

The Relationship between Academic Optimism and Reflective Teaching: A Triangulated Study

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Abstract

The present study set out to investigate any significant relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism. The instruments of the study included the reflective teaching questionnaire devised by Akbari, Behzadpour and Dadvand (2010) and academic optimism scale designed by Beard, Hoy and Hoy (2010). Initially, the researcher piloted the questionnaires on 30 non-participants and calculated their reliability. Then, the two instruments were administered to 200 Iranian female and male EFL teachers within the age range of 28 to 48 with different levels of teaching experience. Prior to the administration of the instruments, the researcher briefed the participants on the aims of the study and data collection purposes. Out of the initial 200 participants only 184 returned the two questionnaires. Therefore, the study could use data only from 184 participants. At the end of the study, the researcher also interviewed 10 participants who agreed to take part in the interview sessions voluntarily in an effort to triangulate the findings of the study. The results of the parametric person correlation coefficient indicated that there was a significant and positive correlation between reflective teaching and academic optimism. The results of the interviews corroborated the existence of a positive relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism. The findings of the present study provide EFL teacher educators and teachers with awareness concerning the relationship between the two constructs.

Keywords: Academic Optimism, Reflection, Reflective Teaching, Triangulation

1. Introduction

It goes without saying that teacher is considered as the essential component in all educational systems, playing a pivotal role in the success or failure of each society. Therefore, conducting research on teachers is a must and of great importance for having a successful society (Kulshrestha, & Singhal, 2017). As discussed by Wright, Hom, and Sanders (1997), teacher's efficacy can contribute to the efficacy of education more than any other single factor. In the same vein, George and Visvam (2013) assert that teachers essentially guide and educate learners. This has motivated many researchers to examine the factors that influence teachers and hence the teaching process. Generally speaking, teachers and particularly L2 teachers can perform more effectively through drawing on the results of studies recently carried out in order to keep abreast with the latest developments in their relevant field (Faghihi, & Anani Sarab, 2016). Such a concern is one of the main considerations of the post method approach to teaching, which is in keeping with a flexible role for teachers (Borg, 2009). Adopting a flexible approach to instruction and its impact on teaching outcomes has been found to be useful by some studies (e.g., Farrell, 2004; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). This flexibility entails that teachers think deeply of their teaching, resulting in making the relevant changes to their teaching practice accordingly (Fatemipour, 2012). In fact, reflective action has to do with the dynamic, on-going and deep inclusion of any belief or any form of expertise and knowledge by making use of the grounds that strengthen it (Dewey, 1933 as cited in Jay & Johnson, 2002). It can be assumed that reflective teaching is related to some other constructs in the area of L2 teaching as well (e.g. academic optimism).

Academic optimism which is viewed as a psychological construct is gained as an outcome of the quantitative research whose aim is to identify those teachers' features that impact the academic achievement (McGuigan, 2005). Consequently, many recent studies have been conducted on this construct (e.g., Ekeh, & Njoku, 2014; Mishoe, 2012; Moghtadaie, & Hoveida, 2015; Vaidya, 2014; Van Hof, 2012). In the view of Hoy (2006), the concepts including collective teacher efficacy, reflective teaching, academic emphasis, and mutual trust are linked with academic achievement and they are considered as the sub-components of academic optimism. For instance, Beard, Woolfolk-Hoy and Hoy (2010) looked at academic optimism as a teachers' quality that influences the learners' academic achievement. They maintain that a university or school that has academic optimism serves as a place where the teachers and the faculty collectively believe that such optimism is so powerful through which all students can learn, achieving exceptional academic performance (Hoy, 2012). Consequently, it can be proposed that collective academic optimism along with individual teacher optimism contribute greatly to the students' academic achievement.

An effective teacher is able to transform a learner's life in various ways (Hoy & Spero, 2005). In the same vein, some recent studies (e.g., Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Genç, Kuluşaklı, & Aydın, 2016; Mazlum, Cheraghi, & Dasta, 2015; Sotoudehnama, & Fakhari, 2016; Ucar & Bozkaya, 2016) have been carried out on teachers' features to shed light on the contribution made by teachers to effective teaching. As is evident in the literature review, another variable which has been ignored in the context of L2 teaching and learning especially in Iran is academic optimism. This construct is characterized as teachers' belief systems. Many studies have been conducted, emphasizing the contribution of teachers' beliefs to the quality of education (Borg, 2009). That teachers' beliefs and how they think influence their practice have been covered adequately in ELT, with many researchers believing that it has an essential role in shaping one's professional identity (e.g., Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992). For instance, Donaghue (2003) is of the belief that teachers' educational beliefs impact how they find personal meaning with respect to their professional identity, channeling the teaching method they use. In such a context, academic optimism as a teacher belief category would influence the teachers' practice as well as students' achievement the way in which teachers come to reflect upon their practice and thinking system (Hoy & Spero, 2005).

