The Relationship between Iranian EFL Institutes Teachers' Beliefs and Their Instructional Practices regarding Writing Strategies

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Abstract—Understanding the L2 teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward writing practices, on the one hand, and applying those beliefs in actual teaching activities, on the other hand, can uncover the real reasons of Iranian language learners' difficulty in dealing with writing skill and tasks. The present study was an attempt, first, to examine and investigate the construct of teachers' belief systems about writing strategies among EFL institute teachers, then to investigate and explore the extent of discrepancies or consistencies between teachers' beliefs about writing strategies and their practical teaching activities in the context of English teaching as a foreign language in different institutes of Najaf Abad, Tiran and Goldasht in Iran. To these ends, 60 EFL institute teachers teaching at different language institutes in Najaf Abad, Tiran and Goldasht participated in this research. The teachers were both male and female with teaching experience ranging from 5 to 25 years. Using a validated researcher- made questionnaire, the obtained data revealed that most Iranian teachers had positive beliefs and attitudes toward most of the mentioned English writing strategies in the research questionnaire. Also, Iranian teachers considered the compensational and social aspects of writing strategies more significant than the other aspects in their actual class practices. However, Conversely, they did not pay attention to the implementation of Meta cognitive, cognitive and affective writing strategies which are very essential in facilitating the task of writing for the language learners.The findings of the study will contribute to L2 both teachers and learners.

Index Terms—instructional practices, Iranian teachers, writing strategies, English language institutes

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is a practical and effective way for learners to express their thoughts, creativity, and uniqueness. It is also a fundamental way in which students learn to organize ideas, and it is a task that requires the individuals to activate different skills simultaneously. This skill is seen as a process of discovery because the writers try to find their way while they are struggling to think, compose and put their ideas together, therefore, it is not a static process but a cognitive, social and dynamic one. (Ahmed Ismail, 2011).Writing in a second language is a challenging, complicated and complex process. This complexity and difficulty comes from the fact that this skill includes finding a thesis, developing support for it, organizing, revising, and finally editing it to make sure a useful and effective errorless piece of writing. These L2 problems usually overwhelm lower proficiency L2 writers, sometimes to the point of a complete failure in the writing process. What can worsen the problem of learning for these language learners might be the lack of an organized and systematic procedure followed by EFL/ESL writing teachers in their actual class activities.

However, most studies tried to focus on mostly the same steps to writing at different levels of proficiency. It is, finally, the teachers who consciously or subconsciously bring or neglect the systematic procedures of writing into the actual class practices. One of the factors affecting this choice made by writing teachers is assumed by this study to be their beliefs towards teaching writing and the degree to which the teachers apply those beliefs in their teaching activities.

The relation between teachers, attitudes about the way writing occur and how teachers foster writing skills in their classroom has been studied by a lot of scholars. However, empirical studies on this are not only a relatively recent development but also are limited in many ways (Pace & Powers, 1981). Although, as Chou (2008, p192) asserts, "the few number of studies on exploring teachers' beliefs in the area of L2 writing instruction have shown an unclear picture of teachers' idea construct in teaching writing".

Thus researchers need to study and investigate more on the attitudes and actual instructional practices considering writing. Beliefs have been reported by a number of scholars as being very hard to define, despite they are described as the most valuable psychological construct to teacher education among which is Pajares (1992, p.2) labeling them a "messy construct [that] travels in disguise and often under alias." These aliases include "personal theories" (Borg, 1999), "untested assumptions" (Calderhead, 1996) "teachers' subjectively reasonable beliefs" (Harootunian&Yarger, 1981), "implicit theories" (Clark & Peterson 1986), "conceptions" (Ekeblad& Bond, 1994), "personal pedagogical systems"

(Borg ,1990), "explicit propositions" (Nisbett& Ross ,1980), "judgments" (Yero, 2002) and "maxims" (Richards, 1996, cited in Mohamed, 2006).

Teachers' Beliefs may be based on their actual practices, personality factors, educational rules, experimental evidences, and principles elicited from a method or an approach (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). By Looking at the researches on teacher beliefs we find that teachers have beliefs about all aspects of their work. As Calderhead (1996) believes, there are five basic areas about which teachers have significant including beliefs about teaching learners and learning, curriculum or subjects, learning how to teach, and about the self and the nature of teaching. These five areas are stated that are closely well related. The structure of teachers' beliefs is by no means uniform or simple.

since a belief "does not lend itself to empirical investigations" , they are very hard to define (Pajares, 1992, p. 308). Related to this issue, beliefs are considered as a "messy construct" by Pajares which have not been dealt with precisely:

…travels in disguise and often under an alias of values, attitudes, judgments, axioms, ideas, ideology, conceptions, perceptions, conceptual systems, preconceptions, dispositions, implicit theories, personal theories, action strategies, internal mental processes, practical principles, rules of practice, perspectives, repertories of understanding, and social strategy, to name but a few that can be found in the literature (p. 309).

