Teachers' Beliefs and Teaching English Writing to Children and Adolescent Learners in Iran

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Abstract
Working on SLA, most of researchers have focused either on the advanced learners or the future achievements of young learners. consequently the young language learners' early second language writing development has been largely neglected and needs to be taken into a serious consideration that is of the areas in SLA which can be investigated regarding different aspects, the young language learners themselves and the teachers who are teaching them English writing. The present study has investigated the beliefs of Iranian English teachers on the teaching of second language writing as one of the major roots for teaching English Writing.130 Iranian English teachers were selected to participate in this study of whom 65 were teaching to children and 65 were teaching to adolescent. However both have experiences in teaching the other group too. Through a 35 close ended questions designed questionnaire, the study examined the teachers' belief in teaching writing and the extent to which their beliefs were reflected in their writing practices in their classroom. At first, a comparison was made regarding the same age groups. Then, the obtained data from both children and adolescents groups were compared in order to gain an overall view. The results of data analysis suggest a number of findings First, teachers' theoretical knowledge do not significantly differ in their beliefs about the "importance of writing", "Meaning of writing" and "Feedback and error correction" that they should provide in their classes when they are teaching witting. Second, The differences indicates that English teachers of children and English teachers of adolescents believe to adopt different approaches and use quite different practices and activities in their classrooms when they are teaching children and adolescents. Third there seems to be other factors affecting Iranian teachers' belief about writing that were not studied in this research and, therefore, need to be considered by further research. Other factors such as student-related factors, cultural context of school, and educational curriculums may affect teachers' beliefs.

Key words: Adolescence, Childhood, Teachers' beliefs, Writing

I. Introduction

English as a second language being widely used in many different areas such as tourism, telecommunication, science and technology seems to be not only a means but also as a key to obtain the latest achievements in such areas, so for this role as a medium for satisfying these growing needs English has turned into a unique language in the world. This distinctiveness does not only refer to the language itself, but also the way it is taught as a foreign or second language.

Researchers have hypothesized that individuals can acquire a second language when they have access to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1981) which has been negotiated through listener- speaker interaction. Also it has been argued that L2 acquisition can occur when the

acquirer participates in natural communication and when the focus in that communication is on the message than on the language form. Therefore comprehensible input, natural communication and emphasis on the message over form are seen as three vital ingredients in successful language acquisition which is what Weger (1998) argues about as what members of communities do through a dynamic dual process involving a complex interplay between participation and negotiation.

So for language teaching and its retention, while English status has been discussed from different scopes of ideological, cultural and political stand points, one of the major focuses in teaching this language has often been about the four underlying language skills named as speaking, listening, reading and writing as the most pedagogical concerns, and through the class observations of this language it is overtly clear that among the mentioned skills, oral skills have receive major attention through the class activities these days and the writing forms have been concerned even less important than the other three, while one easily overlooked benefit of writing at the communicative level is that such practice provides excellent preparation for oral communication activities in class (Chastain, 1988, p.248). Hence this ability needs to be considered as a basic communication skill and as a unique asset in the process of learning/teaching a second or foreign language.

For children as language learners, Stages of childhood are often identified according to developmental changes which have been argued to correspond to qualitatively different ways of thinking (Berk 2006). These stages also largely follow divisions of schooling: Early childhood (between 2–7 years of age, when children are in preschool and the beginning grades); Middle childhood (7–11 years, in elementary or middle school); Also, it is identified as the age span ranging from birth to adolescence. In developmental psychology divided up into the developmental stages of toddlerhood (learning to walk), early childhood (play age), middle childhood (school age).

Children in early childhood are learning to think symbolically and are using language to represent objects, but they still do not think logically or understand the viewpoints of others (Philp& Mackey& Oliver).At middle childhood, it becomes clear how distinct it is from early childhood. Children become more logical in their thinking and are able to categorize and organize objects, but are not yet abstract in thinking. They can, however, consider multiple aspects of a problem and imagine others' perspectives. Children at this age are increasingly adept at turn-taking, topic maintenance, and the pragmatics of making speech acts such as requests. As far as SLA is concerned, it is relevant to note that in middle child-hood children already possess a highly developed L1, and their language is increasing in vocabulary size and grammatical complexity. They are acquiring greater metalinguistic awareness, which is reflected in their language play, including a delight in riddles and puns, and later, pedantic play contrasting literal versus illocutionary meanings. Their oral and written literacy is still developing, but they are exposed to a greater range of text types as they move through schooling. In addition, the experiences of context learning and socializing in middle childhood are different to those of their younger peers (Philp& Mackey& Oliver).

According to these developmental changes identified adolescence as: the early adolescence (12–14 years, in junior high school); and later adolescence (15 years and older, in high school). Moreover base on Erik Erikson's stages of human development, an adolescent is a person between the ages of 13 and 19. In studying adolescent development, adolescence can be defined biologically, as the physical transition marked by the onset of puberty and the termination of physical growth; cognitively, as changes in the ability to think abstractly and socially, as a period of preparation for adult roles (Erickson 1986).

