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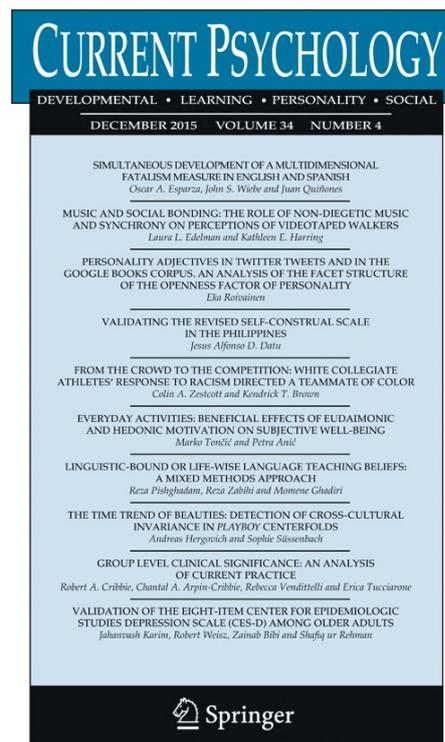
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# Linguistic-Bound or Life-Wise Language Teaching Beliefs: A Mixed Methods Approach

Reza Pishghadam<sup>1</sup> · Reza Zabihi<sup>2</sup> · Momene Ghadiri<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract** Learning life skills is a fruitful practice that helps individuals to deal effectively with the everyday challenges of life. Although the attitudes in literacy education have shifted somewhat toward life-wise instruction for three decades (Oxenham et al. 2002), it seems that the unique potentials of English language classes for enhancing learners' life qualities have mostly been ignored in English literacy education. In the present study, the authors used an explanatory mixed methods research design to examine Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' life-wise language teaching beliefs. The first phase involved the collection of quantitative data via the administration of the Life-Responsive Language Teaching Beliefs Questionnaire to Iranian EFL teachers ( $N=192$ ). Analysis of the questionnaire results revealed that among the four underlying factors of life-responsive language teaching (i.e. Life-wise Empowerment, Adaptability Enhancement, Pro-social Development and Life-over-language Preference) teachers tended to underscore the pro-social development of language learners above others. Follow-up face-to-face interviews were carried out with a subsample ( $N=7$ ) selected from Phase 1 participants. These interviews were used to identify the types of linguistic-bound or life-responsive teaching practices that L2 teachers experienced. Having added more plausibility to the quantitative results from phase 1, the follow-up qualitative phase uncovered few disparities among L2 teachers regarding the aspects of

linguistic-bound or life-responsive language teaching. The theoretical and practical implications of this study are discussed.

**Keywords** Applied English Language Teaching (Applied ELT) · Life-responsive language teaching · Triangulation · Questionnaires · Interviews

## Introduction

Humanistic approaches to education generally revolve around the notion that education should empower individuals to lead a good life. Simply put, the underlying assumption of humanistic education is that “there is only one subject-matter for education, and that is life in all its manifestations” (Whitehead 1929, p. 6). Be that as it may, as Walters (1997) points out, the ultimate purpose of education should be to make us ready for life, a meaningful and purposeful enterprise, as well as to educate people all the way to that meaning. Yet, one should not interpret Walter's assumption to mean that attention to content area should be waived for the sake of improving students' lives; on the contrary, it seems to be pointing to the fact that teaching should not only encompass helping students acquire academic excellence, but it should also include the consideration of emotions, relationships, attitudes, thinking styles, feelings, and values.

Reasoning along similar lines, several philosophers of education have consensually highlighted the inclusion of life skills in education (e.g., Dewey 1897; Freire 1998; Krishnamurti 1981; Walters 1997). They made attempts to draw attention to the fact that all systems of education have an obligation to prepare their members for improving their life skills in advance of making them ready for employment or other personal pursuits. Seen as complementary rather than

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conflictual, therefore, several life skills such as *happiness* (Noddings 2003), *self-determination* (Walker 1999), *emotional abilities* (Matthews 2006), *critical thinking* (Hare 1999), and *autonomy* (Winch 1999) have accordingly been characterized as educational aims to be achieved.

Learning life skills is thus a rewarding practice that enables individuals to deal effectively with the everyday challenges of life. In this connection, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines life skills as “the abilities for adaptive and positive behavior that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO 1999). By the same token, the Targeting Life Skills Model characterizes life skills as “skills that help an individual be successful in living a productive and satisfying life” (Hendricks 1996, p. 4). Accordingly, the WHO has introduced ten key life skills including, (i) decision making, (ii) problem solving, (iii) creative thinking, (iv) critical thinking, (v) effective communication, (vi) interpersonal relationship skills, (vii) self-awareness, (viii) empathy and understanding, (ix) coping with emotions and (x) coping with stress.

