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Capturing student voice on TEFL syllabus design: Agenticity of pedagogical dialogue negotiation

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Abstract: Over the last decades, attempts at empowering student voice have captured, cross-culturally, the attention of educators as a means for improving educational landscapes. Hence, students have been repositioned as invaluable resources in schooling, research, and reform movements. To this aim, this study is to capture how the Iranian MA TEFL students' voice is realized regarding syllabus development. The data was collected through an open-ended questionnaire responded by 47 students majoring at eight state universities. The results of running a thematic content analysis showed that the constructs of student voice, i.e., students' interests, background knowledge, culture, styles, and gender, have become tokenistic and simplistic in practice. Students were treated as marginalized agents with no determining role in syllabus designing, while the instructors' voice acted as the sole leading factor. This study suggests that it is possible to envisage a situation wherein "student voice" is projected into syllabus development. It underscores that Iranian instructors should set the ongoing process of syllabus development open to modifications inspired by students' voice. In view of the findings, it is also discussed that student voice constructs refer to a more wide range of practices including "needs analysis," "students as decision makers," and "reciprocal humanistic appreciation." Finally, the study provides the educators as well as TEFL instructors with some implications both on how to be more cognizant of the challenges of student voice and how to project that awareness into syllabus development so as to reform the educational structures and build new spaces for exercising educational democracy.

Subjects: Language & Linguistics; Language Teaching & Learning; Literature

Keywords: Student voice; critical pedagogy; syllabus development; student attitude

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Student voice—being practiced in democratic educational systems over the world—has affected the ways curriculums can be designed and practiced. This perspective article goes about capturing the voices of Iranian MA students of English language teaching on the process and practice of syllabus design. The paper reports that teachers, by neglecting students as invaluable resources, develop the syllabus based on their own criteria. The study proposes teachers, course designers, materials developers, administrators, and language policy makers to take the voice of students seriously while designing the syllabus in order to construct a more democratic educational system.

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1. Introduction

Critical pedagogy along with its constellation within and across varying fields has been after acknowledging and incorporating student voice initiative into educational curriculums (Fredricks, 2007). "Student voice or a student role in the decision making and change efforts of schools" "has emerged" "as a potential strategy for improving the success of school reform efforts. Yet few studies have examined this construct either theoretically or empirically" (Mitra, 2004, p. 651), especially within the field of TEFL in higher education.

In postmodernism era and postmodern pedagogy — upon which everything changes and goes under some modifications — individuals' voice and autonomy should be provided with the required liberal capacity to exercise their own agency. Hence, it is expected, in real-life classes, to exist some continuous changes and adaptations propounded by students. However, it seems that there are still classes imbued with inflexible curricula and a priori prescribed teaching practices. In these cases, there are teachers who are required to strongly adhere to set curricula — which if followed as demanded all could lead to a state wherein students' voice and autonomy are fettered. Provided that students' voices and power relations are unfairly observed in a class and "limited by a dull or imposing teacherly voice," the corollaries tend to "inhibits the critical challenges to the syllabus" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 13).

The building blocks of education in a democratic world dwell on the bilateral relationship between the teacher and students. This could be reflected and echoed via "dialogue and a curriculum that mirrors the students' goals and interests" (Fredricks, 2007, p. 24). Moreover, to empower the bilateral relationship, teachers should be committed to respect and so "validate the experiences that students bring to schools" (Foley, Morris, Gounari, & Agostinone-Wilson, 2015, p. 117) and most significantly schools should, in turn, "celebrate this knowledge by building upon it" (Segedin, 2012, p. 105). With respect to the current literature on students' voice, not only should teachers know the students' backgrounds, needs, motivation, and personal experiences, but they should also consult with them on developing bilaterally fair syllabi (Camargo, 2005; Flint & O'Hara, 2013; Pomar & Pinya, 2015).

As such, it could be reasoned that a fully-fledged appreciation of the building blocks of a syllabus informed by students' voice would enhance learners' participations and engagements (Flutter, 2006), build up sense of ownership (Morgan & Streb, 2001), increase the distribution of power and authority (Mitra, 2008a), construct a liberal identity (Rumenapp, 2016), and develop the students' independence (Fielding, 2004). Moreover, having the "student voice" as co-creators of teaching approaches, course designers, and curricula developers (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011) would create education systems empowered to make learning be formed in an ideally desired reality.

Knowing that the starting point of instruction, to a large extent, depends on syllabus development — as without which the process of teaching ceases to reach its expected potentiality — and knowing that student voice has garnered inadequate attention in syllabus development (Brooker & Macdonald, 1999), the present study attempts to capture the realization of Iranian MA students' voice in the development of syllabus design and their perceptions on the concept of "student voice."

2. Literature review

A glance through the studies conducted on the concept of student voice indicates how it has arisen from the field of education development. Moreover, one point is evident concerning the application of student voice beyond general educational development and within fields such as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP); that is, EFL, TEFL, and EAP contexts show a promising research landscape as educators as well as researchers within these contexts are just starting to project the building blocks of student voice into practice. In fact, student voice has been scrutinized deeply within L1 schooling and recently the concept has been applied in higher education so as to enhance those aspects of educational system demanding reform.

