

# A Mixed Methods Research on Teachers' Beliefs about Action Research in Second Language Education

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## **Abstract**

Despite the fact that the beliefs about action research (AR) are considered essential for teachers' professional development, teachers' beliefs about AR have not been studied in any systematic way in second language education. This study is thus an attempt to fill the gap through examining Iranian teachers' beliefs about AR. The present study used a mixed methods design, i.e. questionnaire and interview, to gain a richer understanding of the participants' beliefs about AR. The participants were 65 English teachers from 5 private English language teaching institutions. The findings revealed that most of the teachers equated AR with observation, had the ability to distinguish between AR and standard research, preferred collaborative AR, and, in contrast to the mainstream research, did not believe AR to be a way to professional development. The results also showed that while AR is not unknown among these teachers, its use is not widespread, which highlights the need for organizational, practical and intellectual support from responsible agencies.

**Key Words:** teachers' beliefs, action research, mixed methods design, questionnaire, interview

## **Una Investigación de Métodos Mixtos sobre las Creencias de los Profesores sobre la Investigación Acción en la Educación de una Segunda Lengua**

A pesar del hecho de que las creencias sobre la investigación acción (IA) son consideradas esenciales para el desarrollo profesional de los profesores, las creencias de los profesores sobre la IA no han sido estudiadas de manera sistemática en la educación de una segunda lengua. Así, este estudio es un intento de llenar ese vacío, examinando las creencias de los profesores iraníes acerca de la IA. El presente estudio utilizó un diseño de métodos mixtos, es decir, cuestionario y entrevista, para obtener una comprensión más rica de las creencias de los participantes acerca de la IA. Los participantes fueron 65 profesores de Inglés de 5 instituciones privadas de enseñanza del idioma Inglés. Los hallazgos revelaron que la mayoría de los profesores equipararon la IA con la observación, tuvieron la habilidad de distinguir entre la IA y la investigación estándar, IA colaborativa preferida, y, en contraste con la corriente principal de investigación, no creyeron en la IA como una forma de desarrollo profesional. Los resultados también mostraron que, si bien la IA no es desconocida entre estos profesores, su uso no está muy extendido, lo que pone de relieve la necesidad de apoyo organizativo, práctico e intelectual de las agencias responsables.

**Palabras Clave:** creencias de profesores, investigación acción, diseño de métodos mixtos, cuestionario, entrevista

## Introduction

In the field of second/foreign language (L2) teacher education, beliefs are viewed as an essential ingredient in teacher development, and have attracted the attention of many researchers. This is due to the fact that beliefs “are involved in helping individuals make sense of the world, influencing how new information is perceived, and whether it is accepted or rejected... [beliefs] serve to frame our understanding of events” (Borg 2001, pp. 186-187). Numerous past studies on L2 teachers’ beliefs have provided us with invaluable insights on comprehending plans teachers use when implement their teaching, and the important role beliefs play in teachers’ classroom practices in the last two decades. This strand of research in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition has looked into teacher beliefs in diverse L2 teaching contexts and from different perspectives (e.g., Basturkmen et al. 2004; Borg 2011; Farrell & Lim 2005; Kern 2008; Levine 2003; Phipps & Borg 2009; Underwood 2012; Zheng & Borg 2014). In line with this general disposition toward exploring teachers’ beliefs in L2 education, researchers have recently paid a special attention to teachers’ beliefs about research generally (e.g., Allison & Carey 2007; Barkhuizen 2009; Borg 2007, 2008, 2009; Gao et al. 2011; and Hiep 2006), and action research (AR) specifically (e.g., Atay 2006, 2008; Bashir 2011; and Rainey 2000).

The primary reason underlying this drive has been that such beliefs are considered essential for teachers’ professional development (Borg 2010; McDonough 2006). In other words, reading and doing research can empower teachers to better comprehend their work, encourage them to reflect on what they do, lead them to explore different avenues regarding new thoughts, and become more autonomous (e.g., Kirkwood & Christie 2006; Tinker Sachs 2000). AR is specifically noteworthy, as teachers are increasingly being encouraged to carry out small-scale research studies in their own classrooms, and to assume the role of a teacher-researcher (Atay 2006, 2008; Burns 2010; Edwards & Burns 2016; Wyatt 2011). It is now an established belief in the field of L2 education that the process of AR, if conducted systematically and extensively, enables the construction of teacher-generated knowledge, thus empowering teachers as the creators and not just the holders of such knowledge (Avgitidou 2010). Moreover, AR has been regarded favorably because it can help teachers develop in-depth perspectives about the process of teaching and learning (Lacorte & Krastel, 2002). In addition, AR can help L2 teachers recognise the importance of learning how to seek answers to their questions (Tedick & Walker 1995), address and find solutions to particular problems in a specific teaching or learning situation (Hadley 2003), develop personal theories about L2 learning (Crooke, 1997), reduce gaps between academic research findings and practical classroom applications (Sayer, 2005), and become familiar with research skills and enhance their knowledge of conducting research (Crookes & Chandler 2001).

