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Bridging the Gap: A Comparative Analysis of Iranian EFL and ESP Teachers' Beliefs and Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

The present study attempted to comparatively investigate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers' beliefs about language learning and teaching and their distinctive characteristics. To this end, 150 EFL and ESP teachers, selected randomly from various universities in Iran, were asked to fill out two pilot-tested validated five-point Likert-scale questionnaires, one on *beliefs* (including 45 items) and the other on *characteristics* (comprising 16 items). To do multiple-level analysis and triangulate the data for validation purposes, 25 teachers, selected randomly from among the study participants, were also interviewed. The results of (Quantitative data analysis such as Independent Samples t-tests, Chi-Square and Pearson product-moment correlation analyses, as well as qualitative content analysis of interviews) found no significant mismatch between ESP teachers and EFL teachers' beliefs overall; however, significant differences were found between characteristics of ESP teachers and EFL teachers overall as well as between the *specific* beliefs and also between *specific* characteristics of the two groups of the teachers. The results are discussed in detail in the paper, and the implications, which are significant for the field of language education and ESP, and the pertinent implications are presented.

KEYWORDS: Teacher beliefs; Teacher characteristics; ESP teachers; EFL teachers; Language teaching

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1. Introduction

Teacher beliefs are widely recognized as a crucial factor influencing instructional decision-making, classroom practices, and student learning outcomes. In the field of English language teaching, teachers' beliefs shape their approaches to pedagogy, curriculum design, and assessment. While extensive research has explored the beliefs of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers (e.g., Borg, 2006a; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2017), less attention has been devoted to English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers. Given the distinct nature of these two instructional contexts—EFL focusing on general language acquisition and ESP addressing domain-specific language needs—it is essential to investigate whether their pedagogical beliefs differ and how these differences might impact teaching practices.

Despite the growing body of research on teacher cognition, comparative studies examining the beliefs of EFL and ESP teachers remain limited (Rajabi et al., 2011; Watson, 2003). Most studies in ESP primarily focus on curriculum design, material selection, and learner needs, neglecting the role of teacher beliefs in shaping instructional decisions. This gap in the literature

underscores the need for a comparative analysis to determine whether and how EFL and ESP teachers differ in their beliefs about language teaching and learning.

The present study aims to address this gap by examining and comparing the beliefs and characteristics of Iranian EFL and ESP teachers. Specifically, it investigates the most and least frequently reported beliefs and characteristics, explores potential mismatches between the two groups, and discusses the implications of these differences for teacher education and professional development. The findings of this study can contribute to a deeper understanding of teacher cognition in language education and inform the design of teacher training programs tailored to the specific needs of EFL and ESP instructors.

2. Literature review

Understanding teacher beliefs and professional characteristics is essential in language education, as these factors shape instructional practices, decision-making, and student learning outcomes. While extensive research has explored teacher cognition in general language teaching (Borg, 2006a; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Soodmand Afshar & Ghasemi, 2017), comparatively little is known about how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers differ in their beliefs and professional characteristics. This section reviews relevant literature on teacher beliefs, theoretical perspectives, and the distinctive characteristics of EFL and ESP teachers, highlighting the research gap this study aims to address.

2.1. Teacher beliefs: definition and importance

Teacher beliefs refer to implicit or explicit assumptions that guide teachers' perceptions, decision-making, and instructional behaviors (Kagan, 1992; Lan & Lam, 2020; Pajares, 1992). According to Puchta (1999), beliefs serve as guiding principles that influence individuals' actions, shaping their responses to educational challenges and their teaching methodologies. These beliefs influence classroom management, pedagogical strategies, and interactions with students (Williams & Burden, 1997). Bodur (2003) further defines teacher beliefs as personally held opinions regarding the nature of teaching, learning, students, subject matter, and the overall classroom context. These deeply ingrained perceptions shape how teachers design their lessons, interact with learners, and implement instructional strategies.

In the context of language teaching, teacher beliefs shape how instructors approach lesson planning, error correction, assessment, and student engagement (Farrell, 2019). For instance, beliefs about language learning difficulty can influence teachers' expectations and attitudes toward students (Horwitz, 1985). Similarly, research suggests that reflective practice can help teachers critically evaluate and modify their beliefs to enhance their teaching effectiveness (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Ramezani, 2014; Rashidi & Moghadam, 2014).

2.2. Theoretical perspectives on teacher beliefs

Several theoretical frameworks explain the formation and evolution of teacher beliefs (Abelson, 1979; Farrell, 2019; Pajares, 1992):

- **Cognitivist Perspective:** Beliefs are viewed as stable mental constructs that shape decision-making and are not easily altered (Li, 2013).
- **Interactionist Perspective:** Beliefs evolve through experience, social interactions, and professional engagement with students and colleagues (Skott, 2001).
- **Theories-in-Action Perspective:** This framework distinguishes between espoused beliefs (what teachers claim to believe) and beliefs-in-use (actual classroom practices), suggesting that teachers may act differently from their stated beliefs (Argyris et al., 1985; Rahimi & Sahragard, 2019).

