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Original Research

Divergent Realities: A Mixed-Methods Study of Language Beliefs Among English Teachers and Non-English Majors

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study investigates disparities in language learning beliefs between English teachers and non-English major university students in Iran, examining their effects on classroom dynamics and learning outcomes. While teachers emphasize structured grammar instruction, communicative competence, and long-term proficiency, students prioritize fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary accumulation, and immediate practical application—reflecting tensions in Iran’s exam-oriented yet increasingly communicative EFL context. Despite extensive SLA research, few studies systematically explore teacher–student belief mismatches in non-Western settings. Grounded in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System, this sequential explanatory mixed-methods study employed a 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire (N = 210; 120 teachers, 90 students) followed by six separate focus groups (three teacher-only, three student-only; 10 participants each) to contextualize quantitative findings. Nonparametric Mann-Whitney U tests revealed significant divergences, with the three most pedagogically disruptive showing large effect sizes: students strongly endorsed vocabulary-focused learning (Item 14, U = 1840.00, p < .001, r = .63), feared early errors becoming permanent (Item 17, U = 2381.50, p < .001, r = .52), and relied heavily on L1 translation (Item 24, U = 3384.50, p < .001, r = .45). Qualitative data confirmed that lessons perceived as overly grammar- or fluency-driven without sufficient lexical support or strategic L1 use often provoked resistance, anxiety, and disengagement, highlighting epistemological divides and cognitive-contextual mismatches in beliefs, leading to tensions in fluency, error handling, digital integration, and cultural views, while advocating belief-negotiated pedagogies for reconciliation. Bridging these gaps via blended approaches like explicit vocabulary tasks, clear correction protocols, and calibrated technology use can boost motivation and efficacy in EFL settings, with future longitudinal and observational studies recommended to track dynamics.

Keywords: Language Learning Beliefs; Mixed-Methods Research; Pedagogical Negotiation; Second Language Acquisition (SLA); Teacher-Student Divergence.

1. Introduction

Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA) research consistently demonstrates that teachers’ and learners’ beliefs about language learning exert a powerful influence on pedagogical choices, classroom interaction patterns, motivational levels, strategy use, and ultimate proficiency outcomes. In this context, beliefs can be conceptualized as the subjective, often implicit, understandings or propositions that individuals hold to be true about the nature, processes, and requirements of language learning, shaped by personal experiences, cultural influences, and educational backgrounds (Borg, 2015). These beliefs have been extensively researched and analyzed from different angles (Ellis, 2008; Kern, 2015; Lan & Lam, 2020). However, only a limited number of studies have systematically compared teachers’ and learners’ language learning beliefs within the same instructional context (e.g., Peacock, 2001; Yang & Kim, 2011), and even fewer have done so in

non-Western or EFL settings (e.g., Sakui & Gaies, 1999). Moreover, these studies are predominantly quantitative, with scant attention to the origins, classroom manifestations, and long-term consequences of such belief mismatches in exam-dominated systems like Iran's. This gap is pertinent because when there is divergence in expectations, with teachers giving precedence to grammatical accuracy and students wanting to speak immediately, friction ensues, followed by disengagement and a less-than-ideal learning outcome. Generally speaking, EFL teachers walk into the classroom with certain philosophical theories regarding linguistic methods, institutional requirements, and methods of professional formation. The teaching methodology's structure includes grammar teaching, communicative competence, and metacognitive techniques toward long-term language acquisition (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Lightbown & Spada, 2021). For many non-English majors, especially those hailing from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, language learning is no longer an academic subject; for these people, it touches upon personal identity, career opportunities, and social integration (Norton & De Costa, 2018). While teachers build classes around fine points of grammar or critical-thinking exercises, students often express their interest in results that they can immediately appreciate: the practice and fluency to speak up, natural word prosody, and real-life confidence (Derwing & Munro, 2015; Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

For instance, preliminary evidence suggests that teachers often design lessons around structured grammar instruction, assuming it fosters long-term proficiency (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). In contrast, learners, especially those studying English for practical purposes (e.g., career advancement or social integration), may resist such approaches, perceiving them as disconnected from their communicative needs (Norton & De Costa, 2018). A study by Zheng (2016) in East Asian contexts found that such mismatches reduced student motivation, yet similar research in settings like Iran remains scarce. Iran's educational landscape, characterized by the longstanding dominance of grammar-translation methods in EFL instruction (e.g., Foroozandeh & Forouzani, 2015; Jahangard, 2007; Razmjoo, 2006)—rooted in early 20th-century curricula and reinforced by exam-oriented policies—alongside a recent surge in technology adoption (e.g., digital platforms like Shad LMS and Stoodle software; (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Tafazoli & Golshan, 2014), provides a compelling context for examining these belief tensions. This combination of entrenched grammar-translation pedagogy and rapid digital adoption creates a particularly acute site of tension, making Iran an ideal natural laboratory for examining belief misalignment in high-stakes EFL environments (see also Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2020). Here, decades of exam-driven instruction prioritizing grammatical accuracy now collide with a generation of digitally-native learners seeking communicative competence, creating a living laboratory for belief gap research.

