

EFL Teachers' Understanding of the Teaching Portions of INSET Programs

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the portions of teaching materials for English classes in Iran's high schools. The efficiency of these materials was evaluated by (a) eliciting the teachers' perception of the materials to identify their distribution portions and (b) studying the teachers' satisfaction to identify whether the materials were successful to develop the EFL teachers' knowledge and skills for real classes. Participants were 94 in-service teachers. Two questionnaires elicited their perception and satisfaction of the programs. Findings indicated the programs focus strongly on grammar, reading, vocabulary, and pronunciation and weakly on speaking, writing, and listening. Results indicated the teachers showed positive attitudes towards the materials for teachers' knowledge and negative attitudes towards materials for teachers' skills in teaching. Findings necessitate attention to all portions of EFL to meet students' needs and bringing more practice into classes than theories.

Keywords: In-service Teacher (INSET) Programs; Professional Knowledge; Professional Skills

1. Introduction

1.1 INSET Programs

A best way to come up with new ideas to increase optimum growth, according to Heros (2009), is the analysis that examines how texts and talks represent and construct reality within a specific ideological system. Moreover, Widdowson (1998) views it as the uncovering of implicit ideology in texts. Fairclough and Wodak (1997) regard it as a study that addresses social problems. However, Gee (2004) takes it as an approach to language analysis that considers texts and talks as parts of specific social practices.

Analysis in education tends to shed light on areas vaster than language surface such as verbal interaction and written communication that belong to the microlevel of the linguistic competence. It exerts focus which pinpoints accuracy on transition and change in education (Kendall, 2007) as macrolevel phenomena such

as language policies, interdisciplinary teacher education schedules, social theories with linguistic analysis, and even multimodality in language teaching and learning. In ELT, it takes a critical position on how language is used and scrutinizes texts and talks as well as other types of interactions to identify the ideology and values underlying them. It tends to reveal the interests and rationales in any institutional and sociohistorical context by considering how people use language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

The analysis in education field moves in nature towards conducting analyses in critical modes. However, such analyses in education should not be considered negative criticism as in the common sense of the word. The academic notion of criticism at the earliest form from the Frankfurt School has not been associated with “positive” and the same concept in conducted critical research was recently proposed by Martin (2003, p.21). It simply means not taking anything for granted and opening up alternative substitutes instead.

Conducting analysis critically in teacher education is viewed as a tool to make visible the less explicit features of the contexts, that is, what is presented in the teacher training and teacher development courses, what should be practiced in the classes, how knowledge and techniques should be interrelated, and how the teacher and learner should be constantly developed? Roger et. al. (2005) say that critical analysis can be used to describe, interpret, and explain the ways in which teacher education components are constructed and represented.

Critical analysis in language teacher education can, therefore, help to make transparent the contents and the components which are prepared and presented in the programs and help to look into the connections between them and practices in the classroom. Accordingly, in order for any teacher education course to be constructive, all the figures involved in the programs including education policy makers, school administrators, and professional teachers should not remain on the fringe; instead, they should be context analysts whose inputs are appreciated in analyzing the discourse of the programs.

Among such programs, in-service teacher (INSET) programs address the scheduled materials offered within the courses on the job to uplift EFL teachers' capabilities regarding fresh knowledge and new techniques on the teaching performance and to assist them to transfer new skills and strategies to the classroom and school (Gordon, 2004). These programs are planned and held every year involving approximately all staff of the Ministry of Education and teachers in particular. INSET programs are presented in the form of regular seminars, lectures, and workshops held based on the required changes and listed issues (Vajargah, 2008).

The INSET programs for the EFL context in Iran which started in the 1930s received the first systematic programs in 1977. The programs were organized locally, and each city could design and manage its own in-service education courses. Then, due to Iran's Revolution in 1979, the textbooks and the educational system underwent a great change; therefore, there was an urgent need to renew the INSET programs, too (Vajargah, 1997).