These perspectives highlight the fact that beliefs are dynamic and context-sensitive, making it essential to study them within specific teaching environments.

2.3. Beliefs of EFL and ESP teachers

Previous research has extensively examined the beliefs of EFL teachers, particularly regarding communicative language teaching (CLT), grammar instruction, and error correction (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Lee, 2009). EFL teachers typically emphasize fluency, interaction, and general language proficiency (Borg, 2006a; Fang, 1996).

In contrast, ESP teaching is tailored to specific professional or academic needs, requiring instructors to balance linguistic competence with subject-specific knowledge (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Rajabi et al., 2011). Research suggests that ESP teachers often prioritize content knowledge over language proficiency, leading to potential differences in pedagogical beliefs (Doğruer et al. 2010; Erkmen, 2012; Watson, 2003). However, studies directly comparing the beliefs of EFL and ESP teachers are scarce, making this an important area for further investigation.

2.4. Distinctive characteristics of language teachers

In addition to beliefs, teachers' professional characteristics, such as subject knowledge, pedagogical skills, and instructional strategies, play a critical role in shaping their effectiveness. Borg (2006a) identifies five key characteristics that distinguish language teachers from other educators:

- Nature of subject matter: Language is both the content and the medium of instruction.
- Interaction patterns: Language teaching requires dynamic engagement and real-time communication (Borg, 2006a).
- Continuous knowledge development: Teachers must stay updated on linguistic, pedagogical, and technological advancements (Borg, 2006a).
- Professional isolation: Many language teachers work independently, limiting interdisciplinary collaboration (Borg, 2006a).
- Reliance on external resources: Authentic materials, technological tools, and supplementary resources are essential in language teaching (Borg, 2006a).

Given these factors, the professional identity and instructional practices of EFL and ESP teachers may vary significantly, reinforcing the need for comparative research.

3. Significance of the study and research questions

Teachers play a pivotal role in shaping students' learning experiences and outcomes. As Galluzzo (2005) states, "nothing is more central to students' learning than the quality of the teacher" (p. 142). Understanding teachers' beliefs and characteristics is essential for enhancing instructional effectiveness, designing evidence-based professional development programs, and informing language education policies (Brown, 2000; Wright et al., 1997). Research suggests that teachers' beliefs influence not only their instructional choices but also their attitudes toward student learning and professional development (Pajares, 1992; Puchta, 1999; Williams & Burden, 1997). Additionally, Al-Osaimi and Wedell (2014) argue that teacher beliefs are shaped by contextual variables, including cultural norms, institutional expectations, and students' learning goals, all of which influence pedagogical decision-making. Moreover, Riley (1997) highlights those beliefs affect key psychological factors such as motivation, attitudes, and learning strategies, ultimately shaping students' engagement and success in the learning process (Allebone & Davies, 2000).

Despite a growing body of research on teacher cognition, limited attention has been paid to the comparative study of EFL and ESP teachers' beliefs and characteristics. While EFL instruction emphasizes general language proficiency, ESP focuses on discipline-specific language use, requiring instructors to balance linguistic competence with subject-specific knowledge (Rajabi et al., 2011; Watson, 2003). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding whether and how these two groups of teachers differ in their pedagogical beliefs and professional attributes. Theories of teacher cognition suggest that beliefs are shaped by professional training, teaching experiences, and contextual factors, making comparative studies particularly valuable (Borg, 2006a; Farrell, 2019).

This study aims to bridge this gap by systematically examining the beliefs and characteristics of Iranian EFL and ESP teachers. Specifically, it investigates whether significant differences exist in their reported beliefs about language teaching and learning, as well as their self-perceived professional characteristics. Additionally, it explores the extent to which these differences (if any) impact their instructional practices. By addressing these questions, the study contributes to the broader field of teacher cognition and provides insights into the professional development needs of EFL and ESP instructors. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, curriculum designers, and teacher educators seeking to enhance the quality of language instruction across diverse educational contexts.

To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the most and least frequently reported pedagogical beliefs among ESP and EFL teachers?
2. What are the most and least frequently reported professional characteristics of ESP and EFL teachers?
3. To what extent do ESP and EFL teachers differ in their overall pedagogical beliefs?
4. To what extent do ESP and EFL teachers differ in specific pedagogical beliefs, as measured by individual items in the belief questionnaire?
5. To what extent do ESP and EFL teachers differ in their overall professional characteristics?
6. To what extent do ESP and EFL teachers differ in specific professional characteristics, as measured by individual items in the characteristics' questionnaire?

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

The present study participants included 225 ESP and EFL teachers, out of whom 150 teachers (70 ESP teachers and 80 EFL teachers) completed and returned the questionnaires. Out of this total number (150), 71 were female and 79 were male. The teachers in both groups had 1 to 30 years of teaching experience, with the highest number falling within the 1-5 year-experience category for EFL teachers ($n=27$) and the 6–10-year category for ESP teachers ($n=20$). Most teachers ($n=57$) were 31 to 40 years old, and most ($n=87$) held a doctoral degree. The participants were randomly selected from various universities throughout the country to better represent the population of teachers.

