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Research Paper

English Language Teacher Education Programs in Selected Language Institutes in Iran: Curriculum Priorities and Programmatic Realities

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Abstract

English Language Teacher Education (ELTE) programs in Iran have been designed in a distinctive bilingual environment where private language institutes offer influential training foundations for most English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers. This study examines the structure and content of teacher preparation programs in four prominent Iranian language institutes to identify the core components of their training courses. To gather data, semi-structured and focus-group interviews were conducted with two novice teachers and two teacher educators from each institute selected through purposive sampling. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that training programs emphasized seven key themes: Teaching Methods, Flexibility, Practical teaching, Reflection, Native language use, Culture, and Technology. These findings can offer English language teachers valuable insights into their future roles and provide policymakers with rich data to evaluate existing programs and make necessary modifications in areas that require improvement. potentially bridging the gap between theoretical training and practical classroom demands.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, English Language Institutes, Teacher Career

Teacher professional development might occur through various processes, such as entering teacher training courses (TTCs), performing action research, reviewing existing methodology materials, and exchanging ideas with groups of teachers (Harmer, 2002). Among the various approaches introduced for the professional development of teachers, entering TTCs has a much longer history. The primacy of teacher preparation courses for developing teachers' knowledge and skills through all stages of their careers has been captured by numerous scholars in recent decades (e.g., Arviv Elyashiv, & Rozenberg, 2024; Ballantyne et al., 2008; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; König et al., 2024; Mgaiwa, S. J., & Milinga, 2024). As stated by Musset (2010), since the initial teacher preparation program is the primary route to entering the

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instruction world, the well-established structure of such programs is of paramount significance. Correspondingly, Ganji et al. (2018) disclose the urgency of continually updating, reformulating, and restructuring initial TTCs for decision-makers to ensure that they can meet the demands of fast-changing surroundings and diversified individual demands. Paetsch et al. (2023) and Duarte et al. (2024) maintain that this urgency is particularly evident in bilingual and monolingual settings where teachers struggle with linguistic and cultural diversities.

Within the Iranian context, English language teacher preparation programs are conducted in two distinct contexts: universities governed by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology and the Ministry of Education, as well as private language institutes. Public universities primarily provide structured, degree-oriented programs offering theoretical underpinnings and pedagogical research. In contrast, private language institutes present shorter, practice-oriented TTCs mainly focused on equipping future teachers with immediate classroom skills (Ganji et al., 2018). Recent research has highlighted significant differences between these two contexts. For instance, Ganji et al. (2018) maintain that universities often present more formalized approaches, contrasting less standardized curricula of private language institutes.

Recent scholarship has explored the characteristics of teacher training programs in private language institutes. For instance, Zarabi et al. (2023) assessed the quality of teacher preparation courses of private institutes, highlighting that these programs primarily advocate short-term practicalities over prolonged professional development. Alternatively, Ghorbani et al. (2023) argued against the peripheral attention to SLA theory and the existence of theory-practice gap in many private language institutes, which prohibits the promotion of reflective and research-oriented teaching practices. Notwithstanding the significant contribution of these valuable studies, we felt a considerable gap in examining the actual content and curriculum structures of TTCs in major language institutes. Most existing scholarship seems to focus on providing evaluative critiques, with less attention to the content documentation of the available programs. To address this gap, we aimed to examine the dominant components of TTCs in four of the major language institutes of the country. Our study also responds to the call by Divanbegi et al. (2023) for ongoing analysis of curricular and programmatic realities of the English language institutes that train the majority of ELT teachers, but often function without rigorous oversight. The study was also initiated in response to the claim made by Peacock (2009)-recently echoed in systematic reviews (e.g. Fischer et al., 2022) regarding the fact that teacher education is an "under-researched" domain. Having these in mind, our research question- What are the dominant components of the English language teacher education programs in selected Iranian language institutes? - aims to inform a detailed account of the content of teacher preparation courses offered in four prominent language institutes with schools throughout the country. This study not only complements previous publications but also presents an experimental basis for rethinking or reformulating English language teacher education programs in Iran's educational sphere. We hope that this inquiry will provide insights into developing more comprehensive curricula for future TTCs.

Literature Review

History of Teacher Education

Before the mid-1970s, the act of teaching was conceptualized as a collection of discrete behaviors and practices derived from empirical investigations of proficient educators' practices in real-world settings. Effective teaching was defined as the set of behaviors that led to successful learning outcomes for students (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). During this time, the predominant model for teacher education in applied linguistics was a process-product approach that aimed to facilitate student learning by guiding teachers' actions (Freeman, 2002). In this model, teachers were viewed as passive recipients of the training programs with limited roles.

In the latter years, the pedagogical approach of transition-oriented teacher education was supplanted by the constructivist perspective of teaching, which encompassed activities aimed at cultivating teachers' cognitive awareness (Elliott & Ageton, 1980). As Adler (1991) asserted, by the transformation of the image of teachers and the objectives of teacher education programs, classrooms came to be perceived as complex social settings, and teachers were viewed as decision-makers. Consequently, during the period spanning from 1980 to 1990, concepts such as teaching as decision-making and the significance of beliefs and assumptions in teaching gained prominence (Freeman, 2002). This new body of related research, which later became known as teacher cognition, regarded teachers as rational individuals who make deliberate choices regarding their classroom practices (Freeman & Johnson, 1998).

The transformations in ELT teacher development have also been captured by Canagarajah (2005). According to him, the field has moved away from traditional programs that primarily focused on acquiring professional knowledge and implementing prescribed methods towards more collaborative and situational approaches. He grounds this evolution in a growing understanding of how teachers learn and the most effective pedagogical models for facilitating their professional growth as educators. This understanding led to the emergence of numerous books and papers that explore various aspects of teacher preparation and development from multiple perspectives, including professional, cognitive, and contextual perspectives (e.g. Johnson, 2000; Richardson, 2003; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Tedick, 2013).

This literature presents that what teachers know about teaching is more than just a set of facts and theories. Instead, it is primarily based on experiential learning, which is socially built around the various realities of teaching (Johnson, 2009). Barahona (2018), describes teacher development as the accumulation of experience in learning to teach which includes the processes of appropriation, acculturation, and socialization of ELT professional knowledge and the inculcation of this knowledge in teachers. Simply put, he views the professional development of teachers as a situational, context-dependent, and complex undertaking that involves the attainment of values, skills, and thought processes underpinning the development of teaching activities, as well as the formation of a language teacher's identity.

Additionally, the literature on English teachers' professional development has conceptualized teachers as reflective practitioners who, through their intricate web of knowledge, are cognizant of the decisions they make in their instructional domain. Hence, reflection has been considered a pivotal component of teacher education programs and the preparation of novice educators, as evidenced by the widespread adoption of the reflective practitioner paradigm in the field of teacher education (Jay & Johnson, 2002). Accordingly, reflective practitioners have been characterized as individuals who can learn from their experiences and retrospectively evaluate the outcomes of their teaching practices (Shulman & Colbert, 1989).

These fundamental concepts of experiential learning and reflective teaching have developed to address more recent educational transformations. Contemporary worldwide trends (2020-2025) highlight three notable changes in teacher education: (1) the introduction of digital and hybrid learning models that integrate technological competencies with reflective practices and teacher cognition (Tondeur et al., 2023); (2) a move towards decolonial approaches to English language teacher identity (Ubaque-Casallas, 2021); and (3) context-specific professional development in limited-resource settings (Bergmark, 2020). While these worldwide developments transform global teacher education, they might manifest uniquely in the Iranian teacher education context, where the coexistence of teacher preparation practices run by universities and language institutes can create both opportunities and challenges.

