

# Teacher Cognition and Personal Beliefs: A Harmonious Mismatch?

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## Abstract

Some engravings are meant to be adored and some possibly abhorred. Teacher cognition, as a meant-to-be-praised engraving, is defined by Borg (2003, p. 81) as “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching what teachers know, believe, and think.” This concept in teaching has recently gained momentum meaning that teachers learn so much about their teaching through the vast experience they have gathered as learners (Nespor, 1987). A teacher’s idea about teaching and the methodologies employed is largely shaped by his/her cognition about the whole story of teaching. In this study, through a structured questionnaire, some open-ended questions, and a thorough interview, the researchers tried to delve into some deep-rooted beliefs and teaching conceptions of six EFL teachers, which had led them to decide on delicate issues in the classroom. This was done with the intention to unravel the mysteries in their practice and to see if there was a way out. A few not-so-much-spotted problems are traced and a general panorama of what is going on in classes based on teachers’ cognition are depicted. Some implications and areas of research on teacher cognition are introduced at the end.

**Keywords:** Teacher Cognition, Fossilization, Defossilization, Culture, Language Learning Knack

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## **Introduction**

Human being is a paradoxical, bizarre, and creative entity who is capable of doing the undoable. As humans gather together they form a society in which each of them is responsible for at least one specific act. For example, one is a firefighter, another a peddler, while some assume careers as teachers.

Teachers, as members of the teaching-learning society, bear the responsibility of educating those who pursue it in an environment, namely a classroom, where there exists a relationship between the teacher and the students.

This classroom of course is governed by a multiplicity of factors at work, some of which have been identified over the centuries and throughout various forms of qualitative and quantitative research while some others still remain as a source of mystery to the specialists.

As Edge (1993) points out, “learners coming into a class bring with their names, their knowledge, experience, intelligence, skills, emotions, imagination, awareness, creativity, sense of humor, problems, purposes, dreams, aspirations, fear, memories, interests, blind spots, prejudices, habits, expectations, likes, dislikes, preferences, and everything else that goes with being a human being, including the ability to speak at least one language” (p. 9).

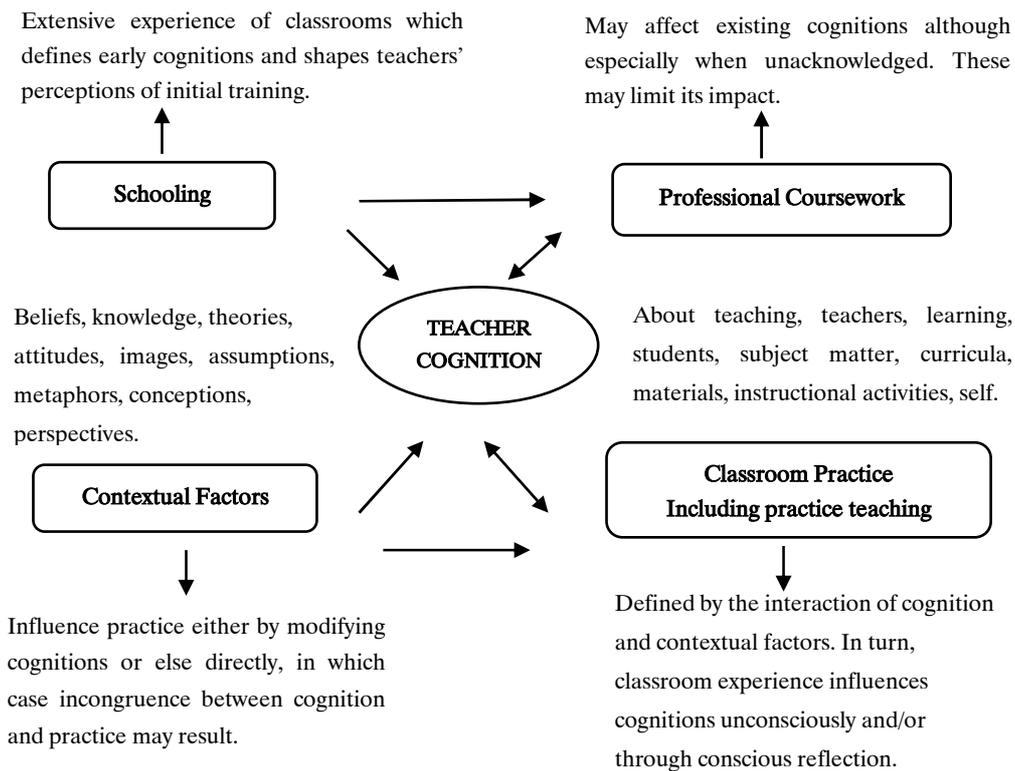
In other words, teachers and students should be considered as individuals who are connected to their unique psychological processes, which play a decisive role in their everyday encounters. In searching about what is going on in the mind of a teacher, his/her personal attitudes and convictions should be taken into consideration because they somehow lead the teacher to decide about crucial moments within the teaching context.

