

Delving into English for Medical Purpose Teachers and Medical Students' Perceptions of Fairness in the Classroom: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: A feature of English for Medical Purpose (EMP) teachers which is directly related to their teaching quality and its outcomes is their fairness in educational settings. This study aimed at exploring EMP teachers' and Medical students' perceptions of classroom fairness.

Methods: This qualitative study included EMP teachers and medical students. The participants were divided into two groups. The first group included 15 (10 males and 5 females) EMP teachers who were selected through snowball sampling. The second group consisted of 30 (15 males and 15 females) medical students who were selected through available sampling from different virtual groups in WhatsApp or Telegram. To collect the data, a Demographic Information Scale, an Open-ended Teacher Questionnaire, an Open-ended Learner Questionnaire, and a semi-structured interview were utilized. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software.

Results: The teacher's equal help, care, emotion, and attention to the students and obliging all students to observe the rules of the classroom should be observed to have fairness in the classroom context. Furthermore, shortage of time and facilities; financial problems; low language proficiency of students; students' unwillingness, and demotivation to learn are important challenges that EMP teachers encounter in the classroom.

Conclusion: In conclusion, EMP teachers' and medical students' perceptions of classroom fairness share some themes which mainly turn around students and their rights. The results have some implications for EMP teachers, learners, teacher educators, curriculum planners, and researchers.

Keywords: Classroom Fairness, Distributive Classroom Fairness, Interactive Classroom Fairness, Procedural Classroom Fairness

Introduction

Any educational system, including English for specific purposes (ESP) is characterized by a huge load on teachers' shoulder for they constitute an important component of learners' success.¹ Thus, English for Medical Purpose (EMP) teachers' diverse behavior dimensions are paramount in classroom.² A feature of EMP teachers which is directly related to their teaching quality and outcomes is their fairness in educational settings.³ As defined by Chory-Assad,⁴ classroom fairness refers to learners' fairness perceptions of the outcomes, processes, and relations that exist in instructional environments, which, classroom fairness contains three elements including distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness, each being run via diverse fairness principles.⁵

As uncovered by the previous research, students are profoundly willing to be taught by fair teachers.⁶ Students welcome fair teachers in classrooms³ since they regard teacher fairness as a big strong point and a mark of teaching quality and success.⁶ Given that teachers' unfairness in classroom may reversely affect students' feelings, personal and social behavior, and more importantly academic achievement,⁷ teachers should not ignore this professional aspect of their work. Clearly, teachers' perceptions of their fairness in managing classroom and the level of their attention to classroom fairness is of high importance in implementing fairness in the classroom and keeping it. This issue has been tackled in few studies among which Ehrhardt et al.,⁸ Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al.,⁹ and Sonnleitner and

Kovacs¹⁰ can be mentioned. However, since teachers and students both have a role or portion in implementation of classroom fairness, both groups' perceptions of classroom fairness are worth exploration. But reviewing the existing literature shows that just few studies conducted on teacher fairness have addressed the issue from students' viewpoints.¹¹⁻¹⁴

This is convincing enough to show that teachers' and students' perceptions of classroom fairness are among the gaps in the existing literature. This is while since teachers and students are the two main players in the scene of the implementation of classroom fairness, exploration of their perceptions can be of good help in adding to the knowledge base and making implementation of classroom fairness more easy in educational settings.¹⁵ Another research gap identified in the literature by the researcher is that the prevalent research approach followed by previous researchers in this regard is the quantitative one. Therefore, more exploratory studies are needed to be conducted in the field. This study seeks to fill this gap by taking a mixed-methods approach using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), taking advantage of both qualitative and quantitative tools and analysis methods. In so doing, the following research questions were proposed:

1. What are EMP teachers' perceptions of classroom fairness?
2. What are medical students' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness?
3. What are the challenges and problems experienced by EMP teachers in implementing classroom fairness?

Materials and Methods

Research Design

In this study, the qualitative data were collected and analyzed through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires to explore the participants' perceptions of classroom fairness. In so doing, a basic interpretive design was used. Basic interpretive design is the best choice for this study since this approach is the best one for exploration of people's perceptions.¹⁶ In the basic interpretive design, the researcher seeks to understand the meaning constructed for a phenomenon or situation by people involved in it.

Participants

The population of the study included EMP teachers

and Medical students at universities medical sciences in north-west of Iran. The participants divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 15 (10 males and 5 females) EMP teachers with more than 5 years of teaching experience who selected through snowball sampling. The second group of the participants consisted of 30 (15 males and 15 females) medical students who were selected through available sampling from different virtual groups in WhatsApp or Telegram. To observe ethical issues, the consent of the participants was taken for participation in the study. Moreover, they were ensured about anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information.