It is generally recognized that the improvement of these life skills can and should be intently taken into consideration in the context of education (Brooks 2001; Francis 2007; Goody 2001; Larson and Cook 1985; Matthews 2006; Noddings 2003; Radja, Hoffmann, and Bakhshi 2008; Spence 2003; Walker 1999). Considering the fact that schools enjoy a high credibility with parents and community members (WHO 1999), they can be considered appropriate sites for introducing life skills programs alongside other academic subjects (Matheson and Grosvenor 1999), or in Behura's (2012) words, appropriate places for a ‘life skills intervention’. In many countries, life skills education forms an essential and regular part of the school curriculum. As Francis (2007) points out, life skills training is a value added program which aims at empowering individuals to realize their own real self, adapt socially and emotionally, and become enabled to assess their abilities and potentials. Besides, it has been argued that life skills training, through the promotion of individuals' decision-making skills as well as their abilities to construct positive values and self-concept, modifies the contributions they make to the society (Spence 2003).

Such an amalgamation (of educational abilities and life skills) also applies to literacy education. Given Freire's (1972) view of literacy as reading both the *word* and the *world*, it seems to be a cogent argument that the power of literacy encompasses not only the ability of individuals to read or write, but also their capacity to employ these skills in shaping the course of their own lives. Accordingly, for the past three decades, the attitudes towards literacy education have been fading away from literacy for its own sake to the consideration of its potential to be used for better livelihoods (Oxenham et al. 2002). This is a palpable shift in attitude as cross-cultural studies have shown that many graduates of

basic adult education programs could change habits that affected their health (Oxenham and Aoki 1999).

In view of these, a fundamental feature of literacy education should thus encompass the activities which aim at boosting life skills rather than being designed primarily as a precondition of programs (Singh 2003). In a similar vein, the Delors Report (Delors et al. 1996), whose mission is to give education the role of providing humanity with the capacity to control its own development, was put forward with four educational pillars, namely *learning to be*, *learning to know*, *learning to live together*, and *learning to do*. Attempts have accordingly been made by some organizations such as The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Ayrton Senna Institute to apply the four fundamental areas of learning proposed by Delors et al. (1996) with the aim of catering for and nourishing different aspects of individuals' lives such as, *inter alia*, their multiple competencies, abilities, innate potentials, as well as their emotions and attitudes.

Given the importance of this life skills premise, the theory of Applied English Language Teaching (Applied ELT) has been developed to combine language learning with life skills (Pishghadam 2011). Applied ELT states that ELT, due to its interdisciplinary nature and scientific acceptability, has now gained the potentiality to be applied and contribute to other disciplines. In other words, it offers a new way of looking at ELT classes, not only as conveyors of grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic information, but also as sites where a critical mission about life that can address the psychological, emotional, social, spiritual and even religious and moral needs of learners is to be set out. Furthermore, by virtue of several distinctive features that ELT classes offer, it can pave the way for the enhancement of several life skills. This in turn requires that the professionals in other fields take a new look at ELT, and figure out ways to employ its findings for the enrichment of those disciplines (Pishghadam et al. 2012a; 2012b). Hence, a variety of life skills including their thinking skills, innate abilities, emotions, attitudes, creativity, compassion, intuition, reason, and other values like harmony, generosity, and kindness can be pre-arranged to be promoted in ELT classes via the design and application of a variety of life syllabi (Zabihi, Ketabi, and Tavakoli 2013).

In view of the above, and considering the significance of teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning in understanding the activities and the strategies teachers make use of for coping with the challenges of teaching (Van Patten 1997), the authors of the present study attempted to examine the extent to which ELT practitioners believe that teaching life skills should be incorporated into English literacy education programs. This study is of relevance because many studies have shown the importance of investigating the relationship between teachers' perceptions and their actual practices and have pointed out that modifying teachers' beliefs might lead to the

enhancement of teaching practices inside the class (e.g., Basturkmen et al. 2004; Breen et al. 2001; Woods 1996). In view of this, examining teachers' perceptions can be effective in understanding and improving educational processes and is in close connection with their practices and the strategies they use for coping with challenges in class. So, in the present study the authors take a mixed methods approach to examining the extent to which EFL teachers believe that relevant life skills should be integrated into English literacy education programs.

## Theoretical Background

In the past few decades, the outlooks on literacy education have been shifting from literacy for its own sake to the consideration of its potential to be used for better livelihoods (Oxenham et al. 2002). This is in line with Paulo Freire's view of literacy which involves not only the ability of individuals to read or write, but also their capacity to employ these skills in shaping the course of their own lives (Freire 1972). Therefore, it has been argued by Singh (2003) that activities which aim at boosting life skills should become part and parcel of literacy education programs. However, it seems that the professionals in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) have not been able or willing to adopt much of such a life-responsive approach in English literacy education. Conversely, it seems that due to their unique features which can provide ample opportunities for improving learners' life skills as well as satisfying their educational needs, English language classes can be sites where such factors should be dealt with and improved more than any other educational context, hence the need for incorporating life skills training into English literacy programs.