Yet teachers are primarily human beings and as such, they are guided by a huge variety of elements ranging from extremely emotional to distinctly

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rational. And amidst all this, one must not forget the fact that being a teacher -unlike the traditional view held by many earlier societies- is anything but synonymous with not being a learner.

Holt Reynolds (1992) stated that there is a plethora of evidence that teachers' experience as learners shapes their cognition about teaching and learning which, in turn, imposes its influence on the process of teaching throughout their career. Borg (1997) introduced a schematic conceptualization in which he depicted how teachers' cognition plays a fundamental role in teachers' lives.



**Figure 1 – Teacher cognition, schooling, professional education, and classroom practice (Borg, 1997)**

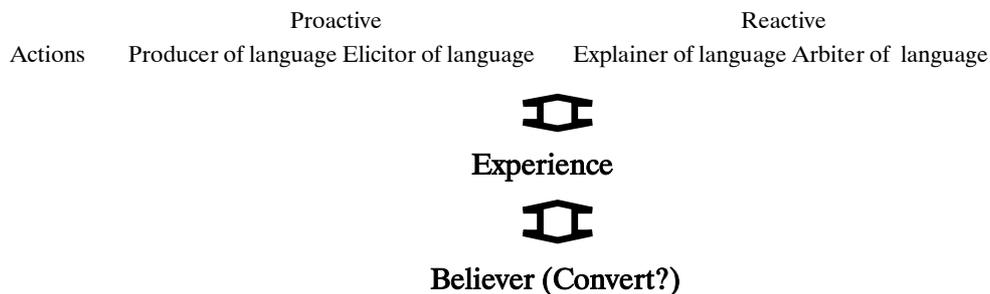
Borg (2003) has defined teacher cognition as “the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe, and think” (p. 81). This explanation shows the link between teachers’ psychological constructs and their actual instructions in the classroom. He further maintains that, “Teachers are active thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context sensitive networks of knowledge, thought, and beliefs” (p. 81).

### **Teacher Cognition and Teachers’ Classroom Practices**

When it comes to teacher roles in language classrooms, Lynch (1990, p. 119) refers to the effect of teachers’ beliefs about the language teaching/learning process on their teaching in order to illustrate the value of classroom research.

In his theory, he considers teachers’ roles as any of the following four: “producer of language”, “elicitor of language”, “explainer of language”, or “arbiter of language”. These roles can be categorized into two different actions and those actions are substantially related to teachers’ beliefs about language which are shaped from their experiences as both teachers and learners.

Teachers’ beliefs constructed as such are expected to underpin their classroom behavior as illustrated in Table 1:



**Figure 2. The effects of teachers’ beliefs about language (Adapted from Lynch, 1990)**

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Studies related to teacher cognition play a pivotal role in teacher education because insights into teacher cognition allow us to:

- Understand discrepancies between theoretical recommendations based on research and classroom practice and hence to attempt to explain the lack of influence on practice of educational innovation (Clark and Peterson, 1986);
- Provide quality portraiture of teaching in all its complexity (Clark and Peterson, 1986);
- Provide policymakers in education and teacher education with the basis for understanding how best to implement educational innovation and to promote teacher change (Freeman, 1992);
- Engage teachers in a form of reflective learning by making them aware of the psychological bases of their classroom practice and to help teachers understand their mental lives, not to dictate practice to them (Clark and Peterson, 1986);
- Understand how teachers develop (Tobin and LaMaster, 1995); and
- Develop a new conceptualization of teaching which supports and improves the quality of teachers' professional practice (Calderhead, 1987).

