Challenges of Mediation Theory and Gender Differences in Iranian EFL Contexts

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Abstract—According to the Feuerstein mediation theory, a social mediator who monitors the process of interaction is required to facilitate the communication process and promote learning outcome (Dendrinos, 2006); however, researchers found that every language teaching context is unique and conducting this theory might face learners with some challenges; therefore, this study investigated the significance of mediation theory and gender difference in Iranian EFL context. To conduct the study, 86 teachers of Kashan high schools were chosen. To elicit the attitudes towards mediation theory between male and female high school teachers, Warren teacher mediation questionnaire (1995) was administered and to deepen the obtained data, interviews were conducted with ten teachers. The results of both quantitative and qualitative data have shown that conducting mediation theory in language teaching contexts needs some prerequisites that cannot be ready normally in every teaching environment. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that there is a general difference between male and female teachers in the order of mediation theory in Iranian EFL context.

Index Terms—Feuerstein mediation theory, interactionism, gender difference, mediation, mediator, teacher mediation

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning in the presence of others, learners are faced with some challenges that might be different from context to context and from gender to gender. Learning in a social setting is obviously attributed to Vygotsky and interactionism theory (Alred and Byram, 2002; Ridley-Duff and Bennett, 2010). Vygotsky and Feuerstein as the main components of social interactionism have seen that cognitive approaches to psychology that highlighted learner's cognitive developments in learning are not enough for effective teaching (Lantolf, 1994; Schneider and Watkins, 1996; Ellis, 1996). In contrast to Piaget's cognitive theory, in social interactionists view, children are born into the social world and learning occurs through interaction with other people. These people function as mediator, facilitator, and supporter, help children to reach their potential. In the early ages, these mediators are parents and in school period, teachers and their pupils play this role (Vygotsky, 1978; Williams and Burden, 1997; Antón, 1999). The significant feature of Vygotskian tradition is Genetic method that differs from mainstream SLA research in two key concepts: First, it focuses on the situational contexts in that learners learn through interaction and communication rather than on language learning in isolation; second, it focuses on the process by which new functions emerge (process-oriented learning). Zone of proximal development (ZPD) and challenges in the teaching process lead learning in the context rather than the products of learning (Vygotsky, 1979; Appel and Lantolf, 1994; Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, and Miller, 2003; Ellis, 2008). Vygotsky invented the concept of ZPD and advocated that children's thinking and meaning making is socially constructed and emerged out of their social interaction with their environments. According this concept task is an activity that a child cannot do alone, but could do with the help of more competent peers or adults that are teachers and parents (Feuerstein and Feuerstein, 1991; Ohta, 1995).

Sociocultural theory accepted that humans have a genetic inheritance that supply the basis for development, therefore, it tries to elucidate how mediated minds developed out of the social activities and transform the culture of particular communities that is fixed and stable. Feuerstein, in accordance with sociocultural theory, works on mediation theory that is based on the solid belief that anyone can become a fully effective learner. Central to the psychology of both Vygotsky and Feuerstein is the concept of mediation (Vygotsky, 1986; Feuerstein, Klein, and Tannenbaum, 1991; Cheng, 2011). Sociocultural theory brings the social and psychological learning into contact through the notion of mediation. In Lantolf and Thorne (2006) words, mediation is a procedure that individuals organize their culturally constructed skills, beliefs, and activities to self-regulation (as cited in Ellis, 2008).

Gibbons (2003) believed that mediation provides a means of studying social processes and requires construction in language learning contexts which facilitates and promotes educational development. Mediation is also central to the

study of collaborative interactions in which group working is the main principle of mediation. Vygotsky (1981) argued that individuals' physical and mental tasks are mediated and facilitated by different tools and cultural practices. The main concerns of mediation that are useful to administer collaboration and group working in learning context are ZPD, scaffolding, joint construction, and contingency.

Dendrinos (2006) defines a mediator as follows:

A social actor who monitors the process of interaction and acts when some type of intervention is required in order to help the communicative process and sometimes to influence the outcome; a facilitator in social events during which two or more parties interacting are experiencing a communication breakdown or when there is a communication gap between them; a meaning negotiator operating as a meaning-making agent especially when s/he intervenes in situations which require reconciliation, settlement or compromise of meanings (P. 11.)