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Within the general education, student voice has intrigued the researchers on topics such as "student participation," "active citizenship," "youth leadership," and "youth empowerment" (Mitra, 2008a), "rights," "respect," and "listening" as well as "presence," "power," and "agency" (Cook-Sather, 2006), "authenticity," "inclusion," and "power" (Rudduck & Fielding, 2006), "participation" (Bahou, 2011), and "co-creators of teaching approaches, course design and curricula" (Bovill, Cook-Sather, & Felten, 2011, p. 9). However, in those contexts wherein English acts as a foreign language, it becomes rather tedious to find extensive research on student voice. Of all the studies in TEFL, EFL, and EAP contexts, some studies highlight the students' analytical repertoire in critiquing their EFL curricula as a means to a democratic educational system. Hongboontri and Noipinit (2014) delved into the voices of 70 EFL Thai university students on their curriculum and instruction in terms of teachers, learners, subject matter, and context. They reported that Thai university students' voices unanimously tapped upon the characteristics of an effective EFL instructor. The students suggested an effective instructor who is open to students' voice and has a friendly open-minded nature can be of great help to them over the course of learning English language. Thaher (2005) aimed to explore the effects of large classes on non-English major EFL students' voices at An-Najah National University in Palestine. The findings showed three major areas namely, instructional, psychological, and social effects. The student indicated both negative aspects (i.e., lack of concentration and attention) and positive features (i.e., a sense of competition) of being as an EFL learner in large classes.

Within the context of Iran, there are a number of studies with a focus on the principles of critical pedagogy and student voice in English language classrooms. Those studies have dealt with raising multivocality and multilogue in a grammar course (Khatib & Miri, 2016), profiling the perceptions of Iranian students' and instructors' voices in EAP courses (Eslami, 2010), and examining power relations in an EAP context (Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016).

Making their argument on the point that in transmission-based language discourses the teachers' power as well as authority preside over students, Khatib and Miri (2016) set out to observe the probable effects of implementing a teacher-oriented critical pedagogy on developing a multi-vocal English learning environment. They argued that such an integration paved the way for the teachers to move from having a univocal environment — wherein exited aspects such as "teacher-(s) echo, limited wait-time, frequent interruptions, overextended teacher turns, rejecting student self-initiated turns, excessive emphasis on metalinguistic terms, and prohibiting L1 use" — to a multivocal state in which the classes were imbued with "extending wait-time, delaying error correction, "reducing teacher echo, using referential questions, welcoming student initiation, and using L1" (Khatib & Miri, 2016, p. 98).

Eslami (2010) profiled the perceptions of students and teachers on the problematic areas in EAP programs. The findings tapped upon the existence of some discrepancies between the instructors and students' perceptions; the instructors fell short of being able to understand the students' needs and challenges. In addition, the students were willing to have learner-centered classes and demanded more engagement in class activities.

Khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi (2016) conducted a study wherein a critical theory was implemented with a focus on the "right analysis" and not "need analysis" of Iranian students and instructors dwelling in EAP classes. The analysis of data collected over a survey and follow-up interviews with Iranian EAP students and teachers indicated that there was "little or no interaction among students, teachers and department officials in constructing the EAP curricula and classroom practices" in a way that the students were deemed "to be powerless and passive recipients who had to enact the institutional requirements defined a priori by the departments or curriculum developers" (Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016, p. 72).

Hence, in view of the current state of literature on student voice in contexts wherein English is being practiced as a foreign language and based on the fact that non-critical approaches to

education would "encourage students' passivity and conformity to the wisdom transmitted to them" (Abednia, 2015, p. 78), this study is to respond to the following research questions.

3. Research questions

The research questions of the current study are as follows:

(1) How is the voice of Iranian MA TEFL students manifested in the development of syllabus design?

(2) What are the Iranian MA TEFL students' attitudes toward the concept of student voice in the development of syllabus design?

4. Method

4.1. Context of the study

The education system of Iran, which is prescribed by the Ministry of Science and Research and the Ministry of Education, is being developed at two major levels. The first level, a mandatory one, demands a 12-year period in that all the students are required to be in the process of education from the elementary to diploma. The age at which the students enter such a process is 7 and in case all the school years are successfully passed, the year at which the students graduate with a diploma is 18. This period is classified into three schooling sub-levels as follow (1) the elementary level encompassing 6 years, (2) a three-year period of junior high school, and (3) the senior high school level including three years timespan. Concerning the English language instruction, it should be mentioned that all the students are required to study English as off the beginning of the junior level. As to the content of English language textbooks, the students learn English a series of in-house developed textbooks which are constructed in terms of the sociocultural identity of Iran. Those contextual features encapsulate Islamic religious identity — such as costume wearing and images of Qur'an — aesthetic features, including music, media, literature, and cinema, and sociological as well as sociohistorical notions (i.e., symbols related to foods, national buildings, and names).

