Investigating the Impacts of EFL Teachers' Age, Educational Background, Instructional Experience and Gender on Their Beliefs about Formative Assessment

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Abstract
Formative assessment is deemed the collaborative processes in which teachers and learners are engaged for the purpose of understanding the learners' learning and diagnosing their strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, teachers' beliefs about formative assessment are paramount and might be influenced by a legion of variables such age, educational background, instructional experience, and gender. This study investigated the impacts of EFL teachers' age, educational background, instructional experience, and gender on their beliefs about formative assessment. To this aim, 100 male and 100 female EFL teachers from Ahvaz junior and senior high schools participated in the study. The participants were given the questionnaire of teachers' beliefs about formative assessment. The results regarding EFL teachers' age, educational background, and gender revealed no statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment. However, teachers' teaching experience had significant impacts on their beliefs about formative assessment. These findings can contribute to EFL authorities concerning assessment procedures in language learning and teaching.

Keywords: Formative Assessment, Summative Assessment, EFL teachers' beliefs, age, educational background, teaching experience, gender.

Introduction

The fact that teachers' beliefs influence their classroom practice is critical when a systematic reform of policy and implementation is taken into account. Teachers are the last step in the sequence of changes that occur from a policy level down, and as Black and William (2009) argue, the implementation of new reforms in assessment practice is impossible without considering that they cannot be implemented in exactly the same way throughout the world. According to Fives and Gill (2015), teachers' beliefs in education are of different types and they exist simultaneously. These beliefs may concern knowledge, students' attributions, motivation, test anxiety, culture, intelligence, self-efficacy, self-concept, self-esteem. Teachers also develop beliefs respecting their subject matters, how to teach them, and many other things which can impinge on their behaviors in the classroom.

There are certain distinctions between knowledge and beliefs acknowledged by Pajares (1992), Calderhead (1996), and Richardson (1996). They suggest that beliefs are more personal, whereas knowledge is based on facts agreed upon by members of particular communities. However, Kagan (1992) contends that much of what had been considered professional knowledge should be categorized as beliefs, and Pajares (1992) concludes that attitudes, values, perceptions,

theories, and images about teaching are just beliefs in disguise. Thus, the beliefs that teachers conceive impact to some extent on their instruction and the behaviors they have in class meetings. Johnson (1994) maintains teachers' beliefs influence both perception and judgment which, in turn, affects what teachers say and do in classrooms. Furthermore, teachers' beliefs are quite critical in how teachers learn to teach. This in fact refers to how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how that information is translated into classroom practices. Therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs.

Given the fact that beliefs can impact on individuals' behaviors, there have been studies concerning the influence of teacher beliefs' on how they design and interact in their classes. For instance, Richards (1998) stated that "a primary source of teachers' classroom practices is belief systems that encompass the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning that teachers build up over time and bring with them to the classroom" (p. 66). Richards and Lockhart (1996) further expounded that teachers' beliefs impact on how they make decisions or act in a classroom.

It was the objective of the present study to find out whether the beliefs that EFL teachers maintained about formative assessment could be affected by their age, gender, educational background, and instructional experience.

Review of the Literature

Teachers' practices within the scope of classroom can reveal their beliefs and conceptions. Johnson (1992) examined a relationship between ESL teachers' theoretical beliefs and their classroom practices. Her study showed that most of the teachers had clearly defined theoretical beliefs which reflect their preferred teaching approach. They were:

1. Skill-based, emphasizing the practice of discrete skills, attending to the accuracy of language production, and promoting memorization,
2. Rule-based, focusing on the learning of grammar rules and the practice of structures in meaningful contexts),
3. Function-based, promoting the use of authentic materials, communication-oriented activities, and the appropriate use of language in real situations, and
4. Function-based, preferring the use of language functions.

Johnson (1992) scrutinized only three teachers who had clearly defined theoretical beliefs, revealing that the teachers designed their reading and writing activities in accordance with their beliefs. Johnson concluded that there was a relationship between teachers' theoretical beliefs and their classroom practices. In another study, Johnson (1994) found associations between beliefs about second language teachers and second language teaching and the instructional practices of pre-service ESL teachers. Also, she investigated the origin of these influential beliefs, discovering that the pre-service teachers' instructional practices were influenced by beliefs that originated from the pre-service teachers' formal learning experiences, rather than beliefs originating from informal learning experience, projected self-image as teachers, and teacher preparation programs. To clarify the point, it can be stated that the pre-service teachers tended to teach the way they were taught, not the way they thought they should. She concluded that the pre-service teachers imitated their teachers' teaching approaches because they lacked knowledge about real classrooms and students as well as alternative models of teaching and teachers.

Examining the relationship between decision making and beliefs of nine ESL teachers, Smith (1996) found that teachers' beliefs about second language teaching and learning impacted on the curricula design as well as the selection of learning tasks and teaching approaches. The

two groups of teachers, one focusing on grammar and accuracy and the other focusing on language for communication purposes, designed the curriculum and developed activities that were consistent with their beliefs. The teachers who were concerned about accuracy "adopted a structural core for their curriculum design and developed lesson tasks which emphasized language code" (p. 207). In contrast, those who focused on the use of language for communication adopted a functional curriculum and developed activities that promoted student interaction in meaningful communication. In the aggregate, these research studies suggest that second and foreign language teachers have certain beliefs respecting second language learning and teaching which may affect their instructional practices. However, Johnson (1994) argues that teachers' beliefs system seems to be complicated and encompasses several constructs. She contends that some beliefs may conflict with others or may not be as influential as others, and thus may not show their influences on teachers' instructional practices.