These reasons and many more legitimize the time and energy allocated to this area of study, demanding more endeavor than before.

### **Teachers' Cognition and Their Experience as Learners**

Ideas and beliefs shaped early on in our life remain defiant to change even if one finds an undeniable counter-evidence (Nisbett and Ross, 1980). Clearly, teachers' methods of teaching and their attitude towards it are largely derived from their previous experiences as learners; Lortie (1975) has labeled this phenomenon as "apprenticeship of observation". Bailey et al. (1996) investigated the role of teachers' language learning histories in molding their

current teaching practices and philosophies. They came up with some factors related to teaching and learning situations which had influenced their own language learning positively: (1) teacher personality and style mattered more than methodology; (2) teachers were caring and committed and had clear expectations of their students; (3) teachers respected, and were respected by, the students; (4) as students, their motivation to learn enabled them to overcome inadequacies in the teaching; and (5) learning was facilitated by a positive classroom environment.

Freeman (1992), in the same vein, was of the utter conviction that, “The memories of instruction gained through their ‘apprenticeship of observation’ function as de facto guides for teachers as they approach what they do in the classroom” (p. 11). Johnson (1994) reached the conclusion that pre-service teachers’ instructional decisions during a practicum were due to images of teachers, materials, activities, and classroom organization produced by their own experience as second language learners. She maintained that, “Pre-service ESL teachers’ beliefs may be based largely on images from their formal language learning experiences, and in all likelihood, will represent their dominant model of action during the practicum teaching experience” (p. 450).

To cement this fact that teachers’ previous experience has a dominant role in their teaching methodology and decision making in the classroom, Numrich (1996) found that novice teachers decided to encourage or discourage using specific instructional strategies on the basis of their positive or negative experiences of those strategies as learners. He reported that error correction was actually more often cited as a technique that had been used by their language teachers and that had inhibited them from speaking and that in some cases, it had even turned them off to language learning because they had felt so humiliated and uncomfortable being corrected. Because of negative

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experiences of being corrected, several teachers chose not to interrupt their learners' flow of speech in the classroom to correct errors (p. 139).

All in all, teachers' previous language learning experiences play a decisive role in developing cognitions about learning and language learning which molds their general ideology of teaching and may continue to be significant throughout their professional lives.

The aim of this study was to roughly discover how teachers' beliefs and ideas shaped their current methodology in teaching. As argued before, previous learning experiences of teachers are at the zenith of importance when it comes to their chosen strategies in the classroom. Through a questionnaire and an interview, the researchers tried to trace and pinpoint the rationale behind the adherence of the participants to some fundamental issues in teaching, namely:

- Who learns better: a child or an adult?
- Is there an aptitude or “knack” to learn a second language?
- Are some languages easier to learn than others?
- Is it crucial to know about the second language culture?
- Which one is important: fluency or accuracy?
- What is the role of vocabulary in learning a second language?
- What is the role of repetition in learning?
- Is gender a privilege in learning another language?
- What is the role of grammar?
- Are those who speak more languages highly talented?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

To fulfill the goal of this study, the researchers selected six participants (three males and three females) who agreed to take part in this study. At first, they completed a questionnaire and then they were interviewed. The participants were in their twenties and had an average of four years experience in teaching.

All of them were teaching at intermediate and upper intermediate levels, teaching Interchange 2 and 3 at a language school in Tehran.