He also explains that in the past, mediation was a "political act of diplomacy", but today mediation is more significant than before as of the social change lately from the production of goods and tools to the production of knowledge and technology.

Research studies ignored the particular culture of learning environments that might cause learners some unanticipated problems and demotivate them; therefore, the present study investigated the latent facts of applying mediation theory in language classrooms. The findings are important, especially to teachers and curriculum designers that are mediation theory disciples.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Lots of literature studies advocated mediation theory as a universal theory that is applicable to any situation and learning context: Scaffolding is a term that is pivotal to Vygotskian descriptions of learning that is in accordance with the socioconstructivist view of human functioning. Scaffolding is an effective tool that is employed by teachers to promote the development of learning (Gibbons, 2003). The two theories that are mostly related to the development of the mediation approach to learning are the Vogotskian sociocultural theory and Feuerstein theory of Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) (Vygotsky, 1986). These theories put emphasis on the importance of sociocultural forces – parents, teachers, pupils, and communication between them in society- in shaping a child's development and learning. Both emphasized the significant role played by teachers, parents, peers and the community in determining the types of learning interaction occurring between learners and their near environments. The proponents of sociocultural theory did not deny the role of cognitive development, but they believe it has a peripheral effect on development (Ohta, 1995).

Singh and Richards (2006) confirmed that theories of teacher-student learning center on the concept of learning as cultural-social practice, which includes peer-interaction, mediation, discourse, social interaction and participation structures. Lantolf (2005) stated that one of the fundamental concepts of sociocultural theory is it's argue that the individuals' mind is mediated. Lantolf claimed that Vygotsky discovers a significant function for what he called "tools" in people understanding of the whole world and also of them. Wertsch (1985) advocated that humans do not act directly on the physical world without the intermediary of tools. Feuerstein and Louis (1990) point out that the main roles of the mediator are the stimulus, the organism, and the response to interpret, regulate, elaborate, and reinforce the learner's experience (as cited in Chang, 2004).

Many studies worked on the notion of mediation and clarified the function of it in children's social development. Mediation theory originates mainly in Social Interactionism (Bruner, 1966); in a school in educational psychology which is along with the constructivist school (Kelly, 1955; Piaget, 1972); and in humanistic thoughts (Erikson, 1968; Maslow, 1970; Rogers, 1982) that focused on social interaction (Preacher, et al. 2007; Lantolf, 2005). The main premise of Social Interactionism that is reflected in the works of Vygotsky (1978, 1981) and Feuerstein (1991) is that learning occurs in a social context through interaction with other people including parents, teachers, and pupils (Zafeiriadou, 2005). Zarate, et al. (2004) defined the notion of cultural mediation in language teaching as follows:

The teacher's role as mediator and facilitator is fundamental. Taking account of the cultural dimension of the language, the language teacher needs to be able to raise students' awareness of the cultural patterns and prepare the students to embrace them in intercultural encounters. Hospitality is just one example among others of subjects that vary widely within Europe and which are, consequently, totally relevant to the language teaching context (P. 219).

Lande (2000) suggests that using a facilitative approach is a good tool for mediators for many of the reasons. Facilitation emphasizes the principals' abilities by mediators to do their own critical evaluation and creative problem solving. He explains that mediation is not useful for everyone and it is not a cure-all, but mediation truly offers a distinctive opportunity for parties to exercise responsibility over their own disputes and their own lives. Other dispute resolution processes generally do not promote this important social value.