Regarding the graduation, the Ministry of Education requires the students to pass each year of education or schooling after scoring the cut-off mark of 10 out of 20. Knowing that the system of higher education provides the learners some university majors in terms of three fields of study, the students are required to select their field of interest at the turn of senior high school. It is worth mentioning that the selection criterion is set a priori by the Ministry of Education based on the students' GPA. The fields, the students select from, are math, science, and humanities. At the end of senior high school, the students take a national multiple choice items entrance exam so as to enter their respected universities and majors of interest.

This is the turn at which the Ministry of Science and Research exercises its guidelines. This major educational level, as opposed to the one governed by the Ministry of Education, is not mandatory in that the university instructors, faculties, and departments are allowed to follow any schedules or books deemed appropriate. In the same line, it is worth mentioning that instructors are in a position to introduce, teach, and practice the same materials time and again. Hence, in contrast to the nationally homogenized education in the first 12 years of schooling, there are some variations as to the assessment measures (types and presence or absence of them), books, learning contents, and schedules in the higher educational system of Iran. As to the last point, it is worth mentioning that the educational system in Iran is being built upon Islamic ideologies, the schools are required to observe gender segregation rule at all levels; however, universities are provided with the freedom whether to observe it or not.

4.2. Participants

The total sample size of the present study encompassed 47 MA TEFL students — of which 33 were male and 14 were female. The students were selected from eight state universities over Iran,

namely Allameh Tabataba'i University, Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Ilam University, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kharazmi University, Bu-Ali Sina University of Hamedan, Al-Zahra University, and Shiraz University. The number of students coming from these universities were 16, 8, 6, 3, 3, 4, 3, and 4, respectively. The students' age varied from 24 up to 42. Of these participants, three were doing their first year and the rest were already completed their first year of M.A education. As to the inclusion criteria, the students were selected on the accessibility and feasibility grounds of the convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007).

4.3. Instrument

To collect the required data, an open-ended questionnaire, encompassing two items, was developed. The items tapped upon two sides of the students' experience and perception as follow: (1) the first question dealt with the participants' conception of their voice realization — enjoying their choices, power, gender, role, etc. — over and in the process of the development of syllabus to be studied over the course of a term and (2) the second question tackled the participants' perception on the concept of student voice realization in the development of syllabus in a TEFL major at an MA level. The data were collected through two mediums: (1) a hard copy questionnaire fill-out and (2) an online questionnaire administration. The reason for tending to the second medium derived from the difficulty of access to some participants. Hence, these individuals filled out the questionnaire administered online.

4.4. Data analysis

As this study is constructed upon an exploratory fact-finding qualitative design and knowing the nature of the posed research questions, a thematic content analysis was run on the collected data. The thematic analysis put at the researchers' disposal a means to bring harmony into the data (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007) through making descriptive students' content-driven units, creating categories, and then organizing the categories under general labels. Such a process then led to the conceptualization of dominant patterns embedded in the students' voice. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the process of content analysis encapsulated a couple of phases. The first phase dealt with students' voice appreciation. That is, the students' reflective opinions were read a number of times to reach a dominant understanding on each and every one of them. The second phase tackled the first step in thematic content analysis; that is, making descriptive students' content-driven units. The students' reflective opinions were highlighted, underlined, and annotated over the margins through using their own words. The third phase enjoyed creating categories based on the students' initial descriptive idea units. To clarify the process of content analysis up to this point, one instance is provided. Upon being asked about their voice as well as agenticity in the process of syllabus development, students #39 and #10 elaborated as follow.

Student #39:

Teachers would consider their own personal interests, aims, and background knowledge in syllabus development. For example, one teacher who was interested in genre analysis, he or she devoted 50% of the materials on genre analysis, however there were some students who didn't like to read such materials.

Student #10:

Some teachers are crazy about some ideas and topics like one of our language assessment instructor, he is crazy about dynamic assessment. So this teacher includes more materials about dynamic assessment. So teachers' own interest is a leading factor.

As it is evident in their responses, some parts are underlined indicating the importance of these units for the students. These units were then categorized under the label of "teachers' preference dominance" or "students' preference negligence." Following this labelling, the fourth phase encompassed comparing and contrasting all these organized categories in an attempt to reach the most

comprehensive and dominant themes. As an example, the dominant theme of "university structure" was selected as a major level for the sub-categories of "short term length" and "large classes."

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Results on research question one

The first research question explored—"how is the voice of Iranian MA TEFL students manifested in the development of syllabus design?" The following were emerged through running a thematic content analysis on the data: oppressing and marginalizing students, neglecting students' personal experiences, interests, and background knowledge, neglecting students' social and cultural domain, neglecting learners' styles, and neglecting students' gender. The concepts are sketched in the following sections.

