Research Paper

EFL Teachers' Perception of Using Stylistic Imitation in EFL Classes: Benefits and the Challenges

Arash Dehghanian[1], Seyyed Hassan Seyyedrezaei[2]*, Omid Mazandarani[3], Ghasem Barani[4]

[1] Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

[2]* Assistant Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

[3] Assistant Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

[4] Assistant Professor, Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran

ABSTRACT

Writing always plays an essential part in learning languages, mostly due to the close connections it bears to speaking and reading development. Nevertheless, next to speaking and reading, writing is comparatively less attended to. This paper is an attempt to look into the potential stylistic imitation holds in learning how to write as well as how this technic is perceived by EFL teachers. Action research offers an invaluable chance to delve into the real-life issues teachers deal with on a daily basis. In-service teachers attending a writing course took part in this study to experience first-hand how it feels to use imitation in class to teach writing. They were first presented with a model paragraph and asked to imitate it, first closely sticking to the style of the writer, then freely making changes to the wording and structure as they see fit. Lastly, they were asked to reflect upon the experience. It was revealed that most teachers believed stylistic imitation can benefit learners and they intend to practice it in their classes. They seem to believe stylistic imitation can be of extraordinary help to novice learners in their classes in that it can alleviate the burden they feel trying to master writing. However, a few argued against it stating concerns about voices getting lost and styles getting killed. The results from the present inquiry can raise awareness of the way imitation, stylistic imitation to be more specific, can find its way back into the classroom, which can help material developers reconsider the role it can play in teaching writing. They can now reconsider the role both literature and imitation can play in reinforcing writing instruction in English classes. They now can incorporate some carefully selected works of literature to be introduced into class and add to the excitement and productivity of English classes. There is a great number of great authors as well as great works of art waiting to enter language classes, which can make students more interested in both English literature and language, vastly affecting the learning outcomes.

Keywords: Imitation; Modeling; Stylistic imitation; Social cognitive theory

INTRODUCTION

Learning by observation in human beings, an ever-present method since the dawn of history justifies employing imitation in learning; i.e., it has always benefitted beginners via facilitating their way into the intended craft.

Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory holds that young human beings have the capability to imitate events that are beyond their immediate sensory field making their way towards the total mastery in small steps. Similarly, Snow (1997) maintains that children

are capable to learn a great deal through imitating peers, older children and adults around. Also, Douglas Brown explains how infants master language learning via solely responding to phonological code, known as surface structure imitation, and internalizing the semantic code, the fact that those sounds bear meaning, a process called structure imitation.

Furthermore, Bartholomae (1986) contends that the act of becoming situated in an established discourse with its own specific guidelines justifies the use of imitation over invention and discovery. He believes that being welcomed in a field of knowledge requires a certain extent of mastery upon the jargon and the discourse which would take too long if it were not for imitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Imitation

Hamad, Metwally, & Alfaruque (2019) argue that using YouTube videos and Listening Audio Tracks Imitation (YATI) leads to improvement in EFL learners' speaking skills. They believe that imitating authentic language from real life videos and audios can help develop fluency and pronunciation. Similarly, Edmiston et al. (2018) contends that spoken words emerge when children imitate what they hear around, and across time, the imitated sounds become more stable and word-like.

In the same vein, Lin (2017) proposes some optimizing strategies to introduce sentence imitation in primary schools in China. He seems to believe that language is a meme, meaning it must be imitated to be learned; from input (assimilation) to intake (retention) to output (transmission). Here he roots for close reproduction of the target sentence. He believes watching and following the model can bear optimum outcomes. Also, Zhou and Guo (2016) demonstrated that undergraduate students coming from American and Chinese cultures take advantage of imitations when trying to learn. They found that most undergraduate students believed imitations have positively affected their learning.

Similarly, Joyce and Lundberg (2013) name a student who shared the experiences of copying to learn. Using imitation, he was able to take the lessons he noticed and absorbed from his copying. He also managed to apply it to all sorts of writing, which, in some cases even outperformed some of the successful graduates of ELPP (English Language Preparatory Program). He, they carry on, held a positive attitude towards what he is doing to learn. Also, Brinkman (2010) assigned creative imitations in his undergraduate literature classrooms which, he maintains, has improved students' understanding of and interest in literary genre and form.

