



The Effect of Educational Context on Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research in the Iranian EFL Educational System

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Introduction

Second/foreign language (L2) researchers and educators have always been looking for new ways of teacher professional development to make teachers more responsible for examining their teaching context so that they might gain a deeper insight of their own work (Edge, 2005). Action research (AR) has gained its reputation as a reliable tool to this end as it helps to cultivate teachers' professional development (e.g., Atay, 2006, 2008; Chou, 2011). Wallace (1998) defines AR as "the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice" (p. 1). So it can be argued that unless L2 teachers involve themselves in AR, they would not be able to develop their expertise progressively in the teaching profession.

It has also been shown that L2 teachers' beliefs play an important role in their professional development (Farrell & Guz, 2019). It is because beliefs "play a crucial mediating role in teachers' professional development by shaping how they think, feel and act out in the classroom" (Altinsoy & Okan, 2017, p. 53). In this way, beliefs play a crucial role in influencing teachers' behaviors, actions and interactions in the classroom (Borg, 2006; Farrell & Lim, 2005) as they constitute a complex network of assumptions underlying teachers' professional behavior (Zheng, 2015). Due to such an importance, a new strand of research has recently paid a special attention to teachers' beliefs about AR in L2 education (e.g., Atay, 2006, 2008; Mehrani, 2014, 2017; Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021). The main purpose behind investigating teachers' beliefs about AR has been to find out about teachers' research engagement in the classroom context.

However, despite the fact that teachers' beliefs affect teachers' views and attitudes toward AR, these beliefs have not been studied systematically in L2 education (Borg, 2008), and there is not much known about the effect of different factors on shaping teachers' beliefs (Moini, 2009). This is problematic as it has been argued that this lack of empirical knowledge about the effect of different influential factors on teachers' beliefs results in a gap in our understanding about teachers' engagement/disengagement with research (Borg, 2007). One important contextual factor which might affect teachers' beliefs about AR, and to the best of my knowledge has not been investigated before, is the role of educational context. Another important reason for examining the role of educational context in teachers' beliefs about AR in the present study is that teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in different educational contexts (i.e. public school, private institute, and university/college) in Iran, although within the same geographical area, is extremely different (Ebn-Abbasi & Nushi, 2022). For example, it has been shown that while



Iranian public schools usually do not consider communication in the target language important, private institutes encourage communicative competence (Moradkhani & Haghi, 2017). The difference between these educational contexts has been attributed to different educational policies established in these contexts. In other words, while public schools in Iran follow a centralized educational system under the supervision of the Ministry of Education through which certain books are published and the same syllabus for public schools is assigned across the whole country, private institutes follow a decentralized educational system through which various international coursebooks are used and different approaches to teaching English are practiced (Ebn-Abbasi & Nushi, 2022). Given the differences in attitudes toward teaching EFL in different educational contexts in Iran, conducting a study on this aspect is of particular importance.

Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to find out whether the educational context in which L2 teachers work causes any statistically significant difference in teachers' beliefs about AR.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the main aim of the present study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Do different L2 educational contexts (i.e. public school, private institute, and university/college) affect teachers' beliefs about AR?
2. What might be the possible reasons for their effect or lack of effect?

Literature Review

Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research

Previous research in the field of L2 education has reported numerous benefits of AR as a form of professional development. For example, it has been argued that, if conducted regularly, AR empowers teachers as the creators and not just the holders of knowledge (Avgitidou, 2010). Moreover, AR can help teachers gain a deeper insight about the teaching and learning process (Lacorte & Krastel, 2002). In addition, it has been shown that AR can help L2 teachers identify particular educational problems and find solutions to those problems in their specific teaching contexts (Hadley, 2003), become autonomous (Tinker Sachs, 2000), use academic research findings in their classrooms more effectively (Sayer, 2005), and increase their knowledge of conducting research (Crookes & Chandle, 2001).