4.2. Instruments

The present study used a mixed method of data collection and analysis. That is, it adopted two types of instruments: Two Likert-scale structured questionnaires and a semi-structured interview, which are described below:

4.2.1. Likert-scale structured questionnaires

Two separate five-point Likert-scale questionnaires were adopted for data collection purposes. One questionnaire focused on EFL/ESP teachers' beliefs (BQ), and the other concentrated on ESP/EFL teachers' distinctive characteristics (CQ). The response options ranged from 1 to 5, showing strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The first part of the BQ sought some background information about teachers' gender, age, university degree, teaching experience, etc. The key items of the BQ were chosen from different accredited questionnaires in the field, including the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1987). Because BALLI was used initially with ESL students, a modified version of it, adapted and applied to foreign language teachers by Vibulphol (2004), was used in this study. It comprises five factors in foreign language acquisition: aptitude, difficulty learning, nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation. Another questionnaire from which some of the items of the BQ of the study were adapted was the one devised by Fives and Buehl (2005), which includes teachers' beliefs about teaching ability and pedagogical knowledge. The CQ used in the present study is provided by Borg (2006a) with only minor modifications. The questionnaires were validated through a pilot study, expert judgment, and factor analysis. BQ and CQ can be found in Appendix A and Appendix B.

4.2.2. Pilot study

In the process of the pilot study, the questionnaires were distributed among a similar group of 65 teachers at different universities (except those used in the study). Most of the answers were completed and collected via electronic mail; some were in paper and pencil format. After collecting the first round of data, the reliability and construct validity of both questionnaires were estimated. Based on the ideas and comments of the pilot study participants and the views of two experts in the field, some changes were made to the questionnaires to make them more reliable and valid. In the pilot process, the questionnaire on beliefs contained 50 items, among which five ambiguous or ill-functioning items were deleted. Also, the questionnaire used by Borg (2006a) had 18 items originally, two of which were removed for the same reason mentioned above, leaving it with 16 questions.

The Cronbach's alpha internal consistency reliability of both questionnaires was calculated. According to the reliability statistics, BQ and CQ yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89 and 0.75, respectively, which revealed that they both enjoyed acceptable internal consistency reliability indices. Also, the KMO sampling adequacy measures (0.73 and 0.71 for BQ and CQ, respectively) were adequate. Additionally, the results of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity were significant ($=000$) for both questionnaires, which, together with the results of KMO mentioned above, confirmed the validity of the questionnaires.

4.2.3. Interview

A semi-structured interview was also designed to obtain detailed information on the questionnaire data for multiple-level analyses and triangulation purposes. Drawing on Sawani's (2000) and Barcelos' (2000) interview questions regarding teacher beliefs and characteristics and taking the views of two experts in the field in this regard into consideration, the interview was constructed and conducted with 12 ESP and 13 EFL teachers selected randomly out of the population of the study whose informed consents were also obtained. The interviews were audio recorded (with teachers' permission), transcribed, and content analyzed. As a result, the common themes and recurring patterns were extracted, coded, quantitized, and frequency analyzed. The interview questions are in Appendix C.

4.3. Procedure

First, the study participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study and asked to complete the BQ and CQ. In the second step, twenty-five teachers selected, as mentioned above, were interviewed to examine the data obtained from the

questionnaires further. Finally, the data collected from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed to provide the answers to the research questions.

5. Results

5.1. Results of the questionnaires

The first research question investigated the most and least frequently reported beliefs by ESP teachers and EFL teachers. The results are provided in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. The most frequently reported beliefs by both ESP and EFL teachers

| Rank | Number of items in the questionnaire | Mean | SD |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 1 | 28 | 4.54 | .72 |
| 2 | 27 | 4.52 | .79 |
| 3 | 39 | 4.50 | .73 |
| 4 | 40 | 4.48 | .84 |
| 5 | 41 | 4.46 | .65 |

Table 2. The least frequently reported beliefs by both ESP and EFL teachers

| Rank | Number of items in the questionnaire | Mean | SD |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1 | 19 | 2.07 | .93 |
| 2 | 4 | 2.24 | .98 |
| 3 | 17 | 2.42 | 1.05 |
| 4 | 10 | 2.43 | 1.10 |
| 5 | 5 | 2.76 | .94 |

The second research question explored the most and least frequently reported characteristics of ESP and EFL teachers, the results of which are presented in Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Table 3. The most frequently reported characteristics by both ESP and EFL teachers

| Rank | Number of items in the questionnaire | Mean | SD |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|-----|
| 1 | 1 | 3.80 | .81 |
| 2 | 14 | 3.78 | .80 |
| 3 | 9 | 3.70 | .85 |
| 4 | 5 | 3.56 | .82 |
| 5 | 3 | 3.53 | .96 |

Table 4. The least frequently reported characteristics by both ESP and EFL teachers

| Rank | Number of items in the questionnaire | Mean | SD |
|------|--------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1 | 12 | 2.68 | 1.08 |
| 2 | 13 | 3.06 | .96 |
| 3 | 11 | 3.10 | 1.05 |
| 4 | 8 | 3.22 | .97 |
| 5 | 2 | 3.28 | .98 |