The findings of Cheng (2011) indicated that mostly EFL instructors in China have no knowledge of mediation and therefore are unable to mediate learners' learning. Cheng and Kia (2011) tried to elucidate EFL teachers' mediation functions that learners reach their potentials in the subsequent four dimensions: teachers as mediators interact with students, teachers as mediators facilitate learner-learner interactions, teachers as mediators develop interactive classroom tasks or activities, and teachers as mediators generate new classroom tasks or activities. They concluded that the teacher's role of mediator is theoretically acceptable and practically feasible, but there is a long way to the interactive society settings. To obtain this goal, EFL teachers should re-orient their instructional roles to adapt to the

development process and new challenges. Teachers as mediators can play a significant role in learning through mediation. Cheng (2011) also concerned China secondary school teachers' us of mediation to investigate why there are so few meditative-oriented classrooms and what can be done to make language classrooms more meditative-oriented. In his research, he concluded that most of the teacher which participate in the survey argued that they played the roles of situational and cultural mediators rather than the universal mediators and showed that the teachers' constraints and impedance involving the lack of knowledge of mediation that prevented them from implementing it effectively. His research also confirmed that most secondary school EFL teachers fail to mediate their learners' learning in China's present educational setting. Teachers faced with a complex task in the application of teacher mediation principles in the classroom.

However, the mediations' principles are culture-bound as every teacher, student, and context is unique; therefore, application of this theory needs special skill on the part of teachers. It means that the notion of mediation can get different meanings in different contexts. Few researches carry on the significance of Feuerstein mediation theory and gender difference. The Feuerstein mediation theory consists of twelve principles. The purpose of this study is to investigate the significance of order in Feuerstein mediation theory, gender difference in Iranian ELT context, and throw light on different aspects of this theory between teachers of Iranian language contexts.

The first research question is general and covers a broad domain and the second one is more specific. They are as follows:

Q$_1$: What is the order in teacher mediation principles based on Iranian EFL teacher beliefs?

Q$_2$: Is there any gender difference between Iranian teachers in the order Feuerstein mediation principles?

III. METHOD

A. Participants

This study investigated the significance of order in mediation theory and gender difference for teachers in Iranian EFL context. The researchers chose 86 teachers of Kashan high schools randomly. The participants' age were ranged between 23-40 years old. Fifty-six of them were male and 30 were female. They were at different levels of education; 37 teachers in B.A., 49 teachers in M.A. level and different records of experiences that ranged from three to more than 10 years. They were taking part in the in-service programs in which teachers learned how to teach more effectively so they were familiar with modern methods of language teaching. It is possible that these programs cause some confusion for teachers to choose the best method in their teaching contexts.

B. Instrumentations

The first instrument for collecting data in this mixed method research was Teacher Mediation Questionnaire (TMQ) (Warren 1995) that is based on Feuerstein mediation theory. This questionnaire consists of two parts; theoretical and practical that in the present study, just theoretical one that is related to the teachers' beliefs or attitudes about language teaching was used. Every question of this questionnaire is an underpinning to a special feature of mediation theory. To provide truly educational learning tasks, teachers or adults can mediate in a number of different ways. Feuerstein identifies twelve features of mediation that is described in the Warren questionnaire. This questionnaire was piloted with 40 teachers of the similar participants at different schools. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was 0.81 (r = 0.81). To avoid misunderstanding, the researchers translated it into the fluent Persian and administered it among participants.

To enhance the findings of the questionnaire and shed light on the latent aspects of educational frameworks that formed in teachers' minds based on their teaching experiences and teacher education programs, the researchers conducted interviews with ten teachers. In these semi-structured interviews, teachers explained about the significance of mediation principles and practicality of them in their actual teaching environments.

C. Procedures

Teachers had some theories and methods about teaching language in their minds and based on them, they established lesson plans and curriculums to teach more effectively and organized methods that fit the learners and the context. To actualize their educational frameworks, determining their teaching priorities from their point of views was a fundamental step. To investigate the order in Feuerstein mediation theory's principles and gender difference in Iranian EFL context, at first, 86 teachers of Kashan high schools were chosen. They all accepted to participate in this study; therefore, their participation was voluntarily. They were informed about the study from the beginning, and that they could withdraw their contributions at any time without penalty. All participants were provided with written information about the nature and purpose of the research project. All of them were insured that the identity of them to the survey would be held in strict confidence. As the teachers' first language was Persian, to avoid misunderstanding, Warren's questionnaire translated into the fluent Persian. Before administration of the questionnaire, the researchers explained the procedure to the participants; therefore, they were informed of the instruction and purpose of the study. Warren teacher mediation questionnaire (1995) was administered with no time pressure; however, they had 20 minutes to answer this questionnaire. Next, semi-structured interview was conducted with ten teachers to enhance the quality of the questionnaire's findings. Finally, participants' answers to the questionnaire were collected and entered into a data file

and analyzed statistically using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 18. Some collected data were qualitative. The procedure for analyzing qualitative data was as follows: Each data set was read several times to gain some sense of the main ideas being expressed. Then the data were coded and analyzed manually and subjectively.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

