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Teachers' Thinking about Their Teaching: A Critical Study on Iranian TEFL Teachers

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Abstract

Knowing about teachers' thinking, beliefs and attitudes toward their own teaching practice are of crucial and important factors in designing course materials, educational planning and improving educational levels. According to the literature available, unfortunately few studies have been conducted on these issues in the context of Iran. Therefore the effect of teachers' mentality on improving teaching process seems to be neglected to some extent. Taking this existing gap in planning of related educational organizations into consideration, this study aimed to go through the mind of teachers, and to find out how they think. To conduct this study, a questionnaire with high reliability of 0.89.9 was designed and implemented in 18 different cities of Iran. 267 Iranian TEFL teachers participated in the study, filling the questionnaire which was consisted of 100 closed questions and 3 major open ended questions. The participants were given enough time to fill the questionnaire in their free time. To prevent the exhaustion and boredom of the participants, the questionnaire was divided in to 2 equal parts and was implemented to teachers in two different sessions. 60 teachers were also selected randomly for interview in order to elaborate on their own thinking. The results are presented via the tables and diagrams, showing the frequency and correlations between the teachers' thinking and beliefs in their communities according to their age, experience and educational degrees. The results can be used to pave the way for adopting effective decision making, planning, and consequently progress in teachers' practice.

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1. Introduction

Human beings are reflective creatures who have the ability of thinking on their own actions and on what happens around them. On the other hand, what we do in action is the reflection of what we think, believe and value. This interplay between thinking and practice finds its major importance in the educational settings when we deal with teaching and learning issues. Since teachers play the key role in class practice and their teaching has the most effect on the students' learning, knowing about the ideologies and methodologies that they do have and in general, their beliefs and thinking about teaching finds more importance for educational purposes.

According to Michael Borg (2001), A belief is a proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by the individual, and is therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further, it serves as a guide to thought and behavior" (p.186), teachers' beliefs are of considerable importance for understanding and improving educational process. They are as guides for language teachers in adopting some teaching strategies in facing their everyday teaching challenges. They have influence on their general well-being, and give shape to the learners' motivation, learning environment, and ability and language achievement (Xu, 2012). In this regard, Freeman (2002) pointed out that, exploring teacher thinking may give rise to many different questions related to the conceptual framework and the appropriate research methodologies in order to address language teachers' knowledge base.

1.1. Aims of the study

The available literature show that the studies which have been conducted on teacher's thinking and beliefs up to now do not suffice the growing needs in the field, due to the fact that thinking and belief have a considerably vast area. Hence, the door is always open for more studies in which we go through the mind of teachers to find out how they think individually or in their groups according to their age, experience and educational degrees and so many other aspects.

In this study we wished to explore Iranian EFL teachers' theoretical thinking, their beliefs, attitudes and views on their teaching practice and different aspects of teaching framework. We aimed to convey their overview about language teaching and their own teaching focusing on issues like class management, psychology of teaching, error correction and feedback, teachers' self-confidence and self-efficacy, job satisfaction, work condition and facilities, factors of a good teacher, use of technology in class, role of teachers' in classroom from their own overview, teacher's crisis strategies, psychological considerations regarding learners, class setting and atmosphere, teacher-learner relationship and their thinking about many other different aspects that they encounter in their everyday teaching experiences. We also aimed to find out, to what extent Iranian teachers' thinking on different aspects of teaching are correlated with each other, and to what extend there is divergence or convergence in the way of thinking of the teachers who are located in different groups according to their teaching experience, namely, novice teachers and experienced teachers- age and their educational degree.

1.2. Significance of the Study

Knowing about teachers' thinking, their beliefs and attitudes toward their own teaching practice and process are crucial and important factors in designing course materials, educational planning and improving educational levels. Review of the related literature shows that the major part of studies that has been done on teachers' self-reflection considered teachers' beliefs in only few aspects of teaching. They mostly focused on teachers' thinking and beliefs in the areas of evaluation (e.g. He, Valcke, and Aelterman 2012), language learning (e.g. Inceçay, 2011) Teacher' role in classroom (e.g. Wan, Low, and Li, 2011), Teachers' abilities and Knowledge (e.g. Fives & Buehl, 2008); and Use of Technology in classroom (Tondeur, Hermans, van Braak, and Valcke, 2008).To the best of the researcher's knowledge, unfortunately in Iran few researches have been dealt with these issues (e.g. Zakeri & Alavi,2011; Sheikhol-Eslami; Allami, 2012). It's worth mentioning that they have been mostly conducted only recently. However in many of these studies, the effects of these thinking and beliefs on improving teaching process seem to be neglected to some extent. This existing gap in educational planning of related organizations calls for...
further researches on Iranian EFL teachers from different aspects of cognition, thinking and beliefs, so that results can be used to pave the way for adopting effective decision making, planning and consequently progress in teachers' practice, which is also one of the main purposes of this article that works out on these issues.

