

## Voicing the Current Challenges Faced by EFL Teachers: The Case of Iranian Junior and High School<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This study aimed at investigating job-related challenges faced by Iranian EFL junior and high school teachers during their professional jobs as English language teachers. To this end and to develop a valid questionnaire for investigating the Iranian EFL teacher challenges, researchers first asked a representative group of teachers for their views on the challenges they have confronted during their professional jobs. Then the data were classified into seven main challenges including textbooks, teachers, learners, social problems, spaces and educational facilities, educational systems, and social contexts. After developing the instrument, the participants who were 93 Iranian EFL junior and high school teachers were required to respond to open-ended items related to each classification. The findings demonstrated that Iranian EFL teachers have a wide range of challenges concerning their professional careers understanding of which can exert a great impact on EFL teaching and learning process. The results have different theoretical as well as practical implications for students, teachers, policymakers, learners, and curriculum developers.

### Resumen

Este estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar los desafíos relacionados con el trabajo que enfrentan los maestros iraníes de secundaria y preparatoria como profesores de inglés. Con este fin y para desarrollar un cuestionario válido para investigar los desafíos de los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera iraníes, los investigadores preguntaron primero a un grupo representativo de docentes sobre sus puntos de vista sobre los desafíos que han enfrentado durante sus trabajos profesionales. Luego, los datos se clasificaron en siete desafíos principales, incluidos los libros de texto, los docentes, los alumnos, los problemas sociales, los espacios y las instalaciones educativas, los sistemas educativos y los contextos sociales. Después de desarrollar el instrumento, se pidió a los participantes (n=93), profesores iraníes de secundaria y preparatoria de EFL, que escribieran sobre sus dificultades/problemas relacionados con cada clasificación. Los hallazgos demostraron que los profesores de EFL iraníes tienen una amplia gama de desafíos relacionados con sus carreras profesionales, cuya comprensión puede ejercer un gran impacto en el proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje de EFL. Los resultados tienen diferentes implicaciones para estudiantes, docentes, formuladores de políticas, aprendices y desarrolladores de planes de estudio.

### Introduction

The role of the teacher is central to the teaching and learning process. Without the availability of professional and capable teachers, it is not possible to achieve educational goals. Teachers as key agents in education can have direct and indirect effects on society. Specifically, by being in close contact with their students, teachers have a great impact on students' achievement. Yet they face challenges in performing their job. Greenberg et al. (2016) stated that teachers have challenges while trying to boost their students' academic achievement. In addition, teachers need to deal with, students' discipline issues (Shernoff et al., 2016). Other researchers stated that a healthy work environment, including adequate resources and support, was important for teachers to promote the learning and teaching outcomes (Ouellette et al., 2018). Moreover, some researchers believe that "the quality of any teaching program cannot rise above the quality of its teachers" (Bhalla et al., 2002, p. 1405). Others, including Cheng and Wang (2004), believe that teachers are central for the teaching process. Mundy et al. (2008) suggested that teachers play an important role in educational reform due to the link between the teachers and classroom events.

Previous research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was focused on learning, teaching methods, textbooks, curriculum development, testing, and learners. It is clear that these issues are very important in teaching and learning, but it cannot be ignored that teachers are responsible for their performance in the classrooms. In other words, just focusing on one part of the learning process does not guarantee that it will actually take place. Therefore, focusing on teacher challenges is as significant as the above mentioned issues. This study is focused on identifying the challenges that Iranian junior and high school English language teachers come across in their professional careers. Specifically, the researchers investigated seven main challenges which are faced by the teachers in a preliminary research stage.

### Literature Review

It seems that relatively few studies have been conducted on EFL teachers' professional challenges, even fewer in the Iranian context. However, there are some studies that specifically focus on teacher pedagogical, social and administrative problems in Iran (Aliakbari, 2005; Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014; Safari & Rashidi,

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2015); as well as overseas (Anyiendah, 2017; Ary et al., 2010 ; Camacho & Parham, 2019; Cheng & Wang, 2004; Markow et al., 2012).

Anyiendah (2017) discussed, based on her experience as a teacher, the difficulties faced by English as Second Language (ESL) teachers in a real classroom situation in East Africa. She categorized these challenges as "the limited classroom language opportunity for the learner, the mismatch between language policy and the actual practice in lower primary, learners' negative attitude toward English, the challenges of handling large classes, and limited access to resources" (pp. 1-2).

Camacho and Parham (2019) in their mixed-methods study investigated various challenges that urban teachers in the United States encountered in their classrooms. The most frequent types of issues were "misbehaving student, aggressive student behavior, student motivation, and behavioral health problems" (p. 160). However, this study was limited only to the classroom settings.

Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014), conducted research using a questionnaire in order to understand Iranian EFL teachers' problems in teaching English. They classified the problems into three main issues including the teacher, the context, and the teaching approach. They have pointed out that "insufficient teaching times, limited teaching resources, low proficiency in speaking English, and inadequate use of technology during teaching time" (p. 207) are among the most prominent challenges for Iranian EFL teachers. Despite the importance of Behroozi and Amoozegar's (2014) findings, there were some limitations. First, the use of a questionnaire limits the participant's responses. Second, the challenges are not limited to those mentioned by Behroozi and Amoozegar, for example, they did not pay attention to the basic needs of the teachers such as healthcare and their well-being at home.

Safari and Rashidi (2015) implemented reflexive narrative and collaborative dialogue in their study to understand the challenges leading to the current failures of the language curriculum in the Iranian context. They stated that the challenges included the authoritarian and rigid nature of the system, teachers' financial needs, public school textbooks and instructional materials, the employment system, the status of English as a subject matter in the system, learners' false expectations and erroneous beliefs, assessment, heterogenous language classes, and the scarcity of pre-service and in-service classes for English teachers. But, it is clear that these challenges can include other sub-challenges that should be considered. Also, the relative effect of these challenges on the success or failure of teachers careers were not investigated.

In the present study, the authors first used a thematic analysis to identify the main themes as the main challenges, then they used these main challenges to construct open-ended questions to draw the opinion of the participants and sub-challenges of each type of the challenges. It is worth mentioning that high school and junior school Iranian EFL teachers with the same qualifications, such as degrees (B.A., M.A., or Ph.D.), and teaching experience, have no noticeable difference in number of teaching hours per week, or on their salaries. While both high school and junior school Iranian EFL teachers with different academic degrees teach English twenty-four hours per week, their degrees and experience can have a minor effect on their salaries. Researchers seem to assume that Iranian junior and high school EFL teachers have almost the same challenges in their professional careers of English language teaching, ignoring their differences in preparation and and experience. Accordingly, this study attempts to answer the following research question:

*What challenges do Iranian junior and high school English language teachers come across during their professional careers?*

## **The Study**

A full understanding of and responding to the challenges confronted by teachers can have a great benefit for society, education, and specifically students. This study, therefore, was an attempt to identify English language teacher challenges in the Iranian context. As there is a paucity of research regarding this issue, the researchers hope that the findings of this study can serve the Ministry of Education in order to decrease the effects of these challenges on teachers and students' achievements in particular and the educational system and society in general.

Previous studies on Iranian EFL teacher challenges regarding their teaching mostly collected data through questionnaires with set questions that do not allow the participants to freely state their viewpoints. The present study used open-ended questions and interviews to collect the data to allow participants to give their own opinions and to not be guided by the questions designed by researchers.

English as an international language is included in the Iranian curriculum. Students' first exposure to English starts in junior high school at the age of 11 and they study English for 6 years. However, as Moradi (1996) and Rahimi (1996) note, they may not be able to meet the specified goals after graduating from high school.

As pointed out earlier, some researchers claimed that Iranian students are not able to communicate in English properly, which is not just a matter of students themselves but can also be related to the challenges that teachers experience. Since teachers are closely connected with their students in the classrooms, their challenges and concerns can explicitly or implicitly influence students.

## Method

### Participants

In order to find participants and to obtain more inclusive results, on the basis of snowball sampling techniques (Best & Khan, 2006), we recruited from different geographical areas of Iran using different participant recruitment methods, including personally contacting educational centers and asking the participants to fill in the questionnaires (See the *Instrument* section below) via E-mail, *Whatsapp*, *Telegram*, and face-to-face discussion.

As the questions were open-ended, the participants were requested to thoroughly reflect upon their answers, and report/comment on any challenges that they faced during their teaching as part of their profession. They were free to answer the questions on the spot or answer them later and return the completed version of the questionnaire. Out of 138 hard copies of the open-ended questions, 93 completed versions ( 67%) were returned.

The final participants included 93 Iranian EFL teachers (50 males and 43 females; 45 high school and 48 junior school-teachers) who were selected. All of them were teachers at public schools who were teaching young adults in junior and high schools. They held different degrees including BA (N=49, 53%), MA (N=34, 36%), and Ph.D. (N=10, 11%). Their age ranged from 25 to 47 with a mean of 36 years. Their teaching experience ranged from 4 to 28 years (Mean = 15) and their participation in the research was voluntary.

### Instrument

In order to construct the questionnaire sent out to the sample of 138 participants, an open-ended question was first given to a representative group of the participants selected from the original group based on snowball sampling techniques. This group included seventeen (ten male and seven female) Iranian junior and high school EFL teachers. They were asked to name any kind of challenges that they face while they teach English as part of their work. Participants reported almost 103 different challenges. The researchers collected the responses, which were later analysed. First, duplicate or similar responses were omitted. Second, the remaining responses were analyzed and coded. This coding uncovered the main themes that were classified as main challenges. Then, to ensure the validity of this classification, the researchers consulted with seven Iranian EFL teachers with more than 20 years of experience and two experts in teacher education. On the basis of participants' feedback and experts' judgments, challenges were classified into seven main types as indicated in Figure 1.