Language Teacher Education Programs in Iran

In the opening section of this study, it was asserted that the preparation of language teachers in the context of Iran necessitates particular consideration in multiple facets. This structured urgency is well-documented in Iranian ELT literature. Nezakat-Alhossaini and Ketabi (2013) contend that teacher education in Iran requires substantial modifications regarding the duration of training, course materials, job reconsideration, and the degree of practicality required for teaching. Similarly, Ganji et al. (2016) and Rezaee and Ghanbarpour (2016) underscored the absence of a standardized protocol for organizing teacher training courses in various language institutes, resulting in devising divergent curricula for teacher training.

To better capture these institutional disparities, recent research has applied multimethod approaches. Author et al. (2022) conducted semi-structured interviews with two administrators, nine teacher educators, and two teachers. Additionally, they analyzed documents available on the websites of the targeted institutes. Results of their data analysis revealed five constant themes in the teacher training courses examined: methodological directions as content, the transmission approach in teacher preparation, providing teachers with external opportunities for professional development, insistence on monolingualism in ELT, and objection to the introduction of local culture in ELT. This aligns with earlier studies from Author et al. (2019) who examined teacher training courses in three private language institutes with 240 language

schools throughout the country from the perspectives of 12 novice English language teachers and three supervisors. They gathered data through semi-structured interviews, focus-group discussions, teacher diaries, informal peer interviews, and observations of occasional meetings of supervisors and teachers. Their inductive analysis demonstrated critical gaps in balancing theory and practice, reflective teaching skills, technology integration, and experiential learning.

In addition to the qualitative explorations, large-scale examinations corroborate these concerns. Ranjbari et al. (2019) assessed the sufficiency and efficacy of the most recent pre-service teacher education curriculum from the perspectives of 227 stakeholders, including teachers, teacher educators, and senior student teachers. The study employed a 35-item Likert scale questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to gather data. While their results indicated the effectiveness of the program in fostering pedagogical and linguistic competence, they highlighted the lack of technology use in Iran's skill-based teacher preparation milieu.

The evidence presented in the preceding paragraphs underlines two main realities: First, as highlighted by Farhady et al. (2010) and Baleghizadeh and Farshchi (2009), English language institutes hold a critical position in Iran due to educational policies that prioritize grammar and reading instruction at the expense of communicative skills at the public school and national curriculum. Recent studies (e.g. Sadeghi & Richards, 2021) confirm this position; they highlight that the country's national curriculum excludes communicative language teaching and conversational skills which are demanded by language institutes. Consequently, students seeking to develop communicative skills in English often turn to private language institutes. Next, teacher preparation programs in language institutes lack consistency and current best practices (Askarpoor et al., 2022; Author et al., 2022). Dashtestani (2014), for instance, provides solid evidence for this claim; he argues that the majority of language institutes do not provide any formal training in digital literacy and thus experience a theory-practice gap in technology integration. Additionally, Gheitasi and Aliakbari (2022) found the peripherality of teacher identity development in most institutional training programs. Having these in mind, our study responds to the calls for institutional accountability in teacher education (e.g. Sadeghi & Richards, 2021) by examining how Iran's prominent language institutes provide training programs for their prospective teachers.

Method

Context and Participants

The current study was conducted in three private English language institutes, named Institutes A, B, and C, and one public institute named Institute D. Public institutes belong to governmental or semi-governmental bodies and follow centralized policies. However, private institutes are independently operated and more flexible in their curriculum and management. Among these institutes, Institutes A and D have branches all around the country, and Institutes B and C have branches mainly in Tehran. All the selected institutes offered ELT teacher education programs at the time of recruiting new teachers and during their practices. Institutes

B and C were founded in 1969; Institute A was established in 1949; and Institute D was founded in 1925. The institutes were selected purposively to address variation, which ensured that various institutional policies (private versus public institutes), geographical variety (Institutes A and D: nationwide schools; B and C: Tehran-located), and historical roots (establishing years 1925-1969, capturing probable shifts in ELT) were represented in the data set.

Participants in the study included eight novice teachers and eight teacher educators, two from each language institute, selected through purposeful sampling. These teachers had recently finished their TTC and were in the best position to comment on the courses they had completed. The participants, aged between 26 and 50 years, were of both genders and had BA, MA, or PhD, mostly in ELT. Four participants had not studied English at the university but had completed English courses at language institutes. The purposeful sampling of the participants ensured the relevance of the data- all teachers had completed their TTCs within the last six months-; capturing expertise- teacher educators had more than five years of training experience; and maximizing demographic diversity- ages were 26-50, degrees ranged from BA to PhD (including participants with non-ELT training to represent real-world diversities). Table 1. present the information about the contexts and participants.

Table 1

Overview of Institutes and Participants

Category	Institute A (Private)	Institute B (Private)	Institute C (Private)	Institute D (Public)
Founded	1949	1969	1969	1925
Branches	Nationwide	Tehran-based	Tehran-based	Nationwide
Curriculum Policy	Flexible	Flexible	Flexible	Centralized
Participants (Novice Teachers)	2	2	2	2
Gender	1M, 1F	1M, 1F	2F	2M
Highest Degree	MA (ELT) BA (Translation)	BA (ELT) BA (English Lit.)	MA (Linguistics) BA (ELT)	PhD (ELT) MA (ELT)
Experience	<6 months	<6 months	<6 months	<6 months
Participants (Teacher Educators)	2	2	2	2
Gender	2F	1M, 1F	1M, 1F	2M
Highest Degree	PhD (ELT) MA (ELT)	MA (ELT) PhD (ELT)	PhD (Applied Ling.) MA (ELT)	PhD (ELT) MA (ELT)
Experience	8 years/5 years	6 years/12 years	10 years/5 years	7 years/15 years

Data collection techniques

The current study adopted a qualitative research approach, utilizing semi-structured and focus group interview methodologies, to investigate the implementation of English language teacher education programs in selected Iranian language institutes. These two qualitative approaches were adopted to achieve depth and contextual understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Semi-structured Interview

In this study, the primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, as outlined by Tracy (2013). Qualitative interviews offer opportunities for mutual discovery, reflection, and explanation, making them a suitable choice for this research. Our rationale for selecting this technique was that it would enable the interviewees to feel less formal than the structured interviews, fostering richer responses (Brinkman, 2022). Another rationale for our selection was the flexibility associated with semi-structured interviews, which facilitated the discussion of issues that arose or piqued the participants' interest, allowing probing of emergent themes. Our interview protocol included 12 main questions with optional probes to elicit examples of participants' training experiences, and to allow for cross-participant comparison while keeping individual responses. Prior to administering the interviews, the questions were reviewed by an expert in Applied Linguistics with a PhD qualification to ensure their suitability for the study. Subsequently, a content validity index was utilized to validate the interview questions. Three ELT experts were invited to provide their opinions on the questions, and the resulting content validity index of 0.84 indicated a favorable level of agreement among them. To calculate the content validity ratio, they rated the essentiality of each question on a 4-option Likert scale (1= not relevant- 4= highly relevant). The content validity index was calculated by the proportion of items that were rated as being highly relevant by the three experts.

The questions were developed and validated through a three-stage process. First, questions were developed based on a thorough review of literature on details of teacher preparation courses and key related themes (e.g. Borg, 2023; Yuan, 2023) and covered all study objectives (program content, L1 use, technology integration, etc.). Sample core questions included: Describe how the TTC prepared you to teach various language skills and sub-skills?; Were you allowed/encouraged to use Persian? If yes, how?; Were technological tools integrated into your training? If so, how? ; Did the training program require you to reflect on your teaching? If yes, how?; How did the training program balance theoretical representations with practical teaching techniques? How did the training course address the integration of students' native culture into the English teaching? Provide examples. The core questions were accompanied by probing questions- like give me examples, or can you elaborate further- to further elucidate the realities of the under-studied teacher education programs. Next, three applied linguists reviewed the protocol for content validity, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Later, the interview guide was pilot-tested by conducting interviews with two teachers (not included in the final participants); the protocol was refined based on their feedback in terms of adding more probing questions and reducing jargon.

