



## SITUATED KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING IN AN EFL CONTEXT

Seyyed Ali Ostovar-Namaghi<sup>i</sup>

Shahrood University of Technology, Iran

### Abstract:

Theory-first approaches to language teaching research assume that language teaching is directed by factors internal to the teachers, i.e., teacher cognition since they weed out contextual constraints as irrelevant. As a result, practitioners enter the profession with little or no knowledge of the culturally valued modes of thought and action. To uncover contextual constraints or context-sensitive parameters, this study collected and analysed interview data through grounded theory procedures. The results show that rather than being directed by generally accepted principles of language teaching, teachers' action is directed by teachers' awareness of parameters, "*a set of culturally permissible, though theoretically unjustified acts specified through local exams and teacher evaluation and promotion schemes*". To improve practice, teacher education programs should not only develop teachers' conceptual knowledge but also equip them with a critical awareness of contextual constraints, i.e., the parameters of teaching which account for the situated nature of teaching knowledge.

**Keywords:** conceptual constraints; contextual constraints; teachers' action; grounded theory; deskilling

### 1. Introduction

Many studies show that teachers' conceptions about teaching or language derive their practice (see Johnson, 1992a; Richards, Tung, & Ng, 1992; Smith, 1996; Woods, 1996). These conceptions can be of either two types: explicit or implicit. A review of previous literature shows different contrastive terminology to describe teachers' cognition:

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [saostovarnamaghi@yahoo.com](mailto:saostovarnamaghi@yahoo.com)

conceptual vs. experiential (Hawkins & Irujo, 2004); technical vs. practical (Ellis, 1997); received vs. experiential (Wallace, 1991); and academic vs. experiential (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

Traditionally it is explicit, declarative knowledge which teacher educators have focused on in teacher education (Borg, 2003b; Wallace, 1991). For example, Fillmore and Snow claim that *“teachers need to know that spoken language is composed of units of different sizes: sounds...morphemes...words...phrases...sentences, and discourses”* (Fillmore & Snow, 2002, p. 20). Emphasis on the superiority of explicit ideas regardless of the situation is hardly surprising as one of academics main jobs is the production of explicit knowledge (Bartels, 2003; Becher & Trowler, 2001). By producing context-free knowledge, they inculcate that this type of knowledge is important for teachers (Bartels, 2004). Rather than being guided by knowledge of the learning needs and developmental profiles of novices (Nathan & Petrosino, 2003, p. 906), educators tend to use knowledge of academic disciplines to change their students' beliefs about learning, language and teaching since they believe that *“beliefs are reliable predictors of teacher practices”* (Savova, 2003, p. 27). If they could change teachers' conceptions, teachers would teach differently (Peacock, 2001).

The centrality of academic disciplines in second language teacher education has been criticized on several grounds. First, it has been argued that *“some linguists have been more interested in finding application for their science than in solving the problems of language teaching”* (Mackey, 1966, p. 200). As such applied linguistics lacks a coherent and well-rounded research program on the practical aspects of language teaching, so it cannot provide answers central to teachers' practices (Brumfit, 1995; Larsen-Freeman, 1990). Still others have shown that *“SLA, as an academic discipline, is concerned with the production of technical knowledge, whereas language pedagogy, as a profession, is primarily directed at practical knowledge”* (Ellis, 1997, p. 237).

Explicit theory-driven knowledge has been attacked on many other grounds. *“The cumulative effect of studying what language is and how it is learned, especially when language is defined structurally, does not necessarily translate cogently into knowing how to teach”* (Freeman & Johnson, 2004, p. 122) and that *“what novice teachers learn in our teacher education programs tends to be absent from and alien to the authentic activity of real teaching”* (Johnson, 1996b, p. 24). Therefore they suggest that *“professional learning...needs to rely less on the transmission of codified knowledge about language, language learning, and language teaching and more on the experiences that teachers engage in as learners of L2s and as learners of language teaching”* (Freeman & Johnson, 2004, p. 123).

Nonetheless many teacher education programs imply that novice L2 teachers can use explicit knowledge from academic fields to develop implicit, practice-oriented

knowledge (see Hedgcock, 2002; Wallace, 1991). The problem with this argument is that L2 teachers do not use the explicit knowledge they learned in language teacher education programs to develop practice-specific implicit knowledge. Furthermore, in many cases implicit knowledge precedes explicit knowledge; in other words, people learn something first (implicit) and only later learn to explain what they know (explicit). Thus, explicit knowledge may be an offshoot of implicit knowledge, not the other way around (Dulany, Carlson, & Dewey, 1984; Graff, Squire & Mandler, 1984).