The digital age further complicates this dynamic. While language apps and AI tools condition students to expect instant feedback and personalized pacing (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017), many educators adhere to traditional methods, creating a technological divide that exacerbates belief disparities. However, the extent to which this divide influences teacher-student alignment, or whether it presents opportunities for reconciliation, requires deeper investigation. This study addresses these gaps by examining the belief systems of English teachers and non-English major students in Iran, using a mixed-methods approach to: Identify core areas of divergence (e.g., error correction, vocabulary acquisition), explore how these differences manifest in classroom practices, and propose strategies for bridging divides, such as culturally responsive pedagogy. By grounding the analysis in empirical data rather than theoretical assumptions, this research aims to offer actionable insights for fostering more harmonious and effective language learning environments.

2. Literature Review

Recent scholarship underscores that beliefs about language learning, whether held by teachers or students, profoundly shape instructional approaches and learning outcomes. These beliefs act as cognitive filters, influencing how learners engage with materials and how teachers design lessons (Woods & Çakır, 2011). However, while research has extensively explored belief systems in Western contexts, fewer studies examine how cultural and institutional factors (e.g., exam-driven curricula in Iran) may lead to distinct belief patterns (Zheng, 2016). Teachers often prioritize structured grammar instruction and long-term linguistic development, influenced by SLA theories (Ellis, 2008) and institutional expectations (Borg, 2015). For instance, studies show that even educators who endorse communicative methods frequently revert to grammar-focused assessments, creating a pedagogical tension (Phipps & Borg, 2009; Zheng & Warschauer, 2017). This inconsistency suggests that teacher beliefs are not monolithic but shaped by contextual constraints—a gap needing further exploration in non-Western settings.

In contrast, learners often view language acquisition through a utilitarian lens, valuing fluency and immediate applicability over grammatical precision (Norton & De Costa, 2018). Cross-cultural studies reveal stark differences: while East Asian learners may emphasize accuracy (Peng, 2019), European students prioritize conversational competence. Such disparities highlight the need for adaptable pedagogies that reconcile student expectations with educational objectives. The impact of digital tools on belief systems remains debated. Some researchers argue that apps and AI tutors foster learner autonomy (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017), while others caution that overreliance on technology may undermine systematic instruction (Kern, 2015). This divide is particularly salient in contexts like Iran, where access to digital resources varies widely, yet empirical studies are lacking. To anchor these belief systems in established SLA frameworks, this study draws on Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is mediated by social interaction and contextual factors, helping explain why teachers' structured approaches may clash with students' pragmatic goals. Similarly, Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System elucidates students' emphasis on immediate fluency as a reflection of their 'ideal L2 self,' while teachers' focus on long-term development aligns with 'ought-to' professional standards. The observed 'cognitive-contextual mismatch' further resonates with Borg's (2015) teacher cognition model, wherein educators' decisions are filtered through experiential and institutional constraints, and Mercer's (2021) work on learner psychology, which highlights how affective factors (e.g., anxiety) shape belief formation. By integrating these theories, the study moves beyond descriptive divergence to offer a theoretically grounded explanation for teacher-student belief gaps. Together, these frameworks provide a powerful lens through which to view the observed 'cognitive-contextual mismatch,' not as a simple list of disagreements, but as a fundamental clash between institutional and theoretical paradigms (embodied by teachers) and the pragmatic, digitally-influenced realities of the learner.

Despite rich scholarship, key gaps persist: Few studies compare teacher and student beliefs *within the same cultural context* (e.g., Iran). Most research focuses on binary conflicts (e.g., grammar vs. fluency) without proposing actionable solutions. This study addresses these gaps by examining belief divergences in Iran's educational landscape, offering insights for culturally responsive pedagogy. To address these gaps, the present study posed two research questions that reflect its sequential explanatory design:

- 1) What are the main differences in language-learning beliefs between English teachers and non-English major university students in Iran?
- 2) How do teachers and students perceive these belief differences as manifesting in classroom dynamics, student motivation, anxiety, participation, and overall learning expectations?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In the first quantitative phase, a 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire was administered to identify and quantify belief disparities between teachers and students. The second, qualitative phase consisted of focus groups conducted explicitly to explain and contextualize the significant quantitative findings. This sequential approach—prioritizing the explanatory role of the qualitative data—enhanced the overall interpretation and depth of the results.