Due to the importance of AR in professional development of teachers, L2 researchers have shown particular interest in teachers' beliefs about AR in the last two decades. Rainey's (2000) study is considered the first systematic study on this issue which dealt with opinions of L2 teachers with respect to AR in addition to their knowledge and practices about AR. The study showed that three-quarters of the teachers surveyed had not heard of AR and even those who knew about AR believed that it was only for professional self-development. In other words, the view toward AR was traditional and teachers did not have any idea about other potentialities of AR.

In order to help pre- and in-service English teachers do more research in Turkey, Atay (2006) introduced a collaborative AR model to help teachers become familiar with research in real classroom contexts and engage in more research. The model encouraged the teachers to carry out research together after gaining knowledge about AR theoretically. The results showed that the collaborative AR was successful and teachers became more skillful in conducting research as they learned how to observe, evaluate, and reflect on their teaching practices in the classroom. The results also showed that teachers changed their beliefs about AR positively. In another study, Atay (2008) tried to introduce AR as an

opportunity for changing English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' beliefs during an in-service teacher program. She divided AR into three main parts, namely, theoretical knowledge, issues for investigation, and doing research. The data consisted of teachers' narratives and journals written by teachers. The analysis of teachers' narratives and journals at the end of the program showed that teachers became aware of the usefulness of AR and had positive beliefs about AR.

Trying to find out about the advantages and disadvantages of AR from the Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives, Mehrani (2017) carried out a study which made use of multiple sources of data, including narrative frames, semi-structured interviews, AR reports and reflective essays. It was found that Iranian EFL teachers mainly did AR to deal with practical aspects of their profession. In addition, teachers believed that AR could increase their understanding of language education and help them to reflect on their practice. However, the findings revealed that there were some limitations in the way of conducting AR such as lack of time, lack of specialized knowledge about AR, and administrative restrictions.

In a recent series of studies, Rahmani Doqaruni and his colleagues (Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2017, 2018, 2019) tried to gain insight into English language teachers' beliefs, reasons, and views about AR in private English language teaching institutions. Their findings showed that most of the teachers believed that AR was like observation (where a teacher observes another teacher's classroom to analyze the teaching and learning process), could tell the difference between AR and standard research, and had positive views toward collaborative AR. Teachers' views about conducting AR also showed that some issues were of considerable importance to them, such as being empowered in dealing with a particular problem, belonging to a professional community, and valuing time allotment. In addition, many teachers considered AR useful in solving their practical teaching problems and improving their teaching practices. However, the further analysis of the teachers' reasons made it clear that they had problems in conducting AR which were of practical, logistic, and attitudinal nature.

Educational Context

Previous research has shown that educational context can affect teachers' beliefs regarding their professional development and instructional practices. For example, Flores and Day (2006) found that new teachers are affected by the normative and implicit rules of their school context. Therefore, the teachers follow a more compliant attitude and try to modify their beliefs in line with the demands and norms of the new educational context. Investigating the relationship between new teachers' attrition and their school contextual factors, Boyd et al. (2011) found that teachers' professional development and career decisions were influenced by their working conditions. Savasci and Berlin (2012) studied the relationship between science teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices with respect to the concept of constructivism in two different school settings. Their data showed that despite the fact that the teachers were interested in applying the constructivist principles in their classrooms, some contextual factors, including school type, caused problems in practicing what they considered appropriate for their classrooms.

Similar findings have been found in the field of L2 education. For instance, Richards and Pennington (1998) found that although novice teachers in Hong Kong became familiar with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology during their formal education and were expected to follow its principles in their classrooms, they did not practice this methodology due to hindering factors in their educational contexts. Sakui's (2004) study also showed that the prescription of curriculum by the Ministry of Education in Japan made teachers unwilling to follow the principles of the CLT methodology in their classrooms. Cuayahuitl and Carranza's (2015) more recent study on EFL Mexican teachers revealed that contextual factors had a great effect on the practicing teachers' beliefs which in turn formed their instructional practices and decisions.

