The Issue of Cohesiveness in Foreign Language Classes at Higher Education

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Abstract: Understanding the social structure of the classrooms is vital for language teachers in order to create an environment which fosters learning. The key to creating positive climate in the classroom and also improving the quality of the learning context is to develop good group cohesion. We believe, having a general group development objective, that is establishing classroom cohesion, as well as a specific pedagogic goal, in our case teaching English, is necessary in language classrooms. This study investigates whether language teachers at tertiary level place value on class cohesion. For this purpose, we made a survey among a group of university lecturers, who were teaching English to preparatory class students. The participant teachers were asked to describe a "good" language classroom through metaphors. They were also asked for the properties which make a language classroom effective. It was found out that classroom cohesion was not a concern for the English teachers participated in this study.

Key words: Cohesion · Classroom environment · Teacher perception · Social context for language learning

INTRODUCTION

Learning never takes place in a vacuum, but rather it occurs within a variety of overlapping contexts contributing to the cognitive, affective, moral and social development of individuals [1]. There are four domains of learning environment (physical, social, instructional and psychological) and all play a significant contributory role in facilitating or hindering learning [2]. Thus, the study of different aspects of learning environments is particularly important for understanding appropriate conditions for learning to take place. Among all these four domains of learning environment, especially in the field of language teaching, understanding of the social structure of the classrooms is vital in order to create an environment which fosters learning. Modern approaches to language teaching are based on communicative classrooms. When students do not feel secure enough in their classroom group to communicate, learning is compromised and conversely, when they do feel secure, learning is enhanced [3]. The key to making students feel secure in the language classroom is to develop the group's cohesion [3].

Cohesiveness is concerned with the collective feeling that the class members have about the classroom group and it emphasizes the individual's relation to the group as a whole [4]. In more specific terms, cohesiveness refers to the ability and willingness of group members to work as a group [4]. It is a sense of togetherness, or community, within a group [5]. In cohesive classrooms students become more motivated to interact and this contributes to a creation of a positive group dynamic that increases the effectiveness of lessons. Group cohesiveness is one of the most important attributes of the successful communicative language class [6]. Any class with a positive whole-group atmosphere is good, whereas any class which lacks a spirit of group cohesion is unsatisfactory, even if it is composed of high-achieving students [7].

Although the importance of developing and maintaining a positive whole-group feeling among students in language classrooms has been revealed by the findings of researches conducted in the field [6, 8-12], little attention has been paid to the social aspect of language classrooms by teachers. Most teachers view teaching in terms of transmission of information [13]. Yet, instruction takes place within a group context and, therefore, the nature and behavior of the classroom group have a significant effect on learning [14]. Thus, the role of the teacher is to foster the development and operation of an effective classroom group [14]. Therefore, we believe, having a general group development objective, that is

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establishing classroom cohesion, as well as a specific pedagogic goal, i.e. teaching English, is necessary in language classrooms. However, very often, teachers are so busy with covering the language items in the syllabus that the social processes within their classroom occur below the threshold of their conscious awareness. To improve the quality of teaching and learning process in language classrooms, it is important to investigate teachers' thoughts regarding what constitutes a good class. This study was conducted to find out whether language teachers at tertiary level place value on class cohesion.

MATERIALS AND METHOD

Participants of the Study: The study was carried out at Cukurova University, School of Foreign Languages, Adana, Turkey. Twenty-three English teachers, all females with only one exception, participated in the study. Their age varies from 28 to 42. The average year of working experience was 13. All of the participant teachers have master degree in teaching English as a foreign language. A few of them hold doctoral degree in English language teaching. The school the participant teachers were working was a preparatory school where university students attend two semesters to study English before they continue their education in their departments.