Ghazi-Saidi and Ansaldo (2017) set out an inquiry to delve into the impact of verbal repetition and imitation on network configuration. Integration changes within and between the cognitive control and language networks were studied, in a pair of linguistically close languages, Spanish and French. 12 native Spanish-speaking (L1) adults, and 12 native Persian-speaking adults learned 130 new French (L2) words, through a computerized audiovisual repetition and imitation program. It was revealed that learning L2 words through repetition induces neuroplasticity at the network level. Specifically, L2 word learners showed increased network integration after 3 weeks of training, with both close and distant language pairs. Moreover, higher network integration was observed in the learners with the close language pair, suggesting that repetition effects on network configuration vary as a function of task complexity.

In the same way, Cotter and Schinckel (2014) agree that imitation proves beneficial as it comes to mastering not only pronunciation but such aspects as tone, intonation and rhythm. Besides, they seem to believe that more advanced speakers may use repetition or imitation as a tool to try and achieve a near-native proficiency in their speech. Likewise, mastering the alphabet is one more example of how great of an aid imitation is to children s learning. The early writing, also, demonstrates the vitality of imitation in that it is ever present as they try to string the letters together

following the samples provided by the instructors (Snow, 1997).

Nguyen and Delvaux (2016) looked into the role of imitation in modern speech and language. They review the evidence provided by experimental and modeling studies for the potential role of imitation in the emergence and evolution of phonological systems. The findings revealed that imitation of speech sounds is a universal, manifold phenomenon in speech playing a major role in language development, second language acquisition, conversational interactions and language variation and change. Moreover, turning to the role imitation is presumed to play in the emergence of phonological systems, they discovered that there is convincing evidence pointing to the fact that imitation is selective, compositional, and may lead to innovation and change.

Couzijn & Rijlaarsdam (2000) also compared the more conventional learning via doing with learning via observing. They revealed that observational learning proved more productive since the subjects were more willing to transfer their knowledge to reading tasks. Shields (2007) analyzed the style and the stylistic techniques in Dante s Inferno and Chaucer s Canterbury Tales. The students were given a chance to produce narrative following the same style. He found out that given specific criteria, students find it far more convenient to both initiate the narrative and come up with creative ways to produce their own piece.

Stylistic Imitation

Regarding stylistic imitation, Geist (2004) is of the belief that it is more a matter of gaining insight into possibilities than trying to write the same exact way the model has. This way, he proceeds, imitating the style of some model provides a preliminary step to independent learning rather than strictly sticking to the model, hence, crippling the learner in their attempts to master writing. Likewise, Stodola (2013) holds that stylistic imitation is not only concerned with how to write but enables the learners to develop their own style. He argues that through providing the learner with a model, stylistic imitation illustrates how it is done.

Similarly, Liang (2019) holds that due to insufficient knowledge and practice, those learning English as a foreign language face difficulty with the rules of writing in English. This, he argues, explains why stylistic imitation can prove productive in developing writing proficiency. Finally, Jones and Freeman (2003) suggest teachers should be repeating some activities that lead to L2 writers finding new voices through close and free stylistic imitation.

Reeves and Liang (2019) argue that stylistic imitation can bridge grammar and meaning in English writing classes. They agree that unless learners see what they look like, they keep failing to write sentences and paragraphs. They demonstrate how to do stylistic imitation using excerpts from J. K. Rowling and Katherine Anne Porter, as well as Lakota Memoirist, Delphine Redshirt. To them, style is practical; i.e., it provides writers tools for crafting sentences and paragraphs. Twomey (2003) points out that using imitation exercises, models, can benefit beginner writers. She believes that being starters, the first year students are easily confused by unclear instruction and shortage of exposure. Hence, presenting well established passages from favorite authors can truly lessen the burden.