The third research question was whether a significant mismatch existed between ESP teachers and EFL teachers' beliefs. To answer this question, an Independent Samples *t*-test was conducted. However, the descriptive statistics for both groups of teachers are presented in Table 5 first.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for ESP teachers and EFL teachers’ beliefs

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------|----|--------|----------------|
| EFL teachers | 80 | 167.75 | 14.54 |
| ESP teachers | 70 | 171.62 | 14.01 |

As mentioned, an independent samples t-test was run to compare ESP and EFL teachers’ beliefs. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Independent Samples t-test comparing ESP teachers’ and EFL teachers’ beliefs overall

| | Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|--------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| Equal variances assumed | .099 | .75 | -1.65 | 148 | .100 | -3.87 | 2.34 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | -1.66 | 146.61 | .099 | -3.87 | 2.33 |

As the results in Table 6 show, *overall*, there was no significant mismatch between ESP teachers and EFL teachers concerning their beliefs, $t(148) = -1.65, p = 0.1 > 0.05$ (two-tailed).

However, one-way Chi-Square analyses were conducted to investigate whether there were any significant differences between ESP teachers’ and EFL teachers’ *specific* beliefs as measured by individual questionnaire items. Only the results of those significantly different items are presented in Table 7 to save space and for brevity.

Table 7. Chi-Square analyses comparing ESP teachers and EFL teachers on their specific beliefs

| NO. | Percent | | Pearson Chi-Square | df | Sig. (2-sided) |
|-----|----------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|----|----------------|
| | EFL teachers | ESP teachers | | | |
| 1 | 37.5 Agree | 50 Agree | 20.13 | 4 | .000 |
| 3 | 60 Agree | 34.3 Agree | 11.13 | 4 | .02 |
| 4 | 40 Disagree | 44.3 Neither agree nor disagree | 10.77 | 4 | .02 |
| 17 | 45 Disagree | 35.7 Disagree | 13.75 | 4 | .008 |
| 22 | 43.8 Agree | 72.9 Strongly agree | 22.77 | 4 | .000 |
| 23 | 57.5 Agree | 35.7 Agree | 13.97 | 4 | .007 |
| 25 | 36.3 Agree | 51.4 Agree | 8.38 | 3 | .03 |

As the results in Table 7 show, there were significant differences between the two groups on seven individual items of BQ; that is, items number 1 ($p = .000$), 3 ($p = .02$), 4 ($p = .02$), 17 ($p = .008$), 22 ($p = .000$), 23 ($p = .007$), and 25, $p = .03 < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

The fifth research question of the study aimed to investigate whether there was any significant mismatch between ESP teachers and EFL teachers’ overall characteristics. An Independent Samples *t*-test was conducted, the results of which are summarized in Tables 8 and 9 below:

Table 8. Descriptive statistics for ESP teachers and EFL teachers’ characteristics overall

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--------------|----|-------|----------------|
| EFL teachers | 80 | 55.46 | 6.79 |
| ESP teachers | 70 | 52.58 | 6.38 |

Table 9. Independent Samples t-test comparing ESP teachers and EFL teachers' characteristics overall

| | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | |
|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|--------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|
| | F | Sig. | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| Equal variances assumed | .11 | .74 | 2.66 | 148 | .009 | 2.87 | 1.08 |
| Equal variances not assumed | | | 2.67 | 147.22 | .008 | 2.87 | 1.07 |

As the results in Table 9 indicate, there was a significant mismatch between ESP teachers' and EFL teachers' characteristics *overall*, $t(148) = 2.66$, $p = .009 < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

To answer the sixth research question as to whether there was any significant mismatch between ESP teachers and EFL teachers' *specific* characteristics as measured by individual items of the questionnaire, one-way chi-square analyses were conducted, the results of which are presented in Table 10 below:

Table 10. Chi-Square analyses comparing ESP teachers and EFL teachers on their specific characteristics

| N0. | Percent | | Pearson Chi-Square | df | Sig. (2-sided) |
|-----|------------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|----|-------------------|
| | EFL teachers | ESP teachers | | | |
| 1 | 55 Agree | 41.4 Neither agree nor disagree | 9.67 | 4 | .04 |
| 5 | 51.3 Agree | 50 Neither agree nor disagree | 12.84 | 4 | .01 |
| 9 | 46.3 Agree | 50 Agree | 12.64 | 4 | .01 |
| 10 | 38.8 Agree | 55.7 Neither agree nor disagree | 18.49 | 4 | .001 |
| 12 | 32.5 Disagree | 38.6 Neither agree nor disagree | 10.98 | 4 | .02 |

As shown in Table 10, there were significant differences between the two groups on five specific characteristics; that is, items number 1 ($p = .04$), 5 ($p = .01$), 9 ($p = .01$), 10 ($p = .001$), and 12, $p = .02 < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

5.2. Results of the semi-structured interview

Tables 11 and 12 present the results of the participants' responses to the questions posed in the semi-structured interviews regarding teacher beliefs and characteristics.

