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University and High School Teachers' Beliefs
about Teaching English to Elementary
School Children in Iran

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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*Dedicated to my father and mother and my husband, for their loving
concern, support and devotion*

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Abstract

Until now many studies have been done over recent decades throughout the world to show the right age to start English. In Iran, research is still at an early stage in terms of evaluating teachers' beliefs about teaching children English. The problem of at what age to start teaching English and how to teach English to elementary school children has not been solved neither in this country nor elsewhere. In order to deepen our understanding of teacher's beliefs regarding teaching English to elementary school children and discover what similar and different beliefs might be held by university teachers and high school teachers, this study elicited teachers' beliefs and compared the belief systems of university teachers (to cherish theory-based beliefs) and high school teachers (to accentuate experience-based beliefs). In order to recognize the teachers' beliefs, a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire assessed the participants' views in three major areas: 1) the nature of children's English development, 2) teaching methods and techniques, and 3) self-efficacy as an English teacher. In addition, an open-ended question was added to the end of the questionnaire to obtain supplementary beliefs about qualifications of successful elementary school English teachers. A total of 50 teachers (25 university teachers and 25 high school teachers) participated in this study. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, independent t- test analyses, and content analysis. The results of this research indicated that starting English language teaching at primary education stage can improve better English learning and also there are slight differences of beliefs between university and high school teachers regarding teaching English to elementary school children.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

The English language is becoming increasingly important in a world in which political, social and trading barriers among nations are rapidly diminishing. As Graddol (2006) observes:

Despite the extraordinary changes of the last few years, one thing appears to remain the same. More people than ever want to learn English. . . . English learners are increasing in number and decreasing in age. . . . We've become used to the idea of English growing in popularity across the world. Far from being news, it has become one of the few enduring facts of global modern life. (p. 10)

Many studies have been conducted over the last decades across the globe in order to suggest the right age to start teaching/learning English as a foreign/second language (Scott and Lisbeth 1992; Wells, 1999). Some researchers have focused on exploring teachers' beliefs about this issue (Johnson, 1992b; William & Burden, 1997; Richards, 1998). However, in Iran, where teaching English as a foreign language formally starts in junior high schools when the students are twelve years old, research still seems to be at its infancy in this regard. The question at what age to

start teaching English and how to teach it to elementary school children still remains unanswered in this country and elsewhere.

According to research findings, the earlier children begin to learn a second/foreign language, the better they can achieve (e.g., Krashen, Long, & Scarcella, 1979). An earlier exposure to the foreign language can help young learners to get greater academic achievements and consequently more job opportunities as they grow up. Therefore, the curriculum for educating young children draws our attention and compels us to study what is now happening at the educational settings. In doing so, the top priority should be given to childhood education.

In this study, the researcher investigated the English teaching beliefs of university and high school teachers. The researcher categorized these beliefs and in the end proposed some suggestions and implications regarding teaching English to children.

1.2. Statement of the problem

In order to deepen our understanding of teacher's beliefs regarding teaching English to elementary school children and discover what similar and different beliefs might be held by university teachers and high school teachers, this study elicited teachers' beliefs and also compares the belief systems of university teachers (to cherish theory-based beliefs) and high school teachers (to accentuate experience-based beliefs).

In an attempt to identify these teachers' explicit beliefs in a more systematic way, a research instrument, a questionnaire was used. The questionnaire asked participants to assess their beliefs about teaching English to children in these major

areas: 1) the nature of children's English development, 2) teaching methods and techniques, and 3) self-efficacy as an English teacher. Moreover, an open-ended question about qualifications of successful elementary school English teacher was added to the end of the questionnaire to elicit additional beliefs.

1.3. Significance of the study

The implementation of an English curriculum in elementary schools has created a huge demand for qualified English teachers; hence placing more importance than ever on studying the issues related to teacher education. However, the research in English teacher education thus far has focused on secondary and tertiary levels. Little attention has been paid specifically to teaching English at elementary level so far. Therefore, this study is an attempt to examine issues concerning teaching English at elementary schools with a particular emphasis on teachers' beliefs.

There have been arguments about the desirable age to start foreign language learning. Psychologists and linguists, in general, argue that early childhood is the optimum period for foreign language learning (MacLaughlin, 1984; Larew, 1961; Penfield, 1953; Dunkel and Pillet, 1957).

In studying teacher education and development, researchers have shown how teachers' beliefs play a critical role in their teaching method and the kind of thinking and decision making that underlie their classroom practices (Moon, 2000; Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Trappes-Lomax & McGrath, 1999). Furthermore, these beliefs that are stable sources of teachers' reference, are built up over time, and are related to teachers' theories of language regarding the nature of language

teaching practices, their role as teachers, and their relationship with students (Johnson, 1992b; Richards, 1998).

This study aims to help teachers to develop their own beliefs about teaching English to children to a level of awareness, and further improve their classroom practices.