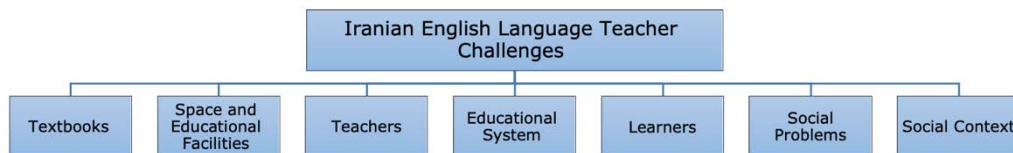


Figure 1: Main challenges of Iranian English Language Teachers

These seven main challenges were used to develop the questions of the instrument. In this regard, each main challenge was used to design a question. As there were seven main challenges, seven open-ended questions, accordingly, were developed. For example, *textbooks* as one of the main challenges was transferred to the relevant question *What are your challenges related to the textbooks?* These seven open-ended questions, designed from the initial survey, comprised the final instrument for data collection. Furthermore, the instrument consisted of questions regarding respondents' background information including age, gender, and teaching experience. In order to be comprehensible, the instrument questions were written in Farsi, the respondents' native language. Finally, it was important to pilot the tool in order to reveal "subtle flaws in the design or implementation of the study that may not be readily apparent from the

research plan itself" (Mackey & Gass, 2005, p. 43). Thus, the researchers used experts' judgments in their pilot stage. The final instrument is presented in the Appendix. It is worth noting that there are two reasons for focusing on these open-ended questions in the questionnaire, which is an instrument for data gathering. First, these questions were designed from a thematic analysis of participants' ideas of their challenges during their professional jobs of English language teaching. Second, open-ended questions allow participants to freely express their ideas.

### Procedure

A qualitative-quantitative mixed-methods design was adopted in this study. On the one hand, this study is qualitative because the researchers implemented open-ended questions. On the other hand, to understand which challenges were more prominent for the participants, the researchers recorded the frequency of each response. Hence, this study also takes advantage of the quantitative design. The data were collected during the winter and fall of 2018 during teachers' class time.

After the data were collected, seven tables were designed to record responses, one table for each question. The answers to each question were recorded. Finally, the responses were written down in the tables based on their importance to the participants or their frequencies. These procedures were followed for each question.

### Results

As was pointed out earlier, the purpose of this study was to investigate challenges that Iranian EFL teachers face during their teaching as part of their profession. These different types of problems that Iranian EFL teachers face that affects their teaching in any way. The main challenges were presented in Figure 1. Each main challenge has other related sub-challenges as follows.

*Textbooks* were one of the main challenges among Iranian EFL teachers. Eleven problematic issues were pointed out by the Iranian EFL teachers with regard to textbooks. Table 1 illustrates these challenges in detail from the most frequent to the least frequent mentioned by both male and female teachers according to teachers' level of education. As Table 1 shows *Not paying enough attention to writing skills by teachers and students* with 83% is the most frequent challenge that both Iranian male and female EFL teachers mentioned. On the other hand, *The teacher's guidebook's unavailability* with 24% is the least frequent challenge that both Iranian male and female teachers mentioned as one of the problematic issues regarding the textbooks.

|   | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|---|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|   | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Not paying enough attention to writing skills by teachers and students   | 24   | 16 | 5   | 19     | 14 | 4   | 83      |
| 2) Not paying enough attention to workbook by teachers and students   | 21   | 15 | 6   | 19     | 13 | 3   | 78      |
| 3) Lack of attention to the other cultures  | 19   | 14 | 2   | 17     | 14 | 4   | 72      |
| 4) Insufficient attention to speaking and listening in the process of teaching and excluding them from the final exam and Konkoor( Iranian national Entrance exam for universities) | 17   | 13 | 5   | 18     | 12 | 3   | 70      |
| 5) Absence of the necessary quality in providing textbooks  | 15   | 12 | 4   | 11     | 11 | 3   | 57      |
| 6) Question and answer of speaking skill are difficult  | 14   | 13 | 4   | 10     | 8  | 2   | 52      |
| 7) Lack of vocabulary list at the end of the book   | 12   | 8  | 3   | 11     | 9  | 1   | 48      |
| 8) Lack of phonetic signs for vocabularies  | 11   | 7  | 2   | 10     | 8  | 0   | 38      |
| 9) Textbook mistakes  | 13   | 4  | 1   | 12     | 5  | 1   | 36      |
| 10) Lack of unity in presenting materials   | 9    | 6  | 0   | 11     | 6  | 1   | 33      |
| 11) The teacher's guidebook unavailability  | 7    | 5  | 1   | 7      | 3  | 1   | 24      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 1: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to textbooks

