

The Role of Academic Education on the Development of Iranian EFL Learners' Moral Competency

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Abstract

This study aimed at investigating the moral competency of university students majoring in English literature. To this end, four hundred university students were selected. In the first phase of this study, they were asked to complete MJ test developed and validated by Lind (1998). The results of a One-Way ANOVA showed that C-scores (consistency score) of students significantly increased during the four-year period of university study. In the second phase, to investigate the situation most likely to affect students' moral growth, 60 students were invited for a semi-structured interview. They were the ones with the high and low MJ scores. The interviews revealed that there were five situations of family, friends, reading books, media and classroom activities where they had found the chance to express their ideas freely or at least had the chance to see specimen of self-expression and logical reasoning. In the third phase of the study, students were required to complete FAMC test to examine the pattern of factors affecting moral competency of students. The result of a Two-Way ANOVA showed that both the year of study and the five aforementioned situations could significantly affect the cognitive and affective layers of making moral decisions.

Keywords: moral competency, academic education, guided reflection, role play, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

Miller (1987) believes that literature exposes one to a multitude of ethical systems and moral perspectives, and thus expands and deepens one's moral awareness. It is said that the development of democratic thoughts and negotiations play a critical role in

increasing students' level of moral judgment competence. However, the extent to which this goal is attained in our educational contexts is mostly neglected. Authorities do not have a clear picture of the moral judgment level of their students when they enter university, they are similarly ignorant of their degree of moral development upon their graduation from university. Many studies have revealed the critical role of education on the moral competency of students. Their findings have shown that educational settings which encourage role-taking and lead students to have guided reflection would positively affect their moral judgment. However, lack of proper education or inappropriate methods of teaching can stabilize students' level of moral judgment competence. In some situations, wrong education can lead to decrease in the morality level of students as well (Wakenhut, 1984; Räder and Wakenhut, 1984). Considering the unique role that education plays to increase the level of moral competence of people, it will be of great significance for the experts of the field to deal with this issue more than before. Only now, with the new concepts and methods that cognitive-developmental theory has provided, the evaluation of the democratizing effects of schooling can be based on a broader and more adequate set of empirical data. To this end, this paper aims at investigating the pattern of growth of moral competency of English Literature students and also retrieving the factors most likely to affect this pattern.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kohlberg (1984) introduced moral judgment as a competency which consists of both affective and cognitive aspects. This way, a new definition of the term emerged that was different from the older definitions which considered moral decisions as being parallel with merely affective factors.

Later, Lind (1985b) developed his dual aspect theory of moral competency on the basis of the existence of two inseparable layers of affect and cognition shaping moral decisions. This theory became the building block of the current moral judgment test (MJ).

Kohlberg (1971) believed the experience of responsibility and freedom offered by higher education was necessary to foster the moral judgment of students. In his terms, role taking is defined in social interactions which help people to take social roles by which they become informed of the fact that others are in some ways similar to self with the same expectations and desires and that the others are responsive to this self in the context of complementary expectation (Kohlberg, 1984).

Another factor having proved to be effective in fostering moral competency of students is guided reflection. The word guided shows a kind of scaffolding in cooperative learning to solve complex problems. This term is close to the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that is the distance between the actual developmental level of a learner and his level of potential development. The level of actual development in Vygotsky's term is determined by independent problem solving, however, the level of potential development is indicated by the degree to which one is dependent on an adult,

guidance or cooperation to solve problems (Vygotsky, 1978, in Reiman, 1999). This means that guided reflection should not be considered as a one-time process but a constant endeavor on the part of a learner who whenever facing new demands needs to have cognitive strategies available to solve problems in consistent ways and also means that whenever needed more capable people are ready to help them. Many studies have been carried out on the effect of education on the development of morality (Gibbs & Widaman, 1982; Lind, 1985; Sprinthall et al, 1996, Comunian & Gielen, 2000; Lind 2000, 2003; Piaget, 1965; Kohlberg, 1980 and Kohlberg, 1993).

