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EFL Teacher Education Programs in Iran: The Absence of Teachers' Involvement

Somayeh Baniasad-Azad, *University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran*
Mansour Tavakoli[*], *University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran*
Saeed Ketabi, *University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran*

Abstract

This study investigated the nature of EFL teacher education programs with respect to implementation, practicality, and approach to teacher learning. The data were collected through observation of two teacher education programs and interviews with 8 teacher trainers. The results attested to the transmission orientation of the programs. It was found that a pre-specified body of teaching knowledge is transferred from the trainers to the teachers. Teachers' creativity, prior knowledge, and experience, the role of teaching context, and the population of learners are not considered in program development. The results of interviews with teacher trainers supported the results of the observations. It was found that even the trainers are not involved in the process of program development, as they are only transmitting the materials presented by textbook authors. The findings also indicated that what teachers considered beneficial for their development was different from what was incorporated in the programs. The existing gap between macro plans and teachers' practices and preferences results from the centralized education system in Iran in which practicing teachers are not involved in the policy-making process. Implications for teacher education in general and EFL teacher education programs in particular are discussed.

Key words: EFL Teacher education programs; English teachers; Teacher trainers; Teacher development

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Corresponding author: Department of English, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Email address: mr.tavakoli14@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Teacher development is essential to the improvement of student learning (Johnson & Golombek, 2011); therefore, it should be an integral part of teachers' life (Smith, 2005). Changes in English curricula, especially in EFL contexts, have made teacher education programs urgent for teachers, adjusting their teaching to the new curriculum (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001). As research has found a positive role for teacher learning and improvement in educational outcomes (Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Tedick, 2005), it is significant that teacher learning be improved through teacher education programs.

Traditional English teacher education programs regard teacher development as a process of transmitting a body of knowledge about learning and teaching to teachers by an outside expert (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Richards, 2002; Richardson, 1997). Moreover, in traditional approaches to teacher education, it is assumed that general methods and theories of teaching and learning are applicable to any teaching context (Jonson, 2009). Freeman and Johnson (1998) argued against traditional teacher education programs that "teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills" (p. 401). The traditional approaches to teaching "promote neither the interaction between prior and new knowledge nor the conversations that are necessary for internalization and deep understanding" (Richardson, 1997, p. 3). Traditional teacher education programs may offer a consistent and standards-based methodology through prescribed curricula and methods; however, the autonomy and creativity of teachers are neglected in the process (Quiocho & Stall, 2008).

Over the past years, the concept of teacher development has changed, among other factors, due to the influence of sociocultural theory. A sociocultural stance provides language teacher educators with a number of principles. First, teachers are learners of teaching. Moreover, they have their zones of proximal development and require assisted performance (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). Second, language is a social practice. Third, teaching is a dialogic mediation taking place through

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dialoguing and collaborating with others (Johnson, 2009). Ultimately, inquiry-based approaches to professional development have been given priority (Burns & Richards, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Johnston, 2009; Richards, 2002), as these approaches both reveal teachers' current abilities and show developing abilities. Moreover, the sociocultural perspective considers teachers' prior experience significant in shaping their beliefs and practices (Ahn, 2011; Borg, 2006; Dunn, 2011; Johnson, 2009; Johnston, 2009; Richards, 2002; Tarone & Allwright, 2005).

In spite of the claim that English teaching is in a post-method era, many English language teacher preparation courses are dominated by the concept of language teaching method (Ur, 2013; Waters, 2012). One barrier to the implementation of post-method pedagogy is teacher education programs (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), which generally, attempt to transfer a set of predetermined body of knowledge and skills from the teacher educator to the teachers. However, even if teachers want to put into practice the knowledge and skills prescribed in a method, there are some local factors influencing their decision and application of theories (Ur, 2013). Therefore, instead of prescribing a method or some specific methods, teachers should be helped to "generate their own location-specific, need-based classroom procedures" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 201). In fact, what is needed is a change in teacher education programs from a transmission model to exploratory (Kumaravadivelu, 2006) and collegial ones (Allwright, 2003).

