

## **Some Post-Graduate Students' Conceptions of the Role of Facilitator in the Language classroom.**

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### **Abstract:**

*This study investigates the conceptions of eight post-graduate students of the role of facilitator in the language classroom. Analyzing the participants' written responses to the question "what does the role of the facilitator in the language classroom mean to you?" yielded four conceptions of this role. These conceptions indicate students' understanding of some basic principles and practices of this role. However, some more fundamental principles of this role were not reported by all the participants. This may reflect their lack of understanding of these principles which affects their effective implementation of this role.*

*Generally, all the participants hold positive attitudes towards implementing this role for ELT in Libya.*

*Key Words: Facilitation, learning, facilitator*

## **1.Introduction.**

Adapting the approach of ‘Facilitation’ in classrooms implies providing appropriate conditions for facilitating students’ independent learning ( Rogers, 1969). His introduction of this notion was based on a humanistic perspective about the individual as implied in his definition of this concept as “the way we develop the learning man, the way in which we can learn to live as individuals in a process” (Rogers, 1969: 105).

Rogers (1969) rejected the concept of teaching because of its association with notions of instructing or imparting knowledge and skills from teacher to student. He criticized this approach for focusing on the intellect side ‘mind’ of the person without considering “feelings or personal relevance to the whole person”. He described the learning which might result from this process as taking place “from the neck up” (ibid: 4). He believed that this kind of learning is no longer valid as it would not lead to involve the whole person or to facilitate students’ independent learning (ibid).

There is a clear link between the notion of facilitation and student-centred learning. Voller (1997:101) pointed out the emphasis on associating the role of teacher as a facilitator with the notions of student-centredness such as ‘self-directed’, self-instructional’, ‘individualized’ and ‘autonomous learning’ in language learning contexts. Weimer (2002: 74) also considered teachers’ adoption of this notion in learner-centred classrooms as a necessity. By the same token, Clifton (2006:142) explained

that facilitation is often proposed as an alternative for the teacher-fronted classroom.

## **2. Facilitator :**

Changing the name of the act of teaching to facilitation is accompanied by a parallel change in the name of teacher to facilitator. Changing the approach of instruction into facilitation involves a change in the role of teacher from a knowledge-transmitter or an information-giver to a facilitator of students' learning (Rogers,1969). Roger listed some of the tasks and responsibilities of the facilitator. The effective implementation of these tasks and responsibilities for ELT requires language teachers to play different roles in order to realize the humanistic objectives for language learners (see Rogers,1969: 164-166). These tasks and responsibilities explain the demands and the complexity of the role of the facilitator. Therefore, EFL teachers have to understand these new tasks and responsibilities and have to be well-equipped and prepared for undertaking them effectively. Nevertheless, it is not expected that all teachers will perceive adopting and implementing this role as an easy matter. These tasks may be perceived by teachers from two different perspectives. Teachers who lack knowledge about these tasks and responsibilities or may lack the necessary skills for performing them may perceive them as demanding and challenging. Other teachers may perceive these tasks as a source of motivation and encouragement for adopting the role of facilitator. These teachers' perception of the new tasks and responsibilities in terms of maintaining their significant role in the learning process may lead them to think positively about it.

Teachers' personal qualities can be an influential factor in their perception of facilitation. According to Rogers (1951:22), this role would be accepted by those teachers who have the attitude of respecting the 'othernesses' as this would help them for developing the humanistic and democratic ideas of the learner-centred approach into classroom practices. Rogers (1969:106) added that the facilitator should be characterised by the '*realness in the facilitator of learning*', '*Prizing, acceptance, Trust*' (ibid: 109) and '*empathic understanding*' and considered these qualities as essential for the attitude of those who would be successful in facilitating learning. Tudor (1993:29) emphasized that the proper implementation of the new tasks of the facilitator in language classrooms would require their development of personal, educational and course planning skills and qualities. However, the facilitator's possession of these skills and qualities may not be enough for leading him/her to shift his/her instructional approach into facilitation. Knowledge and understanding of this notion and what its implementation in classrooms entails is also a significant factor.