As Loucks-Horsley (1998) states, "beliefs are more than opinions: they may be less than ideal truth, but we are committed to them" (P. 27). Pajares (1992) has also declared the difficulty in studying teachers beliefs has raised from different views in defining beliefs, differing understandings of beliefs structures, and poor conceptualization" (P.307). some researchers in other fields have pointed out, "belief" is not an easily defined concept (Cantu, 2001).As Pajares (1992) expresses studying educational beliefs is in danger of becoming what an' entangled domain' as called by Nespor (1987). she explains that the entangled domain concept deals with examples or instances or entities which can be recognized by some criteria as belonging to a given domain, but which simultaneously do not all share some basic sets of criteria and do not fall into relationships of dominance and subsumption with each other. Thematic features overlap only incompletely and partially across domains (p. 325).

To achieve the goal of the present study, we used the concept of belief to characterize teachers' idiosyncratic unity of thought about events, people, objects and their characteristic relationships that influence on their planning and interactive thoughts and decisions. If we want to comprehend thoroughly what is meant by 'belief', understanding its nature is necessary, as will be discussed in the review of the literature section.

In the following parts of this chapter first the problem under this study will be clarified. Then research questions and hypotheses are illustrated. After that, the significance of the study is explained. Finally, the operational and conceptual definitions of some key terms are presented.

II. METHODOLOGY

The first aim of the present study is to explore the construct of teachers' beliefs towards writing strategies among EFL institute teachers, then to investigate the degree of discrepancies or consistencies between teachers' practical teaching activities and their beliefs about writing strategies in the context of English teaching as a foreign language in institutes of Najaf Abad, Tiran and Goldasht in Iran.

The objectives of the study can be summarized as follows:

1. To explore Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward writing strategy instruction.
2. To learn about actual practices of writing instruction in the above mentioned language institutes.
3. To compare teachers' self-reported practices with actual practices in institutes.
4. To determine the relationship between teachers' degrees of qualification and their attitudes toward writing strategy instruction.

A. Participants

The participants included 60 EFL institute teachers teaching at different language institutes in Najaf Abad, Tiran and Goldasht. The teachers were both male and female (39 and 21, respectively) with a range of teaching experience from 1 to 25 years, degrees of B.A, M.A and PhD, and with majors like TEFL, Linguistics, English Literature, and English Translation. There were 2 Ph. Ds, 7 PHD students, 16 MAs, 11 MA students, and 24 BAs.

B. Instrument

In order to answer the first research question, a Writing Strategies Questionnaire was used with reference to Oxford's (1990) classification of language leaning strategies types in order to gain information on the writing strategies adopted by language teachers. Oxford's classification of language learning strategies was viewed as a comprehensive and efficient classification and thus has been used and adapted for research in particular task settings (Ellis, 1994; Oxford, Cho, Leung, & Kim, 2004).

The validity of the questionnaire was determined through a detailed review, revision and edition by 6 University lecturers at university of Isfahan and Sheikhbahaee. In order to reach the reliability for our questionnaire, we asked 20 undergraduate and graduate students not included in the sample, to fill it out prior to the research. The Reliability was established using this pilot test. Data collected from pilot test was analyzed using SPSS .Cronbach's Alpha method was used. A reliability of 0.87 proved the reliability of our questionnaire.

C. Procedures

The participants were 60 EFL institute teachers teaching at different institutes in Najaf Abad, Tiran and Goldasht. After selecting the participants, a Writing Strategies Questionnaire that was developed in English with reference to Oxford's (1990) classification of language leaning strategies types was piloted and the reliability and validity of the questionnaire were determined. Then it was given to the teachers and they were asked to respond to each strategy item.