Adolescence is distinct in character from middle childhood: cognitively, linguistically, and socially. Many L2 learners at this age have a greater capacity for abstract thought, including language analysis, and can draw logical inferences a capacity which continues to develop in later adolescence, together with greater metalinguistic awareness across all domains, phonology, morph, syntax, the lexicon, and pragmatics (Berman 2007). In adolescence there is an increasing reliance on peers; adolescents spend more time with peers than with any other social partners (Berk 2006), and greater social networks and independence affect their contexts of interaction and L2 development. This is matched by consolidation of socio-cognitive abilities. Language use changes as social networks intensify and extend beyond home and school settings (Chambers 1995; Oliver, Haig, &Rochescouste 2005).

In addition to the above mentioned findings, done about the young English learners around the world and what they need as motivation or giving feedback or types of class activities which should be practiced in the class, but considering writing skill, previous studies have focused on adult ESL writers (Silva & Matsuda, 2001), on children's L1 writing (Dahl &Farnan, 1998; Dyson, 2003), and on instructional contexts (Gutie´rrez, 1992). One of the fastest growing, yet traditionally under represented areas of research in second language teaching is L2 writing especially in the classroom situation and among EFL learners.

It is a unique asset for second or foreign language learners should be paid attention to as it is more than having ability in orthographic form of language. Research in L1 and L2 composing has demonstrated that the writing process is extremely complex (Flower & Hayes, 1981) and involves social as well as cognitive factors (Bizzell, 1992). Ehrman (1996) focused on the challenges such as cognitive learning styles, biographical backgrounds, and emotions faced by second language learners as they learned to acquire new linguistic forms. The benefit of writing at the communicative level is that such practice provides excellent preparation for oral communication activities in class (Chastain, 1988, p.248).

In the realm of teaching writing as a language skill, often research in to classroom teaching ignores teachers' perspectives on practices that they implement in their lessons. Carol Griffiths (2007) believes that the close attention paid to learner variables, issues related to teachers have not attracted the same degree of attention, this is while, teachers are "pivotal in the enterprise of teaching and learning" and their role will inevitably have a major impact on what goes on in the classroom. So for having such a key role, their practices and perceptions are

critically important since they have the capability of influencing the effectiveness of the teaching/learning process. For such a reason understanding teachers' belief and theories about their work is necessary, as Clark and Peterson (1986) comment, in order to "make explicit and visible the frames of reference through which individual teachers perceive and process information" (p. 287).

Beliefs are often known as our attitudes, values, judgments, axioms, opinions. They affect not only how people behave but also what they perceive (or pay attention to) in their environment. Contrary to the old saying "seeing is believing", it is more likely that "believing is seeing." When people believe something is true, they perceive information supporting that belief. Beliefs alter expectations. People perceive what they expect to perceive (Tara, 1996). Beliefs are formed early; remain relatively stable, and are resistant to change (Pajares, 1992).

Therefore, considering the aforementioned problems and purposes, about teachers and their roles, this study would be conducted to provide plausible answers to the question whether there any differences between the practices of Iranian teachers of adolescents and those of teachers of children in teaching writing?

II. **Methodology**

To collect the required data 130 EFL teachers teaching English in different private language institutes in Isfahanhave participated to answer the first designed questionnaire including 35 close ended items. All of these teachers had teaching background about teaching these two groups of students or they were teaching both age groups at the time of study.

For achieving the above mentioned objective, the results of the present study were obtained through the first 35 item 5-point likert scale questionnaire required the respondents to check each statement on a given five point scale, rangingfrom Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree.The questionnaire was distributed among both group of teachers, teachers of children and teachers of adolescents. It mainly dealt with quantitative data exploring the general beliefs teachers have considering learning and teaching, the type of activities used, and the factors that influence teachers' teaching approach. The questionnaire was divided into four main categories including 1) meaning of writing 2) importance of writing 3) teaching activities and practices 4) feedback and error correction.

While in this questionnaire, parts one, two and four are seeking general beliefs about teaching writing to both groups of teachers, the third part of this questionnaire is also divided in three separate parts named as part A, part B and part C. part A asks about some general writing activities which can be applied for both groups but part B relates to writing activities and practices which can be applied for adolescent group of learners and part C includes the writing activities and practices which can be applied for children group of students. The rational for doing this is that our 130 participants included teachers who were teaching to both groups of

students who were under study, so through this divisions we can have their beliefs about teaching to both groups instead of giving them two different questionnaires one of which for children learners and the other one for adolescence learners. In addition we can compare their answers separately about both groups.

Teachers were given thelikert questionnaire either before or after their class time as they were required to check their responses to the option that best explains their beliefs. The teachers' responses to these close ended questions would make the quantitative data for this study which would be analyzed statistically using the computer software program Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

III. **Results**

As table (1) and figure (1)show teachers of Children and teachers of adolescents do not significantly differ in their beliefs about the "importance of writing", "Meaning of writing" and "Feedback and error correction". They both showed almost nearly the same pattern regarding their Means and the standard deviation.