To determine the significance of mediation principles in EFL Iranian context, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed through SPSS software. To answer the first research question, which states, "What is the order of teacher mediation principles based on Iranian EFL teacher beliefs?", as the results has shown in table 1, question four has the highest mean *n= 86, m = 4.6, SD = .968* and question two has the lowest mean *n = 86, m = 3.45, SD = .702*.

TABLE I.
MEAN AND STANDARD DEVIATION OF EACH QUESTION IN DESCENDING MEAN RANK ORDER

Questions	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q4	86	4.6	.968
Q9	86	4.4	1.019
Q5	86	3.84	.925
Q7	86	3.76	.885
Q6	86	3.76	.764
Q12	86	3.75	1.129
Q10	86	3.75	1.055
Q1	86	3.63	.799
Q3	86	3.63	.894
Q8	86	3.63	.916
Q11	86	3.49	1.046
Q2	86	3.45	.702

Note. This table shows the mean and standard deviation of all questions in descending rank order.

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the results of the questionnaire for the male and female participants and there is a significant difference in scores for males (M= 46.21, SD= 9.069) and females M= 41.53, SD= 8.287; t(84)= 2.349, P= 0.21 (2-tailed). The magnitude of differences in the means (mean differences= 4.681, 95% CI: .719 to 8.643) was very small (eta squared: .006). The eta squared of .006 indicates that the differences have a moderate effect. As the results of Table 2 reveals, there is a meaningful difference in the significance of mediations' principles between male and female teachers in Iranian EFL contexts.

TABLE 2.
RESULTS OF INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T-TEST OF TMQ FOR MALE AND FEMALE TEACHERS

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Scores	Equal variances assumed	.057	.812	2.349	84	.021	4.681	1.993	.719	8.643

Note: <0.05 is significant.

Feuerstein's mediation theory has twelve key features that are as follow respectively: "*Significance*", "*purpose beyond the here and now*", "*shared intention*", "*a sense of competence*", and "*control of own behaviors*", "*goal-setting*", "*challenge*", "*awareness of change*", "*a belief in positive outcomes*", "*sharing*", "*individuality*", and "*a sense of belonging*". Feuerstein believes that the first three principles are central to language learning and the others are peripheral and function in some special contexts (Williams and Burden, 1987). He classifies these principles into three categories:

The first three principles are the central principles of this theory and Feuerstein emphasizes that the main factor of "*significance*" of one task is the transmission of culture from one generation to the next; the key feature of this theory emphasizes that any learning task must have value or personal meaning to the learners. "*Purpose beyond here and now*" that Feuerstein called it "transcendence" refers to the reason of learning. Feuerstein believes that every task should learn something of value that is more general rather than the actual point of the task. Why learners should learn a special point in their classrooms? When the reason of learning is clear, students learn more effectively. Third feature is "*intentionality*" or "**reciprocity**". In the learning tasks, teachers should explain precisely what they want learners to do by providing a clear set of instructions. This procedure in the writings of Feuerstein is referred to as 'state of vigilance'.

The next category is factors concerned with taking control of learning. These factors are peripheral to language learning. They are useful just in some situations and particular cultures. "*A sense of competence*" is culture-bound; therefore, self-confidence has diverse definition in various cultures. Teachers should stimulate or encourage senses of positive self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence, and a feeling of "I can" in learners. Schwarzer and Hallum (2008)

claimed that self-efficacy has great influence on preparing action because self-related cognitions are major elements in the motivation process. Self-efficacy levels can enhance or impede motivation and learners with high self-efficacy choose to perform tasks that are more challenging. Closely related to "*a sense of competence*" and "*control of behavior*" is the notion of "*goal setting*". Individuals need to learn how to set their own goals in learning situations and more importantly, learn how to plan to achieve them.