Grounded upon the findings regarding the relationships between teachers' beliefs and their instructional practices, it should be pointed out that these studies stressed how teachers' beliefs are conceived, resulting in the assumptions that pre-service teachers enter teacher education programs with preconceived ideas about learning and teaching that are developed early and from several sources. These findings can also refer to the fact that the application of formative assessment practices by the teachers may be influenced by the some other variables such as teaching experience. As stated above, the beliefs system is complicated and it is not quite lucid where teachers' beliefs originate from.

There are some other research studies which stress the fact that teachers' beliefs originate from their learning experience as learners. Lortie (1975) proposed that pre-service teachers started their apprenticeship when they were in the classroom as students, thus developing their beliefs concerning teaching and learning early from that experience. In reality, he discovered that there is a connection between teachers' current classroom practices and those of their teachers. Along the same line, Jonhson (1994) found that pre-service teachers' instructional practices were influenced by their experiences from their formal learning.

Teachers' experiences coming from their educational programs constitute another source of teachers' beliefs. It is proposed that pre-service teachers' beliefs concerning learning and teaching may be affected by the ideas they formed based on their teaching methodology classes and the experiences they gained during their practice teaching program (Horwitz, 1985; Johnson, 1994; Kern, 1995; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). However, other research studies have shown that the beliefs of advanced language learners such as those of pre-service teachers may not be influenced by the experiences from the teacher education program. Tatto (1998) claimed that "little empirical evidence exists on the influence of teacher education on teachers' values and beliefs. Consensus exists that teacher education has little effect on altering teachers' beliefs" (p. 66).

Dole and Sinatra (1994) supported that it is not easy for beliefs to change, especially the permanent change in beliefs. They expounded that "the central route to belief change requires deep thinking, critical reflection, and a weighing of the issues" (p. 257). Elsewhere, they pointed out that "learners' beliefs will not have a central change unless the learners process information deeply and think critically about new data and that such change is difficult, and in many cases, unlikely" (p. 261). Given the complex and idiosyncratic nature of beliefs, Wenden (1998) proposed that beliefs are relatively stable. In an investigation of pre-service EFL teachers in Hong Kong over the course of three-year teacher education program, Peacock (2001) found consistency in the mismatch between beliefs of pre-service teachers and in-service teachers over the course of the program. He concluded that pre-service teacher beliefs "are slow or very slow to change"

(p.181). Similarly, Kern (1995) found that beliefs of advanced learners may be more resistant to change, compared with those of novice learners. He found that the beliefs of his French I students showed some changes over the course of the study program; whereas beliefs of the French II were more stable.

Teachers' beliefs about the application of formative assessment practices may undergo some influences as shown by the aforementioned studies. These beliefs may stem from their level of ambiguity tolerance; or their ambiguity tolerance may impinge on their beliefs about the use of formative assessment. Since the employment of formative assessment in the context of Iran is a new issue in the educational system, this novelty may encounter the resistance of teachers' beliefs concerning the application of these practices as assessing tools in schools. Nespor (1987) theorized that beliefs reflect the following:

1. An existential presumption, i.e. personal truths that are incontrovertible and unknown to the individual,

2. Alternative perspective to experience reality, i.e. what "should be" rather than what "is" perspective,

3. Affective and evaluative components, i.e. guided by feelings/judgments rather than rationality/logic, and

4. Episodic rather than semantic structure.

Pajares (1992) remarked that belief structures or systems are defined as the set of beliefs which individuals, whether collectively or individually, hold about a particular topic. Barnes, Fives and Dacey (2015) state that although there are some studies on teachers' beliefs that have longer traditions of investigation such as personal epistemology and self-efficacy, and specific content domains such as science and mathematics and have more clearly explained the constructs of knowledge and beliefs, scholars working within the domain of teachers' assessment beliefs use different subsuming terminology such as "conceptions" and "values" to describe variables of interest. For instance, Thompson (1992) referred to conceptions "as a more general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like" (p. 130). Barnes, Fives and Dacey (2015) argue that "essentially the concept of a conception subsumes knowledge and belief into a singular construct and provides a framework for describing teachers' overall perception and awareness of assessment" (p. 285). Brown (2004, 2006) and Harris and Brown (2009) have established a strong multinational line of research focused on teachers' conceptions of the purpose of assessment.

Remesal (2007) analyzed the interview transcripts and artifacts from 50 Spanish teachers and through this process identified four dimensions of assessment and mapped them onto a continuum of purposes from pedagogical to accounting. Harris and Brown (2009) adopted a phenomenographic approach to investigate whether Brown's (2004, 2006) model of teachers' conceptions about the purpose of assessment and his resulting instrument adequately assessed the full spectrum of teachers' beliefs about the purposes of assessment. Harris and Brown finally reported that their participants, 26 New Zealand teachers, were interviewed, and their responses were analyzed for conceptions of the purpose of assessment. The analysis revealed seven conceptions of assessment. Davis and Neitzel (2011) conducted a qualitative investigation with 15 practicing middle school teachers and described teachers' assessment-related beliefs for four different audiences: teachers, students, parents, and higher-ups (p. 208). Karp and Woods (2008) investigated pre-service physical education teachers' beliefs about assessment multiple times (prior to, during, and after implementing a field-based unit) and through multiple sources (i.e., interview, survey, artifacts) during a semester long course in physical education curriculum. These pre-service teachers held distinct beliefs about the purposes of assessment for teachers and

for students (based on their personal experiences in high school) and these beliefs fall along our continuum of purposes.

