English teacher training courses in Iranian private language institutes: Issues and options

Mansoor Ganji, Saeed Ketabi and Mohammadtaghi Shahnazari
University of Isfahan, Iran

This study aims to paint a vivid picture of the English teacher training courses held in Iranian private language institutes, both to critically analyse their aims and content, and to find their strengths and weaknesses. In line with this, qualitative data were gathered through information available on 34 institutes' websites, narrative observations of 24 sessions, open-ended questionnaires filled out by supervisors in 37 institutes, and semi-structured interviews conducted with six English teachers and six teacher trainers. The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach (open, axial, and selective coding). The findings indicated that these courses offered a very convenient schedule, focused on practical teaching techniques, and were based on the institutes' needs. However, they suffered from problems such as the trainees' low knowledge of general English and teaching methodology, lack of a written syllabus, focusing on received rather than experiential knowledge, stifling the teachers' creativity, and lack of experienced and certified teacher trainers. A number of practical suggestions are given for the reconsideration of the course aims and content so that they can be made more suitable for the Iranian context and further involve the trainees.

Introduction

Iranian people learn English either in schools run by the state educational system or private language institutes owned by the private sector. In the state middle and high schools, students study English for between two and four hours each week. However, English books at middle school primarily focus on alphabet recognition, pronunciation and vocabulary development, while high school books are for the most part concerned with reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary development — an approach in the wake of which writing, listening, and speaking fall into sheer oblivion (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Many a time a high school graduate, who has spent six years learning English as a part of their general education, can hardly introduce themselves in English unless they have taken English lessons in private language institutes, which is increasingly the case these days (Bandpei, 2011; Dorshomal, Gorjian & Pazhakh, 2013; Haghighi & Norton, 2016). Thus, in order to develop practical skills in English, many young people take courses in private institutes, and these are the language institutes which play the main role in teaching English in the Iranian context (Haghighi & Norton, 2016).

Sadeghi and Richards (2016) argued that there has been a growing demand for learning English in Iran in recent years, both at the national and the individual levels. As a result, private language institutes are mushrooming across the country

(Haghighi & Norton, 2016). For example, there are more than 50 private language institutes in Urmia, where people of different age groups participate in English classes for various reasons. Mesri (2009) added that while there are 6800 private language institutes in Iran, just 500 of these institutes are legally certified by the Ministry of General Education.

However, students attending these institutes are often not satisfied with the courses and do not attain their aims, since they mainly study grammar and vocabulary and the class activities do not develop their speaking skills (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015). Mirhosseini and Khodakarami (2015) argued that directors and supervisors of private language institutes do not have a clear understanding of what communication in English means. Finally, Sadeghi and Richards (2015) asserted that most of these institutes have not been successful in teaching spoken English. The reasons for this failure might be attributed to the curriculum and the teaching materials, the limitations of the classroom-based learning, and lack of efficient and competent teachers. They have highlighted that English teachers in these language institutes have not been trained in what is meant by proficiency in spoken English and in how to teach a speaking course effectively.

Regarding the critical role of teachers in education, Sandres and Horn (1998) rightly stated that "the single most important factor in determining student academic success or failure is the classroom teacher" (p. 19). Several researchers (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2005) have pointed out that teacher quality and student achievement hinge upon teacher education programs. In this regard, the quality of initial teacher education needs to be taken more seriously, for it is "the first entry point to the teacher professional career, [so] it plays a fundamental role: the way it is organized determines both the quality and quantity of teachers" (Musset, 2010, p. 15). Thus, initial teacher training courses need to be constantly reformed, reframed, and restructured so that they can keep up with the demands of a fast-changing world and dynamic individual needs.

Private language institutes in Iran hold teacher training courses with durations ranging from 10 to 60 hours in order to employ the English teachers they need. Initial teacher education plays a vital role in the Iranian context because in most institutes it is the only training course that the teachers take, and there are not many, if any at all, after-employment and/or on the job training workshops for teachers. However, there is no unified procedure among these institutes for conducting teacher training courses, and every institute runs its own teacher training course. Although all of the institutes seek to train English teachers for the Iranian context, they choose quite different curricula (Rezaee & Ghanbarpour, 2016). That such diversity of opinion should exist amongst the institutes on a

subject of so much importance is lamentable, since none of these language institutes approve the teacher training course certificates issued by other institutes; as a result, teacher applicants have to take different teacher training courses in various institutes in order to find a job as an English teacher.

Despite its importance, the field of teacher education is regarded as "under-researched" (Peacock, 2009, p. 260), meaning that research into this area is "noticeably missing" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 397). Especially important, there exists little research on evaluating English teacher training courses in Iranian private language institutes (Ganji, Ketabi & Shahnazari, 2016). In view of the fact that to the researchers' best knowledge, little research has examined the teacher training courses held in these institutes (Abasifar & Fotovatnia, 2015; Abaszadeh, 2012; Ganji, Ketabi & Shahnazari, 2016; Rezaee & Ghanbarpour, 2016), the present study attempts to provide a clear picture of the procedures followed in holding teacher training courses in these institutes, analyse their aims and content, and diagnose their strengths and weaknesses.