Although in the context of Iran indicate, some studies in the field, have been done on comparing novice and experienced teachers' beliefs, few of these studies, if any, have devoted themselves to comparing and contrasting the TEFL teachers' thinking and beliefs based on factors such as experience, education degree and age difference. It should be noted that not many studies were found to consider the factors of age and educational degree in other educational contexts in the world. Henceforth, in this study, he attempt was taken to analyze teachers' thinking and beliefs from many different aspects that the researcher recognized as being required and necessary to search according to the educational and teaching setting of Iran, so that the collected data could provide useful information for later considerations in teaching quality improvements. The results were also interpreted in 3 phases and in the form of correlation between experienced teachers' thinking vs. Novice teachers' thinking, more educated teachers' thinking vs. less educated teachers' thinking and finally, younger teachers' thinking vs. older teachers' thinking.

1.3. Research Questions

Our research was designed to address 3 main questions each of which consists of many other questions according to the categories the results will be discussed upon:

(1) Is there any relationship between teachers' thinking in experienced group of teachers and novice group of teachers?

(2) Is there any relationship between teachers' thinking in younger group of teachers and older group of teachers?

(3) Is there any relationship between teachers' thinking in less educated group of teachers and more educated group of teachers?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data collection in this study was restricted to Iranian TEFL teachers with the experience of teaching in English language Institutes. In this regard, 267 participants were selected randomly from among English language teachers teaching in 16 different cities of Iran, namely, Tehran, Shiraz, Arak, Isfahan, Sari, Babol, Tabriz, Semnan, Mashhad, Babolsar, Ahvaz, Rasht, Gorgan, Urmia, Shahr e Kord and Ghaemshahr to fill the questionnaire. The subjects, considering three factors of education, experience and age, included:

(a) 112 teachers with higher level of education (i.e., with at least MA degree in teaching or other related majors in the field of English language) and 155 teachers with lower level of education (i.e., BA students of English language teaching, other unrelated fields and those with lower degrees such as diploma).

(b) 173 experienced teachers (with more than five years of experience in teaching English) and 94 novice teachers (with less than 5 years of experience in teaching English).

(c) 131 teachers with the age less than 30 years old and 136 teachers with the age more than 30 years old.

Moreover, 60 teachers who were willing to participate in the interview were selected from this pool of 267 teachers to answer the semi-structured questions and also elaborate on their reasons for some of their answers in the questionnaire.
2.2. Instruments

Two types of materials were employed in this study for the purpose of collecting data on teachers' thinking of their teaching: Teacher Thinking Questionnaire (TTHQ) and Interview.

2.2.1. Teacher Thinking Questionnaire (TTHQ)

Taking some different aspects of teaching, which the researcher considered essential to be investigated among EFL teachers in the context of Iran (due to the few researches devoted in these issues in Iran), a questionnaire consisting of 100 closed questions and 4 major open-ended questions was designed by the second author of this article. There were considerable part-whole correlations between items and the total scale. In designing the items, it was attempted to address theoretically and practically important aspects of teaching with objective wording in order to reduce the possible effects they may have on the answering of participants. Moreover the items of the same category were not ordered one after each other, but they were all scattered among the pool of items in the questionnaire so that it could avoid giving participants clue or influence their answers, hence the items were designed unbiased. The building construct of the 100 structured items were scored on a six – point Likert scale. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).The first section of the questionnaire which were in the form of 100 likert items, measured EFL teachers' thinking, beliefs and attitudes to gather information toward 14 main domains: (1) Teachers' self-confidence, (2) job satisfaction, work condition and facilities, (3) characteristics of a good teacher and his role in class, (4) class management, (5) Class evaluation and assessment, (6) importance of feedback and error correction, (7) psychological considerations toward students, (8) the extent of the use of first language in classroom, (9) lesson planning and preparation for class, (10)use of technology in classroom, (11) use of pedagogical aids and games for teaching practice, (12) teaching theories/methods and techniques, (13) class setting and atmosphere, and (14) teachers' self-reflection on their practice. The second section of the questionnaire, on the other hand, came up with 3 main scoping questions to explore teachers' thinking about teaching methodology, the relationship teachers make between the methods they use in their classrooms and those of highly-established methods of teaching that they were learnt and finally to explain their own methods which they apply in their classroom and the extent they think they are efficient in terms of their use of self-made methods and techniques of teaching in comparison to highly established methods.