In a discussion on the possibility of such an enterprise, i.e. life skills education in English language learning classes, several distinctive features of ELT classes which can smooth the way for the change towards the enhancement of learners' life skills can be proposed. For example, learners are free to discuss a large number of social, scientific, and political topics in ELT classes. We typically do not see any class at schools that incorporates these issues into the syllabus. Putting aside for a moment the very informative role of these topics, they can provide the learners with more 'food for thought' about life. Through the course of these discussions, learners can reflect more on their own lives, trying to change the current state of affairs. As one case in point, consider the following excerpt extracted from the writing of an EFL learner:

Our country is full of problem, and the biggest and most important problem is that we can't live without pressure of economic problem. We should pretend to think that we don't agree with them. In our liability this act is not correct but our government and people want and force

us to pretend. If one person be itself all of people force him and defiance with him. We can't control our life. We just slogan that we have Islamic country, but it's not real Islam.

Notwithstanding the fact that the above text suffers from several lexical and syntactic errors, it does display an 18-year-old girl's views of her own country and the perceived social problems that she and her friends are experiencing. A different account of the uniqueness of ELT classes can be put forward once we recall that these classes mostly enjoy the overuse of various pair work and group work practices. Such interaction and social exchange of information can enhance the dialogic and dynamic nature of the class by taking the spotlight off the teacher and putting it onto the learners (Pishghadam 2011). It gives the learners a sense of achievement when they accomplish a shared goal. In a similar manner, such co-construction of knowledge takes place when individuals take part in collective practices mediated by several cultural artefacts, tools and signs, with 'language' playing a crucial role as a mediator of activity (Rogoff, Turkanis, and Bartlett 2001; Wertsch 1991).

Language is both a cultural tool and a psychological tool through which shared knowledge is developed and the processes and content of people's thoughts are shaped (Vygotsky 1978). Vygotsky contends that social interactions forge some of the most important cognitive capabilities; hence, individuals' engagement in joint activities and tasks brings into being new understandings and ways of thinking. The process of meaning making is thus both an interpersonal and intrapersonal process (Wegerif and Mercer 1997). As Wertsch (1991) has pointed out, it is through the co-construction of meaning that multiple perspectives or 'heteroglossia', in Bakhtin's (1981) words, might emerge.

Moreover, L2 learners face another culture more directly in the L2 context through which they become more familiar with their own home culture. This in turn adds to the conflictual nature of the language class, wherein two big personalities (i.e. cultures) struggle for supremacy. In plain language, the native and the foreign culture can have dialogue in L2 contexts, facilitating learners' identity formation or maintenance. As a case in point, Hoffman (1989) presents ethnographic data on Iranian immigrants to San Francisco:

For Iranians, English was the language of the workplace, and its use connoted the values of technological expertise, efficiency, and clear information exchange. (Farsi, on the other hand, was associated with art, emotional expression, friendship, and social refinement.) (Hoffman 1989, 127)

Another unique feature of these classes is that learners become familiar with the words and grammar of another

language. It has been argued that grammar is an instrument for developing the higher order abilities of human beings (Vygotsky 1978). Grammar can also enhance individuals' logical thinking. In addition, given that the words of two languages are different, learning the vocabulary of an L2 can convey different types of understanding, shedding more light on our vague grasp of things. Hence, such linguistic contact of the L1 and the L2 of language learners makes the setting even more unique.

In the same way, considering the fact that English is the *lingua franca* (i.e. a language that is adopted as a shared language among speakers whose native languages are different) and the language of science, it is a necessity for all people to learn it (Seidlhofer 2001). Therefore, every person who wants to enjoy life, travel other countries, be successful in international business, push back the frontiers of knowledge, and to gain access to the most reliable scientific resources, is bound to learn English (Pishghadam 2011). The literacy essence of the English language thus makes all learners take it seriously, investing a considerable amount of time, money, and energy to acquire it. Nonetheless, it is important to note that English language learning classes enjoy a funny and friendly atmosphere for learning (e.g., Bell 2011; Pomerantz and Bell 2011; Waring 2012). For example, listening to different songs (Salcedo 2002), using blogs (Pinkman 2005), using cell phones and SMS (Meurant 2007), and using online streaming video websites (e.g., YouTube.com) (Watkins and Wilkins 2011) alongside discussing different topics make the English language class be a fun. Besides, learners might feel free to express themselves and show their own real self through communicating in an L2. By speaking in another language, learners can disclose their own true identity, taking enough freedom to say something they would not express in their mother tongue due to social or political reasons (Pishghadam 2011). To give but one tangible instance, let us consider the following short statements which have been submitted as part of a narrative task about one of the memories of a 19-year-old boy:

As soon as I could speak, I was told to listen; as soon as I could play I was told to work; I have had no choice in my life.

For reasons discussed above, we argue that English literacy education can be a formidable ground for a life skills intervention. In this manner, these classes can act as a safety net, by teaching learners a variety of life skills. These distinctive features smooth the way for the corroboration of the theory of Applied ELT in which English teachers are supposed to first, reinforce different aspects of learners' lives such as critical thinking, creativity, motivation, stress management, empathy, etc., and then teach a language.