### **Instrumentation**

As mentioned before, a questionnaire was used to elicit the participants' beliefs in teaching. The original questionnaire was developed by Horwitz (1987) under the name of BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory). Later on, Richards and Lockhart (1996, p. 50) modified Horwitz's BALLI into a more compatible version to measure the beliefs of teachers in their practice. This latter modified questionnaire was used in this study because of its relevance to this paper. The questionnaire asked for information like the gender, age, and teaching experience of the participants, consisting of 23 multiple-choice items and six open-ended questions. The first 21 items appeared in a Likert format (with the alternatives of strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree). Questions 22 and 23 were asked the participants about their views on how hard it would be to learn English and how long it would take for someone to be fluent in this language. The last six questions were both open-ended asking for their purpose and preferred style of teaching accompanied by a number of choices to be chosen from. The time allocated to fill out this questionnaire was 30 minutes.

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The other instrument used in this study was an interview which took place for about three hours while the participants and the researchers went through the questionnaire after the researchers introduced and explained the whole concept behind their research. The researchers made extensive notes while conducting the interviews.

## **Procedure**

After selecting the participants, based on their willingness to participate, the researchers administered the questionnaire. Subsequent to collecting the responses to the questionnaire, the researchers went through the answers and after making some notes, arranged an interview with the participants to delve more into their beliefs.

During these interviews, the researchers realized that the six participants in this study were unanimously referring to some of the points raised in the questionnaire more than other points. Having taken specific note of this interest and following a subsequent analysis of the questionnaire, they were able to pinpoint seven questions in the questionnaire that were the source of the aforementioned interest. These seven were:

1. Child vs. adult dichotomy in learning the second language
2. The “knack” or aptitude of language learning
3. The role of culture in learning the second language
4. The role of vocabulary/grammar in acquiring the second language
5. The importance of practice and repetition
6. Woman vs. man dichotomy in learning the second language better
7. Fossilization and defossilization

Accordingly, the researchers decided to highlight the above seven criteria which were thus deemed more important by the subjects in this study and

report the responses made to them in the spirit of the law of parsimony. Quite a number of these responses end with further questions to reflect upon.

## **Results**

The statistical analysis of the results was carried out through Microsoft Excel 2007 after tallying and obtaining the mean of each item. It has to be mentioned that this study was carried out on a small scale, namely with six EFL teachers and, therefore, lacks generalizability and only seeks to open up horizons about teachers' beliefs and conceptions.

### **Child vs. Adult**

There has always been a controversy over who a better learner is: a child or an adult? Some believe that children, due to the critical period, are better learners and can outperform adults in acquiring a second language. On the other camp, adherents to the supremacy of adults express that because of the analytic power and developed mindset, adults are, by far, better than children language-wise.

Eighty-five percent of the participants voted in favor of children and believed that children learn a second/foreign language better and with little difficulty.

This data is demonstrated in Figure 3. Amazingly enough, all the participants were teaching adults and here there is a catch: If a teacher who believes children are better learners teaches adults, would this idea of child's superiority in language learning not affect his/her cognition and idea about language learning and teaching and consequently his/her process of teaching adults? In other words, if teacher X works with adults but deep inside feels children are better, would s/he allocate all s/he has in boosting adults'

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knowledge? S/he might say *why bother? Adults are worse than children anyways.*

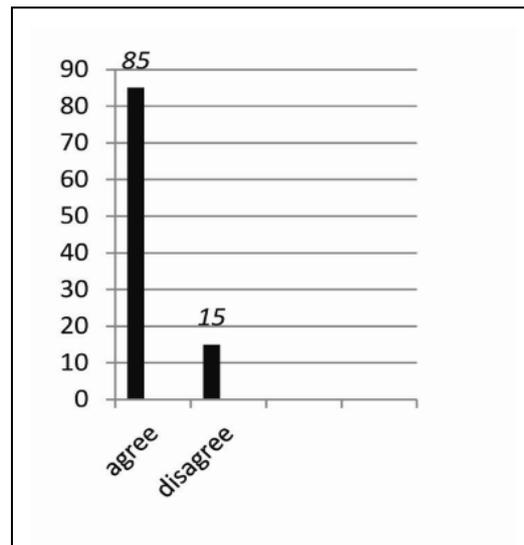


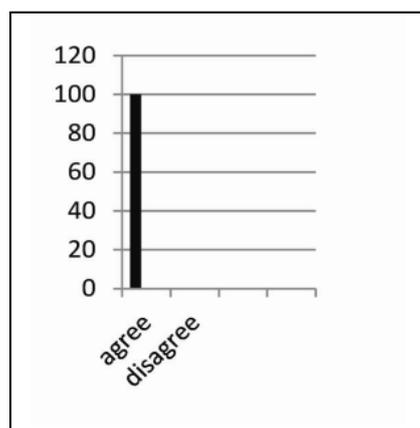
Figure 3 – Teachers' opinion about children vs. adults