Review of the related literature

Teacher education is said to be a future-oriented business since it is intended to prepare teachers for the educational needs of future citizens (Zhao, 2010). Ballantyne, Sanderman, and Levy (2008) maintained that "there is a pressing need for education for teachers at all stages in their careers which aims to prepare or upgrade teachers' knowledge and skills" (p. 10). Whatever the method of professional development, Lynch (2003) and Peacock (2009) considered systematic evaluation of the teacher training programs as seminal. Doubtless, education is not complete without evaluation, which directly contributes to its improvement and development as a whole (Rea-Dickins & Germaine, 1993).

In the past there was little investigation of ways to evaluate English teacher education programs, and it was not until 1980s that this topic started to attract attention from researchers in EFL contexts. As Day (1993) and Weir and Roberts (1994) pointed out, foreign language teacher education is in its infancy when compared to teacher education in other areas. A plethora of research has recently been conducted in other countries on teacher training courses and programs (Bayrakçı, 2009; Burton, 2009; Coskun & Daloglu, 2010; Erozan, 2005; Hawkins & Norton, 2009; Özer, 2004).

However, teacher training courses in Iranian private language institutes, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, have not been comprehensively evaluated by Iranian scholars and researchers. Where studies have been conducted, they have either evaluated the teacher training courses held by Iranian Ministry of Education (Birjandi & Derakhshan Hesari, 2010; Kazemi & Ashrafi, 2014; Rajabi, Kiany, & Maftoon, 2012; Razi, & Kargar, 2014), or they have failed to take into account all the stakeholders' viewpoints (Abasifar & Fotovatnia 2015; Abaszadeh, 2012).

However, it is noteworthy that few studies haveinvestigated the English teacher training courses held in Iranian language institutes (Ganji, Ketabi, & Shahnazari, 2016). Given the paucity of research in this area and admitting the vital role of initial teacher training in Iran, the researchers decided to launch this study. It aims to find the common procedures followed in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of these teacher training courses. It also aims to critically analyse their aims and content, and to pinpoint their strengths and weaknesses by providing answers to the following questions.

1. What are the common procedures for holding English teacher training courses in Iranian private language institutes?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher training courses held in Iranian private language institutes?

Method

Participants

First of all, the researchers chose two cities in western and central parts of Iran (Isfahan and Kermanshah respectively). Then, from each city, three language institutes were chosen purposefully because particularity rather than generalisability is an important characteristic of qualitative research. Finally, from each institute, one teacher trainer and one English teacher were invited for a face to face interview. In addition to the interviews, an open-ended questionnaire was sent via email to those supervisors who were not volunteers or not available for face to face interviews. This questionnaire was sent to 45 institute supervisors working in these cities, with 37 responding to the invitation. Teacher trainers were coded as TTA to TTF, teachers were coded T1 to T6, and supervisors were coded S1 to S37. Table 1 gives the information about all participants.

Table 1. Background information of the teacher trainers and English teachers

Institute	Codes	Date of interview	Age	Degree
ANEL	TTA	20 October 2015	36	PhD student of TEFL
JIDA	TTB	7 December 2015	28	MA in TEFL
GOSA	TTC	13 March 2016	34	MA in TEFL
SAMA	TTD	10 July 2016	38	PhD student of TEFL
GOOO	TTE	2 January 2016	34	BA in translation studies
AFFF	TTF	8 November 2015	39	PhD student of TEFL
ANEL	T1	25 October 2015	28	BA student
JIDA	T2	12 December 2015	25	MA student in TEFL
GOSA	T3	20 March 2016	23	MA in TEFL
SAMA	T4	15 July 2016	20	BA in translation studies
GOOO	T5	8 January 2016	25	BA student
AFFF	T6	9 November 2015	20	MA student in literature
Different supervisors	S1…S37	1 October 2015 to 30 March 2016	25-43	8 BA, 14 MA students, 10 MA, and 5 PhDs

Data collection procedure

The first source of data was the information provided on the websites of the private language institutes holding English teacher training courses. Firstly, all of the information provided on the websites of the institutes in these two cities as well as Tehran and Shiraz was gathered. Institutes situated in Tehran and Shiraz were also taken into account because not all the institutes in these two cities provided data on their websites to help the researchers reach data saturation point. Then, one of the researchers coded the information available on the websites of nine institutes. Having done so, the researcher found the main categories and themes of the data. After that, he analysed the information on the other websites to find out if there were any new themes or categories in this regard. Searches for new institutes continued up to the data saturation point (34 institutes). In fact, the researcher continued his search until data saturation point which is the stage where no new information is found related to the themes under study, and the relation between the themes are established and proved (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The second source of data was the semi-structured interviews conducted with the English teacher trainers and English teachers. Having chosen six language institutes from the two cities, the researchers invited one English teacher and one teacher trainer for a face to face interview. The semi-structured interview consisted of open-ended questions and focused on the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages of the teacher training course (see Appendices A and B).

The third source of data was an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix C). This questionnaire consisted of almost the same questions as the interview with slight differences. It was sent to 45 institute supervisors who were not available for or willing to participate in a face to face interview. However, 37 of the supervisors responded to the questionnaire, and 8 supervisors did not accept the invitation due to their hectic schedules.

