

Life Syllabus: A New Remedy for Iranian EFL Learners' Aggressiveness: Socio-Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigated the effectiveness of Life Syllabus for decreasing aggressiveness of Iranian EFL students. The purpose of this study was to see whether there was any difference between Life Syllabus when a teacher used it in the classroom to reduce aggressiveness or not. A total of 206 Iranian EFL learners from four high schools in Bandar Abbas, Iran take part in this study. A quasi-experimental research approach with an interview followed in this study. A pre-test and post-test with the control and experimental group conducted to get participants' performance before and at the end of using aggressiveness. The study lasted for one term with the naturalistic use of Life Syllabus for the experimental group. The comparison between the students' scores showed that there was a significant difference in the final performance of two groups. Therefore, this study supports the idea that Life Syllabus reduces the EFL learners' aggressiveness. As Life Syllabus proved to be useful with Iranian EFL learners, EFL teachers also can adopt the technique in their classes to advance their students' language learning

Keywords: Life Syllabus, Aggression, Aggressive Behavior, EFL

1. Introduction

The framework of this research is based on Pishghadam's Applied ELT and Life Syllabus (2011). Pishghadam's paper (2011) brought a new flash for thinking about second and foreign language studies and its own educational nature. In fact, ELT has been studied as a branch of applied linguistics as yet. Pishghadam (2011) claims that it is perhaps time to have a revision in applied linguistics and ELT. In this view, he goes on with saying that, "ELT has grown in maturity over the years, establishing an independent identity for itself. It does not play second fiddle to applied linguistics anymore" (p. 9). Therefore, he presented a new idea of *Applied ELT* into the field of English language teaching and learning via a superiority seen in the educational ambit of ELT classes.

Earlier, Schmitt (2002) has expressed that ELT teachers should not be only consumers of the findings of other disciplines. Today, ELT holds an autonomous status or tendency to provide to rather than be provided by other disciplines such as psychology and sociology; it is more life-centered precedence (Pishghadam, 2011).

However, applied ELT is to switch the direction, taking a more contributory role (Pishghadam, 2011). In applied ELT, discussions are over language and linguistics with issues regarding life qualities. So, it's time for ELT to engage in *life-and-language* classes rather than *language-and-life* ones (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012, 2013). First, a language learning class must be a class in which life issues are taken into consideration. Because of the unique nature of English language learning classes, the classes are presumed to enhance critical abilities, creativity, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, etc. and then teach a language. So, learners' depression, stress, anxiety disorders, burnout, aggressiveness and so on would be eradicated (Pishghadam, 2011). Teachers must design their linguistic syllabus around the life syllabus to decide which aspect of life is going to be aimed, e.g., creativity, then, we plan our linguistic syllabus so as to acquire this aim. It means that language must be at the service of boosting life qualities (Pishghadam, 2011).

Applied ELT, with the aim of sending a map as Life Syllabus for the ELT community to consider the improvement of these life skills prior to language learning, was further expanded by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012). ELT classes can, therefore, be suitable places for life skills training programs. Life skills training is a valuable extra practice in general education and in ELT in order to try to make learners ready for meeting the

life's challenges such as anxiety, stress, depression, aggressiveness, another educational need (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012).

Moreover, Pishghadam (2011) explains unique features of ELT classes to improve life skills for solving socio-psychological problems such as aggressiveness, anxiety, stress, etc. Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) highlighted distinctive features including, (a) discussing a large number of social, scientific, and political topics, (b) holding pair work and group work in class, (c) comparing two cultures, (d) getting acquainted with the words and grammar of another language, (e) speaking in another language in which one can show their own real self, (f) taking language learning very seriously, and (g) having a funny and friendly atmosphere for learning.

Pishghadam (2011) proposed the notion of *life syllabus* which is classified in Applied ELT. Based on life syllabus, a language course should "incorporate the issues of concern in learners' life into the ELT curriculum, highlighting these aspects as well as the enhancement of learners' language proficiency" (Pishghadam, Zabihi, & Kermanshahi, 2012, p. 895). Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) hold that "it is high time to shift the focus of ELT from the linguistic theories to a life-changing status, and one possibility is that life syllabi should be incorporated into the ELT curriculum." (p. 97).

However, as Pishghadam (2011) points out until now few studies have been implemented to support and operationalize the appropriateness and effectiveness of this new educational perspective, i.e., life syllabus. For instance, the field of psychology has produced some interesting and useful implications from ELT in order to cure some abnormal psychological characteristics of learners such as aggressiveness, anxiety, stress and etc. (Hosseini & Navari, 2012).

