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The Impact of Teaching Experience on Iranian EFL Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy and their Perception of English Teacher Distinctive Characteristics

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Abstract

This study investigated the effect of Iranian EFL teachers' years of teaching experience on their sense of efficacy and beliefs about teachers' distinctive characteristics. To this end, 135 Iranian EFL teachers completed a validated questionnaire developed by (Borg, 2006) and Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale developed by (Tschannen and Hoy, 2001). The results of MANOVA revealed significant effect of experience on teachers' sense of efficacy; however, it indicated no significant impact on their beliefs about characteristics that differentiated them from teachers of other subjects. Three sets of characteristics were discovered through interview; "Similarities" (also reported in Borg's study); "Differences" mentioned differently by participants of both studies, and "unique characteristics" only specified by Iranian teachers.

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1. Introduction

Studies on the effectiveness of teaching practice cannot be accomplished without considering the role of people involved in it, i.e. teachers. Emergence of different approaches to language teaching led to the development of new conditions whereby specific roles and characteristics were defined for language teachers (e.g., possessing native like

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pronunciation, teaching L2 culture, tolerating errors, etc.). As stated by (Borg, 2006), characteristics of language teachers and language teaching cannot be separated. Distinctive features between teachers of English and other subjects, as reported by the two groups of teachers, include "the nature of the subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher-learner relationships, and contrasts between native and non-native speakers" (Borg, 2006, p. 3). From students' viewpoint, EFL teachers are different from other teachers due to the complex nature of the subject matter, unity of the medium and content of instruction, enhancement of communication skills and cultural knowledge along with linguistic knowledge, more learner involvement and error tolerance, and more positive attitude and enthusiasm (Lee, 2010). The point to be highlighted is that because this distinctiveness could be culture- and context-bound, proposing a global definition for L2 teachers appears to be illogical.

Another teacher belief that could be affected by years of teaching experience is teachers' sense of efficacy. Any teacher who believes is capable of handling Student Engagement, Efficacy in Instructional Strategies, and Efficacy in Classroom Management is considered to possess the sense of efficacy (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). According to (Bandura, 1986), people's self-efficacy belief is associated with their judgment of what they can do with their skills rather than possessing the skills. At first, sense of efficacy may be viewed as a trait; nevertheless, during the course of actual teaching, this belief is gradually influenced by different sources such as mastery experiences, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and physiological arousal (Bandura, 1997). (Hoy and Spero, 2005) identify mastery experiences as a powerful influence on teachers' efficacy development during early days of teaching. In order for this experience to be positive, novice teachers need to feel satisfied with their performance and be supported by colleagues and authorities through verbal persuasion (Moran & Hoy, 2007) before these beliefs are set and become resistant to change. (Ghaith and Yaghi, 1997) stated that higher personal teaching efficacy encourages teachers to adopt new instructional practices more frequently. As postulated in Tschannen, Hoy, and Hoy (1998), efficacy lowers in teachers who perceive their performance as a failure and this perception creates the expectation that future performances will also be inept. Thus, teachers judge their capabilities not only based on their knowledge of L2, but also according to students' achievement and motivation (Moran & Hoy, 2001).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there are only a few studies (e.g., Borg, 2006; Lee, 2010) that clearly concentrate on distinctive characteristics rather than effectiveness and ineffectiveness of English teachers (e.g. Bell, 2005; Brosh, 1996; Mullock, 2003; Park & Lee, 2006). Therefore, this study was an attempt to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perception of their own characteristics and how this perception and their sense of efficacy are affected by years of experience. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does years of teaching experience significantly affect EFL teachers' beliefs about their sense of efficacy and distinctive characteristics?
2. Are there any other context-specific characteristics of Iranian EFL teachers than those specified by Borg (2006)?

2.Methodology

2.1.Participants

Participants of the study were 135 EFL teachers selected randomly from three western cities in Iran. Their teaching experience ranged from a few months to 30 years. They were categorized in three groups of Low (with less than 2 years of teaching experience, n=44), Mid (with 2 to 5 years, n=45), and High (with 6 years of experience and above, n=46). Twenty teachers from among the above were randomly selected and sat an open-ended interview in addition.

2.2.Instruments

The instruments used in this study included two questionnaires and an open-ended interview. The first questionnaire was Teachers' Distinctive Characteristics adopted from Borg (2006) and validated in Iran by Kasraee (2014). It is a five-point Likert scale questionnaire, ranging from strongly agree (=5) to strongly disagree (=1). An item about years of teaching experience was included in the demographic section of this questionnaire. The second questionnaire employed was Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale developed by Tschannen and Hoy (2001), the

reliability of which was reported to be .94. It contains 24 items and lies on a nine-point scale ranging from 'nothing' (1) to 'a great deal' (9). An open-ended interview on teachers' distinctive characteristics in the context of Iran was the last instrument used.