The last source of information was observations made by one of the researchers. The researcher employed non-participant narrative observation instead of following a pre-determined observation scheme. Employing naturalistic inquiry (Best & Kahn, 2006), one of the researchers observed the six teacher training courses carefully and transcribed their main events, activities, and procedures. He observed 4 sessions of each teacher training course in order to collect first-hand information about the event. At the outset of the study, an observational protocol was developed, specifying the type of data to look for, and the procedures for recording the necessary data. Having consulted the previous literature and decided upon what data to look for; however, the researcher mostly took descriptive notes, gathered demographic information, and expounded on the participants of the observed sites, events, and activities. It must be mentioned that all the data were collected during 1 October 2015 to 30 March 2016. As all the interviews and questionnaires were conducted in Persian, the participants' mother tongue, the texts of the interviews and questionnaires were translated by one of the researchers. However, the information on the institutes' websites was presented in English, and the researcher took observation notes in English.

Data analysis

In order to analyse the interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observation notes, and websites' information, the researchers adopted a grounded theory approach. Three stages of data analysis are involved in grounded theory: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. However, before proceeding to the coding process, the researchers had to carefully transcribe the audio-data. The researchers typed the transcripts and did the coding procedure using *track changes* function in *MS Word.* The texts were coded by analysing complete sentences or paragraphs and finding their main ideas. The researchers chose this method since they had consulted the previous literature and had identified several categories in this regard.

The researchers chose names for the categories based on the respondents' words, called *in vivo codes* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Having coded the first and second interviews and the documents, the researchers identified the main themes and categories of the data. Then, the researchers reviewed the data again to check if the extracted themes were appropriate or not, or if there were new themes in the data. At this stage, it was necessary to ensure the reliability of the coding. According to Lynch (2003), who suggests using external code checks, the researchers asked one of their colleagues to code the first interview according to the list of already-developed codes. Then, they discussed the outcomes and talked about their differences in coding. Finally, the researchers asked their colleague to code the second interview. Since there was 80% agreement in coding the second interview, one of the researchers did the rest of coding himself.

Results and discussion

Research question one

Analysis of the data showed that Iranian private language institutes which hold teacher training courses could be divided into three groups. The first group (G1) held teacher training courses in order to train teacher applicants and employ them. In these institutes, teacher trainers usually focused on the practical techniques needed for teaching a special book series such as *Top Notch*, based on the institutes' needs. The second group (G2) held teacher training courses three to six times a year, but they did not employ any of the trainees. Here, teacher training course consisted of mostly theoretical aspects and partly practical teaching techniques and was based on the teacher trainer's experience and intuition. Finally, the third group of institutes (G3) claimed to prepare English teachers for teaching English in an EFL context, following the syllabus of international courses such as *Certificate in Teaching English to Adults* (CELTA) or *Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages* (TESOL). The big difference between these groups was that G1 language institutes held teacher training courses when they needed to employ teachers, but G2 and G3 institutes held teacher training courses when a quota of enrolees was reached. However, holding a teacher training course in all these institutes had five stages, with some variation in the order and quality of the stages. The stages were as follows: Enrolment, Written proficiency exam, Interview, Teacher training course, and Evaluation. Table 2 shows the results of the data analysis, displaying all of the steps and stages

involved in holding an English teacher training course in Iranian private language institutes.

Table 2: Different stages of holding a teacher training course in Iran

Enrol-ment	Aim---Mode---Information needed	To check basic qualification--online-- personal, educational, teaching experience, contact, English proficiency
Written exam	Base---Sections---Result	Based on TOEFL or IELTS--listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar--pass or fail (cut-off score 70%)--60 to 90 minutes
Inter-view	Aim---Length---Form	Evaluate speaking proficiency--10 to 15 minutes--face to face--no objective scoring criteria--pass or fail
Training course	Aim---Length---Content---Trainer---Activities	Teaching the necessary teaching skills--10 to 60 hours--teaching theories, demos, and TPs--between 100 to 200 US dollars
Eval-uation	Task---Criteria---Examiner---Result	5 to 10 minute teaching practice--no objective criteria--holistic subjective scoring--supervisors and trainers--certificate of attendance (almost all the trainees receive that)

The first stage was called enrolment, divided into subcategories of aim, mode, and the information needed. This stage could be named *application* in G1 institutes, since the candidates' and the institutes' main objective was employment. However, it is better to call this stage *enrolment* in G2 and G3 institutes since the candidates attended these courses in order to get a certificate and to increase their opportunities for finding a job as English teachers, although these institutes were not going to employ any of the trainees. In most institutes, the candidate had to fill out the registration form online, but in a very few cases they had to come to the institute's office to submit their resumes. The application form contained items for giving personal information, educational background, teaching experience, contact information, and the applicant's English proficiency certificates. Only in GOSA Institute, candidates had to write an argumentative essay to be assessed by the experts in the Teacher Recruitment Centre located in Tehran. In fact, the candidates' selection procedure started right from the first day, and some of the candidates failed this stage.

In order to enter the teacher training course, the teacher applicants had to take a written exam measuring their general English proficiency, and be interviewed regarding their speaking ability. However, the institutes did not require the applicants to be at a certain age, have a certain academic degree, or have a minimum of teaching experience. Those who were at intermediate and advanced levels of English, as determined by the written and spoken exam, were admitted to the teacher training course. The written English proficiency exam was present in some G2 and G3 institutes and all G1 institutes. This exam, administered to choose the most proficient candidates, was based on TOEFL, IELTS, or GRE exams. It consisted of grammar, vocabulary, listening, and reading comprehension sections. A writing section was, in some cases, omitted to save time, and

there was no speaking section since the applicants' speaking ability was to be assessed in the interview. Sad to say, in five out of the six institutes, the exact results of the written exam were not announced. To top it all, in some of the G2 and G3 institutes, there was no written exam at all, so all the candidates could attend the interview stage. This is a serious problem since both English teachers and teacher trainers working in private language institutes believed that language proficiency is the prerequisite for teaching English in Iranian private language institutes (Abaszadeh, 2012).