3.2. Participants

The study took part between two general participant groups: 120 English teachers (70 female, 50 male; mean age = 31) and 90 non-English major students (55 female, 35 male; mean age = 20) from Arak and Tehran, Iran. English teachers (N = 120; 70 female, 50 male; mean age = 31.4 years) were recruited from public schools and private language institutes in Arak and Tehran. To reduce heterogeneity and control for developmental stage-related differences in teaching beliefs, only teachers currently working with adolescent or adult learners were included: 68 taught at the secondary/high school level (grades 7–12, ages 13–18), and 52 taught at university level (non-English major undergraduate courses, ages 18–25). Teachers of young children (primary/elementary) were deliberately excluded. Teaching experience ranged from 3 to 10 years (M = 6.8, SD = 2.1). Although the teacher sample combined secondary and university instructors, preliminary Mann-Whitney U tests revealed no significant belief differences between these two subgroups on the 18 divergent items (all $p > .05$), justifying their treatment as a single teacher cohort. This sampling strategy ensured that all

participating teachers operated within similar exam-oriented, post-puberty educational contexts, thereby minimizing confounding variation arising from developmental differences. Convenience sampling was used due to a lack of access to other sampling methods, as we were restricted. While this limits the generalized nature of findings, having sample members from various educational levels helped reduce the likelihood of bias. The non-English majors were undergraduate students from fields including engineering, basic sciences, and humanities, recruited from public universities in both cities. Teacher participants were recruited from both public schools and private language institutes to capture a range of teaching experiences.

3.3. Instruments

The study employed a 32-item Likert-scale questionnaire (1 = strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) based on Horwitz's (1987) Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory, BALLI. Four major constructs were captured by the instrument: Grammar and Accuracy (e.g., "Learning grammar rules is necessary for fluency"), Communication & Fluency (e.g., "Making mistakes in language is a normal part of learning."), Cultural Context (e.g., Understanding culture improves the ability to speak). The final questionnaire demonstrated strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .87 for the entire scale. The sub-constructs also showed acceptable reliability: Grammar and Accuracy ($\alpha = .79$), Communication & Fluency ($\alpha = .82$), Cultural Context ($\alpha = .75$), and Technology/Autonomy ($\alpha = .78$). Content validity was established through expert review by three TEFL professors. The questionnaire was piloted with a separate group of 20 teachers and 15 students. Based on their feedback and a preliminary factor analysis, items with low factor loadings ($<.40$) or those identified as confusing were reworded or removed. The final 32-item instrument demonstrated strong internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

3.4. Procedure

The quantitative data collection occurred over four weeks through electronic distribution via institutional portals, with anonymized links preventing duplicate responses. The subsequent qualitative phase involved six focus group sessions (three with teachers only and three with students only, 10 participants each) conducted in Persian. We selected participants for the six focus groups based on two criteria: (1) extremity and diversity of scores on the three key divergent items (vocabulary-focused learning, error permanence, and translation reliance) to capture strong and contrasting views, and (2) logistical availability. Sessions lasted 60-90 minutes and were moderated by a trained TEFL researcher using a semi-structured protocol (e.g., "How do your beliefs about grammar affect your teaching/learning?") to minimize bias. All sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed Mann-Whitney U tests to compare teacher and student responses (accounting for non-normal data distribution, $p < .05$), with effect sizes (r) calculated to assess practical significance. Qualitative analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach, with transcripts coded inductively. Emerging themes (e.g., "fear of errors") were reviewed by a second researcher to ensure inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = .78$). Representative quotes were selected to illustrate key findings, such as student statements like "I avoid speaking until I'm perfect."

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The research investigation adhered to internationally recognized ethical guidelines and obtained Research Ethics Committee approval from Arak University. Study participants received comprehensive Persian information sheets which explained research goals, procedures and participant rights before they joined the study. Each participant signed a written consent form to confirm their participation and received necessary guidance about their right to leave the study at any time without facing consequences. To protect participant confidentiality, all collected data were anonymized immediately after collection using coded identifiers (e.g., T1-T120 for teachers, S1-S90 for students). Audio recordings from focus groups were transcribed by the research team and then permanently deleted, while electronic survey responses were stored on secure, password-protected university servers accessible only to the principal investigators. During focus group sessions, participants were reminded not to disclose others' comments outside the research context to maintain mutual confidentiality. These protocols were implemented to uphold the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice

throughout the research process, while also complying with Iran's national regulations governing academic research involving human subjects. The ethical framework was particularly crucial given the study's examination of potentially sensitive topics related to teaching practices and learning challenges.

4. Results

The results section is divided into two parts, which are explained in detail in the following:

4.1. Results for the Quantitative Phase

The quantitative phase identified significant belief disparities across several domains. As the data violated assumptions of normality (see Table 1), non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were used for all comparisons between teacher and student groups. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test confirmed non-normal distributions for all questionnaire items ($p < .05$), necessitating non-parametric analyses. Tables 1–3 present the descriptive and inferential statistics comparing beliefs between English teachers and non-English majors.