Table 11. Common patterns of participants' responses to interview questions on teacher beliefs

| Number of Question | Common patterns of responses | Participants | | | | |
|---|---|---------------|---------|--------------|---------|-------|
| | | EFL Teachers | | ESP Teachers | | |
| | | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent | |
| 1. | Yes | 10 | 76.92 | 7 | 58.34 | |
| | No | 3 | 23.08 | 5 | 41.66 | |
| 2. | Yes | 6 | 46.16 | 4 | 33.33 | |
| | No | 7 | 53.84 | 8 | 66.67 | |
| 3. | Yes | 7 | 53.84 | 5 | 41.66 | |
| | No | 6 | 46.16 | 7 | 58.34 | |
| 4. | Depends | 2 | 15.39 | 4 | 33.33 | |
| | No | 11 | 84.61 | 8 | 66.67 | |
| 5. A. The most manageable parts of learning English | Grammar | 1 | 12.5 | 3 | 23.07 | |
| | Reading | 8 | 50 | 5 | 46.15 | |
| | Vocabulary | 2 | 18.75 | 2 | 15.39 | |
| | Speaking | 2 | 18.75 | 2 | 15.39 | |
| | B. The most difficult parts of learning English | Writing | 5 | 41.17 | 6 | 50 |
| | | Pronunciation | 3 | 23.52 | 3 | 21.43 |
| | | Listening | 2 | 11.77 | 3 | 21.43 |
| | | Speaking | 2 | 11.77 | 1 | 7.14 |
| Grammar | | 2 | 11.77 | 0 | 0 | |
| 6. | Depends on the goal | 4 | 31.25 | 1 | 7.69 | |
| | All | 4 | 31.25 | 4 | 38.46 | |
| | Vocabulary | 3 | 19.25 | 1 | 7.69 | |
| | Grammar | 2 | 18.25 | 0 | 0 | |
| | Reading | 0 | 0 | 2 | 15.39 | |
| | Writing | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7.69 | |
| | Listening | 0 | 0 | 2 | 15.39 | |
| | Speaking | 0 | 0 | 1 | 7.69 | |
| | 7. | Interest | 2 | 13.63 | 2 | 17.39 |
| Prestige | | 1 | 10.63 | 1 | 10 | |
| Academic needs | | 4 | 30.28 | 4 | 34.78 | |
| Job | | 3 | 22.73 | 3 | 21.73 | |
| Communication | | 3 | 22.73 | 2 | 16.1 | |
| 8. | It is better | 7 | 53.85 | 8 | 66.66 | |
| | Not necessarily | 6 | 46.15 | 4 | 33.34 | |
| 9. | They are effective | 11 | 84.61 | 7 | 58.34 | |
| | Not much important | 2 | 15.39 | 5 | 41.66 | |
| 10. | It can be learnt | 6 | 46.15 | 2 | 16.66 | |
| | It is innate | 3 | 23.08 | 6 | 50 | |
| | Both of them | 4 | 30.77 | 4 | 33.34 | |
| 11. | Subject knowledge | 5 | 25.8 | 5 | 35.71 | |
| | Teaching knowledge | 4 | 23 | 4 | 28.57 | |
| | Psychology knowledge | 3 | 19.35 | 3 | 21.42 | |
| | Knowledge about students | 3 | 19.35 | 2 | 14.3 | |
| | Classroom management knowledge | 2 | 12.9 | 0 | 0 | |

Table 12. Common patterns and recurring themes of participants' responses to Interview questions on teacher characteristics

| No. of the Question | Common patterns of responses | Participants | | | |
|---------------------|--|--------------|---------|--------------|---------|
| | | EFL Teachers | | ESP Teachers | |
| | | Frequency | Percent | Frequency | Percent |
| 1. | Using the same medium (e.g., English) makes it easier | 7 | 50 | 5 | 41.66 |
| | Using the same medium makes it harder | 2 | 14.28 | 1 | 8.34 |
| | Language learning is a skill | 2 | 14.28 | 1 | 8.34 |
| | Other fields are more formal and serious | 3 | 21.44 | 2 | 16.66 |
| | Language is easily forgotten | 0 | 0 | 1 | 8.34 |
| | The amount of information is higher in language learning | 0 | 0 | 2 | 16.66 |
| 2. | Helpful | 4 | 30.77 | 4 | 33.34 |
| | Effective | 4 | 30.77 | 5 | 41.66 |
| | More successful | 5 | 38.46 | 3 | 25 |
| 3. | Higher | 3 | 23.07 | 2 | 16.67 |
| | The same | 6 | 46.16 | 8 | 66.66 |
| | Lower | 4 | 30.77 | 2 | 16.67 |
| 4. | Yes | 10 | 76.92 | 5 | 41.66 |
| | No idea | 3 | 23.08 | 7 | 58.34 |
| 5. | A subject in English | 5 | 38.46 | 10 | 83.34 |
| | English with specific content | 8 | 61.54 | 2 | 16.66 |
| 6. | EFL teachers | 4 | 30.76 | 1 | 8.33 |
| | ESP teachers | 1 | 7.7 | 5 | 41.68 |
| | EFL teachers are familiar with specific content | 4 | 30.76 | 2 | 16.66 |
| | ESP teachers are good at English | 2 | 15.39 | 3 | 25 |
| | Both of them can teach it | 2 | 15.39 | 1 | 8.33 |

6. Discussion

The first and second research questions investigated the most and least frequently reported beliefs and characteristics of ESP and EFL teachers. As the results indicated in Tables 1 to 4, some of the beliefs and characteristics were commonly shared by the teachers in both groups.