The interview stage followed the written exam, but in GOSA, the interview and the written exam were held on the same day. The interview was expected to give information about the candidates' language proficiency, grammatical accuracy in speech, speech fluency, correct pronunciation, reasons for becoming teacher, and communication skills. It focused on personal and working information, job experience, and everyday conversation topics. Interviews took 5-10 minutes, were carried out by one or two interviewers, were usually face to face, and were not normally recorded for scoring purposes. The only difference between different institutes was in the length of their interviews, the number of interviewers, the form of the interviews (focus-group versus individual), and whether they were recorded or not.

The next category was the teacher training course itself, consisting of the subcategories aim, length, content, trainer, and activities. Although Wallace (1991) stated that an effective teacher training course must have a clear philosophy and aim, and that the course content should reflect that philosophy, five out of the six institutes did not specify their aims in a detailed and written manner. This finding was similar to Uysal's (2012) findings that participating teachers in Turkey were not informed of the course aims beforehand. Secondly, in some institutes (IROX), *Practical Demos* were mentioned as one of the course aims, indicating that the course designers did not have a clear understanding of the term *aims* and had wrongly mentioned an implementation strategy as an aim. Furthermore, as Table 2 shows, all Iranian institutes mentioned the course content as their aims. In fact, there was not much difference between the course aims and content. Next, some of the aims were vague and very general. *Increasing the trainees' knowledge of teaching,* and *Becoming familiar with secondary concepts* are examples of these aims. The findings in relation to the course aims are generally in line with those of Uysal (2012) and Ozer (2004), asserting that teacher training courses in Turkey lacked systematic planning and clear aims.

The most common aim was *Becoming familiar with up to date teaching techniques.* The terms *"recent", "modern"* and *"new"* were used in different websites to convey this message. The second most common aim was *Acquiring familiarity with all of the English teaching methods. "All", "comprehensive"* and *"every"* were the terms used to convey the same meaning. This aim which was present in 50% of the institutes was mentioned by English teachers as one of their main reasons for attending a teacher training course (Abaszadeh, 2012). They believed that knowledge of language teaching methods and language learning theories was an important element of a teacher's knowledge base. Another very frequent aim was *Learning practical techniques for teaching English.* This was the most important reason for attending a teacher training course, and all of the six English teachers mentioned that they

attended a teacher training course to acquire practical techniques for teaching in a real class. Table 2 shows the *most common aims* of the 34 institutes in the order of frequency.

Table 3: The most common objectives of English teacher training courses

No.	Aim	%
1	Becoming familiar with up to date teaching techniques	50.0
2	Acquiring familiarity with all of the English teaching methods	47.0
3	Becoming familiar with modern English teaching methods	44.1
4	Learning practical techniques for teaching English	41.2
5	Learning different English teaching methods	38.2
6	Learning the main teaching skills	35.3
7	Learning techniques for teaching language skills and components	32.4
8	Learning about the psychology of language teaching	29.4
9	Learning class management skills	29.4
10	Learning the lesson planning techniques	26.5
11	Coping with class usual challenges	23.5
12	Learning practical techniques for teaching the four skill	23.5
13	Using computer and multimedia tools	23.5
14	Putting the theories into practice	17.6
15	Increasing the trainees' self-confidence in teaching	14.7

The teacher training course is ordinarily an intensive course, lasting from 10 hours (AFFF institute) to 60 hours (SAMA, and JIDA), depending on the course aims and content. When the course trainers focused on the practical techniques needed for teaching a special book series, it lasted only 4-5 sessions. However, it took 50-60 hours when the course was not based on the specific needs of an institute.

Course content was mistakenly mentioned in the section called *Aims*, so there was a great deal of overlap between *Contents* and *Aims*. Secondly, content was mostly related to the received knowledge of language teaching, and the experiential knowledge gained through observation, feedback, and teaching practice received a complete disregard. This contrasts with the results of Uysal (2012), who found that a great deal of practical information about different methods and learning styles as well as techniques to teach language skills was provided. Furthermore, some of the course designers (DIII institute) based their teacher training course on the *Cambridge Teacher Knowledge Test* (TKT) which is a test, not a teacher training course. The international teacher training courses which were quite popular with Iranian language institutes were CELTA and DELTA, and JIDA and MOFT institutes exactly followed CELTA and DELTA respectively. This finding is not in accord with recent research in teacher education advocating a more context-sensitive and trainee-centred approach which is appropriate to the context and the participants' needs (Bax, 1995, 1997). Thirty out of thirty-four institutes mentioned the following topics as the content of their courses.

