



## The Effect of Educational Background on Iranian EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research

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### Introduction

Initial teacher education programs have shown interest in the practice of action research (AR) in the last few years (Dassa & Nichols, 2020; Phillips & Carr, 2010; Volk, 2009). It has been proposed that AR makes pre-service teachers familiar with a reflective approach to teaching (Kosnik & Beck, 2000), forms their practice in the future (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), enables them to solve their routine classroom problems (Hatch et al., 2007), and encourages them to follow an inquiry-oriented teaching approach during their career (Aras, 2020; Moran, 2007). As Mitchell et al. (2009) make it clear, “research becomes a tool beginning teachers can use to continuously inform and improve practice, engage ongoing expertise development and not something student teachers read about in college and promptly forget when entering the world of teaching” (p. 349).

Meanwhile, AR is also finding its way in the graduate (master's and doctoral) programs of the institutions of higher education in many countries. As the previous research has shown AR can result in professional development and move professional practice forward (e.g., Atay, 2006, 2008; Cabaroglu, 2014; Dikilitas & Yayli, 2018; McDonough, 2006; Richards & Farrell, 2005), the methodology courses in graduate programs in the field of education try to make AR part of their students' personalized instructional practice (Sela & Harel, 2012).

Due to the important role of AR in both initial and graduate teacher education programs, researchers in the field of second/foreign language (L2) teacher education have paid special attention to teachers' beliefs about AR in recent years (e.g., Atay, 2006, 2008; Bashir, 2011; Mehrani, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017; Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2017, 2018, 2019; Wyatt, 2011). However, despite the existence of a large number of studies on teachers' beliefs about AR in the L2 literature, the various factors which might affect such beliefs have not been studied systematically. This is an important issue because as Moini (2009) points out, “researchers have seldom examined the effect of these personal and institutional variables on teachers' beliefs...There is not much known about the extent to which individual, organizational and educational factors play a role in shaping teachers' beliefs” (p. 146). Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to find out whether there are any statistically significant differences in teachers' beliefs about AR with special reference to their educational background.

In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following research question was posited: Do EFL teachers with different educational backgrounds (i.e., B.A., M.A., and Ph.D.) have different beliefs about AR?



## Literature Review

As pre-service teacher education programs play an important role in shaping student teachers' understanding and awareness of AR, such programs have increasingly adopted AR courses in their curriculum. In this way, Ginns et al. (2001, p. 114) point out that, "requiring students to engage in action research, in particular, in the final year of pre-service programs, could play an important role in developing their awareness and understanding of, and immersion in, the culture of action research". It has also been suggested that making student teachers aware of AR may be beneficial for developing reflective practice as it has been shown that AR encourages reflection through intentional and rigorous examination of teacher practices in the classroom context (Mann & Walsh, 2017; Sato & Chen, 2019).

In contrast to the approval of AR in many initial teacher education programs, the use and practice of AR in graduate education programs has been controversial. The argument which is provided against the use of AR is that it is considered inferior in comparison to traditional research methodologies. It has also been argued that graduate students prefer not to use this methodology "either because of the politics of their position or because of the demands of the methodology" (Osterman et al., 2014, p. 97). Yet another problem lies in the fact that students often face resistance from their institutions' administrators or supervisors as they are unwilling to let students examine their educational context. In other words, "the politics of conducting an action research dissertation within a students' work environment can add additional challenges to the dissertation process" (Vaughan et al., 2019, p. 3).

On the other hand, there are researchers who emphasize the benefits of exposure to and use of AR in graduate programs. For example, Amrein-Beardsley et al. (2012) report the positive attitudes of a group of students who experienced AR in their doctoral program. In their own words, AR "provided them valuable opportunities to reflect on their practice and improve their research skills" (p. 107). Considering the collaborative nature of AR, Klocker (2012) refers to the benefits that doctoral students achieve by conducting their research as a member of a participatory action research (PAR) team and believes that "the time-saving potential of PAR has scarcely been acknowledged in the literature but was most apparent to me during the data collection phase of the project" (p. 154). Since collaboration is an important part of AR, it has been proposed that AR can even improve social justice as it has "the potential to shift power relationships and facilitate joint efforts that cross lines of organizational hierarchy" (Osterman et al., 2014, p. 101).