Both groups had similar beliefs regarding teachers' common beliefs about general pedagogical and pedagogical content knowledge. That is, they believed studies of teachers' classroom behavior combined with studies of pedagogical knowledge of teachers would help significantly in understanding the teaching process, which is in keeping with the general belief that with professional growth and practice, there will be changes in teachers' cognition towards more effective teaching (Bullough, 1991; Calderhead, 1991; Clift, 1991). In the first group, which included beliefs about foreign language aptitude, the majority of the participants in both groups neither agreed nor disagreed that "women are better than men at learning foreign languages", which was one of the least frequently reported beliefs of teachers.

As an example of one of the most frequently reported characteristics by teachers, it was revealed that 55% of EFL teachers and 54% of ESP teachers agreed with the first item of the questionnaire (i.e., errors being seen as a natural and desirable learning process). Although the difference is insignificant, it might imply that EFL teachers are more familiar with the role of errors in language teaching than their ESP counterparts. Borg (2006a) holds that one of the differences between language teaching and other fields is that in subjects such as mathematics and science, learners learn and apply formulae without searching for their underlying rationale; however, in language teaching, most of the learners ask their teachers to explain the rationale behind, for instance, grammatical rules (i.e., item 11 of the CQ). As an example of the least frequently reported characteristics by teachers in the present study, only 40% of EFL teachers and 37% of ESP teachers agreed with this stance. Some teachers stated that every field of study had its own methods and difficulties.

The third research question investigated any significant mismatch between ESP and EFL teachers' beliefs. As the results showed, overall, there was no such mismatch between the beliefs of these two groups of teachers. The second group of items in BQ discussed beliefs about the difficulty of language learning. The purpose was to know whether and to what extent teachers believed in the difficulty of learning language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and sub-skills or components (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation).

Most teachers in each group (about 84%) agreed that some languages were easier to learn than others. Similarly, most pre-service teachers in Vibulphol's (2004) study agreed with this idea; however, this percentage was much higher in the present study. Regarding the difficulty of English, more than half of the participants in each group agreed that it is a language of medium difficulty. One of the ESP teachers stated that the difficulty of teaching a foreign language "depends on the teacher, his/her knowledge and ability to teach." The Thai pre-service teachers in the study of Vibulphol (2004) had different ideas from those found in the present study. They mentioned the alphabet system was one reason they saw English as a complex language.

According to Horwitz's (1985) study, when teachers underestimate the difficulty of the language they are teaching, they might develop unrealistic expectations and regard their students as less successful. Regarding the participants' ideas about which skills and components are easy or difficult to learn, nearly half of them agreed that 'reading' was the easiest skill to acquire. 'Writing' was mentioned as the most challenging skill by both groups. However, 'pronunciation' was believed to be the second most challenging component by EFL teachers, but 'pronunciation and listening' jointly were regarded so by ESP teachers.

The third group of the items on beliefs (i.e., beliefs about the nature of language learning) investigated what was important in learning a foreign language. About half of the participants in both groups believed it necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English. The majority of the teachers in both groups (nearly 80%) agreed that "It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country". However, as the reports of the interviews showed, although not most, some of the EFL teachers believed that "English should not necessarily be learnt in an 'all-English' environment (e.g., in UK, USA, Canada, etc.)". In contrast, ESP teachers perceived the environment as being of crucial importance.

Although learning the vocabulary of another language was naturally expected to be significantly more important for ESP teachers, on the whole, only 47% of them agreed with this belief. This percent for EFL teachers was slightly lower (i.e., 43.8%). With the belief that "the most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar", 43.8% of EFL teachers and only 31.4% of ESP teachers disagreed. As Horwitz (1985, 1987) believes, having a (strong) belief in the role of vocabulary and grammar in learning English will harm the language learning process. Similarly, Peacock's (2001) study also found that less proficient EFL learners believed in learning only vocabulary and grammar, and more proficient ones disagreed with this belief.

In the group of beliefs about learning and communication strategies, about half of the participants in both groups believed that speaking English with excellent pronunciation was important. Also, nearly 80% of teachers in each group stated that they enjoyed practicing English with native speakers. More than 70% of teachers in both groups appreciated guessing as a communication strategy, and the majority disapproved of the statement, "You should not say anything in English until you can say it correctly."

Unsurprisingly, most of the participants agreed with all statements in the group of beliefs about motivations and expectations, which illustrates that learning English was important and that they tended to learn it for various reasons, especially for instrumental inspirations. Weinstein and Mayer (1986) state that the goal of learning strategies is to "affect the learner's motivational or affective state or how the learner selects, acquires, organizes, or integrates new knowledge" (p. 315). Also, according to the experiments reported by Vernon (1971) about motivation, motivation might make perception and learning easier, rapid and exact and can thus affect or be affected by one's belief system.