Design of the Study: The participant teachers' understanding of what constitutes a good language classroom was the starting point for our study. To uncover the perceptions of teachers regarding the nature of "good" English language classes, we made a survey. The data were gathered through structured interviews and open-ended questionnaire. As a first step, we interviewed each teacher to examine their beliefs regarding good language classrooms. The way we think, what we experience and what we do every day is very much a matter of metaphor and that people's deep-seated belief systems are metaphorical in nature [15]. In line with this argument, the teachers were asked to describe a good language classroom by using a metaphor and then, they were asked to give underlying reasons behind their answers. Each interview was made in the teachers' offices and lasted for about 15 minutes. During the interviews, we took detailed notes in order not to miss any information given by the interviewee. Following the interviews, the teachers were given a questionnaire which consists of one open-ended question: What are the properties of "good" language classrooms? The teachers were asked to

make a list of qualities which they think make a good language classroom. They were asked to return the questionnaires back when they complete it. The expressions used by the participant teachers to describe good language classrooms were then analyzed to find out whether they judge good language classrooms according to pedagogic or social criteria.

RESULTS

Interview Results: The purpose of our using metaphors was revealing what the teachers hold in their minds regarding the nature of good language classrooms. Each teacher was given a prompt, "A good language classroom is …", to complete in the interview. The metaphors used by the teachers clearly show us what they associate "good" language classrooms with. The metaphors and the underlying meanings (given in parenthesis) attached to each metaphor, as elaborated by the teachers themselves, are as follows: *heaven* (everyone is happy), *good dish* (it is cooked enthusiastically and liked by the customers), *travel all around the world* (everyday something new is learned), *deep rough sea* (it is changing every time, very dynamic), *community* (it is a team working together), *family* (there is mutual love and respect among its members), *tennis game* (there is continuous interaction between teacher and students), *home* (you feel happy, safe and secure), *dark sky with bright stars* (there are both good and bad students), *mirror* (it is a reflector of the participants' language use), *theatre stage* (it is very much like real life), *good heart* (there is sharing and caring among participants in order to achieve the goals), *sea* (learners fight so as not to drown in the huge waves that wash them ashore at full force), *mum* (you pick up language from without being aware of it), *train* (it takes you different places for various experiences), *playground* (one learns while having fun at the same time), *arena* (everyone displays his or her competence) and *library* (it is a source of information).

The richness of the metaphors used by the teachers to describe good language classrooms points out that the participant teachers' perceptions of the quality of language classroom is varied. For example, while some of the metaphors, such as "travel" and "deep rough sea", reflect the changing nature of language classes, some other metaphors, such as "heaven" and "good dish", focus on the affective dimension of learning created in language classrooms. With regards to our research topic, we found that out of 23 teachers participated in the study only seven (30.43%) teachers associated a good language

Table 1: Teachers' perceived qualifications of "good" language classrooms

Classroom atmosphere	Learning Activities and Participation	Classroom Management	Teaching Methodology	Social Structure of the Classroom	Student Participation
Encouraging and motivating classroom environment	Focus on language use	Equal power distribution between teacher and students	Autonomous language learning	Cooperation among students	Active student involvement
Comfortable and pleasing environment	Real like learning tasks	Mutual respect	Information transfer from teacher to students	Harmony among group members	Voluntary student contribution
Emotionally fulfilling	Fair place	Technology integrated teaching	Sharing and caring behaviors among members		
Fun/Joyful and enjoyable lessons			Learner-centeredness	Sense of security and safety within group	

classroom with concepts related to classroom cohesion, such as community (1), family (2), home (3) and good heart (1). When these teachers were asked to give the underlying reasons behind their answers, they commented that in their point of view, a good language classroom entails mutual respect and love among its members. In their opinion, a good language classroom also means becoming a team working together to reach goals. Finally, according to these teachers, a good language classroom is like home. Everyone feels safe and secure in there.