### **Language Learning “Knack”**

Some scholars believe just a few people are gifted in learning a language; as a result, they have the knack or the aptitude of learning a language and others are simply devoid of such an innate blessing. All the participants selected the option that stated some people have and others lack the language knack (Figure 4). Therefore, if a teacher is of the utter conviction (like all the participants in this study) that some learners do not have the required knack, they would not spend enough effort to help and guide those learners. That is, the teacher might reach this conclusion that if some learners are destitute of such an aptitude, then s/he might differentiate among the students and put

aside some of the learners who might be considered as lacking the knack. This raises a very important question in discussions of language teaching: fairness.

If, for a moment, that teacher forgets about his/her predetermined predilection about the presence of the knack and work with the students as people who *can* learn a second language regardless of the “knack”, would that teacher not make an invaluable difference in those students’ lives? Is teaching not all about making a difference at the end?



**Figure 4 – Teachers’ opinion about the knack in language learning**

## **Culture**

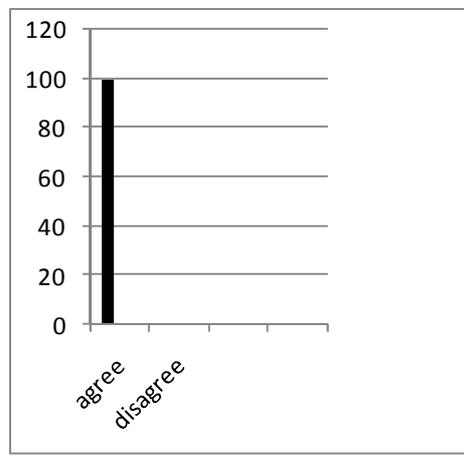
The role of culture in learning a second language is believed to be pivotal.

Nowadays, all of us, to put aside some exceptions, agree with the facilitative role of injecting culture into the class milieu. One hundred percent of the participants (Figure 5) believed in the virtuous role of culture in their teaching.

Yet again a bizarre paradox surfaces: Having been asked how much they maneuver on cultural points in their teaching, the participants gave nothing in response except their embarrassed body posture and facial expression. They said the reason why they could not employ enough culture in their teaching was

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twofold: first, they had not been acculturated enough and second, they could not find a source about the target language culture adaptable to their context of teaching. Therefore, although in their teaching cognition they had an established premise about the importance of culture in learning a language, the teachers who participated in this study had some severe problems in doing so.