The last category of Feuerstein mediation theory is factors concerned with fostering social development. "*Sharing*" and "*individuality*" are the main features of this category. Sharing or working cooperatively is a pivotal part of every social situation. Co-working is one of the main principles of mediation theory and the notion of ZPD. The help of other people happens in a social setting and group working. To Feuerstein and mediation theory, the notion of individuality has the same importance as sharing and co-working.

To Feuerstein, the first three principles are the foundation of mediation theory, but as the results of Table 1 show, Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes are not along with it. The results show that principles four, nine, and five are the most important principles of mediation theory from the Iranian EFL teachers' point of view. Question number four that has the highest mean $m = 4.06, SD = .968$ refers to "*a sense of competence*". Iranian EFL teachers believe that "*a sense of competence*" is the most important feature for effective language teaching. In their point of view, teachers' primary function is encouraging positive self-image, self-esteem, and self-confidence among learners; however, to Feuerstein, a feeling of competence is necessary but not sufficient for learning to be effective.

Iranian EFL teachers believe that students learn best when they have a clear purpose for learning and when they learn skills or knowledge that can be quickly applied in daily life. In their point of view, a sustainable solution to such impedance is working on contextualized instruction that means assist learners to see real-world applications or purposes for their learning. "Just under such circumstances, teachers would be able to create and enhance "*a sense of competence*" in their learners' minds", teachers claimed in interviews.

In contrast to Feuerstein beliefs, Iranian EFL teachers believe that the second important principle of mediation is "*a belief in positive outcomes*", $m = 4.04, SD = 1.019$. They supposed that after positive image and self-confidence, learners need to learn how to solve a problem; deciding that a solution is impossible will automatically prevent learners from seeking out an appropriate way and trying alternative ways to solve a problem. Feuerstein also mentions the importance of this principle, but he believes that the first three principles are more important than a belief in positive outcomes.

The next important principle is "*control of own behaviors*", $m = 3.84, SD = .925$. Iranian EFL teachers believe that after self-confidence and belief in positive outcomes the most important principle is control of behavior. Learners should learn how to solve a problem, gather information, process the information, and express the results logically. Even within the same context, the significance of sociocultural principles varies; the results of the present study indicated that male teachers carry different attitudes towards language teaching. Variability of these principles or any other fixed prescriptions for every learning context is highly intense that teachers recommended overlooking their order, significance, and priority in their classrooms.

In his theory of the development of the human mind, Vygotsky focused on natural, individual, and social forces and that their cooperation leads to consciousness. In its theoretical foundation, sociocultural theory works effectively to promote learners' knowledge with the help of others that are tools, teachers, or even parents. Quite contrary, in its practical framework, teachers and instructors face with challenges that are not as motivating as mentioned in the theoretical foundation. As the results of both quantitative and qualitative analyses of this study demonstrate, Feuerstein mediation principles are highly culture-bound and vary from context to context considering both their significance and their intensity.

Considering cultural points as unproblematic curricular content reflects a rather traditional and unsophisticated perspective. In the modern century of language teaching, culture is considered as a socially constructed practice, in which language and culture are mutually constitutive and transmission of knowledge and new materials into learners' mind inextricably tie with cultural creation. As culture is a social practice, its function in sociocultural theory has great influence on language promotion and possibly in some context is determined as an obstacle to that. Perhaps adapting these perspectives and perceptions on language teaching and cultural points would remedy some of the problems that are apparent in current approaches to teaching language in different cultures. Despite the advances made about the notion of intercultural and multicultural language, language still continues to be taught as a fixed system of formal structures and universal speech functions that is called best method, a neutral medium for the transmission of cultural knowledge. Culture is considered only as a stimulating tool and content verification and is cooperated to the extent that it reinforces. In other words, culture is a process that is imbued with issues of power and control that are exclusively culture-bound.