1. Review of different teaching methods
2. Different practical techniques for teaching English
3. Increasing the trainees' knowledge of modern teaching techniques

4. Becoming familiar with the class environment
5. Learning class management skills
6. Learning about psychology
7. Lesson planning

The training course was usually taught by the institute supervisor (AFFF institute), experienced teachers (GOOO institute), those holding CELTA or TESOL (JIDA and GOSA), or a PhD in TEFL (SAMA). In most cases, the first sessions were teacher-centred, and the trainees mostly took notes (trainer F). Later on, the trainees played a more active role in the class and had teaching practice (TP) when asked. After the trainer demonstrated the techniques, one trainee started teaching the same point for about 10 minutes, and this teaching practice was followed by oral feedback from the trainer and other trainees (trainers A, B, and E). The trainees had 4-8 teaching practice sessions during the course, depending on the number of trainees and the trainer's teaching policy (trainer F). However, the trainees did written assignments in one institute (JIDA), and observed classes taught by experienced teachers of the institutes in two institutes (GOSA, JIDA), not doing much reading or writing. These results are partially similar to Bayrakçı (2009) and Odabaşı Çimer, Cakir and Cimer (2010) who found that Turkish teacher training programs followed a pure transmission model and mostly focused on theoretical knowledge without allowing the trainees to take active participation in their learning, or to implement what they have learned.

The last category was evaluation, where the trainees' teaching performance was assessed and the certificates were awarded to successful candidates. In most of the institutes, the only task evaluated was the trainees' final teaching practice (AFFF, GOOO, and SAMA). For the final teaching practice, the trainee taught part of a unit from the specified book, including a conversation, a grammatical point, a listening passage, or a reading exercise. In some of the G2 institutes, the trainee prepared a *PowerPoint* slide for the demonstration, and was completely ready for the teaching practice (SAMA, and AFFF). However, in some cases, the trainees knew what they had to teach only half an hour before the final teaching practice started (GOOO). This teaching practice was assessed by one examiner who was the course trainer (SAMA, JISA) or by two to three examiners who were not necessarily the course trainers (GOSA, GOOO). These examiners gave a mark to the trainee's performance based on the criteria developed or adopted by the institute (JIDA), or evaluated the trainees' performance quite subjectively and holistically based on their own experience (SAMA, ANEL). Those trainees who met the requirements and attained scores exceeding the cut-off score (70 out of 100) were accepted for teaching in the institute (GOOO institute). However, the exact score was not mentioned in any of the certificates issued by the institutes visited (SAMA, ZAAA), and all the trainees were awarded the same certificate.

Research question two

The second objective of the research was to look for the strengths and weaknesses of Iranian teacher training courses. All of the four English teachers having teacher training courses on the weekend believed that the strength of the course was that it had a

convenient schedule. Even the two trainees who attended classes on weekdays in the evenings were quite satisfied, since they were free at that time. They believed that because each session lasted for 90 minutes, they did not get tired and bored.

> T4: I liked the teacher training course in SAMA since it was held on weekends and I could attend all the sessions. And more importantly, I could review the material and practise the techniques in my classes in other institutes.

Four English teachers, three teacher trainers, and twenty one supervisors noted that the content of the course in G1 institutes was quite practical. Teacher training courses in these institutes focused on a series of steps and techniques for teaching different language skills and components.

> T6: Well, I have attended two teacher training courses before this. But the teacher training course in AFFF institute was the best. It was very short, 10 sessions. The trainers taught us the techniques for teaching different parts of *Top Notch*, and all the trainees had demos. That was what I needed most.

Still another good point about the teacher training courses was that they were based on the institutes' needs, since they focused on the presentation and analysis of the syllabus of the book series taught in the institute and showed the trainees how to teach every part of the book. This is not in line with Uysal (2010)'s finding that the content of training courses in Turkey was not exactly relevant to the teachers' contextual needs.

> TTA: In some institutes, they consider the institutes' needs. For example, in GOOO institute, they present a series of steps and techniques for teaching different parts of the book taught in the institute. It is very practical. No theories.

On the downside, there were a number of deficiencies with Iranian English teacher training courses at the planning stage. The most serious problem was that the course designers did not take the trainees' needs into account. It was either based on the trainers' intuition or their experience (TTA and TTB, as well as 8 supervisors).

> TTA: If I want to criticise the teacher training courses, I must say that these courses do not take the trainees' needs into account. They hold the teacher training course with the same content even if the participants' proficiency, teaching background, and interest change'.

The next weakness of these courses was mentioned by TTB, TTD, T1, T3 and S16. They all complained that these teacher training courses limited the teachers to a series of steps and required them to teach in a fixed manner. In fact, they stifled the creativity of the teachers, forcing them to follow a series of steps with no regard to the realities of the classroom and learners.

> TTB: For example, GOOO does not have a real teacher training course. It provides the trainees with a series of steps to be imitated exactly, with no change at all. It is a kind of debriefing course, educating teachers to teach in the same way.

Trainers A and D as well as seven supervisors argued that the intensive nature of the courses and lack of enough time for trainees' teaching practice did not allow the trainees to develop teaching skills, since developing skill needs time and practice. This is in line with the findings of Abaszadeh (2012), who concluded that acquiring teaching knowledge and skills does not finish by the end of these short teacher training courses, and English teachers have to attend workshops and study a lot since teaching skills are learned gradually through teaching and practising.

> TTD: The first point is that these trainees are not going to learn declarative knowledge. They need procedural knowledge. They need skills. Developing skills needs practice. The scheduling and content of these courses do not allow much practice for the trainees.