Concerning beliefs on the reasons for learning English, the majority responded that it was for such utilitarian purposes as getting a good job, accessing information from around the world, entering a higher education level, and helping communicate with people from other countries. In general, the results of the BQ, up to here, converge with those of similar studies, especially that of Büyükyazi (2011), who investigated the beliefs about language learning of 156 EFL students and 19 EFL teachers in Turkey. Also, with some slight variations in the results of some items, the general outcome of this study is in line with the results gained from the teachers' beliefs' study conducted by Ghobadi Mohebi and Khodayay (2011), who compared Iranian university students' and teachers' beliefs about language learning.

The rest of the questions focus on teachers' pedagogical knowledge. With the belief that individuals are born with the ability to teach, most participants neither agreed nor disagreed, and some disagreed. Most teachers believed that teaching required both innate talent and pedagogical preparation and that individuals had to develop their natural abilities to be teachers. This finding corroborates the results of Fives and Buehl (2005) in this respect.

As the results previously showed, the responses of EFL and ESP teachers to the BQ were not significantly different, which contrasts the findings of the study by Rajabi et al. (2011) conducted in the context of the present study. This might be because the beliefs of language teachers are complicated (Farrell & Ives, 2014), and a multitude of factors might be involved in the issue by different individuals, even in the same cultural and educational context.

The fourth research question dealt with whether any significant mismatch existed between ESP teachers' and EFL teachers' specific beliefs. As the results showed, significant differences were found between the two groups on seven specific beliefs measured by individual items of the questionnaire; that is, items number 1, 3, 4, 17, 22, 23, and 25. Items 1, 3, and 4 belong to the group of 'beliefs about foreign language aptitude'. This group aimed to investigate whether (EFL and ESP) teachers believed foreign language learning required specific abilities and whether some learners could learn a foreign language (i.e. English) better than others. Although Horwitz (1985, 1987) argues that these beliefs are harmful to the process of language learning for both teachers and learners, the majority of the participants in the study reported holding these kinds of beliefs. This calls for further research to see whether this has an adverse impact on teachers' classroom practices and students' achievement in various cultures and contexts.

Almost all ESP teachers in the study believed it was better to start learning English in childhood. One of the reasons for the disagreement of a small number of EFL teachers in the study with this idea might have been that they considered individual features and differences of the learners in the learning process more important than age, as one of them stated in the interview. As Puchta (1999) maintains, belief in aptitude for language learning should be given due attention. Teachers' expectations about students' learning abilities might influence their interactions with them. When a student is seen as a low-ability learner, he/she might have less interaction (both verbal and non-verbal) with the teacher in comparison with his/her competent counterparts. As

a result, these types of students might eventually not succeed, something which the teacher might also expect. This line of reasoning supports the finding of Dođruer et al. (2010), who found EFL teachers believed the most important factor affecting them was their belief in aptitude for language and how it affected their teaching styles.

Teachers did not consider translation important. Almost all ESP teachers considered repetition and practice more important in learning; however, only 71% of EFL teachers agreed. One of the possible reasons for this might be that EFL teachers regard other factors, such as watching movies and listening to music, as being more important in the process of learning a foreign language. One of the plausible reasons for EFL teachers' significantly higher beliefs in the need for speaking skills compared to their ESP counterparts might be that the latter feel English is mainly needed for reading texts, and they do not sense a need to speak the language. With item 25, which dealt with belief in and preference for native speaker friends, 36% of EFL teachers and 51% of ESP teachers agreed, which caused a significant difference. This rate was expected to be higher for the EFL group. However, ESP teachers consider having native-speaker friends more important than their EFL counterparts. The fifth research question addressed whether there existed any significant mismatch between ESP teachers' and EFL teachers' characteristics overall, the results of which indicated, overall, there was a significant difference between the two groups of teachers in this regard.

Most teachers in both groups had no idea whether the range of competing methodologies and methodological shifts in language teaching over the years outweighed similar phenomena in other subject areas. Teachers' lack of knowledge about other fields might be one of the reasons why many students are not satisfied with ESP courses. One of the differences the teachers believed existed between language teaching and other fields was that in the former, the subject and the medium for teaching are the same, a finding in line with the results of Borg (2006a). Nearly 40% of ESP teachers stated they had no idea about the many sources for language learning and teaching. The high agreement of EFL teachers (61%) with item 7, which stated, "driven by powerful commercial forces, language teaching is characterized by a proliferation of teaching and learning resources unparalleled in other subjects", caused a significant difference between the two groups. One of the possible reasons for these differences might be that ESP teachers only know the English language and are not thus familiar with language teaching theories, methodologies and practices.