In this connection, teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning are essential for understanding and improving educational processes and are quite related to instructors' activities and the strategies they make use of for coping with the challenges they might face with in class (Van Patten 1997). English teachers hold different beliefs about language learning and teaching. These beliefs are in turn affected by teacher cognition (Marchant 1992). Teacher cognition pertains to what teachers think, know, and believe, and has a crucial role in the practices that teachers implement in the language classroom (Borg 2003). Borg (2009) further argues that through our examination of teacher cognition we can discover more about the nature of teachers' instruction.

Therefore, it is worth examining whether and to what extent the future generation of ELT practitioners believe that such a life-responsive philosophy should be adopted. This study is of relevance because many studies have pointed to the significance of examining the links between teachers' perceptions and their practices and have accordingly implied that modifying teachers' beliefs might lead to the improvement of teaching practices (e.g., Basturkmen et al. 2004; Breen et al. 2001; Woods 1996). Provisionally, therefore, exploring teachers' beliefs would be essential in understanding and improving educational processes and is in close connection with their practices and the strategies they use for coping with challenges in class. With that in mind, taking a mixed method approach, the authors attempted to investigate whether EFL teachers believe that relevant life skills should be integrated into English literacy education programs. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What is the nature of EFL teachers' life-responsive language teaching beliefs?
2. To what extent do language teachers try to enhance learners' life skills in ELT classes?

## Method

In this study, a combination of questionnaires and face-to-face interviews was used in order to enhance the validity of inferences made (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007).

## Setting

In Iran, like in other EFL nations, English is not the *lingua franca*. Thus, learners cannot make use of the second language within natural setting through their daily communication. Mostly, due to educational constraints, learners start to learn English when they are in sixth grade, i.e. when they are around 12 years of age, just after the critical period (i.e. the first few years of life which is the crucial time when a person can

acquire a first language if they are provided with sufficient stimuli). If one is to initiate language learning sooner, he/she has to attend private institutes, which are mostly run by communicative or task-based language teaching approaches (which mostly focus on the use of authentic language and on asking learners to communicate while doing meaningful tasks). Therefore, typically, one cannot expect learners' achievement of native-like competence within the Iranian context. Rather, due to the importance of the Entrance Exam English teachers at schools mostly resort to practices on grammar and reading comprehension which are the vital skills for the Entrance exam. Within the setting of the English schools, instructors usually tend to follow the steps provided by the author of the English book series, as they believe that through this way they can enhance language proficiency as the primary goal of English language classes in Iran (Pishghadam et al. 2012a; 2012b).

## Participants

### Questionnaire Participants

A total of 192 Iranian EFL teachers at the University of Isfahan, Sheikhabaee University, Islamic Azad University (Khorasgan Branch) and Abadan Institute of Technology (AIT) in Iran participated in this study. They ranged in age from 24 to 55 and were graduate-level university professors of English teaching, translation, linguistics and literature. The sample consisted of both male and female EFL teachers. The number of male and female teachers was 73 and 119 respectively. It is worth noting that in Iran those teachers whose degree is in English Literature, English Translation, and English Linguistics are also allowed to teach general English courses. The detailed information on the participants is shown in Table 1.

### Interview Participants

Through purposive sampling, EFL teachers were selected for the interview session. In order to select the participants, four

criteria were taken into consideration. First, they all agreed to take part in this study voluntarily. Second, they filled out the questionnaire before. Third, they completed their M.A. and Ph. D. in English Language Education. Finally, they had teaching experience at universities for at least two semesters. However, given the voluntary nature of our selection of interviewees, only seven of the English teachers who could achieve the above-mentioned criteria agreed to take part in the interview. The detailed information on the participants in the interview is shown in Table 2.

## Data Collection and Analysis

### Questionnaire

The Life-responsive Language Teaching Beliefs Scale was administered to 192 Iranian EFL teachers in two ways: (a) face-to-face administration (print form), and (b) administration via an electronic fillable PDF document. The questionnaire was developed by Pishghadam et al. (2012a) for the measurement of life-responsive language teaching beliefs, and validated through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA), yielding four subscales of *life-wise empowerment* (the language teacher's ability to support mental well-being and behavioral preparedness of learners including creative and critical thinking), *adaptability enhancement* (the language teacher's ability to foster adaptive and positive behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life including problem-solving and decision making), *pro-social development* (the language teacher's ability to promote personal and social development including interpersonal bonds and effective communication), and *life-over-language preference* (the language teacher's ability to center attention on learners' qualities of life including their feelings and emotions in comparison with linguistic points). Examples of each of the 4 subscales for the Life-responsive Language Teaching Beliefs Scale are given in the Appendix.