Instruments

The following instruments were used for data collection in the present study:

Demographic Information Scale

A demographic information scale was developed and used to collect the information about the participants. The information covered in scale included the participants' age, teaching experience, gender, major, academic level, province, and the English proficiency level.

Open-ended Teacher Questionnaire

A researcher-made open-ended teacher questionnaire was developed by the researcher to uncover the teachers' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as the challenges and problems experienced by them in implementing classroom fairness. The reason for the use of this tool is to triangulate the data collected through semi-structured interview, by permitting the participants to provide a broad range of possible responses. It consisted of some open-ended questions to which the participants were to answer in the written format and submit it to the researcher through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed through expert judgment by asking five university professors expert at teacher education domain to rate the scale in terms of relevance in a range from (1) not relevant, (2) item requires some modification, (3) relevant but require some minor modification, to (4) totally relevant; and in terms of clarity in a range from (1) unclear, (2) item require some modification, (3) clear but require minor modification, to (4) totally clear.

Open-ended Learner Questionnaire

A researcher-made open-ended learner questionnaire was developed by the researcher to extract learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness. The reason for the use of this tool was to triangulate the data collected through semi-structured interview, by permitting the participants to provide a broad range of possible responses. It consisted of some open-ended questions to which the participants were to answer in the written format and submit it to the researcher through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed through expert judgment by asking five university professors expert at teacher education domain to rate the scale in terms of relevance in a range from (1) not relevant, (2) item requires some modification, (3) relevant but require some minor modification, to (4) totally relevant; and in terms of clarity in a range from (1) unclear, (2) item require some modification, (3) clear but require minor modification, to (4) totally clear.

Semi-structured Interviews

This study also benefited from two semi-structured interviews, one to uncover EMP teachers' perceptions of classroom fairness as well as the challenges and problems experienced by them in implementing classroom fairness; and the other one to extract medical students' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness. Each interview consisted of five open-ended questions which were designed by the researcher consulting the existing literature and his supervisor and advisor. The language of the interviews was English and there was no time limit for each interview session. Moreover, each interview was taken in the one-on-one format through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram applications for the convenience of the interviewees. All the interviews were taken by the researcher and transcribed to create verbatim written data for analysis. To establish the dependability and credibility of the interview data, low-inference descriptors and member checks were used.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

To collect the data, after sampling procedures, the demographic information scale was distributed among the participants to be filled. Then, a semi-structured

interview was conducted by the researcher with the teachers to identify their perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as the challenges and problems experienced by them in implementing classroom fairness. Next, another semi-structured interview was conducted with the learners to uncover their perceptions of teacher classroom fairness as well as their perceptions of the main problems of their English teachers' implementation of classroom fairness.

Next, the researcher-made open-ended questionnaires were converted into the Google Form by the researcher to recognize the participants' perceptions. The links of the questionnaires were distributed among the participants through social networks including WhatsApp and Telegram. Data analysis was conducted through MAXQDA software. That is, the data gathered through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software to identify the recurring patterns, themes, categories and sub-categories among the obtained data.

Results

Concerning the first research question, thematic analysis of the data led to the emergence of the following themes concerning Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness. Along with each theme, two quotations have been presented to observe credibility of the results:

1. Classroom Fairness as a Necessity

One of the necessary elements of teaching is classroom fairness. Without classroom fairness, classroom is nothing but a boring and demotivating space wherein students stay just like a machine. (Participant 8)

To me, no classroom can be imagined in the absence of fairness. How we can expect good outcomes from our teaching and efforts without being fair? It is an inevitable dimension of teaching. (Participant 2)

2. Providing Equal Opportunities for all Students

We should be careful to provide all students with the same opportunities to learn in the classroom. Depriving some students for any reason from learning opportunities is not accepted at all. (Participant 5)

Fairness is concerned with generating a classroom which is fair and just for all students regardless of

their economic, social and cultural background. Students should be treated equally in materials and methods of teaching. No student should lag behind others. (Participant 9)

3. Teacher's Equal Help, Care, Emotion and Attention

To be fair in the classroom, teachers should assist all students equally. Teacher's assistance should be distributed equally among all students. Teachers should show affection to all students not just some ones. (Participant 4)

A fair teacher scaffolds all students without any discrimination. He or she even looks at all students in the classroom. Fairness should be observed even in the amount of teacher's attention and care to students. (Participants 1)

4. Giving Equal Duties to all Students

Classroom fairness obliges teachers to give a fixed assignment to all students in the class. If for example I give a hard assignment to a strong student and a light one to a weak student, I have belittled him and this is unfairness. (Participant 3)