The differences in teachers' beliefs can be attributed to the duality of public or private educational contexts in L2 and their different conditions and requirements. For example, Keihaniyan (2011) found that Iranian public high schools and private language institutes differ to a large extent in their teaching methodology. Classes in high schools were teacher oriented and used common textbooks. Activities were

mainly imitative and two important parts of the language which received the highest attention were vocabulary and grammar. On the other hand, private language institutes emphasized more on developing the main skills and improving the process of language learning. Pazhouhesh's (2014) comparative study also indicated that private and public schools are different at three levels of approach, design and procedures.

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., 2021). The ITBAR consists of 21 items which are categorized under five main factors, namely *Teacher Empowerment* (which refers to issues related to equipping teachers in their profession), *Practical Issues* (which measures teachers' beliefs about the effect of AR on their classroom practice), *Professional Development* (which reflects teachers' views about the ways they can develop in their profession), *Institutional Culture* (which deals with the role that the institutions can play in encouraging teachers to do AR), and *Research Engagement* (which takes into account teachers' views about research).

Participants and Data Collection Procedure

The target sample of the present study was defined as all practicing English Language Teaching (ELT) teachers at private institutes, public schools, and colleges/universities in Iran. Both face to face and email methods were used for instrument distribution. The total number of instruments completed and returned was 186. However, 117 randomly selected instruments were used for data analysis by considering the teachers' educational context. In this way, the participants were divided into three equal groups of teachers (each consisted of 39 teachers) teaching at private institutes, public schools, and colleges/universities. Regarding gender, 79 of the respondents were female (67.5%) and 38 were male (32.5%).

Results

Table 1 shows the mean scores of three different educational contexts. According to the results of descriptive statistics, teachers at public schools ($M=184.21$, $SD=20.936$) had the most positive beliefs about AR. The second group in this regard was college/university teachers ($M=183.18$, $SD=22.799$). The group which had the least positive beliefs about AR with respect to their mean scores was private institute teachers ($M=182.82$, $SD=16.298$).

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Public School	39	184.21	20.936	3.352	177.42	190.99	131	216
Private Institute	39	182.82	16.298	2.610	177.54	188.10	148	213
University/College	39	183.18	22.799	3.651	175.79	190.57	112	216
Total	117	183.40	20.031	1.852	179.73	187.07	112	216

In order to test whether the difference among the groups was significant, the one-way ANOVA test was used. As Table 2 shows, there was not any statistically significant difference in teachers' beliefs about AR with respect to their educational contexts, $F(2, 114) = .049, p = .952$.

TABLE 2
One-Way ANOVA

	<i>Sum of Squares</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Mean Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between Groups	40.274	2	20.137	.049	.952
Within Groups	46501.846	114	407.911		
Total	46542.120	116			

Discussion

As the data show, educational contexts did not have any significant effect on teachers' beliefs about AR. This finding might be attributed to barriers in EFL teaching in Iran which restrict teachers' beliefs about AR. These barriers are somehow related to the Iranian centralized educational system which makes it difficult for the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum to develop. According to Maftoon et al. (2010, p. 10), "concerning the vast geographical distribution of education in the country [Iran] and different needs of various geographical locations with different educational, cultural, economic, and administrative infrastructures, a unified or integrated English education seems to be doubtful". In other words, in such a context, educational goals are determined in such a way to support the national educational objectives which are at odds with the AR principles that are flexible to the needs of local agency and are rooted in the values of its stakeholders (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009).

In order to change this situation, teachers should be encouraged to practice AR gradually and step-by-step and feel supported in their journey from a teacher to a researcher (Edwards & Burns, 2016). However, as Yucel and Bos (2015) point out, teachers need to be set free from their "comfort zone" in order to overcome their unwillingness to adopt a research identity. In their words:

The term [comfort zone] connotes a sphere of ease and security, which in turn implies a certain reluctance to progress or evolve in terms of classroom practice... it has subsequently become evident to us just how ensconced we had become in the so-called "comfort zone", and just how far we really did need to step out of it in order to become teacher researchers (p. 35).