The INSET programs in Iran entail different formats. The most familiar format is the face-to-face one in which the teachers should attend seminars or conferences in the training centers on the weekend or in the afternoon programs. The sandwich format is another stream of the INSET programs through which development packages are handed to the teachers to improve their profession theoretically and practically without attending certain sessions in training centers. The other format is on-the-spot development which brings development sessions in the schools instead of taking the teachers to training centers (Vajargah, 2008).

The INSET programs for the EFL context in Iran as continuing education which includes training courses emphasising new theoretical approaches towards the issues relevant to the classroom practice, presenting new materials, introducing new techniques and follow-up activities, improving classroom skills, and pursuing question-and-answer routines derived from the teachers' experience (Narafshan, 2006).

Moreover, Atai and Khaki (2006) mention that some objectives of the INSET programs for the EFL context, based on the documents of the Iranian Ministry of Education (1999, 2000), are to increase the teachers' professional knowledge and professional skills to teach reading comprehension, listening comprehension, grammatical structure, and new words practically, and to help the teachers to evaluate oral and written examinations in terms of new demands.

1.2 Components of INSET Programs

According to Tippelt and Amoros (2003), knowledge and skills that a professional needs to manage and run the profession within the structure of the work place have collectively been the center of attention. Regarding professional knowledge and professional skills in the EFL context, they are defined as the application of the knowledge and techniques in the classroom that a teacher needs for teaching and developing English language among the nonnative students (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

Professional knowledge and professional skills of EFL teachers means the teacher's knowledge and techniques in helping the students to learn the subject matter, guiding them towards the outlined educational objectives, providing them with knowledge, and directing them to know and apply the language (Brown, 2007).

Professional knowledge and professional skills of Iranian EFL teachers indicate the ability of the successful teachers as they practice the knowledge and the techniques presented in the INSET programs in their classrooms. So, the concern of the INSET programs for the EFL contexts in Iran is to develop professional knowledge and professional skills of teaching regarding the teacher's performance. In this line, the teacher's attitude, knowledge, skills, behaviour, and status are to develop in the programs in the form of seminars or lectures within two weeks to one month (Bazargan, 2004).

In particular, professional knowledge and professional skills refer to the concern for the teacher's knowledge and techniques in order to enhance the mastery of teaching the various tasks and activities in the classroom (Rahman, Ghafar, & Li, 2010). In sum, professional knowledge and professional skills are the ability to apply the knowledge and the skills in the classroom for the teacher to perform a particular part of teaching in terms of getting useful results.

In this study, professional knowledge and professional skills are operationally defined as the teacher's knowledge and techniques presented to him or her in an INSET program. Professional knowledge consists of subject knowledge, updating knowledge, self-development, experience enhancement, development of assessment procedure, interaction, and classroom management. Professional skills include the teaching ability, management on time, instructional planning, and implementation of techniques, interaction among students, conducting assignment, and presentation in their classroom.

2. Literature Review

In a study by Abdulla (2002), the researcher demonstrated the participants' perception of six aspects of development programs for English language teachers including course objectives, benefits of the courses, planning process, teaching-learning environment, presentation of the programs, and programs qualification. Almost the majority of the participants perceived the development programs as positive, especially in terms of knowledge of teaching and management of work.

In another study, teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions of INSET programs concerning the teaching-learning process of EFL and influence of such programs exerting on the teachers' professional skills in the classroom were explored and analysed (Chavez, 2006). This study emphasized the basic areas where teachers need urgent help to improve their performance in the classroom. The programs need to widen teachers' knowledge base of TEFL concepts, language learning theories, methods, and approaches. INSET programs should offer effective alternatives to build up teachers' improvement against the situational contexts which are the major negative sources on teachers' professional skills.