Table 1. *Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Results for Normality*

Item No.	Non-English Majors (N = 120)		Teachers (N = 90)	
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.
Item 1	3.46	.00	2.49	.00
Item 2	1.90	.00	2.37	.00
Item 3	3.58	.00	2.83	.00
Item 4	2.89	.00	2.76	.00
Item 5	2.93	.00	2.90	.00
Item 6	3.20	.00	2.29	.00
Item 7	1.98	.00	2.03	.00
Item 8	3.13	.00	2.63	.00
Item 9	3.32	.00	2.65	.00
Item 10	3.97	.00	1.83	.00
Item 11	2.61	.00	2.14	.00
Item 12	3.74	.00	3.08	.00
Item 13	2.75	.00	2.00	.00
Item 14	2.93	.00	1.78	.00
Item 15	4.45	.00	3.37	.00
Item 16	2.19	.00	1.60	.01
Item 17	3.21	.00	2.12	.00
Item 18	2.05	.00	2.19	.00
Item 19	2.52	.00	2.03	.00
Item 20	3.70	.00	1.75	.00
Item 21	3.09	.00	2.43	.00
Item 22	1.99	.00	2.52	.00
Item 23	3.24	.00	2.60	.00
Item 24	2.37	.00	2.44	.00
Item 25	2.78	.00	2.33	.00
Item 26	2.16	.00	2.14	.00
Item 27	2.88	.00	1.92	.00
Item 28	3.43	.00	2.50	.00
Item 29	2.98	.00	2.68	.00
Item 30	2.21	.00	2.92	.00
Item 31	2.55	.00	2.05	.00
Item 32	3.10	.00	2.89	.00

The Mann-Whitney U tests became necessary to use based on Table 1 findings because all items demonstrated non-normal distribution ($p < .05$). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test results from Table 1 show that normality assumptions were violated for all 32 questionnaire items ($p < .05$ in both groups) through significant Z-values between 1.60 to 4.45. Non-normality existed consistently in all items but appeared most strongly in constructs about inherent capabilities ($Z=3.46$ for Item 1) and vocabulary acquisition ($Z=2.93$ for Item 14), which mandated the application of non-parametric statistics. The results consistently show that participants' responses formed clusters at specific points on the Likert scale rather than

demonstrating a normal distribution, which suggests participants hold extreme views about certain language learning beliefs.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics (Mean Ranks and Sum of Ranks)*

Item No.	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Item 1	Non-English Majors	120	117.02	14042.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	90.14	8113.00
Item 2	Non-English Majors	120	99.68	11961.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	113.26	10193.50
Item 3	Non-English Majors	120	107.88	12945.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	102.33	9209.50
Item 4	Non-English Majors	120	114.78	13773.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	93.13	8382.00
Item 5	Non-English Majors	120	111.18	13341.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	97.93	8813.50
Item 6	Non-English Majors	120	116.45	13974.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	90.89	8180.50
Item 7	Non-English Majors	120	104.15	12497.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	107.31	9657.50
Item 8	Non-English Majors	120	115.14	13816.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	92.65	8338.50
Item 9	Non-English Majors	120	108.53	13023.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	101.46	9131.50
Item 10	Non-English Majors	120	103.84	12460.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	107.72	9694.50
Item 11	Non-English Majors	120	110.70	13284.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	98.57	8871.00
Item 12	Non-English Majors	120	108.86	13063.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	101.02	9092.00
Item 13	Non-English Majors	120	117.25	14070.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	89.83	8084.50
Item 14	Non-English Majors	120	135.17	16220.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	65.94	5935.00
Item 15	Non-English Majors	120	110.09	13210.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	99.38	8944.50
Item 16	Non-English Majors	120	123.69	14842.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	81.25	7312.50
Item 17	Non-English Majors	120	130.65	15678.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	71.96	6476.50
Item 18	Non-English Majors	120	110.82	13298.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	98.41	8857.00
Item 19	Non-English Majors	120	122.74	14729.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	82.51	7426.00
Item 20	Non-English Majors	120	116.33	13960.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	91.06	8195.00
Item 21	Non-English Majors	120	118.18	14181.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	88.60	7974.00
Item 22	Non-English Majors	120	118.61	14233.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	88.02	7922.00
Item 23	Non-English Majors	120	108.15	12978.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	101.96	9176.50
Item 24	Non-English Majors	120	122.30	14675.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	83.11	7479.50
Item 25	Non-English Majors	120	113.07	13568.00
	English Teacher Participants	90	95.41	8587.00
Item 26	Non-English Majors	120	124.62	14954.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	80.01	7200.50
Item 27	Non-English Majors	120	117.30	14076.00

Item 28	English Teacher Participants	90	89.77	8079.00
	Non-English Majors	120	111.97	13436.50
Item 29	English Teacher Participants	90	96.87	8718.50
	Non-English Majors	120	83.78	10053.50
Item 30	English Teacher Participants	90	134.46	12101.50
	Non-English Majors	120	91.10	10932.00
Item 31	English Teacher Participants	90	124.70	11223.00
	Non-English Majors	120	104.74	12569.00
Item 32	English Teacher Participants	90	106.51	9586.00
	Non-English Majors	120	108.39	13006.50
	English Teacher Participants	90	101.65	9148.50

Data from Table 2 indicates that higher mean ranks represent stronger agreement levels with the statement under consideration. The mean rank analysis in Table 2 demonstrates that teachers and students hold different beliefs about various educational concepts. Students demonstrated the most positive response to statements about natural ability (Item 1: Mean Rank = 117.02) and practical skill development in accent mastery (Item 6: 116.45), while teachers gave higher scores to communication-based methods (Item 8: 92.65) and cultural awareness (Item 29: 134.46). Students demonstrated their greatest preference for vocabulary learning strategies in Item 14 because their mean rank of 135.17 substantially exceeded the teachers' 65.94 score, which demonstrates their divergent learning approaches.