Studies of ELT in Iran have addressed foreign language policies (Kiany, Mirhosseini & Navidinia, 2011), problems in foreign language teaching (Jahangard, 2007; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010), curriculum planning and practice (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), or effectiveness of specific methodologies (Hayati & Mashhadi 2010; Riazi, 2005). However, English teacher education programs have been neglected. The nature of these programs has not been investigated with respect to the planning and practice, practicality and approach to teacher learning, and the involvement of teachers and trainers in program development. The focus of the present study is on the exploration of these issues.

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2. Review of the Related Literature

In Iran, English is formally taught in junior high schools to the students aged between 11 and 13 years. The whole education system is under the purview of the Ministry of Education. English textbooks are designed and developed by this Ministry. After the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, to gain industrial, economic, and agricultural self-sufficiency, reading English scientific texts was given a higher priority when setting ELT program goals (High Council of Cultural Revolution, 2002, p.3, cited in Atai & Mazlum, 2013), prioritizing the development of students' reading skills. However, criticisms have been raised on different bases. First, arguments have been made that the grammar translation method dominates Iran's education system (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Jahangard, 2007; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi, 2005; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Second, the need of learners and their families for learning English communicatively is not met by the formal English curriculum (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi, 2005). Even the officials in the Ministry of Education found the public sector inadequate in meeting students' needs (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). These criticisms by both the officials and independent researchers have led to a change in English language policy during the last three year, attempting to design and develop a CLT-based curriculum.

Teacher education programs, similar to textbooks, are designed, developed, and authorized by the Ministry of Education. Some of the teacher education programs are general and held for teachers from different disciplines and educational levels, with teachers being required to read some pre-specified references, usually a series of journals published by the Ministry of Education, and attend the exam taken in locations specified for this purpose at a specific time. These kinds of in-service training are mainly held through the Internet and have become more prevalent during the past few years since they are more beneficial economically and they do not require the allocation of funds and time for teacher trainers. Other kinds of

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teacher education programs require teachers' attendance in the activities such as seminars, workshops, and infrequent in-service courses. The certificate given to the teachers at the end of such programs forms the main basis of yearly evaluation, promotion, and subsequent raise in salary. For these reasons, many teachers are motivated to attend the in-service courses.

EFL teacher education programs in Iran are held infrequently. Such programs are mainly held before a new school year starts. Teachers are required to attend an intensive program which is held during a week or at most two weeks. Recent changes in the country's English teaching policy and the move toward CLT raised subsequent changes in the textbooks. *Prospect Series* was designed and developed by the Ministry of Education. Accordingly, new in-service programs were developed based on the content of the new textbooks.

General dissatisfactions with language teacher education in Iran have been discussed. Kiany et al. (2011) found that close attention has not been paid to foreign language policy in Iran; analyzing the national documents showed that contributions of foreign language experts in the policy-making process have been neglected. Atai and Mazlum (2013) argued that there is a discrepancy between macro and practice level in Iran. While planners believe that teacher education programs are efficient for teachers, Iranian teachers believe that in-service programs help them little and their personal investment is more beneficial.

The authors of the present study could not find any study conducted specifically on English language teacher education programs in Iran. This situation calls for a thorough investigation of EFL teacher education programs, determining how they are planned and practiced. This study, hence, is an attempt to explore the planning and implementation of teacher education programs administered for junior high school English teachers. The researchers tried to achieve the aim of the study through observing EFL teacher educations and interviewing teacher trainers. Accordingly, the following research question was addressed in the study:

What is the current status of planning and practice in junior high school EFL teacher education programs in Iran?

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3. Method

3.1. Participants

In order to select teacher trainers, we used a purposeful sampling strategy. According to Patton (1990), "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p. 169). In purposeful sampling, the researcher identifies key informants, that is, persons who have specific knowledge of the phenomenon being studied (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). Eight trainers who were teaching English teacher education courses or had previously taught such courses were chosen. Two of the participants were the trainers of the programs in Kerman and Baft (a town in Kerman Province) that were observed for the purpose of this study, one was teaching the similar program in Birjand, and five interviewees had previously been teaching English teacher education courses in Kerman, Esfahan and Baft. Table 3.1 presents the detailed information on the interviewees.