Through the quantitative methods, Brown (2004, 2006) conducted some investigations to describe and frame teachers' conceptions of the purpose of assessment. Brown identified three commonly reported purposes of assessment. He acknowledged that assessment is used to:

1. Advance teaching and learning,

2. Hold students accountable, and

3. Hold teachers and schools accountable.

Preservice and practicing teachers hold beliefs about the effectiveness of different forms of assessments (Tittle, 1994). Adams and Hsu (1998) surveyed 269 U.S. elementary math teachers about their conceptions of assessment and found that teachers relied on classroom observations as their preferred assessment method. Graham (2005) stated that pre-service teachers' conceptions of different assessment types revealed that they are more likely to rely on traditional, paper-and-pencil assessments because these are the types of assessments they experienced in school. Furthermore, Wang, Kao, and Lin (2010) pointed out that their assessments tend to measure low-level knowledge and skills.

Wang et al. (2010) employed a combination of open-ended questionnaires and pre-post individual interviews to determine 215 Taiwanese pre-service teachers' beliefs about assessment during the third year of their teacher education program. The results of their study indicated that the participants' conceptions of assessing content knowledge were limited to low-level, repetition of information covered in the textbook or during lecture. Few pre-service teachers believed it was important to assess the use of knowledge, and for those who did, their conceptions remained limited to application of knowledge to solve well-structured as opposed to more authentic, ill-structured problems. To give another example, Anderson, et al. (2001) launched an investigation into participants' beliefs about assessing processes of inquiry with 94% of pre-service teachers. Their study indicated that scientific inquiry is best measured by testing students' understanding of the procedures used to complete a laboratory assignment instead of assessing inquiry processes using the highest cognitive levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

In a qualitative study of 13 Canadian elementary school teachers, Thomas, Deaudelin, Desjardins, and Dezutter (2011) found that teachers' conceptions of formative assessment could be classified by time, form, and the role of the actors. As regards time, teachers conceptualized formative assessment as an integral part of the teaching-learning process, refuting the position that assessment is separate and distinct from teaching. Then, they stated that formative assessment should constantly occur during the lesson to provide the teacher with real-time information about students' understanding using a variety of informal and formal assessment tools. Ultimately, teachers were different in how they conceptualized responsibility for formative assessment. Some of them considered it as a shared responsibility with students. However, many of them held more traditional notions equivalent to providing feedback. Thomas et al. (2011) noted few opportunities for students to engage in self or peer-evaluation and that formative assessment was primarily teacher-directed.

In another study conducted by Davis and Neitzel (2011), similar results were obtained. They found teachers to be primarily responsible for formative assessment processes and most teachers believed that the primary purpose of formative assessment was to assist teachers in identifying and diagnosing students' competencies and motivations. Although this showed relatively advanced beliefs of formative assessment, many reportedly struggled with applying formative assessment practices in their classroom routines.

Studies conducted in different cultures revealed that teachers' conceptions of assessment differ across contexts and these differences reflect teachers' internalization of their society's cultural priorities and practices (Brown & Harris, 2009; Brown, Lake, & Matters, 2009, 2011). Barnes et al. (2015) refer to some research studies on these cross-cultural conceptions which were implemented in Australia, China, Iran, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Spain. These studies deploy Brown's (2008) Conceptions of Assessment (COA)-III. When this instrument was translated and administered in various countries, the results of the studies revealed different factor structures as well as variation in the pattern and strength of agreement for each factor. Barnes et al. (2015) point out that "it appears that understanding the assessment context may help to explain cross-cultural differences in teachers' conceptions of assessment noted in the research" (p. 294).

Among the countries mentioned above, just Australia, the Netherlands, New Zealand, and Spain, are the contexts in which low-stakes accountability exists in that few compulsory national assessments are required and the local jurisdiction or school level makes decisions concerning assessment (Brown, 2008; Brown, Lake, & Matters, 2011; Brown & Remesal, 2012; Harris & Brown, 2009; Segers & Tillema, 2011). Barnes et al. (2015) point out that formative and summative assessment practices are used by the teachers in these contexts and the data obtained are employed to make decisions about students' knowledge and skills. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that teachers' beliefs about assessment in these countries might reflect the "assessment for improvement" conception to a greater extent than they reflect "assessment for accountability" purposes.

Brown (2004) examined New Zealand elementary school teachers' beliefs about assessment. He made use of the 50-item version of the Teachers' COA questionnaire. The results of his study revealed that teachers believed assessment is used to improve teaching and learning. Additionally, these teachers agreed that assessment can be an external measure to hold schools accountable. However, they rejected the notion that assessment is for student accountability purposes and that assessment is irrelevant. Teachers' conceptions of assessment were also examined in high-stakes assessment contexts such as China and Iran (Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, & Yu, 2009; Pishghadam & Shayesteh, 2012). Both countries use public examinations that carry high-stakes for teachers and students. Examination results determine placement into different levels of education and acceptance into high-quality institutions. Furthermore, teachers make frequent use of summative assessments to motivate students and to inform instruction in the classroom. Therefore, teachers' beliefs in high-stakes accountability contexts are hypothesized to reflect endorsement of assessment for student and school accountability purposes.