Available tests to measure the factors affecting moral judgment

ORIGIN/u - To assess the effect of role taking and guided reflection on the growth of moral judgment, Lind (1998, reviewed 2001) developed ORIGIN/u questionnaire. It is a scale to evaluate the role-taking and guided reflection opportunities within higher education institutes. The test covers 8 domains for the two dimensions of role taking and guided reflection. Each dimension contains 4 domains that include Syllabus related role taking opportunities (RTS), Semi-Syllabus related role taking (RTSS), Extra Syllabus related role taking opportunities (RTES), Non-Syllabus related role taking opportunities (RTNS); Syllabus related Guided Reflection (GRS), Semi Syllabus related Guided Reflection opportunities (GRSS), Extra Syllabus Guided Reflection opportunities (GRES), and Non-syllabus related Guided Reflection (GRN). This questionnaire is a descriptive quantitative measure that inquires students' practical experiences at the institutes where they are studying and does not intend to measure some personality trait or attitude.

The questions generally ask students the extent to which they have role taking or guided reflection opportunities in academic settings. In fact, this questionnaire evaluates the effect of two variables namely as role taking and guided reflection in four pre-specified contexts on the improvement of moral judgment and hence is not suitable to assess factors rather than these two dimensions and their 4 corresponding domains

FAMC- To investigate the factors affecting moral competency of people, FAMC was developed by Javadimehr et al (2015). It was constructed on the basis of the dual aspect theory and hence measured two broad categories of factors influencing people's moral competency. One category is the domain of affect and the other one is cognition. It is designed in a way to assess people's moral judgment in various situations of interest with no limitations.

This study is designed to answer the following questions:

- Is there any difference among English literature students of different years of study in terms of their moral competency?
- What factors affect the moral competency of EFL students in different years of studying English literature?
- What is the pattern of the factors affecting the moral competency of English literature students?

METHOD

Participants

400 students took part in this study. They were all university students majoring in English Language and Literature of Ferdowsi university of Mashhad and Beheshti university of Tehran in the academic years of 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. From this number, 100 students were freshman, 100 sophomore, and 100 junior and 100 senior students. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 26 years. The overall mean age was 21.13.

Instrumentation

The participants of the current study were asked to complete MJ test of Lind (1998) and FAMC test (Javadimehr et al., 2015).

FAMC (factors affecting moral competency) scale – it was constructed on a 5-point Likert scale from 1(never) to 5(almost always) and validated through factor analysis model and estimation of criterion related validity with validated and reliable moral judgment test (MJT) (Lind, 1998). Items of this questionnaire were developed based on the dual aspect model of Lind (2002) which defines moral competency in terms of two domains of affect and cognition. It assesses the role of 3 factors of Focus, Sharing and Challenge influencing cognitive domain and Support as one major factor influencing affective domain. FAMC can be used by researchers to evaluate the extent to which various situations can provide affective and cognitive grounds needed to foster morality.

MJT(Moral Judgment Test) - it was developed by George Lind (1998) presents moral dilemmas to participants and offers them positive and negative arguments, giving reasons for certain types of behavior. According to Kohlberg, the arguments represent various levels of moral judgment. Using a scale of -4 to +4, participants indicate how much they endorse certain kinds of behavior and their ways of accounting for these behaviors. The standard version of the Moral Judgment Test contains two dilemma one of a health care worker and one of a doctor. Each dilemma first presents a problematic situation in the form of a story, followed by 12 arguments (six for and six against the behavior of the person involved).

Procedure

The researcher of the current study collected data in three phases. In phase one, participants were required to complete MJ test to measure their C-score (consistency score). In phase two, to investigate the situations affecting students' moral competency score, the individuals with the highest and those with the lowest C-scores were invited to a semi-structured interview. To increase the validity of the qualitative part of this study, the researchers used a grounded theory. It helps the researchers to continue their data collection until the required association is created between the concepts (Dornyei, 2004). Following this theory, 60 EFL students who got high and low scores

were selected and invited for the interview. Using the results of interviews and investigating the related literature, the researcher decided on 5 situations of family, friends, books, media and classroom activities where interviews showed as more likely to affect students' moral competency. These situations were included in FAMC test. Finally, in phase three, all participants were asked to complete FAMC considering these 5 situations. The data obtained at this stage helped the researcher to compare the situations where may influence students' moral competency and find their pattern of influence in different years of studying English literature at university.