Focus-group Interview

A second data collection technique we employed was focus-group interviews, which were utilized to gain a more profound comprehension of the research subject (Hummelvoll, 2008). A focus-group interview is defined as a series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a particular topic in a permissive, non-threatening environment where there is comfortable interaction and communication between the interviewees and the interviewer (Krueger &

Casey, 2000). In this study, the focus group interviews provided a congenial atmosphere for participants and facilitated the interviewer in obtaining information that could not be acquired through semi-structured interviews. Since the time allotted for discussion in a focus-group interview is restricted, and the fewer the number of participants is, the greater the amount of time that each individual contributes (Krueger & Casey, 2000), we decided to conduct focus-group interviews in four separate sessions; each session was assigned to the four participants from each institute. This approach enabled us to gain a more comprehensive view since the four participants in each focus group interview were acquainted with each other, and there was a good rapport between them with sufficient time to investigate the topic of the interview. Three main reasons justified our choice of focus-group interviews: Synergistic dynamics- peer interactions could better capture institutional norms-; efficiency- four sessions of focused interviews optimized time, while keeping small-group depth of the data-; and triangulation- the collective perspective cross-verified the individual interviews. Similar to the interview protocol, focus-group interview questions were developed and validated through the three-stage process of literature grounding, expert review, and pilot study. Examples of core questions raised for this phase are: Share your experiences about technology training in your TTC; describe moments when using Persian assisted or limited English learning; how did the program address L1 culture in English teaching; and how could TTCs help you become more reflective practitioners?

Procedure

In this study, a systematic approach was employed to identify language institutes with a long history of teaching English in the country. The researchers initiated their search by exploring the websites of various language institutes. After a thorough examination, four language institutes were selected based on their extensive precedence in English language education. We then contacted their managers and informed them about the research objectives. Upon receiving their consent, we were introduced to four novice teachers and four teacher educators at each institute. The participants were selected based on their recent completion of the training course at their respective institutes, and they expressed enthusiasm to participate in the study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in person at their institutional setting to minimize anxiety and obtain reliable results. The interview sessions lasted between 45 minutes and one hour, and all sessions were recorded for later transcription. During the interviews, the participants were asked to provide factual information to ensure the quality of the data gathered. The interviews were conducted in Persian (the interviewees' preferred language) to ensure participants' comfort and ease of expression. All the interviews were conducted by one of the authors of this research with more than five years of teaching experience in various language institutes.

Approximately two weeks after the initial interviews, a second focus group interview was conducted with all participants. The focus group interviews were carried out in four separate

sessions, with each session allocated to the participants from one language institute to facilitate the sharing of common experiences, insights, and beliefs regarding the training courses offered by their respective institutes. The focus group interviews began with a warm-up stage during which the researcher reviewed the key points mentioned by each participant in their initial interview to provide them with an opportunity to add any additional viewpoints if needed. The discussion then continued with main questions directed towards the group, allowing each individual sufficient time to think and express their ideas. The focus group interviews lasted between one and a half hours and two hours and were audio-recorded for later transcription. At the end of each discussion, the main issues were overviewed and summarized by the participants.

This study applied the ethical guidelines by asking all the interviewees to provide written informed consent prior to their participation. Their consent ensured they understood the study's objectives, its voluntary nature, as well as their right to withdraw. Their anonymity was protected by using pseudonyms and removing identifiable institute names. Data was only accessible to the authors and used for research purposes.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The framework includes the phases of familiarization with the qualitative data, generating codes, developing themes, reviewing the themes, naming the themes, and presenting the final report. During this process, we first did an iterative review of all interview transcripts. This resulted in generating codes like 'grammar-translation', 'communicative approach', and 'error-correction strategies' which were later consolidated, based on their shared theme, into the same category, named Teaching Methods. In other words, Teaching Methods combined codes about method diversity and skill-specific techniques. This inductive process allowed us to extract recurring themes within the transcripts and to interpret them within the broader ELT context of the country. To validate the coding procedure and ensure analytical rigor, we coded the transcripts independently and achieved a high inter-coder agreement. Disagreements in theme identification were resolved through discussion. Finally, we shared findings with five participants; in most cases, they confirmed our categorization of their data. In the results section, participants quotations, which are presented for illustration, were derived from a systematic theme-based analysis rather than anecdotal presentation.

Results

The ensuing analysis yielded several primary themes, which are expounded upon in this section utilizing data from multiple sources of collection. This practice, namely triangulation of data through comparing themes extracted from two data sources, adds to the credibility of the findings. Quotes are presented as representative evidence of themes validated through inter-coder agreement. Their inclusion aligns with Tracy's (2010) standard for thick description in

qualitative work. Representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme's salience across institutes. The themes include teaching methods, flexibility, practical teaching, reflection, native language use, L2 culture, and technology use. All seven themes were noticeably present across the interviews, reflecting their dominance in Iranian TTCs; however, the interviewees devoted unequal discursive space to each of theme. For instance, teaching methods and practical teaching dominated the interviews (evidenced by repeated examples and extended recollections); technology use and reflection prompted more situational dialogues; flexibility, native language use, and culture were addressed primarily when discussing constraints.

Teaching Methods

In our analysis of the perspectives of participants in various language institutes, we identified teaching methods as the predominant theme that emerged through a systematic thematic analysis process. This theme was consistently highlighted across both semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions, revealing its centrality in teacher preparation courses we explored. While some minor differences emerged, the findings of the two data sources mainly converged. Thematic coding revealed that a significant portion of teacher preparation courses in their respective institutions focused on presenting a range of traditional and modern teaching methods and, by extension, techniques for teaching specific skills and sub-skills. For instance, in semi-structured interviews, novice teachers expressed this sentiment as follows:

> *We delved into the various techniques and principles used in language teaching, including the grammar-translation method, the direct method, the audio-lingual method, and the silent way. We learned how to effectively teach all four language skills to students of different ages and how to create engaging learning experiences for them. Later on in the course, we shifted our focus to communicative approaches to learning and teaching English, which prioritize developing students' ability to communicate effectively in real-life situations.* (Teacher C2, semi-structured interview)

This excerpt exemplifies a pattern observed across multiple participants and varied data sources, where teacher educators stressed the transition from traditional approaches to more learner-oriented ones. A teacher educator in the focus-group interview admitted that such a shift reflects the students' communicative needs.

By the aforementioned assertion, during their exposition of diverse pedagogical approaches, teacher educators offered extensive guidance on how to impart linguistic competencies and subskills. The emphasis placed on this particular aspect was consistently underscored by the majority of respondents. An illustrative instance includes:

> *We learned how to instruct all four language skills to students of different ages. We were required to create a warm-up for teaching each skill before moving on to the actual instruction. After teaching the skill, we helped our students practice and produce it. This*

> *approach allowed us to provide a comprehensive and engaging learning experience for our students.* (Teacher A2, semi-structured interview)

This quote supports the thematic code "integration of methods with skills instruction", which emerged in our coding process, across the two data sets, under the theme of Teaching Methods. Triangulated data from focus-group interviews corroborated the individual accounts. In this regard, our interviews furnished empirical evidence supporting the imperative of imparting diverse pedagogical techniques for teaching speaking skills to all examined teacher education courses. The thematic patterns related to speaking instruction highlighted the emphasis on classroom interaction strategies, error correction, and learner personality factors. As articulated by one educator,

> *During their teacher training, teachers learn how to encourage students to participate in speaking activities and how to correct their oral errors. They also discover that students' personalities can impact their speaking abilities, as some may be hesitant to speak in front of others due to shyness or a fear of making mistakes. By recognizing these factors, teachers can develop strategies to help all students feel confident and comfortable when speaking in class.* (Teacher educator D4, semi-structured interview)

As the proceeding excerpt indicates, in contrast to our teachers who reported what they experienced, teacher educators elaborated on the rationale behind instructional activities. For instance, they advocated adapting speaking instruction to the students' personalities. Teachers and teacher educators in their focus-group discussion, further, highlighted the primacy of integrating techniques for teaching speaking skill in TTCs as well as the justification behind these inclusions.

