Research Paper

Phenomenology of EFL Teacher Leadership from the Viewpoint of Iranian College Language Learners

Saeed Safdari[1]

1. Corresponding Author: Assistant professor, Department of English, Chalous Branch, Islamic Azad University, Chalous, Iran. saeed_safdari@iauc.ac.ir

Abstract

Aim: Teacher leadership has been overlooked in language teaching. This phenomenological study examined language learners' views on EFL teacher leadership to provide an accurate understanding of teacher leadership concept in this field. Twenty-one BA candidates in TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Chalous Branch took part in the study. The data were collected from the participants through semi-structured interviews about the qualities that distinguish teacher-leaders. The data were analyzed by coding and thematic analysis revealing that a collection of various characteristics including the five themes of professional command, personal capacities, rapport capacities, purposefulness, and flexibility constitute the traits of EFL teacher leadership. Results suggest that learners' views transcend teachers' knowledge and teaching techniques and incorporate elements that not only include teachers' behavioral characteristics, but those that are constructed via interaction between teachers and pupils. It can be extrapolated that in learners' views, the concept of teacher leadership differs from the traditional perspectives

Keywords*: Language learners, Phenomenology, Teacher leadership, Thematic analysis*

Introduction

One of the key attributes of successful teachers that have recently been highlighted by scholars and researchers in the field of education studies is teacher leadership. This attribute is believed to spawn considerable

repercussions both inside and outside the teaching and learning environment. In spite of its significance, the concept of teacher leadership has been overlooked in the realm of language teaching. Also, the paucity of literature on language teacher leadership, too, stimulates further inquiry into the subject. Thus, it seems warranted to investigate into its nature and impact in the field of second language learning and teaching. The current research study aimed to examine the views of Iranian language learners on EFL teacher leadership in order to provide a more reliable understanding of teacher leadership concept in this field. Various definitions and theorizations have been proposed and used to delineate and elucidate the concept of teacher leadership. Some of the more relevant ones include the following: servant leadership (Kiersch & Peters, 2017) that emphasizes leaders' attention to followers' needs and interests and also, instilment of trust and motivation. Transformational leadership (Anderson, 2017) incorporates inspiring people and envisioning engaging and promising future states to motivate followers. Original leadership (Begley, 2001), too, puts emphasis on morality and honesty which are developed via empathy and cooperation. Finally, distributive leadership style (Harris, 2013) is concerned with distribution of responsibilities and duties among members of the group or organization. Despite some superficial differences, all of the styles highlight the importance of empowering individuals. This has been even more stressed in educational settings where teachers can hugely impact their students (Stein, 2020). However, a dearth of research on this subject, especially in the field of second language learning and teaching necessitates that the nature and mechanism by which teacher leadership is understood be explored.

Methodology

Concerning its exploratory nature, the present study follows a qualitative approach and is based on the principles of phenomenology. Phenomenology is a kind of qualitative research design that delves into the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2007). A total of 21 male (n= 10) and female (n= 11) senior and junior BA candidates in TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Chalous Branch were selected through purposive sampling to take part in the research study. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. A few pioneering questions had already been thought out and designed by the researcher and according to the plan, the researcher put the major questions forward and then allowed the respondents to bring their own experiences in and stimulate further detailed questions. During the interviews, they were asked to express their opinions on the qualities and characteristics that make a language teacher-leader and distinguish him/her from other counterparts. The interviews took between 40 to 50 minutes to accomplish. In order to secure the reliability and validity of

the data collection instrument, four criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were utilized. They reassured the researcher about the validity and reliability of the interviews. After the data collection process was completed, the audio-recorded interviews were listened to and then, transcribed onto paper for further scrutiny. The data were subjected to thematic analysis. The process of data analysis consisted of reading through the transcribed texts several times and in a series of coding rounds. Then, by using note taking, initial codes were identified. Later, after revisiting the codes, they were organized into more inclusive and meaning-carrying categories that bore more significant themes. Thus, the lengthy passages were reduced into more encompassing and fundamental themes and concepts. Finally, some excerpts that corroborated the themes were selected to substantiate them.