5.1.1. Oppressing and marginalizing students

Education can be influenced by stakeholders, i.e., policy makers, administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and students. In the literature, the role of students as one of the most invaluable resources in educational landscapes has elaborately been argued (Baroutsis, McGregor, & Mills, 2016; Blair & Noel, 2014; Nelson, 2015; Robinson & Taylor, 2012). However, in practice, their role has been conceived as a mere act of tokenism and obedient recipients who are thought and decided about. The practice of agents with the power in designing curriculums may lead to a situation wherein a directional power exercise is present and the student voice is reduced to a state of being just the meek followers of those in charge. In the same line of reasoning, Freire (1970) argued that "the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it" (p. 73). Based on the same tokens, critical pedagogy projects the idea that the top-down practice of power relations should be scaled down through having a consideration for "how we should do our educating" and what we should learn (Phipps & Guilherme, 2004, p. 3).

Through such oppressive approaches, the disempowered who have no voice submit to the teachers' authority and power. Byrom, Thomson, and Gates (2007) believe that students have the right to get involved with decisions that directly influence their education. Nelson (2015) also argued that teacher reflections are required in teaching practices and teachers and students need to be partners in decision-makings. Hence, at times that teachers exercise their power directionally, they may dictate their developed syllabus for at least some learners. With respect to the Iranian MA TEFL classrooms, many students highlighted that nearly all course objectives were pre-defined by their instructors.

Student #16:

I can say students didn't have an influence in developing the syllabus in approximately all courses. In the first session, the syllabus was set by the teacher and we didn't have other alternatives.

It can be found that before coming to the classes and meeting the students, the instructors had designed the syllabus. This fact is in line with khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi's (2016) study as they argued that Iranian EAP students have no say concerning the specification of academic goals and educational objectives knowing that those were a priori prescribed by instructors.

Many students stated that they were not able to suggest their own books of interest, papers, and topics to be covered or discussed in their classes. To put this way, students had no input on the modification, adaptation, or any deletion of syllabus contents. In case there happened to be any parts deleted, modified, or adapted, it was instructors who decided to do so. Hence, the students were kept unnoticed with no say on those matters. This fact is clear in the following.

Student #14:

Having taken three successive terms, I can't remember that students were requested to bring their own topics or papers to classes.

In view of these findings, it can be argued that one single voice took precedence over students leaving them to be unheard and not attended to. This is against what Mack (2010) conceives of as "the acceptance of plurality" whereby student's voice can be integrated into the process of education. Mack (2010, p. 202) argued that plurality might be served both to inspire students to become "co-creators of their own learning" and promote "student agency and empowerment."

At times students observe themselves captured in university instructors' power, they may consider themselves to be individuals having no agency. As a consequence, the students' hope to experience educational changes of their interest would fade away. However, conceptions of the "student voice" are indispensable elements of the calls for "change," "growth," and "transformation" of educational systems (Snaza & Lensmire, 2006).

Analyzing the responses, it was captured that in some courses students could mostly propose their interested topics and papers in a form of a report to be delivered in their classes. Some ideas by these students have been listed in the following excerpts.

Student #8:

The main sources that had to be taught were introduced by teachers and in some cases <u>we were told to bring a paper related to the topics</u> chosen by teachers. <u>We just had this chance and freedom to bring a paper out of the syllabus.</u>

Student #46:

In most <u>courses we didn't have such freedom</u>. However, we had <u>only one course titled</u> discourse analysis which the teacher, in some sessions, allowed us <u>to choose our interested topics and papers and to present them</u> in the classroom.

As it is underlined in the excerpts taken from the students #8 and #46, the extent of power choice — although declared by some instructors — moves not beyond the mere selection of a paper with a subject that is of interest to the students and it falls under the direct guidelines of a prescribed syllabus. Moreover, all participants responded that they were dependent on the instructors' syllabus to be studied over a term. This act of imposed limited voice power on students was captured in another realization. Some students mentioned that instructors adhere to their syllabi up to a state that others subject-related matters could be left unnoticed. As an instance, the following excerpt indicates how one of the students is implicitly mentioning the idea of instructors' adherence to their syllabi through demanding the students to be prepared for the prescribed contents.

Student #1:

There are two scenarios here. One is students just follow what teachers give them.
The second scenario is self-study. For self-study, students have different syllabus. For getting marks, teachers' syllabus is the most important one.

Overall, it can be argued that the consequences of any imposed syllabi are not just restricted to their effects on the class time experience rather they exceed beyond and to students' lives and ideologies. To put it this way, teachers' directionally prescribed syllabi affect the perceptions and perspectives of the students, getting them to know that the only route toward success is to be passive recipients with no agency. Students might think that what is read by themselves outside the teachers' syllabi would be of no immediate observable application. Freire (1970, p. 73), in this respect, argued that in an imposed syllabus "the teacher chooses the program content" as well as "acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher" in a way that they adapt to it and shape their ideologies around the concept of a true education is nothing but being passive (and not even active) recipients.