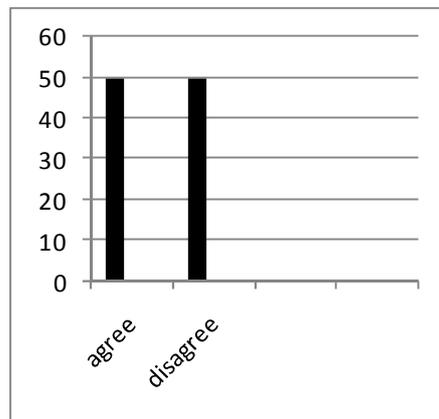


**Figure 5. Teachers' opinion about culture being injected into the class milieu**

## **Vocabulary and Grammar**

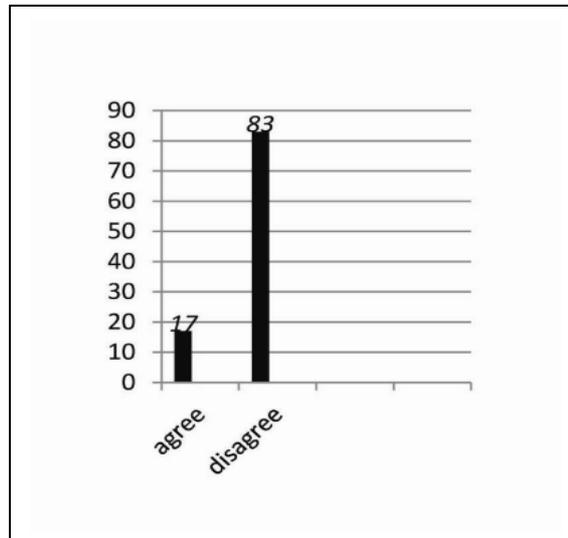
It has been a long held belief that if someone wants to learn a language, there are two undeniable building blocks the help of which is needed in order to be successful in acquiring that language impeccably. Those two crucial blocks are vocabulary and grammar. Metaphorically speaking, grammar is the skeleton and lexical items are the flesh, so first we need to install the appropriate framework into which suitable items would fit. Amazingly enough, only half of the participants believed learning vocabulary items was the most important part in learning a language and shockingly only 17 percent of them held the idea that grammar played a fundamental role in learning a language. When asked

why grammar and vocabulary was not that much important for them, they came up with two main reasons. First, they maintained that the main focus in their classes was just communication and transmitting the thoughts and ideas and just a minimum amount of words and structures were needed to reach that goal. Second, they said with a sense of regret that their limited KAL (Knowledge About Language) in general, and KAG (Knowledge About Grammar) in particular, were the cause. They uttered that the image they had about their proficiency in possessing enough vocabulary items and grammatical structures influenced to the large extent how they taught and emphasized these two components in their classes. The data is presented in Figures 6 and 7.



**Figure 6 – Teachers’ opinion about the role of vocabulary**

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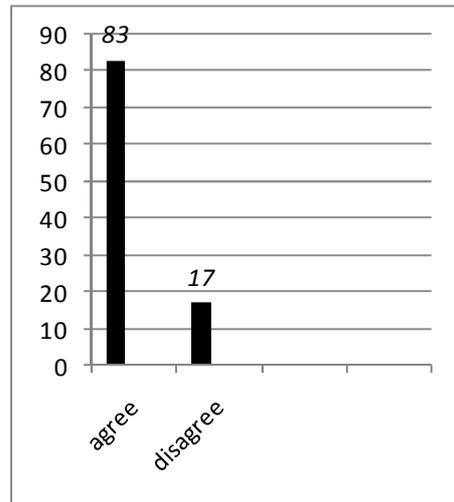


**Figure 7 – Teachers’ opinion about the role of grammar**

## **Practice**

Practice makes perfect; hardly would anyone disagree with this statement. If one wants to be a good driver, common sense tells him/her to just drive and practice as much as possible. And there is no exception when it comes to learning a language. From the Grammar Translation Method to recent communicative-based methodologies, the role of practice has waxed and waned but never disappeared. Accordingly, 83 percent of the participants pinpointed that repetition was at the apex of importance in learning simply because they had learned the language that way. The data is presented in Figure 8.

At this point, the previous experiences of the teachers as learners are crystal clear and very decisive in shaping their ideology of how a language is supposed to be learned. Their experience, and as a result, much of their cognition was molded by their own encounters as learners.



**Figure 8. Teachers' opinion about the role of practice**

### **Women vs. Men**

From the time of the Genesis up to now, the man vs. woman dichotomy has fascinated many people and of course has been a mind boggling issue. In language learning, some say women are better and others believe the opposite is true and men are superior. There has been no evidence in favor of the supremacy of one gender over the other. As Figure 9 demonstrates, 34 percent of the participants agreed women are better in learning a language, 17 percent disagreed, and 49 percent had no idea. The questions are if a teacher, in his/her deep-rooted beliefs, thinks one gender learns better than the other, does it affect the way of his/her teaching? How was such an idea formed in teachers' conceptions about teaching and learning? Does such a conception exist in the majority of the teachers teaching EFL in our context? Of course, the answer to the latter requires a study with a wider scope, and thus generalizability, than the present one.