Teacher education programs may wrongly assume that once developed, conceptual knowledge can be used in practice. Many studies, however, show that knowledge transfer is not as simple or unproblematic as assumed by educators. The following studies all show that teachers' conceptual knowledge has very little effect on their practice:

1. Despite a solid knowledge base of passive structure, the explanations and examples were unclear or misleading (Myhill, 2003).
2. Despite knowledge of task-based teaching, they did not implement it because of contextual factors (Carless, 2003, 2004).
3. Despite solid knowledge of communicative language teaching (CLT) teachers could only talk about it rather than implement it (Sakui, 2004).
4. Despite alternative conceptions of teaching, they unconsciously acted upon their own gestalt of teaching (Korthagen & Lagerwerf, 1996).
5. Despite knowledge of constructivist approaches to teaching, they still had little idea of what constructivist concepts meant in terms of everyday teaching activities such as planning, instruction and assessment (Cook, Smagorinsky, Fry, Konopak, & Moore, 2002; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002).
6. Despite a vast explicit knowledge, they did not use it because of "*cognitive bottleneck*", or the limited amount of information that can be explicitly processed at any one time in working memory (Bruer, 1993).

The foregoing studies show that explicit knowledge is not readily accessible in practice. According to Tomlinson, implicit knowledge can be processed much quicker than explicit knowledge as it does not require working memory capacity (Tomlinson, 1999a, p. 415). Moreover many claim that implicit knowledge is what teachers use when engaged in their practice (Eraut, 2000a, 2000b; Furlong, 2000). Thus a primary goal of preservice programs should be providing procedural knowledge to novices... (Kagan, 1992b). Unfortunately, the acquisition of implicit knowledge is rarely a central focus in language teacher education programs. The lack of procedural knowledge gained in language teacher education programs may be a significant factor in teachers' difficulty in transferring knowledge gained in these programs to their practice of teachers.

Regardless of knowledge type, however, problems of practice are taken to be cognitive in origin. That is, teachers do not teach efficiently because of constraints internal to themselves, i.e., lack of knowledge, either explicit or implicit. The problem with the foregoing studies is that they have weeded out social factors as irrelevant. Within the social context of teaching there are a large number of external factors which potentially need to be taken into account. Teachers can take them as ‘resources’ or as ‘constraints’... They can take them as ‘resources’ if social factors increase the number of possibilities or options open to them... On the other hand, teachers take them as ‘constraints’ if these factors narrow, limit or decrease the number of possibilities or options open to them (Woods, 1996). Similarly, social teaching norms, conventions and culture may take teachers' knowledge as a resource that strengthens them or as constraints that fly in their face. Thus teachers' implementing their knowledge depends on whether the society recognises it rather than whether it is explicit or implicit.

Thus in addition to principles of teaching which are universal in nature, teachers need an awareness of the specifics of teaching contexts, i.e., the parameters of teaching which are context-specific. While principles present a universe of possible acts for teachers, parameters specify a set of permissible acts within a given locality. Several studies have reported that EFL teachers who learn general conceptions about language learning and teaching in academic contexts are not able to use this knowledge in local, non-western contexts because they lack knowledge of the constraints of specific contexts (Lo, 2005). For example, Xiao (2005) found that teachers of Chinese could provide clear feedback on learners' character writing if given plenty of time, but they were not able to provide adequate feedback in the time available during actual classroom teaching. Since social conditions determine teaching, the knowledge-base of language teacher education is in an urgent need of context-specific studies which aim at uncovering these parameters.