### **3. Preparing the Facilitator:**

Teachers who have been taught and trained through traditional teaching approaches may not accept or adapt the role of facilitator easily or unquestionably. Rogers (1983:163) emphasized the importance of changing teacher education and training programmes in order to produce genuine facilitators who can sincerely promote students' independent learning. He believed that institutions which undertake the task of pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes could play a significant role in this process. He stressed that these institutions should be a place where "a human climate for learning is created, where prospective teachers

experience the excitement of discovery-in both in regard to themselves and the subject matter they will teach”. Roger offered a model of a ‘person-centred approach’ for teacher education and reported the benefits which had been gained by twenty-two student teachers from attending this programme in a Faculty of Education in the USA. These benefits included enhancing ‘self-esteem’, ‘in insight’, ‘confidence in career choice’, ‘understanding of children’, ‘personal maturity’, and ‘ability to handle difficult situations with responsibility and courage’ (ibid: 174).

Teachers’ proper implementation of the role of facilitator requires their full understanding of how to integrate the humanistic ideas of ‘*Learner-centred Psychological Principles*’ in their instructional approaches ( Lambert & McCombs ,1998:16). They claimed that these principles could be applied to “all learners from children, to teachers, to administrators to parents, and to community members involved in our educational system”. Marshall (1998:457) suggested teaching these principles in educational psychology of teacher education programmes and believed that “if those preparing to teach are expected to follow these learner-centred and constructivist principles, they must experience these principles as learners themselves”. This can lead to develop teachers’ understanding of the benefits of using these principles as guidelines for constructing and selecting their instructional approaches inside classrooms and for establishing their relationships with other school members. Yilmaz (2009: 29) believed that teacher education programmes should include “learner-centred instructional approaches such as cooperative learning, inquiry-based learning, students-led discussion, and concept mapping”.

However, Rogers (1969) anticipated challenge and resistance that would face the application of facilitation in classrooms. Rogers and

Freiberg (1994) believed that facilitators would find it difficult to fit themselves within traditional schools. Nevertheless, Rogers (1983) emphasized that no one would reject the democratic principles and practices of facilitation but they would argue that it “is very commendable as a dream, but it just wouldn’t and couldn’t work in practice” (p: 190). For example, Gadd’s (1998:233) criticism of implementing Rogers’ ideas in language teaching was related to the overemphasis of these ideas on exploring individuals’ inner thoughts and feelings. Arnold (1998:242) criticized this argument and called for more humanistic approaches for language teaching. He pointed out the influence of Rogers’ (1969: 1983) humanistic ideas on forcing many educational reforms such as in Spain and Finland to incorporate more humanistic ideas in ELT.

The implementation of facilitation in foreign language settings can create a better environment for ELT. This environment may provide students in these contexts with an atmosphere of caring and constructive support in order to overcome the difficulties they encounter. This atmosphere is also necessary for EFL teachers who struggle to please students, inspectors, parents, headteachers and educational authorities and who struggle to change their teaching approaches from instruction into facilitation. This can enhance teachers’ motivation which has been empirically proved to have a positive impact on students’ motivation to learn (Atkinson, 2000: 55).

## **2. Methodology:**

This phenomenographical investigation was conducted to explore EFL post-graduate students’ conceptions of the role of facilitator in the language classroom. Phenomenography is a qualitative and empirical

research approach which was first introduced by Marton (1981) and was developed for investigating conceptions of teaching and learning. Accordingly, it was found to be an appropriate approach for this study. Eight post-graduate Libyan EFL students who were enrolled for a module entitled 'Teacher Education and Training' during their MA programme participated in this study. They will be referred to as (S1, S2, S3.....S8) The data was collected through an open ended questionnaire including only one question (what does the role of facilitator in the language classroom mean to you?). They were asked to report about their experience of this role during their module as the conception of any phenomenon is always based on experiencing it (Marton, 1986).

### **3. Results:**

Analyzing the qualitative data of this study was conducted through a 'dialectical' process as the researcher develops the conceptions of his participants of the role of facilitator in the language classroom through bringing quotes together and comparing them (Marton, 1986: 155). The categories of description reached in this study were emerged from the data. The following subsections explain these categories with some selected quotes from the participants' responses to the research question ...what does the role of facilitator in the language classroom mean to you.