The scale comprises 45 items that are scored according to the Likert-type scale of seven points ranging from (1)

**Table 1** Distribution of questionnaire participants

Sex	Age	Degree	Teaching Experience
Male	73	Twenties	149
Female	119	Thirties	28
		Forties	8
		Fifties	7
		Total	192
		English Teaching	77
		English Literature	46
		English Translation	62
		English Linguistics	7
		Less than two years	46
		2–4 years	74
		5–9 years	45
		10–14 years	13
		15–19 years	4
		20–24 years	6
		25–30 years	4

**Table 2** Characteristics of the interviewees

No	ID	Age	Gender	Major	Degree	Teaching Experience (year)
1	0205	29	Male	Teaching	Ph. D.	6
2	0840	25	Female	Literature	M.A.	8
3	7001	35	Female	Teaching	Ph.D. Candidate	13
4	3178	32	Male	Literature	M.A.	5
5	5142	38	Male	Teaching	M.A.	12
6	6790	30	Male	Teaching	Ph.D. Candidate	10
7	1781	35	Female	Teaching	Ph.D.	15

“strongly disagree” to (7) “strongly agree”. The internal consistency of the scale was also found to be 0.94, indicating high reliability. Also, all of the four factors yielded good reliability estimates ranging from 0.57 to 0.90. In the present study the participants were asked to provide answers to questions regarding their age, gender, major, degree, and teaching experience.

### Interview

Face-to-face interview was carried out in Persian (and then translated into English) in April and May 2012 and lasted for about 20–30 min. The interviewer conducted the interviews and analyzed the data. Prior to the interview, the interviewees were told that their participation would be voluntarily, that they could stop the interview if the questions made them feel uncomfortable and that the researchers would take notice not to disclose the data, except for the aims of the study. The interviewer did her best to make a responsive relationship with interviewees so that they could provide unreserved explanations concerning their beliefs and teaching practices.

The interview began with some demographic information mainly with a focus on the interviewees' English background, continued with teachers' beliefs about the main objectives of an ELT class, and teaching practices inside the class, and ended with their suggestions for incorporating a life-skill based syllabus into an ELT class. The detailed information on the questions in the interview is shown in Table 3. Data were subsequently transcribed, modified (English language editing), analyzed and translated into English. The inter-rater reliability between two raters was found to be 0.88, indicating good overall agreement between raters. Authors have made an attempt to circumspectly transcribe the data so that it precisely reflects the ideas and beliefs of the teachers.

## Data Analysis Results

### Questionnaire Data

The results from descriptive statistics revealed that EFL teachers in these four universities put more emphasis on the

Pro-social Development of language learners ( $M=5.49$ ). Since the questionnaire was a 7-point Likert scale, the maximum and minimum scores were 7 and 1, respectively. As it is displayed in Table 4, teachers lent prominence to different factors of life-responsive teaching from the most to the least as follows: 1) Pro-social Development, 2) Life-wise Empowerment, 3) Adaptability Enhancement and Life-over-language Preference.

**Table 3** The List of interview questions

Interview Question
1. What do you think the purpose of an ELT class should be?
2. In general, what kinds of feedback do you provide for your students in your language classes?
3. To what extent do you agree with the following statement? “Teaching students the essentials of mental health and giving training in life skills should be integrated into the educational system”
4. In your opinion, do English classes have the potential to promote mental well-being in young people and equip them to face the realities of life? Why?
5. The ten key life skills emphasized by WHO are: >Decision making >Problem solving >Creative thinking >Critical thinking >Effective communication >Interpersonal relationship skills >Self-awareness >Empathy >Coping with emotions >Coping with stress How do you see the potential of English classes in promoting the given life skills? Please mention if any of the given skills has already been practiced inside English classes.
6. To what extent do you think English language teachers need to have knowledge of other disciplines including psychology and sociology?
7. Is there any need to have teacher training courses concerning promoting the given skills? Does the language knowledge of the English teacher suffice for training young learners? Who should take responsibility of such training courses? Language teachers, sociologists, psychologists? Or a team comprising all three?
8. Can English education be of any help to other disciplines? If so, which disciplines?

**Table 4** The means of factors obtained from descriptive statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pro-social Development	192	5.49	0.76
Life-wise Empowerment	192	4.98	0.83
Adaptability Enhancement	192	4.93	0.83
Life-over-language Preference	192	4.21	0.84
Valid N (listwise)	192		

In order to determine whether the means of the four factors from the scale are significantly different from one another, multivariate tests (Pillai's Trace, Wilks' Lambda, Hotelling's Trace, Roy's Largest Root) were applied to the data. The results showed that the differences among the means are statistically significant (see Table 5).

**Analysis of Interview Data**

The second set of data we turn to are audio-recorded conversations with seven EFL teachers. Data from these interviews, conducted with a purposive sampling procedure, provided further insights into the life-responsive teaching beliefs among language teachers, in general, and the types of life skills that they considered more suitable to be included in an L2 course, in particular. From a qualitative perspective, the following pattern emerges of the similarities and differences among the interviewees.