## 2. Research Context

This study was conducted in high schools of Mashhad, one of the five major cities of Iran. This city is located in the eastern part of Iran. The study is limited to experienced male teachers teaching in urban areas. Since the syllabus and the testing scheme are uniform throughout the country, there seems to be very little variation in teachers' practice. There seems to be a culturally accepted teaching scenario as follows:

*“Nearly thirty students sit in rows facing the blackboard. A ninety-minute class is mainly teacher-fronted, and teacher centred. Lecturing is the rule, though there may be*

*occasional variation on the part of novice teachers. Learning activities are text-centred. Teachers' main concern is coverage rather than responsive teaching. Similarly, students' main concern is passing the final exams and scoring high rather than learning English. Thus responses to the questions about the text tend to consist of relevant passages quoted from the text. A limited version of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the best guarantee for teachers to cover the material in the pre-specified time-line, and an efficient method of helping students score high in the finals since oral skills are totally ignored in the finals. Since final exams cover reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, teachers' main tasks are: providing Persian equivalents for new words, translating the text, making the students translate, explaining grammar, and making students do written exercises at home, and finally giving feedback on the accuracy of their answers. But there remains a question: why is teaching so simplistic and detached from principles of language teaching?"*

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

Eight experienced male teachers were selected from the urban areas of Mashhad, one of the five major cities of Iran. All the participants majored in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL). One of them had earned his PhD, three had earned their master's degrees, and the others had earned bachelor's degrees. They were selected on the basis of their teaching experience and willingness to share their views and experience with the researcher because *"understanding requires an openness to experience, a willingness to engage in a dialogue with one that challenges our self-understandings"* (Schewandt, 1999, p. 458). To add diversity and richness to the collected data, however, participants were selected from structurally-different high school types. The researcher stopped sampling when theoretical saturation was achieved.

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

Glaser (1998) proposed that both tape recording and note taking may cause participants to be more careful about what they say. To solve this problem, each data collection session included two phases: an initial casual conversation which was not recorded and a subsequent unstructured interview which was tape-recorded. This procedure offered several advantages. First, informants tended to be more open during casual conversations, more likely to spill the most deeply felt, important and sensitive details. Second, using hints from the conversation, the researcher was able to make the participants clarify initial ambiguous ideas. Third, the researcher did not worry that he

may forget some of the precious information. In short, theoretical sampling and simultaneous analysis covered:

1. initial data about teachers' work;
2. data related to the determining conditions or parameters of teachers' work;
3. data related to teachers' action in the face of local conditions; and
4. data related to the consequences of teachers' action.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

The rigorous techniques and coding schemes of grounded theory (Straus and Corbin, 1998) enabled the researcher not only to generate the concepts and categories but also to unify them into a coherent whole. Filed notes and interview transcripts amounted to piles of data. Open coding generated dozens of concepts and four higher order categories indicating external constraints and their effect on teachers' action and subsequently on teachers' professional life: "**evaluation criteria**", "**promotion criteria**", "**stakeholders' pressure**", and "**time pressure**". Axial coding led to the development of a conditional matrix that elaborated, expanded, contextualised and related categories by answering questions such as why, where, when, how, and with what results. Selective coding led to the development of the core category "**parameters of teaching**" which pulled the other categories to form an analytic explanatory whole.

To establish trustworthiness, the emerged concepts and categories were verified through "*member-checking*" (Riley, 1996). Following Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher tried to develop a sense of the situation without imposing pre-existing expectations on the phenomenon or setting under study. He also tried to allow important concepts and categories emerge from the data without presupposing in advance what the important propositions will be. Despite methodological rigor, however, findings such as these that follow are not a guarantee of truth; for truths are always partial (Clifford, 1986) and knowledge "*situated*" (Haraway, 1988).

## 4. Results

The results clearly show that rather than being directed by principles of teaching learned through teacher education programs or through reflection, teachers' practice is directed by **parameters of teaching** or an awareness of school culture, i.e., culturally accepted though theoretically unjustified modes of thought and action in a given context. In contrast with principles of language teaching, parameters of teaching are patterns of action and interpretation that are considered right in a given context. They are warranted by their taken-for-granted effectiveness. According to Schutz (1971),

these cultural patterns offer ready-made direction for use to eliminate troublesome inquiries, or reflection.

Though teacher-fronted, teacher-centered approach is rejected by both grand theories learned in pre-service teacher education programs and personal theories developed through reflection, it is an efficient way of meeting social demands of teaching in high schools of Iran. School culture usually resists informed proposals initiated by grand theories because they are not functional. Though professionally defensible, they prove less effective than the culturally approved ready-made solutions or parameters of teaching. Replacements for teaching as usual must be down to earth and guarantee the efficiency inherent to parameters. *Parameters will remain teachers' operating knowledge until principles prove their functionality and efficiency in meeting social demands of teaching.* The rest of the result section aims at elucidating the parameters that shape teachers' action and their effect on language teachers' professional life.