5.1.2. Neglecting students' personal experiences, interests, and background knowledge

Teachers should commit themselves to "validate the experiences that students bring to schools" (Foley, Morris, Gounari, & Agostinone-Wilson, 2015, p. 117) and provide an opportunity for students to "connect their own lives and everyday experiences to what they learn" (Giroux, 2004, p. 44). Pedagogy in this sense is not a mere transfer of teachers' knowledge; rather it puts forth that students become passionate and motivated by affective investments they bring to learning processes (Giroux, 2004). Considering the unbalanced relationship between teachers and students in MA TEFL classes in Iran, from the standpoint of students, teachers' personal experiences, interests, preferences, and background knowledge were the sole determining criteria to develop syllabi. It should be mentioned that students made comparison between their respective syllabus and syllabi presented by other universities. Students pointed out that instructors considered other colleagues' syllabi being presented out there. To put it this way, instructors were not concerned with the students' needs, personal interests, and background knowledge when they wanted to develop their syllabus. Instructors introduced materials solely based on their personal preferences and over the years of their academic carrier. In essence, this is called student abuse and absolute immorality and in Bizzell's (1991) words, such approach is called "coercion" or "coercive pedagogy" (p. 56). Along with Bizzell's (1991) reasoning, the analysis of data tapped upon one aspect of this coercive pedagogy. Some of the students referred to instances wherein the instructors dedicated a number of successive sessions to topics of their interest and over them they had knowledge control. Such instances resembling Bizzell's (1991) coercive pedagogy realization are provided as follow.

Student #23:

During the syllabus design course, we had already got to know about needs analysis and its definition which is a rather important term in ESP. However, our ESP instructor skipped its practice and did not pay much attention to it. This is a classification based on students' background knowledge. Not much focus has ever been given to learners' personal interest and needs in designing and introducing the syllabus.

Student #15:

The criteria were the syllabus that they themselves had studied when they were MA students. If they have added something to it, it is papers and topics that they have studied 10 years ago.

Student #39:

Teachers would consider their own personal interests, aims, and background knowledge in syllabus development. For example, one teacher who was interested in genre analysis, he or she devoted 50% of the materials on genre analysis, however there were some students who didn't like to read such materials.

Student #10:

Some teachers are crazy about some ideas and topics like one of our language assessment instructor, he is crazy about dynamic assessment. So this teacher includes more materials about dynamic assessment. So teachers' own interest is a leading factor.

Looking from another perspective at the concept of students' preference negligence, the analysis of one of the students' reflective voice illustrated how the inclusion of the same materials in syllabi and the fact that instructors have accustomed to a fixed manner of preparing, presenting, and class handling on those routinized subjects may lessen the students' voice. As it is shown in the following excerpt, student #33 explicitly underscores such a fact that having the same materials would sap the students' motivation and as a result their desire to have a voice. This finding is in line with Garn and Jolly's (2013, p. 7) argument; they put forth that "the fun factor of learning" is one of the

underlying factors that increases the learners' "intrinsic motivation" and "identified regulation" in case the learning activities are tailored to the learners' "personalized interests and goals." As such, it can be argued that learners' motivation and calls to have voice are reciprocally related.

Student #33:

It is something that the teacher has been taught previously and the teacher has been doing for the last few years or decades. Because they have been overloaded with classes and courses they do not get the time to revise, modify, add, and edit. That's why it is somehow repetitive. It is something that they are comfortable with and they can easily get their hands on.

Built upon these instances, it can be deduced, on the one hand, that instructors projected their own personal views, interests, and supposedly areas of expertise into education and followed a monologic approach; on the other hand, the students' needs and personal interests as well as investments were neglected by not counting on their voices concerning the process of syllabus development. Moreover, it can be mentioned that prescribed syllabi, wherein the students' voice is not sought, have a dampening power on the students' motivation and level of engagement. This in turn may lead to a condition where the students shy away from projecting their voice and as a result they may face self-censor voice power.

5.1.3. Neglecting students' social and cultural domain

The purpose of education is the socialization of students; that is, its aim is to maintain and reinforce students' culture. This social heritage must be translated into classroom and "the cultural capital of students must be related to the curricula teachers develop or mediate" (Foley et al., 2015, p. 117). Furthermore, when instructors enjoy a global view toward individuals of linguistically, ethnically, and culturally diverse communities, the process of delivering and constructing an equitable educational system could be more effectively achieved (Diaz-Greenberg & Nevin, 2003). However, the findings of the current study unveiled that the social and cultural experiences of the students went unnoticed. Some stated that although the students come from different cultures like Turk, Kurd, Arab, and Lor, their instructors attended not to these minute matters. The following excerpt is an instance of how lack of thorough consideration for the students' cultural background may lead to a decrease in their voice power as well as choice.

Student #3:

Although we live in a multicultural and multilingual society, the university instructors just introduce the fixed syllabus. They don't care about the social students' backgrounds. For example, most students are from cities other than Tehran, the capital city, with different cultures. Some are Kurdish, some are Turkish, and so on. I don't think that they care about these factors.