*Space and Educational Facilities* was another prominent challenge among the Iranian EFL teachers. In this regard, nine sub-challenges were stated by the Iranian EFL teachers. Detailed representation of these challenges from the most frequent to the least frequent is shown in Table 2. Most of the participants, 89%,

agreed that they were faced with *Poor facilities for teaching including desk, chairs, whiteboard*. On the other hand, *No use of online training network* is the least frequent challenge pointed out by the Iranian EFL Teachers with 62%. Table 2 provides more detailed information with regard to these challenges from the participants' point of view.

|  | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|--|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|  | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Poor facilities for teaching including desk, chair, whiteboard etc. | 25   | 17 | 5   | 21     | 16 | 4   | 89      |
| 2) Lack of audio, visual and laboratory equipment                      | 24   | 18 | 6   | 22     | 14 | 3   | 88      |
| 3) Lack of cooling and heating appliances                              | 21   | 15 | 4   | 22     | 13 | 2   | 77      |
| 4) Inappropriate classroom space                                       | 22   | 16 | 3   | 18     | 12 | 4   | 75      |
| 5) Lack of enough facilities for rural students                        | 21   | 15 | 4   | 17     | 14 | 2   | 74      |
| 6) Inappropriate school space  | 23   | 17 | 2   | 13     | 15 | 1   | 72      |
| 7) Absence of songs and movies for training                            | 21   | 13 | 1   | 17     | 12 | 1   | 66      |
| 8) Lack of intelligent instruments in classrooms                       | 19   | 14 | 1   | 18     | 10 | 2   | 65      |
| 9) Lack of online training networks                                    | 18   | 11 | 3   | 20     | 8  | 1   | 62      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 2. Iranian EFL teachers' challenge related to space and educational facilities

Another main challenge was related to Teachers themselves, in particular, respondents reported twenty problems of this type. Among them Instructive teacher-centered teaching methods, and implementing the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), and Audio Lingual Method (ALM) was the most reported, 92%, and the Long distance from home to work was the least mentioned, 12%, among the Iranian EFL Teachers. An in-depth representation of these challenges is shown in Table 3.

|   | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|---|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|   | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Instructive teacher-centered teaching methods, and paddling in the GTM and ALM | 26   | 17 | 6   | 22     | 16 | 4   | 92      |
| 2) Teacher's livelihood status  | 26   | 18 | 6   | 20     | 16 | 4   | 91      |
| 3) The lack of mastery of some teachers in textbooks and language skills          | 25   | 17 | 6   | 21     | 15 | 4   | 86      |
| 4) The need for teachers to hold private classes                                  | 24   | 16 | 6   | 20     | 15 | 4   | 86      |
| 5) Lack of effective courses to update teachers                                   | 24   | 16 | 6   | 19     | 14 | 4   | 84      |
| 6) Lack of coordination between teachers and textbook changes                     | 26   | 15 | 5   | 20     | 14 | 2   | 83      |
| 7) Teachers second job due to livelihood problems                                 | 25   | 18 | 6   | 16     | 9  | 4   | 79      |
| 8) Housing, treatment, and welfare problems                                       | 26   | 18 | 6   | 14     | 7  | 4   | 76      |
| 9) How to deal with students  | 24   | 17 | 4   | 13     | 12 | 2   | 73      |
| 10) Use of non-English teachers   | 21   | 12 | 6   | 16     | 10 | 3   | 69      |
| 11) Some teachers' lack of discipline   | 18   | 11 | 2   | 14     | 9  | 1   | 56      |
| 12) Poor classroom management by some teachers                                    | 20   | 10 | 3   | 10     | 6  | 2   | 52      |
| 13) The lack of the study of the books by some teachers before it is presented    | 12   | 8  | 4   | 11     | 8  | 1   | 45      |
| 14) Family members' dissatisfaction with the teacher's job                        | 19   | 12 | 4   | 3      | 4  | 2   | 44      |
| 15) Inability of some teachers to provide proper assignments                      | 12   | 9  | 1   | 9      | 6  | 1   | 38      |
| 16) Lack of proper communication between teachers and students                    | 13   | 10 | 5   | 4      | 3  | 3   | 38      |
| 17) Lack of coordination between teachers and parents                             | 8    | 5  | 4   | 3      | 2  | 1   | 23      |
| 18) Lack of coordination between colleagues                                       | 9    | 5  | 1   | 5      | 4  | 0   | 24      |
| 19) Means of commuting  | 5    | 4  | 2   | 3      | 2  | 1   | 15      |
| 20) Long distance from home to work   | 2    | 3  | 1   | 2      | 2  | 2   | 12      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 3: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to teachers