Table 1

Description of the participants

Sex	**No.**	**Teaching experience**	**No.**	**Educational degree**	**No.**
Males	2	10-20 years	7	BA	6
Females	6	More than 20 years	1	PhD candidates	2
Total	8				

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3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Direct Observation

Observations are useful in providing insight into the contextual conditions and exploring participants' behaviors and practices (Lichtman, 2010). One of the authors engaged in a qualitative observation to record what actually happened in English teacher education programs. Data collection began with recording the whole parts of English teacher education programs. Two teacher education programs, one held in Baft and the other in Kerman, were observed. The programs were held from mid-September to mid-October in five subsequent weeks. The purpose of the observations was to investigate the practice of teacher education courses. As both teacher trainers and the teachers participating in the programs felt reluctant to be videotaped, the sessions were only audio-recorded. In addition to recording, the participant-observer took notes during the observations. Particular attention was paid to the way materials were presented to teachers and the role given to teachers' beliefs, preferences, and challenges. The parts relevant to research question were transcribed.

3.2.2. Interviews

The purpose of the interviews was to shed some light on the status of ELT teacher education programs in Iran. Another aim was to investigate teacher trainers' ideas and preferences about the programs. Eight teacher trainers were interviewed through semi-structured interviews in order to gain their perspectives on the content, quality, and status of teacher education programs. The interviews were recorded for further analysis, while the interviewer was also taking notes during the interview session.

3.3. Procedures

The study had a qualitative design, as researchers have argued for the benefits of a qualitative research design in evaluating a program. For instance, Patton (1998) states that a qualitative study allows the researcher to collect detailed information

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about the various aspects of a program. Moreover, qualitative research enables the researcher to pay attention to limitations and constraints that impact both the real application of a program and the study in positive or negative ways (Poehner, 2009). Therefore, this study utilized a qualitative approach to analyze and describe how an ELT teacher education program is held and how much interaction exists between teachers and teacher trainers.

Sustaining the validity of data in a qualitative research is difficult. The researchers have used multiple sources of data including direct observation, interviews, and field notes to provide different perspectives. The focus was on providing detailed accounts of interactions and practices that took place during the sessions as well as considering some of the participants' reflections on the content and quality of sessions and their own preference.

Data collection was conducted in 2014 and early 2015. To get formal permission to conduct research, official correspondences were made with the Kerman General Office of Education in July 2014. Subsequently, the researchers delivered separate official consent forms to the offices of teacher education programs in Kerman and Baft. Observations were conducted from mid-September to mid-October 2014. Each program was held within five subsequent weeks during which the teachers were required to attend a 6-hour session. Because the trainers did not consent to be videotaped, the whole sessions were audio-recorded (a total of 48 hours). Notes were also taken by the participant-observer during the observations.

Interviews with eight teacher trainers were carried out and audio-recorded. On average, each interview lasted about 35 minutes. One interview was conducted in English with the approval of the interviewee while the others were conducted in Persian. Notes were taken during the interviews, followed by their immediate transcription. Two interviews were conducted with the trainers of the programs observed three weeks after the program started. Interviews with other trainers were conducted during the school year.

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All audio files of interviews were transcribed and used in the data analysis procedure. One of the authors listened to the audio files of the observations while only the parts relevant to the research question were transcribed. The documents were transcribed into separate World Office files.

When transcription was finished, the researchers started coding. Coding is developing concepts from the raw data (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). Patterns, ways of thinking, and information that appeared regularly in the transcriptions and field notes and seemed important were coded by the researcher. After identifying the main categories, the major themes emerging from the codes were identified and compared to the literature. The data were closely analyzed for themes with respect to the status of EFL teacher education programs and teacher trainers' ideas about the experience of attending such programs. Moreover, to ensure that the researchers' own biases did not influence data analysis (Lodico et al., 2006), peer debriefing was conducted.