1.4 Research questions and hypotheses

This research was an attempt to answer the following questions:

- ١) What core beliefs do English teachers hold about starting teaching English in elementary schools?*
- ٢) What are the differences between university and high school teachers' beliefs about methodology and process of teaching English to elementary school children?*

Based on the research questions above, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- ١) English language teachers believe that starting English language teaching at primary education can enhance better English learning.*
- ٢) There are differences of beliefs between university and high school teachers regarding the methodology and process of teaching English to elementary school children.*

1.5. Definition of Key Terms and Concepts

Belief: According to Horwitz (1985), beliefs are a central construct in every discipline which deals with human behavior and learning. Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) and Ajzen (1988) believe that the central construct of human behavior is his beliefs. In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that teachers and students bring with themselves the learning situation are known as significant factors which influence the learning and teaching process and attitude success.

CLT: CLT is the abbreviation for Communicative Language Teaching that according to Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992) “ is an approach to the [teaching](#) of second and [foreign languages](#) that emphasizes [interaction](#) as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a [language](#). It is also referred to as “communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages” or simply the “communicative approach”. The communicative approach has been developed particularly by British applied linguistics as a reaction away from grammar-based approaches such as the aural-oral approach. Teaching materials used with communicative approach often includes: a) teach the language needed to express and understand different kinds of functions, such as requesting, describing; expressing likes and dislikes, etc. b) are based on a Notional Syllabus or some other communicatively organized syllabi...” (p.65)

CPH: Critical Period Hypothesis, Generically, a “Critical Period” is considered to be the period of time during which an organism displays a heightened sensitivity to certain environmental stimuli; typically, there is an abrupt onset, or increase of sensitivity, a plateau of peak sensitivity, followed by a gradual offset, or decline which is asymptotic (Birdsong, 2001). The idea of “Critical Period” was first introduced by

Penfield & Roberts. According to Penfield & Roberts (1959), a child's brain is more plastic compared with that of an adult, and before the age of 9, a child is a specialist in learning to speak; he can learn 2-3 languages as easily as one.

Early Childhood Education: *Early Childhood Education is a term that refers to educational programs and strategies geared toward children from birth to the age of eight. This period is widely considered the most vulnerable and crucial stage of a person's life. Early childhood education often focuses on guiding children to learn through play. The term often refers to preschool or infant/child care programs.*

EFL: *English as a foreign language. Based on what is mentioned in dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics by Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992) this refers to "the role of English in countries where it is taught as a subject in schools but not used as a medium of instruction in education nor as a language of communication (e.g. in government, business, or industry) within a country." (p.123)*

Elementary School Children: *Children aged six to eleven in their first years of formal education in Iran.*

ESL: *English as a second Language. Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992): this refers to "the role of English for immigrant and other minority groups in English-speaking countries. These people may use their mother tongue at home or among friends, but use English at school and at work." (p.124)*

High School Teacher: *one who teaches to students aged twelve to fifteen in formal education in Iran.*

L2: *Second Language, according to Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992) it refers to "a language which is not a native language in a country but which is widely used as a*

medium of communication (e.g. in education and in government) and which is usually used alongside another language or languages.”(p.143)

Primary Education: *Primary School Education is most often referred to as elementary school, which is usually composed of grades one through six. The main purpose of primary education is to give [children](#) a strong foundation in the basics of a general curriculum, with an emphasis on reading and math.*

Language Proficiency: *Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992): this refers to “a person’s skill in using a language for a specific purpose. It refers to the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language.” (p.204)*

Self-Efficacy: *Self-Efficacy mainly deals with teachers’ personality factors and the affective domain of English teaching by investigating how they place worth and value on their teaching career.*

SLA: *Second Language Acquisition, Based on Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992) it refers to “the process by which people develop proficiency in a second or foreign language. These processes are often investigated with the expectation that information about them may be useful in language teaching.” (p.325)*

UG: *Universal Grammar, Richards, Platt.J and Platt.H (1992): “A theory which claims to account for the grammatical competence of every adult no matter what language he/she speaks. It claims that every speaker knows a set of principles which apply to all languages and also a set of parameters that can vary from one language, but only within certain limits. The theory was proposed by Noam Chomsky and has been stated more specifically in his model of Government/Binding Theory.” (p.392)*

Young Learner: *Elementary School Children (see the entry above)*

University Teacher: *In this research context, this refers to an academician who is a member of the English Department at a university or a higher education center in Iran.*

VYL: Very young learners: *According to McIlvain (2004), this group refers to children aged three to five.*

1.6. Limitations and delimitations of the study

Since I live in Shiraz, only the perspectives of the respondents residing in Shiraz will be studied and analyzed. Another limitation concerns the use of a questionnaire as the means of investigating teachers' beliefs. Questionnaires only measure beliefs in theoretical aspects without referring to teachers' actual teaching behaviors in the classroom, and thus do not provide a complete picture of the complicated factors involved in the teaching process and educational context. Consequently, an open-ended question was added to the end of the questionnaire in an attempt to enhance the validity of this study.