The questionnaire was piloted at the beginning of the research among 43 teachers which took 1 month of the study. Measuring Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, high reliability of 0.89.9 (p<0.001, n= 43) was obtained and validity of the Teacher Thinking Questionnaire (TThQ) used in this study for collecting the desired information was ascertained by Two English University Professors, 3 English language teaching Experts, a psychologist (for psychological considerations of designing the questions and their effects on eliciting teachers' attitudes and beliefs on the issue) and 17 experienced TEFL teachers. However after piloting the questionnaire, the necessary modifications were implemented.

2.2.2. Interview

A semi-structured interview was also used to explore teacher participants' thinking about their teaching experiences and to elicit their reasons for the answers they provided previously for likert items in the teacher thinking questionnaire (TTHQ). The scoping questions asked in the interview were designed based on the items and questions in the teacher thinking questionnaire, hence ensuring their both validity and reliability.

2.4. Design

In consistence with the focus of the study which was proposed earlier as exploring EFL teachers' thinking about teaching, this study is qualitative in nature, although with the help of statistics, the likert scale information was quantified for easier explanation of the results. However, Correlational analysis was employed, following the main goal of the study, which was investigating the relationship between teachers' thinking and beliefs about teaching in 3 groups of: (a) Novice teachers vs. experienced teachers, (b) Less educated teachers vs. more educated
teachers, and (c) Younger teachers in age vs. Older teachers. Hence, the design of the present study was descriptive correlational.

2.4.1. Procedures

2.4.1.1. Administrating the Teacher Thinking Questionnaire (TTHQ)

For the purpose of the study, the participants were randomly selected from among both groups of novice and experienced teachers with varied range of Age and educational degrees. In this regard, the Teacher Thinking Questionnaire (TTHQ) was administered to the participants in 16 different cities of Iran, which were chosen from those teaching in English language institutes. For the majority of participants who were not in touch, questionnaires were sent via e-mail. It is worth mentioning that, since the number of questions was quite large (100 Likert and 3 open-ended questions) and it could not be reduced due to the information that we needed to explore, according to the researchers' decision, the questionnaire was divided into two equal parts and was implemented to learners in two different sessions, so that it could prevent the exhaustion and boredom of the participants. The participants were also given enough time to fill the questionnaire in their free time. In that they could take the questionnaire home and fill it at peace, far from their work pressures. In this way they could concentrate better on filling the questionnaire and provide their answers carefully. Data collection process was began from June 2012 and continued until March 2013.

As it was mentioned, in this study 267 participants submitted the TTHQ questionnaire. The questionnaires were categorized according to the educational degree; age and teaching experience of the participants and the correlations were obtained between each dichotomy of teachers' communities, using SPSS software.

2.4.1.2. Conducting Interview

Following the administration of the questionnaires, those participants who showed satisfaction for participating in interview were selected. In this regard, 60 teachers that were selected from the total number of 267 teacher participants in the questionnaire filling were investigated in a semi-structured interview. The probing questions asked in this interview were based on the Items which were prior asked in the questionnaire, in this regards teachers were asked to bring reasons for the answers they provided earlier and elaborate on their responses on the questionnaires' items. In this way teachers' mentality on their teaching was investigated and was used for the explanation of the research results which is discussed later in this article.

2.4.3. Data Analysis

The data were gathered and organized for the following analysis. First, the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed as a whole to indicate the thinking and beliefs of Iranian EFL teachers in general. Then, the questionnaires were organized in 3 phases. In phase 1, the data gathered from the participants were divided in two groups according to their teaching experiences, in other words, novice teachers and experienced teachers. In phase two, the collected data were divided into two groups according to the participants' ages, namely, younger teachers (less than 30 years old) and older teachers (more than 30 years old). In phase three, considering the educational degree of the participants, the whole data was divided into two groups of more educated and less educated. Accordingly, the correlation was obtained between the mentioned dichotomous variables in each phase of the study.