Additionally, our findings revealed that pre-service teachers were not only trained in oral communication skills but also received instruction on how to impart writing proficiency to their future students. A teacher educator emphasized the gravity of disregarding the teaching of writing competency to students in the initial stages, as this neglect may persist into advanced levels. Another teacher educator elaborated on the treatment of teaching writing in their teacher training courses:

> *Teachers come to understand that correcting grammar is not the only aspect of teaching writing. In fact, writing involves more than just grammar, and there are other crucial components that teachers need to focus on as well. By recognizing this, teachers can provide their students with a more comprehensive and effective writing education.* (Teacher educator D3, semi-structured interview).

This was reinforced in focus-group interviews where multiple teacher educators emphasized incorporating components of writing instruction into teacher preparation courses.

Data analysis yielded further subthemes about teaching listening and reading. In fact, in their effort to imbue teacher candidates with the proficiency to instruct in the domains of oral and written language, teacher trainers have also sought to imbue them with expertise in teaching listening and reading skills. About the preeminence of incorporating listening abilities into teacher education programs, one instructor expressed that teaching listening skills to students presents a formidable challenge for teachers, particularly novice ones. One of the teacher educators elaborated that this difficulty is inherent in the nature of the skill itself.

> *When it comes to teaching listening skills, there are many factors that teachers should be aware of. For example, they should know when to pause the audio for students to repeat what they've heard, as well as how to teach new vocabulary and expressions that come up during listening activities. These skills can be developed through attending teacher training courses.*
> (Teacher Educator C5, focus group interview).

Our participants further emphasized the crucial importance of teaching reading skills in teacher training programs. They collectively emphasized the necessity of viewing reading as an interactive process during preparation courses. In this regard, Nunan (2003) draws attention to the components of the reading process, which include decoding, deciphering, identifying, articulating, pronouncing, understanding, and responding. Burgoyne et al. (2013) underscored the significance of background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge for successful reading comprehension, highlighting the responsibility of teachers to activate these concepts. The subthemes related to teaching listening and reading, including "scaffolded listening" and "interactive reading" were evident in both sets of data, with focus groups adding institutional perspectives to the narratives reported in individual interviews.

Among the various sub-skills, four language institutes paid special attention to educating teacher trainees on how to teach grammar to the pupils. The subtheme of "adaptive grammar instruction" was extracted from both sets of data and reported by both groups of participants. Teacher educators D3 in the focus-group discussion reasoned that:

> *One of the most debated topics in teaching English is how to teach grammar. Different approaches have been developed, and new teachers might feel overwhelmed about which one to choose. The discussion around grammar teaching has centered on whether it should be taught implicitly, explicitly, deductively, or inductively. This is a significant issue in language education because grammar is a fundamental aspect of any language, and students need to learn it accurately and effectively. As a result, teachers must understand the strengths and weaknesses of each approach and choose the one that best suits their students' needs.* (Teacher educators D3, focus group interview)

In addition to their instruction on teaching grammar, teacher educators devoted a significant portion of time to imparting techniques for teaching vocabulary to prospective

teachers. A teacher educator emphasized the importance of providing teachers with the necessary knowledge to anticipate potential issues that may arise in vocabulary instruction. Subsequently, he underscored the significance of raising teachers' awareness of the disparities between vocabulary teaching in students' native languages and that in foreign languages. In light of this, he advocated for the presentation of contemporary and suitable methods for teaching vocabulary in teacher education programs that can be implemented in actual classroom settings. The subtheme of "real-world vocabulary teaching" was evident in both data sets.

In summary, the aforementioned evidence collected from triangulated analysis of semi-structured and focus-group interviews highlights the significance of cultivating linguistic abilities in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors and learners. The programs under examination have dedicated ample time to teaching trainee teachers how to teach each skill and how to facilitate their students' proficiency development in these areas. Notably, the trainers of these TTC institutes have asserted that their primary objective is to enable their students to communicate effectively orally and in writing, as many of them are required to pass internationally recognized examinations such as IELTS or TOEFL. Furthermore, the multitude of pedagogical approaches presented in scholarly literature warrants devoting time to educating EFL teachers on these methods during TTC programs.

Flexibility

During the thematic analysis of our data, flexibility emerged as a fundamental tenet, reflecting our interviewees' emphasis on adaptability as a prominent teaching competency. This theme emerged across both sets of data collection, which revealed substantial alignment in how the theme was perceived by the participants.

According to Santiago et al.'s (2021) assertion, flexibility is inherently linked to the capacity for adaptation, and a lack thereof poses challenges for both educators and learners in delivering effective teaching and learning experiences. In essence, flexibility refers to the ability of teachers to adjust and reorganize instructional materials, manage time efficiently, and implement various strategies to maximize educational outcomes in a dynamic learning environment that is subject to disruptions, dialogue, and novel ideas.

In the semi-structured interviews, the majority of participants emphasized individual teacher flexibility in resolving classroom uncertainties. As highlighted by Trainer A4, flexibility is a crucial teacher-related characteristic that directly contributes to effective teaching and enables educators to respond appropriately to varying circumstances and student requirements. The trainer further expounded on this notion, stating that:

> *In the ever-evolving world of language education, unexpected scenarios can arise in the classroom that can either enhance or hinder the learning process. As an academic, I firmly believe that teachers must possess flexibility and adaptability to manage these unforeseen situations and maximize the learning outcomes for their students. Let's delve into this topic further.* (Teacher educator A4, semi-structured interview)

This excerpt supports the coded subtheme "real-time instructional adjustment" which was reported in both semi-structured and focus-group interviews.

During our discussions, several justifications for the promotion of pedagogical flexibility in English language teaching have emerged. Both data sets converged on the view that flexibility is not just desirable, but essential for an effective ELT class. Teacher C2 highlighted the unique characteristics of each classroom as a crucial factor that necessitates flexibility in ELT instruction. He underscored the importance of adaptability in ELT, given the diverse learning needs and styles of students, as evinced in the following excerpt:

> *They stressed the uniqueness of each classroom and encouraged teachers to adapt their teaching methods to fit the particular circumstances of their students. They also highlighted the importance of considering larger institutional, social, and cultural factors when making decisions about teaching methods and activities to maximize the potential of each class. Essentially, they were advocating for a tailored and contextually aware approach to teaching.* (Teacher C2, semi-structured interview)

This observation was echoed in focus-group discussions, where participants insisted on the significance of flexibility in dealing with a recent inclination towards hybrid classes. The aforementioned instances serve to demonstrate the efficacy of teachers' adaptability, which assumes heightened significance in light of the hybrid nature of classroom settings and the diverse requirements and objectives of students.