Teacher trainers, institutes' supervisors, as well as English teachers mentioned serious problems regarding the implementation stage. The first and most serious problem in this stage was reported to be the lack of a written and detailed syllabus (TTD, T4 and S12).

> T4: Unfortunately the trainer did not have a clear plan for the course. We did not know what we would do the next session. For example, one session in the middle of the course, we had a free discussion class. Or another session, we had to write an argumentative essay. The course hand-out was just 10 pages, can you believe that? Twenty four sessions, 10 pages!

Another problem mentioned by almost all of the English teachers (5 out of 6 teachers) was that none of the institutes approved teacher training course certificates from other institutes, and trainees were required to take the teacher training course in every institute where they applied for a job.

> TTD: Some of my trainees in SAMA institute had three teacher training course certificates when they were attending my class, and were planning to attend more teacher training courses. They believed their time and money had been wasted since they did not learn much and found no job.

Out of the thirty-four institutes, eight institutes followed CELTA and DELTA syllabus with no adaptation for the Iranian context. Six supervisors, one English teacher, and two trainers expressed that this policy could not be successful in the Iranian context since Iranian teacher training courses lasted for 40-60 hours, being much shorter than CELTA and DELTA. Thus, it is impossible to cover the CELTA syllabus in this short period, resulting in the deletion of the practicum sessions, observations, and assignments. Besides, Bax (1995) argued that predetermined content results in courses that are not sensitive to the trainees' particular teaching situations, because they are developed for a particular social and educational context. Trainers B and D, and 11 supervisors complained that the trainees were weak in general English and teaching methodology, no matter if they were English majors or not.

> TTB: Even English majors do not know much about teaching methodology since they do not study much about teaching at university. And because these days they are graduated in translation studies and English literature, they pass just four to six credits related to teaching methodology. And many of them are not English majors.

Both teachers and trainers argued strongly that teacher trainers in Iran were not very experienced, certified, and skilful. They believed that a teacher trainer needs to have attended several teacher training courses, should have taught for more than ten years at different levels, and should be certified for this job by attending at least one trainer training course.

> TTA: And another problem is that we do not have good and efficient teacher trainers in our country. All of us can teach books by Brown, Richards and Rodgers, Freeman, and Ur. But all these things are theories. Not everybody can induce teaching practices from these theories.

Two trainers and fourteen supervisors emphasised that Iranian teacher training courses review the history of language teaching, are *about* the practical techniques of teaching, but they do not provide the trainees with opportunities to undertake practice teaching or do observations (trainers A, B, and D).

> TTD: And the trainers are mostly lecturing, and presenting different theories. As far as I know, many trainers are wrong in choosing the content. Maybe, those who employ the trainees at the end of the course act differently. But for example in ZAAA, they start teaching the theories included in the Larsen Freeman or Rodgers' books.

Conclusion and implications

The analysis of the data revealed that holding a teacher training course in Iranian English language institutes generally had five stages: enrolment, written exam, interview, teacher training course, and evaluation. Furthermore, analysis of the aims and content of these courses indicated that almost all of the courses claimed to be up to date, practical, and comprehensive. All of the teacher training courses aimed to prepare trainees for teaching English in Iran, familiarise the trainees with teaching methods and techniques, especially recent developments in TEFL, teach them practical techniques for teaching all of the language skills, and provide opportunities for practising classroom management skills. However, to reach the same goal, they chose quite different ways. While a number of courses focused on the practical aspects of teaching and included the techniques necessary for teaching different language skills and components, other courses mostly dealt with theoretical aspects of teaching, reviewing teaching methods and theories, and ending with a few sessions on practical teaching techniques.

It was also found that these teacher training courses had a convenient schedule for the trainees, were quite practical, especially in G1 institutes, and the content was pertinent to the institutes' needs. On the downside, trainees were found to be weak in general English and teaching methodology, and trainers were not experienced and knowledgeable enough for teaching such courses, and had not attended any trainer training course. The most serious problem in the implementation stage was revealed to be the lack of a written and detailed syllabus for teacher training courses. Furthermore, institutes did not approve teacher training course certificates offered by other institutes and required the candidates to take the teacher training course in every institute where they applied for a job. Still another problem was that the course designers did not consider the trainees' real needs in

most of the cases, did not address general teaching techniques, and the courses were based on the trainers' experience and intuition. Finally, a lack of opportunities to undertake teaching practice and observe teaching during the course, coupled with the tight scheduling of the courses, restrained the trainees' development of their teaching skills.

With these findings, the researchers suggest that in order to choose the most proficient trainees, an English proficiency test such as TOEFL or IELTS should be used. Since there are not many centres for holding IELTS and TOEFL tests in Iran and the registration fee for these tests is very high for an English teacher, Iranian institute owners and teacher training course designers need to develop and validate a national English proficiency test for this purpose. Another suggestion is to not base the evaluation only on the final teaching practice and to assess the candidates' teaching knowledge at the end of the course through a test such as *Teacher Knowledge Test* (TKT). This way, the institutes can choose trainees who have the highest potential to become English teachers.

Next, course designers are strongly advised to base their syllabus on the real needs of the trainees and institutes' expectations from a teacher. A list of necessary topics and practical source books should be provided for holding an English teacher training course in Iranian private language institutes. These sources should be based on the trainers' ideas, trainees' needs, and institutes' recommendations, as well as paying due attention to international courses designed for the same purpose. If this happens, the training courses will be more efficient and comprehensive, preparing better English teachers. Besides, the trainees will not have to attend different teacher training courses in different language institutes. The course designers are also advised to avoid repeating the same theoretical materials which are taught at BA and MA levels.