#### **3.1 Facilitating Students' Independent Learning:**

Seven of the participants perceived the role of the facilitator in the language classroom as facilitating students' independent learning. They believed that the teacher's role is no longer major as it is limited to facilitate students' learning when are working on their own. S3 explained

that *“the teacher’s presence in the language classroom is to help students while they are doing activities by their own”*. She added that *“our teacher used to put us in groups to work together and he moves around the groups to monitor our performance and answer our questions”*. S6 reported about their teacher who acted as a facilitator *“he just introduces the activity to us, then we work together sometimes in groups and sometimes in pairs. He is always there to respond to our questions”*. S8 wrote *“our teacher told us from the beginning of the course that he will not play the main role. He explained that his role is to facilitate our independent learning and that most of learning tasks will be carried out by us”*.

### **3.3 Sharing Responsibility of the Learning Process with Students:**

Five of the participants understand the role of facilitator in the language classroom in terms of sharing responsibility of the learning process with students. They believe that this role implies involving students in all the decisions that are concerned with their learning. These participants were not clear about involving students in making decisions about assessment and examinations and some of them believed that this role should be left for the teacher. S4 wrote *“the idea of changing the role of the language teacher to become a facilitator implies his involvement of students in all the decisions that are concerned with their learning. I think this involvement will enhance students’ motivation to learn as they feel responsible for their own decisions”*. S5 commented *“in the English classroom of the facilitator, students share and negotiate with their teacher all the decisions. But I do not agree that students share their teacher the responsibility for making decisions about their assessment. Only the*



*teacher can make judgements about and evaluating students' learning". S1 reported about how he and his classmates negotiated with their teacher the decisions about their learning materials, assessment strategy, dates of examinations and criteria of success". She added that "it was very positive and exciting experience".*

### **3.4 Making the Language Class Lively and Interesting:**

Changing the atmosphere inside the language classroom to become lively, enjoyable and interesting was perceived by four students as an important task for the facilitator. These students compared the atmosphere of the classroom of the facilitator with the atmosphere of the classroom of the traditional language teacher. In fact, all the students reported about their satisfaction and preference of the lectures of their teacher who acted as a facilitator more than the lectures of their traditional teachers. They believed that the language classes should be lively and interesting where students cooperatively practice English in different communication activities. They all rejected the notion of students' passivity in a language classroom in which most of the talk and teaching done by a traditional teacher. S2 wrote *"comparing the lecture of our teacher who acted as a facilitator with the lectures of the traditional teachers of our other three subjects, it is clear that the facilitator's lecture is more interesting and participatory"*. S3 commented *"offering us the opportunity to talk more, to actively participate in performing learning tasks independently and to share the task of teaching and presenting information through microteaching sessions during the lecture of the facilitator makes the class very lively and interesting"*. S8 wrote *"I like the lecture of our teacher who acted as a facilitator... I never*

*feel bored as I am always engaged in many communication activities in groups and sometimes in pairs”.*

#### **4.4 Building a Good Rapport with Students:**

Adapting the role of facilitator in the language classroom involves establishing a positive relationship between teacher and learner. Four participants perceived this a necessary condition for the effective implementation of the role of facilitator in the language classroom. They believed that teacher student relationship in the language classroom should be based on mutual respect, love, caring and understanding. These students emphasized the positive impact of such a relationship on enhancing students’ motivation to learn and for promoting their active participation. S2 wrote *“when the language teacher has a good relationship with students, they will trust him more and will feel more secure to participate in classroom activities and to take the initiative”*. S5 commented *“the notion of facilitator implies help and assistance for others. I believe that creating the appropriate environment for offering this help and assistance requires a good relationship between the two parties”*. S7 describes the relationship between language teacher and learner as *“friendly, sincere, trustful and supportive”*. However, S1 pointed out that *“some students may misunderstand the notion of having a good relationship with the teacher as they used to be strictly controlled by a harsh teacher who forces discipline in classroom. These students may take an advantage of this relationship and make some discipline problems”*.