Investigating Hong Kong teachers' beliefs about assessment, Brown et al. (2009) found that teachers who believed that assessment makes students accountable were also likely to believe that assessment can be applied to improve teaching and learning. This is different from the data collected in the New Zealand sample that revealed a negative correlation between improvement and student accountability purposes. Brown, Hui, Yu, and Kennedy (2011) examined the beliefs of 1464 primary and secondary teachers from Hong Kong and Guangzhou, China. Applying exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, teachers' beliefs were conceptualized as a three factor model: assessment for improvement, assessment for accountability, and assessment is irrelevant. The results of this study indicated that teachers from Hong Kong and Guangzhou responded similarly to the survey, thus holding similar beliefs. An examination of the inter-correlations among factors indicated that the improvement purpose had a strong, positive correlation with the accountability purpose. This is consistent with Brown et al.'s (2009) finding. Additionally, the irrelevance purpose was weakly and negatively correlated with the

improvement purpose, and weakly and positively correlated with the accountability purpose. Since Chinese policies and practices reinforce examinations as a tool to improve student learning, such findings are not surprising.

Similar to China, Iran is considered a high-stakes assessment system (Pishghadam & Shayesteh, 2012). Pishghadam and Shayesteh examined 103 English language teachers employed at private language institutions, finding evidence for Brown's (2004) four factor model of teachers' conceptions about assessment. Similar to the sample taken in Hong Kong, Iranian teachers' data indicated a strong, positive correlation between assessment for improvement and assessment for school accountability purposes. It should be noted that Chinese and Iranian teachers' beliefs would be similar in that both countries have very similar assessment systems. Almost all classes at schools and universities in Iran follow the summative assessment procedures and run mid-term and final examinations. Of course, recently there has been an inclination toward the qualitative evaluation in elementary schools. Thus, the researchers made attempts to launch an investigation into the probable effects of teachers' age, educational background, teaching experience and gender on their beliefs about formative assessment. To achieve this purpose, the following questions were posed:

1. Does EFL teachers' age significantly influence their beliefs about formative assessment practices?
2. Are EFL teachers' beliefs concerning formative assessment practices significantly affected by their educational background?
3. Does EFL teachers' teaching experience have a significant effect on their beliefs about formative assessment practices?
4. Does EFL teachers' gender significantly affect their beliefs about formative assessment practices?

Method

Participants

To use EFL teachers in the present study, first of all, the first researcher asked the head office of Khouzestan Education to inform how many EFL teachers were available in junior and senior high schools in Ahvaz. According to this organization, the number of Ahvaz English teachers is as follows:
1. Vocational and Commercial School: 5 female English teachers.
2. Junior High School: 74 female and 61 male English teachers.
3. Junior High School for Exceptional Students: 2 male English teachers.
4. Technical High School: 2 male and 5 female English teachers.
5. Technical High School for Exceptional Students: 1 female English teacher.
6. Senior High School: 60 male and 124 female English teachers.
7. Technical and Vocational High School: 2 male English teachers.

There were, in the aggregate, 336 English teachers, 127 of whom were male and 209 were female English teachers in Ahvaz. In the present study, however, there were 270 available EFL teachers whom the researchers could make use of: 70 EFL teachers participated in the pilot study intended to test the reliability of the questionnaire for teachers' beliefs about FA since the questionnaire was adopted from Chan (2006); 100 male and 100 female EFL teachers from Ahvaz junior and senior high schools participated in the main study. The participants were 21 to above 51 years of age, all living in Ahvaz; 88 EFL teachers were 21 to 30 years old, 89 EFL teachers were 31 to 40 years old, 19 EFL teachers were 41 to 50 years old, and 4 EFL teachers

were above 51 years old. All of them were acquainted with the instructional purposes of English learning and teaching in Iran's educational system and had a clear understanding of the materials being taught at junior and senior high schools. The information regarding these teachers was obtained from the Khouzestan Education Office located in Ahvaz. To manage the progress of the research and to have access to EFL teachers, Ahvaz was selected as the field of study. In addition to the 270 EFL teachers, the study selected 14 TEFL professors to establish the validity of the FA questionnaire. They were all acquainted with formative assessment and teachers' beliefs within the domain of second language acquisition.

Instrumentation

The study enjoyed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire concerning teachers' beliefs about the use of FA practices in Ahvaz junior and senior high school EFL classes. The questionnaire for the teachers' beliefs about FA was adopted from Chan (2006). It was a multiple assessment questionnaire whose items related to FA were chosen. The questionnaire had two parts:
1. Personal information containing six items of varying choices which are as follows: gender, age, educational background, English teaching experience, the grade(s) that they taught, and the average number of students in each class they taught.
2. Beliefs about the use of FA practices consisting of 33 items with five options to choose from.

The first three items of this scale concerned the teachers' understanding of the FA and the rest concerned EFL teachers' perception, EFL teachers' beliefs, and the impact and effectiveness of FA on learning and teaching. The questionnaire for teachers' beliefs about formative assessment is provided in the Appendix. The first part of the questionnaire concerned the personal information of the participants. These pieces of information were of great contribution since they were used to check whether they had any statistically significant influences on the data obtained from the FA items. The other items afforded information respecting EFL teachers' beliefs and the impact and effectiveness of FA on learning and teaching.