The researchers also recommend that course designers involve the trainees more in the implementation of the course through assigning some written and oral homework and giving them more opportunities for doing practice teaching sessions and observations during the course. To give the trainees more opportunities for observation, Iranian institutes can ask them to watch video recordings of experienced teachers' classes at home and prepare a report on the pros and cons of the session. This can prove very helpful because the supervisors argued that trainees' observing in classes disrupted the natural routine of the class, so they did not allow the trainees to observe classes. Since almost all of the English classes in these institutes are equipped with cameras, institutes can easily provide the trainees with the video recordings of experienced teachers' classes. Another suggestion is to hold English classes free of charge for interested language learners and observe the trainees while teaching in these classes. This is a norm in Iran to get a free service when the service provider is a novice, for instance getting a free haircut in hair studios.

References

Abasifar, S. & Fotovatnia, Z. (2015). Impact of teacher training courses on Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs. *International Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 3(9), 63-75. http://jfl.iaun.ac.ir/article_13921.html

Abaszadeh, A. (2012). Comparing teachers' needs and teacher trainers' priorities. *Proceedings of the 10th International TELLSI Conference* (pp. 53-66). Tehran, Iran. https://www.academia.edu/4048552/Comparing_Teachers_Needs_and_Teacher_Trainers_Priorities

Ballantyne, K. G., Sanderman, A. R. & Levy, J. (2008). *Educating English language learners: Building teacher capacity.* Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED521360

Bandpei, P. (2011). Unorganized situation of teaching English at schools. *Ettelaat Daily*, 25 December, pp. 16.

Bax, S. (1995). Appropriate methodology: The content of teacher development activities. *System*, 23(3), 347-357. https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(95)00022-C

Bax, S. (1997). Roles for a teacher educator in context-sensitive teacher education. *ELT Journal*, *51*(3), 232-241. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/51.3.232

Bayrakçı, M. (2009). In-service teacher training in Japan and Turkey: A comparative analysis of institutions and practices. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 34(1), 10-22. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2009v34n1.2

Best, J. W. & Kahn, J. (2006). *Research in education* (10th ed.). Boston: Pearson Education.

Birjandi, P. & Derakhshan Hesari, A. (2010). Teachers' perceptions of the present and optimum status of the in-service EFL teacher preparation programs. *English Language Teaching,* 3(4), 47-57. http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v3n4p47

Burton, J. (2009). Reflective practice. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 298-307). Cambridge: CUP.

Coskun, A. & Daloglu, A. (2010). Evaluating an English language teacher education program through Peacock's model. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education,* 35(6), 24-42. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2010v35n6.2

Darling-Hammond, L. & Youngs, P. (2002). Defining "highly qualified teachers": What does "scientifically-based research" actually tell us? *Educational Researcher*, 31(9), 13-25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3594491

Day, R. R. (1993). Models and the knowledge base of second language teacher education. *University of Hawai'I Working Papers in ESL*, 11(2), 1-13. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED370359

Dorshomal, N., Gorjian, B. & Pazhakh, A. (2013). The role of pedagogical films in developing pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' speaking skill: The case of motivation. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 4(4), 143-150. http://ijllalw.org/December2013fullissue.pdf

Erozan, F. (2005). *Evaluating the language improvement courses in the undergraduate ELT curriculum at Eastern Mediterranean University: A case study.* Doctoral Dissertation, Middle East Technical University, Turkey.

Freeman, D. & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 397-417. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/3588114/abstract

Ganji, M., Ketabi, S. & Shahnazari, M. (2016). Evaluating an English teacher training course for Iranian private language institutes' teachers. *Iranian Journal of English for Academic Purposes,* 5(1), 70-88. http://journalscmu.sinaweb.net/article_46542_5276.html

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *Discovery of grounded theory.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Goldhaber, D. D. & Brewer, D. J. (2000). Does teacher certification matter? High school teacher certification status and student achievement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 22(2), 129-145. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737022002129

Haghighi, F. M. & Norton, B. (2016). The role of English language institutes in Iran. *TESOL Quarterly*, 51(2), 428-438. https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.338

Hawkins, M. & Norton, B. (2009). Critical language teacher education. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to second language teacher education* (pp. 30-39). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kazemi, A. & Ashrafi, M. (2014). In-service training programs for Iranian EFL teachers revisited. *International Journal of Asian Social Science*, 4(10), 1062-1076. http://www.aessweb.com/journals/October2014/5007/2917

Lynch, B. K. (2003). *Language assessment and programme evaluation.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Mesri, K. (2009). English language institutes are a mess. *Jame Jam Online,* p.1, 28 July. http://www.jamejamonline.ir

Mirhosseini, S. A. & Khodakarami, S. (2015). A glimpse of contrasting de jure-de facto ELT policies in Iran. In Kennedy, C. (Ed.), *English language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Innovations, trends, and challenges* (pp.23-32). London: British Council. https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/continuing-professional-development/cpd-teacher-trainers/english-language-teaching-islamic-republic-iran-innovations-trends-and-challenges