Additional research in this area could also adopt qualitative interviews and observations to elicit more open-ended responses from the teachers. These types of additional information may provide us with more insights into the role of teachers' beliefs in their English teaching.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

The question 'When to start?' has been of great concern to language policy-makers for many years. Would there be real gains if children began learning English as elementary school students rather than guidance school students?

In this chapter, beliefs as a whole and beliefs of teachers, factors regarding age and some more other items about teaching English to elementary school children will be discussed.

2.2. Beliefs and attitudes

2.2.1. Conceptions of beliefs

Beliefs are a central construct in every discipline which deals with human behavior and learning. Teachers' beliefs influence their consciousness, teaching attitude, teaching methods and teaching policies. Teachers' beliefs also strongly influence teaching behavior and, finally, learners' development. The formation of teachers' educational beliefs in language teaching/learning process will exert an indiscernible effect on forming effective teaching methods and will bring about the improvement of learners' language learning abilities (Horwitz, 1985).

The history of 'attitude' dates back to more than sixty-five years ago. At that time, Allport (1935) who was a psychologist at Harvard University asserted that attitudes are probably the most distinctive and inevitable concept of American social psychology. After Allport (1935), many social psychologists have been repeating his claim (e.g., Ajzen and Fishbein, 1975; McGuire, 1985).

Fraser (2001), following the early social psychologists who studied attitude, claimed that many people believe as a rule of thumb that there are relations between attitudes and behavior. Furthermore, a commonsensical assumption seems to be that attitude is some way to determine or cause actions.

According to Ajzen and Fishbein (1975) and Ajzen (1988), the central construct of human behavior is his beliefs. In the classroom context, the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and metacognitive knowledge that teachers and students bring with to the learning situation are known as significant factors which influence the learning process and attitude success.

Based on research conducted on the nature and effects of beliefs, White (1999) made the following claims that "(1) beliefs have an adaptive function to help individuals define and understand the world and themselves, and (2) beliefs are instrumental in defining tasks and behaviors. Thus, the belief systems that teachers develop are often held to be true and can guide their teaching behaviors" (p.443-457). To put it another way, Belief systems, according to Muijs and Reynolds (2002), are "dynamic and permeable mental structures, susceptible to change in light of experience" (p.4).

Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) discussed the connections which exist between actions or teaching behaviors and beliefs. They believed that personal beliefs might

ultimately affect or change a teacher's behavior. According to Kennedy and Kennedy, teaching behavior or actions may be connected to beliefs. Based on their study, beliefs orient attitudes and positive attitudes are values in effective teaching. When beliefs play such an important role in developing attitudes, it is important to understand the sources of the teacher's action. They claim that teachers can change and modify their beliefs in a number of ways. The sources of beliefs that they emphasize are (Richards and Lockart, 1995):

- “• Teachers' own experience as language learners*
- Experience of what works best*
- Established practice within a school or institution*
- Personality factors*
- Educationally based or research-based principles*
- Principles derived from an approach or method ” (p.30-31)*

2.2.2. Beliefs and teachers

In fact, teachers' beliefs have already been classified into various sets of categories by some researchers (Johnson, 1992b; William & Burden, 1997). William and Burden (1997) divided their discussion of teachers' beliefs into three areas: they are as follows: (1) about language learning, (2) about learners, and (3) about themselves as language teachers.

Much of the literature on teacher education has suggested that teachers' beliefs affect their teaching practices and instructional decisions in the classroom (Donaghue, 2003; Johnson, 1992a; Muijs & Reynolds, 2001; Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1996), but Pajares (1992) noted that the difficulties involved in

investigating teachers' beliefs are due to several factors that includes "definitional problems, poor conceptualization, and differing understanding of beliefs and belief structures" (p. 307). He argued that a broad psychological construct like beliefs must be context specific and relevant to teaching behavior and should be useful for empirical study.

Teaching beliefs are considered as the "culture" of teaching (Richards et al., 1992, p.81) and a "filter through which a host of instructional judgments and decisions are made" (Johnson, 1992, p.84). The essential role of teachers' beliefs is also well recognized in the "teacher-as-thinker" metaphor that moves us into reflection on the identity of the teacher and the central role of a teacher's "cognitive world" in which teaching is grounded (Richards, 1998). Though there is not much empirical evidence showing a causal relationship between teachers' beliefs and their actual teaching practice (Altan, 2006), some empirical studies have suggested that there is a close connection between the two. A summary of common assumptions of research on teachers' beliefs can be found in Johnson (1994).

It has been claimed that teachers' beliefs in their abilities to teach students and even the beliefs in their abilities to influence the students' performance would be fundamental factors if we paid attention to instructional effectiveness (Bandura, 1977). Bandura proposed that beliefs and the effect of expectations of individuals determine their choices of the classroom activities, their efforts, and persistence. Other studies have stated that efficacy beliefs affect teacher activity, effort and productivity (Ashton and Webb, 1986). For example, some studies showed that high efficacy beliefs of teachers cause positive expectations for student behavior and achievement. They see themselves responsible for their students learning. They try to achieve the objectives by applying appropriate strategies; and they can influence