2.3.Procedure

135 Iranian EFL teachers selected randomly from western Iran were administered the two questionnaires of Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale and Teachers' Distinctive Characteristics. 20 of these teachers were also interviewed on their perception of English teacher characteristics in the context of Iran.

3.Results

Table 1. To explore whether teachers' sense of efficacy and their beliefs about English teachers' distinctive characteristics were influenced by years of experience, a MANOVA was run

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Teaching Experience	Sense of Efficacy	26802.371	2	13401.15	20.054	.000
	Characteristics	128.612	2	64.306	1.32	.149
Error	Sense of Efficacy	86872.652	130	668.251		
	Characteristics	4326.622	130	33.282		
Total	Sense of Efficacy	3286719.000	133			
	Characteristics	528559.000	133			

Years of experience, as illustrated in Table 1, significantly affected teachers' sense of efficacy (.000); while, their perception of English teachers' distinctive characteristics was not influenced by this experience (.149).

The results of effect of levels of experience on three subcomponents of sense of efficacy are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Multiple comparisons of effect of experience levels on subcomponents of sense of efficacy

Dependent Variable			Mean	Std.	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
	(I)	(J)	Difference (I-J)	Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Efficacy in Student Engagement	Low Experience	Mid Experience	-5.74*	1.945	.010	-10.35	-
		High Experience	-11.20*	1.924	.000	-15.76	-6.63
	Mid Experience	Low Experience	5.74*	1.945	.010	1.13	10.35
		High Experience	-5.45*	1.913	.014	-9.99	-.92
	High Experience	Low Experience	11.20*	1.924	.000	6.63	15.76
		Mid Experience	5.45*	1.913	.014	.92	9.99
Efficacy in Instructional Strategies	Low Experience	Mid Experience	-5.65*	1.915	.010	-10.19	-1.11
		High Experience	-10.88*	1.894	.000	-15.37	-
	Mid Experience	Low Experience	5.65*	1.915	.010	1.11	10.19
		High Experience	-5.23*	1.883	.017	-9.70	-.77

Efficacy in Classroom Management	High	Low	10.88*	1.894	.000	6.39	15.37
		Mid	5.23*	1.883	.017	.77	9.70
	Low	Mid	-4.72	2.212	.087	-9.96	.52
		High	-12.59*	2.188	.000	-17.78	-7.40
	Mid	Low	4.72	2.212	.087	-.52	9.96
		High	-7.87*	2.175	.001	-13.03	-2.71
	High	Low	12.59*	2.188	.000	7.40	17.78
		Mid	7.87*	2.175	.001	2.71	13.03

As revealed in Table 2, except for Classroom Management between Low and Mid groups (.087), the significant effect of experience on the three subcomponents is observable for Low, Mid, and High groups.

After content analysis of the open-ended interview, characteristics were compared with those mentioned in Borg (2006) and were categorized into three groups. Table 3 represents the first set called "similarities" that were mentioned by participants of both studies.

Table 3. Main themes of distinctive characteristics mentioned by participants of the study similar to those of Borg (2006)

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
1. Language dynamism and its relevance to real life	18	.90
2. Extension of English teaching to culture and communication skills	15	.75
3. Teacher and students' involvement in personal interaction due to communicative nature of the subject	11	.55
4. Influence of commercial and political forces in language teaching	10	.50
5. Application of more methodologies in teaching	9	.45
6. Positive view on errors made by students	7	.35
7. Registration of adults in language classes more than other subjects	6	.30

As suggested in Table 3, the characteristic of relevance to real life is the most frequently referred by participants.

Table 4 demonstrates the "Differences" i.e. characteristics stated in a different way by participants of the study compared to those of Borg (2006).

Table 4. Main themes of distinctive characteristics mentioned by participants (different from Borg's)

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
1. Higher position and status awarded by learners	15	.75
2. Long training before starting the carrier	14	.70
3. Creativity, flexibility and enthusiasm as institutes' requirements	12	.60
4. Not teaching facts resulting in relative right and wrong	9	.45
5. Lack of native/non-native comparison due to lack of native teachers in Iran	8	.40

As Table 4 shows, the same features of EFL teaching are analyzed from different viewpoints by Iranian teachers compared to Borg's participants.

However, some characteristics were reported to be context-specific as illustrated in Table 5, which are those not specified in Borg (2006).

Table 5. Main themes of context-specific distinctive characteristics mentioned only by Iranian participants

Themes	Frequency	Percentage
1. English teaching being regarded as an unreliable first/permanent job	17	.85
2. Influence of English teachers on learners' behavior, way of dressing, and their world view	16	.80
3. Great need for learning English due to academic and financial requirements	16	.80
4. The importance of number of students in class management and communicative activities	11	.55

5. Need for more attention to individual differences in English classes	9	.45
6. Lack of teachers' native intuition due to EFL situation	7	.35

As Table 5 shows, the list of characteristics is limited only to Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs.