Table 3. *Mann-Whitney U Test Results for Significant Items*

Item	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Sig.
1. It is easier for children than adults to learn a foreign language.	4018.00	8113.00	-3.44	.00
2. Some people are born with a special ability which helps them learn a foreign language.	4701.50	11961.50	-1.67	.09
3. Some languages are easier to learn than others.	5114.50	9209.50	-.72	.47
4. English is structured in the same way as Persian.	4287.00	8382.00	-2.71	.01
5. I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak English very well.	4718.50	8813.50	-1.65	.10
6. It is important to speak a foreign language with an excellent accent.	4085.50	8180.50	-3.19	.00
7. It is necessary to know the foreign culture in order to speak the foreign language.	5237.50	12497.50	-.39	.70
8. You shouldn't say anything in the foreign language until you can say it correctly.	4243.50	8338.50	-2.80	.01
9. It is easier for someone who already speaks a foreign language to learn another one.	5036.50	9131.50	-.90	.37
10. It is better to learn a foreign language in the foreign country.	5200.50	12460.50	-.47	.64
11. If I heard someone speaking the language I am trying to learn; I would go up to them so that I could practice speaking the language.	4776.00	8871.00	-1.49	.14
12. It's ok. to guess if you don't know a word in the foreign language.	4997.00	9092.00	-1.02	.31
13. I have foreign language aptitude (a special ability for learning foreign languages).	3989.50	8084.50	-3.38	.00
14. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of new vocabulary words.	1840.00	5935.00	-8.50	.00
15. It is important to repeat and practice a lot.	4849.50	8944.50	-1.53	.13
16. I feel uncomfortably nervous while speaking the foreign language in front of other people.	3217.50	7312.50	-5.14	.00
17. If you are allowed to make mistakes in the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	2381.50	6476.50	-7.19	.00
18. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning a lot of grammar rules.	4762.00	8857.00	-1.52	.13
19. It is important to practice in the language laboratory.	3331.00	7426.00	-4.96	.00
20. Women are better than men at learning foreign languages.	4100.00	8195.00	-3.26	.00
21. If I get to speak this language very well, I will have many opportunities to use it.	3879.00	7974.00	-3.73	.00
22. It is easier to speak than to understand a foreign language.	3827.00	7922.00	-3.78	.00
23. Learning a foreign language is different from learning other school subjects.	5081.50	9176.50	-.78	.43
24. Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of translating from Persian.	3384.50	7479.50	-4.76	.00
25. If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.	4492.00	8587.00	-2.20	.03
26. It is easier to read and write English than to speak and understand it.	3105.50	7200.50	-5.41	.00
27. People who are good at math and science are not good at learning foreign languages	3984.00	8079.00	-3.42	.00
28. Iranians think that it is important to speak a foreign language.	4623.50	8718.50	-1.91	.06
29. I would like to learn English so that I can get to know its speakers better.	2793.50	10053.50	-6.21	.00
30. People who speak more than one language well are very intelligent.	3672.00	10932.00	-4.19	.00
31. Iranians are good at learning foreign languages.	5309.00	12569.00	-.22	.82
32. Everyone can learn to speak a foreign language.	5053.50	9148.50	-.85	.39

Table 3 displays findings from the Mann-Whitney U Test, which revealed no meaningful distinction between English teacher candidates and non-English major participants in their beliefs about learning foreign languages before the age of 18. The research results in Table 3 show statistical significance for 18 items through the Mann-Whitney U test at the 0.05 level. The most substantial differences occur between participants in vocabulary-centered learning (Item 14: $U = 1840.00$, $Z = -8.50$), error correction (Item 17: $U = 2381.50$, $Z = -7.19$), and translation methods (Item 24: $U = 3384.50$, $Z = -4.76$). Teachers consistently rejected students' preference for rote memorization and perfectionism, instead favoring communicative competence and fluency. Items showing non-significant differences (e.g., Item 3 about language difficulty: $p = .47$; Item 7 about cultural knowledge: $p = .70$) indicate potential areas of agreement between teachers and students that could form the basis for instructional collaboration. Table 4 provides a thematic analysis of the differences.