In addition, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) point out that the new and amplifying functions and roles of ELT practitioners should come to terms. They maintain that language teachers should give prerogative to learners' life issues and teach the desired language. However, it does not mean that language learning should be ignored in English language classes. It advocates that "language learning should not be considered the end product of ELT classes" (p. 23). Hosseini and Navari (2012) believe that more attention should be given to emotionally problematic students in ELT classes and teachers need to help them run over their emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, aggressiveness and so on.

In a later prolongation of the theory of Applied ELT, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2013) have presented *English for Life Purposes (ELP)* as a new notion in English language teaching. ELP includes different kinds of life skills, such as, "motivation to learn, emotional intelligence, critical thinking ability or creativity, learners' anxiety, neuroticism, and depression or burnout" (p. 6). They point out that the focus of teaching English as a second/foreign language has changed from considering learners' specific needs to improve their life qualities in different topics for discussion that enable learners to compare their home culture with other cultures and emboss their identities. It not only allays learners' anxiety, depression, aggressiveness or other negative aspects of life but also enables teachers to improve learners' emotional, intellectual, and motivational abilities while teaching them a second/foreign language.

Digiulio (2001) recognized the increase in the antisocial behavior of learners in schools worldwide. Beginning aggression was related to males. Females were considered to lack aggression. But aggressive behavior shown by learners in schools is a concern for everyone (Renfrew, 1997). Because most learners are directly or indirectly involved in aggression, it affects learners, education personnel, teachers, parents, school governing bodies, and the community. This behavior places everybody's life at risk and makes the culture of learning and teaching very difficult. Learners' aggressive behavior has different factors such as family backgrounds, school, and community. If the learner is unstable due to the above factors, learner may suddenly show abnormal behavior or tends to be emotionally disrupted and shows harmful tendencies. Theories of aggression suggest that aggression is acquired through a process of cut and try. The aggressive behavior is affected by

reinforcement, the past experiences of the person, the social environment, and one's personality (Felson&Tedeschi, 1993).

McWhirter (1998) held that the peer pressure leads to norms of risky behavior and irresponsibility. The peer group is defined as “the tendency to change one's behavior, beliefs, opinions or actions to correspond with the norms expressed by other people because of implicit or explicit social pressure (Harilal, 1996, p.40). One of the important features that we need in decreasing this tension is peer group and workgroup that is considered as one of the Applied ELT and life syllabus features. As Budhal(1998) cited some high school learners express aggressiveness for popularity among their peers. Some become so aggressive, act immaturely and display disruptive and deviant behavior if they are not accepted by a peer group, so by this description we can introduce a remedy for this pressure, namely life syllabus that plays an important part in accepting learners as group members to act together.

Based on the community, instability in the community may place learners in a stressful situation to be aggressive. By that, learners may experience psychological problems in adjusting to normality and think that violence is the only way to address problems. Based on Applied ELT and life syllabus ,development is not only “economic growth, but also social investment, individuals’ empowerment, satisfaction of the basic needs such as healthcare, education and social safety nets as well as political and cultural freedom and all other aspects of people’ lives” (Pishghadam and Zabihi, 2013, p. 6).

Besides, the factors that lead to aggression among learners in high schools are necessary to reduce aggressive behavior among learners in high schools. Using life syllabus with its unique features as an efficient remedy seems to be a good supplementary solution to this problem. The reason for selection of Life Syllabus as a new remedy has been two folds: First, revealing the factors that lead to aggression among learners in secondary schools, then, recommending and developing a program that can reduce aggressive behavior among learners in secondary schools.

This research study is about foreign language aggressiveness. The study investigates the relationship between aggressiveness and the students’ participation in class. The aim is to see how aggressiveness relates to student participation in foreign language classrooms. In the first part of this section, the subjects in the study are described. Next, there is a description of the instrument and materials used in this study. Lastly, the procedures for data collection and statistical analysis are presented.

2. Research Design

A quasi-experimental design along with questionnaires and face to face interviews are used in this study.

2.1. Participants

A total of 206 Iranian EFL learners from six high schools in Bandar Abbas take part in this study. The sample consists of both male and female EFL learners. They range in age from 15 to 20. To select the participants, two criteria are taken into consideration. First, they are required to agree in taking part in this study. Second, they fill out the questionnaire in advance. However, given the voluntary nature of interviewee selection, the number of learners who took part in the interview decreased.

2.2 Instruments

The instruments used for the study are both quantitative and qualitative in nature. For the quantitative part, biographical data of the respondents, frequencies, and percentages for school climate, peer interaction, aggression instinct and treatment used to collect data on high school learners’ aggressive behavior. On the other hand, qualitative interviews conducted to triangulate the results of the study.