Similarly, Mitchell and McGee (2011) argue that looking at a text and analyzing what the writer does is a far more productive way of mastering writing. They believe that given a chance to go through the model to unearth how the writer has put it together raises awareness of the ways writing in English works. Also, Liang (2019) maintains that stylistic imitation is capable of bringing together grammar and meaning in English writing classes. This could benefit the learners in that they mostly know the content and the structure but not together. Finally, Loux (1987) maintains that exposure to great writers can rise literature students to the level of a writer; i.e., help them internalize matters of style they may find dull to discuss: diction, sentence structure, parallelism and repetition. So, there seems to be adequate theoretical ground to support the introduction of stylistic imitation into language classes.

Liang (2019) aimed to investigate the productivity of stylistic imitation to teach writing. He found out that imitating a famous writer can prove quite effective in familiarizing learners with English writing patterns. They saw the model and tried to follow it, and they learned from it. It seems that the model has proved effective in presenting how good writing is done so they can, quite effortlessly learn to do it themselves. This is why the participants found this to be a positive, helpful experience which they planned on using to teach writing in their very own classes. There were a number of concerns, but the attitudes were mostly positive.

Also, Tager-Flusberg and Calkins (1990), investigating the imitation of organizational and sentence patterns, revealed that when imitation can, in fact, be liberating. It was concluded that imitation acts as a bridge from acquiring the stylistic features of the model to developing an autonomous style of one's own.

Theoretical framework

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) was first started as Social LearningTheory (SLT) in the 1960s by Albert Bandura. SCT revolves around people watching and learning from a model, either interpersonal or media sources. It holds that learning occurs at a faster pace when the beginner has a chance to see things in action and follow in the same footsteps rather than being merely told about them. Likewise, Green and Peil (2009) hold that learning behaviors through observing others replaces the need for direct instruction.

This process involves learning the knowledge through observing those who have mastered the craft so they can flawlessly demonstrate how it is done. SCT holds that imitation bears better results when the learner identifies himself with the master and displays high levels of self-efficacy; i.e., the extent to which an individual believes they can master the craft (Bandura ,2005). Besides, Bandura (1989) contends that cognitive and social development would be seriously harmed, if not laborious and slow were knowledge and skills only acquired via direct experience.

Modeling

Holland & Kobasigawa (1980, in Salisu and Ransom, 2014), define modeling as the process of learning new information and skills through observing a masterful model rather than receiving direct instruction. Also, according to Bandura, modeling promises the most efficient way of gaining knowledge or learning skills (1986). This kind of observation bestows a chance to see the rules required to properly function around others. Furthermore, Schunk (1991) believes that modeling is more effective than direct instruction or step-by-step instruction. He holds that it offers better results in shorter time. In short, learning by doing is quite prevalent in language education despite arguments against its effectiveness. Through observing, their cognitive power is associated with a faultless model in a social setting. As they observe the writer do it, they form a mental picture of how the task is done, thus, alleviating the confusion and producing better results.

Research Questions

Q1. What are the benefits and challenges of using stylistic imitation to teach writing in EFL classes, viewed from the teachers' eyes?

Q2. Does stylistic imitation help with learning style in English classes?

METHODOLOGY
Design

The present inquiry is an attempt to explore the use of stylistic imitation in class and the participants were in-service teachers who practice the technique as students. Furthermore, this qualitative investigation, via delving into the subjects' experience of practicing the stylistic imitation, tries to find the meaning of the stylistic imitation which has on any the participants.

Qualitative research seems to fit the current inquiry in that, giving the participants a chance to freely delve into their thoughts and views, it generates an opportunity for the researcher to come back with rich insights that can actually makes things better in class.

Table 1
Description of participants by degree and years of experience

Participants	Age		Degree		Years of Experience	
	-30	+30	BA	MA	-5	+5
Female	5	2	4	3	3	4
Male	2	5	6	1	1	6
Total	7	7	10	4	4	10

Participants

Fourteen English instructors teaching in Gooyesh Language Institute in Shahroud, both female and male, agreed to participate in the present inquiry, to be introduced to and practice grammar based stylistic imitation. They were then asked to reflect on their own experience and explain their personal views towards stylistic imitation.

Instrumentation

The researcher asked the participants to write a paragraph at the beginning. He, then, presented a model paragraph, an excerpt from Kate Chopin s "Awakening" chosen for its style and the target syntactic structure, i.e., participial phrases and adjectives. The reason for choosing a world- renown author is twofold. First, a well-established writer can prove a totally reliable source to bank on, thus enticing the participants to show full dedication.