With the feature that language teaching has a practical outcome that is not a characteristic of other subjects, 40% of ESP teachers had no idea, and only 45% of them agreed, while 65% of EFL teachers agreed. This might show that EFL teachers believe more in utilitarian purposes and instrumental reasons for teaching and learning. In response to the sixth research question as to whether there was any significant mismatch between ESP teachers and EFL teachers' specific characteristics measured by individual items of the questionnaire, the results showed significant differences between the two groups on five specific characteristics; that is, items number 1, 5, 9, 10, and 12.

One of the possible reasons for the existence of a significant difference between the answers of the two groups to item 9 appears to be that some of the ESP teachers might not have been familiar with the concepts of declarative and procedural knowledge. Moving forward, with item 12 (i.e., language teachers are considered low-status compared with their subject-matter counterparts), 38% of ESP teachers and 18% of EFL teachers neither disagreed nor agreed, and 34% of ESP teachers and 32% of EFL teachers disagreed. One of the likely reasons for this disagreement with this statement might be that, in the academic situation of universities, teachers of various disciplines consider themselves at the same level. However, the results here are not in line with those of Borg (2006a), in which the EFL teachers felt isolated and low status compared to their counterparts in other fields.

The findings of this study, highlighting the significant differences in specific beliefs and characteristics between EFL teachers and ESP teachers, align with prior research emphasizing the contextual sensitivity of teacher beliefs (Argyris et al., 1985; Farrell, 2019). This disparity underscores the importance of tailored teacher training programs that address these contextual variances. For instance, the stronger emphasis on procedural knowledge among EFL teachers compared to the declarative focus observed in some ESP counterparts, Borg (2006b) suggests the necessity for differentiated professional development strategies. Moreover, the results resonate with Puchta's (1999) assertion that beliefs about learners' aptitude can shape teacher-student interactions, potentially reinforcing or mitigating students' learning anxieties. These findings also echo Peacock's (2001) conclusion that teacher beliefs about grammar and vocabulary can significantly influence language learning approaches, indicating a need for pedagogical alignment with contemporary language acquisition theories. Policymakers and curriculum designers should consider integrating reflective practices into teacher training, enabling educators to critically evaluate their beliefs and align them with effective instructional practices, as Farrell and Ives (2014) suggested. Such initiatives can bridge the gap between espoused theories and classroom realities, fostering a more effective language-teaching ecosystem.

7. Conclusion and implications of the study

This study investigated and compared the beliefs and characteristics of EFL and ESP teachers at the tertiary educational level in Iran. The results indicated that there was no significant mismatch between their beliefs. More specifically, the results indicated that most of the teachers in both groups believed in the role of aptitude in foreign language learning, considered English as a language of medium difficulty, and regarded reading as the easiest and writing as the most difficult skill to learn. Learning the culture of the foreign language and speaking in the specific environment where the given language is spoken were considered important by both ESP and EFL teachers in general. Both groups of teachers considered the practice as an important learning strategy. They believed the motivation behind learning English was mainly instrumental and included getting a good job, accessing information from around the world, entering higher education levels, etc. They also believed effective teachers should

have high pedagogical knowledge about the theoretical foundations and implications of teaching practices, the subject matter they teach, how to motivate and engage students, how to deliver information, etc., to mention only a few. However, ESP and EFL teachers had significantly different ideas about learning a foreign language's most important skills/ components.

Significant differences were also found between the two groups of teachers concerning their characteristics. The results further indicated that many ESP teachers, for instance, were unfamiliar with English language teaching. Additionally, the results showed how EFL and ESP teachers thought differently about who should teach the ESP courses and what should be taught in these courses (a subject in English or English with specific content). The results of this study emphasize the complex interplay between beliefs and characteristics in shaping the pedagogical approaches of EFL teachers and ESP teachers. While no overarching mismatch was found between the two groups' beliefs, notable differences in specific beliefs and characteristics highlight the context-dependent nature of teaching practices. These findings suggest that professional development programs should adopt a differentiated approach, addressing EFL teachers and ESP teachers' unique needs to enhance their effectiveness. Additionally, the study underscores the importance of fostering reflective practices among educators, enabling them to align their beliefs with evidence-based methodologies. Future research could further explore how these differences impact student outcomes and investigate the role of institutional and cultural factors in shaping teacher beliefs and practices.

Moreover, the present study's findings suggest some implications for teaching and learning English. Although teaching at the university level shows that teachers might have reached the professional growth needed and have a good command of the theories in their fields, it does not necessarily mean that they need no evaluation of their salient beliefs and characteristics. The evaluation of (belief systems and characteristics) can make teachers reflect on their teaching, enabling them to become aware of the differences between their current beliefs and practices and those leading to favorable learning conditions and then change their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and methods. As Farrell and Ives (2014, p.14) maintain, by bringing beliefs to the level of conscious awareness and articulating them, teachers can develop a kind of self-evaluation which can ultimately lead to "a form of self-mediated professional development".

The results of the evaluation of teacher beliefs can also help educational policymakers and administrators in making better decisions and teacher educators in designing more effective pre-service and in-service training courses in which the improper written-in-the-stone beliefs of teachers on teaching and learning a foreign language are challenged and those in line with optimal foreign language learning conditions are highlighted and strengthened if we are to improve the current situation.

8. References

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