Teachers in the interviews claimed that language teacher education programs have failed to prepare teachers for the realities of the classroom. Theoretically professional teachers may face with crucial problems in real classrooms as they are not fully prepared for the difficulty of language teaching in real context. The multitude of differences in students, curricula, policies, materials, programs, and the socio-cultural environments that teachers are likely to face in their careers calls into question any set of best teaching tasks and activities appropriate for all contexts or any attempts to transfer the knowledge and practice from teacher education programs directly to language teaching (Crandall, 2000).

Lantolf and his colleagues (2000) contended that a comprehensive theory of SLA should incorporate principles derived from sociocultural theory. They predict that learning occurs as a result of mentorship and sociocultural activity; however, they refer to culture as a distinguishing factor in material development, content, and teaching method. Learning will happen in interaction between learner and the culture; therefore, learning is situation and culture bound, and the resulting symbols, for instance, knowledge of the L2 mediated conscious thought relating to those situations and cultural phenomena. The method of teaching metalinguistic knowledge will vary in important ways depending on the context of learning and learners' knowledge of various levels of linguistic representation such as discursive, sociolinguistic, phonological, lexical, and strategic knowledge. It will differ widely from one learning context to another because each learning context is defined by a unique set of situations, characteristics and a local culture.

Brain researchers indicated that learners might learn best when they have a purpose for their learning and when the skills or knowledge can be quickly applied directly in their daily life. Adult literacy teachers work to contextualize instruction – assisting learners to see real-world applications or purposes for their learning. There are many different ways to approach contextualized instruction. Instructors can think of contextualization as simply the examples they use to illustrate concepts in class, the topic used for a single lesson, or the theme around which all instruction will revolve for several weeks. Students should be involved in the planning process – their needs and interests pave the way to the appropriate contexts for teaching and learning.

Culture is an important aspect that influences all language learning factors just because of its dynamic nature; therefore, prescribing an ideal or best solution for language teaching/learning would be somehow impossible. Motivation, relationships, anxiety, confidence, hospitality, and social talent are some factors that are highly convertible under the influence of cultural changes. Here, the role of professional teachers highlighted as the only solution for such perplexing situation is teacher experience in that particular context. Under the acceptance of a fixed method chosen by stakeholders and policy makers, teachers and instructors pass their responsibilities- all weaknesses and drawbacks in language classrooms attributed to inappropriate teaching methods. On the contrary, when teachers have a sense of belonging and feel their responsibility for every event in their classrooms, the theoretical foundation of instructions and pedagogical tasks alter in a large extent. In teacher education programs, teachers should be fully informed of various teaching methods and different situations, shortcomings, and impedances that might be faced in their classroom; meanwhile, the appropriate decision for every teaching context is in the hands of teachers.

V. Conclusions

This study investigated the significance of mediation theory and gender differences in the EFL contexts and shed light on latent aspects of language teaching with a fixed method or process that designated as ideal or best method. The findings demonstrated that cultural characteristics are the paramount factor in any language teaching context and that prescribing an ideal and fix method is the biggest mistake in teaching process.

Mediation is not useful for everyone and it is not a cure-all, but mediation truly offers a distinctive opportunity for parties to exercise responsibility over their own disputes and their own lives. The teacher's role of mediator is theoretically acceptable and practically feasible, but there is a long way to the interactive society settings. To obtain this goal, EFL teachers should re-orient their instructional roles to adapt to the development process and new challenges.

In sum, the current study investigated the significance of order in Feuerstein mediation theory and gender difference in Iranian EFL context. The findings have shown that the order of principles of mediation theory in Iranian EFL context is different from the Feuerstein principles order. The findings of this study are also in accordance with other studies such as Chang (2004). He believes that the order of mediation principles varies in different contexts. There are also some differences between the order of mediation theory between Iranian male and female EFL teachers. Iranian teachers should consider these findings in their teaching process for more effective teaching. These findings represent that Iranian male teachers tend to encourage self-confidence in their students, but Iranian female teachers focus on social factors and tend to encourage group-working tasks in their classrooms. Institutes managements and high school principals can benefit these findings in choosing teachers regarding their learners. This research was administered at the high school level in Kashan city; therefore, its findings are not generalizable to other levels and contexts. The age of teachers and their records of experiences were not considered in the present study. Further researches can focus on such variable and investigate the effect of them on mediation order and teacher beliefs.

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