Procedure

Firstly, to establish content and face validity of the FA questionnaire, the researchers gave it to 14 professors from the field of assessment in Ahvaz and asked them to review the questionnaire. To check the face validity of the FA questionnaire, the 14 judges assessed whether the questionnaire looked valid to the respondents who took it, the administrative personnel who decided on its use, and other technically untrained observers. Content validity required the use of recognized subject matter experts to evaluate whether test items assessed defined content and more rigorous statistical tests than did the assessment of face validity. One widely used method of measuring content validity was developed by Lawshe (1975). It is essentially a method for gauging agreement among raters or judges regarding how essential a particular item is. Lawshe (1975) proposed that each of the subject matter expert raters (SMEs) on the judging panel respond to the following question for each item: Is the skill or knowledge measured by this item 'essential,' 'useful, but not essential,' or 'not necessary' to the performance of the construct?" According to Lawshe (1975), if more than half the panelists indicate that an item is essential, that item has at least some content validity. Greater levels of content validity exist as larger numbers of panelists agree that a particular item is essential. Following Lawshe's (1975) method of calculating validity, the validity coefficient of the FA questionnaire was .891.

To start the investigation, then, a pilot study on FA questionnaire was conducted. A pilot study has several functions, principally to increase the reliability and practicability of the questionnaire (Morrison, 1993; Oppenheim, 1992; Wilson & McLean, 1994), it thus serves to:

1. Check the clarity of the questionnaire items, instructions and layout;
2. Gain feedback on the reliability of the questionnaire items, the operationalization of the constructs, and the purposes of the research;
3. Eliminate ambiguities or difficulties in wording;
4. Gain feedback on the type of question and its format (e.g. rating scale, multiple choice, open, closed etc.);
5. Gain feedback on response categories for closed questions, and for the appropriateness of specific questions or stems of questions;
6. Gain feedback on the attractiveness and appearance of the questionnaire;
7. Gain feedback on the layout, sectionalizing, numbering, and itemization of the questionnaire;
8. Check the time taken to complete the questionnaire;
9. Check whether the questionnaire is too long or too short, too easy or too difficult, too unengaging, too threatening, too intrusive, too offensive;
10. Generate categories from open-ended responses to use as categories for closed response-modes (e.g. rating scale items);
11. Identify redundant questions (e.g. those questions which consistently gain a total "yes" or "no" response, i.e. those questions with little discriminability;
12. Identify commonly misunderstood or noncompleted items (e.g. by studying common patterns of unexpected response and non-response;
13. Try out the coding/classification system for data analysis.

To this aim, 70 EFL teachers were randomly selected and participated in the pilot study with the help of Khouzestan English Language Teachers Association (KELTA). The FA scale was administered to these EFL teachers at 10 in the morning. They were allotted 60 minutes to complete the questionnaire. To calculate the responses given by the participants, Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree were given the value of 1 to 5 respectively. For instance, if a respondent chose "Disagree", he would obtain the value 2. Then, all the values for the 33 responses in the scale were totaled and entered in a list. Finally, the data obtained was analyzed using SPSS 16.0. The reliability analysis yielded a coefficient of .849 through the Cronbach's Alpha. Thus, the formative assessment questionnaire was ready to be given to 200 junior and senior high school EFL teachers in Ahvaz.

Through KELTA, the researchers gave the questionnaire to the EFL teachers. The 200 EFL teachers were members of KELTA and were satisfied to take part in the study in that the results obtained would be beneficial to their instructions and they would make better decisions about assessing their students' progress. During some in-service training programs which KELTA held for Ahvaz EFL teachers, the questionnaire was distributed. The teachers were allotted an hour to complete the questionnaire. The first researcher was present there to check whether there were any problems. Ultimately, all questionnaires were collected and it was time to calculate their results. The primary data obtained from the question were fed into the SPSS 16.0 to check for their probable effects.

Results

The study started to investigate the impacts of EFL teachers' age, educational background, instructional experience, and gender on their beliefs about formative assessment. To this aim, a questionnaire on teachers' beliefs about formative assessment was used. As mentioned

earlier, a pilot study was conducted on the questionnaire for the teachers' beliefs about formative assessment. The purpose of the pilot was to check the clarity of the questionnaire items, instructions and layout, gain feedback on the reliability of the questionnaire items and the operationalization of the construct, eliminate ambiguities or difficulties in wording, gain feedback on stems of questions, check the appearance of the questionnaire and the time taken to complete the questionnaire, identify redundant questions, identify commonly misunderstood or non-completed items, and try out the coding/classification system for data analysis.

To check the validity of the FA questionnaire, 14 professors were selected and through the following formula developed by Lawshe (1975), the content validity of the questionnaire was calculated: CVR= (ne-N/2)/ (N/2) where CVR = content validity ratio, ne= number of SME panelists indicating "essential", N = total number of SME panelists. This formula yields values which range from +1 to -1; positive values indicate that at least half the SMEs rated the item as essential. The mean CVR across items are used as an indicator of overall test content validity. Table 1 displays the result of the content validity of the FA questionnaire.