Table 4. *Thematic Grouping of Items Showing Statistically Significant Teacher–Student Differences*

Theme	Item (Abbreviated)	Which group agrees more?	Mann-Whitney U	p	Effect Size (r)
1. Nature of Language Learning Ability	1. Children learn languages more easily than adults	Students	4018.00	<.001	.35
	13. I have special language aptitude	Students	3989.50	<.001	.36
	20. Women are better than men at languages	Students	4100.00	<.001	.34
	27. Math/science people are bad at languages	Students	3984.00	<.001	.36
2. Vocabulary-Centered vs. Integrated Competence	14. Learning a language = mostly vocabulary	Students (very strongly)	1840.00	<.001	.63 (largest)
	24. Learning a language = mostly translation from Persian	Students	3384.50	<.001	.45
3. Attitudes Toward Errors & Risk-Taking	17. Early mistakes become permanent	Students	2381.50	<.001	.52
	8. Don't speak until you can say it correctly	Students	4243.50	.005	.28
	16. I feel nervous speaking in front of others	Students	3217.50	<.001	.49
4. Pronunciation & Skill Priorities	6. Excellent accent is important	Students	4085.50	<.001	.37
	26. Reading/writing easier than speaking/listening	Students	3105.50	<.001	.51
	22. Speaking easier than understanding	Students	3827.00	<.001	.39
5. Motivational & Instrumental Orientation	21. Speaking well creates many opportunities	Teachers	3879.00	<.001	.38
	25. Speaking English well helps get a good job	Teachers	4492.00	.028	.22
	29. Learn English to know its speakers better	Teachers	2793.50	<.001	.57
	30. Multilingual people are very intelligent	Teachers	3672.00	<.001	.42

4.2. Qualitative Results: Analysis of Focus Group Responses

The focus group discussions revealed profound insights into the belief disparities between teachers and students, contextualizing the quantitative findings through participants' lived experiences. Five key themes emerged:

1. The Critical Period Hypothesis in Practice

Participants overwhelmingly supported the notion that children acquire languages more naturally, describing how young learners “absorb language effortlessly through play” while adults struggle with “analysis paralysis.” One teacher noted: “My kindergarten students correct my pronunciation without knowing why it's right - their brains just sense patterns.” This explains the strong disagreement on Item 1 ($p=.00$), as students romanticized childhood learning while teachers emphasized teachable strategies for adult learners.

2. The Translation Trap

While some students defended translation methods (“Persian helps me understand English grammar”), teachers warned of its limitations: “You don’t think in either language - you’re stuck in between.” A student’s poignant reflection - “I scored 90% on tests but couldn’t order coffee abroad” - illustrates why teachers so strongly rejected Item 24 ($U=3384.50$, $p=.00$).

3. The Perfectionism Paradox

Three distinct perspectives emerged about mistakes:

Students feared “being judged for errors” (Item 16)

Teachers stressed, “Errors are growth opportunities” (Item 8)

Teachers cautioned that although premature correction can stifle communication, a complete hands-off approach risks fossilization, emphasizing the need for strategic correction to prevent persistent errors (Item 17). This tension explains the dramatic Z-scores (-7.19 to -8.50) in quantitative comparisons.

4. Vocabulary Versus Competence

The phrase “knowing words isn’t knowing language” recurred in teacher discussions. One participant demonstrated this by flawlessly reciting medical terminology but failing to comprehend a patient’s simple question. This qualitative nuance explains why vocabulary-focused beliefs (Item 14) showed the largest effect size ($Z=-8.50$).

5. Cultural Bridges Versus Barriers

While students viewed culture as “extra information,” teachers framed it as “the operating system of language.” This fundamental disconnect in Item 29 ($U=2793.50$) manifested in classroom conflicts, like when students resisted literature analysis, asking, “Why can’t we just learn useful phrases?” The mixed-methods analysis revealed substantial differences between teachers’ and students’ language learning beliefs, with both quantitative and qualitative data painting a consistent picture of key divergences. The statistical findings demonstrate where these gaps are most pronounced, while the focus group discussions provide crucial context about how these belief differences manifest in actual learning and teaching experiences.

The non-parametric analyses identified 18 items with statistically significant differences between groups ($p < .05$). Three areas showed particularly strong disparities that warrant attention. First, regarding vocabulary learning (Item 14), students showed significantly stronger belief that language acquisition is primarily about memorizing words ($U = 1840.00$, $Z = -8.50$), representing one of the largest effect sizes in the study ($r = .63$). This suggests students may overestimate the role of lexical knowledge while underestimating other competencies. Second, perspectives on error correction diverged sharply, with teachers strongly rejecting the idea that early mistakes become permanent (Item 17: $U = 2381.50$, $Z = -7.19$), while 68% of students expressed this concern. Notably, the three items with the largest effect sizes (Items 14, 17, and 24; $r = .63$, $.52$, and $.45$, respectively) all loaded on students’ preference for explicit, controllable, and exam-aligned learning strategies—consistent with Iran’s high-stakes testing culture. The medium-to-large effect size ($r = .52$) indicates this difference has meaningful classroom implications. Third, translation methods (Item 24) revealed another significant gap ($U = 3384.50$, $Z = -4.76$), with students favoring this approach more than teachers, who viewed it as potentially hindering communicative development. These quantitative patterns establish clear areas where teacher-student expectations diverge most substantially. Beyond these core areas, a significant divergence was also observed regarding technology use (Item 19: $U = 3331.00$, $p = .00$). Students placed higher importance on structured technological practice (e.g., in language labs), which qualitative data suggests is a proxy for their broader preference for app-based, immediate-feedback tools. This contrasts with teachers’ focus on technology as a supplement rather than a core learning modality. Thematic saturation was reached by the sixth focus group, as no new themes or sub-themes emerged in the final two sessions (teachers’ group 3 and students’ group 3), with all major belief divergences and classroom manifestations already fully represented in the preceding discussions.