3. Discussion

The first part of the results highlighted the role of teaching experience in EFL teachers' sense of efficacy. Regarding experience, the "Low" group are those with less than two years of teaching experience who are mainly pre-service or student teachers that are known as novice teachers in studies of teachers' sense of efficacy (Hoy, 2000; Hoy & Spero, 2005; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007). Their lower efficacy belief is attributed to stress and commitment to teaching (Hoy, 2000). Therefore, they need support and preparation to overcome unexpected classroom issues. Teachers in the "Mid" group (i.e. those with two to five years of experience) have been exposed to some aspects of practical teaching and its challenges. Although, this experience has improved their general sense of efficacy, their ability in Classroom Management seems to be still underdeveloped. It is concluded that Classroom Management is a broader notion and needs more experience to be obtained. The "High" group seems to be more established and resistant to change. Successful teaching experiences (Hoy & Spero, 2005), incremental increase in language proficiency, and familiarity with more pedagogical techniques could be the possible reasons for "High" group's higher sense of efficacy. Unlike sense of efficacy, teachers' perception of distinctive characteristics was not shown to be affected by their experience. Instead, their belief is apparently determined by characteristics (Borg, 2006) and the context of language teaching.

To explore these beliefs in the context of Iran, an open-ended interview was conducted and three sets of characteristics were coded and identified. The first set includes characteristics mentioned by both participants of this study and those of (Borg, 2006); hence, called "Similarities". Examples include relevance of English language teaching to real life, teaching culture and communication skills along with knowledge of English, importance of teacher-learner relationship, and higher error tolerance in English teaching than other subjects. The second set refers to the characteristics that are pointed out differently in the two studies. Unlike Borg's participants, Iranian teachers maintained that students awarded them a higher position than teachers of other subjects; that is they believed being able to speak and understand another language is highly appreciated by society. Furthermore, Borg's participants indicated that sometimes teacher training period is very short; while, Iranians believed that due to EFL situation in Iran, training process takes a longer time; because, either they study the subject at university for a few years or, as EFL learners in institutes they are exposed to formal teaching and subconsciously absorb how to teach English before taking teacher training courses. Another characteristic mentioned in (Borg, 2006) includes more creativity, flexibility, and enthusiasm of English teachers; in Iran, possessing these characteristics are among requirements of most institutes, rather than being an option. The point that language teachers do not teach facts was also mentioned by participants of the two studies. Borg's participants explained that exercises, materials and techniques could be employed by English teachers rather than just 'telling' the facts. However, Iranian teachers associated it with the issue of correct or incorrect. They stated that correctness of many utterances is relative and that level of formality and pragmatics play an important role in this case, whereas in many disciplines there is a clear borderline between correct and incorrect usage. Unlike Borg's participants, Iranian teachers were not found to be concerned about priority of native teachers, because almost all EFL teachers in Iran are non-natives. The last set of characteristics found in the study was not mentioned by (Borg, 2006) participants. They can thus be regarded as context-specific features, although future research might shed more light on them.

The findings revealed that first, despite being offered many job opportunities, participants did not consider teaching English as a permanent job unless benefits such as insurance is provided. Second, EFL teachers in Iran are regarded models of behaving, thinking, and dressing for learners; they attributed the reason to teachers' direct and un-translated connection with the world. Next, taking English classes has priority over other subjects i.e. it is considered as a need due to parents' awareness of the role of English in children's future success both academically and financially. Also, due to the necessity of interaction among learners, the number of students in each class is thought to negatively affect class management and the quality of teaching in EFL classes much more than other subjects. As the fifth characteristic, participants referred to greater attention needing to be paid to students'

individual differences by EFL teachers than those of other subjects. The last context-specific characteristic mentioned was lack of intuition by EFL teachers. While teachers of other subjects can communicate naturally using their own mother tongue, EFL teachers present the content using a language that is not perfectly sensed by them.

4.Implication

This study started with a focus on the effect of years of experience on EFL teachers' sense of efficacy and their views about distinctive characteristics of English teachers. Regarding sense of efficacy, only one case of non-significant effect was observed for Classroom Management (between Low and Mid groups). It led to the conclusion that more training was needed to enhance teachers' ability in classroom management during the first five years of teaching. Due to non-significant effect of experience on teachers' perception about distinctive characteristics, the source of beliefs may lie in contextual and cultural factors, specialist knowledge of teaching, and their own experience as a student during school days. Results of the interviews are only representative of this study; more research is needed in different contexts to reach global set of distinctive characteristics and find more about context-specific ones in each specific context.

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