The first section of the questionnaire was consisted of 100 items in likert scale and the answer options for each item were ranged from "Strongly disagree", "Disagree", "Slightly disagree", "Slightly agree", "Agree", and "Strongly agree". For analyzing this section, we used frequency analysis and descriptive statistics. According to the nature of the data gathered, it was decided that Pearson Product–moment correlation (r) be engaged for descriptive analysis. The results are shown by the graphs, illustrating the correlation between the responses to the same items in different groups based on the factors under the study.
The 100 - Item scale in the first part of the questionnaire was categorized in 14 areas of teaching, which were mentioned earlier. To interpret Iranian TEFL teachers' thinking about teaching we dealt with analyzing the data and discussing the results in these different categories. At first the whole 267 questionnaires were analyzed together, considering all participants in one big group, so that the results could be generalized to the population of TEFL teachers in Iran. In the next step, considering teachers' thinking in their different communities (based on 3 variables of age, teaching experience and educational degrees) were compared and contrasted using correlational analysis between their responses on the questionnaire. In other words, the data collected was analyzed in three phases: Less educated teachers' thinking vs. more educated ones, younger teachers' thinking vs. older ones, and more important than all, Novice teachers' thinking vs. experience teachers' thinking. In each phase correlation was obtained between the two groups and the results were discussed based on the related graphs.

To analyze the qualitative data, namely, participants' responses on open ended questions on the questionnaire and their responses to the questions asked during the interview the following steps were taken:

Participants' responses to the open ended questions were typed exactly as they were written in the papers (without any modifications or correction on grammatical mistakes) to keep the data authentic. The responses to each question were typed under each question in an organized way, so that, it could help the interpretation process become easier. On the other hand, the responses to the interview questions were also transcribed to verbatim. They were typed and organized as it was done for the questionnaire's open-ended questions. In the next step the whole answers were reviewed by the researcher, using content and document analysis to interpret the findings of the data collected. In this regard "open-coding" strategy (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p.62) was applied, based on which the data were analyzed.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Descriptive Statistics of Teacher thinking Questionnaire (TTHQ) in the realm of interview results

Participants' responses were analyzed based on each of the 14 categories under the study and interpreted under the shed of teachers' own explanations in interview sessions, elaborating on the reasons on choosing each option and their thoughts about related issues.

3.1.1. Descriptive analysis of participants' responses to part 1 of the TTHQ and the related interview results

In this part, participants responses to different category of questions were analyzed and interpreted based on the reasons and explanations they were provided for their choices and thoughts.

3.1.1.1. Category 1: Teachers' self-confidence and autonomy

Experienced, older and higher educated teachers had more self - confidence but younger, novice and lower - educated teachers felt that they are not confident enough in class. However, most of the participants were reluctant of hosting supervisors in their classes.

3.1.1.2. Category 2: job satisfaction, work condition and facilities

Most of the participants complained the low teaching facilities and the low income they received in English Institutes. Lower – educated, higher-educated, experienced and older teachers believed that they would teach better if they were paid more. However, younger and novice teachers stated that their low income doesn't have effect on their teaching quality. For them earning experience is more important. In this regard, we can conclude job satisfaction among Iranian language teachers is considerably low.
3.1.1.3. Category 3: characteristics of a good teacher and his role in class

Teachers in different teaching communities had different criterion for evaluating a good teacher and assumed different roles for teachers in class. While lower educated, older and experienced teachers considered teachers' roles as instructor, authority and knowledge transmitter; the rest of participants considered teacher roles as guide, leader, facilitator and interest arouser.

3.1.1.4. Category 4: characteristics of a good teacher and his role in class

Comparatively, novice teachers and surprisingly those higher educated teachers with low teaching experience think that they have more difficulty in their class management. In comparison to younger teachers, experienced teachers and lower educated teachers with more teaching experience, feel more comfortable in dealing with noisy students and managing class from different aspects.

3.1.1.5. Category 5: Class evaluation and assessment

Majority of higher educated teachers claimed that they use portfolios in their class activities and considered it as a good assessing instrument. Although considering self-assessment as a good evaluation technique, older and less-educated teachers mostly use teacher assessment rather than self-assessment. On the other hand, younger, experienced and novice teachers claimed that they use teacher assessment, self-assessment and peer-assessment in class.

3.1.1.6. Category 6: importance of feedback and error correction

Younger, less educated and novice teachers believed that students' mistakes should be corrected. However giving feedback to students and taking feedback from them are not necessary. On the other hand, older, higher educated and experienced teachers emphasized the importance of feedback, especially as a positive reinforcement. They also believed that learners' errors should be corrected; however each community had different views regarding the ways of error correction.

3.1.1.7. Category 7: psychological considerations toward students

Nearly all of the participants claimed that they pay attention to the psychological needs of the students and they try to pay equal attention to all students. However, teachers in different groups had different ideologies about learners' needs and how teachers should consider those needs in their teaching.

3.1.1.8. Category 8: the extent of the use of first language in classroom

Higher educated, novice and younger teachers believed that native language should not be used in class at all, but they sometimes use native language when it is necessary, especially in teaching grammar. Others believed that use of native language in some situations is even beneficial when they can facilitate students' learning.