Despite such benefits, however, it seems that teachers’ beliefs about research and AR have not been studied in any systematic way in English Language Teaching (ELT) and while there is a large amount of research about the benefits of teacher research engagement, we do not have as much knowledge about teachers’ beliefs about research (Borg 2008). As Borg (2007, p. 733) emphasises, “this gap in our understanding means we are unable to

make informed decisions about the development of policy and initiatives whose aim is to enable teachers to engage more fully both with and in research". This study is thus an attempt to fill the gap through examining teachers' beliefs about research, especially action research, primarily motivated by the following facts. Firstly, while numerous past studies have dealt with teachers' engagement in research, they have for the most part looked at teachers working in the inner circle countries such as Australia, the UK, and the USA (Hiep 2006). This implies that very little is known about teachers conducting research in the outer and expanding circle countries such as Iran. Secondly, and in relation to the first statement, this research is inspired by Borg's (2009, p. 377) claim that more "localised studies of research engagement can deepen understandings of how research is perceived in particular contexts, and help promote more informed consideration of feasible forms of teacher research engagement in those contexts". Since few, if any, studies have previously dealt with teachers' beliefs about research in an Iranian context, this paper is thus a response to this plea.

## Research questions

This study aimed to collect data relevant to the following questions to understand the beliefs about AR held by ELT teachers working in Iran:

- 1) What are the beliefs of Iranian ELT teachers about AR?
- 2) What might be the possible reasons behind such beliefs?

## Literature review

In contrast to a much more extensive collection of work on teachers' beliefs about research (e.g., Allison & Carey 2007; Bai & Hudson 2011; Barkhuizen 2009; Borg 2007, 2008, 2009; Gao et al. 2011; Reis-Jorg, 2007), teachers' beliefs about AR are surprisingly scarce in the field of applied linguistics. Rainey's (2000) study was one of the first in its own type which reported the findings of an international study using questionnaire into the knowledge, practices and opinions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from ten countries with respect to AR. Her study was based on several hypotheses which one of them, which is of particular relevance to the present study, was that the majority of the teachers surveyed in her study would have some knowledge of AR. This hypothesis was not confirmed since three-quarters (75.5%) of the teachers surveyed had not heard of AR. In addition, she found that the teachers who knew about AR, their beliefs were more in accordance with the primary type of AR, i.e. AR for professional self-development, as they believed that AR could just tackle an issue in their classrooms or enhance their teaching practices. In other words, it seemed that the teachers were not well informed of alternate potentialities of AR such as change.

Dissatisfied with this fact that neither pre- nor in-service teachers of English could do much research in Turkey, Atay (2006) used a collaborative AR model to help both in-service teachers fill the gap between research and teaching and pre-service teachers become familiar with research in real classroom contexts. After gaining relevant theoretical

knowledge on this type of AR, the teachers worked with each other and carried out their research in in-service teachers' classes. The results showed that both groups benefited from conducting the collaborative AR as it provided them with a framework to systematically observe, evaluate, and reflect on their teaching practices in the classroom. In addition, the results also revealed some major themes regarding the effects of AR which changes in beliefs about AR were of considerable importance. In another study, Atay (2008) also directed an in-service education and training programme with the aim of helping 62 Turkish EFL teachers to conceive AR as an opportunity to challenge their underlying belief systems. Her programme consisted of three sections: theoretical knowledge on ELT, issues for investigation, and investigating the classroom and doing research. She then analysed the data from the teachers' narratives and journals. The analysis of teachers' narratives on their understandings of AR showed that they were generally aware of the usefulness of AR. The further analysis of the teachers' journals revealed some major themes, such as that the AR process had positive effects on their beliefs toward AR.

Carrying out a study on Sudanese teachers' professionalisation, Bashir (2011) tried to deal with the complexities of engaging in AR by providing explanations in different areas, one of them was teachers' beliefs about AR. In order to explore the principles and practices of AR, a workshop consisting of 25 teachers and 7 representatives from universities was held. The data obtained from the workshop discussions were analysed and the results revealed that since AR was not part of the Sudanese teachers' institutional culture, they did not have any idea about AR. In addition, it was found that the teachers were chiefly unwilling to do AR due to the absence of knowledge which was viewed as a critical element. Some other factors for the scarcity of AR were also recognised such as lack of time, overload, and uncertainty about the adequacy of doing AR. It was also found that the teachers' beliefs about AR were adjusted to conventional notions of research such as statistics, objectivity, hypotheses, large samples, and variables. She then concludes that teachers do not have the ability to engage in AR feasibly and productively as their beliefs of what AR is are not in line with the forms of systematic inquiry.