Subthemes like "material adaptation strategies" also emerged in both data sets. Participants revealed how they were trained to modify instructional materials to meet the needs of students with varying proficiency levels and learning styles. Teacher educator C3 reinforced this:

> *The more flexible a teacher is, the more effectively they can adjust their instructional methods and enhance student participation and engagement*. (Teacher educator C3, semi-structured interview)

In essence, as explained by our participants, the activities and resources proposed by teachers must be adaptable and intended to foster the development of transferable skills and strategies. To this goal, teachers must be trained on how to modify materials through omission, addition, reduction, extension, rewriting/modification, replacement, reordering, and branching whenever learners need extra practice with certain elements. Moreover, teachers need to be able to address various learning styles and preferences as students have varied experiences and backgrounds. The overlap of participant responses across varied data sets regarding the relevance of flexibility as both a pedagogical method and as a practical skill set highlights the prominence of this theme within ELT teacher education programs.

Practical Teaching

Thematic analysis of the data identified practical teaching as a key theme that emerged across the two sets of data sources. This theme included several subthemes, namely "peer observation", "mock teaching", and "experiential reflection", which were developed during the coding process, based on the repeated patterns in the transcripts.

According to Baric (2020), practical teaching involves the integration of theoretical concepts with practical tasks to enhance teacher proficiency. This conceptualization aligns with the perspective of our practitioners who endorsed the significance of experiential learning for bridging the theory-practice gap in teacher education. They acknowledged that over time, the proportion of practical teaching has augmented. The study's subjects expounded on diverse methods utilized in teacher training programs to achieve the objective of practical teaching. Two techniques proposed for this purpose were observing other teachers' classes and mock teaching in the presence of experienced and aspiring educators, as illustrated in the following instance:

> *During our teacher training program, we had the chance to deliver lessons in the target language for our fellow teachers. We also observed other classes to get a better understanding of their teaching methods. This practice helps participants in these courses learn how to effectively teach in different scenarios. One of the unique aspects of these teacher training programs is the opportunity to watch top teachers' classes and learn from their experiences.* (Teacher A2, focus group interview)

As evidenced by the preceding quotations, the study's participants expressed a favorable opinion toward the implementation of practical teaching methods in preparation courses through various pedagogical approaches.

Semi-structured interviews offered complementary insight into how practical teaching is operationalized in teacher training courses. Teacher educators highlighted the function of practical teaching to assess trainee teachers' readiness for real class environments. One teacher educator revealed that classroom observation and teaching rehearsals were obligatory for issuing certificates. Participants also recalled that exposure to real or simulated teaching was among the most valuable parts of their training. It helped them to feel more confident for meeting varied classroom contexts. In sum, the theme's recurrence across the two sets of data sources and participants of various contexts reveals its centrality in the architecture of teacher preparation programs.

Reflection

Thematic analysis of the data identified reflection as a recurring theme within semi-structured and focus-group interviews. This theme included subthemes such as "pre-lesson mental rehearsal", "in-action adjustment", and "post-lesson evaluation", which were coded during the analysis of the data. This finding represents the embeddedness of reflection in the design of teacher education courses in the selected contexts.

In the realm of English language teaching, scholarly investigation into reflective teaching has been ongoing for approximately three decades. The concept of reflection has been defined in various overlapping ways in existing discourse. Kaywork (2011) identifies learning from experience and returning to teaching practice to consider its consequences as fundamental aspects of reflective teachers. Burton (2009) view teacher reflection as a continuous process of self-observation and self-evaluation. According to the Center for the Advancement of Teaching (2021), reflective teaching involves a progression toward heightened awareness of the various facets of teaching.

Our investigation into selected teacher training contexts in Iran uncovered evidence of this concept's integration into training programs. Within the vast array of advantages associated with reflective teaching, our participants consistently emphasized its significance in promoting student learning. An illustrative instance is provided below:

> *It's commonly recommended for teachers to take a moment to reflect on their teaching practices before, during, or after their classes. This reflection can have a positive impact on their students' learning experiences. By contemplating their teaching methods beforehand, teachers can prepare themselves mentally and emotionally for the class, ensuring they are fully present and engaged. During the lesson, reflection can help teachers adjust their teaching strategies in real time based on student feedback and engagement levels. After class, reflection allows teachers to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching methods and identify areas for improvement. This ongoing process of reflection can ultimately lead to more effective and engaging teaching practices for students.* (Teacher Educator C3, semi-structured interview)

Focus-group participants, particularly teacher educators, presented a complementary perspective. They reported that reflective logs were embedded as structured components of their teacher training sequence. Hence, triangulation of data sources revealed alignment in participants' perceptions across the two data sets. Teachers valued reflection for its personal benefits, and teacher educators mainly advocated reflection due to its pedagogical and institutional utilities. Overall, all participants concurred that reflective teaching was integrated into their teacher education programs. Moreover, they advocated for the use of reflectivity as a pedagogical strategy to improve classroom awareness and responsiveness and ultimately to promote student learning. As a result, reflection can be considered not only as an individual training tool but as a collective activity that can be integrated into the training courses. By advocating reflection within teacher training programs, institutes can smoothen the path of teachers' professional development by training teachers who are both adaptive and introspective.

Native Language Use

Thematic analysis of the data revealed native language use as a prominent theme. This theme emerged from both semi-structured and focus-group interviews. During the coding process, subthemes such as "judicious facilitation", "L1 for classroom management", and "institutional divergence on L1 policy" were identified.

In the realm of language pedagogy, the integration of students' native languages into foreign language learning has been a subject of contentious debate (Brown, 2000). While some experts advocate for this approach as conducive to learning, others deem it detrimental. Nevertheless, certain language theorists have contested the complete eradication of the mother tongue from foreign language classes (Nation, 2003) and have posited that judicious utilization of the native language can yield favorable outcomes (Cook, 2000). In our exploration, the majority of our selected institutions permitted the judicious use of L1 to an extent that does not impede learning the second language: The following quotation illustrates this point:

> *During our TTC program, the instructor advised us to avoid using Persian unless it was absolutely necessary when communicating with students. This is because excessive use of Persian in English language classes can indicate a teacher's weak speaking skills and hinder students' exposure to English. Therefore, it's essential to minimize the use of Persian and prioritize clear and concise English communication to enhance the learning experience for students.* (Teacher A1, semi-structured interview)

This excerpt which was coded in the sub-theme ""judicious facilitation" reveals teacher educators' cautious encouragement of L1 use, only when necessary.

The analysis of the perspectives held by practitioners in institutions A, B, and C suggests a congruence with emerging insights from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning. This alignment offers fresh perspectives on the judicious utilization of the native language in second language (L2) instruction. Our research reveals that the role of the native language in L2 classrooms can serve diverse functionalities, as reported by our participants. For instance, a teacher described the use of L1 as being instrumental in maintaining discipline and building rapport, especially in large classes. She elaborated:

> *The mother tongue can be utilized to foster a positive classroom environment and preserve discipline in large classes. This is because students may find it easier to comprehend and follow instructions in their native language, which can lead to a more conducive learning atmosphere. Additionally, using the mother tongue can help teachers manage large classes by making it simpler to convey instructions and maintain order.* (Teacher C1, semi-structured interview).

The focus-group data provided further depth by locating L1 use within specific classroom situations. For instance, one of the teachers stressed that the use of L1 promotes efficiency and reduces misunderstandings in instruction. He emphasized:

> *In these courses, it was conveyed that the use of the mother tongue can be beneficial in certain situations to enhance comprehension, speed up learning, and clarify crucial concepts. However, it was also emphasized that the use of the first language should not impede the acquisition of the second language. This means that teachers should strike a balance between using the mother tongue and English to facilitate learning without hindering students' progress in English.* (Teacher C2, focus group interview).

Interestingly, both interview types converged on the idea that their teacher training programs encourage a balanced approach to the use of learners' native tongue in the L2 environments and provide a triangulated support on the use of native language as a scaffold rather than a hindrance to learning.