The *Educational System* is the fourth main challenge faced by the Iranian English language teachers and includes sub-challenges as listed in Table 4. *Low allocation of time to present content* is the most problematic issue among the Iranian EFL Teachers reported by 82% of them and *Lack of appropriate facilities and opportunities for continuing education for teachers* is another challenge that they face and this was reported by the smallest number of teachers, 14%.

|  | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|--|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|  | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Low allocation of time to present content   | 23   | 15 | 6   | 20     | 14 | 2   | 82      |
| 2) Low salary  | 24   | 16 | 6   | 15     | 12 | 3   | 76      |
| 3) The basis of policies is not to learn English   | 21   | 16 | 6   | 15     | 12 | 3   | 74      |
| 4) Very small budget for education   | 22   | 14 | 6   | 12     | 13 | 3   | 71      |
| 5) Corruption in the educational system  | 22   | 12 | 5   | 15     | 12 | 2   | 69      |
| 6) Changing the attitude of authorities towards the development and teaching of this lesson                  | 19   | 13 | 4   | 16     | 12 | 2   | 67      |
| 7) Problematic issues associated with teacher's upgrading  | 16   | 12 | 5   | 10     | 8  | 2   | 54      |
| 8) Lack of psychological support of teachers in the event of an accident                                     | 15   | 8  | 4   | 6      | 6  | 1   | 42      |
| 9) Not paying enough attention to teachers' feedback and students' needs in the preparation of the textbooks | 13   | 7  | 3   | 6      | 9  | 2   | 40      |
| 10) Mismanagement in education   | 11   | 6  | 4   | 8      | 8  | 1   | 38      |
| 11) Lack of the honesty of the educational authorities with the teachers                                     | 12   | 7  | 3   | 4      | 5  | 1   | 32      |
| 12) Lack of discipline for students  | 13   | 6  | 3   | 5      | 1  | 1   | 29      |
| 13) Lack of expertise of authorities   | 9    | 3  | 2   | 4      | 3  | 0   | 21      |
| 14) False policies in giving a score to students to pass the exam  | 5    | 3  | 2   | 4      | 3  | 1   | 18      |
| 15) Lack of consistency in teachers' rating  | 7    | 2  | 1   | 3      | 3  | 0   | 16      |
| 16) Management weaknesses by school administrators, and officials  | 5    | 2  | 2   | 4      | 0  | 3   | 16      |
| 17) Lack of appropriate facilities and opportunities for continuing education for teachers                   | 2    | 4  | 4   | 1      | 1  | 2   | 14      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 4: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to educational system

Challenges regarding *learners* are listed in Table 5, which includes ten sub-challenges. In particular, related to the learners, *The challenges of how to deal with misbehaving students* were mentioned by 74% of the participants. It was the most challenging issue among the Iranian EFL teachers. On the other hand, *Differences between learners*, mentioned by 16% of the participants, was the least challenging issue among the Iranian EFL Teachers.

|   | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|---|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|   | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) The challenges of how to deal with misbehaving students                  | 23   | 16 | 4   | 15     | 14 | 2   | 74      |
| 2) Students' demotivation towards this lesson                               | 21   | 13 | 6   | 11     | 12 | 4   | 68      |
| 3) High number of students in most of the classes                           | 22   | 14 | 6   | 9      | 8  | 3   | 63      |
| 4) Lack of respect from the students  | 18   | 11 | 3   | 9      | 6  | 2   | 50      |
| 5) Lack of attention to the learner's age in language learning and teaching | 9    | 10 | 5   | 5      | 6  | 3   | 38      |
| 6) Lack of attention to the needs of learners                               | 7    | 9  | 5   | 4      | 5  | 3   | 33      |
| 7) Cultural differences among Students                                      | 5    | 6  | 6   | 4      | 4  | 2   | 27      |
| 8) Students' Poverty  | 4    | 5  | 3   | 4      | 5  | 1   | 22      |
| 9) Lack of attention to the learners' emotions of learners                  | 2    | 3  | 5   | 1      | 3  | 4   | 18      |
| 10) Differences between learners  | 3    | 4  | 2   | 1      | 3  | 3   | 16      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 5: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to learners

Based on the participant's point of view, sub-challenges related to the main challenge of the *Social Problems* are represented in Table 6. As can be inferred from the table, *Low social status* mentioned by 78% of Iranian EFL teachers was the most challenging issue and *Lack of proper understanding of the status of this lesson by families* was the least challenging issue cited by 27% of the participants. Table 6 presents a detailed picture of these challenges.

|  | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|--|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|  | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Low social status   | 23   | 16 | 6   | 14     | 14 | 4   | 78      |
| 2) Lack of enough respect by society                                     | 20   | 15 | 6   | 17     | 13 | 3   | 72      |
| 3) Favoritism  | 19   | 11 | 4   | 7      | 10 | 2   | 54      |
| 4) The instability of society and the creation of concerns for teachers  | 16   | 8  | 5   | 6      | 5  | 1   | 41      |
| 5) Lack of proper understanding of the status of this lesson by families | 11   | 4  | 4   | 3      | 3  | 2   | 27      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 6: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to social problems