Table 1.*Validity Statistics of Questionnaire for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA*

No. of Raters	No. of Items	Content Validity Coefficient
14	33	.891

Through Cronbach's Alpha, the reliability coefficient related to the formative assessment was .849. This assured the researchers that the tool to examine teachers' beliefs concerning the formative assessment was reliable. Table 2 depicts the results.

Table 2. *Reliability Statistics of Questionnaire for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA*

No. of Participants	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on Standardized Items
70	33	.849	.924

As shown in Table 2, 70 EFL teachers took the questionnaire for teachers' beliefs about formative assessment which included 33 items. Through analyzing the raw data in SPSS 16.0, the coefficient reliability was .849. According to Berk (1984), Hatch and Lazaraton (1997), Kerlinger (1973), Mansfield (1986), and Rust and Golombok (1999), this coefficient of reliability is considered high.

EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Age

To examine whether EFL teachers' age a significant impact had on their beliefs about formative assessment practices, the researchers applied independent samples *t* test and Mann-Whitney statistical procedures to find out the probable effect. However, the results obtained showed no statistically significant effect of age on teachers' beliefs about FA practices. The tables given below have the details.

Table 3. *Group Statistics for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Age*

	N	Mean	*t*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)
Age Group 21-30	88	1.199	.659	.512
Age Group 31-40	89	1.189		

The first age group (21-30) included 88 and the second age group (31-40) encompassed 89 EFL teachers. Statistically speaking, only these two age groups of the study were qualified to be investigated for their effects on EFL teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices since the number of the third age group (41-50) and the fourth age group (above 51) were not sufficient statistically to be investigated for their influences on EFL teachers' beliefs about FA. The third group included 19 and the fourth group had only 4 EFL teachers. Based on Table 3, the *Sig.* (2-tailed) is .512. Since this value is more than 0.05, it can be stated that the age variable did not have any influence on EFL teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices.

EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Educational Background

As regards the educational background of the EFL teachers and its effect on the beliefs about formative assessment practices, it should be stated that the independent samples *t* test and Mann-Whitney analyses depicted that there was not any significant influence of EFL teachers' educational background on their beliefs about formative assessment. Table 4 shows the *t* test analysis for the effect of educational background of EFL teachers on their beliefs concerning formative assessment practices.

Table 4. *Group Statistics for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Educational Background*

	N	Mean	*t*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)
B.A. Teachers	108	1.194	-.403	.687
M.A. Teachers	92	1.200		

As Table 4 shows, in the present study, 108 EFL teachers had B.A. degrees and 92 EFL teachers held M.A. degrees and there was no PhD holder among the research population of the study. The *Sig.* (2-tailed) is .687. The value is greater than 0.05 revealing that EFL teachers' educational background had no statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment practices.

EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Teaching Experience

The data related to the EFL teachers' teaching experience and their beliefs about formative assessment practices were analyzed through Kruskal Wallis and one-way ANOVA. The findings related to both statistical procedures revealed the fact that there was a statistically significant impact. That is to say, teaching experience had significant impacts on the EFL teachers' beliefs concerning formative assessment practices. The tables provided below reveals the facts.

Table 5. *Kruskal Wallis for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Teaching Experience*

	N	Mean Rank
3 to 5 Years	85	101.00
6 to10 Years	64	106.05
More than 11 Years	45	78.73
Total	194	

No EFL teacher was in the first group (less than 1 year). There were six EFL teachers in the second group who had 1 to 2 years of teaching experience and since this number was meager for the study, it was excluded. The third group enjoying 3 to 5 years of teaching experience and had 85, the fourth group having 6 to10 years of teaching experience had 64, and the fifth group with more than 11 years of teaching experience included 45 EFL teachers.

Table 6. *Test Statistics for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Teaching Experience*

Chi-Square	6.853
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.033

Based on Table 6, the *Sig.* (.033) revealed that EFL teachers' teaching experience had a statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. Another meticulous analysis of the EFL teachers' teaching experience and their beliefs about formative assessment practices was also carried out. This time, the researchers employed one-way ANOVA to scrutinize the effects of EFL teachers' teaching experience on their beliefs about formative assessment practice.

According to Table 7, the *Sig.* (.014) shows that EFL teachers' teaching experience had a statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment practices.

Table 7. *One-Way ANOVA for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Teaching Experience*

	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	*Sig.*
Between Groups	812.584	2	406.292	4.391	.014
Within Groups	18227.291	197	92.524		
Total	19039.875	199			

In the questionnaire for teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices, there were five groups in terms of teaching experience. As stated above, there was no EFL teacher in the first group (less than one year of teaching experience). In the second group (1-2 years of teaching experience), there were only six. So, they were left out since they did not constitute a statistically sufficient group to be investigated. The third, four, and fifth groups were investigated in that their numbers were statistically conspicuous. The *Sig.* (.053) obtained out of the comparison made between the third group with the fourth and fifth groups revealed no statistically significant influence. However, the *Sig.* (.012) obtained out of the comparison made between the fourth group with the third and fifth groups and the comparison made between the fifth group with the third and fourth groups displayed a statistically significant influence of EFL teachers' teaching experience on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. Table 8 displays the details.