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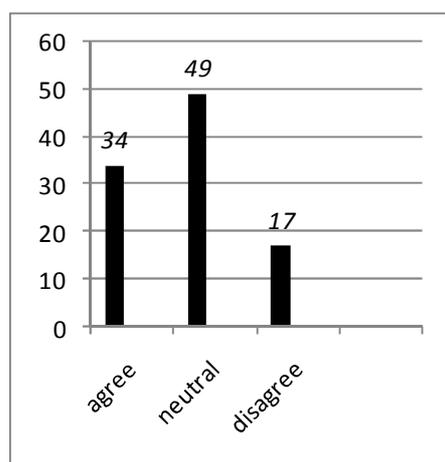


Figure 9 – Teachers' opinion about the role of gender

## **Fossilization and Defossilization**

Learning a new language has many an acrimonious nemesis, one of which happens to be fossilization. Once an erroneous item has been learned, it is very difficult, and some believe even impossible, to wipe it off the mind. A teacher's conception about defossilization, meaning correcting that erroneously formed mindset, decides to a large extent the path of his/her teaching, especially when it comes to the thorny and delicate part of error correction. Sixty-eight percent of the participants concurred that if beginning students are permitted to make errors in learning a second language, it would be difficult for them to speak correctly later on. In talking with them, most of the participants did not rule out the possibility of defossilization but found it a challenging ordeal to overcome.

This finding pinpoints the issue of the way teachers may deal with such fossilized errors in case they have the conception that the defossilization process is very difficult to be done. Will it make the teachers spend more time

and effort in dealing with such errors, or will it result in giving up the whole idea of trying to help learners defossilize due to the hardship or impossibility?

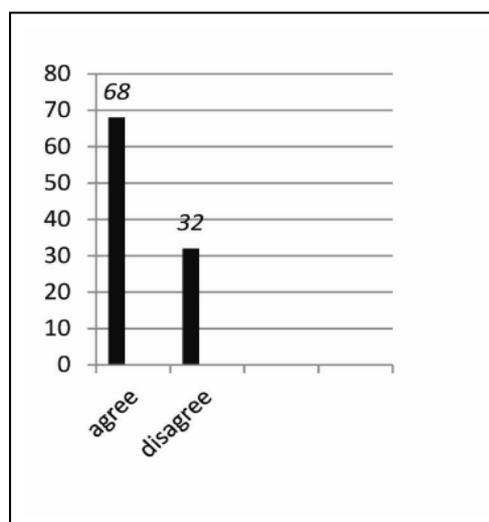


Figure 10 – Teachers’ opinion about early fossilization is hard to wipe off

### Results of Data from Open-Ended Questions

The participants were also asked some open-ended questions about aspects of teaching and the cognition behind each one. In the following section, first the questions will be presented and then, what some of the participants wrote as the answer will be quoted.

When asked what the main purpose of their teaching was, they said:

- *My teaching serves me in a multipurpose fashion: (a) transferring what I know, (b) challenging myself (self-satisfaction), (c) learning from the class atmosphere, and (d) enjoying the “teach”.*

(A 28-year-old male teacher with 10 years of experience in teaching)

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- *I just want to get the encouragement to learn how to handle a class and teach everything I know in a way that my students understand the language easily. I need it to become a good professor in university.*

(A 27-year-old female teacher with three years of experience)

The second question was about whether they encountered any particular strength or weakness in their students:

- *Yes. Most of the time they (students) have a skill in common which really helps (vocabulary, comprehension).*

*Sometimes lack of self-confidence (weakness).*

(A 23-year-old female teacher with three years of experience)

- *They are good at understanding the meaning of new words. In addition, they are good at the reading and grammar part. Yes, they usually have problems due to errors from their L1.*

(A 24-year-old male teacher with more than four years of experience)

Another question was about whether they believed their teaching would be useful for the students who wish to lead an academic and non-academic life in English speaking countries in the future:

- *We can't say that teaching can be useful only for an academic or non-academic life. Being in an English country or position is another experience. It makes their learning applicable. Also, teaching in Iran is the only way to start. I mean this way of learning makes them familiar with some basic and possible backgrounds. They're only ready to start. They have to try to achieve whatever they want. We only teach the first step. Both academic and non-academic lives are composed. So you have to learn and find about the usage of language.*

(A 21-year-old female teacher with 1/5 years of experience)

## Conclusion

Many of us, as teachers, believe that we are doing our job according to the way it is supposed to be done. But we are subconsciously ignoring the fact that some deep-rooted beliefs might be arch-enemies of the *correct* way of doing teaching. Our experience as learners, with culture, and with the issue of gender, and many other elements mold our beliefs about the best way of teaching. We might say to ourselves we learned English this way, so our learners *should* learn it the same way too.