5.1.4. Neglecting learners' styles

Learners' styles are treated as factors which can project their influences into the designing process of syllabi as the students are born with diverse styles; that is, some are reflective, analytical, ambiguity tolerant, impulsive, and synthetic. It is suggested that to raise creativity in classrooms with those students who are ambiguous intolerant, teachers can introduce a syllabus covering "contradictory materials" and critical issues (Brown, 2007). Otherwise, the suppression of the learners' differences will come to the forefront — leaving no opportunity for compensation.

The analysis of responses illustrated how the students' styles are neglected in the final format of syllabi or over the process of development. Furthermore, the analysis tapped upon the idea that instructors tended to design syllabi based on their own styles—be it teaching style or personality style. The following excerpts illustrate two points: (1) how the syllabi are constructed based on instructors' teaching as well as personality styles and (2) how the syllabus outcomes were invariably developed the same for all the involved students.

Student #41:

> The syllabus is the same for all students whether they are visually-oriented or auditory-oriented.

Student #9:

> Teachers think that it is better to determine the syllabus just based on their own styles not students' styles.

Student #5:

> Once we proposed the teacher that the syllabus is vague. We didn't know what to do. We asked her to clarify it a bit or reduce the number of materials and resources that she had introduced, but it didn't work and she persisted on her own style.

It is worth mentioning that there existed two students who reported that some teachers considering their learning styles; however, they did not elaborate on how those instructors considered the students' styles. One just noted "to some extent" styles are taken into account and the other one maintained "in some cases" instructors declared the students' styles.

5.1.5. Neglecting students' gender

Within critical pedagogy, educators should take notions such as gender, class, and race seriously for the management of classrooms and the development of curriculum contents as well (Rahimi, 2013). Concerning the role of gender in affecting syllabus development, it was found that instructors take this issue for granted.

> As to the gender equality, participants mentioned no trace of exercising gender fairness in the act of syllabus development. As such, it can be argued that classes were held irrespective of students' gender—be it segregated or male-female classes. This is clearly evidenced by one of the participants' reaction in the following excerpt.

Student #11:

> Actually there is no role at all. We can see that no matter if the class is separated or not. There is no difference in syllabus outcome. Most of the time they cover the same syllabus. No matter what their gender is.

However, it should be borne in mind that some participants pointed out that they were not in a position to voice their opinions about the effect of gender in syllabus development—knowing that some university in Iran exercise gender separation in class holdings.

> In sum, the analyzed responses suggested that instructors had a superior role in syllabus development. In the absence of students' voice, in fact, instructors relied on their own judgments as the sole criteria of syllabus selections. As such, what could be inferred from the findings was the apparent authority and dominance of instructors in the act of designing syllabi; instructors' personal experiences, interests, and background knowledge were influential. In view of these, students' responses indicated that the prime dominant voice in play was that of instructors' rather than theirs.

> In general, it can be argued that "teachers' limited understanding of the implementation of 'critical' in their curricula" (Sarroub & Quadros, 2015, p. 254) could be one of the factors of not taking students' voice into the practice of syllabus development.

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5.2. Results on research question two

The second research question investigated—"what are the Iranian MA TEFL students' attitudes toward the concept of student voice in the development of syllabus design?" The following were emerged based on the codification of the available data: needs analysis, students as decision-makers, and reciprocal humanistic appreciation. The concepts are sketched in the following sections.

5.2.1. Needs analysis

The results brought yet another prime theme dealing with the necessity of having a thorough need analysis prior to and over the course of content delivery as well as presenting teaching materials. In this line, the students stressed how varied their interests are in different fields of TEFL, backgrounds, knowledge depth, and breadth of English language teaching courses. As such, they went to suggest that these variations demand a personalized learning approach which can be tailored through having their needs be analyzed in a reciprocally dynamic manner. The following excerpts depict the demand of having a need analysis from the students' perspectives.

> Student #19:
>
> Teachers should select some papers that we are able to connect to our own experiences in teaching English and share it with other classmates.

> Student #13:
>
> In our first sessions, teachers should ask us about our originality, background experiences, and motivation.

As it is shown in students #19 and #13, a necessity of a reciprocally dynamic need analysis is strongly felt by students as both of them are tapping upon two important factors; the learners' "own experiences in teaching English" and "background experiences, and motivation" should be taken into account. The analysis of responses indicated that the students demand not only a first-session need analysis — through being asked about their needs, personal interests, background knowledge, textbooks covered, learning styles, etc. — but also an analysis lasting over the course of their study. This ongoing process of reciprocal need analysis is illustrated in the following excerpt wherein one of the students suggested an analysis which fluids over the term.

> Student #20:
>
> Teachers can take students' personal interests and social and cultural experiences into consideration while introducing the syllabus. It can be done by means of a questionnaire or interview during the term.

This finding is consistent with Flutter's (2007) argument in that some stress is put on the creation of syllabi through having students' voice integrated to it as "a process of ongoing collaboration rather than as occasional feedback" (p. 353).