Also, the well-developed style of a great author has a lot to offer, which means it can exert the impact the researcher is hoping for. He presented them with a chance to read and analyze the model and to produce their own two paragraphs following the model, in both close and free fashion.

Reading and rereading the respondents' accounts carefully, the researcher used thick description procedures to produce a record of subjective explanations and meanings provided by the people engaged in the behaviors. Delving into the data, the researcher tried to discover the patterns so they can be more manageable for further analysis.

Procedure

This research gave the respondents a chance for the stylistic imitation of a well-written model. First, the participants had some time with the model to read and analyze it so they get familiar with the style, wording as well as the structures employed by the original author.

Close imitation of the model arrived next to be followed by free imitation; from the spirit of the page, they produced a passage following the patterns set by the model, only this time they could, feeling the need, make changes so the new paragraph feels like their own. Finally, they were asked to write a paragraph to share views on stylistic imitation as a method to teach writing and to comment on the benefits and challenges of stylistic imitation in classes.

RESULTS

Research Question One

What are the challenges and the advantages viewed by the teachers?

Stylistic imitation seems to have proved beneficial in 8 cases out of the 14 participants in the study.

To begin with, they contend that being exposed to a perfect model tells one how to word their own piece. This is especially true about the less proficient in that it shows them how to write a paragraph. Similarly, they seem to believe that seeing how an established author is doing it is quite illuminating.

Writing is a complicated task and a well-established model, it is argued, has a lot to learn from to facilitate it. Finally, it is an enjoyable experience basing one's writing on an authentic piece from a world-renown author.

Although called imitation, they argue, it still gives one adequate opportunity to create a unique story using the framework given. In one case, an independent writer owning his unaffected, simply put together language seems using more of a combination of his style and that of the model; even though he has tried to remain unaffected, some alterations arising

from the model are clearly visible proving that employing models can influence style of writing.

They seem to believe that if done sufficiently, this technic is highly capable of producing results, that is helping the beginners find their own voice. Finally, it is seen as a chance to raise awareness of how language works; i.e., seeing language at actual writer s disposal elucidates how English language takes advantage of all it has, words and structures, to convey the meanings intended.

However, it is argued, by some, that trying to stick to the model deprives one of the chances to develop their own piece freely. They believed it takes away one's chances of writing independently and freely.

In one case, the participant preserved the content except for one replacement bringing about some semantic change, which indicates his effort to keep his own voice. Likewise, the missing participial clause also indicates his insistence on staying loyal to his own style.

Furthermore, stylistic imitation seemed even detrimental in one case; an average but confident writer with a good grasp on lexicon has gone missing in the wake of making contact with the model; in her efforts to remain faithful to the style, she appears to have forgotten about her own voice. It seems she has lost sight of why she is writing, which could be a case against stylistic imitation. Hence, the teacher employing the technic needs to be diligent and carefully planned.

In the same vein, another one seems to have given her style up for the sake of preserving the one she is exposed to, meaning that employing a model can exert mixed effects on writing styles in classes. In yet another case, her first piece demonstrates her beyond average mastery upon English structure. Nonetheless, all her efforts is then shifted to sticking to the style employed in the model totally abandoning hers, an unfortunate indication of how powerful imitation can be.

Regardless, they mostly agreed upon applying it to their own classes, mostly due to the following reasons: helping them to write like native speaker, find their own style, and learn English structure.

Also, some find it particularly helpful with younger learners in that, being new to the experience, they do not know much about how to organize their thoughts, hence could hugely benefit if the template is already there. It truly takes the pressure off.

In a nutshell, a model by a world renown author seems to promise results. The major benefit it offers is a precious opportunity to see writing in action, and not just any real-world model, from a well-established writer, which makes it both fruitful and motivating.

On the other hand, stylistic imitation in writing classes is not the all-cure mostly sought after. It seems, in some cases, to halt creativity and personal voice. This means those who wish to apply the technic in writing classes need to be well aware, well planned and at the same time really observant of every little move learners make so they do not fall prey to the style of the model at the expense of their own voice.