As the research results, discussions, and quotations indicate, teacher cognition has a very important role in teacher education. Although the results of this study do not have generalizability about how teachers in our context think about the issues raised in general, they shed light on the fact that their ideas and conceptions about teaching influence their practices and that such conceptions are the result of certain factors such as their experiences as learners. Making teachers aware of their cognition and how it affects them in the long run might empower them to unlock some of their latent potential to invigorate their teaching ambience. There are many angles in approaching the concept of cognition, namely previous experience of the teachers as learners, their knowledge, their styles and strategies in learning and many other elements. Raising awareness about these issues might lead a willing teacher to choose a better path in his/her career.

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**Questionnaire**

Please read all the questions below carefully and tick the options which are in accordance with your beliefs.

Gender: female  male  age:----- years of teaching:-----

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1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
2. Some people have a special ability for learning foreign languages.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
4. People from my country are good at learning foreign languages.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
5. It is important to speak English with excellent pronunciation.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
6. It is necessary to know about English-speaking cultures in order to speak English.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
7. You shouldn't say anything in English until you can say it correctly.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
8. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
9. People who are good at mathematics or science are not good at learning a foreign language.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
10. It is best to learn English in an English-speaking country.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree

11. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning vocabulary.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
12. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
13. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
14. If beginning students are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly later on.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
15. The most important part of learning a foreign language is learning the grammar.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
16. It is easier to speak than understand a foreign language.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
17. It is important to practice with cassette tapes.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
18. Learning a foreign language is different than learning other academic subjects.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
19. People who speak more than one language are very intelligent.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
20. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
21. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.  
a) strongly agree    b) agree    c) neutral    d) disagree    e) strongly disagree
22. English is  
(a) a very difficult language                      (b) a difficult language  
(c) a language of medium difficulty    (d) an easy language    (e) a very easy language

*Teacher Cognition and Personal Beliefs...*

23. If someone spent one hour a day learning a language, how long would it take them to speak the language very well?

- (a) less than a year      (b) 1-2 years      (c) 3-5 years      (d) 5-10 years  
(e) You can't learn a language in 1 hour a day

1. What is the main purpose of your teaching? In other words, what is your aim of teaching?

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2. Which **teaching styles** do you tend to employ in your classes? (*circle many if applicable*)

- chalk and talk     distributing handouts     giving visual aids (e.g. OHT, PowerPoint)     introducing IT (e.g. computers, internet-learning)     discussion classes     debating classes     "discovery" technique (i.e. eliciting students' knowledge first)     others (specify):-----

3. Do you usually encounter any particular **strength** of your students (e.g. their attentiveness, desire to learn)?

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4. Have you experienced or do you usually encounter any particular **weakness** of your students, either linguistic or non-linguistic?

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5. In order to overcome some problems deriving from such weaknesses of your students, what kind of **strategies** do you use? (*circle many if applicable*)

- use of visual aids and handouts     modification or simplification of words  
 use of examples     verbal feedback (e.g. questioning students to check their comprehension of the lecture)     non-verbal feedback (e.g. from the look on students' faces, reactions)     empathizing (i.e. any emotional understanding or support to mitigate students' language difficulties)     others (specify):-----

6. Do you believe that your teaching will be useful for the students who wish to lead **academic** life in English-speaking countries in the future? **Yes / No**

**Why?** -----

7. Do you believe that your teaching will be useful for the students who wish to lead **non-academic** life in English-speaking countries in the future? **Yes / No**

**Why?** -----

Thank you for the time you allocated.