## Method

### Instrument

In order to find out about teachers' beliefs about AR, the present study used the Inventory on Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research (ITBAR) which has recently been developed and validated for L2 teachers (for details on its development and validation see Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2020). The ITBAR (see the Appendix) includes 21 items which are categorized under five main factors. The first factor is called *Teacher Empowerment* because the six items in this factor refer to issues related to equipping teachers in their profession. The second factor is named *Practical Issues* because this 4-item factor measures teachers' beliefs about the effect of AR on their classroom practice. The third factor is labelled *Professional Development* as the three items categorized under this factor reflect teachers' views about the ways they can develop in their profession. The fourth factor is named *Institutional Culture* since all of the four items in this category clearly deal with the role that the institutions can play in encouraging teachers to do AR. The fifth factor is called *Research Engagement* because the four items in this factor take into account teachers' views about research.

## Participants and Data Collection Procedure

The target population of the present study was defined as all practicing ELT teachers at different institutes, schools, and centers of higher education in Iran. Both face to face and email methods were used for instrument distribution. A total of 115 instruments were distributed in hard copy to the teachers in Mashhad city (northeastern Iran) from which 104 completed questionnaires were returned, representing a response rate of 90%. The instrument was also sent through email to more than 500 ELT teachers and professionals in Iran. In general, 82 respondents completed the instrument, representing a response rate of 16%. The total number of instruments completed and returned was 186. However, 11 questionnaires were discarded as the participants either did not mention their academic degrees or had non-academic certificates such as CELTA or DELTA. Out of the remaining 175 questionnaires, there were 53 Ph.D., 58 M.A., and 64 B.A. holders. According to their educational background, the participants were divided into three groups (i.e., Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctoral degree), each consisting of 48 randomly-selected teachers. Regarding gender, 93 of the respondents were female (65%) and 51 were male (35%).

## Results

Table 1 shows the mean scores for three levels of educational background. According to the results of descriptive statistics, Ph.D. holders ( $M = 184.33$ ,  $SD = 22.740$ ) had the highest degree of beliefs about AR. The second group in this regard was M.A. holders ( $M = 180.21$ ,  $SD = 18.893$ ). The group which had the lowest degree of beliefs about AR with respect to their mean scores was B.A. holders ( $M = 173.17$ ,  $SD = 22.533$ ).

TABLE 1  
*Descriptive Statistics*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean			
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound	Minimum	Maximum
B.A.	48	173.17	22.533	3.252	166.62	179.71	141	204
M.A.	48	180.21	18.893	2.727	174.72	185.69	109	211
Ph.D.	48	184.33	22.740	3.282	177.73	190.94	112	216
Total	144	179.24	21.807	1.817	175.64	182.83	109	216

In order to test whether the difference among the groups was significant, a one-way ANOVA test was used. As Table 2 shows, there was statistically significant difference in teachers' beliefs about AR with respect to their educational background,  $F(2, 141) = 3.323$ ,  $p = .03$ .

TABLE 2  
*One-way ANOVA*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3060.722	2	1530.361	3.323	.039
Within Groups	64943.250	141	460.590		
Total	68003.972	143			

As Table 3 shows, the LSD post hoc test makes it clear that the mean difference between B.A. and Ph.D. holders is statistically significant ( $p = .01$ ). However, the data did not show any other statistically significant differences among the groups.

TABLE 3  
LSD Post Hoc Test

		Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
B.A.	M.A.	-7.042	4.381	.110	-15.70	1.62
	Ph.D.	-11.167	4.381	.012	-19.83	-2.51
M.A.	B.A.	7.042	4.381	.110	-1.62	15.70
	Ph.D.	-4.125	4.381	.348	-12.79	4.54
Ph.D.	B.A.	11.167	4.381	.012	2.51	19.83
	M.A.	4.125	4.381	.348	-4.54	12.79

## Discussion

As the data show, both M.A. and Ph.D. holders had higher means than B.A. holders with respect to their beliefs about AR. Moreover, the follow-up post hoc test showed that the significant difference among the groups lies between B.A. and Ph.D. holders. This finding might be attributed to the increased use of AR as an accepted methodology in graduate education, especially Ph.D., programs (Vaughan & Burnaford, 2015). In other words, since graduate programs require students to deepen their insights after completing their bachelor's degree programs, graduate students' understanding of the function and value of AR might have improved. However, it should be noted that still there is a long way for making AR popular in graduate programs as yet "few academic faculty are trained in action research" (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 7). This is because quantitative and qualitative methodologies have traditionally dominated graduate teacher education programs and students have not had the opportunity to take methodology courses about AR during their education (Leech & Goodwin, 2008).

Yet it is worth noting that many of the graduate teacher education programs in the field of education use the reflective practitioner model as their foundation. Due to the fact that reflection is an essential part of the AR process, these programs have viewed AR as an appropriate tool for developing reflection in their students. For example, Lebak and Tinsley's (2010) study in the context of a graduate education program showed that teachers can use AR to become reflective practitioner researchers. Conducting an AR course in a graduate education program, Christenson et al. (2002) also showed that students gained the ability to deepen their skills as both reflective teachers and researchers by using AR. So the acceptance of AR in graduate teacher education programs can be related to its power to increase teachers' reflective practice. This fosters positive views toward AR by graduates, which is in line with the findings of the present study.