Table 8. *Tukey HSD for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Teaching Experience*

		Mean Difference	*Std.* Error	*Sig.*	Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
3 to 5	6 to10	-1.30048	1.56922	.686	-5.0063	2.4053

	More than 11	4.09744	1.75295	.053	-.0423	8.2372
6 to 10	3 to 5	1.30048	1.56922	.686	-2.4053	5.0063
	More than 11	5.39792*	1.87131	.012	.9787	9.8171
More than11	3 to 5	-4.09744	1.75295	.053	-8.2372	.0423
	6 to10	-5.39792*	1.87131	.012	-9.8171	-.9787

The results pertinent to the EFL teachers' teaching experience and their beliefs about formative assessment practices through Kruskal Wallis and one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant impact. In the present study, there was no EFL teacher with less than one year of teaching experience. Six EFL teachers constituted the second group with 1 to 2 years of teaching experience. However, they were not studied since this number was meager for the research. There were 85 EFL teachers having 3 to 5, 64 EFL teachers with 6 to10, and 45 EFL teachers with more than 11 years of teaching experience. The results of one-way ANOVA demonstrated that EFL teachers' teaching experience had a statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment practices.

EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Gender

Finally, the study investigated the probable effects of EFL teachers' gender on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. The researchers applied independent samples *t* test and Mann-Whitney analyses to check possible impacts. The results for both independent samples *t* test and Mann-Whitney analyses demonstrated no statistically significant effect of EFL teachers' gender on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. The tables given below have the details.

Table 9. *Group Statistics for EFL Teachers' Beliefs about FA and their Gender*

	N	Mean	*t*	*Sig.* (2-tailed)
Male	100	1.204	.902	.368
Female	100	1.192		

Table 9 shows that 100 male EFL teachers and 100 female EFL teachers were investigated in terms of their gender effects on the EFL teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices. The information presented in Table 4.8 reveals that the *Sig.* (2-tailed) which is .368 is greater than 0.05, acknowledging the fact that EFL teachers' gender had not significant impact on their beliefs concerning formative assessment practices. The findings related to gender and EFL teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices displayed no statistically significant effect.

Discussion

Through employing an independent samples *t* test and Mann-Whitney, the researchers found no statistically significant effect of age on teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices. This is in line with Chan (2006) whose investigation demonstrated that the relationship between teachers' beliefs and age was not statistically significant. This meant that the participants of Chan's study in different age groups did not differ significantly. The findings of the present study also revealed that educational background of the EFL teachers had no significant effect on their beliefs about formative assessment practices and. However, the studies carried out by

McMullen (1999, 2003) showed that teachers with higher educational background had different beliefs compared to the teachers with lower educational background. Thus, in these studies, educational background had significant influences on teachers' beliefs. The results pertinent to the EFL teachers' teaching experience and their beliefs about formative assessment practices revealed a statistically significant impact. In the present study, there was no EFL teacher with less than one year of teaching experience. Six EFL teachers constituted the second group with 1 to 2 years of teaching experience. However, they were not studied since this number was meager for the research. There were 85 EFL teachers having 3 to 5, 64 EFL teachers with 6 to10, and 45 EFL teachers with more than 11 years of teaching experience. The results demonstrated that EFL teachers' teaching experience had a statistically significant influence on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. Based on the results obtained, the comparison made between the third group with the fourth and fifth groups, no statistically significant influence was found. However, the comparison made between the fourth group with the third and fifth groups and the comparison made between the fifth group with the third and fourth groups displayed a statistically significant influence of EFL teachers' teaching experience on their beliefs about formative assessment practices. In line with these findings, Chan's (2006) investigation displayed a significant relationship between teachers' beliefs and years of ESL teaching experience. The participants in the Chan's study in the five groups with different years of EFL teaching experience differed significantly. Also, it was found that there was a significant interplay between EFL teaching experience and their practices.

The findings related to gender and EFL teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices displayed no statistically significant effect. The influence of ambiguity tolerance on developing certain beliefs about formative assessment in both male and female participants was the same. Thus, the fifth null hypothesis claiming that EFL teachers' gender does not impact on their beliefs about formative assessment practices was sustained. Within the domain of second language acquisition, gender has been referred to as the variable which probably has effects on the process of language learning and learner's performance (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1994). Studies have demonstrated that male and females differ significantly in terms of their test-taking abilities (Lumley & O'Sullivan, 2005; O'Sullivan, 2002). The study carried out by Cizek, Fitzgerald, and Rachor (1996) respecting any potential relations between differences in assessment practices and background characteristics such as gender, grade level, and years of teaching experience revealed significant diversity among teachers' assessment perspectives and practices. Cizek et al. (1996) associated these discrepancies in practice with individual assessment policies that reflected teachers' own individualistic values and beliefs about teaching. However, the findings of the present study revealed the fact that gender had no influence on EFL teachers' beliefs concerning formative assessment. Along the same line, Fives and Gill (2015) mention that "there is a lack of diversity among participants in research on teachers' beliefs with regard to gender, age, race, ethnicity, language background, and socioeconomic status (p. 60). Elsewhere, they argue that there are few investigations on beliefs of teachers who enter teaching through alternative pathways, and none that purposefully compare beliefs of male and female teachers, or teachers of color with white teachers, or teachers in urban school with those in other types of schools. However, concerning the influence of other variables on teachers' beliefs, Fives and Gill (2015) remark that teachers' beliefs may be affected by the variables such as professional experience, gender, and the disciplinary emphases of their academic careers, race, ethnicity, and school level of teaching. The study by Youngs and Youngs (2001) examined the role of six variables reported in the literature to be predictors of teachers' attitudes toward ELLs. These variables were subject area taught, multicultural course work, ESL training, personal experience with foreign cultures,

contact with ESL students, and gender. Finally, they found that while individually these variables were relatively weak predictors of teachers' attitudes toward English language learners, "collectively they explained a significant and substantial 26% of the variance in teachers' attitudes" (p. 115). Based on such propositions, it can be pointed out that teachers' beliefs may be subject to many impacts of variables which make teachers show particular behaviors in EFL classes and take certain stances on the use or non-use of formative assessment practices.