The recollections presented herein provide robust support for the utilization of students' native language in the context of language learning. The use of a student's native language has been found to facilitate the explanation of complex ideas and grammar rules, as well as the effective acquisition of new vocabulary. Moreover, it prevents the waste of time in explanations and instructions. The diverse contexts in which the first language (L1) can be employed to aid second language teaching have been explored by various scholars, such as Kraemer (2006) and Warford (2007), who have examined the role of L1 in classroom management, translation and meaning checking, understanding grammatical points, language analysis, and code-switching. These scholars have also observed that L1 use can create a more relaxed classroom environment, where students share linguistic and cultural references with their teacher, which undoubtedly impacts learning. From a broader perspective, Centeno-Cortes and Jimenez (2004) have asserted that in problem-solving tasks, private verbal speech performed in L1 plays a crucial role in the development of L2 learners' language abilities. Similarly, McMillan and Rivers (2011) have demonstrated that judicious use of L1 can enhance language learning in the context of communicative language teaching (CLT).

In contrast to other institutions, Institute D appears to adopt a more rigorous stance regarding the role of the first language in second language classrooms. The following excerpt offers insight into their reluctance to incorporate L1 in foreign language learning contexts:

> *In these courses, there was a highly unfavorable perspective toward the use of the mother tongue in the classroom, and it was strongly emphasized that it should not be employed, particularly with more advanced students who had already acquired a sufficient level of proficiency in English. The reasoning behind this view is that these students are capable of expressing themselves fluently in English and should be encouraged to do so to further develop their language skills.* (Teacher D2, semi-structured interview)

The orientation of Institute D teacher educators seems to be in line with earlier attempts at language teaching pedagogy, which, as elucidated by Cook (2000), has somehow ignored or suppressed the use of the first language, favoring a predominantly monolingual policy.

Krashen's comprehensive input hypothesis and Long's interaction hypothesis played crucial roles in L1 exclusion in this era. In more recent years, scholars, such as Sampson (2011), have considered the 'English-only' policy, which began with the popularity of the Direct Method, as an indication of hostility toward the Grammar-Translation method as a bilingual approach.

Overall, the analysis of the data of the current study in light of the existing debates on the role of L1 and the teacher preparation contexts of concern reveals that in addition to being affected by the current talks in the field, practitioners are influenced by the policies of the institutions in which they are working, their experience as teachers, the physical condition of the classroom, and the fact that all the students share the same L1. Additionally, students need to learn a foreign language to prepare for examinations or communication in L2 impacts the use of L1 in the education system. In sum, the picture that emerges here may refer to the fact that teacher training courses favor judicious use of L1 by novice teachers who have no or little real teaching experience.

Culture

Thematic analysis of our data revealed culture as a significant theme, which occurred in both semi-structured and focus-group interviews and reflected varied institutional orientations towards the inclusion of culture in teacher training programs. The coding stage identified three main subthemes, including "balanced cultural integration", "institutional constraints", and "intercultural readiness".

In the realm of linguistics, culture is defined as a set of behaviors, thoughts, communications, languages, practices, beliefs, values, customs, rituals, modes of interaction, and social relationships (Brown, 2007). Within the context of language learning, all aspects of teaching and learning are inherently cultural, and learning a language is inseparable from learning its culture (Kuang, 2007). As a result, cultural awareness is a critical component of effective communication in a new language (Risager, 2007). In Iran, the sensitivity surrounding foreign language culture is particularly pronounced due to variations in cultural traits (Sowden, 2007). Consequently, it is imperative for teacher educators to enhance teacher candidates' local and/or foreign cultural awareness in teacher preparation courses and prepare them to navigate cultural differences in their future classrooms.

Our interviews with practitioners revealed that selected language institutes differed in their orientation toward culturally imbued teaching. Institutes A, B, and C appeared more inclined to integrate both the source and target culture into their language teaching preparation courses. The following anecdote illustrates this observation:

> *Alongside promoting an understanding and appreciation for their native culture, we also strive to instill respect and dignity for the target culture in our students. This is crucial because as they become more proficient in the foreign language, they will be better equipped to navigate and interact with the culture associated with that language.*

> *Therefore, it is essential to teach students about the L2 culture when the ultimate objective is communicative competence.* (Teacher educator C4, semi-structured interview)

Focus-group discussions with participants from Institutes A, B, and C reinforced this idea. Our practitioners reinforced the idea that L2 learners need foreign culture for their international communication, migration, or for professional settings where intercultural competence is required. In contrast to educators and teacher training course instructors at other institutions, those affiliated with Institute D appeared hesitant to incorporate sessions on the target culture into their pedagogical programs due to systemic challenges. The following remark illustrates this observation:

> *A variety of factors hinder our ability to teach culture in the classroom. These include overcrowded curricula, insufficient time, exam-focused courses, and a lack of familiarity with foreign cultures. These obstacles make it challenging to incorporate cultural instruction into the classroom setting.* (Teacher educator D3, focus group interview)

The preceding statements primarily underscore the significance of integrating culture into foreign language instruction and the necessity to instill awareness among prospective teachers regarding this issue, as highlighted by Clayton et al. (2008). Our respondents have emphasized that the majority of English as a Foreign Language instructors disregard the importance of teaching culture and instead focus solely on linguistic materials during their classes. To address this neglect, teacher training programs can provide a suitable platform for teachers to comprehend how culture affects the teaching and learning processes. The excerpts cited above further reveal that the majority of our participants favored the integration of local and Western cultures in teacher training courses. They acknowledged that students intending to migrate should not be deprived of learning cultural aspects. These findings signify that the vast majority of Iranian language instructors perceive the value of respecting the uniqueness of native and foreign cultures to facilitate their students' preparation for encountering target language contexts while empowering them by drawing upon the features of their native culture.

Technology Use

Technology use was the last theme extracted through the thematic analysis of the interviews. It emerged through recurring patterns in our practitioners' recollections about the inclusion of technological tools in teacher education practices. Three main subthemes appeared in both sources of data: "digital literacy tools", authentic interaction via technology", and "evolution of instructional roles".

Technology use in language learning is characterized as integrating technological tools into language learning activities to enhance efficiency, foster motivation, and accommodate diverse learning styles (Zhou & Wei, 2018). Technology offers numerous benefits for language learning, as it infuses instruction with interest and productivity, and enables learners to engage

in practical language acquisition through communication with their peers. This mode of learning is not limited by curriculum or resources (Shyamlee & Phil, 2012). Unsurprisingly, the participants in the current study acknowledged the pivotal role of technological advancement in English language teaching contexts. Teacher educators enumerated a variety of functions that technology serves. One of them cited:

> *Technological resources, particularly the internet, can serve a multitude of purposes in the classroom. For instance, students can utilize online dictionaries, create digital flashcards, and access authentic examples to enhance their language learning experience. Teachers can also leverage technology tools by facilitating online conversations between students and native speakers, providing them with a unique opportunity to practice their language skills in real-life scenarios during class time.* (Teacher educator A4, semi-structured interview)

This quote which was coded under the subtheme "authentic interaction via technology" appeared repeatedly in educators' accounts of real-time communication tools like email, video calls, and forums.

When asked about how the issue of technology was treated in teacher preparation courses at language institutes, teacher trainees uncovered other aspects of technology integration into their language classes. An instance is:

> *During our session, we acquired knowledge about various digital resources that can be utilized on smartphones and laptops. One such tool that we learned about is Grammarly, which assists students in identifying and correcting grammatical errors in their writing. We were also provided with a list of websites where we could download podcasts to play in class or distribute them as homework assignments to our student groups via email.* (Teacher D1, semi-structured interview)

Focus-group interviews, further, added insights into the subtheme "digital literacy tools", by elaborating on how to integrate digital tools like Quizlet and online classroom platforms into the curriculum design. They noted how smartphone apps are featured in training programs. The third subtheme, namely "evolution of instructional roles" appeared only in focus-group interviews, where participants referred to the change of teachers' roles from authoritative to facilitator roles. Murray (2005) highlighted this change in classroom dynamics through the integration of technology.