Another important point that should be considered is that the needs of schools and teachers have changed in recent years and teachers have adopted new roles. These roles require teachers to perform not just at the classroom level but also at the school and/or community levels. In order to address these new school needs and teacher roles, graduate degree programs have tried to prepare teachers by including new positions in their programs so that the prospective teachers become familiar with their expected new roles. Accordingly, Lieberman and Miller (2004) propose that teachers should have three specific roles, namely, researchers, scholars, and mentors. In line with this new trend in graduate teacher education programs, the previous research has shown that AR has the power to change teachers into leaders and mentors at the graduate level (e.g., Carboni et al., 2007; Crocco et al., 2003; Evans et al., 2000; Shosh & Zales, 2007). This might explain why graduate teachers have higher degrees of beliefs in the present study in comparison to their undergraduate counterparts as they have become more familiar with the new roles of teachers as researchers, generally, and action researchers, specifically, in their graduate programs.

## Conclusion

Despite the problems in the way of accepting AR in academic contexts (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), the findings of the present study showed that teachers who have finished their graduate (master's and doctoral) programs have more positive beliefs about AR. This might be due to the fact that AR provides teachers with opportunities in these programs to conduct research on real-world issues specifically related to their field of study. According to Brown et al. (2015, p. 74), "just as action research enhances graduate students' teaching and research, action research can be an approach that enhances instructors' pedagogy and scholarship."

However, as the data show, it seems that undergraduate teachers lag behind their graduate colleagues regarding their beliefs about AR. In this way, it is argued that initial teacher education programs need to help teachers become more familiar with the benefits of conducting AR and a lack of attention to AR in these programs can only result in continued lower beliefs about AR among student teachers. There is still work to be done supporting undergraduate teachers who wish to use AR as a methodology and initial teacher educators and specialists in higher education institutions around the world should continue their discussion of the role of AR within their programs.

Meanwhile, as interpreting the results of the present study, it should be noted that the study was conducted in Iranian educational contexts with the Iranian ELT professional community as participants. This is an important issue as the points discussed and the conclusions reached might not be generalizable to other contexts and need to be viewed in the context of the present study. For the findings to be generalizable, of course, the study should be replicated with other participants in different educational contexts from different countries. Hence, more extensive data collection by using ITBAR and innovative research methods will undoubtedly result in a clearer understanding of teachers' beliefs about AR and any potential difference that might be attributable to various variables, such as the teachers' educational background.

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### Appendix

#### Inventory on Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research (ITBAR) Adopted from Rahmani Doqaruni et al. (2020)

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Moderately Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Disagree</i>	<i>Somewhat Agree</i>	<i>Moderately Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
1) AR helps teachers to form a better understanding of the contextual constraints which leads to their emerging role as agents of change						
2) AR Encourages teachers to re-think about their teaching, their students, and the values of their work and thus change the status quo correspondingly						
3) AR helps teachers to become more aware of their autonomy in educational system						
4) AR reinforces good teachers' qualities needed to teach such as to be more open, more patient, and more flexible						
5) AR gives teachers a break in their routines to renew their energy and enthusiasm about teaching						
6) AR helps teachers to reflect about the aims and values implicit in their teaching and students' learning						
7) AR encourages reflection through the intentional and rigorous examination of teacher practices in the classroom						
8) AR is a useful tool for teachers to improve their classroom practice						
9) AR empowers teachers to develop a pedagogical theory and to explore it in practice						
10) AR enables teachers to become more aware of their students' needs and thus be able to adapt their lessons correspondingly						
11) AR is facilitated if time for doing AR is built into teachers' workloads in their institutions						
12) AR is facilitated if teachers have access to AR books and journals in their institutions						
13) AR is facilitated if management provides opportunities such as organizing workshops or giving teachers support to attend conferences						
14) AR is facilitated if the institution atmosphere makes teachers feel that doing AR is an important part of their job						

15) AR has positive effects on teachers' perspectives toward research						
16) AR makes teachers feel motivated to read professional journals and publications						
17) AR acquaints teachers with the concept of research and enhances their knowledge of conducting research						
18) AR makes teachers feel motivated to disseminate their research through publishing articles or participating in conferences						
19) AR empowers teachers as the creators of knowledge and not just the holders of such knowledge						
20) AR has profound impacts on teachers' professional development						
21) AR helps teachers to be more thoughtful and purposeful about their teaching						