First, all interviewees believed that the primary goal of a language class should be language learning, and if there is to be any life skills training it should receive minor or marginal attention. English language learning is part of education, not the whole education. Nevertheless, it was recurrently pointed out throughout the course of interviews that these life skills can indirectly be considered inside ELT classes. Teachers can make use of students' critical and creative thinking as well as their interpersonal relationship skills and effective communication to enhance students' language proficiency.

In my classes, I typically work on language itself. We might work on these [life] skills indirectly; I

mean these skills should be incorporated into the curriculum, but I have doubts as to the extent to which we can directly teach them; I recommend that these skills form the secondary aims of language classes... I suggest that if we are to work on life skills, it should be organized and pre-planned, not incidental and haphazard (ID: 7001). The aim of a language class should be to teach the four core language skills; promoting life skills in this country is a motto; it is too idealistic... These ten life skills [proposed by WHO] might be worked on indirectly, but it would not be possible to have a plan for teaching them (ID: 3178).

Secondly, all participants in the interview described feedback as an inseparable part of a language class. Although it was pointed out that teachers can unconsciously integrate the ten key life-skills including critical thinking and effective communication into their linguistic-bound feedback in order to improve students' oral and written production, the feedback described by the interviewees mostly involved focus on form; that is, their spoken or written feedback revolved around issues like grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc. By observing learners' written as well as oral productions and analyzing them, one can easily figure out that learners do not observe very simple syntactic rules let alone the complex sentence structures or discourse organization. They cannot speak fluently enough; so they need not make attempts at enhancing their mental health through being provided with life-responsive types of feedback. Indeed, in practice, incorporating life-syllabus into an English class through providing life-wise feedback seems to be improbable.

I just provide feedback on form; content is not that much important and it is time consuming. The purpose of a class is primarily to correct forms (ID: 0205).

I think feedback plays an important role in the development of language proficiency. I provide feedback on learners' incorrect use of grammatical structures, pronunciation, organization, etc. (ID: 1781).

**Table 5** Multivariate tests for the significance of differences among the means of variables

Variables		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Sig.
Pro-social Development	Pillai's Trace	0.984	2.835E3a	4.000	0.000
Life-wise Empowerment	Wilks' Lambda	0.016	2.835E3a	4.000	0.000
Adaptability Enhancement	Hotelling's Trace	60.313	2.835E3a	4.000	0.000
Life-over-language Preference	Roy's Largest Root	60.313	2.835E3a	4.000	0.000

a. Exact statistic

To further complicate matters, institutional restraints were another issue underscored in the interviews. All interviewees contended that the current status of language education in Iranian universities does not allow the broad integration of life skills training into the ELT curriculum. Under this account, it goes without saying that educational policies need to be redefined. However, while one of the interviewees (ID: 5142) acknowledged that there are and can be life skills education programs in private language institutes, another interviewee (ID: 3178) cast doubt upon such a possibility and referred to institutional constraints which could prevent EFL teachers from adopting an approach other than the current linguistic-bound approaches to language teaching. Moreover, private institutes may not be the sites wherein life-skill training can be incorporated. Sadly, most institutes look at the language education like other businesses and do their best to satisfy their learners in order to run their businesses. Therefore, the fact that most learners themselves are not prepared enough for these trainings may jeopardize the future of their language institutes. Meanwhile there are a number of teachers who try to indirectly tap the given skills, in particular cultural identity, inside the language institutes:

In the case of life-skills education, our education system is deficient, and given the limited time allotted to language courses, the language teacher cannot properly cover language skills let alone incorporate life skills. But in some private language institutes these skills are broadly taken into consideration, especially effective communication. For example, in Pooyesh institute, they usually go beyond the teaching of vocabulary and grammar towards the enhancement of interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and creative thinking, though it depends on learners' level of proficiency (ID: 5142).

I do believe that they are important; it is necessary for a language teacher to know about, and offer some impressions, to psychology and sociology; and we might be doing all these unconsciously; yet in the present conditions of our country it seems to be impossible; we have huge constraints; if we try to overtly shift the focus to anything other than language skills, the authorities may close down the institute (ID: 3178).

I think the potentiality of classes at universities to enhance life skills is near zero! In Azad and Non-profit universities, there are about 50 learners in one class, though in State universities there might be 25 or 30 students... It is self-evident that a language teacher needs to work on non-linguistic skills as well which in turn necessitates the development of special teacher training courses. So,

although the idea is interesting and forward-looking, it may not be currently directly applicable (ID: 6790).

Finally, two out of seven interviewees (IDs: 0840; 5142) believed that the degree to which life skills can be incorporated into the ELT curriculum depends on the proficiency level of learners and cited learners' low level of language proficiency as the main cause of ignoring life skills by L2 teachers.

I do not believe in limiting the language class to the four core language skills; one should take care of life skills in language classes, too. However, in my classes learners are not that much proficient in English, so I have to focus on the form; I try to use topics so as to indirectly tap their creative and critical thinking abilities, for instance (ID: 0840).