## Methodology

### Design and data types

The present study used a mixed methods design, i.e. questionnaire and interview, to gain a richer understanding of the participants' beliefs about AR. This particular design is called "sequential explanatory strategy" by Creswell (2009). In his words, this is a design which "is characterised by the collection and analysis of quantitative data in a first phase of research followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data in a second phase that builds on the results of the initial quantitative results" (p. 211). The questionnaire survey is the first part of this strategy which allows an extensive analysis of data but also acts as a kind of filter through which a smaller sample of participants will be identified for the subsequent interview phase of the study. The rationale behind this type of mixed methods research is that although the questionnaire survey is a versatile technique that helps to gather a large amount of data efficiently and quickly, it also suffers from the shallow respondents'

engagement. In other words, it is difficult for the researcher to investigate complex meanings directly by using this technique alone (Dornyei 2007). It is believed that adding a subsequent interview component to the study can help the researcher to deal with this weakness. Each data type is described in detail in the following sections.

## Questionnaire

An original questionnaire, consisting of two sections (i.e., scenarios and characteristics of good quality action research), was developed based on the research questions (see Appendix). In section 1, the use of AR scenarios was inspired by the work of Borg (2009), who used a similar strategy as part of a study of ELT teachers' views of research. This section aimed to gain insights into the beliefs of teachers by finding out about the concept of AR in their minds. Ten scenarios were given and teachers were asked to evaluate the instances "definitely not AR", "probably not AR", "probably AR", and "definitely AR". All of the ten scenarios in section 1 were inspired by *classroom voices* from the Burns' (2010) book. The scenarios were devised with this aim in mind to make picture of a range of activities with different characteristics of AR (e.g., methods, data collection, and analysis). To make the length of the scenarios reasonable, it was decided to limit the number of scenarios to ten. In addition, the exploration of reasons for answers was left to the follow-up interviews to eliminate the burden of writing required by respondents. In section 2, AR characteristics were also developed to have a deeper understanding of the teachers' beliefs about AR. Twelve possible characteristics of AR were given and teachers were asked to identify their importance levels. All of the characteristics were based on the relevant literature about AR and referred to issues such as AR design, data collection, analysis, and application. On the whole, the items covered in the survey (sections 1 and 2) were created according to the range of research questions listed above. In order to improve the quality of the questionnaire, its design: question types, wording, layout, length, was checked and revised based on the relevant methodological literature (Brown 2001; Dornyei 2003).

## Interview

A subgroup of teachers (n=22) were randomly chosen and invited to a semi-structured interview to elaborate on their responses to the quantitative data. In total 17 teachers were actually interviewed. The aim of the interview was to clarify some concepts in the questionnaire. In this way, during the face-to-face interviews, teachers were requested to elaborate on their questionnaire responses; in particular they were asked to explain why they rated/did not rate certain scenarios AR and to express their understandings of the criteria they had rated in the questionnaire as good AR. Although there was a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, the format was open-ended and the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on their views and experiences of AR in an exploratory manner. Interviews lasted on average between 25 to 30 minutes and were audio recorded. Farsi (the teachers' native language) was used as the teachers felt they could express themselves better in their native tongue. All of the interviews were then translated from Farsi into English and fully transcribed.

## Participants

The participants were 83 Iranian teachers from 5 private ELT institutions. English teaching staff members in these institutions were recruited with the mission of teaching general English skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing). The institutions were located in Mashhad, northeastern Iran. The questionnaires in hard copy were given personally to the teachers in each institute from which 65 completed questionnaires (38 female and 27 male) were returned, representing a response rate of 78.3%. Before administering the survey, consent was sought from the chair of each of the five institutions and all participants received information about the voluntary nature of the study with anonymity assured.

Tables 1 and 2 present the sample according to experience in ELT and qualifications relevant to ELT, respectively. As Table 1 shows, the majority of this sample of teachers (83.1%, N=54) had less than 15 years of ELT experience. Table 2 indicates that just over 18 per cent had postgraduate qualifications.

*Table 1:* Respondents by years of ELT experience

Years	N (%)
0-4	11 (16.9)
5-9	25 (38.5)
10-14	18 (27.7)
15-19	8 (12.3)
20+	3 (4.6)
Total	65 (100)

*Table 2:* Respondents by highest ELT qualification

Qualification	N (%)
Certificate	7 (10.8)
Bachelor's	46 (70.8)
Master's	12 (18.4)
Total	65 (100)

## Findings

### Beliefs about AR

Respondents' beliefs about AR were examined in two ways: First, they were asked to assess a series of scenarios about AR. Second, they were asked to comment on the characteristics of good-quality AR.