Data analysis

First of all using One-way ANOVA test, the scores of MJ tests taken from the students in the first phase were analyzed. It helped the researcher to find the pattern of development of moral competency in four years of studying English literature. Then Two-way ANOVA test was employed to examine the interaction of the situations and year of study and their effect on students' moral judgment during the years they are studying at university. For all statistical procedures, SPSS software (version16.) was used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In phase one of the study, to investigate the pattern of students' moral competency in four years of studying English language and literature, their MJ scores were measured and presented in table 1. As table 1 shows, MJ scores of learners ranged from 0.96 to 67 with the lowest score belonging to students studying in the first year and the highest score to year - 4 students. As with the mean of scores, there was a gradual rise from 20.43 in the year one to 32.28 in the year four of studying English language and literature.

Table1. Descriptive statistics of participants' MJ scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
year1	100	20.4381	12.12686	.96	50.05
year2	100	23.6810	13.27359	1.78	53.66
year3	100	27.2492	15.16271	2.00	61.00
year4	100	32.2830	17.30299	2.80	67.00
Total	400	25.9128	15.19583	.96	67.00

To examine the pattern of learners' MJ scores in different years of studying English literature, One-Way ANOVA test was used. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between year-1 to year-4 learners ($p < 0.05$).

Table2. One-Way ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	7731.868	3	2577.289	12.092	.000
Within Groups	84402.476	396	213.138		
Total	92134.344	399			

For conducting more in- depth analysis of the pattern of MJ scores, Scheffe test was run to have a detailed comparison of students' scores in four years of studying English language and literature. According to table 3, there was no significant difference between those in the first year and the second year ($p>0.05$), the same results was obtained for the second and third year as well as between the third and fourth year($p>0.05$). However, the difference between MJ scores of year 1 and 3 was significant and the same results was obtained for year two and four ($p<0.05$).

Table3. Comparison of students MJ scores

Year	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Year1 &2	-3.24	2.06	0.48
Year2&3	-3.56	2.06	0.39
Year3&4	-5.03	2.06	0.11
Year1&4	11.84	2.06	0.00
Year1&3	6.81	2.06	0.01
Year2&4	-8.60	2.06	0.001

In phase two of the study, 60 students were selected. Of which 40 students who had got high and 20 students having obtained low scores in MJ test were invited for a semi-structured interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for more scrutiny. As table4 shows all 40 high score students said that they could express their ideas freely in their families. These students also stated that they could express their ideas with no limitation with their friends and could express their agreement or disagreement with them if needed. They all mentioned that they had noticed examples of democratic discussion on media and sometimes had given it a try to have the same freedom of speech. Table 3 shows that 38 out of these 40 students said that they had the chance not only to express their ideas but also to challenge others in non-competitive manners in their classrooms.

Table4. Frequency number of high & low scorers in democratic situations

Class	Media	book	friend	Family	
38	40	40	40	40	High scores
8	19	17	6	5	Low scores

In contrast, with respect to the low score students, 15 students out of 20 said that they were not able to express their opinions in front of others and found expressing open agreement or disagreement quite difficult. 14 students in this category said that they could not even express their ideas freely with their friends as they were afraid of losing their friendship or being ridiculed by them. 19 low score students stated that they had noticed specimen of logical reasoning on media but were unable to transfer them to their daily lives. Likewise, 17 students said that they had read books containing logical challenges or examples of moral dilemmas solved by the characters but they were unable to do the same when it comes to reality. Only 8 students from this category could express their views in their class activities including group works tasks and projects.

In phase three of the study, the scores of students in FAMC test were measured. This scale was designed to investigate the pattern of factors affecting students' moral competency in five situations.

Tables 5 to 9 illustrate the descriptive statistics of FAMC scores in five situations of family, friends, media and books and classroom for English literature students in year 1 to year 4. As table 5 shows the mean of students in family situation of FAMC did not vary considerably during the years studying at university and was between 75.58 to 77.52. The same pattern is seen for friends, media and books. The only FAMC situation which showed changes from the first year of studying English language and literature to the year four was classroom activities which rose from around 35.67 to about 78.65 in these years (table9).