#### 4.1 Evaluation Criteria

Language teachers are really dissatisfied with teacher evaluation scheme. They believe that evaluation criteria bear little resemblance to the now fashionable rhetoric of teacher autonomy. They believe that evaluation subjects their professional life to the administrative logic that seeks to tighten the rein of control over the processes of teaching and testing. Among other things, language teachers noted that the evaluation scheme:

1. assesses teachers' degree of compliance with administrative rules and regulations;
2. does not discriminate competent skilful teachers from incompetent one; and
3. covers general, non-professional items.

But teachers' main concern is that their performance is evaluated by a non-professional, i.e., the school principal. They complain that he does not have the professional knowledge to assess language teachers' skill and knowledge. Instead of reflecting what a language teachers do in the classroom, evaluation reflects principal's subjective judgement. Reza complains:

*“Teachers' evaluation score depends solely on the principal's idea. He never observes any classes. He does not know language teachers' level of skill and knowledge. If he favours a teacher, no matter what, the teacher receives the highest score, i.e., 30. Everything depends on the principal's judgement. To keep my position in this high school, I should do as he wishes.”*

Instead of comparing language teachers' performance with each other, he compares teachers of different school subjects with each other. Keyvan complains:

*“There are nearly 30 teachers in this high school. Although they teach different subjects they are evaluated by the same evaluation form. There is no consistency in principal’s judgement because it is totally subjective. When the school principal is replaced, the new principal favours another teacher. There are some principals who really want to be objective but they cannot because the evaluation form covers vague items about general aspects of teaching.”*

One of the most tormenting aspects of teacher evaluation is that teachers' evaluation score depend on students' pass rate in the final exams. This is the most objective yardstick of success which is commonly accepted among principals. Karim comments:

*“Experienced teachers know that they are judged by their students’ pass rates rather than by their professional knowledge and skills of language teaching. Thus instead of improving their teaching expertise, they try to inflate students’ pass rate because they know that important stakeholders favour scores rather than learning.”*

In short, evaluation covers general aspects of teaching; it does not cover the techniques and skills specific to teaching a special schools subject. Moreover, professionals are evaluated by non-professionals via non-professional criteria. But the main problem is that the scheme takes pass rate as the only objective yardstick of success. Knowing that they are not judged by their knowledge and skills of language teaching, teachers forget them and try to develop things which are culturally approved and valued: conformity with the dictates of the principal and students to achieve a high pass rate in the final exam. While we may find no relationship between evaluation and teachers' knowledge and skill, there is a positive correlation between students' pass rate and teachers' evaluation score.

## **4.2 Promotion Criteria**

The results show that there are two types of teachers in high schools: those who follow the professional norms and standards and those who follow cultural norms. The interesting finding is that cultural orientation is the rule while professional orientation is an exception. Those who comply with the cultural norms and practices do what the education system wants and the education system does what they want: the education



system favours conformity and teachers favour promotion. On the other hand, those who comply with professional norms automatically diverge from accepted norms and practices and as a natural consequent marginalized. Thus promotion is directly proportional to conformity and inversely proportional to divergence. Reza complains:

*“CLT is culturally rejected because it is not efficient in terms of final exams. I can't change my teaching practice to accommodate the final exam. I believe that examiners should alter testing which is limited and limiting. Unfortunately promotion is only for those who conform to the testing scheme and sacrifice their knowledge of the principles of language teaching. I prefer to sacrifice my promotion for my professional knowledge and skills.”*

Hassan has similar concerns:

*“Those who focus on communication are not popular among stakeholders. The reason is that oral skills are not tested in the final exam. If you ignore communication, you will have more time to prepare students for the final exams and your students have a better chance of scoring higher. This makes you popular among students and the principal. If you receive the highest evaluation score for three successive years, you will be promoted to the next grade. “*

Mahmood, however, complains that success even in terms of pass rate in the final exams is secondary in one's promotion. He believes that promotion depends on teachers' cultural activities rather than his professional activities. He says:

*“Promotion scheme specifies a set of cultural activities which are irrelevant to teachers' professional knowledge and skills. Those who engage in these culturally valued activities have a better chance for promotion than those who engage in professional activities. The reason is that in the promotion scheme non-professional activities carry more weight than teachers' level of knowledge and skill.”*

Thus instead of being directed by teachers' professional knowledge and skills, teachers' action is directed by an awareness of the specifics of the promotion scheme. Promotion can be the best motivation for teachers to develop their knowledge and skills. In its present form, however, promotion scheme reinforce conformity with top-down, non-professional criteria. Since it ignores professional aspects of teaching, teachers similarly ignore them and develop those aspects that lead to their promotion. Those who

conform to non-professional promotion criteria are promoted while those who focus on developing their knowledge and skills of language teaching are not because of their incongruity with pre-specified norms.