### Evaluating AR scenarios

In section 1, the teachers were asked to indicate to what extent they felt the activities described in ten scenarios were or were not AR. All of the scenarios in this section were created with the aim of presenting some form of inquiry. There were no right or wrong answers here and the purpose of the items was to gain insight into respondents' views of what

counted as AR. The findings for this section are summarised in Table 3, which gives the number and percentage of teachers selecting each of the four possible ratings for each scenario. In order to find the overall direction of the teachers' responses more clearly, and for ease of discussion, the results were categorised into two main categories for each scenario: *Not AR* (consisted of definitely not AR and probably not AR) and *AR* (made up of probably AR and definitely AR).

Table 3: Teachers' assessment of 10 scenarios (Appendix, Section 1)

Scenario	Definitely not AR N (%)	Probably not AR N (%)	Probably AR N (%)	Definitely AR N (%)
1	8 (12.3)	11 (17.0)	19 (29.2)	27 (41.5)
2	20 (30.8)	23 (35.4)	18 (27.7)	4 (6.1)
3	17 (26.1)	14 (21.6)	19 (29.2)	15 (23.1)
4	6 (9.2)	12 (18.5)	14 (21.5)	33 (50.8)
5	22 (33.9)	17 (26.1)	12 (18.5)	14 (21.5)
6	2 (3.1)	5 (7.7)	23 (35.4)	35 (53.8)
7	12 (18.5)	13 (20.0)	16 (24.6)	24 (36.9)
8	25 (38.5)	20 (30.8)	14 (21.5)	6 (9.2)
9	25 (38.5)	12 (18.4)	17 (26.1)	11 (17.0)
10	21 (32.3)	13 (20.0)	15 (23.1)	16 (24.6)

It is clear from Table 3 that the scenario which was rated as AR by most teachers (89.2%) was number 6, in which an EFL teacher asks his critical friend to observe him in the classroom and then to compare their observations. This was the only scenario out of the 10 where only 2 respondents felt that it was definitely not action research. Two other scenarios which were also highly judged to be in the AR category were numbers 4 and 1, with 72.3% and 70.7% respectively. Another highly rated scenario is number 7, in which a teacher asks her learners to give her feedback on her teaching by distributing a written feedback form. The general themes that emerge from these scenarios are dealing with a practical problem, collecting information through some sort of questionnaire, and collaborating with colleagues.

Scenario 8 was that least recognised as AR (69.3% placed it in the not AR category). In this scenario, a teacher who is interested in finding out which of two methods for teaching grammar is more effective conducts an experimental study with two different groups. The other two scenarios which were highly rated as not AR were numbers 2 and 5, with 66.2% and 60.0% respectively. The common themes that emerge from these scenarios are those related to the traditional beliefs about research such as experimental/control group, large sample size, statistically analysing the data, and administering pre/post-test (though not explicitly stated in the scenarios).

The other remaining scenarios, i.e. numbers 3, 9 and 10, were more spread in terms of responses. For example, on scenario 3, while 23.1% said it was definitely AR, 26.1% said it was definitely not. In the same line, while 43.1% and 47.7% of teachers rated scenarios 9 and 10 as AR, respectively, the other teachers, i.e. 56.9% and 52.3% of them, rated these scenarios as not AR. The main themes extracted from these scenarios include the use of technology (such as audio/video recording) for collecting data, keeping journal, and observation.

## Interview

As Table 3 shows, the three scenarios most highly rated as AR by the teachers were numbers 6, 4, and 1. Scenarios 8, 2, and 5 were the three least rated as AR. Although the statistical analysis of these scenarios gives us a general picture of teachers' beliefs about AR, it is far from reality to believe that the questionnaire data alone will provide us with teachers' reasons for their judgments. This is why we must make use of the follow-up data obtained, as discussed earlier, through interviews. Due to the lack of space, it is not possible to provide a comprehensive qualitative analysis of teachers' comments on every scenario, but common themes which shaped teachers' assessments of the individual scenarios most highly and least highly rated are extracted from spoken data. The representative comments are samples from all the comments reflecting a particular theme and are not meant to give an exhaustive view of all comments on that theme.

Scenario 6 was the one that was most highly rated as AR. Teachers who participated in the interview and who said this was definitely AR were asked to elaborate on their choice. The following comments illustrate a number of common influences on their assessments:

This [observation] is what we always do in our institute to help each other improve our teaching. In fact this is part of our teaching culture in the institute.