These recollections reveal a consensus among participants of selected language institutes regarding the enhancement of technology in ELT preparation courses and actual classes. This consensus is also evident in published literature on the subject. As Arno-Marcia (2012) asserts, since 1991, technologies have provided authentic materials and resources for English learning in real-world situations due to the increased availability of resources and materials on the internet. Mishra and Koehler (2006) describe information and communication technologies as

crucial in education because they can alter the classroom environment and make subject matter more accessible to learners.

It is noteworthy that there has been a significant transformation in the realm of technology integration in teacher training programs offered by Iranian language institutes in recent years. While in the past, language institutes used to hold classes in language laboratories where teachers could monitor students' interactions, today, various forms of technology integration facilitate language teaching and learning. According to Lai and Kritsonis (2006), technology tools are currently utilized for communicative and interactive activities to help foreign language learners strengthen their linguistic skills, learning attitudes, and build self-instruction strategies and self-confidence. Murray (2005) note that the use of technological devices by teachers has led to changes in their roles, from lecturers to facilitators of learning, thereby promoting student independence and self-sufficiency.

In summary, the data we gained through differing data sets revealed that technology is no more supplemental but foundational to ELT training programs. It can be regarded as a multidimensional asset that can be used for planning, assessment, interaction, and personalization. By juxtaposing the voices of various representatives of language institutes, we can support the integration of digital competencies into ELT pedagogy.

Discussion

As previously stated, teaching methods emerged as the most prevalent theme extracted from the data of participants in various language institutes. The development of required teaching skills for prospective teachers has been advanced by almost all scholars in different parts of the world due to its significance and effects on the teaching profession (e.g. Akbari & Eghtesadi Roudi, 2020; Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2018). As highlighted by Kumaravadivelu (2001), EFL teacher trainers require information on methods for presenting new materials and concepts due to the variety of teaching methods and materials and the heterogeneity of learners. The findings of this study regarding the predominance of familiarizing teacher trainees with teaching methods corroborate the results of an earlier study by Author et al. (2022), who found that instructing prospective teachers in ELT approaches, teaching methods, and steps of teaching constituted the primary focus of English language teacher preparation programs for language institutes. Notably, a lack of critical engagement with local teaching models and realities in some of the under-studied institutes might limit the practicality of such methods. As argued by Askarpoor et al. (2022), method-based training might be inapplicable and abstract, without contextual adaptation.

Our participants demonstrated that all language skills and sub-skills were appropriately emphasized in their preparation courses. The primacy of empowering teacher candidates with the ability to teach speaking skills and, consequently, teacher intervention to enhance students' oral skills has been advocated by scholars such as Juhana (2012), and Namaziandoost and Nasri

(2019). They contend that speaking is a critical skill for foreign language learners, previously overlooked, that necessitates trained teachers to intervene in improving students' speaking abilities through various strategies. The significance of teachers' considering writing strategies and writing processes has also been a topic of concern in related literature in recent years. According to Ariyanti (2016), novice teachers often adopt a typical approach to teaching writing by providing students with a topic to write on, which overlooks the most crucial aspect, which is the process. The results obtained in the present study do not seem to concur with some existing research. For instance, while other studies, such as Rezaee and Ghanbarpour (2016), found that writing skills were disregarded in all courses, our selected institutes were found to devote a reasonable amount of time to teaching writing. This spread might be indicative of a positive trend in teacher preparation priorities, in the sense that some language schools are beginning to move away from traditional exam-based approaches toward more skills-based, learner-centered instruction.

In addition to other language skills, the complex nature of learning and teaching listening skills has been acknowledged for several years. Rost (2002) considers listening to be a complex process that occurs simultaneously inside the mind. Andrade (2006) emphasizes that teachers face challenges in effectively teaching listening skills due to various reasons, including a lack of innovative methodology, equipment, and materials, teacher capability, and student motivation. Furthermore, our participants underscored the essential requirement of considering reading skills as an interactive process in preparation programs. Nunan (2003) highlights decoding, deciphering, identifying, articulating, pronouncing, understanding, and responding as composing the process of reading skills. Burgoyne et al. (2013) emphasize that background knowledge and vocabulary knowledge are crucial for successful reading comprehension, which is the responsibility of teachers. While these sub-skills were reportedly emphasized, it remains unknown if the instructional materials provided were in line with contemporary understandings of multiliteracies and digital literacies in reading and listening instruction (see Godwin-Jones, 2023).

Moreover, the significance of vocabulary teaching techniques, as highlighted by our research participants, is in line with the prevailing discourse in the literature on teaching language sub-skills. The necessity of preparing future teachers for vocabulary teaching techniques is a recurrent theme in this body of literature. Walters (2004) emphasizes that vocabulary acquisition is a crucial factor in successful language learning. Berne and Blachowicz (2008) contend that teaching vocabulary is a challenging and problematic aspect of teaching English as a foreign language, particularly for novice teachers who may lack confidence in implementing optimal practices and are sometimes unaware of how to initiate word learning. Our participants also acknowledged the primacy of receiving training in grammar instruction. Similar findings have been reported in the context of Iran by Nazari et al. (2022), who discovered that collaborative and pragmatic aspects of grammar instruction were addressed in TTC classes. The need for learning techniques for grammar teaching has been

recognized for several decades. Richards and Renandya (2002) underscored the significance of focusing on grammar teaching techniques due to the proliferation of different methods and approaches, which have transformed the nature of grammar instruction in response to theoretical changes. In another study, Farrell and Lim (2005) claimed that overemphasis on grammar might waken communicative competence, and our results indicated that the studied TTCs might be balancing these demands by integrating both form-focused and meaning-focused instruction.

Overall, while our findings provide support for the predominance of method eclecticism, evidence from Mohamadi et al. (2023) highlights that Iranian language institutes now seem to blend CLT with Persian-mediated-scaffolding, a practice that is not recognized in the ministry agenda. This challenges the claim made by Kumaravadivelu (1994) that post-method pedagogy requires full immersion in the second language. We argue that this hybrid approach might represent Iranian teachers' response to the pressure for communicative teaching in the worldwide ELT trends as well as the expectations for the grammar-translation methods in the university entrance exams.

Another theme that emerged from our data analysis was flexibility. Our participants' concerns regarding flexibility align with the robust evidence provided by existing literature on the value of being trained as adaptable educators. According to Cao (2004), flexible teachers recognize that students have varying needs, motivation levels, abilities, and goals. This attribute enriches the learning environment, whereas inflexible teachers may find that their students are unable to follow their instructions due to neglecting their specific requirements. The results of our study, indicating that teachers are responsible for modifying their teaching methods when previous methods prove ineffective, corroborate the findings obtained by Rostami and Mirsanjari (2022), whose teachers acknowledged that adhering to a fixed old method cannot satisfy the complexity of teaching to different learners at different points in time. Such findings further highlight the need for moving towards responsive expertise in teacher education programs, as reinforced by recent calls by Vreuls et al. (2023), who advocate training courses that advocate adaptability over rigid curriculums.

The other theme identified in this study pertains to the role ascribed to practical teaching in the teacher training courses of the selected institutions. Numerous publications have underscored the primacy of practical teaching and have delineated various pathways to realizing it. For instance, Ranjan (2013) advocates for allowing student-teachers to teach in front of others before commencing their professional careers in actual classrooms and observing experienced and more knowledgeable teachers' classes. In terms of practicality, the findings of this study contradict those of Nezakat-Alhossaini and Ketabi's (2013) investigation, which revealed a lack of practicality as one issue with the courses in their study. Likewise, the results of this part diverge from Liyaghatdar's (2002) assertion that the way teachers are trained is predominantly theoretical, and practical courses are not offered for their practice as teachers. This shift towards increased classroom-based training may be regarded as a partial move away

from a transmissive model of teacher training towards a more experiential approach, but the scope and quality of such experiences are little researched.