The same questionnaire is used by the researcher as a checklist during her classroom observations. In each visit, the researcher using a 5-point scale of *never*, *occasionally*, *sometimes*, *often*, and *always* marked how often teachers teach students in each writing strategy. Every teacher was visited 6 times. Each visit lasted 40 minutes during which the teacher teaching was observed carefully to see which strategies are being taught. If a strategy was practiced by one teacher during all visits, it was considered as an always-practice. If 4 or 5 times the strategy was mentioned by the teacher, it was scaled as often, if in half the sessions the teacher worked on that strategy, the observer marked it as sometimes, and if it was once or twice observed, it was considered as occasionally.

To answer the third question of the research about the possible relation between the qualifications and the beliefs of teachers about teaching writing strategies, according to their years of teaching experience and educational level, the teachers were divided into three main groups. The first group included the PhD and MA teachers with an average teaching period of 12 years. Group 2 included graduate students and BA teachers with an average teaching period of 5 years, and the last group included undergraduate teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience. The data was categorized accordingly into three groups and were analyzed to find the answer.

III. RESULTS

To reply the first research question ("What are the most common attitudes and beliefs of EFL teachers toward the explicit teaching of writing strategies in Iranian institutes?"), using SPSS software the researcher calculated descriptive statistics. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show the percentage of importance and necessity of each strategy mentioned in the questionnaire.

TABLE 1
THE IMPORTANCE OF WRITING STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WRITING

The Importance of writing strategies for improving writing in percentage					
Strategies	Very important	important	Neutral (do not know)	Less important	Not important at all
Strategy 1	46.66	23.33	6.66	11.66	11.66
Strategy 2	33.33	30	5	21.66	10
Strategy 3	53.33	28.33	3.33	10	5
Strategy 4	26.66	38.33	6.66	20	8.33
Strategy 5	26.66	35	5	16.66	16.66
Strategy 6	31.66	31.66	3.33	20	13.33
Strategy 7	48.33	20	5	15	11.66
Strategy 8	35	25	3.33	23.33	13.33
Strategy 9	33.33	23.33	8.33	13.33	21.66
Strategy 10	25	25	3.33	18.33	28.33
Strategy 11	21.66	35	6.66	21.66	15
Strategy 12	33.33	23.33	10	13.33	20
Strategy 13	53.33	23.33	3.33	16.66	3.33
Strategy 14	26.66	20	5	35	13.33
Strategy 15	13.33	8.33	8.33	38.33	31.66
Strategy 16	33.33	23.33	3.33	23.33	16.66
Strategy 17	11.66	20	3.33	16.66	48.33
Strategy 18	21.66	15	6.66	38.33	18.33
Strategy 19	61.66	20	3.33	10	5
Strategy 20	45	30	6.66	13.33	5
Strategy 21	21.66	35	5	28.33	10
Strategy 22	51.66	36.66	3.33	8.33	0
Strategy 23	36.66	20	6.66	25	11.66
Strategy 24	25	20	6.66	36.66	11.66
Strategy 25	33.33	23.33	5	18.33	20
Strategy 26	50	26.66	3.33	11.66	8.33
Strategy 27	68.33	20	3.33	6.66	1.66
Strategy 28	53.33	31.66	5	8.33	1.66
Strategy 29	38.33	30	3.33	21.66	6.66
Strategy 30	40	31.66	5	16.66	6.66
Strategy 31	65	21.66	3.333333	5	5
Strategy 32	38.33	33.33	5	13.33	10
Strategy 33	50	20	3.333333	18.33	8.33
Strategy 34	26.66	18.33	8.33	38.33	8.33
Strategy 35	56.66	23.33	3.33	15	1.66
Strategy 36	41.66	30	5	18.33333	5
Strategy 37	36.66	30	6.66	15	11.66
Strategy 38	40	30	8.33	18.33	3.33
Strategy 39	16.66	28.33	3.33	30	21.66
Strategy 40	46.66	28.33	5	15	5
Strategy 41	41.66	23.33	3.33	15	16.66
Strategy 42	35	21.66	5	26.66	11.66
Strategy 43	50	23.33	6.66	16.66	3.33
Strategy 44	43.33	33.33	3.33	20	0
Strategy 45	30	26.66	5	25	13.33