Table 5. FAMC scores for Family situation

Year	1	2	3	4
Mean	75.58	76.11	77.12	77.52
Std. deviation	6.21	5.90	6.89	5.12

Table 6. FAMC scores for Media

Year	1	2	3	4
Mean	59.77	58.88	58.70	60.78
Std. deviation	9.15	8.78	8.16	7.87

Table7.FAMC scores for Friends

Year	1	2	3	4
Mean	48.39	47.64	46.65	47.14
Std. deviation	5.44	6.43	5.12	7

Table8. FAMC scores for book

Year	1	2	3	4
Mean	38.12	34.22	35.18	37.12
Std. deviation	8.51	8.23	7.79	7.58

Table9. FAMC scores for Classroom situation

Year	1	2	3	4
Mean	37.65	39.55	71.65	78.65
Std. deviation	5.76	5.34	4.67	6.11

To examine the interaction between the learners' year of study and the situations, Two-Way ANOVA test was used (Table 10). As table 10 shows the effects of both situation and year of studying English language and literature are significant ($p < 0.05$). To investigate the significance of the effect of year of study

Table10. Two -Way ANOVA

	Df	Mean square	F	Sig
Situation	4	78086.60	1.35	0.00
Year	3	7254.70	125.46	0.00
Situation & year	12	7339.40	128.83	0.00

To examine the interaction between the learners' year of study and the situations, Two-Way ANOVA test was used (Table 10). As table 10 shows the effects of both situation and year of studying English language and literature are significant ($p < 0.05$). To investigate the significance of the effect of year of study and situation on the FAMC scores of students Scheffe test was run for these two variables (table 11&12).

The results of multiple comparisons between FAMC scores and year of studying (table 11) were obtained by Scheffe test. They show a non-significant difference between year 1 and 2, and 3 and 4 ($p > 0.05$), but there is a significant difference between year 1 and 3, 2 and 3 as well as year 2 and 4 ($p < 0.05$).

To evaluate the difference between FAMC scores of learners in the five defined situations, Scheffe test was used. The results showed significant difference between all possible pairs of situations ($p > 0.05$).

Table 11. Comparison of FAMC scores based on year of study

Year	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Year1 &2	0.18	0.48	0.98
Year2&3	-6.78	0.48	0.00
Year3&4	0.20	0.48	0.87
Year1&4	-6.32	0.48	0.00
Year1&3	-6.12	0.48	0.00
Year2&4	-5.45	0.48	0.00

Table12. Comparison of FAMC scores based on situations

Situation	Mean difference	Std. Error	Sig.
Family & friends	15.81	0.53	0.00
Family & media	27.72	0.53	0.00
Family & book	37.40	0.53	0.00
Family & class	21.25	0.53	0.00
Friends & media	11.91	0.53	0.00
Friends & book	21.59	0.53	0.00
Friends & class	5.44	0.53	0.00
Media & book	9.68	0.53	0.00
Media & class	-6.46	0.53	0.00
Book & class	-16.15	0.53	0.00

CONCLUSION

This study aimed at investigating the moral competency of students majoring in English language and literature and examining the situations where are likely to affect the moral judgment of these students. The findings revealed that students' moral competency rose gradually during their 4-year academic study. This growth is most apparent when they complete their third academic year and when they become graduated. The analysis of interviews showed that family, friends and class activities have the most effect on students' moral development as those who could not express their views freely in these contexts obtained lower moral judgment consistency scores. However, high scorers in

MJ test had tendency to express open agreement or disagreement or even challenge others in these contexts without being afraid of losing their face. Considering the results of FAMC test, family is the context where more than other situations students could focus on others' opinions, challenge others, share their ideas and support other members emotionally. The effect of all these factors did not show any change in the course of their study at university. It was also interesting that more than half of low scorers stated that they had read books containing moral dilemmas and had noticed many opportunities of open discussions on media, but this awareness did not lead to higher MJ scores.

The findings of FAMC test showed a major difference between students who had finished their third year with those finishing their second academic year. As the effects of four factors of books, media, friends and family did not change in this 4-year period, this difference can be attributed to the factor of class activities. This is in line with previous studies on the effect of education on the development of moral competency. According to the results of this study, all five situations obtained significantly different scores showing their effects on students' moral judgments.

This study opens new horizons for those involved with students to consider the effect of educational contexts on the growth of learners' morality and democratic thoughts. It shows class activities if used appropriately can be as effective as family factor in the development of students' moral reasoning. From this vantage point, curriculum developers and practitioners of the field should make the utmost use of the privileges that literature classes offer to them to foster students' moral thinking which is an important aspect of human education.

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