3.1.1.9. Category 9: lesson planning and preparation for class

Majority of older, experienced and less-educated teachers stated that they don't usually use lesson planning and they don't need previewing lessons before class. However younger and novice teachers felt it's very useful for them, and give them much confidence in class. On the other hand, higher educated teachers stated that although they are important factors, they don't usually use them.
3.1.1.10. Category 10: use of technology in classroom

Experienced, older and less educated teachers preferred paper-based materials and stated that they don't usually use software and computer in classroom. Novice, younger and higher educated participants showed interest in using Internet-based materials and different instructional software in class.

3.1.1.11. Category 11: use of pedagogical aids and games for teaching practice

Nearly all of the participants claimed that they use pedagogical aids and games in class, particularly in elementary and pre-intermediate levels, and they believed that they are very useful for teaching purposes. However, less-educated and novice teachers believed that they take the time of class and sometimes may distract students' attention from the main points of the lesson being taught.

3.1.1.12. Category 12: teachers' self-reflection on their practice

Nearly, all participants argued that they had bad memories from their teaching experiences, especially their first years of teaching. Except for older and experienced teachers, all other participants believed that they have a lot of weak points in their teaching.

Most of the participants claimed that they always use warm up at the beginning of class and they preview previous session's lesson plan to let weak students get the points better.

Majority of the higher-educated and novice teachers believed on the effectiveness of group activities and claimed that they always use grouping in their classes. However the rest of participants also stated that they sometimes use grouping, only because of the nature of the books they teach.

3.1.1.13. Category 13: class setting and atmosphere

Older, experienced and lower-educated teachers preferred teacher-oriented classes. However, alongside of the rest of participants, who preferred the combination of teacher-oriented and learner-oriented class designs, they strongly believed that the atmosphere and environment of the class plays an important role in learning of students and creating stress-free environment helps to raise students' learning ability.

3.1.1.14. Category 14: teaching theories/methods and techniques

The results of this category were explained in the heart of the results obtained from participants' answers to the 3 open-ended questions of the second part of questionnaire

3.1.2. Descriptive analysis of participants' responses to part 2 of the TTHQ

From participants' responses to the question "To what extent do you think Knowledge about methods and techniques of teaching have influence on your teaching practices?" Following results were obtained:

Surprisingly, the majority of experienced teachers believed that knowing about methods and techniques introduced by others are of no use. They thought that there is no need for teachers to know about different methods, since they may prevent them to develop their own methods. They claimed that teachers' own personal experiences are the first essential factor in their teaching practice rather than academic learning. On the other hand, novice teachers emphasized on the effectiveness of being aware of different methods, since they can aid them in dealing with different situations and can orient them and guide them in their teaching experiences. More educated teachers and also older teachers believed that although having knowledge about methods is important, but teachers should not solely rely on one method, but in the eclectic form of using methods, dependant on different factors such as class
conditions, and etc. Interestingly, putting the highly established methods in the margin, younger teachers and also less educated teachers emphasized on the importance of teachers’ innovations and creativity.

However, Responses to the second question “How much do you think your teaching practice concords with the rules and techniques, defined by highly established methods?” indicated that experienced teachers, more educated teachers and older teachers’ class practice are to the large extent based on the highly established methods, due to the expectations of English institutes in which they are teaching, yet not exactly concord. Other half of participants believed that they do their best to adjust the techniques they used to highly established methods, yet include their own methods and creativities in their class practice.

And from the last question in which participants were asked to write briefly about their "own" methods (the methods created exclusively by their own), and to answer what methods are they inspired from, It was found that what Iranian English teachers call their own creativity and methods have completely overlap and in so many cases concord with those of famous methods of teaching being taught in teacher education courses. However, most of the participants believed that their teaching methodology is mostly inspired from CLT method in the first place, and TPR and GTM methods, in the second and third place.

3.1.3. Correlations between participants responses to TTHQ, based on three factors of experience, age and educational degree

Graph 1. shows the positive correlation between experienced and novice teachers' thinking, where $r = 0.41$ ($r>0.05$) and the coefficient of determination equals to 0.170.

Graph 2. shows the positive correlation between older and younger teachers' thinking, where $r = 0.22$ ($r>0.05$), and the coefficient of determination equals to 0.051.
Graph 2.3. shows the positive correlation between higher-educated and lower-educated teachers' thinking, where $r = 0.13 \ (r>0.05)$, and the coefficient of determination equals to 0.019.

4. Conclusion

It can be concluded that although being slightly different in their opinions and beliefs about different aspects of their own teaching, there exist a low but positive relationship between teachers' thinking and their underlying beliefs in all groups of teacher communities.

References