Research Question Two:
Has stylistic imitation been of any effect to their style?
It has mostly helped them develop a style, a way of organizing ideas into acceptable strings of words. In one case, he has stayed most faithful to semantic content the second time, indicating how effective the technic can be. Likewise, in another case, his simple, unadorned language has turned into a more professional style after he comes in contact with the model, pointing, once more, to the positive effect of imitating a professional. In still another case, his simple, plain language has become more sophisticated language demonstrating how useful imitation can be. Also, in another case, being exposed to the model, she has abandoned her own ways in an attempt to keep the style and the structure, proving that exposure to a professional writer can and does produce results.

On the other hand, not all participants proved to be impressed by the style presented. Despite keeping the content, the participant made no such effort about structure; a number of changes and different structures seems his way to declare independence; he does not seem to enjoy enthralling to the style. In still

another case, a few lexical substitutions have resulted in a rather different story, meaning that, rather than sticking the style presented, he is trying to employ the structures he feels comfortable with. In another case, even though she has stayed faithful to the meaning in both renditions, regarding grammar, there have been quite a number of alterations indicating her effort not to fall for the writer s style. In yet another case, she proves quite a writer; i.e., great lexical choices as well as advanced structures. She sticks to her own style in the face of the model presented as well, indicating that it takes a true writer to preserve her style when exposed to a fellow writer.

Regarding the reasons, imitation seems to work when participants have already had some experience with producing written pieces. Otherwise, the model is going to impose itself upon the learners depriving them of any chance to find their own voice, without which it is nearly impossible to become a writer in the first place. Regarding the rest, the technic could go either way. Since they are already proficient writers, they have the chance, if they choose, to benefit from the more advanced style of the writer. A possibility some may not find attractive enough since they value freedom and independence more. In conclusion, the results on teaching the participants on style seem promising and prolific. Yet, there appears to be some areas of concern the instructor needs to attend to while trying the technic in class.

DISCUSSION

The results have revealed that teachers are in favor of bringing models from literary world to the class to incentivize learners and stimulate their interest in English language and classes.

This technique seems to have proved an invaluable asset in being more attractive to the learners. Normally, teachers are to provide the rules to be then implemented by learners, sometimes followed by a model, from the teachers own writing mind, to demonstrate how it is done. Bringing a model from an A-class writer, thus, is a magnanimous improvement, which leads to stronger motivation. In other words, texts produced by world-renowned authors can easily turn into stimulat-

ing material to be used for English teaching purposes. This is in line with Shields (2007) who revealed that learners find it far more convenient to both initiate the narrative and come up with creative ways to produce their own piece.

Moreover, having an authentic English piece in class can uplift, therefore, attract the instructors as well. Fan of literature or not, reading a text so beautifully strung together by a great writer of our times will draw people in, let alone English learners, who are already into English literature.

Hence, bringing literary work to class can go beyond improving some skill; it will make writers. This is all in line with what the giants in the field have already put forwards regarding the usefulness of bringing back literature into English teaching classrooms.

In contrast, some have cast doubts, mainly concerned with trumping the learners voice and depriving them of a chance to develop their individual styles. This is not in line with Stodola (2013) who maintains that stylistic imitation is more about enabling the learners to develop their own style. He seems to believe that, imitating a model perfectly demonstrates how to write.

These seem to be those who believe change, in both behavior and knowledge need to, and does in fact, arise from within. To them, it is on the teacher to nourish the learners and provide them with ample opportunity to develop at their own pace and passion. However, Liang (2019) believes that English learners face difficulties with the rules of writing in English, which explains why stylistic imitation holds potential for teaching writing.

Also, it seems this opposition on their part is more rooted, at least partially, in prejudices instilled in them in their years of education than based on scientific investigations. Therefore, it seems to be about time for some serious reconsideration, e.g., Geist (2004) contends that imitation is more a matter of gaining insight into possibilities than trying to produce the same exact piece. The present paper provides evidence in favor of reopening the negotiations over the notion of bringing back literature into English teaching classes as one prolific method to teach language skills. This is

in line with Mitchell and McGee (2011) as they believe that given a chance to go through the model to reveal how the writer has put it together opens eyes to the ways writing in English works.