Ways of developing principles of teaching practice in very different locations that might shape the nature of teaching and learning were offered in a study by Korthagen, Loughran, and Russel (2006). The study indicated the participants' feedback showing their focus on the place of experience in teaching as an important approach for teacher development programs. The principles are challenging demands, creating subject, shifting from curriculum to learner, researching, working with peers, and focusing on practice that illustrate one way to create a common language for the development of pedagogy of teacher development. Based on the findings, those informative and applicable principles can help a new understanding of the pedagogy of teacher development across various contexts.

The English teaching policies and practices of INSET programs in Japan and Turkey were compared by Bayrakc (2009). The study indicates that the most important problems facing in-service training activities in the Turkish context are a lack of professional staff, no collaborative partnerships between the teachers, no provision for subject knowledge, and no systematic in-service training model.

A majority of student teachers and teachers in Iran are well-oriented towards the issues of teacher development programs; however, they show different perceptions of the programs (Mirhassani & Behafarin, 2004). The teachers express the need for a revision in the objective setting as well as in the syllabus of the teacher development programs. Based on their findings, the EFL development programs should provide suitable syllabuses with appropriate knowledge and skills as well as quality standards for the development of the profession.

Iranian EFL teachers have different perceptions of the effect of in-service EFL programs—on enabling them to be reflective, on presenting applicable techniques, and on the content efficiency of such courses (Atai & Khaki, 2006). They call attention to a systematic needs-analysis requirement, and that Iran's in-service EFL sector should focus on presenting pedagogic options, tasks, projects, and techniques in a more practical way rather than introducing theories and rationales alone.

Narafshan (2006) shows flexibility as a positive attribute that can drive teachers into a more competent professional status; otherwise, none of the teacher development programs meets the requirements. Her study suggests flexibility in the teaching approach as a goal and invites Iranian educational policymakers to consider it in INSET programs for EFL teachers to acquire wide-ranging professional knowledge. Because the knowledge in general deals with new challenges due to the progress of science and technology, INSET programs should provide the teachers with effectiveness of flexibility in teaching and learning to develop Iranian EFL teachers' accurate teaching competency.

Finally, the INSET programs in Iran suffer from content deficiency as the teachers' access to new theories tend to be "patchy" (Ahmadi, 2007, p. 28) because they are held in the form of seminars and conferences with concentration on practical "show-and-tell sessions, which reduce methodology to a bag of tricks" (p. 30). The findings suggest that not only should critical *why* or *why not* be hired to support *what* and *how* in development programs, but EFL teachers should also be open to theories and should be formulators rather than consumers of theories. Moreover, the teachers' perceptions of the development programs indicate that the content of such programs should move beyond the theory and should include practical skills for the classroom.

Pursuant to some studies mentioned in the review of literature, the present study pursues two purposes. On the one hand, it attempts to elicit the perception of EFL teachers in Isfahan high schools towards INSET programs to identify the portions presented in the programs regarding teachers' knowledge and teachers' skills necessary for teaching profession. On the other hand, this study makes an effort to draw out the level of satisfaction among EFL teachers in Isfahan high school about the portions presented during INSET programs.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Thirty percent of the sample size of the EFL teachers in Isfahan high schools (i.e., 94 male and female EFL teachers at Levels 1, 2, 3, and 4) were selected through cluster random sampling from different high schools of the six education districts in the city of Isfahan. They all had more than four years of English teaching experience and had attended INSET programs. The participants filled out the first 20-item questionnaire of what was presented to the teachers in terms of the teaching materials needed for the classroom. Then, the teachers were handed over another 20-item questionnaire to collect their satisfaction of the portions of the materials offered in the program in terms of professional knowledge and professional skills.

3.2 Instruments

Two questionnaires, each with 20 closed-ended items, were employed to elicit the teachers' perception and satisfaction for the portions of the presented knowledge and skills in the teacher development programs. To validate the questionnaires, the content of the items was taken into account and the viewpoints of three TEFL experts at Shahrekord University were obtained. After their approval was received, the pilot questionnaire sheets were distributed among 30 randomly selected English language teachers in Isfahan high schools, and the obtained data were fed into SPSS to get the reliability. The internal reliability index for all items of

the questionnaire relevant to the teachers' perception represented .77 and for all item of the questionnaire related to the teachers' satisfaction revealed .81 to be considered acceptable in social sciences.