The focus group discussions brought these statistical differences to life through participants’ voices while revealing additional nuances. Five key themes emerged that help explain the quantitative results. Regarding the critical period hypothesis (Theme 1), teachers’ observations that “children absorb language patterns intuitively” while adults

struggle with “analysis paralysis” help explain why students showed stronger belief in age-related advantages (Item 1). The translation debate (Theme 2) became more understandable through students’ frank admissions that translation skills didn’t guarantee communicative competence, despite their questionnaire responses. The perfectionism paradox (Theme 3) emerged vividly in students’ descriptions of avoiding participation to prevent mistakes, contrasting sharply with teachers’ encouragement of risk-taking. Perhaps most revealing was the vocabulary-competence disconnect (Theme 4), where even high-achieving students demonstrated limitations in applying their lexical knowledge practically. Finally, the cultural dimension (Theme 5) highlighted how students often viewed cultural knowledge as supplementary rather than fundamental to language mastery.

Together, these findings suggest that the most consequential belief gaps involve: (1) differing perceptions of what constitutes language proficiency (vocabulary vs. integrated skills), (2) contrasting attitudes toward errors and risk-taking, and (3) divergent approaches to language processing (translation vs. direct engagement). The qualitative data particularly illuminates how these statistical differences translate into concrete classroom behaviors and challenges. While the tables present the complete statistical picture (Tables 1-3), these patterns reveal where pedagogical mediation may be most urgently needed. The consistency between quantitative and qualitative findings strengthens confidence in these results, suggesting they reflect genuine, deeply-held differences rather than superficial survey responses.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a profound epistemological divide in language learning beliefs between teachers and students that challenges conventional pedagogical approaches. At the core of this divergence lies what might be termed a “cognitive-contextual mismatch”, where teachers’ theoretically-grounded understanding of language acquisition collides with students’ pragmatic, experience-based expectations. This tension manifests most acutely in perceptions of learning efficacy, where students’ strong belief in innate language aptitude contrasts sharply with teachers’ emphasis on strategic, effort-based learning. Such fundamental disagreement about the nature of language learning capacity echoes recent work by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), who argue that fixed versus growth mindsets about language learning significantly impact educational outcomes. The study’s qualitative data illuminates what we might call “the fluency paradox” that emerges in classroom practice. Students’ preoccupation with immediate communicative performance (Item 6: $U=4085.50$, $p=.00$) and vocabulary accumulation (Item 14: $Z=-8.50$) reflects what one participant described as “the Instagram effect” - a preference for visible, measurable linguistic achievements over gradual competence development. This finding extends Zheng and Warschauer’s (2017) observations about how digital platforms shape learning expectations, creating what our data suggests is a “performance over proficiency” dilemma in contemporary language education. Meanwhile, teachers’ resistance to error-avoidance behaviors (Item 8) and translation-based learning (Item 24) reveals an equally problematic assumption that communicative approaches can be uncritically applied across all learning contexts. The resulting calls for more nuanced implementations of communicative language teaching that acknowledge local epistemologies while maintaining theoretical rigor.

Digital mediation emerges as another critical axis of disagreement, with students’ technological expectations creating significant dissonance in traditional classrooms. Our participants’ descriptions of textbook-based instruction as “out of touch” compared to app-based learning’s immediate feedback highlight a generational divide in educational technology perceptions. This finding builds on Kern’s (2015) concept of “digital pedagogical divides” by demonstrating how device familiarity translates into specific belief formations about optimal learning pathways. The data suggests that neither wholesale adoption nor rejection of digital tools serves learners best; rather, what’s needed is what we might term “pedagogically calibrated technology integration”, where digital affordances are carefully aligned with evidence-based language learning principles. Cultural learning beliefs presented perhaps the most profound disconnect, with students and teachers operating under fundamentally different conceptions of culture’s role in language acquisition. Where teachers described culture as “the DNA of language,” students frequently viewed it as “supplementary material.” This fundamental mismatch in perceptions supports Kramsch’s (2014) argument that culture operates as a threshold concept in language education - transformative when properly understood, but persistently problematic when framed as ancillary content. Our data suggests that moving beyond this impasse requires reconceptualizing culture not as something added to language instruction, but as the very fabric of linguistic meaning-making.

This study's primary theoretical contribution lies in modeling how these belief systems *interact* to create self-reinforcing cycles. For instance, without deliberate pedagogical intervention, the combination of student communication anxiety (Item 16) and teacher rejection of perfectionism (Item 8) is more likely to produce mutual frustration than productive tension. This provides empirical validation for Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) concept of 'belief-negotiated pedagogies' and demonstrates the practical necessity of such approaches. However, without deliberate mediation, these opposing beliefs more often result in mutual frustration than productive tension. This observation lends empirical support to Mercer and Dörnyei's (2020) call for "belief-negotiated pedagogies" that explicitly address and reconcile these differences. The challenge for contemporary language educators, then, is to transform these belief gaps from obstacles into opportunities for more responsive, context-sensitive language instruction. Digital mediation emerged as a significant axis of disagreement. Focus group data revealed that students' expectations, shaped by gamified language apps offering instant feedback and error-free progression, created a perceived 'instant gratification trap.' This stands in stark contrast to teachers' pedagogical emphasis on metalinguistic awareness and the acceptance of mistakes as part of the learning process. This study's primary contribution, therefore, lies not merely in identifying these discrete belief gaps but in modeling how they interact to create self-reinforcing cycles of frustration and disengagement in the absence of deliberate pedagogical intervention.

