Classroom Environment and EFL Students' Feelings of Alienation:

Reflections on Bahcesehir University Setting

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Abstract

Teaching and learning languages is not innocuously simple straightforward processes, rather, there exist a plethora of psychosocial and cultural parameters. The complexities and intricacies are noticed in all cognitive, affective and behavioral domains of human intellectual effort for learning and transmitting information. EFL students have shown entirely different psychological and cultural specificities reflecting their particular personality type, ethnic background, emotional status, and culture. This diversity has also been noticed in their different degree of academic success and failure, diverse emotional orientations including their motivation, anxiety, risk taking, self-image, self-confidence, etc. Students' different learning techniques, styles and strategies can lead to successful learning and felicitous discourse with the teachers; conversely, they can experience educational failure, isolation, powerlessness, anomaly, and breakage of proper communication with the teacher. One of the repercussions of the traditional learning environments is lack of the proper interaction and felicitous discourse among the teachers and the students. These affective parameters can be the aftermath of the psychologically destructive state called " Alienation". In this study, an attempt was made to decipher the interplay between students' gender, ethnic backgrounds, and cultural specificities and their feelings of alienation at Bahcesehir University, Istanbul, Turkey.

Keywords: classroom environment, alienation, academic achievement, task engagement

1. Introduction and Review of Literature

"The problem of alienation is a pervasive theme in the classics of sociology, and the concept has a prominent place in the contemporary work" (Seeman, 1959, p.783).

Mann (2001, p.8) defines alienation within the learning environment as "the estrangement of the learners from what they should be engaged in". In such a case, individuals cannot engage or contribute in a meaningful and productive way because they are held back, blocked, inhibited, estranged or isolated from what they are learning. Mann (2005, p.44) suggests that one factor that constrains engagement is the assumptions that participants make about what is appropriate or what is not or what is significant in different learning environments. The example of a young Asian student saying "Everybody wants to know but nobody wants to ask a question" (Read et al, 2003, p.270) is a striking one. Read et al suggest that this is due to students' assumption about being a good student – independent and clever. However, asking a question would be seen as the opposite. As a consequence, this assumption impedes them from resolving a problem they face in their learning environment, thus leading to alienation.

According to Mann (2003), a lack of knowledge about the different experiences the teacher and the students have in a classroom environment may also cause a feeling of alienation. It constrains the way they act or interact. That is, the teacher and the students feel ignorant of each other's experience and make assumptions concerning each other's behaviour constraining the possibility to engage actively in the learning process. Therefore, Mann (2003) suggests a need for a dialogue between teachers and learners in order to express, understand and challenge each other's position, needs, preference and concerns.

Teachers can exercise direct influence on their students (Friedel et al., 2007). However, the teachers' professional development and background shape their roles and identities (Rowan, Raudenbush, &Kang, 1991). What's more, they are oftan constained by regulations imposed on them by autorities in terms of their teaching methods, materials development , syllabus and curriculum designs.   (Scott & Hannafin, 2000). The manner, time, domains and topics of the materials are strictly specified by Education Departments. Consequently, the classroom can be a setting in which contradictory ideas are presented by the teachers. (Rees, 1973) and this situation can in turn, influence teacher-student relationships in a negative way.

Seeman (1959) defines five dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. According to Paul & Colucci (2000), there are times when students perceive the knowledge and information of the curriculum as being separate from them, which limits the way they interact

with the information. The result is disconnection and alienation because the information is not meaningful to the student. This meaninglessness results in students' passive involvement in learning, and breeds apathy. When students have a lack of enthusiasm, the students' attitudes towards the curriculum is negatively influenced.

During the last two decades there has been substantial research on the importance of teacher-student relationships. The quality of teacher-student relationships reveals significant association with students' social functioning (Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999), behaviour problems (Graziano, Reavis, Keane & Calkins, 2007), engagement in learning activities (Skinner, Wellborn & Connell, 1990), and academic achievement (Valiente, Lemery-Chalfant, Swanson & Reiser, 2008).