Table1
Descriptive Results of first three items about teaching writing

	Children's teachers Mean score	SD	Adolescent's teachers Mean score	SD
Meaning of writing	12.23	1.17	10.44	2.08
Importance of writing	7.70	1.12	6.81	1.28
Feedback and error correction	11.81	2.11	13.02	2.17

Part (B) and (C) were included in the first questionnaire for obtaining more specific information about teachers' belief about the differences and similarities among these two groups of teachers regarding teaching writing. The gathered data from their filled questionnaires on what they believe about teaching writing to children and adolescent group of students is summarized in table2. The first mean and standard deviation are the results of what each group believes about teaching writing to children and the second ones relate to what the same group believes about teaching writing to adolescent group of learners.

Table2

Descriptive results of teachers answers on writing activities

Teachers of children			
Teachers belief results about teaching children		Teachers belief results about teaching adolescents	
Mean score	SD	Mean score	SD
22.92	2.34	27.43	3.03
Teachers of adolescents			
Teachers belief results about teaching children		Teachers belief results about teaching adolescents	
Mean score	SD	Mean score	SD
15.66	1.51	19.81	2.14

The significant differences observed through the obtained results indicates that English teachers of childrenand English teachers of adolescents believe to adopt different approaches and use quite differentpractices and activities in their classrooms when they are teaching children and adolescents.

After comparing the results of what each group of teachers presented about "teaching practicesand activities" of writing to children and adolescents, the total means and standard deviations of teachers teaching children and teachers teaching adolescent groups of students were put in table3. As the total measured means and standard deviations for both groups of teachers show, there are significant differences between the obtained means and standard deviations which reveal that the teachers of these two groups of students believe that there should be differences in teaching writing to children and adolescent group.

Table3

Total measured mean and SD for writing activities

Both group answers about teaching writing to children	
Mean score	SD
19.29	1.92
Both group answers about teaching writing to adolescents	
Mean score	SD
23.62	2.58

The four participating teachers selected for the second part of study answered the questions on their beliefs about teaching writing through the second questionnaire. While their first mentioned reason, and for some the only written reason, about the logic of differentiating teaching writing to children and adolescence was the age factor, they equate writing with the way for expressing one's own opinion and ideas or as a skill that results in more fluency, accuracy, and more proficiency in English, also as the ability of expressing ideas through words on the paper. They believed thatwriting skill helps students to increase their vocabulary scope; and it is essential as it improves students' spelling, grammatical structure and also their memory for the practice of collecting and organizing information on the paper. They believed that writing skill seems to be necessary if students are to succeed in examinations. In addition, it is seen as a way through which they can discern their true level of efficiency in language; also it is necessary for communication.

Comparing two teachers of children class observations for their writing class activities showed that they both are more or less practicing and applying the same kinds of activities in their writing classes. They wanted their students to do copy copying activities, to do some substitution exercises in which they should change the words, to fill the blank space in a written sentence and to unscramble a sentence. Another similarity between teachers was the use of grammatical points. They wanted them to write sentences using grammatical points they had learned in the class. For further practice of their students they assigned further practice including what their students had done in the class in addition to the writing activities presented in the book.

IV.   **Conclusion**

One of the things which can stop deriving pleasure out of the language activities is the overburden on the shoulder of the young learners. By assigning different tasks of spelling and writing practice, these English learners become soon tired. One reason of this frustration could be their age. They may be under-age yet to start being literate in a second language, while they are not literate enough in their first language. But In this realm before learners themselves and the learning variables, or evaluating the writing tasks and lessons,one important subject that is mostly ignored to study is about English teachers. As the central component in the class what they do in their teaching pedagogy, because while some aspects of language might well be learnt in first language through the explanation, is hardly the prime means of learning principles of syntax and writing. What L2 learners receive necessarily concerns only those points that their teachers are aware of and those are part of his conscious knowledge, so it seems studying about the present subject would be significant for signifying what is going on in our English teaching class and for students writing learning. Therefore the present study aims at providing more information on what do EFL teachers believe about teaching English writing and about the extent to which they practices reflect what they believe. This has been done considering the teachers of young learners divided in two groups. The first group as children, the age span ranging from birth to adolescence, in this study Middle childhood (7–11 years, in elementary or middle school)

and the second is adolescents, in this study the early adolescence (12–14 years, in junior high school).

As the results of data analysis run in pervious sections, a number of findings emerged: First, it appears to be the fact that teachers' theoretical knowledge about definition and importance of teaching writing as a language skill is near to each other and near to what is stated by methodologists and linguists. The findings of this study also showed that they believed that differences in teaching writing skill should exist when they want to teach children or adolescents.In addition, there seems to be other factors such as student-related factors, cultural context of school, and educational curriculums may affect Iranian teachers' belief about writing that were not studied in this research and, therefore, need to be considered by further research.

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