In schools and universities, due to the deficiency in educational system and students' level of proficiency, the language teacher cannot properly cover language skills let alone incorporate life skills. But in some private language institutes these skills are broadly taken into consideration, especially effective communication (ID: 5142).

## Discussion

Given the positive shift of attitude in literacy education toward the inclusion of life skills, in this paper the authors have made attempts at examining the potential of English literacy education to adopt such a life-responsive attitude shift. The purpose was to see, through the use of mixed methods of data collection and analyses, whether Iranian EFL teachers provide learners more with linguistic abilities or life skills. In view of this, considering the degree of emphasis placed on mixed methods research in the analysis and interpretation of results in the present study, in the following paragraphs we need to first provide a summary of the findings and then we put forth discussions of quantitative and qualitative findings in an integrated fashion.

Generally, based on the findings of the quantitative phase of the study, it was revealed that, among the four underlying factors of the questionnaire, i.e. Life-wise Empowerment, Adaptability Enhancement, Pro-social Development and Life-over-language Preference, the participants lent more prominence to the pro-social development of language learners. That is to say, they believed that language teachers should try to promote, prior to other skills, learners' personal and social development including interpersonal bonds and effective communication. Moreover,

other underlying factors of life-responsive language teaching, i.e. life-wise empowerment, adaptability enhancement, and life-over-language preference, also received considerable attention by the participants.

The results of the second phase of the study, primarily characterized by face-to-face interviews, disclosed some similarities and differences regarding the significance of life skills education in ELT classes. For one thing, notable in the conversations was the general interest of the interviewees in the idea of life skills education and its relevance to language teaching; however, teachers believed that English language education should indirectly make use of the given skills to enhance learners' language proficiency. One of the presumptions of applied ELT is that English should be considered as a means to enhance learners' life skills (Pishghadam 2011); thus, the focal role should be given to life-skill training through the means of English education. In view of this, the main task before ELT syllabus designers is to mix life skills with language learning in order to make it meaningful. For example, Zabihi, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2013) have developed a happiness intervention program in terms of a language syllabus wherein three components of authentic happiness (Seligman 2002) were practiced through the medium of language tasks. Therefore, it seems to be a cogent argument that language teaching is deemed not only to convey the knowledge of a particular subject but it can involve the learners' emotions, mode of thinking, feelings and relationships so that the learners can be ready to meet the personal and professional challenges of life. It seems that, as the interviewees almost consensually believed, the present language education system is awaking learners intellectually but cannot nurture their emotional and mental maturity.

Secondly, however, all interviewees believed that the primary goal of a language class should be language learning, and if there is to be any life skills training it should receive marginal, rather than focal, attention. It seems that Iranian EFL teachers are not yet prepared for this big change. Moreover, according to the interviewees, enhancing learners' mental health and well-being may be the purpose of an educational system but not necessarily the goal of language education. Language learners in Iran mostly attend English classes in order to improve their language proficiency, namely, how to speak fluently, read smoothly, write effectively, and listen with ease. They attend English classes for eight hours per week. Thus, the time limitation does not allow the teacher to focus directly on life-skills training; otherwise, it might subsequently lead to poorer language proficiency.

Hence, the major issue from the point of view of our interviewees was that there are many fields of study

which discuss ways of improving life skills. In the language class, if the focus switches from language learning to the development of learners' life skills, then it will not only diminish the scope of language learning but it will definitely also deviate the teachers and learners from the actual goal of ELT. By this token, life-skill training can be the purpose of other courses but not language education. Language has its own identity and should be directly dealt with. Even after twelve semesters of English learning, students will still have problems with sentence structures, collocations, word choices and, in particular, pronunciation. Thus, they said it would be better to let English classes revolve around linguistic points and allocate particular classes to deal exclusively with life skill training.

Teachers generally believed that an EFL context wherein learners mostly start studying English after the critical age and solely practice speaking English inside an educational setting may not enable learners to reach an optimal stage and learn language like native speakers. Indeed, learners are not proficient enough to focus on something other than language itself. In other words, learners are not familiar with English discourse structures; they think in Persian and translate into English. Hence, the structures need to be improved. Almost always, learners face a plethora of problems in organizing their speech or composition. They do not observe syntactic as well as semantic rules in their written or spoken discourse. In this situation, teachers will face the limitation of time; so they cannot even provide enough feedback on learners' language production let alone provide life-wise feedback and enhance the quality of their lives inside the language class. Thus, they have to resort to linguistic-bound types of feedback rather than their life-wise counterparts.

In addition, teachers believed that learners themselves expect their teachers to provide feedback on their linguistic errors. They wait for the comments on how fluently and accurately they speak and how smooth and organized they write. That is, anticipating life-wise feedback seems to be odd in language classes. At universities, teachers mostly have to deal with large classes including a great number of students who are mostly heterogeneous and unmotivated; for enhancing the qualities of learners' lives, these teachers have only 12 or 13 weeks. It thus seems to be unrealistic to adopt life-skill syllabuses. These skills should be worked on in primary schools, guidance schools, or high schools. University years are too late to incorporate the life-syllabus. Therefore, teachers believed that if English language education at schools had worked properly, parents would not have resorted to private institutes. Even the majority of language teachers who participated in our

interviews stated that they would rather have their children continue their language education in private language institutes.