Fair teaching should be implemented in all aspects. Teachers should relegate the same duty in terms of the level and quantity to all members of class. (Participant 10)

5. Giving the Same Punishment and Reward to all Students

Fairness refers to indiscriminate in punishing or rewarding students. If a teacher announces that she wants to give negative marks to noisy students, all noisy students should get negative remark. (Participant 15)

Classroom fairness means objectivity in the kind of punishment or rewards that are determined by teachers. It is not humanistic to just punish or give reward to some students intentionally. Behavior of students should be the main yardstick in punishing or giving rewards. (Participant 12)

6. Teacher's Having Friendly Relationships with all Students

Teachers should be friendly with all students. Intimate relations should not be the right of some pet students. Teacher should be the friend of all students. (Participant 5)

Teacher should behave so that all students regard him/her as their friend. This fair behavior makes classroom environment conducive for learning. Teacher friendly communication should be true about all students. (Participant 3)

7. Using the Same Assessment/Evaluation Procedure for all Students

In a fair class, all students are evaluated using the same evaluation procedure. All students should be justified about the method of assessment that is going to be used by the teacher. (Participant 12)

The criteria used by the teacher in evaluation of students' knowledge should be the same for all the students. Otherwise, the evaluation system is unjust and unfair. (Participant 10)

8. Taking the Voice of all Students into Account in Decision Makings

Fair teachers decide in different matters based on the opinion of all the students. Time of exam, the amount of materials which should be studied for the exam, the topic of class discussion, and all things should be based on all the students' ideas. (Participant 14)

All the students should be fairly involved in classroom decision makings. That we just ask for the comments of some students is not compatible with class fairness. (Participant 8)

On the second research question, the following themes were identified regarding Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness:

1. Obliging all Students to Observe Rules of Classroom

Disciplines of class must be obeyed by all the students. I can see that our teacher is just rigid about few students. He does not intentionally notify some students. (Participant 3)

Rules of classroom should be for all the class. All the class should come to class before teacher. All the class should respect each other. If teacher ignore impoliteness of some students, she or he is unjust. (Participant 9)

2. Having Good Expectations from all Students

A fair teacher is one who predicts good scores for all the students. All the students should be expected to have a good performance in exams even lazy ones. (Participant 21)

Class fairness is violated when teachers just expect good students to get high scores. All students should be seen as good students and worth getting good results. (Participant 1)

3. Showing Equal Respect to all Students

Being just in class means being respectful to all

students. A teacher who only respects smart students is not fair I think. All students are equally respectful according to fair instructors. (Participant 13)

The teacher should respect students even those who give wrong answers to questions or have low scores. It is unjust to just be respectful to clever students. (Participant 27)

4. Teacher's Objectivity in Grading

Fair teachers do not score students based on their personal ideas. They exclusively concentrate on exam sheets and what has been written in them. I had a teacher who always gave good scores to his son. (Participant 10)

When a teacher grades students based on other factors than the test, we can say that the classroom is not fair. Teacher fairness is proved with ignoring irrelevant factors in grading students. (Participant 2)

5. Teacher's Interacting with all Students

Teachers should call for all the students to have participation in class activities. It is the right of each student to have interaction in the classroom. A fair teacher interacts with all the students and does not remove some students from interaction for any reason. (Participant 25)

Most of the classes I have seen are not fair in the classroom interaction. In such classes, teacher just discusses with few students. Other students remain inactive and silent during class. These cannot be considered as fair classes. (Participant 18)

6. Teacher's Loving all the Students

If a teacher show passion toward all students equally, he is really just. I appreciate a just teacher who calls all students with their first name or family name. it is not just to call some students by first name and some others with family name. (Participant 14)

A fair classroom is a place where the teacher loves all the students equally. Students feel teacher's love very easily. They even know when the teacher loves someone more or less than others. (Participant 19)

To answer the third research question, the following themes were recognized in teachers' perceptions:

1. Shortage of Time

Time of class is so short that you cannot pay attention to all of the students. You can just check few students. You cannot deal with all of the students. (Participant 4)

Problem of time is really serious. In 90 minutes, how

can you show care to 35 students? Naturally, some students are ignored. (Participant 10)

2. Financial Problems

My salary is so low that it cannot even afford my life in the first ten days of one month. Monetary problems demotivate teachers because our wage is very low. When teachers are demotivated, fairness is not a big concern for them. (Participant 5)