5.2.2. Student as decision-makers

Voice can be defined as to be considered important and to have an influence on the learning and teaching processes occurring in language classes. To foster student voice in classroom, Thiessen (2006) argues that students are suggested to be actively engaged in shaping their own learning and be involved in decision makings, actions, and changes to syllabus and curriculum developments. Hence, to make students' participation more meaningful in learning they should not be handed pre-packaged forms of knowledge; however, they need to be co-creators in the ongoing process of the curriculum constructions (Bovill, 2013).

The analysis of data indicated that the participants preferred to execute their role as co-producers of syllabus construction. Students asserted that they prefer to have a voice in selecting books, topics thereof and papers to be taught during MA program and teachers should not treat students as passive recipients. Some highlighted that such issues can be proposed right after the inception and over the course. Other students highlighted that at least they should be given a list of assignments in syllabus to select from. These voices on student's roles to be as co-creators of syllabus design are reflected in the following excerpts.

Student #34:

I expect teachers allow students to think about the syllabus that has been introduced in the first sessions and be able to make decisions and give their own comments and feedback. If there are any suggestions by students, teachers take them into account and for the next sessions teachers and students determine the final version of syllabus.

Student #15:

Teachers should select topics based on students' opinions. At the end of each session they should ask us what to be taught and which topic to be selected for the next session. For papers and books they can provide us with several books and different papers in which we could make our own decisions.

Student #28:

I feel more choices can be given to students. They can be given a choice of some subjects that are of more interest to them throughout M.A. program.

Student #41:

Teachers don't pay attention to students' styles whether, for example, summary writing works for students or not. Therefore, students just do the assignments without any concentration to learn. If the assignments are selective it would be better.

Sketched in students #34, #15, #28, and #41 are two major points dealing with the exigency of having students as co-syllabus creators and implementation of students' voice. The first points is suggested by students as "teachers allow students to think about the syllabus," "if the assignments are selective it would be better," "we could make our own decisions," "any suggestions by students, teachers take them into account," and "choices can be given to students." The second point deals with the students' expectation of observing their voices to be implemented. This students' voice can be captured in reflections such as "for the next sessions" and "throughout M.A. program." These findings corroborate Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten's (2011) assertion in that engaging students in planning their educational path can foster students' sense of being the owners of their learning and the fact that such an engagement is an important step to a more in-depth learning process. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the results, as evidenced in the following excerpts, displayed participants' positive perspectives on having them as co-decision makers as it would increase students' motivation, enthusiasm, interest, power, responsibility, commitment, esteem, and intellectuality.

Student #22:

Students' decisions in the process of selecting topics can be an excellent way to enhance their motivation for learning and fostering their intellectual agility.

Student #12

If we are able to make decisions on choosing topics and books we really feel that we are in the position of being a real teacher not a student.

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5.2.3. Reciprocal humanistic appreciation

To make an interaction meaningful, the members should listen. Listening is a skill that needs to be learned. The art of listening, as a thorough examination of non-critical pedagogies shows, was solely the responsibility of students to attend to; however, with the surge of critical studies the idea has observed a shift in focus as the responsibility is placed now on instructors. The history of student voice describes many ways in which research has been growing on the topic of "hearing" and "listening to" students (Demetriou, Goalen, & Rudduck, 2000; Hopkins, 2010; Segedin, 2012; Turner, 2006). The pyramid of student voice (being heard, collaborating with adults, and building capacity for leadership) introduced by Mitra (2006), illuminates that the most prevalent and most rudimentary form of student voice is "being heard." Staff and teachers need to listen to students to figure out their experiences, information, unique knowledge, and perspectives. Cook-Sather (2002) in this regard believes that "we must continually re-learn to listen—in every context, with each group of students and with each individual student" (p. 27). Concerning this hearing voice factor, in Iranian university contexts, some students highlighted that there should exist a reciprocal diplomacy of compromise—suggesting that "It is a kind of mutual understanding" that makes decisions more stable—and a sense of humanism in the instructors' theoretical knowledge repertoire. The latter is shown in student #27 as he mentioned "teachers know a lot of methodologies in theory," however, "they exactly use the old-fashion methods prevalent 20 years ago" leading instructors to have no appreciations for "students' situations."

Student #7:

I believe that the essence of any diplomacy is compromise. I say that you have to walk in their shoes and they have to put themselves in our shoes as well. It is a kind of mutual understanding. The decision that is made based on mutual understanding is stable and really feasible. The crucial idea here is that we have to be listening enough and see the world the way they do and vice versa. I happened to ask a teacher that I'm sorry I can't do the assignments. They don't listen. I said that I work and have to make a living by working but the teacher said that not of my business. I had this situation in one of our classes. The teacher said if you are working you have no room in my class. That is really brutal of that teacher.

Student #27:

We are studying Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Teachers know a lot of methodologies in theory and there are some teachers who deem themselves as knowledgeable but they exactly use the old-fashion methods prevalent 20 years ago. They do not apply any change and they just teach in a routine and strict manner. If students had more voice in classroom it would be better. We have teachers who set a deadline for projects without understanding students' situations.

