the establishment of classroom management as one of the major goals that needs to be accomplished in the first week of the year. Beginning teachers cite classroom management as one of their most serious challenges. School administrators indicate poor classroom management as a major reason for low evaluations, as well as a primary reason why teachers are not hired (Savage & Savage, as cited in Unal & Unal, 2012).

EFL teachers are believed to have combined years of service and a repertoire of classroom skills and strategies. They typically have the ability to prioritize tasks and to attend selectively to a number of key classroom matters (Hagger & McIntyre, 2000). They are generally able to manage the dynamic nature of a classroom setting and to deal effectively with the most salient aspect of a classroom—unpredictability (Doyle, 1990). Compared to beginning teachers, experienced teachers tend to be less hesitant and more flexible and adaptable (Kerrins & Cushing, 2000).

1.2. Critical Thinking

The way we think affects all aspects of our private and social life and education is not an exception. Human beings think differently and teachers who have key roles in education do so as well. Recently proper attention has been given to the ways teachers think and now teaching is more characterized as a thinking activity (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Critical thinking is an important concept in education and is generally defined as the ability to think rationally and make good decisions in doing something or believing something (Ennis, 2011). Critical thinking includes special skills to identify a problem, analyze it, and make inferences to solve it. It also requires judging the validity and reliability of assumptions and sources of data, making decisions based on

specific reasoning criteria, and applying inductive and deductive logic (Diestler, 2001).

Critical thinking, as Scriven and Paul (2004) assert, is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. In its exemplary form, it is based on universal intellectual values that transcend subject matter divisions: clarity, accuracy, precision, consistency, relevance, sound evidence, good reasons, depth, breadth, and fairness. Critical thinking has roots in two primary academic disciplines: philosophy and psychology (Lewis & Smith, 1993). Nickerson (as cited in Schafersman, 1991) characterizes a good critical thinker in terms of knowledge, abilities, attitudes, and habitual ways of behaving and lists some of the characteristics of a good critical thinker as follow:

- uses evidence skillfully and impartially
- organizes thoughts and articulates them concisely and coherently
- distinguishes between logically valid and invalid inferences
- suspends judgment in the absence of sufficient evidence to support a decision
- understands the difference between reasoning and rationalizing
- attempts to anticipate the probable consequences of alternative actions
- understands the idea of degrees of belief
- sees similarities and analogies that are not superficially apparent
- can learn independently and has an abiding interest in doing so
- applies problem-solving techniques in domains other than those already learned

According to Schafersman (1991), critical thinking can be taught during lectures, laboratories, homework, quantitative exercises, term papers, and exams.

2. Empirical Research

There have been some studies done worldwide aiming at finding the relationship among the classroom management, critical thinking, and years of teaching experience (of course not done simultaneously). In a study by Smith (2002), it was revealed that teachers, who employed strong beliefs in their critical thinking abilities, were better problem solvers in their classrooms and obtained strong perceptions in their classroom management. In a similar research done by Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, and Sugai (2008), it was found that teachers, who had positive beliefs about classroom management skills had similar beliefs about the critical thinking abilities as well.

One research study, conducted by Unal and Unal (2012), demonstrated that experienced teachers were more likely to prefer to be in control in their classrooms than beginning teachers while interacting with students when making decisions. The results of the study done by Demirdag (2015) indicated that teachers had positive beliefs about their classroom management skills and critical thinking abilities. However, the findings also indicated that there was not any significant relationship between classroom management skills and critical thinking abilities of high school teachers. Hamidi and Khatib (2016) investigated the interplay among emotional intelligence, classroom management, and language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers. Their findings showed that there was a statistically significant relationship between the classroom management and language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 85 teachers including 50 females and 35 male participants, ranging in age from 20 to 38 and varied in their ELT experience from 2 years to 18 years participated in this research. Fifty-two of the teachers had M.A. and thirty-three of them had B.A. degree in TEFL and translation. Iranian teachers at intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced levels from private English language

institutes were selected based on convenience sampling to take part in the study from Mazandaran province.

3.2. Instruments

The researchers employed two kinds of instruments to conduct this correlational research: a questionnaire on critical thinking by Honey (2000), and a questionnaire on classroom management by Martin and Sass (2010). The critical thinking questionnaire intends to explore what a person might or might not do when thinking critically about a subject. Developed by Honey (2000), this questionnaire aims at evaluating the three main skills of comprehension, analysis, and evaluation of the participants. It is a Likert-type questionnaire with 30 items that allows researchers to investigate the learners' ability in note-taking, summarizing, questioning, paraphrasing, researching, inferencing, discussing, classifying, outlining, comparing and contrasting, distinguishing, synthesizing, inductive, and deductive reasoning. The questionnaire of classroom management, developed by Martin and Sass (2010), was also used. It was a 5-point Likert-type questionnaire with 24 items including the components of behavioral management as well as instructional management.

3.2. Procedure

Participants were given the classroom management questionnaire first. It took them 10 minutes to complete. They were then given the critical thinking questionnaire to fill out. As to the critical thinking questionnaire, the participants were asked to rate the frequency of each category they used on a 5-point Liker-scale option, ranging from never (1 point), seldom (2 points), sometimes (3 points), often (4 points), to always (5 points). Therefore, the participants' scores would range from 1 to 5. Participants' scores were ranked ordinally from 1 to 5. The researchers used Spearman's rank-order correlation formula to answer the research questions 1 and 2.