The biggest problem of teaching job is low wage. It is really intolerable. Other clerks take high wages in comparison to us. Bank clerks' wages are unimaginable but that of us is very low. In such a situation, it is too hard to be fair, if not impossible. (Participant 9)

3. Shortage of Facilities

Physical resources of the institutes are limited. The authorities attribute this to lack of budget. Resources are very weak. Even we suffer from basic facilities in English classes such as internet and computer. This does not permit us to be fair. (Participant 2)

Our main concern is shortage of facilities. This makes us to teach using traditional teaching methods. Teachers don't have important facilities. A mind which is preoccupied with such necessary things forgets fairness and everything related to it. (Participant 7)

4. Low Language Proficiency of Students

One thing which is very dissatisfying in my classes is students' low language proficiency level. In fact, most of the students are below the average level. This affects the teacher's behavior profoundly. (Participant 13)

Students do not have a good language performance. Their scores are very lower than what we expect. To me, students' English knowledge is very weak. They cannot even speak in three sentences. This gives me a very bad sense. Students' scores are not matched with the amount of our effort. Their scores are low although we try hard in classes. Be fair with students is nothing more than a dream. (Participant 15)

5. Students' Unwillingness and Demotivation to Learn

Students don't show tendency to learn English. They complain that English is a hard lesson and they don't understand it. I feel students are not eager to learn English. They are always tired in English classes. (Participant 1)

Lack of interest in English learning is the main challenge of implementing classroom fairness. Students

don't want to learn English. Students' motivation to study English course is slight. They are unwilling to learn. (Participant 8)

6. Students' General Behavior

A negative point affecting fairness in the classroom is that students behave impolitely. Their talking manner, their way of asking questions, and their interactions with their classmates are impolite. This makes me tired. Politeness is increasingly vanished in classes. Each year, students become less polite than the previous year. Their behavior is sometimes intolerable. (Participant 6)

Impoliteness of students cannot be tolerated. They do not even call their teacher politely. Politeness is really missing in the classes. They even do not know the simple social principles. (Participant 11)

7. Parents' Behavior

Parents disturb us very much. They don't help

children in doing home assignments. Parents are always annoyed and they are not satisfied with teachers. They expect teachers to be accountable for their children's low scores. (Participant 12)

A challenge for teacher fairness in our job is that parents think that teachers don't teach well and this is why their children get low scores. This has really adverse effects on our work. When parents talk to me, the connotation of their saying is that I should teach differently. They expect me to teach as they like. (Participant 3)

8. Personal Problems

My family members are not satisfied with my work. As repeatedly said by them, they like travelling, shopping, etc., but these things are not compatible with teaching job. This irritating condition leaves no energy for practicing justice. (Participant 8)

Table 1. Frequency and Percentage of Extracted Themes

Teachers' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness, challenges & problems	Frequency	Percentage
classroom fairness as a necessity	12	80
providing equal opportunities for all students	14	93.33
teacher's equal help, care, emotion and attention	11	73.33
giving equal duties to all students	13	86.66
giving the same punishment and reward to all students	11	73.33
teacher's having friendly relationships with all students	11	73.33
using the same assessment/evaluation procedure for all students	12	80
taking the voice of all students into account	13	86.66
shortage of time	14	93.33
financial problems	14	93.33
shortage of facilities	12	80
low language proficiency of students	12	80
students' unwillingness and demotivation to learn	11	73.33
students' general behavior	13	86.66
parents' behavior	13	86.66
personal problems	11	73.33
personal orientations and feelings	11	73.33
Learners' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness	Frequency	Percentage
obliging all students to observe rules of classroom	25	83.33
having good expectations from all students	22	73.33
showing equal respect to all students	30	100
teacher's objectivity in grading	20	66.66
teacher's interacting with all students	24	80
teacher's loving all the students	26	86.66

My husband doesn't like my job. He always nags and complains about my work. This makes teaching more boring for me. I do not have a peaceful life out of work place. Problems related to children, problems in matrimonial life, etc. make me tired and inattentive to fairness. (Participant 1)

9. Personal Orientations and Feelings

As a teacher, unconsciously, you like some students more than before. In fact, some students are deeply admirable in terms of behavior, effort, appearance, and so on. Therefore, you pay more heed to them unintentionally. (Participant 13)

When a student does her homework well, receives excellent scores, behave in a socially good manner, not me but all teachers show more attention to her. It is inevitable. Every teacher likes this type of student. (Participant 9). Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage of the extracted themes.

Discussion

This research was launched to answer three research questions. In regard with the first research question 'what are EMP teachers' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness?', the following themes were identified: Classroom fairness as a necessity; providing equal opportunities for all students; teacher's equal help, care, emotion and attention; giving equal duties to all students; giving the same punishment and reward to all students; teacher's having friendly relationships with all students; using the same assessment/evaluation procedure for all students; and taking the voice of all students into account in decision makings.