This method is really useful. Most of the times the supervisor comes into my classroom: not only me but all of the teachers, and completes a form and then she says what to do to have a better experience of teaching.

We are asked to observe our colleagues' classrooms every term and to talk about the problems that occur in the classrooms. At first it was not an easy task but now I believe that such an activity is really helpful.

References to classroom observation and teachers' collaboration recurred in the views on scenario 6 in the interview data; it seems that these ideas shape teachers' beliefs about AR in any kind of activity that involves research.

Scenario 8 was the one that was least highly rated as AR. Teachers' criticism of this scenario focused on the assignment of students to different groups and controlling the context, as illustrated in these comments:

What happens in this scenario reminds me of my Research Methodology course at university in which our instructor used to emphasise the control of the context and variables.

This is what we have always been told at university. I mean we have always been told that the main factors that make a piece of research worthwhile are similarity of subjects and controlling the variables.

This story fits in with what I know about ordinary research. When I was a university student, I remember that our Research Methodology professor asked us to do a kind of research at the end of the term. I did it with two other classmates and this [scenario 8] is what we exactly did. It took us a long time and it was really difficult. We went into an institute and divided the students and went through all that stuff. It was really difficult.

## Characteristics of good quality AR

Section 2 of the questionnaire provides further information on teachers' beliefs about AR by asking them to rate a list of the characteristics of good-quality AR based on their importance. Table 4 summarizes the responses to this list of characteristics. For ease of reference and discussion, *Less Important* includes unimportant and moderately important ratings



for each characteristic, while *More Important* constitutes important and very important responses.

*Table 4:* Teachers' views on the importance of 12 action research characteristics (Appendix, Section 2)

Characteristics	Unimportant N (%)	Moderately important N (%)	Unsure N (%)	Important N (%)	Very important N (%)
1	6 (9.2)	10 (15.4)	9 (13.9)	13 (20.0)	27 (41.5)
2	5 (7.7)	8 (12.3)	10 (15.4)	10 (15.4)	32 (49.2)
3	10 (15.4)	17 (26.1)	11 (16.9)	12 (18.5)	15 (23.1)
4	2 (3.1)	2 (3.1)	10 (15.4)	16 (24.6)	35 (53.8)
5	2 (3.1)	3 (4.6)	7 (10.7)	15 (23.1)	38 (58.5)
6	6 (9.2)	6 (9.2)	15 (23.1)	13 (20.0)	25 (38.5)
7	11 (16.9)	6 (9.2)	17 (26.2)	11 (16.9)	20 (30.8)
8	3 (4.6)	10 (15.4)	12 (18.5)	7 (10.7)	33 (50.8)
9	15 (23.1)	13 (20.0)	16 (24.6)	11 (16.9)	10 (15.4)
10	8 (12.3)	8 (12.3)	11 (16.9)	9 (13.9)	29 (44.6)
11	15 (23.1)	10 (15.4)	14 (21.5)	14 (21.5)	12 (18.5)
12	10 (15.4)	12 (18.5)	8 (12.3)	7 (10.7)	28 (43.1)

The characteristic which was seen overall to be the most important was item 5 which stated "AR is a participatory and collaborative enquiry": 81.6% of ratings for this item were in the more important group. "AR is contextual, small-scale, and localized" (item 4) was the second most rated as important as 78.4% of teachers put this statement in the more important category. Taken together, teachers' views here reflect a belief of AR where collaboration between colleagues and locality of research are fundamental concerns. The other three highest rated characteristics in terms of importance were items 2, 1, and 8 which mirrored characteristics such as real practical interest (64.6%), systematic data collection and analysis (61.5%), and reducing gaps between academic research and classroom applications (61.5%), respectively. It is interesting to note that these three last characteristics reflect more pragmatic concerns. Other points worth noting here are that the statements "AR facilitates the professional development" (item 9) and "AR has the potential to become empowering" (item 3) were the characteristics which received the highest ranking in the less important category with 43.1% and 41.5%, respectively.

## Interview

In the interviews, teachers were asked to clarify why they considered particular characteristics as important while some others as not important in terms of the quality of AR. For reasons of space, once again, the focus here is limited to teachers' comments on the characteristics most highly and least highly rated, namely, collaboration and professional development. Here are some of the teachers' views from the interviews which show why teachers rated collaboration so highly, and which help us to understand what meanings teachers assigned to this term:

As far as I know, action research is a kind of group work. I mean if I was supposed to do research alone it was something else not action research.

It is always easier to do research with other people. There are a lot of benefits such as sharing ideas, reducing the burden of research and even sympathizing. Whenever I share a problem with my colleague and see that he has the same problems in his classroom I feel more comfortable because I know that I am not alone.