4. Result

4.1. Answering the First Research Question

The first research question of this research was as follows:

RQ1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between classroom management and critical thinking of Iranian EFL teachers?

Since the data did not enjoy normal distribution, the non-parametric Spearman rank-order correlation test was used. The following Table shows the result of the correlation test between the classroom management and critical thinking of Iranian EFL teachers (Table 1).

Table 1. The Result of the Spearman Rank-Order Correlation Test between the Classroom Management and Critical Thinking

		Classroom- Management	Critical- Thinking
Spearman's rho	Classroom- Management	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.
		N	86
	Critical-Thinking	Correlation Coefficient	.722**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	86
		**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).	

The Spearman Rank-Order Correlation was run to determine the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' classroom management and critical thinking. The result of data analysis showed that there was a strong positive correlation between Iranian EFL teachers CM and CT, which was also statistically significant, $r_s = .722$, $p < .05$. Thus, the null-hypothesis that there is no

statistically significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' classroom management and their critical thinking was rejected.

4.2. Answering the Second Research Question

The second research question of this research was as follows:

RQ2. Do EFL teacher's years of experience have any statistically significant role in their classroom management ability?

Since the data did not enjoy normal distribution, the non-parametric Man-Whitney U test was used for the mean comparison. The following Table shows the ranks-table for the two variables (Table 2).

Table 2. Ranks Table for the Teachers with 2-10 and 11-18 Years of Experience

	Experience-Year	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Classroom- Management	2-10	47	37.01	1739.50
	11-18	39	51.32	2001.50
	Total	86		

As it can be seen in table 2 above, the mean rank for the teachers with 2-10 (N= 47) and 11-18 (N=39) years of experience are 37.01 and 51.32 respectively. Table 3 below shows the result of the Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 4.3

The Man-Whitney U Test for the Teachers with 2-10 and 11-18 Years of Experience

	Classroom-Management
Mann-Whitney U	611.500
Wilcoxon W	1739.500
Z	-2.648
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
a. Grouping Variable: Experience-Year	

The Mann-Whitney U test was run to compare the mean scores of the teachers with 2-10 (N= 47) and 11-18 (N=39) years of experience considering their classroom management ability. The result of the Mann-Whitney U test showed that there was statistically significant difference between the two groups, $U=611.50$, $p = .008 < 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis that teacher's years of experience do not have any statistically significant role in their classroom management ability was rejected, putting emphasis on the superiority of the more experienced teachers in their classroom management ability.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the importance of the classroom management ability and critical thinking skills in the success of foreign language teachers and EFL teaching, the present study was an attempt to seek the possible relationship between the classroom management, critical thinking, and years of teaching experience of Iranian EFL teachers. The result of the data analysis showed that there was an almost strong positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers classroom management and critical thinking, which was also statistically significant, $r_s = .722$, $P < .05$. The result of the Mann-Whitney U test for the second inferential statistics showed that there was statistically significant difference between the teachers with different teaching experiences, $U=611.50$, $p = .008 < 0.05$.

Hence, it was concluded that more experienced teachers had better classroom management ability.

The result of this study was in line with the findings of Unal and Unal (2012) in which it was shown that experienced teachers were more likely to prefer to be in control in their classrooms than beginning teachers while interacting with students when making decisions. Findings of Hamidi and Khatib (2016) also support the results of this study by showing that there was a statistically significant relationship between the classroom management and language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers. Although Demirdag (2015), in his research, indicated that teachers had positive beliefs about their classroom management skills and critical thinking abilities, his findings were in contrast to the findings of the present study in that he found no significant relationship between classroom management skills and critical thinking abilities of high school teachers. This could be due to the context in which he carried out the study (Turkey) or the place in which the study was carried out (high school vs. private language institute). The findings of the present research showed a positive relationship between the classroom management and critical thinking of Iranian EFL teachers indicating that the ability of critical thinking improves as the ability to control and manage the class increases. Findings further indicated that more experienced teachers were more likely to prefer to be in control in their classrooms than beginning teachers while interacting with students as confirmed by Unal and Unal (2012). Teachers tend to change their thinking and management skills as they become more experienced. It can also be concluded, as supported by Simonsen et al. (2008) and Smith (2002), that teachers, who employ stronger beliefs in their critical thinking abilities, can be better problem solvers in their classrooms and may obtain stronger perceptions in their classroom management.

This study can have some implications for teacher educators and language institute managers. Teacher educators should bear in mind that both critical thinking and classroom management abilities are crucial elements of successful teachers. Therefore, in their education process, educators need to focus on these two abilities in order to have more effective teachers. Language institute managers need either to hire more experienced teachers in order to have better teaching personnel or to work on both critical thinking and classroom management abilities of their available teachers. It is suggested that the classroom management and critical thinking abilities of EFL teachers be compared to each other across levels of proficiency. Gender comparison would perhaps yield an interesting result in that male/female teachers might be found to differ in their classroom management or critical thinking ability.

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