Conclusion

EFL teachers' age was examined to see whether it had any effects on their beliefs about formative assessment practices; the results obtained showed no statistically significant effect, however. As regards the educational background of the EFL teachers and its effect on the beliefs about formative assessment practices, it should be stated that the findings showed no significant effect. The EFL teachers' teaching experience and their beliefs about formative assessment practices were analyzed. The results displayed a statistically significant impact. That is to say, teaching experience had significant influence on the EFL teachers' beliefs concerning formative assessment practices. As regards probable effects of the EFL teachers' gender on their beliefs about formative assessment practices, the results of the study demonstrated no significant effect. Since assessment is considered to be a critical component in the process of teaching and learning and it enables educators to evaluate student learning and utilize the information to improve learning and instruction (Harris, Irving, & Peterson, 2008), EFL teachers' beliefs can even be more important in that their contentions and conceptualizations exert the use or non-use of formative assessment practices. Teachers' beliefs about formative assessment practices can also be affected by other factors such as age, gender, educational background, and teaching experience. As the results revealed, teaching experience had a significant influence on the EFL teachers' beliefs concerning formative assessment practices. This may be true in other contexts in that teachers with varying ages, educational background, gender, and teaching experience may display different beliefs concerning formative assessment. For example, Remesal' (2007) study showed that even teachers from similar school contexts and exposed to the same socio-political influences and expectations reflected varied and mixed beliefs about the purpose of assessment. More attention is required of the educational officials to investigate the larger contexts to probe into formative assessment and how different teaching contexts shape formative assessment-related teachers' beliefs. Additionally, it may be urgent for teacher trainers to carry out certain analyses of contextual systems and help preservice and practicing teachers understand their beliefs about formative assessment and reform practices before belief change occurs.

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Appendix: The Questionnaire for Teachers' Beliefs about FA

Dear Teacher,
This is a questionnaire for an academic study concerning EFL teachers' use of formative assessment practices in Ahvaz. The purpose of this study is to understand your beliefs about formative assessments. Thus, the responses you provide in the following questionnaire are of great contribution to this study. Your assistance is much appreciated.
Part I. Personal Information: Please check your answer in the appropriate box.

1. Gender

☐ Male   ☐ Female

2. Age

☐ 21-30   ☐ 31-40   ☐ 41-50   ☐ above 51

3. Educational background

☐ B.A.   ☐ M.A.   ☐ PhD

4. English teaching experience

☐ Less than 1 year   ☐ 1-2 years   ☐ 3-5 years
☐ 6-10 years   ☐ more than 11 years

5. The grade(s) that you are teaching. Please check all that apply.

☐ Grade 7   ☐ Grade 8   ☐ Grade 9
☐ Grade 10   ☐ Grade 11   ☐ Grade 12

6. The average number of students in each class you are teaching this year

☐ Below 10   ☐ 10-18   ☐ 20-24   ☐ more than 24

Part II. Beliefs: Please check your answer in the appropriate box.

Beliefs about Formative Assessment (FA)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I understand the concept of FA practices.					
2. I know how to implement the process of FA practices.					
3. I understand the concept of task-based FAs (e.g. games, role play, and group discussion).					

4. FA provides information on how well students are doing.					
5. The use of FA places students into categories.					
6. FA is a way to determine how much students Have learned from teaching.					
7. FA provides feedback to students about their performance.					
8. FA is integrated with teaching practice.					
9. The results of FA can be relied on.					
10. FA forces teachers to teach in a way that is contradictory to their beliefs.					
11. Teachers use FA but make little use of the results.					
12. The ability to implement FA is an important capability for a teacher.					
13. FA is an accurate indicator of a school's quality.					
14. FA is assigning a grade or level to student work.					
15. FA establishes what students have learned.					
16. FA informs students of their learning needs.					
17. FA information modifies ongoing teaching of students.					
18. FA results are consistent.					
19. FA is unfair to students.					
20. FA results are filed and ignored.					
21. Traditional paper-and-pencil tests are more effective than FA in understanding students' listening, speaking, reading,					

and writing skills.					
22. FA is a good way to evaluate a school.					
23. In FA, the teacher will focus more on students' performance capabilities.					
24. FA measures students' higher order thinking skills.					
25. FA helps students improve their learning.					
26. FA allows different students to get different Instruction.					
27. The teacher applying FA will understand the effect of his/her teaching more easily.					
28. FA interferes with teaching.					
29. FA has little impact on teaching.					
30. FA is an imprecise process.					
31. FA can lower students' anxiety for assessments.					
32. Teachers' use of FA causes students to develop More practical skills to use English.					
33. Based on FA results, parents will be better informed about their children's progress at schools.					