## **5. Discussion:**

The role of facilitator in the language classroom has been perceived differently by the participants of this study. The four conceptions emerged from analyzing the participants' responses to the research question "what does the role of facilitator in the language classroom mean to you?" represent fundamental principles of theoretical foundations of the notion of facilitation to teaching and learning (Rogers, 1969).

The notion of facilitation is linked to the philosophy of learner-centredness (Rogers, 1969), and therefore, facilitating students' independent learning is a major role of the learner-centred teacher. Language teachers' good understanding of this conception with its related classroom practices and implications can lead to a successful implementation of the role of facilitator in the language classroom. The notion of independent learning for ELT has recently become very popular (Jones, 2007; Rico, 2008). The main goal of developing this approach to ELT is creating self-directed language learners (Jones, 2007). However, language teachers should be aware that implementing the role of the facilitator involves their performance of many tasks different from those they used to carry out in their traditional classrooms.

The adoption of a facilitative role in the language classroom entails teacher's sharing of the responsibility of the learning process with students. This was the conception of five participants of the role of facilitator in the language classroom. In the traditional classroom, the teacher is always responsible for making most of the decisions about students' learning (Rogers, 1983). The teachers with teacher-centred perspective do not believe in learners' ability for taking over the responsibility over their own learning. Knowles (1975: 20-21) described the perspective of traditional

teacher about learner as “essentially a dependant personality and that the teacher has the responsibility of deciding of what and how the learner should be taught”. These teachers misunderstand the philosophy of facilitation and learner-centred in terms of losing their power and control over classrooms. Rogers (1969) considers this factor as the main reason for teachers’ resistance to adapt facilitation for teaching and learning. Therefore, language teachers with such a perspective may not accept to shift their traditional role into a facilitator one. It is important to make those language teachers understand that implementing the role of facilitator does not mean decreasing their role or status inside classrooms. The facilitator has a significant role to play during the learning and his/her tasks are more than the tasks and responsibilities of the traditional teacher (Roger, 1983).

The notion of facilitation implies a humanistic perspective (Rogers, 1969). Therefore, facilitator- student relationship should be characterized by mutual caring, love, support and understanding. Establishing such a relationship in the language classroom can motivate students to participate more in communication activities which consequently will lead to their development of communicative competence (Tudor, 1996).

It is important to highlight the critical fact about those fundamental principles of the role of the facilitator which were not reported by the participants which indicates their lack of understanding of these principles. This may have a negative impact on their implementation of this role. These principles as explained by Rogers (1969; 1983) include promoting learner’ self-study, developing learners’ own language materials, involving learners in assessing their learning through strategies of peer and self-assessment, enhancing learners’ critical thinking, creating a sub-community for learning and leading learners to become autonomous learners. If Libyan

EFL teachers' understanding of these principles can be developed, their implementation of the role of facilitator can be more effective and better results can be achieved. This development can be realized through conducting in-service training courses or incorporating these principles in teacher education programmes.

## **6. Conclusion:**

Implementing the role of facilitator in the language classroom involves undertaking many responsibilities and performing different tasks. The effective application of these tasks and overtaking of these responsibilities require special skills and good understanding of the fundamental principles and practices of this notion.

The role of facilitator in the language classroom was perceived by the participants of this study in terms of 'facilitating students' independent learning', 'sharing responsibility of the learning process with students', 'making the language class lively and interesting' and 'building a good rapport with students'. These conceptions represent some of the basic principles of the approach of facilitation to teaching and learning but not all. Analyzing learners' needs and responding to them, identifying individual differences and accounting for them in lesson planning, developing learner's full potential, making school a sub-community of learners, using formative assessment strategies for evaluating student learning and promoting learner autonomy are more significant responsibilities and tasks for the facilitator in the language classroom. As these tasks and responsibilities were not reported in the participants' responses this may indicate their lack of awareness about them. Therefore, fostering these students' understanding of these tasks and responsibilities

can lead to developing their implementation of the role of facilitator in the language classroom.

Developing Libyan EFL teachers' understanding of the other principles and practices of the role of facilitator in the language classroom seems to be a necessary condition for improving their implementation of this role. Until these principles will be clearly understood by these teachers, their implementation of this role can not yield the desirable results regarding developing students' communication skills.

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