TABLE 2
THE NECESSITY OF WRITING STRATEGIES IN TEACHING PRACTICES

	The Necessity of writing Strategies in Teaching Practices in percentage				
Strategies	Very important	important	Neutral (do not know)	Less important	Not important at all
Strategy 1	43.33	23.33	5	13.33	15
Strategy 2	36.66	30	3.33	16.66	13.33
Strategy 3	58.33	23.33	1.66	10	6.66
Strategy 4	30	35	3.33	20	11.66
Strategy 5	26.66	33.33	5	11.66	23.33
Strategy 6	33.33	25	1.66	23.33	16.66
Strategy 7	46.66	25	3.33	13.33	11.66
Strategy 8	38.33	25	3.33	18.33	15
Strategy 9	33.33	28.33	3.33	10	25
Strategy 10	26.66	30	1.66	11.66	30
Strategy 11	25	31.66	3.33	21.66	18.33
Strategy 12	36.66	23.33	5	10	25
Strategy 13	56.66	18.33	3.33	15	6.66
Strategy 14	25	23.33	3.33	31.66	16.66
Strategy 15	16.66	8.33	5	35	35
Strategy 16	35	23.33	1.66	20	20
Strategy 17	16.66	21.66	3.33	11.66	46.66
Strategy 18	21.66	18.33	5	33.33	21.66
Strategy 19	58.33	21.66	3.33	6.66	10
Strategy 20	46.66	26.66	5	13.33	8.33
Strategy 21	21.66	33.33	3.33	26.66	15
Strategy 22	56.66	30	1.66	6.66	5
Strategy 23	40	20	1.66	18.33	20
Strategy 24	28.33	20	5	30	16.66
Strategy 25	40	21.66	3.33	11.66	23.33
Strategy 26	50	26.66	1.66	10	11.66
Strategy 27	56.66	25	1.66	11.66	5
Strategy 28	48.33	36.66	3.33	6.66	5
Strategy 29	36.66	33.33	1.66	18.33	10
Strategy 30	48.33	30	3.33	6.66	11.66
Strategy 31	61.66	21.66	1.66	6.66	8.33
Strategy 32	35	36.66	3.33	13.33	11.66
Strategy 33	53.33	20	1.66	13.33	11.66
Strategy 34	31.66	18.33	3.33	35	11.66
Strategy 35	55	23.33	1.66	15	5
Strategy 36	36.66	33.33	3.33	16.66	10
Strategy 37	48.33	25	5	13.33	8.33
Strategy 38	43.33	26.66	5	16.66	8.33
Strategy 39	26.66	20	3.33	25	25
Strategy 40	43.33	31.66	3.33	10	11.66
Strategy 41	48.33	20	3.33	8.33	20
Strategy 42	41.66	23.33	3.33	15	16.66
Strategy 43	48.33	21.66	5	13.33	11.66
Strategy 44	48.33	28.33	1.66	15	6.66
Strategy 45	36.66	20	3.33	20	20

It is clear from Tables 3.1 and 3.2 that Iranian teachers have positive attitudes towards writing strategy instruction. Almost all participants agreed on the significance and necessity of the following explicit teaching of all strategies except numbers 15, 17, 18, 39, 34, 24, 14. The agreed and confirmed strategies were:

The second research question which was proposed in a null hypothesis format was: Is there any mismatch between teachers' self- reported practices and the actual practices in writing classes of institutes? In order to answer this question, the researcher qualitative data was collected by observing 10 Iranian English teachers teaching writing at Language Institutes. We visited each teacher 6 times for 40 minutes, during which the frequency was noted by researcher, at which each teacher trained/taught students in one of the writing strategies included in the questionnaire. The researcher used a 5-point scale of always, often, sometimes, occasionally and never. Table 3 shows the frequencies of each writing strategy.