First, a biographical data of the respondent questionnaire used to facilitate research in this study. The questionnaire is used for collecting data on some subjects in a standardized form from a random sample of the population. Three questionnaires named frequencies and percentages for school climate, peer interaction, and aggression instinct were used for data collection. They directed to learners who have been exposed to aggression. The questionnaires contain a Likert- type response scale. Respondents are required to respond with a: ‘No’, ‘Undecided’ or ‘Yes.’

The principals, or deputy principals in some of the high schools, took it upon themselves to arrange the group of selected learners to meet in one class so that the questionnaire could be administered. The researcher personally involved in the administration of the instrument in order to clarify the misunderstanding. The questionnaire handed to each learner individually, and instructions read out and explained. Respondents could ask for clarity. Questions were translated into the mother tongue. Estimating time was about 40 minutes.

Respondents could choose between three options. Options were as follows:

1 = No (N)

2= Undecided (U)

3=Yes (Y)

Third, the experimental study began. Participants took part in a pre-test on aggression. Their scores obtained. Then, they received an instructional program called life syllabus. Three high schools received treatment with life syllabus. Three other high schools received traditional instructional methods and hence were considered as control groups. A post-test on aggression gave to all groups. Participants' scores on both pretest and posttest compared and analyzed. Finally, we found there is a significant difference between participants' scores on pre- and post-tests, then we could see a role for life syllabus in reducing aggression.

Fourth, another paradigm that used in this study is a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach is taken in order to obtain detailed, in-depth knowledge and understanding of the aggressive behavior of high school learners show most of the time. To this aim, individual interviews conducted in a quiet school setting. Individual interviews were chosen so that, the interviewees would not be influenced by the perceptions and opinions of others and more valid accounts of their own meaning would result. An attempt was made to create interview protocols that give the interviewee plenty of time and space to relate their meanings and personal opinions. For the qualitative method, the researcher is considered as the primary instrument of collecting and analyzing data. The interviews recorded using an audio tape recorder.

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the role of the positive effect of Life Syllabus on the aggressiveness of the learners.

3.1 Biographical data of the respondents

Descriptive statistics (questions 1 to 9) yielded the following biographical data for the sample.

Table 3.1: Biographical data of the respondents

	Factor	Frequency	Percentage
Age	15 years and less	13	6.6
	16 to 18 years	164	21
	19 years and older	82.8	10.6
Parents' marital status	Married	120	0.6
	Never married	35	17.7
	Divorced	15	7.6
	Other	28	14.1
Father's work	Unemployed	45	22.7
	Self-employed	52	26.3
	Gardener/Cleaner	35	17.7
	Professional	13	6.6
	Other	53	26.8
Mother's work	Unemployed	76	38.4
	Self-employed	33	16.7
	Gardener/Cleaner	62	31.3
	Professional	8	4.0
	Other	19	9.6
Father's education	None	35	14.6
	Grade 1-7	62	32.3
	Grade 8-12	75	40.9
	Diploma/Degree	24	12.1
Mother's education	None	29	14.6
	Grade 1-7	64	32.3
	Grade 8-12	81	40.9
	Diploma/Degree	24	12.1
Type of friends you interact with at school	Loving	110	55.6
	Aggressive/Violent	15	7.6
	Ordinary	73	36.9
Type of teachers you interact with at school	Loving	55	27.8
	Aggressive/Violent	31	15.7
	Unreasonably strict	14	7.1
	Reasonably strict	98	49.5
Type of friends you interact with in the community	Loving	40	.2
	Aggressive/Violent	38	19.2
	Ordinary	120	60.6

Table 3.1 reflects that most of the respondents do not know the whereabouts of their fathers because when they were asked about their fathers' work, a large number of them (26.8%) responded (other), followed by self-employed (26.3%) and then unemployed (22.7%). The (other) might hold a meaning that the respondents were never exposed to or never knew their fathers or it may be that the father is deceased. This concurs with the commonly held view that the absence of paternal authority and the paternal role model leads to a higher rate of aggression and violence (James 1995). Most of the friends (55.6%) these respondents interact with at school are loving, and 36.9% are neither loving, nor aggressive (ordinary) and a very small number (7.6%) are aggressive. A large number of teachers (49.5%) these respondents interact with at school are reasonably strict followed by 27.8% who are loving and a smaller percentage (15.7%) who are aggressive, and even a smaller number (7.1%) are unreasonably strict. In both the type of friends and community members these respondents interact with the community, the majority (52.5%-friends and 60.6%-community members) are neither loving nor aggressive (ordinary) as compared to (35.9% and 20.2%) who are loving and least percentage of (11.6% and 19.2%) those who are aggressive. The above percentages are important for aggression.