4. Results

4.1. Observation analysis

The purpose of the observations was to investigate the practice of English teacher education courses in Iran. Observing two English language teacher education (ELTE) programs within a 5-week period showed that such programs are truly transmission-oriented. What follows is the summary and analysis of the observations.

4.1.1. Observation one

The program was in Baft. The teacher trainer was a 37-year old female with a Bachelor's degree and a teaching experience of 16 years. The first session of the course was held on September 13, 2014. There were 20 male and female teachers attending the course, all junior high school teachers. Most teachers were relatively young while some were middle-aged. Their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 27 years.

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The trainer explained that the course was about the textbook *Prospect II*, and that they would have a test and receive a certificate at the end of the course. She moved forward through giving a brief description of the textbook, format of the textbook, and its similarity to *Prospect I*. She continued with the content of lesson one, explaining that each lesson of the textbook had different sections including functions, notions, themes, key languages, spelling and pronunciation, and expressions. She talked about blends, diagraphs, and consonant clusters, emphasizing that the authors said those sections were not teachable. Then, she explained that the whole book focused on topics such as places, village, hobbies, nationality, daily activities, abilities, and health. Afterwards, she turned over pages of the textbook, talking about pictures and explaining what to answer if a student asked a question about each picture or page. After turning over all pages of the book, the teacher trainer talked about an article entitled "*phases in word recognition"*, which was presented to them in Tehran. She explained that phases in word recognition were 1) pre-alphabetic, 2) partial alphabetic, 3) full alphabetic, and 4) whole word. She brought examples for each and said that Prospect II was based on full recognition. Teachers' checking the class attendance was the end point of the session.

The next session was held on September 20, 2014. After calling the roll, the teacher trainer started discussing lesson one. She fully explained how to teach conversation: having warm-up, asking students to guess, playing the CD three times, talking about nationality and country, practicing the pronunciation of *ch*, and *sh*. Some teachers believed that students got bored if they listened to the conversation three times, but most thought twice was enough. The trainer, then, talked about blends and diagraphs, emphasizing that they were not teachable, but the teachers should talk about them because the Persian and English structures were different in this respect. Afterwards, she continued to teach the next section (practice 1 and 2) about nationality and country, focusing on practicing blends and the nationality term for each country. Then, she gave a lecture on CLT based on which *Prospect II* was written, explaining its development, main principles, teachers' and students' roles, and activities. After a short break, the trainer

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explained teaching other sections of lesson one in a similar way. Finishing lesson one, she explained that every lesson should be taught in three sessions and specified the relative time for each section.

The third session was held on October 9, 2014, that is, three weeks after the start of school year. The teacher trainer asked the teachers how they taught lesson one. Most teachers complained that they could not have access to teacher guide and they taught some parts based on their prior experience. The rest of the session continued with the trainer's lecture on phases of learning: perception, comprehension, and personalization among others. She told the teachers that her attempt was to convey the exact ideas presented by the authors and trainers in Tehran.

The last session of the program was held on October 16, 2014. The trainer turned over all pages of the textbook, trying to have a brief explanation of all sections. After finishing the textbook, she turned over the workbook page by page and described what students should do in each part. She believed doing workbook is not problematic for the learners, as the instructions were given in Farsi. Finally, the trainer explained about the exam that teachers would take at the end of the program on October, 23. The exam would be based on the materials, ideas, and theories discussed during the course.

Observing this five-week program showed that the trainer was only transmitting the exact materials presented by textbook authors without creativity or freedom of choice. Some teachers had complaints about some parts of the conversation, but the trainer told them that she was retelling what had been exactly told by authors. Teachers also complained that assigning a 2-hour time for the English course at schools was not enough. Although the teacher trainer agreed with them, she believed arguing about the issue is only wasting the time because the decision had been made by the higher authorities and could not change.

Prescribing a specific way of teaching textbook was another theme identified in the trainer's practice. She explained the way of teaching each part of the lesson, specified the time to be spent on each part, and described the way to involve

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learners and to check their understanding. The trainer strongly suggested the teachers teach according to the teacher guide in order to teach unanimously and not to face the shortage of time in finishing the textbook.