What is most important for me in doing action research is solving the problems of my classroom. Here the fame is not important at all. On the contrary, the professors in university are always trying to publish their research with their names appearing as the sole author. So why do not do it [action research] with other teachers when I know the result is more important than who does it? In addition, as they say, two heads are better than one!

As it was mentioned earlier, item 9 which emphasises on the professional development aspect of AR received a high ranking in the less important group. Here are teachers' comments about this characteristic:

I have never thought that action research may result in professional development. Of course action research is very interesting and it may help teachers think more about their job but in the end it is the learners who take advantage not the teacher.

I do not see any relationship between action research and professional development. Maybe when you are working at university it will help you to improve in your job but in private institutes I do not think so.

Personally, I believe that most of the English teachers in Iran are not motivated enough to improve in their jobs. I mean that it is not important whether you do action research or any other kind of activity to show that you are interested in your job. Everything ends up in money. I mean you have to work very hard to earn money especially in such a tough economic situation in Iran. So you do not have time to think about anything else.

## Discussion

Wyatt (2011) believes that observation is one of the “crucial [skills] for teachers conducting classroom-based action research” (p. 423). It seems that most of the teachers in this study have also discovered the benefits of observation for conducting AR since scenario 6 which its general theme is about observation has attracted their attention more than any other scenario. As one of the teachers declares, “I believe that no two teachers have identical experience, training, and beliefs about teaching. So action research can be as simple as making use of opportunities such as observation to talk to colleagues and explore ideas about teaching”. The popularity of this technique might result from both its familiarity and easiness. Regarding familiarity, Dornyei (2007) mentions three unique aspects of conducting research in a classroom context, one of them is classroom observation “which is a highly developed data collection approach *typical* of examining learning environments” (p. 176; emphasis added). One of the teachers clarifies the typicality of this technique by stating that

my colleagues and I are all familiar with observation schemes such as COLT [Communication Orientation of Language Teaching] because our supervisor sometimes asks us to take a copy of this into the classroom and focus on just one aspect of our colleagues' teaching practice.

Regarding easiness, we should note that organising and analysing data efficiently and effectively is extremely time-consuming from teachers' perspective. To assume that teachers

will find or make the time to implement and analyse various AR data collection and analysis methods such as journal writing, videotaping, or survey data analysis may be highly misguided. This is not thus surprising to see that most of the teachers in this study equate this simple technique to AR, however falsely.

Many previous studies have shown that teachers associate research with its conventional characteristics such as large sample size, statistics, pre/post-test, etc. For example, Borg (2007) shows that 98% of the teachers surveyed in his study believe that research means conducting a large-scale survey and analysing the data statistically. In other words, it can be inferred that a lot of teachers have a good knowledge of conventional research. In Borg's (2007) words, "the 'standard' view of research, on the basis of the available evidence, thus seems to remain the predominant model in the minds of teachers both generally and specifically in ELT" (p. 743). The finding in this section is in line with the previous research since it seems that teachers in this study know experimental study better than any other type of research. This is due to the fact that the least three rated scenarios (numbers 8, 2, and 5) all have the specific characteristics of conventional research. As one of the teachers confesses, "I may not know what exactly action research is but I surely know what ordinary research is". However, this can be considered a real threat to teacher AR. For example, Clayton et al. (2008) found that teachers' desire for conducting research can at times be debilitated by "quantitative and essentially positivistic" (p. 78) understandings of research. Although presenting a positive view of how AR is perceived, McNiff and Whitehead (2002, p. 1) have also expressed the same concern more than a decade ago:

Today, action research is recognized as a valid form of enquiry, with its own methodologies and epistemologies, its own criteria and standards of judgment. Debates still take place about the natures of action research, how people carry out their research and for what purposes, but there is general agreement that action research has an identity of its own and should not be spoken about in terms of traditional forms of research.

As Danielson and McGreal (2000, p. 24) assert, "teaching is highly complex, and most teachers have scant opportunity to explore common problems and possible solutions, or share new pedagogical approaches with their colleagues". Collaborative AR can assume a critical part in such a circumstance since it offers principles and frameworks which empower teachers to become more participatory and collaborative in ways that meaningfully engage them in the full cycle of AR, from problem-posing to making research results and implications public (Burns 1999). As one of the teachers states,

What makes me feel depressed is that I sometimes feel that teaching is a kind of isolated job. But I think that if teachers do action research with their colleagues, they can learn from each other and foster a sense of professionalism in themselves.

As this quotation, and the ones mentioned earlier, shows this form of practitioner inquiry takes the form of a specific focus on improving classroom practice and deepening the teachers' understanding of themselves as professional practitioners. Such form of research has been considered extremely important because of both providing teachers with a framework for viewing themselves as researchers and playing an important role in making small-scale change (Brydon-Miller & Maguire 2009).