3.2 Frequencies and percentages for school climate

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Item	No	Undecided	Yes
I work well at school	24.7	9.1	66.2
I feel great to be at school	5.1	4.5	90.4
School is useless for our daily lives	90.4	3.0	6.6
Teachers allow me to give my point of view	30.3	7.6	62.1
The teachers punish us for no apparent reason	73.8	3.0	23.2
We learn many boring things at school	31.3	3.0	65.7
The teachers fail to listen to my problems	60.1	1.0	38.9
The teachers ask unreasonable questions in tests	63.1	4.5	32.3

Most of the respondents have a positive attitude towards schools as 90.4% of them indicated that they feel great to be at school. Although a large number of the respondents (90.4%) disagree that the school is useless in their daily lives, there is a contrast when it comes to the classroom situation. In addition, 24.7% respondents responded that they do not work well at school, 30.3% confirm that their teachers do not allow them to give their point of view, 23.2% get punished for no apparent reasons, 15.2% feel that their teachers get impatient when they ask for help, 65.7% find that they learn boring things at school, 38.9% believe that teachers fail to listen to their problems and they are not actively involved in school activities. All this negativity proves that these respondents are in danger of aggressive behavior. This is emphasized by Nemangwele (1998) that new behaviors are learned at school and teachers and peers play a dominant role in shaping adolescents' behaviors either positively or negatively.

3.3 Frequencies and percentages for peer interaction

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Item	No	Undecided	Yes
I have a good relationship with my friends	17.1	2.0	80.9
I make friends easily	45.1	3.5	51.4
My friends often ignore me	56.9	3.1	40.0
My friends encourage me to do bad things	67.0	1.4	31.6
My friends like to fight with others	60.0	4.9	35.1

Table 3.3 shows that most of the respondents (80.9%) have a good relationship with their friends and 60% of them also disagree that their friends like to fight with others. The other side of the coin is that 31.6% of the respondents are encouraged by their friends to do bad things, and 40% ignore by others. This also proves that they are influenced by their friends to be aggressive. Adolescents learn much of their behavior patterns from modeling the behavior of their age group (Robbins, 2000).

3.4 Frequencies and percentages for aggression instinct

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Item	No	Undecided	Yes
Fighting is bad	21.5	1.0	78.5
Fighting is good when you are cross with someone	65.3	2.0	32.7
When I am really upset I become aggressive	55.6	2.0	42.4

Most of the respondents (78.5%) feel very negative about fighting as compared to only 21.5% of those who feel positive. However, 32.7% respondents feel that fighting is good when someone is cross, and 42.4% confirm that he or she become aggressive when they are really upset. Adolescents who are aggressive believe that aggression will terminate others' noxious behavior (Moeller, (2001).

The interviewees showed that there is a problem of aggression exhibited by learners in the school as well in the society. The quantitative survey tables together with the qualitative survey report reveal that aggressive behavior is rife among the adolescents.

4. Conclusion

In general, the results of this study seem to support some studies that have been conducted on language aggressiveness. The results indicated that affective variables such as anxiety, motivation, and aggressiveness correlate highly with participation with groups. Peer support team members as one of the features of Applied ELT classes with life syllabus play an important role in such contexts. The students become liked and respected. At such events, they can positively influence their peers to improve life skills for solving socio-psychological problems such as anxiety, aggressiveness, stress, etc. (Pishghadam, 2011).

Another part for decreasing aggressiveness in schools is the recovery room. In a school setting, one classroom can be identified as the recovery room. No subjects should take place in this room except aggression related issues. The room should be filled with all the alternatives to decrease anger. People should take a walk, punch the walls and keep themselves busy when they feel angry rather than attacking those who make them angry.

The idea of parental training is also conducted this research. Larson & Lochman (2002) claimed that if parents monitor the child's behavior inside and outside the school, and also recognize, reinforce and model prosocial behavior, a reduction in aggressive behavior can be produced. Affective communication with their children is necessary. Learning how to listen actively, emphasize, resolve conflicts, and cope with personal feelings, anger or depression cued by the child's misbehavior should be practiced.

4.1 Implications for Language Teachers

Teachers should be aware of the fact that language aggressiveness affects students' participation in foreign language classes and language aggressiveness exists in foreign language learning process regardless of students' age, sex, ability and language level. Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) suggested some activities reduce aggressiveness in class, for example, discussing a large number of social, scientific, and political topics, holding pair work and group work in class, taking language learning very seriously and having a funny and friendly atmosphere for learning.

4.2. Suggestions for further research

The process, results, and conclusion of the present study lead to some further lines of research of all, other studies can be done with the same objectives and aims in other levels. Aggressiveness is a theme that can be investigated from various points of view (anger, aggressive or violent behavior). Another research can be done on the duty of parents, teachers and the community to identify behavior problems, implement effective behavior modification and preventive programs.

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