Another theme recurring during the course was ignoring the uniqueness of classroom context and population of leaners. The trainer was presenting a pre-packaged and limited number of strategies and ways of teaching without considering the specificity of teaching context. Teachers attending the program argued that they were teaching in different districts of the town and different schools, ranging from faraway villages, suburb, to SAMPAD schools (national selective schools in Iran developed specifically for the development of exceptionally talented students). Their complaint was that the methods suggested by the program were practical only in SAMPAD schools, not in villages where schools have no facilities even to play a CD or parents lack enough literacy to help their children.

Neglecting teachers' perceptions and preferences in making decisions about the nature and content of the curriculum and the textbook was evident in the talks among teachers and the teacher trainer. Complaints about the assigned time for English course, that is, a two-hour session per week and inconsistencies among students' final exams and the textbook focus were common among all teachers. While agreeing with the teachers, the trainer argued that teachers might face fewer problems regarding time if they followed the teacher guide. She also had the same idea about the incompatibility between exams and textbook instruction and thought one should have changed for the other.

4.1.2. Observation two

The program was held in Kerman. The trainer was a 42-year-old male, with a Bachelor's degree and 20 years of teaching experience. Seventeen male and female teachers were attending the course. They were junior high school teachers. Their teaching experience ranged from 6 to 22 years. The purpose of the course was to

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introduce and discuss the *Prospect II* textbook, which was newly written for the students in grade eight.

The first session of the course was held on September 14, 2014. After greeting, the trainer gave a 50-minute lecture on CLT, its definition, teachers' and students' role in this method, its principles, and the reasons why the method had been revived. Then, he talked about the newly written textbook, *Prospect II*. He explained that each lesson of the textbook had different sections including functions, notions, themes, key languages, and some activities at the end of each lesson in order to test students' learning.

The next session was held on September 21, 2014. The trainer discussed different parts of the textbook and the way to teach them. He emphasized that the most important part in the book was *sounds and letters*. Then, he explained teaching conversation, which is the first part of each lesson, by giving the following guidelines:

> Never tell the students to memorize conversation. Challenge the students with the context. Teach with flashcards, of course, if flashcards become ready on time. First, ask the students guess the topic of the lesson. Wait for their guesses. Then, play the CD immediately. After that, ask some questions from what they heard such as: what is the name of Shayan's cousin? Don't teach grammar. But if they asked, for example, what the meaning of DOES is, you should answer to gain their trust. Teach diagraphs (sh ,ch, etc.) and blends. Before conversation, bring a world map to the class and say the words such as world, map, etc. Write nationality and country in different columns and exemplify them. Play conversation for a second time and ask questions. Then tell the students practice more at home. Don't teach grammar unless they ask you. Tell them practice the workbook at home, but you could work on some parts if they had problems. Each lesson should be taught within three sessions, for example, warm-up and conversation, 30 minutes; practice 1 and 2, 20 minutes.

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The next section of lesson was entitled *practice*. The trainer emphasized using flashcards for this part, asking many questions to ensure their understanding, writing on the whiteboard, playing CD once or twice, and grouping the learners.

In the other session, on September 28, the trainer explained other parts of lesson one in the same way as he did the previous parts. The participant-observer could not observe the last two sessions held on the 9th and 16th of October, as they were conflicting with the program in Baft. However, being asked about the remaining sessions, the trainer mentioned that, as the structure of all lessons was the same, he would have a brief explanation on other lessons and only describe the potentially problematic parts, and the teachers would have an exam based on the content of the course in the last session.

Observation of the program showed that the teacher trainer was prescribing a specific way of teaching to the teachers, who were regarded only as the consumers and receivers of knowledge. Everything was pre-planned: Starting a lesson, asking students and involving them, practicing different sections of each lesson, teaching or ignoring grammar, etc. His emphasis was on following the teacher guide in order to teach better or not to face any problem regarding teaching or time.