Cornelius-White (2007), in his meta-analysis, reveals a significant association between person-centered teacher variables (i.e. affective variables, like empathy and warmth; and more instructional variables, such as higher order thinking and encouraging learning) and student outcomes (affective, behavioral and cognitive).

Two other meta-analyses (Allen, Witt &Wheeless, 2006; Witt, Wheeless & Allen, 2004) reveal significant association between verbal and nonverbal immediacy of teachers' communication and students' perceived and affective learning. However, the association between teachers' communication and cognitive learning, in these analyses, is smaller. All in all, these analyses show that teacher behaviors have influence on student outcomes.

In their analysis, Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort (2011, p. 514-520) focus on affective dimensions of teacher-student relationship and also add negative teacher-student relationships. Their analyses reveal positive associations between positive teacher-student relationships and both engagement and achievement; and negative associations between negative relationships and both engagement and achievement. As for teacher characteristics, their findings suggest that teacher gender has an influence on engagement but not on achievement. According to the results of their study, the influence of the male teachers was stronger. Teachers' ethnicity and experience reveal significant influence on the association between positive relationships and achievement only. As a significant outcome of this study, teacher-student relationships appear to be even more influencial for older students, even into late adolescence. In general, the study reveals that teacher-student relationships are more important for children who are academically at risk, especially for children from disadvantaged economic backgrounds and children with learning difficulties. The associations also suggest that although affective relations are important, they are not sufficient to improve students' learning behaviours.

Research over the last three decades has also proven that the quality of the classroom environment has a significant effect on student learning (Fraser & Goh, 2003; Zandvliet & Buker, 2003). In terms of educational setting, environment can be defined as the atmosphere, the tone, the ambiance or the climate that permiates the setting focusing on human behaviour in origin or outcome (Boy & Pine, 1988; Dorman & Fraser, 2009). In other words, it refers to the psychosocial environment rather than the physical environment.

There exist strong relationships between an individual's perception of learning environment and his/her performance within that environment (Walberg, 1991). The more positive perception of the classroom environment a learner has, the better h/she learns. That is, classroom environment is a strong determinant of student cognitive and attitudinal outcome. (Dorman, Fraser & McRobbie, 1995).

Positive learning environments, such as constructivist ones, are student-centered and students' points of views are highly appreciated and students are provided with the opportunities to express themselves. Such an environment helps students improve their problem solving and critical thinking abilities (Rahimi & Ebrahimi, 2011).

A positive environment also leads to student psychosocial development. Classroom environment has an impact on student beliefs, values and norms. If there is a democratic climate at school and in the classroom, the students will have democratic values (Schmidt & Cagan, 2006).

On the other hand, an objectivist classroom environment assumes students to be passive learners who are expected to know the world as the teacher does (Rahimi & Ebrahimi, 2011). Such an environment is teacher-centered and neither does it allow cooperative activities nor it values students' thinking.

What determines a child's behaviour is the child's individual characteristics and the influence of the environment at that particular time. As Lewin (1935) suggests, in order to yield a certain mode of behaviour, heredity and environment must be co-working; which can be explained by nature vs. nurture issue. In short, behaviour is the function of both predisposition and environmental forces, B= f(P,E).

2. Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of classroom environment on students' learning, engagement and achievement. The objectives were to identify the meaningful and productive learning environment, the factors that inhibit student learning, the factors that encourage student engagement in the tasks and the factors that lead to academic achievement. For this study, a qualitative approach was selected and the data consist of the experiences, perspectives and perceptions of the participants. The idea of how participants (students) experience their learning environment, namely the classroom environment, in terms of meanings, interpretations and

achievement builds the basis of this study. Seven students were eager to answer the interview questions so they were selected as the focal group out of the 6o participants, both male and female at the age of 18-19, from pre-intermediate level answered the interview questions project. They were given four interview questions and asked to express their experiences, perspectives and perceptions regarding their learning and the classroom environment. The interview questions were as follows:

1. Does the classroom environment lead to a meaningful and productive learning?
2. Does it hold back, block, inhibit or estrange you from what you are learning?
3. Does classroom environment lead to your engagement in the task?
4. Does classroom environment lead to your academic achievement?