Consistent with this study, Cropanzano et al.,¹⁷ Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al.,⁹ and Sabbagh and Resh¹⁸ considered classroom fairness as connected to several teacher-related and learner-related factors. Similarly, the perceptions concerned with equality and equity have been documented in the theoretical and empirical literature on fairness under the title of distributive fairness.¹⁹ Moreover, Rasooli et al. reported that the perceptions which revolve around students' voice and role have been supported in procedural fairness principles and interactional fairness encompasses the perceptions tied to care, attention, and emotion.⁷

To interpret the findings, as suggested by Horan and Myers,²⁰ the overall view of teachers towards classroom fairness is shaped by prominent domains such as the assessment/evaluation, teaching/instruction, interactions/

relations, and learning domains. According to this argument, it can be proposed that fairness is a notion which is not generated in the vacuum but it is formed within the boundary of students, teachers and educational setting. In fact, classroom fairness is not a linear concept that is simply achieved in a formulaic sense.²¹ But it is a dynamic issue which needs the interaction of several factors to be shaped.²² Previous scholarly investigations into teachers' perception of assessment fairness have recognized several key elements that influence their understanding of this concept. These factors include equity, equality, reflective thinking, the establishment of a constructive classroom environment, and the socio-economic circumstances prevalent within schools.^{23,24}

On the second research question 'what are medical students' perceptions of teacher classroom fairness?', the following themes were the outcomes of thematic analysis: Obliging all students to observe rules of classroom; having good expectations from all students; showing equal respect to all students; teacher's objectivity in grading; teacher's interacting with all students; and teacher's loving all the students. It is important to note that students' perception of fairness is shaped by the interaction of various elements of education, learning, and assessment.²⁵

The findings are in congruity with those of previous research illustrating distributive, interactional, and procedural fairness as the main aspects of classroom fairness.^{3,26,27,7,18} The points mentioned in interpreting the results related to the first research question also apply to the obtained results of this question. The bottom line is that the role of teacher and students in materializing classroom fairness cannot be easily distinguished from each other. The boundaries are vanished in shaping a kaleidoscope called classroom fairness. Gaining insight into the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the fairness of assessment approaches holds significance, as students who perceive assessments as unjust are more likely to exhibit unfavorable behaviors within the classroom setting.²⁸

According to third research question 'what are the challenges and problems experienced by EMP teachers in implementing classroom fairness?', the following themes were extracted from the data: Shortage of time; financial problems; shortage of facilities, low language proficiency of students; students' unwillingness and

demotivation to learn; students' general behavior; parents' behavior; personal problems; and personal orientations and feelings. In the same line with the present study, in the studies by Chory et al.,³ Derakhshan et al.,²⁹ and Rasooli et al.,¹⁷ shortage of time, behavior of students, and personal feelings were pinpointed as the main challenges experienced by teachers when practicing classroom fairness.

The teachers seemingly attributed much portion of unfairness to factors which are external. They translocated the responsibility of their own unfairness to educational system, students, parents, their own family, etc.³⁰ However, they also enumerated their own feelings as a challenge in implementing classroom fairness. The fact that teachers attributed classroom unfairness to several factors³¹ is also evidence supporting our previous claim that classroom fairness is a dynamic concept which takes form as an outcome of interplay between several macro- and micro-level factors. Moreover, considering the perspective of teacher education, these findings emphasize the importance and requirement for professional development initiatives aimed at in-service teachers. Such programs should prioritize the exploration and application of theoretical principles and practical aspects related to ensuring fairness in classroom assessments.

Limitations

Regarding the limitations of this research, it should be noted that only Iranian EMP teachers were included, while other subject matter teachers, test takers, and even the perspectives and attitudes of their parents towards classroom assessment fairness were excluded. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers investigate the viewpoints of a wider range of stakeholders, such as teacher trainers, educationalists, educational policy makers, learners, and the parents of learners, by involving a larger number of participants.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the research questions, it can be concluded that EMP teachers' and medical students' perceptions of classroom fairness reflect principles of procedural, distributive, and interaction fairness. This means that student-related factors are the common facet of EMP teachers' and learners' perceptions of classroom fairness. Moreover, it can be concluded that a collection of factors connected to educational settings, students, parents and teachers themselves block EMP

teachers in practicing classroom fairness. This implies that even when teachers are willing to implement classroom fairness, several factors which are apparently beyond their control, make implementation of classroom fairness difficult for them.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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