The context of teaching was not considered. The program presupposed that all teachers had the same teaching context and population of learners. Teachers' complaints and arguments, however, manifested the variety of teaching situations and the learners. Some teachers complained that the schools they were teaching in were not equipped with a CD player or they did not have access to the teacher guide until three weeks after the school year started. Some teachers argued that they were teaching at SAMPAD schools where students had already started studying English in institutes and the school textbook was too easy and repetitive, consequently the teachers should adjust pace and way of their teaching so that students did not lose their interest.

Teachers' perceptions, apparently, were considered neither in designing the materials nor in planning the teacher education courses. There was a unanimous

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opinion among teachers that the time of English course was much less than enough, as the content of the textbook had been doubled but the time was reduced to two hours per week. In confirmation, the trainer suggested that the teachers follow the teacher guide in order not to face a shortage of time. Moreover, the teachers argued if the program continued during the school year, it was possible for the teachers to talk about the challenges they faced while applying the presented theories and strategies.

Observation of the two programs showed that the approach to teacher education was still traditional and transmission-oriented. Education of teachers was regarded as a process of transmitting knowledge about learning and teaching to teachers by an outside source (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Richards, 2002). The assumption behind the programs might be that general methods and theories are applicable to any teaching context (Johnson, 2009), as both trainers had unified instruction and prescribed the same limited ways of teaching textbook and involving students. These findings lend support to literature on teacher education programs that most models of teacher education program transfer predetermined knowledge to the teachers (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Ur, 2013; Waters, 2012).

The Iranian educational system is centralized and top-down despite recent changes in the policy of English teaching. Other studies support this argument (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Kiany et al., 2011; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi 2005). Centrality of the educational system is evident in demanding teachers to unify their instructions. Even the trainers did not have much freedom of choice or the opportunity to present materials in a creative or experience-driven way. Both were presenting materials in a unified way. In fact, the trainers were also regarded "as empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills" (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p.401). Sharp contrast between teachers' preferences and program development and materials is another indication of a top-down education system.

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4.2. Interview analysis

The results of the interviews are discussed under four themes, namely, 1) the regularity of teacher education programs, 2) consideration of teachers' ideas and preferences in the content and the development of programs, 3) the procedure of choosing teacher trainers and the application of program materials by practicing teachers, and 4) teachers' preferences regarding teacher development programs. The following is a summary of the results along with the illustrative quotations.

First, there is not any regular ELTE program in Iran. The interviewees argued that some general teacher education programs were previously held for teachers of all subject matters regarding such issues as ideology, political awareness, or using technology in the classroom. However, due to a lack of budget, these programs have been recently limited to introducing a predetermined book to teachers and an online test according to the introduced book. All respondents maintained that if there is a change in English textbooks, the education system offers a program. As they mentioned, in recent years, because of the changes in the English textbooks of junior high schools, ELTE programs are held every year during one to three weeks to introduce the new textbook.

> *If there is a change especially in terms of materials, the system offers these programs, but generally they are rare. (Teacher trainer 2)*

Second, consideration of teachers' ideas and preferences in the content and the nature of programs is open to question. With respect to the programs developed, teachers' ideas are not either required or taken into account. All interviewees unanimously believed that everything is decided by policy makers or authorities in the Ministry of Education.

> *Nothing is shared with teachers about time, content, or whatever. Even the teacher trainer is not involved in. (Teacher trainer 2)*

According to three respondents, the trainer's ideas may be considered only for some irregular programs requested by head teachers or teacher

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trainers of a district, city, or town, which are held as seminars or workshops. Two of the trainers maintained that head teachers and trainers are required to send annual feedbacks and reports to the education office only for the sake of formality, but they are rarely considered.

> *Sometimes, teacher trainers of a city or head teacher request a seminar or workshop. In this case, they themselves suggest the content. (Teacher trainer 6)*

Third, as far as the criterion for choosing teacher trainers is concerned, all respondents maintained that having a higher academic degree, and more teaching experience and teaching skills are the main criteria, although the criteria may not always be observed. As explained by three interviewees, to be a teacher trainer, volunteer teachers fill a specific form containing sections related to the academic degree, years of teaching experience, and the number of hours attending teacher education programs. Based on the score obtained from different parts of the form, a teacher with the highest score will be chosen as the teacher trainer of his or her teaching district. Most respondents agreed that teachers' popularity in their teaching districts with respect to teaching knowledge and skill plays a major role.