3. Ethics

Prior to conducting the research, the purpose of it was explained to the participant students and informed consent was obtained. The participants were also informed that neither their identification nor their answers to the research questions would be shared with other participants or their teachers. They are referred as S1 (student 1), S2, S3, etc. in the study.

4. Data Analysis

Participants' description of ideal learning environment and their perception of factors influencing learning in the classroom environment were the basis for describing the factors for alienation in the classroom.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to the participants' experiences, perspectives and perceptions.

6. Findings and Results

6.1 Classroom as a meaningful and productive environment

All the participants state that classroom environment has a big influence on learning. They believe that a meaningful and productive learning is only possible when they feel comfortable and away from stress. Therefore, all the participants agree that the teacher's and their classmates' attitude towards learning determines its meaningfulness and their productivity. S2 (student 2) explains that *when there isn't a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, she feels uncomfortable, unhappy and she cannot concentrate on the lesson*. In the same vein, when she feels the teacher has a problem and is unhappy, or when the teacher seems to have lost her energy and enthusiasm, it is difficult for her to concentrate on the lesson because she loses her motivation.

S4 states that a positive learning environment is reflected positively on his learning. "*Good relationships with the classmates and a tolerant teacher have a positive influence on me. So I don't pretend to learn because I learn easily*". Hence, it can be interpreted that a stress-free learning environment is the key for a meaningful and effective learning. As Krashen (1989) suggests, providing a safe learning environment where learners can take risks is an important educational principle.

However, when an ambitious student is negatively affected by the learning environment, the result is frustration and demotivation, which undermines productivity. Here is the example: S3 complains about the noise in the classroom and indifferent attitude of his classmates towards the lesson: "*In our classroom students usually don't listen to our teachers. For example Mr. H. usually warns the students because they always talk to each other during the lesson. Half of the lesson is spent with such talks and warnings*".

S7 reports similar experience: "*Sometimes I feel that some students in the class sabotage our learning*". Another student, S5, points out the effects of relationships in the classroom on student learning: "*A fruitful classroom environment depends on the teacher-student and student-student relationships. If there are a lot of dominant students or alot of shy students, this affects the synergy in the classroom in a negative way. The teacher should remember that everyone in the classroom is a unique individual and she should build a good rapport*". Opinions of S6 supports that of S5: *A caring and listening teacher and a good communication between the teacher and the students is necessary*". Since creating a constructive rapport with the students is a positive factor producing a stress-free learning environment, it leads to a meaningful learning and productivity.

6.2 Classroom as an inhibitive factor causing estrangement

Motivation revitalizes human behavior and leads it to the right path (Dornyei, 1998) and it is a very important aspect of any language learning enterprise (Gardner, 1985; Gardner et al. 2004; Lightbown & Spada, 1993).This makes teachers responsible for the degree of student learning and engagement. If students are not motivated they lose interest and become estranged.

Participants's answers in this part center upon the teacher's attitude and the communication between the teacher

and the students. They believe that it is mainly the teacher's attitude which determines the degree of motivation or estrangement in the classroom.

S7 dwells on the use of impolite even pejorative or disparaging discourse employed by certain teachers with the repercussion of students' feelilngs of disgust, fury and demotivation. "*Negative teacher attitudes block learning. For example, Ms. O. always reprimands students or uses bad language in the classroom. This makes me feel estranged and inhibits me from learning. Who would like to learn from such a teacher?*". S1 points out the same aspect and states that "*if the teacher is kind and friendly, the students are influenced positively so they want to study and get more engaged*". S4 shares a similar view and states that "*teachers must be kind and tolerant. If they are not, students cannot concentrate on the lesson, they don't like the lesson and their attention decreases*".

Dornyei (1994) argues that language learners are motivated differently based upon their achievement and self-confidence. In the afore-mentioned cases, the teacher is the main factor that has an impact on the student attitude towards the lesson, a condition which determines student engagement or estrangement.

Research has shown that one's positive experiences and achievements in learning a foreign language has a great influence on one's confidence in using it. Clement (1980) suggests that positive language learning experiences increase learners' self confidence in using the second language and further motivation to learn it. However, if students experience negative feelings in certain classroom situations, they may end up inhibited and estranged from what they have been learning.