Challenges regarding the *Social Context* are listed in Table 7. Among these, *Lack of using English outside the classroom* was mentioned by 79% of the Iranian EFL teachers as the most prominent one and *the Excessive use of the Persian language in the classes by teachers and students* was the least prominent, 52%, among the Iranian EFL teachers. A detailed representation of these challenges is illustrated in Table 7.

|  | Male |    |     | Female |    |     | Total % |
|--|------|----|-----|--------|----|-----|---------|
|  | BA   | MA | PhD | BA     | MA | PhD |         |
| 1) Lack of using English outside the classroom                                   | 22   | 15 | 6   | 20     | 11 | 4   | 79      |
| 2) Inappropriate social context for students learning                            | 20   | 14 | 6   | 13     | 14 | 4   | 72      |
| 3) Konkoor exam (Iranian national Entrance exam for universities)                | 17   | 14 | 6   | 16     | 12 | 4   | 70      |
| 4) Teaching for passing the test and not for communication                       | 15   | 13 | 5   | 12     | 8  | 2   | 60      |
| 5) Excessive use of the Persian language in the classes by teachers and students | 13   | 12 | 4   | 11     | 9  | 2   | 52      |

Note: Numbers were rounded.

Table 7: Iranian EFL teachers' challenges related to the social context

## Discussion

The current research examined the challenges that the Iranian EFL teachers faced in their professional lives. The findings of the study indicated that the Iranian EFL teachers faced many challenges that were categorized into seven main challenges including textbooks, space and educational facilities, teachers, educational systems, learners, social problems, and social contexts. Each of these main challenges consisted of other sub-challenges.

It was found that textbooks, as the manifestation of the curriculum, can be used to achieve educational aims. Besides, they can be an obstacle in reaching educational objectives if they contain problems and teachers have challenges in presenting them. In this regard, teachers' views can be valuable. Since teachers are responsible for their own teaching, they are familiar with the advantages and disadvantages of textbooks. The challenges related to the textbook among the Iranian EFL teachers, which are represented in Table 1, consisted of different problematic issues, each of which can cause a kind of hindrance in the teaching and learning process.

These problems can be divided into three types. First, problems regarding writing skills, workbooks, speaking, listening, textbook mistakes, textbook content, teachers' guidebook unavailability, and cultural problems. Second, some problems were associated with the physical characteristics of textbooks including the fact that the textbooks are unattractive. Third, problems related to the material applications include issues like excluding speaking and writing from the final exam and the Iranian National Entrance Exam for universities which, in turn, causes a lack of enough attention by students to these skills. One important point that we have to bear in mind is that all these challenges are interconnected. For example, not paying enough attention to writing skills and to the workbook by teachers and students are closely connected since

the workbooks are designed specifically to develop writing skills. Not paying enough attention to workbook presupposes not paying enough attention to writing skills. This, clearly, causes a lack of ability in writing by students.

Textbooks are designed to help students in the learning process. Certainly, alleviating these problems can make teachers more motivated and have positive effects on students' learning. Also, we have to bear in mind that the right application of textbooks in the classroom depends on many issues, one of which is facilities and educational space.

Undoubtedly, as both practitioners and researchers, we know that facilities and educational space, as the second main challenge represented in Table 2, can affect and (de)motivate all of those who are (in)directly connected with schools, in particular teachers and students. Challenges regarding facilities and educational spaces are related to appliances and physical characteristics of classrooms and schools. For example, the physical environment includes desks, chairs, and whiteboards, and space and technological facilities include audio, visual and laboratory equipment. Clearly, the physical environment of the classrooms affects the quality of interaction that occurs between teachers and students and their achievements, for example, classroom space can cause differences in academic achievement (Moore & Lackney, 1994) and affects the method of teaching (Proshansky & Wolfe, 1975). Classroom space can affect seating arrangement, one important factor in learning English, and this, in turn, can affect the kind of relationship that occurs among students and between teachers and students. In other words, seating arrangements affect students' participation in class activities (Martin, 2004). As Iranian EFL textbooks are based on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach and there is an emphasis on four language skills, technological facilities can have a positive effect on teaching and learning of four skills. To improve speaking and comprehension, extensive listening is needed. This requires at least audios and videos. Having no access to these technologies, students will have problems regarding their listening and speaking skills. One important point that can be inferred from Table 2 is that on average 74% of the participants confirm that Iranian EFL schools suffer from the lack of educational space and educational facilities, which should be taken into consideration. Overall, educational space and educational facilities affect the learning and teaching process and their lack can have negative effects directly on both teachers and students.