> *Teacher trainers are usually chosen based on teaching experience, academic degree, and teacher's teaching skill and knowledge. (Teacher trainer 7)*

> *To be honest, most often, higher degree or teaching experience is not considered…. Just may be because of the fact that you are famous in your city or you are the head teacher. (Teacher trainer 4)*

Fourth, ELTE programs could not adequately fulfill teachers' preferences regarding teacher education. All respondents preferred ELTE programs to be regularly held, not limited to introducing and discussing a new textbook. They also believed arranging a program over the span of a school year will be more beneficial, as teachers can make a balance between the theories presented in the

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program and their real practices. Moreover, the teacher trainer can gain teachers' feedback on the practicality and effectiveness of the program.

> *If the programs were held during the year, it was more effective. Teachers could discuss the problems they may face while teaching a part. (Teacher trainer 1)*

Five interviewees believed that the programs' focus should be on presenting and introducing modern teaching techniques and strategies rather than a specified way. Six trainers argued that a program would be more helpful if it were based on sharing and discussing teachers' experiences. Some teachers maintained that teachers' experiences alone do not help them much, as some teachers do not update their knowledge and strategies. In this context, establishing a balance between new theories and prior experience is more helpful.

> *To be honest, I have not participated in any of these in-service programs for a number of years because I thought that they do not suggest me something new. They are either pure theories or strategies that are not well-packaged. (Teacher trainer 3)*

Out of the eight main questions asked during the interview, five of them received unanimous answers from the trainers, namely, questions focused on 1) the purpose of the course, 2) main decision makers, 3) role of the trainer, 4) method of preparation, and 5) their preference regarding the intensity of the course. All of the trainers thought that the purpose of the course was "Introducing the new textbook", that the main decision makers were people in the "Ministry of Education", that their sole role in the course was a "Transferor of Knowledge", and that the only preparation they needed before the course was the one provided to them by the Ministry through "Special Courses in Tehran." Moreover, none of them preferred the intensive course which has been the usual choice of the system most probably for logistic reasons. However, the answers found for the other three questions varied across the group.

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The only regular pattern known to some of the trainers was the yearly administration of training courses. In other cases, there is no recognizable or predictable timetable for the event. Hence, the irregularity was perceived by the trainers. It should be mentioned that this is one of the main drawbacks of the system and reflects a lack of planning and consistency on the part of the major planners. It can also show the influence of non-educational boundaries and concerns, such as budget or bigger political plans that might leave their undesired mark on a system which is expected to promote the teachers.

Another aspect of the planning, namely selection of the trainers was solicited from the trainers' answers. Half of the trainers believed that they were chosen based on the place and dignity they had earned within the system and their experience and academic degree were not considered as the main factors of selection. The other half believed that academic degree and teaching experience were the major selection criteria. Social recognition is considered a criterion in choosing expert teachers in the literature; however, sometimes factors other than pedagogical skills inspire this recognition and those identified to be experts are not necessarily the most knowledgeable (Akbari & Yazdanmehr, 2014, p. 3). Although the trainers' understanding of this cannot be taken as a valid source, it can show their self-image and their attitude toward the system and their own place in it. This can have a meaningful effect on the way they act during the course.

Regarding programs at practice level, variance was found in the interviewees' answers. Here, they were asked if they would apply the content of the training course in their own teaching. Most of the trainers argued that they tried to use the materials completely or up to 80 percent, while two of them did not apply the materials because they found them idealistic and impractical in their teaching contexts. This may be affected by the discrepancy between trainers' preferences and expectations of the programs and the actual content of the programs.

Considering the results of interviews and observations, it can be stated that ELTE programs being held in Iran are truly transmission-oriented. Teachers' ideas, perceptions, and preferences are ignored by program designers and subsequently by trainers at the practice level. Moreover, teachers' perceptions are not consistent

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with those of high authorities, textbook authors, and program planners regarding time of the English course, content of the textbook, and approaches to teaching. Context of teaching, population of learners and their differences, and the role of teachers' previous experiences are other issues neglected in such programs.