5.3. Reasons behind lack of voice

5.3.1. Sharing power

In the realm of student voice initiatives, the question of how to share power with students is a challenging one. It can lead to constructive or obstructive moves. Asking instructors for sharing their power with students in classroom settings has not been well-perceived. Power relations existing in language institutions and educational settings permit an asymmetry status between teachers and students (Mitra, 2008a). Among the students' responses, it was found that the reasons behind the lack of respecting student voice goes back to the fact that instructors' authority and prestige would be endangered in case students be provided with an opportunity to exercise agency. This is in line with what Mitra and Gross (2009) argued that "the sharing of power with students can be perceived as threatening to teachers" (p. 537). Such an asymmetrical power relation is presented in student #39.

Student #39:

  Most of the time teachers don't let students interfere in because they think this action will violate their authority in class and they won't let you do so.

5.3.2. University structure

The university atmosphere plays a role in providing instructors with an opportunity so in turn they can allow students to express their voice. For instance, the length of terms and the number of students have a great impact on the extent of voice expressed by instructors and students in classes. In case these qualities are not observed, students' voice would be hampered leading to a situation they cannot be treated equally. As with these qualities, the analysis showed that lack of time is one of the underlying reasons for teachers not to allow students to bring their own books, papers, and topics to be taught in classes.

  Student #1:

  We usually lack time to work out of the syllabus. Usually we cannot fully cover the designed syllabus.

  Student #3:

  When we are short of time, some parts will be deleted by teachers not students.

Along these arguments, another reason dealing with students' dissatisfaction was found; they asserted that, as shown in excerpts #29 and #9, crowded or outnumbered classes make instructors negligent of individual students' needs.

  Student #29

  Because there are many students in classes, teachers do not have time to get familiar with all students.

  Student #9:

  I think, in classes, teachers are more concerned about the needs of the groups rather than individuals. Groups matter more. Teachers want to meet the individuals' needs as well but they cannot sacrifice it for the needs of the groups. So the needs of the majority are the most important to teachers.

These findings are consistent with Mitra's (2008b, p. 24) stance on the way students' voice should be amplified through having schools be "structured in ways that encourage student voice" as not observing structures such as "large school and class sizes and segregation by age and ability increase student alienation."

5.3.3. Dependence

Upon being asked on the feasibility of having the power to determine the forthcoming syllabi, some students preferred the responsibility be on the instructors' shoulders. Such an argument is depicted in student #30.

  Student #30:

  Teachers should select the syllabus and students should not be given choices since they don't do anything. They take no actions if they are not told to study.

This dependency theme is in sharp contrast with the principles of critically-informed education systems as in such systems attempts to help students take responsibility and control over their own learning and independence. This independency, according to Little (1995, p. 175), is embedded within a reform in pedagogical dialogues knowing that the basics of dialogues are negotiation and interactions "characterized by interdependence." He further went to suggest that a true negotiation in pedagogical dialogues demands a symmetrical autonomy; that is, "the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers." This autonomy on the part of students would be achieved unless "a shift in the role of the teacher from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning and manager of learning resources" (Little, 1995, p. 178) occurs. Hence, it seems that the Iranian MA TEFL students' strong dependency on instructors emanates from impaired pedagogical dialogues wherein instructors are still assuming power and autonomy as such a concept can be developed in through educational experiences and interventions (Candy, 1991).

6. Conclusion

By bearing in mind that the current study disclosed the voice of TEFL students in syllabus development over the course of MA program in the context of Iran, some conclusions should be underscored.

The results suggested that instructors took syllabus design decisions in advance and deemed students as followers who have to be thought about. Teachers were the central characters who were foregrounded in the process of material development. The findings also indicated that students demand instructors to share power with in practice and allow them to have a stake in making decisions about what to be taught so as to enjoy more democratic education.

In curricula construction, students' background knowledge, personal interests, preferences, penchant, and predilection are not the only factors contributing such a formation, but students' cultural and social factors, styles, and gender should be foregrounded in the introduction of every course.

In view of the findings, it can be concluded that instructors, while designing syllabi, should keep in mind that the syllabi be unspecified and indeterminate, open to constant revision and modification, and constantly be in dialogue with students' ideologies as well as perceptions.

When students are not allowed to make a little change in the process of syllabus development within classes, they may feel powerless and be conditioned to be decided about. Therefore, the following questions can be put forth: How and when can students get empowered and make bigger changes in their education? How and when can they initiate reform given the structure of present schools and universities? How can they dare to stand against teachers' power? How can they learn to defend their own rights if they face inequality by the teachers?

Overall, it can be argued that education reforms can be brought into practice through projecting the students' voice into the process of syllabus design as "reforms that take students' needs and interests into account are more successful for diverse students" (Rubin & Silva, 2003, p. 6).

Teacher voice calls for more research and should be heard as well to draw a far more objective picture of the issue of student voice. More importantly, utilizing and adopting other methods of investigation specifically observation of actual classrooms can confirm and add more depth to the findings.

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