Moreover, the findings can be interpreted with reference to the general negative view toward AR in the Iranian ELT context. Although Iranian ELT researchers have shown special interest in AR in the last few years (e.g., Dehghan & Sahragard, 2015; Mehrani, 2014, 2017; Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2016; Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2017, 2018, 2019, 2021), it seems that there is an ideological gap about AR in the Iranian ELT community which has led to its unpopularity in different educational contexts. This ideological gap arises from the positivistic views toward science which is mirrored in studies which follow specific scientific features such as rigor, objectivity, reliability, and generalizability. It has been argued that these concepts have shaped the mindsets of the Iranian ELT researchers, directly or indirectly, during the years of their education (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini, 2011). In this context, as Mirhosseini and Ghafar Samar (2015, p. 132) point out,

Scientific conceptions [i.e. rigor, objectivity, reliability, and generalizability] are accepted as undeniable universal truths and perhaps that is why the epistemological foundations of the academic research, knowledge, teaching, and learning are rarely felt to require any second thought. Therefore, in the absence of theoretical grounds and commitment for change, at the practical level the practice simply continues with its own norms that reproduce the dominant views.

So, in order to make AR an acceptable form of research that can lead to teachers' professional development, it seems that the Iranian educational system needs to acknowledge this ideological gap and make an attempt to solve the problem. In other words, unless the current prevalent views toward research, generally, and dogmatic views toward AR, specifically, are questioned, any attempt to make AR an essential element of research culture among teachers is simply doomed to failure.

Apart from these problems about AR which have resulted in its unpopularity in the Iranian educational system, this general lack of acceptance of AR among Iranian teachers may also be attributed to practical issues, no matter which educational context teachers are teaching. For example, lack of time is considered one of the most important reasons why teachers are reluctant to conduct AR. Although the previous research has shown that carrying out AR needs time (e.g., Firkins & Wong, 2005; Gore & Gitlin, 2004), many studies, on the other hand, have indicated that the required time for conducting AR is not acknowledged in L2 education (e.g., Atay, 2006; Barkhuizen, 2009; Borg, 2007, 2008; Burns et al., 2016; Mehrani, 2017; Rahmani Doqaruni et al., 2018). Another practical issue that needs to be addressed is teachers' lack of specialized knowledge about AR. Many previous studies have accused the inefficient teacher education programs as the main reason for this lack of knowledge. It has been claimed that such programs do not provide prospective teachers with enough knowledge and skills to become competent in engaging with research (e.g., Atay, 2008; Gore & Gitlin, 2004; Mehrani, 2017). Yet one more reason which has been blamed for discouraging teachers from doing AR is lack of support (e.g., Burns, 1999; Mehrani, 2014). According to Borg and Santiago Sanchez (2015),

This realization that teacher research needs to be supported is important and represents a step forward from the rather simplistic belief that once teachers have been told about the benefits of teacher research they will then without hesitation proceed to engage fully in it (p. 6).

Conclusion

In order to gain insight into teachers' behavior in the classroom context, studying teachers' beliefs is crucial. However, as the previous research shows, the role of educational context in affecting teachers' beliefs cannot be ignored because of its effect on the teaching and learning process. Therefore, it seems necessary to investigate teachers' beliefs within the educational context in which they are teaching as it is quite an influential factor in forming and shaping their decisions and practices. In this way, the present study probed into Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about AR with respect to educational contexts, namely, private institutes, public schools, and colleges/universities. The findings indicated that there was not any significant difference in teachers' beliefs about AR considering the educational contexts which can be interpreted with reference to ideological and practical reasons in the specific context of Iran. In this way, it can be concluded that there are serious barriers in the way of conducting AR in the context of L2 education in Iran which need to be dealt with appropriately if it is aimed to use AR as a valuable instrument for teachers' professional development.

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