About other themes, this study discovered that teacher training courses promote teacher reflection for professional development. Farrell (2007) posits that in EFL contexts, teacher preparation programs should instruct teachers on the concepts of self-reflection and self-evaluation to enhance their learning and teaching quality. Kumaravadivelu (2001) highlights the need for teacher education to cultivate autonomous teachers who can reflect on their teaching practices. Surprisingly, however, the findings of this study do not align with Author et al.'s (2022) study, which found that maintaining methodological uniformity and adhering to the institutional teaching model was necessary. The TTC trainers at those institutions maintained that they insisted on teaching speaking, reading, or vocabulary based on the framework provided in TPP and that teachers were not permitted to deviate from the model. In contrast, this study revealed that TTCs afforded teachers in the studied institutions opportunities to learn more about reflection to alter and update their classroom teaching practices. Such an orientation might reveal a growing trend towards reflective teaching models in Iranian ELT settings, though seldom implemented and not yet fully regulated.

In the current study, another theme emerged regarding the use of first language. As previously mentioned, the majority of the language institutes in question permitted the utilization of L1 to achieve specific objectives, thereby prioritizing monolingualism in the classroom. This finding aligns with the results of a study conducted by Author et al. (2022), which revealed that language institutes advocated for monolingualism in ELT, except in exceptional circumstances, such as when teaching in English takes an excessive amount of time. Several institutes in the present study also shared similar viewpoints, urging their teachers to avoid eliminating L1 from the process of teaching a new language and to utilize it when necessary to enhance comprehension. In contrast, some institutes completely prohibit the use of L1 and advise their teachers not to employ their native language in the classroom to enable students to learn to think in a second language. However, the restricted use of L1 as a last resort to preserve the pace of teaching at three institutes and the monolingualism policy at another institute do not align with Kumaravadivelu's (2003) criticisms of an 'English only' policy in language teaching or the findings of a study conducted by McMillan and Rivers (2011), which demonstrated that selective use of L1 can enhance learners' communicative abilities in English. This disparity might reveal an intense conflict between prescriptive top-down models and bottom-up instructional practices.

The issue of culture was not overlooked by our selected language institutes. The incorporation of culture in language learning has been emphasized since the emergence of the communicative competence approach, which underscores cultural awareness as part of linguistic competence (Kramsch & Hua, 2016). The importance of both Iranian and English cultures was reinforced in this study, similar to Author et al.'s (2022) study, where teachers attending TTC programs emphasized that cultural topics should not be neglected because

learners require exposure to authentic materials. The emphasis on local culture and the use of native languages in EFL classes is also emphasized in post-method pedagogy (Akbari, 2008). Nonetheless, the extent to which cultural aspects are critically examined- as opposed to just being presented- is questionable. In the lack of critical cultural sensitivity (Byram, 2012), further exposure might potentially lead to essentializing or trivializing cultural differences.

In the realm of language education, various scholarly investigations have established that the integration of technology can yield favorable outcomes. For instance, the implementation of collaborative projects, the provision of authentic materials, and the facilitation of communicative interactions with native English speakers through technology have been identified as positive effects (Golonka et al., 2014). Furthermore, technology can serve as a means of professional development for educators, as it enables them to share their expertise with their peers (McAleavy et al., 2018). The findings of this study align with these notions and correspond to those of Author et al.' s (2022) research, both of which suggest that technology is a prominent focus in EFL teaching methods advocated by TTC trainers and offer examples of how to utilize technological tools and websites to locate suitable listening activities and visuals. This conclusion is also consistent with Ebrahimi et al.'s (2016) study, which emphasizes the use of corpus linguistics in TTC programs. However, this study's results diverge from those of Hedayati et al.'s (2018) investigation, which revealed that discussions about the utilization of technology were absent from the TTC programs offered by language institutes. Accordingly, it seems imperative that future programs move away from training technological tools to address teachers' critical digital literacies, as prioritized by recent scholarship (e.g. Darvin, 2024), particularly given AI integration and the tendency towards remote instruction promoted by the Pandemic.

Conclusion

This study aimed to provide an analysis of the curricular and programmatic realities in a selection of Iranian language institutes with a long-standing history in teaching English. To gather data, a group of TTC instructors and trainee teachers were interviewed. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that topics such as Teaching Methods, Flexibility, Practical teaching, Reflection, Native language use, Culture, and Technology use were the most frequently discussed in the preparation courses of these language institutes. This exploration of teacher preparation programs of the understudied language institutes can could reveal critical insights about English language teaching in selected bilingual contexts. More specifically, our results can challenge three dominant assumptions in ELT: the monolingual myth, cultural neutrality, and the supplemental role of technology. While Institute D favored the English-only policy, three other institutes integrated Persian as a scaffolding tool- a practice which aligns with the ongoing translingual frameworks (Canagarajah, 2023), but contradicts the official monolingual orientation of the country. This disparity between policy and practice calls for nationwide teacher training standards to acknowledge the cognitive and managerial

applications of the students' native tongue. The institutional disparities on the inclusion of culture (A/B/C's integration in contrast to D's avoidance) indicate broader ideological tensions. Our findings could empirically validate Risager's (2023) claim that there could be no culture-free language teaching, yet highlight how systemic and institutional constraints (e.g. time limitations) can marginalize the inclusion of culture. This signals the necessity of curriculum reforms to advance intercultural competence. In addition, it was found that all institutes considered technology as foundational- not supplemental- to language teaching. This finding provides empirical support for the claim made by Kern (2024) on the role of technology in a multitude of class activities. However. Our findings could highlight the policy blind spot of infrastructure inconsistencies advancing inequalities which require attention.

This study has implications for various stakeholders in language teaching and learning, including teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers. Teacher educators can build upon the results of this study to develop modular training courses incorporating L1/L2 techniques. They can also incorporate AI literacy modules (e.g. for material development). Additionally, our investigation can offer policymakers resources to update, reformulate, and restructure TTCs to meet the evolving demands of education and the contemporary needs of students. By examining the specifics of TTCs, more comprehensive curricula for future teacher training programs can be developed. To be more specific, policymakers can approve current culture and technology standards in national ELT curriculum. They can also address the urban-rural inequalities by funding rural teacher tech hubs.

While our study presents valuable insights into English language teacher education programs of the country, several limitations are to be acknowledged, which can provide recommendations for future research. First, the results are dependent on the unique Iranian EFL bilingual education context and might not be applicable to monolingual or ESL situations. Second, while we interviewed diverse practitioners within the institute contexts, our participants were limited to the settings located in Tehran, possibly neglecting the realities of teacher education programs in areas with less financial resources. Third, since our research is based on self-reported interview responses, future researchers could conduct additional studies through alternative methodologies such as observation of TTCs or think-aloud methods to determine how teachers evaluate the materials presented to them during TTCs. Fourth, while we analyzed interview and focus-group data, our study did not include analysis of related documents (e.g. teacher training syllabuses and manuals) of the understudied language institutes. This analysis could further strengthen our findings and is recommended for future research. Additionally, our design could not follow the long-term consequences of teacher training on skill retention and adjustment. A longitudinal study tracking teachers for a longer time span could provide valuable insights in this regard. Finally, as the issue of EFL teacher education in Iran is multifaceted, a single study cannot comprehensively address it. Future studies can further evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in promoting different aspects

of EFL teacher trainees' knowledge and skills. These limitations, however, could provide opportunities for future studies to build upon our results.

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