Similar to S7, S6 believes that "*the lack of communication between the teacher and the students inhibits students from learning*". She thinks *"The students must be able to express their opinions and needs regarding the lesson without constraints*". S5 emphasizes the same point: "*the teacher must allow the students to communicate with her. If the students feel that the teacher listens to them, they become more engaged in the lessons. They don't feel stressed if they know that the teacher will help them when they need help*". Gardner et al. (2004) argue that affective factors influence language acquisition and achievement. It can be concluded from the views of S7 and S6 that positive affective factors can be conducive to student engagement in the tasks by motivating them.

The participants' views in the study also reveal that in addition to the teacher's attidute, their classmates' stance is another factor determining their engagement or estrangement in the classroom activities. S3 reports that "*when it is noisy in the classroom, I cannot get engaged in the tasks, then I feel stressed*". S1 shares similar views: "*if the classroom is noisy, I cannot focus on the lesson so this situation causes failure. The teacher should control the class and maintain discipline*".

According to Dornyei's (2010b) L2 motivational self esteem' approach in second language learning, there is a link between the learning of the foreign language and one's self, roles, and identity. This has implications for learning a foreign language in that the learner develops 'self maturity' and thus 'self motivation' (to use the very same terminologies employed by Dornyei) in acquiring the target language. In the cases reported above through the views of S3 and S1, the main problem that leads to estrangement, inhibition or failure seems to be closely related to student self motivation.

6.3 Classroom as a learning environment that fosters engagement

The views of the participants related to student engagement in the tasks mainly focus on learning styles, methods, and a variety of activities designed by the teacher.

S5 believes that *different learning methods are useful for full engagement*. The teacher must conduct a survey to learn about the learning styles of the students and design the lessons accordingly.

When they need to decide on the content that addresses the interests and needs of diverse students, Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1983) may be helpful for teachers to understand and identify strengths in all students.

S2 shares similar views with S5 and gives specific examples. She states *that different learning methods are very effective on my learning. For example, when the teacher holds a competition, I feel more eager to participate.* She also thinks that visual materials help her learn better. She states that watching videos, for example, makes the lessons more interesting and she pays more attention. According to Morell (2004), Interactive teaching methods for teaching English as a foreign language to university students improves comprehension and communicative competence.

S4 believes in the positive effects of visual material and emphasizes the use of technology in the classroom. According to S4, today technology is so widespread and almost all the students use computer and the internet. Therefore, he believes that teachers should make use of technology in the lessons. He adds that when the teacher uses visual materials and a variety of videos, he concentrates on the tasks as well as materials and contributes to the classroom activities more willingly.

Ramachaudran (2004) argues that using new forms of technologies in the language class will certainly encourage and motivate learners to use the target language. Similarly, Kim (2003) suggests that emails [for example] can be a tool for improving written language skills and oral language proficiency.

S7 complains that the *activities are not sufficient to learn a particular subject*. For example, the teacher sometimes shows power point slides but he claims that *only watching these slides is not enough for learning*. He states that he loses interest and gets lost.

The use of technology has shifted the focus from teacher controlled classrooms to student centered ones (Al-Jarf, 2004; Ramachaudran, 2004). As Udvari-Solner (1996) argues,there is a need for teaching strategies that extend further than delivering instruction to include content that is relevant to the student's lives. Likewise, Fortini and Fizpatrick (2000) suggest re-designing the curriculum to cater to students' differences so that what they encounter in their courses can become more meaningful and maximizes learning.

6.4 Classroom as an environment fostering academic achievement

In this part of the study, except for one participant, all the participants agree that the classroom environment affects their academic achievement.

S2 states that classroom environment has a big influence on her academic achievement. Since she *feels comfortable and relaxed in the classroom, she gets more engaged and asks questions if she doesn't understand a certain subject*. Then, she says, she learns better and achieves more. She also admits that the teacher attitude has also an important role on her academic achievement.