One interesting finding was that teachers' beliefs about the role of AR in professional development were the least rated. Although in both general education (e.g., Ado 2013; Cain & Milovic 2010; Descamps-Bednarz 2007; McNiff 2002; Vogrinc & Zuljan 2009; Zeichner

2003) and second language education (e.g., Atay 2006, 2008; Bailey et al. 2001; Campbell & Tovar 2006; Chou 2011; McDonough 2006; Richards & Farrell 2005) AR has been viewed as an essential factor in providing opportunities for professional growth and development, teachers in the present study do not express the same thought. This might be due to several reasons mentioned by the teachers who participated in the interviews such as lack of motivation, lack of deep knowledge about AR and its trivial effects on their professional lives. There is also evidence from general education that although teachers usually value AR as a means of professional development, it doesn't necessarily lead to changes in their practice. Haggarty and Postlethwaite (2003), for example, have reported that:

[action research] led to understanding of new perspectives for some teachers but limited understanding for others. Where there was new understanding, that understanding led to change for some, but confirmation of existing practice for others. For a third group, the teachers' perceptions were that new understandings and classroom practice were separate – they had not altered or even confirmed their practice as a result of their new understandings (p. 435).

## Implications

It is believed that AR has a great potential to help L2 teachers develop in their profession. First, an awareness of AR and its assumptions provides a suitable basis for understanding the particular assumptions about research, its purposes, and its methods that underpin specific classroom contexts. Many teachers wrongly associate research solely with academics and scientists, experiments and statistics. Shkedi (1998), for example, found that teachers' definitions of research commonly focused on quantitative tools, objectivity, hypotheses, representativeness, and generalisability. However, as Borg (2006a p. 23) truly asserts, in teacher research, "the goal is often understanding rather than proof". Second, doing AR provides L2 teachers with the knowledge and skill that can help them develop research skills required to become autonomous. However, although thoughtful teachers may possess certain skills they can exploit during research, many have not received the "research education" (Borg 2003) that equips them to effectively conceptualise and implement a piece of research. The previous research has shown that AR has the potential to increase the L2 teachers' research skills. For example, Thorne and Qiang (1996) reported in their study that the teachers who implemented AR projects improved research skills than did teachers who did not carry out their projects. Finally, AR gives teachers the knowledge and confidence to act as responsible professionals. As Flake et al (1995, p. 407) claim, "by becoming researchers, teachers can take control of their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within". There is growing evidence that teachers doing AR together in the same school or program make significant impacts on school change, student achievement, and the professional development of teachers participating in the research (e.g., Elyildirim & Ashton, 2006; King & Newmann 2000; Loughran et al. 2002).

## Conclusion

Research on teacher beliefs has already gained its reputation in the field of L2 education. It has been proposed that they play a crucial role in influencing our behaviours, actions and interactions in the classroom (e.g., Borg 2006b; Farrell & Lim 2005; Freeman 2002). Although these beliefs are not usually at the forefront of our cognisance as we teach: this is especially true for new teachers whose fundamental aim is to get by in the classroom, they create a complex network of assumptions that lie underneath our professional behaviour. Paying attention to the personal beliefs and being aware of their inescapable presence is especially of considerable importance in AR because they shape teachers' perception, analysis and interpretation of what is taking place in their classrooms during the AR process. However, as Burns (2010) makes it clear, many language teachers often "have only a hazy idea of what it [action research] actually is and what doing it involves" (p. 1). This study specifically showed that while AR is not unknown among Iranian EFL teachers, its use is not widespread. In part, this might be because AR assumes a high level of autonomy (Castle 2006) and reflection (McIntosh 2010) for practitioner-researchers, neither of which are traditional characteristics of the ELT system in Iran. This highlights the need for organisational, practical and intellectual support, since encouraging teachers to be research engaged without fulfilling such criteria seems difficult, if not impossible.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire

### English language teachers' beliefs about action research (AR)

What is your belief about AR? This is an important question in our field—especially at a time when language teachers all around the world are encouraged to do AR as an effective way to improve their teaching skills and gain more understanding of themselves as teachers, their classrooms and their students. This survey of English language teachers asks you for your beliefs on this issue and will take 10–15 minutes to complete. Participation in this study is voluntary. Thank you for your interest in contributing.

#### SECTION 1: SCENARIOS

The purpose of this section is to elicit your views on the kinds of activities which can be called AR. There are no right or wrong answers. Read each description below and choose one answer to say to what extent you feel the activity described is an example of action research.