Another source of hindrance for the integration of life-skills training into the ELT curriculum was considered to be the low proficiency level of learners. The interviewees' pupils were B.A. students of English and have passed different courses regarding general language skills; however, they did not observe simple English discourse structures. They did not make an attempt to observe the theories they have learned in their oral or written production. It casts doubt on the issue of whether the teacher can incorporate other life skills in addition to language syllabi inside the class. Consequently, the teachers advocated the indirect use of the given life skills to enhance learners' language proficiency, rather than using the potentialities of language classes for promoting learners' life skills. Therefore, another issue is how beginner L2 learners will improve their life skills at an initial stage when they are not adequately exposed to the new language. It means to some extent that the explicit incorporation of life-skills training into the ELT curriculum may work at the advanced level but it may not be suitable for the beginners because the deficiency in grammar and vocabulary can axe their expression. Therefore, the essence of the life syllabus, which Zabihi, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2013) claim is the motivation, may turn contrary to demotivation in such situations. The point with which we need to take issue with at this juncture is that the idea of life syllabus has not been developed to question the merits of the implicit teaching of life skills; rather, it points to the possibility that, through explicit instruction, learners would be more encouraged to practice these skills in a model-based, procedural, fashion.

The study reported in this paper has potential implications for English literacy education in Iran. The findings presented here lend great support to Zabihi, Ketabi, and Tavakoli (2013) contention that the incorporation of life skills has somewhat been ignored in the field of English language education. This was found to be due either to English teachers' own resistance to life-wise language teaching or other sources of hindrance such as, among others, institutional constraints, the low proficiency level of learners, and learners' own expectations. The authors recommend that a big change should take place in the context of English literacy education in Iran. First, English as communication should be incorporated within the educational system of Iran. Furthermore, learners need to initiate learning the English language earlier so as to facilitate a life skills intervention in ELT classes.

Additionally, the purpose of English literacy education should be transformed. As stated by WHO (1999), the primary goal of education should be the enhancement of students' life

skills. Similarly, the authors of the present paper believe that English classes, as part of the educational system, should follow the same purpose. The findings of the present study can function as a consciousness-raising for the professionals in materials development and syllabus design who should pay careful attention to the *direct* incorporation of life skills into the English literacy education programs, rather than relying solely on the teachers' capability to occasionally and unsystematically give prominence to them. Finally, it is required that teachers make attempts at transforming language learners' mindsets to solidify new life-endorsing attitudes towards language learning, giving them a hunger and zest for taking advantage of the opportunities available to them for improving their lives in English classes.

The authors of the present paper do acknowledge the importance of enhancing language learning; yet, they reckon that through the integration of life syllabus which primarily deals with life skills such as creativity, critical thinking, effective communication, and so on, both goals can be achieved. The authors recommend that other researchers replicate this study on different samples from different cultures in order to come up with a solid understanding of English teachers' life-wise language teaching beliefs. Further areas of ELT research may identify the characteristics and needs of learners in life as well as appropriate procedures that have to be used to meet those needs. Other extensions may include a determination and classification of EFL teachers' concerns and the limitations they might face in a foreign language context so as to enable ELT policy makers to make informed decisions on the number and types of life skills to include in English literacy programs.

Nonetheless, the point with which we need to take issue is to acknowledge that the findings obtained in the present study should be interpreted within certain limitations and reservations. Firstly, the sample used for the interview study was small which could be considered to lack variability. Secondly, for the selection of interviewees convenience sampling was carried out where the teachers had control over whether to participate, leaving the potentiality for a self-selection bias; in view of this limitation, interviewing other teachers might have yielded different views. Thirdly, although the interview questions in the present study sought to elicit teachers' perceptions, future research can provide corroborating evidence from language learners regarding what they would like to learn most in a language class, and if they think that what they learned is a life-skill in and of itself. Therefore, it might be argued that the findings of the present study would carry more weight if replications of this study were carried out in different contexts and among different (and larger) populations in order to come up with areas of convergence. In view of this, a closer scrutiny of the questions raised here may enable a better explanation of the inherent problems and the recommended solutions thereof.

## Appendix

**Table 6** Examples of the 4 subscales of the life-responsive language teaching beliefs scale

#	Name of Factor	Example
1	Life-wise Empowerment	“Effective application of language syllabi in English classes can influence the way children feel about others and themselves.”
2	Adaptability Enhancement	“Coping with stress and emotions should be practiced through language learning tasks.”
3	Pro-social Development	“Language teachers should help learners build positive and healthy relationships.”
4	Life-over-language Preference	“Most feedbacks and discussions in my class revolve around linguistic points rather than enhancing the quality of learners’ lives.”

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