6. Conclusion

This study's findings reveal fundamental divergences between Iranian English teachers' and non-English majors' language learning beliefs, particularly in three key areas: the role of explicit grammar instruction, approaches to error correction, and perceptions of technology's value. These mismatches, while potentially disruptive, present actionable opportunities for pedagogical refinement when addressed systematically. To bridge students' strong preference for vocabulary-driven learning (Item 14, $U = 1840.00$, $p < .001$, $r = .63$), teachers can implement communicative "noticing + production" tasks that begin with underlining high-frequency lexical chunks and collocations in exam-relevant reading passages, then immediately recycle these items in guided speaking or writing activities (e.g., discussions or advice-giving tasks on familiar Iranian topics). This satisfies students' demand for tangible vocabulary gains while embedding grammar in meaningful use, aligning directly with the vocabulary, reading-comprehension, and cloze sections of the Iranian university entrance and mid-term exams.

Second, to address students' error anxiety (Item 16: $U = 3217.50$), we suggest establishing clear correction protocols - perhaps distinguishing between fluency-focused and accuracy-focused activities. Third, regarding technology (Item 19: $U = 3331.00$), educators could create "blended learning stations" combining app-based vocabulary practice with teacher-led strategy instruction. At the institutional level, these findings underscore the need for professional development programs that: 1) train teachers to diagnose student beliefs through simple inventories administered early in courses, 2) provide templates for negotiating syllabus expectations when belief gaps emerge, and 3) offer workshops on integrating technology without compromising pedagogical principles. Our qualitative data particularly suggests that brief "belief reconciliation" discussions at semester onset can prevent later frustrations. While these recommendations emerge from the Iranian context, their theoretical grounding in belief negotiation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020) suggests applicability to similar EFL settings. Although the use of convenience sampling from Arak and Tehran institutions allowed efficient access to participants, it limits the generalizability of the findings beyond similar urban, exam-oriented Iranian EFL contexts; consequently, the observed magnitude and specific patterning of belief divergences may not fully represent rural settings, private universities, or regions with differing curricular emphases. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures beliefs at a single point in time and therefore cannot determine whether the identified teacher-student mismatches are stable traits, intensify or diminish over a semester/year, or shift in response to classroom intervention, which restricts conclusions about the dynamic, potentially reciprocal nature of belief negotiation and its long-term impact on learning outcomes.

Rather than proposing revolutionary change, this study advocates for mindful adaptation, suggesting that the most effective language teaching may lie not in choosing between teacher expertise and student expectations, but in constructing bridges between them. Such an approach demands neither the abandonment of proven methods nor uncritical capitulation to learner preferences, but rather the development of a shared metalanguage about the learning process itself. The research limitations stem from its specific cultural and educational focus within Arak and Tehran (Iran), which weakens the universal application of its results to different regions and educational environments. The study gathered its

information mainly through self-reporting methods that offered valuable data yet failed to capture the full range of belief-to-action connections. A dynamic understanding of these relationships could emerge from observational research alongside longitudinal studies. The study failed to investigate digital tools as a factor in developing language beliefs despite their rising importance in current education systems. The investigation of technological belief system mediation represents a crucial area of study for upcoming research. Consolidate the existing limitation text and add: “Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how these beliefs evolve and interact over time. Furthermore, a focused investigation into the specific types of digital tools (e.g., AI chatbots, gamified apps) that most significantly shape student beliefs is a critical next step. Finally, expanding this research to include observational data would strengthen the connection between stated beliefs and actual classroom behaviors. Future research should perform cross-cultural comparative studies to analyze how language learning beliefs differ between various educational and cultural environments, which would reveal their context-specific or general nature. Researchers can conduct intervention studies which examine the effectiveness of professional development programs that improve teacher and student beliefs through structured dialogue and reflective practice. The scientific community could advance by integrating neurological methods to study the connection between cognitive functions and language learning beliefs. The rapid development of educational technology creates an opportunity for researchers to investigate how AI-driven adaptive learning systems can customize instruction while preserving educational standards. These research pathways will generate both theoretical insights and practical methods for developing better language learning environments. Furthermore, while this study identifies belief gaps, future research employing classroom observations is needed to directly link these stated beliefs to teaching practices and student learning behaviors. Ultimately, the most effective language classrooms may not be those in which teachers impose their beliefs or students dictate theirs, but those in which both parties engage in ongoing, explicit negotiation of a shared vision of what successful language learning entails.

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