This study focuses on a problem which, to the best knowledge of the researcher, no study has so far explored, namely, the relationship among the variables proposed in the current study i.e. reflective teaching and academic optimism. According to Odeh et al. (2012), today reflective practice is turning into a major paradigm in ESL/EFL teacher education programs throughout the world. As reflective practice allows L2 teachers to reflect on what, how and why they do their teaching, it enables them to go beyond routine actions, making adaptations to their teaching practice to match the learners' needs and thus helping learners to achieve educational goals more effectively and efficiently. However, a review of literature reveals that the whole process of how reflective teaching can meet these objectives is not that clear and many elements may prevent or facilitate reflective teaching and thus this construct needs to be investigated from different perspectives (Sze, 1999) and in relation to other constructs e.g., academic optimism. Given the inadequate number of studies carried out on academic optimism, more local studies whose aim is to find the correlates of academic optimism should be conducted. In the same vein, this study examined how reflective teaching is related to academic optimism. Thus, the following research question was the focus of the present study:

RQ: Is there any significant relationship between academic optimism and reflective teaching?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The sample of this study was made up of 200 Iranian female and male EFL teachers who were teaching EFL in various language institutes in Tehran. They ranged in age from 28 to 48. All participants were the teachers of elementary to advanced levels of proficiency, with different ranges of teaching experience. As the researcher could not select the participants of the study randomly, the subjects were selected using convenience sampling. Beside the main participants discussed above, 30 other teachers with similar age range as well as similar teaching experiences took part in the pilot study, which was aimed at examining the reliability of the instruments of the study prior to using them in the main study.

2.2 Instruments

This study made use of the following two instruments to collect the necessary data:

Reflective Teaching Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study to measure reflective teaching was a reflective teaching questionnaire developed by Akbari, Behzadpour and Dadvand (2010). This instrument (Appendix A) consisted of 42 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, with five options namely, never, rarely, sometimes, often, and always. These five options are based on the following six elements: Practical, Cognitive, learner, Metacognitive, Critical, and Moral aspects of teaching. The rationale for the selection of this questionnaire was because of its suitability to be used for measuring teachers' reflection in the context of Iran. It has a high reliability of 0.90 as a measuring instrument for teacher reflectivity (Akbari et al., 2010). To check the reliability of this questionnaire for the context for the present study, it was piloted on 30 teachers having similar characteristics to the main participants and Cronbach's Alpha was run on the scores. The reliability index turned out to be .87 which is considered satisfactory.

Academic Optimism Scale

In the current study, the Academic Optimism scale (Appendix B) devised by Beard, Hoy and Hoy, (2010) was used to measure academic optimism. This scale is made up of the following three parts:

- Academic Emphasis (4 items)
- Trust in Parents and Students (4 items)
- Efficacy (3 items)

This instrument measures the index of teacher sense of academic optimism through adding up the scores of these three components of academic optimism (Beard, Hoy & Hoy, 2010). The tool uses a five-point Likert scale ranging from never (1) to always (5). Thus, the overall number of items is 11 and the maximum score is 55. According to Beard, Hoy and Hoy (2010), the reliability of the instrument was found to be .78 using Cronbach's Alpha. To check the reliability of this instrument for the present study, it was piloted on 30 teachers having similar characteristics to the main participants and Cronbach's Alpha was run on the collected data. The reliability index turned out to be .85 which is considered acceptable.

Semi-structured Interview

In order to triangulate the results of the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to confirm the findings. To this aim, 10 participants of the study were interviewed with a set of three questions (Appendix C) in an effort to evaluate their opinions regarding the relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism. To analyze the interview contents, the researcher used content analysis.

2.3 Procedure

First, the researcher piloted the instruments on 30 non-participants, to calculate the reliability of the instruments using Cronbach's Alpha. Then, the researcher contacted the participants, who were asked to complete the questionnaires. The researcher described the nature of the study as well as the reason for the data collection to the participants. In the next stage, the participants were provided with copies of the two questionnaires measuring academic optimism, and reflective teaching.

The researcher asked the teachers to take their time and carefully reply to the items in each of the questionnaires. The participants were provided with expanded time to complete the questionnaires at their own will. This was done for the ethical reasons. The researcher also assured the participants that their data would be kept confidential and that the collected data were used just for research purposes. Out of the initial 200 participants only 184 returned the two questionnaires. Therefore, the study could use data only from 184 participants. At the end of the study, the researcher interviewed 10 participants who agreed to take part in the interview sessions voluntarily in an effort to triangulate the findings of the study.

3. Results

Initially, it was necessary to check the reliability of the questionnaires used in the current study. To do so, the two instruments were piloted on 30 teachers having similar characteristics to the main participants and Cronbach's Alpha was calculated. Table 1 displays the results of descriptive statistics and Cronbach's Alpha values for reflective teaching and academic optimism scales.

Table 1
Reliability and Descriptive Statistics of the Reflective Teaching and Academic Optimism Scales in the Pilot Study

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation | Alpha |
|---------------------------|----|---------|---------|--------|----------------|-------|
| Reflective teaching Pilot | 30 | 68.00 | 173.00 | 88.000 | 12.23 | 0.87 |
| Academic Optimism Pilot | 30 | 21.00 | 43.00 | 34.25 | 9.38 | 0.85 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 30 | | | | | |

As it is seen in Table 1, The alpha value for reflective teaching and academic optimism scales were .87 and .85 which are acceptable indices of reliability.