S4 shares similar views with S2: "*Of course the classroom environment has an impact on academic achievement. If students don't like the teacher, they don't ask any questions when they don't understand. They don't want to talk to her. They don't want to participate in the lessons so they cannot learn well or get good marks*".

S6 emphasizes the relation between academic achievement and feedback: "*Our teacher only highlights our mistakes i our paragraphs and she doesn't give us enough feedback so I don't want to write. But then I can't learn well*".

This is what S7 thinks about classroom environment and academic achievement*: Our grammar teacher explains the grammar topics very well. We can learn well and easily. However, our speaking and writing teacher isn't supportive enough. He cannot teach well, we cannot get feedback, and the worst is, he doesn't communicate with us. All these affect our achievement in a negative way because we get low marks.*

S5 shares her experiences about the negative effects of classroom environment on academic achievement focusing mainly on the teacher aspect: " *If a student doesn't like his class or the teacher, he cannot be expected to be successful. In my class, our teacher explained three different grammar topics in one single lesson and we all got confused. However, he didn't care about it , nor did he listen to us. We are all worried about the coming exam now. On the contrary, another teacher of us encourages us upon smallest contribution or participation so we feel motivated and learn better*".

An exception to the above participant views is that of S3. He states that the classroom environment doesn't have a role on his academic achievement. Whenever he has difficulty understanding a certain point, he says that he listens to the teacher carefully and finally understands it. This probably shows that he is highly self-motivated and ambitious.

7. Discussions and Conclusions

The findings of the study reveal that classroom environment definitely has an effect on student engagement and learning. Students expect a pleasant, constructive environment where they feel relaxed and stress-free and an environment which enhances their learning. The most important element of such an environment is the teacher's attitude. A sincere, kind, friendly, and tolerant teacher is what students consider the most important factor in their learning and achievement because it is the best motivating factor. They expect their teacher to establish a good rapport with them and they are also aware that this is only possible with good communication skills. Students also believe that an effective teacher should very well cater to their individual learning needs. This includes paying attention to different learning styles and teaching methods as well as designing the learning tasks and activities in a variety of ways to appeal to students' interest.

The factors mentioned above are also germane to Dornyei and Csizer's (1998) study where they draw attention to the ten commandments for motivating language learners. They claim that teachers should set a model for students, create a relaxed and pleasant class atmosphere, present tasks properly to the learners, emphasize teacher-student relationships, help improve learners' self confidence and make learning interesting to the students.

In addition to the quality of teacher-student relationships, the findings of this study suggest that another significant element of an ideal learning environment is the student-student relationships. It can be concluded from the students' opinions that the harmony in the classroom is an effective factor to enhance motivation; hence, an increase in student engagement in the learning tasks. This seems to be in line with Newman's (1981) arguments in his study on reducing student alienation where he claims that student involvement-engagement is necessary for learning. He points out the difficulty of teaching passive, withdrawn [alienated] students and claims that the immediate outcome of such a situation is the wasted resources.

Another conclusion that can be drawn out of this study is the effect of the classroom environment on student

achievement. All the students point out that their achievement depends highly on a competent teacher with strong skills of class management, appropriately designed materials and a variety of activities and teaching methods. Deci and his colleagues (1991) support the same view and suggest that students experience personal adjustment problems when their feeling of belonging and the need for competence are not satisfied. As a result, it can be put forward that their motivation decreases and they achieve less than they would otherwise.

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, the participants in this study believe that the teacher should be sensitive to different learning styles and teaching methods and consequently design the learning tasks and activities in a variety of ways to cater to students' interests. They mention the positive ffect of technology used in the classroom, such as videos and websites. They claim that the lack of such tools result in low motivation so that they feel course alienated. However, Johnson's findings somehow contrast with this situation. Johnson (2005) argues that when the students feel alienated from the course, they tend to show resistance in engagement in the tasks which include WebCT. In other words, students' feelings of alienation lead to their reluctance to use WebCT,

As a consequence, classroom environment is a significant factor which influences student learning. Furthermore, teacher attitude, peer attitude, task and material varieties are the main variables determining whether students are engaged and learning or are alienated from learning. Eventually, it can be concluded that classroom environment is a fact which determines student achievement or failure.

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