3.3 Procedure

Because the purpose of this study was to identify the EFL teachers' perception of the distribution portions presented in the INSET programs and their satisfaction of the professional knowledge and professional skills presented in such programs, the lessons and the components of the each lesson with the contents of each component in the textbooks of four levels in high schools of Iran were considered and reviewed. All the EFL books consist of the parts entitled: New Words, Reading, Grammar, Write It Down, Language Function, and Pronunciation Practice. The INSET programs for the EFL context are face-to-face programs in the form of seminars and lectures held in three weeks. Teachers in the face-to-face format should attend the programs in training/development centers. For that, university lecturers or distinguished head teachers of the field are invited to run the lectures. The INSET program held in Iranian school year (2012-2013) was addressed by the EFL teachers teaching English language in Isfahan high schools through questionnaires. In order to identify the distribution of each skill in the presented program, 94 EFL teachers from the six educational districts in Isfahan were randomly selected to fill out the questionnaires. First, a 20-item questionnaire addressing the EFL teachers' perception of the distribution portions of materials presented in the program was handed over. Then, another 20-item questionnaire was employed to collect the teachers' satisfaction of professional knowledge and professional skills presented in the program. Both questionnaires were in Likert scale: 5 (*Strongly Agree*), 4 (*Agree*), 3 (*Undecided*), 2 (*Disagree*), 1 (*Strongly Disagree*).

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize and describe the sample data. They showed the teaching portions presented in the INSET programs, the number of teachers participating in the study, the mean difference for the presented portions, and the standard deviation for each portion. Then, *t* test was employed to find the significant difference between the means of the EFL teachers' perception towards the portions of the teaching materials. Furthermore, frequency distribution and percentage proportion of EFL teachers' perception towards the materials for professional knowledge and professional skills presented in the programs were taken into consideration. To do so, the collected data were fed into SPSS to be analyzed concerning each variable in the study.

4. Results

4.1 Results of Teaching Portions

The focus of ELT in the high schools of Iran seems to be the development of the four skills which is possible to be traced throughout the textbook materials. Based on these materials, the INSET programs in Iran appear to provide teaching portions in accordance with the purpose of the textbooks. Accordingly, the data collected from the 94 questionnaires were statistically analysed. Table 1 shows the teaching portions which were addressed in the INSET program, the number of the teachers participating in the study, and the mean and standard deviation of the teachers' perception of the presented portions:

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Teaching Portions, Number of Teachers, Mean, and Standard Deviation*

Portions	<i>N</i>	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Listening	94	1.25	2.00	1.30	.37
Speaking	94	2.50	4.50	3.05	.46
Reading	94	4.25	5.00	4.57	.43
Writing	94	1.75	3.25	2.37	.52
Grammar	94	4.50	5.00	4.74	.42
Pronunciation	94	2.75	4.25	3.73	.82
Vocabulary	94	3.25	5.00	4.31	.56

As shown in Table 1, the mean for the teacher participants' perception indicates that maximum emphasis during the INSET program is respectively placed on grammar, reading, and vocabulary and the minimum on speaking, writing, and listening. The skill which is moderately paid attention to is pronunciation.

The maximum and minimum focus on some teaching materials during the INSET programs is felt to justify the presence of the first group (grammar, reading, and vocabulary) and the absence of the second group (speaking, writing, and listening) in the University Entrance Exam in Iran. It shows the justification for the influence of the University Entrance Exam on materials like grammar to the maximum and materials such as writing to the minimum and some materials that receive no attention like listening.