Another main challenge was related to the teachers, because they are in direct contact with students, teachers require attention and support and collaboration with students, parents, principals, authorities, societies and other stakeholders. Their challenges need to be thoroughly addressed. Clearly, teachers' challenges can affect students' learning and also have consequences for every member of the society in long run. Among a number of points that can be inferred from Table 3, teachers' knowledge of methodology, textbooks, and their ability of teaching and assessment deserves true attention. For example, 92% of the participants considered *Instructive teacher-centered teaching methods, and paddling in the GTM and ALM* to be useful, also echoed by Mirzaee (2016). Considering the role of the teachers in the CLT method, which the Iranian EFL textbooks are based on, one can infer that there is an apparent contrast between the roles that teachers play in the classrooms and the roles of the teachers implied by the textbooks, which clearly affect students' performance in communication outside of the classroom. Additionally, from Table 3 it can be inferred that the Iranian EFL teachers have problems meeting their basic needs. Among them it can be referred to *Teacher's well-being status, including teachers' need to work second job, housing, the high cost-of-living, and welfare problems, the efforts of teachers to give private classes*. On average, 83% of the participants in this study believe that Iranian EFL teachers have challenges regarding their basic needs of their lives. Struggling with their basic needs, teachers may be unmotivated in trying to do their best in the classrooms. In addition, participants reported that a teacher's poor classroom management style and that alleviating this problem can lead to the enhancement of the teaching and learning process (Saeedi, 2016).

Another main challenge among the Iranian EFL teachers is the educational system, represented in Table 4. Teaching and learning in general and second/ foreign language teaching and learning, in particular, are matters of language planning or educational system policy. The answer to the questions like which language should be taught as a second or foreign language, how much time is needed, budget, teacher's salary, and what kind of curriculum development is provided by the educational system. In public schools, the educational system can have the greatest effect on teaching and learning of a second/ foreign language by allocating the amount of time for its teaching and learning, by budget allocation, and by the textbook preparation among others. Two further issues can be inferred from Table 4. Seventy-four percent of the Iranian EFL teachers believed that the educational system in the Iranian context is not designed so as to



learn English. This is also echoed by Narafshan and Yamini (2011). In addition, 67% of Iranian EFL teachers believed that authorities do not have positive attitudes toward the development and teaching of this subject. This means that the educational system in Iran negatively views the teaching and learning of English. In addition, this point can be inferred from the low time allocation to English teaching and learning, as it was mentioned by 82% of the participants as the most frequent challenge. Considering other problems in the educational system like the lack of psychological support for teachers in the event of an accident, and the lack of appropriate facilities and opportunities for teachers to continue professional development and education, it can be inferred that the educational system in the Iranian context does not pay enough attention to and does not support the Iranian EFL teachers regarding their various challenges.

The sub-challenges of the learner-related challenges of the Iranian EFL teachers are listed in Table 5. Regarding learners' *challenges of how to deal with misbehaving students* as cited by 74 % of the participants, were considered to be the most problematic and the most important issue among the Iranian EFL teachers. It is important because these kinds of students can affect the quality of the teaching and learning process and can take lots of teaching or class time. In addition, misbehaving students can also hinder the process of teaching and learning, which is also echoed by Aliakbari et al. (2013). More than half of the participants, 68%, believed in students' low motivation with respect to learning English. Motivation directs students toward their goals and is the reason for going forward or to take action. If students become unmotivated they may not continue attempting to learn English. This is the most difficult situation that teachers can face, because unmotivated students can discourage teachers from teaching as well. Also, the number of students in classrooms is something to be taken into consideration. Sixty-three percent of the participants in this study maintained that the number of students in classes is high (n= 33). The high number of students is demanding on the part of the teachers, simply because, teachers need to be able to control and manage these classrooms and to present material to students of different ability levels, cultures, ages, and needs.

The wealth and value of every educational system is closely linked with its teachers and "no educational system can be better than its teachers" (Dolton & Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2013, p.9). Social problems of teachers, as represented in Table 6, are one of the issues that need special attention. However, to the authors' knowledge, there has been little research on the issue in the Iranian context. As Table 6 indicates, most of the participants believed that Iranian EFL teachers suffer from *Low social status* and *Lack of enough respect by society*, 78% and 72% of the participants respectively. If EFL teachers are not respected by society, their voices will not be taken into consideration by members of society specifically by the students, their profession will be downgraded. It means that English teaching and learning will not be respected. Over time, this can damage English teaching and learning and can weaken the understanding of the status of this subject as mentioned by 27% of the participants. As a result, each of these social problems can have a negative impact on English teaching and learning and needs to be considered carefully.