In conclusion, a good number of the teachers found it productive and announced their plans to implement it in their own classes. They seem to believe stylistic imitation boosts leaners motivation thus, increases their chances of success. Regarding those few teachers against the idea, it should be noted that they still see the good use of the technique and are willing to try it as one arrow in their quivers. Put another way, they still see it worthy of their time in class. All in all, the findings provide support for the use of stylistic imitation to teach writing in English classes. This is in line with Liang (2019) who argues that learners see the model, try to follow it, then learn from it. Hence, the model proved effective in helping them effortlessly learn to write independently.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This investigation was an attempt to examine the role stylistic imitation can play in promoting writing competence and among in-service English teachers in language schools in Iran. Fourteen teachers agreed to participate in the research, and the researcher followed action research design to elicit the data he was after. The participants were, first exposed to a model of free writing prepared by the researcher, which intended to prepare them to produce a free writing piece. Then, the model by Kate Chopin was introduced to the class to be analyzed in detail. Following that, the participants were asked to produce both a close and free imitation of the model given. The journals produced in each step were analyzed to examine how exposure to the model affected their style of writing. They were also asked to discuss their views on stylistic imitation expanding on the challenges and the benefits of employing it in writing classes. The findings revealed that stylistic imitation is definitely worth trying to teach writing. It also proved more effective with less competent learners, novice writers. Not having formed their own identity yet, the less competent proved

more prepared to follow the original writer s footsteps. With the more proficient writers, having found their voice already, they were less eager to appropriate someone else s style. All in all, stylistic imitation seems a promising procedure and in need of a revaluation by English teachers and syllabus designers. The results from the present inquiry can raise awareness of the way imitation, stylistic imitation to be more specific, can find its way back into classroom, which can help material developers reconsider the role it can play in teaching writing. They can now reconsider the role both literature and imitation can play in reinforcing writing instruction in English classes. They now can incorporate some carefully selected works of literature to be introduced into class and add to the excitement and the productivity of English classes. There is a great number of great authors as well as great works of art waiting to enter language classes, which can make students more interested in both English literature and language, vastly affecting the learning outcomes.

In addition, the teachers, as the most important agent in promoting learning and designing technics to make learning happen, can take advantage of stylistic imitation to address the lasting issue of teaching and learning how to write in English in their classes. Focusing on one author each semester can go a long way in teaching some structure, as long as there is enough exposure. More importantly, helping the learners uncover and follow the style of a great writer holds huge potentials for finding their own voices. The teachers can now plan activities aimed at encouraging reading and imitating literary works in language classes.

Finally, stylistic imitation means bringing back literature in class, which can, through exposure to authentic literary pieces, prove quite exciting for the learners. There has been quite a number of inquiries pointing to that direction. Writing classes are now no longer about long, hard to follow grammar discussions. They are now home to reading beautiful literary pieces put together by the giants in the field. It certainly sounds more motivating.

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Biodata

Arash Dehghanian has been teaching English since 2004. He has been teaching English for almost twenty years at several language schools, Shahrood University of Technology, Azad University and other universities of Shahrood. His areas of interest are English language teaching and testing. He has published some articles in different journals.Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English Language Teaching, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran.
Email:*arash.dehghanian@gmail.com*
arash.dehghanian@shahroodut.ac.ir

Seyyed Hassan Seyyesrezaei, assistant professor of TEFL, is a faculty member of Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul Branch. His areas of interest are English language teaching, linguistics, syllabus design, and testing. He has published a lot of articles and several books till now. Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English Language, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran.
Email: *srezaei.sh@gmail.com*

Omid Mazandarani is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at the Islamic Azad University of Aliabad Katoul Branch. His areas of interest include English language teaching, linguistics, syllabus design, and testing. He has also published several papers in national and international journals. Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English Language, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran.
Email: *omazandarani@gmail.com*

Ghasem Barani is an Assistant Professor of TEFL at the Islamic Azad University of Aliabad Katoul Branch. His areas of interest include English language teaching, linguistics, syllabus design, and testing. He has also published several papers in national and international journals. Assistant Professor of TEFL, Department of English Language, Aliabad Katoul Branch, Islamic Azad University, Aliabad Katoul, Iran.
Email: *baranighasem56@gmail.com*