Results

The findings of the present study revealed that a collection of various characteristics including 28 minor categories that were organized into five major themes of professional command, personal capacities, rapport capacities, purposefulness, and flexibility constitute the major traits and qualities of EFL teacher leadership. First, teachers' command and mastery over the required knowledge and presentation skills alongside delivery expertise were highly appreciated and admired by the respondents. They believed that language teachers must possess and undeniable and flawless competence in linguistic knowledge, especially speaking skill and pronunciation ability. Personal capacities included a variety of subthemes such as being responsible, punctuality, earnestness, charisma, and self-confidence. The participants further insisted on the importance of teacher enthusiasm, dedication, commitment and a love for their profession. Such features can potentially instill powerful motivation, interest and passion in the language learners. The third theme found in the data is rapport capacities. The findings indicate that rapport, relationship and communication constitute the largest portion of the data. This provides evidence that students consider these characteristics to be of primary value and impact. A number of general traits like sociability, patience, kindness, affection, mutual respect and courtesy are among the first expectations of the respondents. They state that these characteristics pave the way for an appropriate and constructive atmosphere and mood within the learning environment, hence, leading to increased positive ties and collateral understanding. It was mentioned that language learning in instructed environments entails a lot of pressure, anxiety, stress and ambiguity. That is why students emphasized that teacher leaders that show a grasp of rapport capacities can facilitate and ease the

hardships of foreign or second language learning. The fourth major theme was purposefulness. A language teacher leader is construed as someone who works on the basis of a pre-established plan. They do not run pedagogical activities in a haphazard manner. As the students described, thoughtful teaching, preparation of lessons and the way they are to be delivered and finally, transporting the same goal orientation to their learners define successful teacher leader purposefulness. The fifth and last major theme which defines language teacher leaders is flexibility. This trait is characterized by the ability of the teacher to find and retain a delicate, yet effective, balance between pedagogical goals and pleasure of learning. They are supposed to keep looking for novel teaching ideas and techniques and venture calculated inclusion and utilization of them in their lesson plans.

Discussion and conclusion

Generally, results suggested that from learners' perspective, teacher leadership transcends traditional implications of authority within a hierarchical system and approaches a more modern and humane view of leadership. Unlike what is expected from an eastern culture like that of Iran, teacher-leaders are characterized by collaborative and ethical traits. Similar findings in Korea (Whitehead & Greenier, 2019) support the view that the traditional mindsets about teacher-learner connections have been revolutionized in the modern world. It is suggested that personal and behavioral characteristics of teachers are far more significant than their professional mastery and knowledge in rendering them effective leaders as construed by learners. The obtained themes and concepts of the present study are not definitive. Further research can make up for limitations of the present study by including larger samples and using quantitative measures and taking many other individual and contextual factors into account to yield a better picture of reality.

Reference

Anderson, M. (2017). Transformational leadership in education: A review of existing literature. *International Social Science Review, 93*(1), 1-13.

Begley, P. T. (2001). In pursuit of authentic school leadership practices. *International Journal of Leadership in Education, 4*, 353-365. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603120110078043.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Harris, A. (2013). *Distributed school leadership: Developing tomorrow's leaders*. Routledge.

Kiersch, C., & Peters, J. (2017). Leadership from the inside out: Student leadership development within authentic leadership and servant leadership frameworks.

Journal of Leadership Education, 16(1), 148-168. https://doi.org/10.12806/v16/i1/t4

Stein, L. (2020): Teacher leadership: The missing factor in America's classrooms, *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, *93*(2), 78-84. https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2020.1716671

Whitehead, G. E. K., & Greenier, V. T. (2019). Beyond good teaching practices: Language teacher leadership from the learners' perspective. *TESOL Quarterly, 53*(4), 960-985. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.526