Table 2. *Paired Samples t Test for the Teachers' Perception on Teaching Materials*

Teaching Materials	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Provided	4.54	94	.67	.08
Nonprovided	2.24	94	.27	.04

Table 2 shows the mean difference for the teachers' perception of the materials presented during the INSET programs. The mean for those materials and skills provided in the program is (4.54) and for the materials that are least presented or were absent in the program is (2.24).

The central question of the first part of the study was whether the INSET programs provide enough teaching portions for teaching the textbook materials in the classroom. The results of the first phase of this study indicate paying close attention to some teaching techniques and paying little or no attention to some others. From the analyzed data, it is apparent to document certain trends to go in line with the University Entrance Exam, whereas the data cannot identify the presence of certain skills required for the EFL learners such as listening, speaking, and writing. This absence of certain skills during INSET programs is highly due to the teaching practices that prepare the learners just for final test in short-term stance and for the University Entrance Exam in long-term stance (Azadi & Gholami, 2013).

4.2 Results of Professional Knowledge and Professional Skills

The results elicited from the collected and analyzed data in this study regarding the EFL teachers' perception of both the professional knowledge and professional skills presented during the INSET programs are tabulated in percentages. Table 3 shows that 75% of the participants agreed (A) that the INSET programs as a resource developed their professional knowledge, whereas 25% of the participants disagreed (D) that the programs developed their professional knowledge:

Table 3. *The EFL Teachers' Perception of Professional Knowledge*

Categories	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid A	73	75.0	75.0	100.0
D	21	25.0	25.0	25.0

Table 4 shows that 55.5% of the participants agreed (A) that the INSET programs as a resource developed their professional skills, whereas 44.5% of the participants disagreed (D) that the programs developed their professional skills:

Table 4. *The EFL Teachers' Perception of Professional Skills*

	Categories	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	A	59	55.5	55.5	100.0
	D	35	44.5	44.5	44.5

The abovementioned percentages represented through statistical means in Table 5 and Figure 1 indicated that the EFL teachers' perception of the professional knowledge is better than of the professional skills:

Table 5. *Overall Means for Professional Knowledge and Professional Skills*

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Professional knowledge	94	2.05	4.45	3.3080	.43316
Professional skills	94	1.55	4.50	3.0422	.55381
Valid N (listwise)	94				

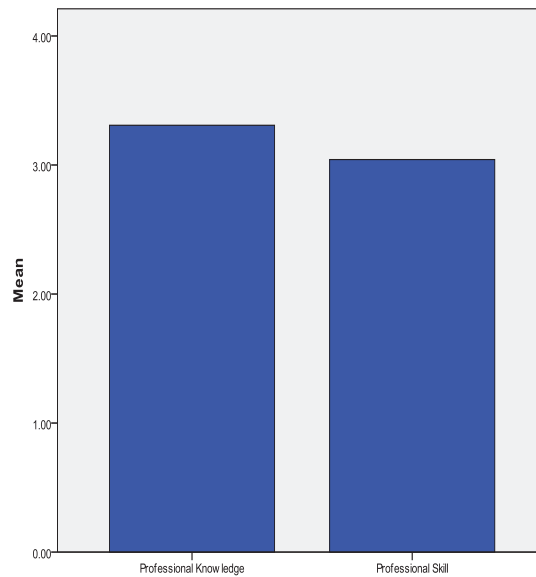


Figure 1. Mean of the EFL Teachers' Perception of Professional Knowledge and Professional Skills

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study shows an overall look at the distribution portions of the teaching materials during INSET programs for the EFL context in Iran. The study points to lack of general awareness of the importance of improving all the required skills for the EFL learners charted in the textbooks in the high schools of Iran. Any teaching practice directed to ignoring or narrowing down the essential needs of students results in being counterproductive of any teacher education programs (Pushkin, 2001). Listening, speaking, and writing that have not been taught or sounded trivial in the programs signify ignoring or narrowing down such skills in spite of being highlighted in high school text books.