TABLE 3.3:
FREQUENCY OF WRITING STRATEGIES

Strategies	Always	Often	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
Strategy1	0%	70%	10%	10%	10%
Strategy 2	0%	10%	0%	0%	90%
Strategy 3	0%	10%	20%	60%	10%
Strategy 4	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%
Strategy 5	0%	0%	0%	90%	10%
Strategy 6	0%	20%	40%	30%	10%
Strategy 7	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Strategy8	10%	70%	20%	0%	0%
Strategy 9	0%	10%	0%	80%	10%
Strategy10	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%
Strategy11	10%	60%	10%	10%	10%
Strategy12	0%	10%	0%	90%	0%
Strategy13	0%	10%	10%	80%	0%
Strategy14	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Strategy15	0%	0%	0%	0%	100%
Strategy16	0%	80%	10%	0%	10%
Strategy17	10%	0%	0%	0%	90%
Strategy18	0%	10%	10%	80%	0%
Strategy19	0%	10%	40%	40%	10%
Strategy20	10%	0%	10%	70%	10%
Strategy21	0%	10%	40%	40%	10%
Strategy22	10%	70%	10%	10%	0%
Strategy23	10%	10%	10%	60%	10%
Strategy24	10%	0%	0%	0%	90%
Strategy25	0%	60%	10%	20%	10%
Strategy26	10%	0%	0%	80%	10%
Strategy27	10%	80%	10%	0%	0%
Strategy28	0%	10%	70%	10%	10%
Strategy29	60%	20%	10%	10%	0%
Strategy30	10%	10%	40%	20%	20%
Strategy31	60%	10%	20%	10%	0%
Strategy32	0%	0%	0%	70%	30%
Strategy33	10%	10%	50%	20%	10%
Strategy34	10%	0%	0%	80%	10%
Strategy35	0%	0%	0%	90%	10%
Strategy36	0%	10%	20%	70%	0%
Strategy37	10%	10%	50%	20%	10%
Strategy38	0%	0%	10%	80%	10%
Strategy39	0%	90%	0%	0%	10%
Strategy40	0%	0%	20%	70%	10%
Strategy41	0%	30%	30%	30%	10%
Strategy42	0%	10%	10%	60%	20%
Strategy43	0%	10%	50%	30%	10%
Strategy44	0%	60%	20%	0%	10%
Strategy45	0%	10%	0%	0%	90%

Test Statistics

		Frequency of actual practice in class	Necessity of writing strategies
Chi-Square	a,b	38.378	9.889
df		7	25
Asymp. Sig.		.000	.997

a. 0 cells (.0%) include expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 5.6.
b. 26 cells (100.0%) include expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 1.7.

Using a frequency of 50% as a cutoff point and the P value got from running a Chi-Squre between the results obtained about the necessity of teaching writing strategies and the actual practice by the observed teachers, tables 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 show that most teachers always or often used strategies 1, 8,11, 16,22,25, 27, 29,31,39, 44.This result is only consistent with this part of the results of quantitative data in which strategies 22,28, 31 were ranked as the most important strategies to teach, with the exception that strategy 28 was just sometimes practiced by 70% of the teachers.

The third research question was: "Is there a significant relationship between the qualifications of teachers and their attitudes toward teaching writing strategies?" The null hypothesis was:

Ho: There is no significant relationship between the qualifications of teachers and their attitudes toward writing strategy instruction.

Using the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, the relationship between the degree of teachers' qualifications and their attitudes toward teaching writing strategies was investigated. The first questionnaire which asked the teachers about their educational degree and their experiment in teaching revealed that the higher degree they had, the more experience in teaching they had. Therefore, out of two variables of degree and years of experience, just one variable, years of experience, was included in our analysis. According to their years of teaching experience and educational level, the teachers were divided into three main groups. The first group included the PhD and MA teachers with an average teaching period of 12 years. Group 2 included graduate students and BA teachers with an average teaching period of 5 years, and the last group included undergraduate teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience. The data obtained from the questionnaire about the necessity of writing was grouped according to the mentioned categories into three groups. Because our two variables (years of experience and attitude toward writing strategies) weren't of the same measurement, we had to use Pearson-Production Correlation test to find the nature of relation between these two variables.

TABLE 3.6:
PEARSON-PRODUCT CORRELATION

		years of experience	necessity of writing strategies
years of experience	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	1 .066 60	.239 60
necessity of writing strategies	Pearson Correlation Sig. (2-tailed) N	.239 .066 60	1 60

The results in table 3.6 show that the Pearson correlation coefficient, r, is 0.066, therefore it isn't statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$). Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no significant relationship between teachers' qualifications and their attitudes toward writing strategy instruction is not rejected.

IV. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

As the results of data analysis run in pervious sections, a number of findings emerged: First, most Iranian teachers had positive beliefs and attitude toward most of the mentioned English writing strategies in the research questionnaire. It seems the teacher training programs in Iran have successfully transferred and is transferring the theoretical aspects of teaching and practicing writing strategies in English classes. However, bringing these theories into practice is apparently not met by most teachers.

Next, the results showed that Iranian teachers consider the compensational and social aspects of writing strategies more than the other aspects in their actual class practices. Conversely, they do not pay attention to the implementation of Meta cognitive, cognitive and affective writing strategies which are very essential in easing the task of writing for the language learners.

And finally, it is concluded that whatever beliefs and strategies the teachers have, has no relation to their qualifications. It seems they acquire their beliefs in the early stages of education rather than later stages.

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