- 1) A teacher of English language in a high school had negative feelings about the oral tests she used in class. To understand the nature of her problem, she collected information by giving students a questionnaire. She found that the interruptions she made were distracting students from searching their minds or following their trains of thought. As a result of this information, she restricted her interventions to a minimum.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 2) A researcher wishes to know whether the use of group work will improve students' ability to speak English. He assigns one group of students in a school to an experimental group, where all classroom tasks are conducted through group work for a period of two months. An equal number of students (the control group) are taught using the same tasks through a whole-class teacher-fronted approach for the same period. The results show that the students assigned to group work have performed at a higher level in relation to fluency, but their accuracy is lower than the control group.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 3) A researcher decides to move away from using whole-class speaking activities in his classroom. He decides to introduce more group work for certain tasks and to observe how the students react. He assigns students to groups and keeps a journal noting down his observations over a period of two weeks. His journal entries indicate that students are reluctant to do group work. The researcher discusses the problem with some colleagues who suggest he tries letting students choose their own groups. He tries this strategy over a further period of one week and notes that students are less reluctant.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 4) A group of five teachers of adult ESL students volunteered to be part of a collaborative project to investigate the teaching of mixed-level classes. First, each teacher identified a focus area for research such as investigating materials development to cater for mixed levels or examining various student groupings. Then, each teacher described the actions they were putting in place in the classroom and their methods for collecting data on what happened. They supported each other by providing reflections, suggestions, and feedback on each project.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
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- 5) A teacher was interested in the use of mobiles in English language teaching. He gave a questionnaire about the use of mobiles in the classroom to 150 learners. He used a professional statistics software to analyze the data. He found that most of the learners were interested in the use of mobiles in the classroom as a way of improving their language. The teacher wrote an article about his study and submitted it to an academic journal.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 6) A teacher who teaches EFL at a primary school wanted to try out different tasks in the classroom to evaluate their effectiveness for students. Because task-based teaching was a new approach for him and he would be fully occupied in teaching the children the language items and then trying out the tasks, he asked a critical friend to observe him in the classroom and to take notes on various aspects of his teaching. At the end of the lesson, he and the observer got together to compare their observations of how a particular task had worked.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 7) A teacher is teaching a class of beginners who are reluctant to interact. She wants to increase confidence and communication among her learners. She asks her learners to give her feedback on her teaching by distributing a written feedback form. The teacher analyzed the feedback forms and used the information based on which she decided to change his teaching method.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 8) A teacher was interested in finding out which of two methods for teaching grammar was more effective. In order to ensure that the students in the experimental group are not at higher levels of language learning to begin with, the researcher first administers a test. She then assigns students to two groups on the basis of the test results and teaches grammar to each class using a different method. At the end of the two months, each of the groups is given a further identical test in order to see whether any of the methods has resulted in better results. She decided to use the method used with the experimental group.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 9) A teacher was interested in the types of oral feedback he and six of his colleagues gave in their classrooms. Data were collected through audio-recordings. Two oral tasks from one of his own lessons and one of his colleagues were chosen for analysis. These were recorded, transcribed and the teachers' use of oral feedback in them analyzed. He found that most of the oral feedbacks were evaluative. He concluded that he should change his feedback strategy because such an attitude might frustrate learners and create in them negative attitudes toward learning.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

- 10) A teacher was interested in whether and how learner autonomy operated in her two speaking classes which focused on the oral presentation activities of students. She video recorded ten 90-minute sessions of her two classes, which consisted of 99 students who were studying at the upper-intermediate level of English. She used an unstructured

class observation method to observe the classes (not to follow any fixed plan or structure). The videos were of great use as she reviewed specifically what the students and she had been doing in class, focusing on elements related to independent learning.

Definitely not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably not AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Probably AR <input type="checkbox"/>	Definitely AR <input type="checkbox"/>
--	--	--	--

## SECTION 2: CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD QUALITY AR

Here is a list of characteristics that AR may have. Tick ONE box for each to give your opinion about how important it is in making a piece of AR *good*.

Characteristics	Unimportant	Moderately Important	Unsure	Important	Very Important
1) AR requires systematic data collection and analysis					
2) AR addresses questions of real practical interest					
3) AR has the potential to become empowering					
4) AR is contextual, small-scale, and localized					
5) AR is a participatory and collaborative enquiry					
6) AR occurs through a dynamic process of cycles					
7) AR usually helps to deepen personal theories about teaching					
8) AR reduces gaps between academic research and classroom applications					
9) AR facilitates the professional development					
10) AR acquaints teachers with research skills					
11) AR involves teachers in reflecting on their teaching					
12) AR is subjective rather than objective					

If there are any other characteristics which in your opinion a study must have for it to be called *good* action research, please list them here.