It is hoped that in future the educational authorities decide to include the evaluation of pragmatic competence during INSET programs so that the teachers make a definite step towards focusing beyond linguistic forms into communicative interaction. It is also essential that the teachers get extensive professional development opportunities in relation to what communicative competence is and how it can be developed. It is also hoped that more direct and authentic language and tasks are included in the programs to drive the teachers to consider all the skills needed to use the language and to stop them from just viewing the usage of language. If the programs do not attend to listening, speaking, or writing, these practices are unlikely to be felt as relevant and important in the classrooms.

It also seems essential that an analysis of the needs of English language teaching and learning in the Iranian context be carried out so that teaching techniques for application in EFL classrooms and learning strategies among EFL students are attended based on the needs. Thus, in order to meet the needs of EFL classroom, teachers feel a real necessity to learn the materials required for all aspects oriented to the four basic skills during INSET programs and do not consider such programs as a mere formality. If so, the teachers and, accordingly, the students are just involved in comprehension and structure tasks which are qualitatively different from what is outlined in the textbooks, syllabus, and curriculum assigned by Iran's Ministry of Education. It is important, then, to keep track of future changes during INSET programs and of the ways in which the schools and the teachers react to them in order to direct all the interested individuals and in particular policymakers, teachers, and students to turn to active communicators instead of being mere receivers.

Ramani (1987) emphasizes that INSET programs should integrate theory and practice and encourage the teachers to theorise and conceptualise their own practice rather than sole theoretical inputs from teacher trainers within the programs. However, Clarke (1994) discusses the reasons for the dysfunction between theory and practice and concludes that because the decision on what works and what fails

in the classroom is upon the teachers themselves, the programs should provide the teachers with knowledge and techniques essential for the classroom.

Based on the results of the second phase of this study, there is general satisfaction among the EFL teachers who attended the INSET programs towards the professional knowledge presented during the programs. It could be explained by the nature of the distribution of the professional knowledge during the INSET programs which seems productive and helpful for all the teachers. It could also be described by the participants' expectations of the applications of the professional knowledge presented during the INSET programs in the real classroom context.

According to the results of the second phase of this study, there is also no satisfaction among the EFL teacher who participated in the INSET programs towards the professional skills presented in the programs. It could be explained by the focus of the programs on mere theories leading to insufficient attention to the practice in the classroom. Moreover, Ananisarab and Mobasheri (2009) and Ahmadi (2002) claim that in spite of the serious shortcomings, theories offered during the INSET programs in Iran are taken for granted too soon instead of being subjected to careful conceptual and empirical appraisals and when it comes to practice, it usually deals with the teachers' control and class administration, not with their abilities and skills in language teaching.

The result of the professional skills could also be explained by the high school textbooks syllabuses oriented to communicative approach. The high school textbooks in Iran seem to be prepared to build up communicative potentiality between students-students and students-teachers (Atai & Khaki, 2006). Therefore, each part of the English textbooks in high schools needs a particular method in a practical way in line with CLT, but the INSET programs seem to suffer from a shortage of the basic requirements of a CLT approach.

The fact that the Iranian EFL teachers perceived the professional skills, presented during the INSET programs as negative, mirrors some crucial factors and realities affecting the findings of the study. Among them, the nature of texts for university matriculation (i.e., Konkoor) in Iran plays a major role. The texts are of the grammar and reading sections as the mere contents which are fully practiced in the classrooms in order for the students to pass the matriculation, and little or no attention is paid to other skills. Therefore, both EFL teachers and EFL students in Iran attempt to fulfil the requirements merely for university matriculation (Ahmadi, 2007; Koosha, 2001).

INSET programs for EFL teachers need to pave the way for productive changes, particularly to the teachers' professional skills so that they can apply the changes practically in the classroom. In this regard, the programs should be

subjected to continuous assessment in relation to practical requirements for both teachers and students. In sum, the Iranian EFL teachers without enough exposure to the practical teaching techniques have difficulty running the classroom resourcefully and efficiently and, therefore, they expect the development programs to provide them with the professional practices for a better EFL teaching.

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