### 4.3 Time Pressure

Time pressure severely constrains teachers' practice. Teachers complain that the time allocated to teaching English is not sufficient. With two hours a week, teachers can only present the content. Thus even in its traditional sense, i.e., presentation, practice and production, the teaching cycle is not complete because teaching mainly involves the presentation phase. There is no time for practice and production. Teachers' only solution to shortage of time is coverage at the cost of responsive teaching. Reza comments:

*“In my first year of teaching, I devoted all the class time to teaching. Yet I could not finish the book. When I complained, the principal advised me to focus on those parts which are important in the final exam. I tried to solve this problem by consulting experienced teachers; they suggested that under time pressure you should cover the book rather than teach the book.”*

Hassan, on the other hand, believed that he does not feel any time pressure. When the researchers told him that other teachers complain about time pressure, he explained:

*“I do agree with my colleagues. If you want to teach the book from A to z, there is not time. However, since the contents of the final exam are predictable, I know which parts carry more weight in the final exam. Thus I teach selectively by leaving out the parts which carry no weight or little weight. Over time teachers come to the realization that if they teach to the test, they will have no problem at all. Moreover, students are more satisfied because they know what to study and what not to study. “*

Similarly Ahmad does not worry about time pressure. He explains:

*“Those who feel the time pressure have not understood the purpose of the English course in high schools. They mistakenly believe that they should teach English and students should learn to use English. This is a wrong supposition. We are here to prepare students for the test. Thus there is no need to teach English. What is needed is four or five sample*

*tests from the previous years. Teach the book and most of your students fail in the final exam. On the other hand, prepare them for the test and they pass.”*

Teachers' comments clearly show how time pressure shapes practice. Instead of using their knowledge and skills to enable students to use language, they find ready-made cultural solutions such as covering the book, teaching to the test, and teaching the test. These approaches are functional. They have lasted a long time for the simple reason that they are efficient techniques of meeting social demands under contextual constraints such as time pressure and stakeholders' demands. Experienced teachers are clearly aware of stakeholders' demand; scoring high rather than learning well.

#### **4.4 Stakeholders' Pressure**

Students in high schools of Iran do not study to learn English. Their short-term goal is to get a high school diploma and their long-term goal is to go to the university. The university entrance exam and the final exams ignore oral skills. They only focus on grammar, reading comprehension and vocabulary. Stakeholders such as students, parents, school principals and higher order officials favour teachers who help students achieve culturally defined objectives.

Entering the profession, teachers try to teach English in line with the principles of communicative approach and task-based language teaching although they see Grammar Translation as the culturally valued and normal approach. Teaching against the grain, they lose their popularity. Knowing that oral skills are not measured in the local exams, students start complaining. Because of students' low achievement in the final exams these teachers receive negative feedback from all stakeholders including students, parents, principals and other education officials. Over time stakeholders' pressure makes teachers forget their professional knowledge and follow a convergent approach which is in line with local norms and traditions. Hassan's comments better clarify the situation:

*“Most of my colleagues and I follow GTM because students favour it, and students favour this method because it is efficient in preparing students for local exam. Knowing that oral skills carry no weight in the final exams, students reject oral activities.”*

Similarly parents reject communicative activities because they see teachers' role as that of preparing their children for the university entrance exam. Mahmood says:

*“Parents prefer an approach that prepares students for the university entrance exam. If you respect their preferences, they favour you and you become very popular. I am favoured by students, parents and school principal because I teach in Persian, explain grammar, and translate reading comprehension texts. I myself prefer these techniques because they are efficient in terms of achievement gains in the local exams.”*

Rather than supporting teachers' professional practices, principals support the dictates of children and their parents. Since the principal is in charge of teacher evaluation, teachers do as he tells them. Hamid explains:

*“Principals prefer teachers who focus on test taking techniques since passing local tests is the only yardstick of success. If he is not content with students' pass rate in the final exams, teachers lose their position in this school next year. Moreover, since the school principal does not know innovative methods of language teaching, he bases teacher evaluation on students' ideas. Thus teachers are favoured and promoted if they do as they are told.”*

#### **4.5 Teachers' Action**

Teachers know that parameters fly in the face of their knowledge and experience. Feeling the incongruity between local norms (the parameters of language teaching) and their professional knowledge (principles of language teaching), teachers take a stand. A great majority of teachers accept the local norms of teaching at the cost of their professional knowledge because they have come to the realization that their professional knowledge is not locally recognized. Thus parameters homogenize their practice. This scenario is more clearly visible in Firooz's comments:

*“CLT is not locally recognised because it does not produce achievement gains in local exams. If you want to teach here, you should teach like others. You should follow GTM. Teachers, students, parents and principals like it. Teach as usual, you are in demand. Teach differently, nobody wants you. I don't simply teach. I teach the students. I have to teach the way they want. Students' main concern is to pass the final exams. Years of experience show that GTM is the most effective method to this end.”*

Thus teachers follow GTM because it has passed the test of time in terms of efficiency. That is to say, teachers follow this approach not because they like it but because it is efficient. Hassan better explain the importance of GTM:

*“Despite different attacks against GTM, time proved powerless to lessen the efficiency of this approach in public high schools in Iran. I follow this approach because it is efficient not because I like it. The methods course can’t prescribe CLT and other alternative approaches. Local board of education defines language teacher success in terms of student pass rate in the final exams. I personally leave out communicative activities because they are not measured in the finals.”*

Teaching is a matter of supply and demand. Teachers cannot supply something the stakeholders do not demand. When local exams and stakeholders do not demand communication skills, how can teachers focus on communicative activities? Thus instead of being directed by principles of language teaching, teaching is directed by the local conditions. Under these conditions, teaching becomes the management of standardized ends and means, learning becomes the consumption of pre-packaged bits of knowledge, and success becomes passing and scoring well.

Despite local constraints, however, there are a few teachers who follow a divergent approach because they follow their professional knowledge and beliefs. Instead of preparing students for the test, they prepare them for communication by focusing on communicative tasks. Mehrdad believes:

*“Students can’t communicate by memorising some rules. I involve my students in real communication so that they can use what they have learned. In contrast with my colleagues in this high school, I do not let my students use reading passages for language learning. I focus on the information and try to involve them in exchanging and criticising the information presented in the text. Thus instead of focusing on learning, I focus on processing information.”*

Mansoor similarly believes that teaching should enable students to communicate not to pass a test about language. He further believes that it is possible to communicate without having an explicit knowledge of language forms. He rejects the cultural approach by claiming that students know a lot of rules about language. The problem is that they cannot use it for communication. He explains his approach which diverges from normal teaching as follows:

*“I focus on dialogues and conversation because I know that memorising bilingual lists of words and grammatical structures will not develop their communicative ability. Although I know that my approach will be used against me, I use it because I believe that*

*what students actually need is the ability to communicate rather than a high school diploma.”*

To summarise, following the cultural norms is the rule while following professional norms is an exception. That is, nearly all teachers follow an approach which is convergent with cultural norms and values. There are quite a few, however, that take cultural norms as problematic. Since they follow their professional knowledge and beliefs, their approach diverges from accepted norms of language teaching.

#### 4.6 Consequences of Teachers' Approach

There are two approaches to language teaching in high schools of Iran: convergent approach as a rule and divergent approach as an exception. These two approaches yield different results and deserve different consequences. Taking a professional stand means violating culturally accepted norms of teaching, and the natural consequence is loss of support, loss of voice, loss of credibility and **marginalisation**. Mehrdad's comments better explains the consequence of divergence:

*“Since I have a lower pass rate in the final exams, the principal does not favour my approach. He used my approach against me by depriving me from the summer courses in which teachers are paid well. Teaching in this high school entails loss of opportunities. Two years ago I was assigned to develop the final exam. Since test type and format was not in line with their expectations, I was reproached by my students, colleagues and the principle since the test negatively affected students’ pass rate.”*

Firooz complains that students' pass rate in the finals do not reflect their performance in the test. Teachers inflate students' scores because this is the only criterion of success. He complains:

*“I have lost many opportunities because my student’s scores reflect their performance in the final exam and mid-term. They want me to inflate students’ scores and teach to the test. This is something which is against my professional beliefs. I have lost my popularity among students and principals because my students’ scores are lower than that of students in other classes. I am not rewarded simply because my approach is different not because it is wrong. My colleagues receive very high evaluation scores because of their students’ pass rate in the final exams. I am negatively evaluated because of my teaching approach and students’ pass rate.”*

The natural consequence of divergence from culturally accepted practices is marginalization. Divergent practitioners are negatively perceived, evaluated and marginalised because they are committed to their professional beliefs. On the other hand, the natural consequence of convergence is **promotion**. More specifically, convergent practitioners are promoted rapidly since they are committed to social demands of teaching and conventional practices of teaching. Ahmad explains the consequence of convergence as follows:

*“I received the award of advanced skills because I had the highest pass rate in the last three years. I find no reason in focusing on communicative skills when they are not measured in the final exams. Students want to pass, I help them pass. Thus I am very popular among my students.”*

But convergence entails forgetting your professional definition of success and defining success in terms of cultural norm, i.e., pass rate. It also entails doing as you are told. Mohsen defines convergence as following the dictates of the principal.

*“Evaluation is subjectively determined by the principal. There are parallel processes for getting one grade: through teacher evaluation and through study. The former involves doing as the principal says and thus getting a high evaluation score for three consecutive years and the other is taking the university entrance exam, passing it and then studying to get the masters’ degree. If you choose the former, you can get an extra grade by taking part in cultural activities. One of my colleagues continued his studies at Shiraz University and got his MA to get one grade. Within the same time span I got two grades through evaluation and cultural activities.”*

Thus promotion and marginalisation are control mechanisms that aim at homogenising teachers' work in public high schools in Iran. Professionally, promotion should be directly proportional to teachers' level of skill and knowledge, and marginalization should be inversely proportional to teachers' level of skill and knowledge. Culturally, however, promotion is directly proportional to teachers' degree of convergence with social norms and practices, and marginalization is directly proportional to teachers' divergence from cultural norms and practices.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

There are two sets of constraints to the act of teaching English in actual situations: constraints internal to the teacher such as lack of knowledge and skills, and constraints external to the teacher such as the social conditions of teaching. To improve teaching, teacher education programmes should equip teachers with a solid knowledge-base and a set of techniques and skills to overcome both sets of constraints. Language teacher education programs mistakenly suppose that problems of practice are cognitive in origin. Once teachers acquired the knowledge and skills of language teaching, they can apply it freely and universally without any constraints. More specifically, educators suppose that teachers' action is directed by his knowledge and skills of language teaching. But in actual teaching there are some culturally accepted and respected teaching practices which are not theoretically justified. Similarly, there are some theoretically justified practices which are not permissible at all culturally.

In contrast with the cognitive orientation taken in teacher education programs, iterative collection and analysis of data from the public high schools of Iran revealed that a set of nationally givens, which are taken for granted because of their functionality and efficiency in meeting the national goals of language teaching, i.e., passing local tests, direct language teachers' action. When faced with these parameters of teaching which fly in the face of principals of teaching, teachers should decide to follow a convergent approach which is shaped by the parameters or a divergent approach which is directed by principals of language teaching. Since the parameters of teaching are imperative, convergent practice is the rule while divergent practice is an exception. The centrality of convergent approach and the rarity of the divergent approach can be related to the consequences of teachers' approach. Divergence from culturally accepted practice and norms entails lack of approval which entails marginalization. On the other hand, convergence entails administrative support and approval and approval entails positive evaluation and promotion.

Parameters of teaching or a knowledge-base of culturally accepted norms and practices are presently missing in the syllabus for language teachers. Educators should know that teachers do not teach in vacuum: they teach for a society. Thus before entering the society they should know about culturally approved, accepted and respected objectives, norms and practices. As such pre-service language teacher education programs should account for the situated nature of teaching knowledge by developing language teachers' critical awareness of parameters of teaching which are context-bound and at times imperative. To conclude, teaching is improved if both the internal and external constraints of teaching are eliminated. Despite language teachers'



breadth and depth of knowledge and skills of teaching, their action is not improved unless the social conditions recognise teachers' expertise. The convergent and homogenised nature of language teaching in the context of this study is not related to teachers' knowledge and skills; it is related to the fact that teachers' use of their personal and professional beliefs leads to their marginalization, loss of voice, support and popularity.

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