After making sure about the reliability of the scales, the two questionnaires were distributed among the participants and upon receiving them, the researcher scored the questionnaires and fed the data into SPSS version 21.

Table 2 displays the results of descriptive statistics for the reflective teaching and academic optimism scales.

Table 2
The Results of Descriptive Statistics on the Reflective Teaching and Academic Optimism Scales

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---------------------|-----|---------|---------|-------|----------------|
| Reflective Teaching | 184 | 69.50 | 178.00 | 93.48 | 14.12 |
| Academic Optimism | 184 | 23.32 | 49.00 | 29.20 | 8.42 |
| Valid N (listwise) | 184 | | | | |

To select the appropriate statistical procedure for addressing the research question, it was necessary to check the normal distribution of the data to choose between the parametric and non-parametric statistical tests. Table 3 demonstrates the results of the tests of normality for the collected data on reflective teaching and academic optimism.

Table 3
The Results of Tests of Normality on the Reflective Teaching and Academic Optimism Scales

| | N | Skewness | | | Kurtosis | | |
|---------------------|-----|-----------|------------|-------|-----------|------------|-------|
| | | Statistic | Std. Error | Ratio | Statistic | Std. Error | Ratio |
| Reflective Teaching | 184 | -.303 | .221 | -1.37 | .611 | .438 | 1.39 |
| Academic Optimism | 184 | -.086 | .221 | -0.39 | -.448 | .438 | -1.02 |

As presented in Table 3, the absolute values of the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors were between +/-1.96 and thus all the data sets met the assumption of normality. Therefore, the researcher uses the Pearson correlation coefficient as a parametric test to examine any significant relationship between academic optimism and reflective teaching. Table 4 displays the respective results.

Table 4

Pearson Correlation Coefficient Test Results for Reflective Teaching and Academic Optimism

| | | Reflective Teaching | Academic Optimism |
|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Reflective Teaching | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .387** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .002 |
| | N | 184 | 184 |
| Academic Optimism | Pearson Correlation | .387** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .002 | |
| | N | 184 | 184 |

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the results of Pearson correlation, it was found that reflective teaching and academic optimism were significantly and positively related ($r=0.378$, $p=0.002 < 0.01$).

To triangulate the findings of the study regarding the positive relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants. The findings of qualitative analysis were in line with the results of the quantitative analysis of the study revealing and confirming the positive relationship between the two variables under investigation. All the participants' responses to the first and second questions of the study eliciting their idea about the existence of possible positive relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism was affirmative. In responding to the third question, the participants believed that being a reflective teacher helps teachers to become more optimistic in their academic efforts and not only does it assist them in becoming more effective teachers but it does help them to affect students' academic achievements positively.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed at exploring any significant relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism. The results of the parametric person correlation coefficient indicated that there was a significant and positive correlation between reflective teaching and academic optimism. The results of the interviews carried out to corroborate the findings of the quantitative analysis of the study confirmed the existence of a positive relationship between reflective teaching and academic optimism.

The findings of the present study can be justified drawing on the components in the two construct investigate din this study. Hoy, Hoy and Kurz, (2008) define academic optimism as a teacher's positive belief that he or she can make a difference in the academic performance of students by emphasizing academics and learning, by trusting parents and students to cooperate in the process, and by believing in his or her own capacity to overcome difficulties and react to failure with resilience and perseverance. (p. 822)

Reflective teaching as defined by Moon (2005) refers to the thinking process through which the teacher thinks about his/her own teaching to evaluate what has been achieved and what has not been achieved by him/her as a practitioner and what has/has not been achieved by students and making informed decisions based on these evaluations. A look at these two definitions reveals that reflective teaching and academic optimism share underlying theoretical commonalities and the main reason behind the positive relationship between the two constructs could be similar theoretical underpinnings.

The findings of the present study can promise implications for teacher educators and language teachers as the findings provide awareness regarding the relationship between the two concepts. Teacher educators may draw on the results of this study to inform language teachers that the more reflective they are, the more academically optimistic they can be. Consequently, language teachers may decide to become more reflective on their practice and develop more optimism towards the academic context in which they are operating and they will be able to influence the achievement of students positively as both reflective teaching and academic optimism can affect educational outcomes in a favorable manner.

Similar to most studies, the present study was not free from limitations which can be addressed in future studies. Firstly, the researcher was not able to select the participants randomly which may put restrictions on the generalizability of the findings. In future studies, the researchers are encouraged to select the participants randomly to add to the external validity of the study and contribute to an enhancement in the generalizability of the results.

Moreover, in the current study teaching experience was not controlled and teachers were selected from both genders. In future studies, prospective researchers may intend to consider the experience and gender of the teachers as two intervening variables to look more closely at the relationship of the two constructs in the light of gender and teaching experience.

5. References

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