Challenges regarding social context that the Iranian EFL teachers faced were listed in Table 7. In Iran, the only opportunity to use the English language by learners is limited to two or three hours per week in the classrooms. As 72% of the participants believed in an *inappropriate social context for students' learning*, it can be inferred that social context is not conducive to learning English in a communicative way. Since one of the most useful ways to learn English is its use in a proper social context. Another challenge that can make this situation worse is that most of the participants, 79%, acknowledged the *Lack of using English outside the classroom*. This means that classes are the only places for English communication. But the worst is that 52% of the participants asserted that teachers and students have excessive use of their native language in the classes, also echoed by Eslami-Rasekh and Valizade (2004). It means that little time in the classes is allocated to communication through English. What can be inferred from these discussions is that classes are the only opportunity and the only places for learning English, which is not sufficient for the students to learn the language. *Konkoor*, or the Iranian National University Entrance Examination (INUUEE), is a final exam at the end of high school that covers almost all of the material in the last three years of high school. The students have to pass INUUEE in order to enter universities. As a result, the INUUEE is one of the main concerns among Iranian students. The Konkoor only includes multiple-choice items that do not need any oral language production. This encourages the students to prefer to pass this exam to enter the universities and take their focus away from the communicative competence. Due to the washback effect students just focus on quick solutions to answer these questions.

## Conclusion

The current research attempted to illustrate the challenges faced by junior high school and high school Iranian EFL teachers. The results of the study indicated that the challenges with which the Iranian EFL teachers confronted varied. Through the study, these challenges were categorized into seven main challenges, including textbooks, space and educational facilities, teachers, educational systems, learners, social problems, and social context. Also, this study indicated that each of these main challenges included a number of sub-challenges and that almost all of them are interrelated and function as parts of a puzzle. The Iranian EFL teachers, however, cannot eliminate or mitigate all of them by themselves. To cope with these challenges and with the inability of the Iranian EFL learners to communicate through English in different situations, all of the stakeholders who have the power to reduce these challenges such as policymakers, textbook developers, families, and students must cooperate with teachers to reach better results.

For further research, one possible way is to compare the challenges faced by the Iranian EFL teachers with those of teachers in similar contexts outside the Iranian EFL context. Another possible direction for further research is a closer examination of each of the main challenges as a separate study. In addition, there are areas such as classroom facilities and the Iranian EFL teacher's well-being status, which have not been explored extensively or need to be studied more in the Iranian context. Moreover, the interrelationship between different challenges can be another fruitful area for future research. Also, future studies can be conducted with more participants and other methods and instruments such as interview, questionnaire, or a combination of them. Similar studies from the students' point of view can also provide a clearer view of the challenges for the English Language Teaching (ELT) in Iran.

## Pedagogical implications

This study has different implications including:

As the focus of this study was on the challenges of the Iranian EFL teachers, it is obvious that the first group who can gain advantages from the findings are teachers themselves. It is worth noting that teachers can be more satisfied and confident when they find that they are not the only cause of the existing problems in the EFL teaching and learning process. Since some of these problems are not related to them, teachers can prepare themselves to solve or mitigate those challenges over which they have control.

Policymakers can, directly and indirectly, take advantage of these findings, by the provision of the resources needed as well as sufficient support for the EFL teachers, for instance, salary and psychological support, and by making changes in policies regarding English language learning. Policymakers can make the learning and teaching situations better for both English language teachers and students.

Furthermore, these results are beneficial for future EFL teachers in a way that they can make sense of the problems that exist and deal with real challenges in their future professions. Being aware of these problems, they will also prepare themselves to come into classes and think about solutions to solve the problems in order to provide a better learning situation for themselves and their students throughout the teaching and learning process.

Curriculum developers can also benefit from the findings of this study. Since they can consider the ineffectiveness of the textbooks and try to eliminate the problems through revision of the current materials or developing better aims to make them more effective.

Students, families, principals, and other members of society can also benefit from the findings of the current research by facing the reality and adjusting their expectations to these realities. They should try to do their best in solving these problems and making the situations better.

Education organizations can also take advantage of the findings of this study as they can provide some in-service training for helping teachers to be up to date and for helping them to adjust their methods of teaching in order to improve their textbooks.

Finally, these findings can be beneficial to other countries with similar settings where English is taught as a foreign language.

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## Appendix

### The Survey Instrument that was Used in this Study

Dear respondent, these questions were designed for research purposes. Please answer these questions patiently.

We would like to thank you in advance for your cooperation.

1. What are your challenges with textbooks?
2. Which issues with education system are most challenging for you?
3. What are your challenges with the learners?
4. What are your challenges with space and educational facilities?
5. Which issues with teachers are most challenging for you?
6. What are the challenges for you when it comes to social issues??
7. What are your challenges related to the educational context?

Personal information:

Age:..... years      Teaching experience: ..... years      Sex:    Male      Female

Degree of education:    AD                      BA                      MA                      Ph.D.

Great. Thanks.