Teachers' satisfaction was not fulfilled by ELTE programs. Short in-service programs were planned for improving teachers' teaching knowledge and skills, but teachers believed regular and continuous programs were more efficient. Teachers' preferences are supported by numerous studies in the literature (Allwright, 2003; Bell & Gillbert, 1994; Burns & Richards, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Johnston, 2009; Smith & Gillespie, 2007). Trainers argued that a continuous program during the school year will be more helpful, since it would enable teachers to deal with the challenges they face while teaching in a real context (Yoshida, 2011). Lack of involvement by language education experts in the process of planning and policy making leads to a sense of dissatisfaction among all of the stakeholders including students, teachers, academics, and teacher trainers (Freeman, 1996; Kiany et al.).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated ELTE programs in the context of Iran. The results of observations and interviews indicated that English teacher education programs are traditional and transmissive. Transmission of a pre-determined body of knowledge to the teachers, generalizability of teaching knowledge to all situations, and ignorance of teaching context were the most salient features of the programs. Despite the increasing awareness of the importance of teachers' prior experience in shaping their beliefs and practices (Ahn, 2011; Borg, 2006; Dunn, 2011; Tarone & Allwright, 2005; Tedick, 2005), language teacher education programs failed to take into account what teachers know about teaching in the design of the programs (Tarone & Allwright, 2005).

Moreover, the findings of the study suggested that a gap exists between the nature of the programs and the teachers and trainers' perceptions and preferences. While short-term programs were designed for the purpose of teacher education,

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teachers put emphasis on attending continuous programs, soliciting and sharing teachers' prior experience, discussing challenges in real practices. Teachers believed that their creativity has not been considered in the programs as everything is presented in a pre-planned way which leaves little freedom of choice on the part of both teachers and trainers. Such inconsistencies may reflect lack of efficient communication and feedback channels between program designers and the practicing teachers (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Freeman, 1996; Kiany et al., 2011).

The findings of the current study can contribute to teacher education programs in Iran. Education system in Iran follows a centralized approach of making policy by officials in the Ministry of Education. All decisions regarding English language teaching are made by some individuals and the teachers are expected to implement the curriculum as planned, without considering the realities at practice level. As long as Iranian teachers are not involved in making decisions, inconsistencies between planning and practice level continue to grow.

The study can have implications for English language teacher education programs in particular. Many English language teacher preparation courses are dominated by the concept of language teaching method (Waters, 2012; Ur,2013). This problem is not restricted to the context of Iran. Most models of second language teacher preparation transfer a predetermined body of knowledge from the teacher trainer to the teachers (Allwright, 2003; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Johnson, 2009; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Richards, 2002; Richardson, 1997). Therefore, what is needed is a change in teacher development programs from a transmission model to exploratory and collegial ones that enable teachers to reflect on their own practices, decide based on their teaching contexts, and improve their knowledge through dialoging with peers (Allwright, 2003; Burns & Richards, 2009; Johnson, 2009; Johnston, 2009; kumaravadivelu, 2006; Richardson, 1997; Tedick, 2005).

The study, while contributing to a better understanding of teachers' perceptions and preferences and a change in English teacher education programs toward continuous and collaborative models, has its own limitations with respect to the sample size of the study. The sample of the study is restricted to eight teacher

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trainers. Future research can probe the beliefs, perspectives, and preferences of a more representative sample most probably through conducting a survey.

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Notes on Contributors:

Somayeh Baniasad-Azad is currently a PhD candidate of applied linguistics at University of Isfahan. She teaches English courses at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Kerman. Her areas of interest include sociocultural theory, teacher education, effective teaching, professional development, and program evaluation.

Mansour Tavakoli is a professor of applied linguistics at University of Isfahan. He has been teaching under- and post-graduate courses for more than 18 years. His research interests are language teaching, assessment, and teacher education.

Saeed Ketabi is an associate professor of applied linguistics at the University of Isfahan. He has been teaching under- and post-graduate courses. His research interests are language teaching, teacher education, and second language acquisition.

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