Musset, P. (2010). *Initial teacher education and continuing training policies in a comparative perspective: Current practices in OECD Countries and a literature review on potential effects.* OECD Education Working Papers, No 48, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/5kmbphh7s47h-en

Odabaşı-Çimer, S., Çakır, İ. & Çimer, A. (2010). Teachers' views on the effectiveness of in-service courses on the new curriculum in Turkey. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 33(1), 31-41. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02619760903506689

Özer, B. (2004). In-service training of teachers in Turkey at the beginning of the 2000s. *Journal of In-Service Education*, 30(1), 89-100. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13674580400200238

Rajabi, P., Kiany, G. R. & Maftoon, P. (2012). ESP in-service teacher training programs: Do they change Iranian teachers' beliefs, classroom practices and students' achievements? *Ibérica,* 24(2), 261-282. http://www.aelfe.org/documents/17_24_Rajabi.pdf

Razi, N. & Kargar, A. A. (2014). Evaluation of in-service foreign language teacher education program in Iran. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 5(1), 221-236. http://www.ijllalw.org/finalversion5118.pdf

Rezaee, A. A. & Ghanbarpour, M. (2016). The status quo of teacher-training courses in the Iranian EFL context: A Focus on models of professional education and dynamic assessment. *International Journal for 21st Century Education*, 3, 89-120. https://doi.org/10.21071/ij21ce.v3iSpecial.5710

Rivkin, S., Hanushek, E. A. & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0262.2005.00584.x

Sadeghi, K. & Richards, J. C. (2015). Teaching spoken English in Iran's private language schools: Issues and options. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*, 14(2), 210-234. https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-03-2015-0019

Sadeghi, K. & Richards, J. C. (2016). The idea of English in Iran: An example from Urmia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(4), 419-434. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2015.1080714

Sandres, W. & Horn, S. (1998). Research findings from the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) database: Implications for educational evaluation and research. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education,* 12(3), 247-256. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1008067210518

Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory.* London: SAGE.

Townsend, T. & Bates, R. (2007). Teacher education in a new millennium: Pressures and possibilities. In T. Townsend & R. Bates (Eds.), *Handbook of teacher education* (pp. 3-20). Netherlands: Springer.

Uysal, H. H. (2012). Evaluation of an in-service training program for primary-school language teachers in Turkey. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education,* 37(7), 13-29. https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2012v37n7.4

Wallace, M. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers.* Cambridge, UK: CUP.

Weir, C. & Roberts, J. (1994). *Evaluation in ELT.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Zhao, Y. (2010). Preparing globally competent teachers: A new imperative for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 61(5), 422-431. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487110375802

Appendix A: Semi-structured interview for teacher trainers

1. What are the main aims of the English teacher training courses?
2. What materials are taught during these courses?
3. What are the requirements for attending the course?
4. How are the trainees involved during the course?
5. How are the trainers selected? Do they have the needed qualifications?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these courses?
7. What criteria do you use for assessing the candidates' teaching performances?
8. What are your suggestions for improving these courses?

Appendix B: Interview for English teachers

1. What were your main reasons for attending the teacher training course?
2. What materials were taught during the course?
3. What were the requirements for attending the course?
4. How were the trainees involved during the course?
5. Were you satisfied with the teacher trainer?
6. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the course?
7. What are your suggestions for improving these courses?

Appendix C: Open-ended questionnaire for institutes' supervisors

1. What are the main aims of the English teacher training courses?
2. What materials are usually taught during these courses?

3. What are the requirements for attending the course?
4. How are the trainers selected? Do they have the needed qualifications?
5. What are the strengths and weaknesses of these courses?
6. What are your suggestions for improving these courses?

Appendix D: The names of the language institutes and their codes

Abbreviation (code)	Real name of the institute	Website
GOSA	Safir Language Academy	http://gosafir.com/en/
ANEL	Anjomane Elmi	No website
JIDA	Jihade Daneshgahi	http://www.jdisf.ir/site#
GOOO	Gooyesh	http://www.gooyesh-edu.com/index.php?lang=en
AFFF	Afra	No website
IROX	Iran Oxford	http://iranianlc.com/
DIII	Diako	http://diako.ir/
MOFT	Mojtamee Fanni Tehran	http://www.mft.info/Home/Department/Language
JISA	Jihade Sanatti	No website
ZAAA	Zabansara	No website
SAMA	Khaneye Sanato Madan	No website

Mansoor Ganji is a lecturer in the English Department of Chabahar Maritime University in Chabahar, Iran. He is currently doing his PhD in TEFL at University of Isfahan. He has taught grammar, writing, methodology, and research courses since 2007. His research interests include written feedback, idioms, collocations and teacher training.
Email: ganjimansoor1980@gmail.com

Dr Saeed Ketabi (corresponding author) is an associate professor, teaching in the English department of University of Isfahan, Iran. He is teaching TEFL methodology, and materials development at MA and PhD levels. He has supervised many MA and PhD theses and published several articles in different international journals. His research areas include materials development, teaching language skills, and teacher education.
Email: s.ketabi@yahoo.com

Dr Mohammadtaghi Shahnazari received his PhD in language teaching and learning from the University of Auckland. He is currently an Assistant Professor in the English Department, University of Isfahan, Iran. His research interests include teacher education, interactional corrective feedback, individual differences in working memory capacity, L2 reading processes and SLA issues.
Email: m_t_shah@yahoo.com