Questionnaire Results: The specific purpose of our using the questionnaire was to understand what, in the eyes of the teachers, a good language class was. We collected a vast amount of pieces of information about the properties of good language classrooms from the teachers. The participant teachers listed a total of 48 items as properties of good language classrooms. After the repeated properties were crossed out, 19 different items left. The qualifications mentioned by the teachers include the following: "encouraging and motivating classroom environment", "equal power distribution between teacher and students", "focus on language use", "real like learning situations", "voluntary contribution", "active student involvement", "autonomous learning", "emotional fulfillment", "mutual respect", "fair place", "information transfer", "cooperation among students", "feeling of security to take risks", "harmony among group members", "technology integrated teaching", "learner-centeredness", "having fun while learning", "comfortable and pleasing classroom environment" and "sharing and caring behaviors among group members".

When the items included in the lists of the participant teachers were analyzed, it was found that the participant teachers had identified various types of qualifications as indicators of good language classrooms. These qualifications reflect different aspects of teaching and learning process that take place in the classroom environment. The content analysis of the qualifications mentioned by the teachers showed that the items in the teachers' list mainly fell into six categories: classroom atmosphere, learning activities, student participation, classroom management, teaching methodology and social structure of the classroom. The Table 1 above summarizes the qualifications and the related aspect.

As it is displayed in the answers, the majority of the items raised by the teachers were concerned with pedagogical issues, such as the nature of classroom environment, the type of learning activities, classroom management issues and teaching methodology, when they were asked to reflect on their views about good language classrooms. On the other hand, only a few items, just four (21%), were listed concerning the social aspect of good language classrooms. These items were limited to "cooperation among group members", "harmony among group members", "sharing and caring behaviors among group members" and "feeling of security and safety". This meant that classroom cohesiveness - which is characterized by shared and goal directed collaboration, high levels of empathy, acceptance and friendship, feeling of being one, concern for group members and safe learning environment - was not found to be a common concern for the participant teachers.

To sum up, the both the interview and the questionnaire results indicated that the teachers in general preferred to judge the quality of language classrooms against pedagogic as opposed to social criteria. That is, teachers' understanding of good language classrooms was mostly shaped by teaching and learning related issues. The social aspect of the classroom, i.e. what happens among students in the process of learning, the social atmosphere, group attraction, emotional attachment, was neglected.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to find out whether language teachers at tertiary level place value on class cohesion. To this end, we asked teachers to judge the quality of language classes which they accept as good ones. First of all, through interviews, the teachers were asked to describe a "good" language classroom by using a metaphor and then, with open-ended questionnaire, they were asked to identify the properties of good language classes. It was found out that cohesiveness was not a concept to pay attention to according to the teachers participated in this study. The teachers did not identify classroom cohesion among the most important qualities of good language classrooms. However, in related literature, cohesiveness is viewed as essential to group productivity and due to its vital role in group learning, teachers are suggested to foster cohesiveness by establishing and maintaining a classroom group [4]. As cohesiveness is not a "static, once-achieved forever-held property of a group" [9], teachers should not only invest in developing group cohesion, but also pay conscious attention to sustaining group unity. It is claimed that a teacher's success in the classroom depends not only on the teacher's skill but also on the atmosphere created, which is a property of the social structure of the class as a whole [16].

As a matter of fact, the social context of language classrooms has been a largely ignored area, as suggested by a number of researchers [17, 18]. There is a need for more studies focusing on the social-psychology of the language classrooms to increase language teachers' awareness of the importance of social aspects of language classrooms. The social context of language learning is of vital importance [19] and if teachers would like to reach to a practical understanding of how students learn in language lessons, they need to think much more in terms of the socio-psychology of the language [20]. It is argued that teachers will benefit from an increased knowledge of group processes and that viewing the class as a working group may change the teacher's perception of the classroom itself [16].

Although limited in its scope, this study, we believe, is important as it reveals the way of thought of a sample group of language teachers at higher education regarding the qualities of "good" language classrooms. It provided evidence that teachers' perception of the quality of the classroom is not linked to group cohesion. It might be inferred from the results of the study that teachers undervalue the important role cohesion play in creating effective language learning environments.

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