Teachers-To-Be Voices: A Grounded Theory Approach Towards Challenges Facing Iranian EFL M.A. Candidates

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Abstract

Improvement in the quality of teacher education is an issue of considerable concern to every country including Iran. The challenges that student-teachers face during their education can be highly influential in this regard. Consequently, the present study was an attempt to come up with a model for the factors challenging Iranian EFL preservice teachers using a grounded theory approach. For this purpose, 30 TEFL M.A. candidates were interviewed individually and in focus groups, and the elicited responses were transcribed and coded using the 3 codification processes of open, axial, and selective codings. Findings revealed 6 major challenges: (a) problems with teachers, (b) lack of educational facilities and amenities, (c) financial problems, (d) problems with educational planning and curriculum development, (e) problems with peers, and (f) personal and social problems. Findings are discussed, and pedagogical implications and suggestions are presented, too.

Keywords: Teacher Education; Challenges; Grounded Theory; EFL M.A. Candidates

1. Introduction

Education, as an influential element, can act like an instrument to bring changes in social and cultural aspects of the society. The leaders of these changes would be teachers who play a primary role in the system of education. The quality of teachers is known as one of the most important factors in the effectiveness of school system (Barber & Mourshed, 2007). Teacher quality plays a crucial role on students' outcomes, and its influence on students' higher achievements and learning has been increasingly recognized to the point that it has become the single most important school variable. Nevertheless, having a broader view of this issue would certainly lead one to notice the profound impact of teacher education on both teacher effectiveness and student outcomes as the most determining factor (Gustafsson, 2003; Wayne & Youngs, 2003).

It is clear that those deciding on teaching as their lifetime profession should get prepared and receive proper education as the other occupations do. Teacher

education program is regarded as the period which would help future teachers to reach their aims. As teacher effectiveness in classroom would be the most important goal of this program, it is essential to ensure the preparation of high-quality training for teachers that would empower them to develop and deliver instruction effectively. Considering the importance of teacher education, exploring student-teachers' voices is one of the essential steps in providing insights into teacher training program. The development of teachers' voices is part of their identity formation which is generated through their interpretation and reinterpretation of their experiences (Sutherland, Howard, & Markauskaite, 2010). Richardson (1996) classifies these experiences into three categories: personal experience, experience with schooling and instruction, and experience with formal knowledge—both school subjects and pedagogical knowledge. These conceptions and beliefs play a central role as student-teachers make sense of their learning in their teacher education program.

Teacher education and, more specifically, EFL teacher education in Iran (the main concern of this study), like many other countries, has had its revisions and changes during time. In recent years, attention towards teacher education programs, including preservice EFL teacher training, has increased and the M.A. in TEFL has become one of most popular postgraduate programs in Iran (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). However, many of those who have graduated as teachers frequently state their lack of competence and skill in performing their jobs as teachers (Hashemian & Azadi, 2014; Molaeenezhad & Zekavatee, 2008; Soleimani, & Rahmanian, 2014). In addition, the results of the few studies which have evaluated this program (e.g., Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013; Forouzandeh et al., 2008) have shown that this program is not as effective as it is expected, and there is a need for its revision or reformation. Hence, this study probed into this issue by investigating the hurdles faced by Iranian M.A. candidates during their years of study, using their own voice with the hope to provide constructive and beneficial guidelines for future improvements in EFL teacher training programs.

2. English Language Teacher Education in Iran

There are two main centers for training English teachers in Iran: Universities that function under the supervision of the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, and some colleges and institutions which are a subset of the Ministry of Education, directly preparing teachers for teaching at schools at B.A. levels. University students are trained in four different levels: associate degree, B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. However, with the establishment of the institutions under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, some universities have stopped training English teachers at B.A. level and have just concentrated on higher education.

Students spend 2 years studying for an associate degree with about 36 credits; for B.A., they have to study for 4 years with some 140 units; M.A. would

usually last for 2 years with about 34 credits; and Ph.D. continues for 4 years with about 36 numbers of credits. The program at B.A. level is usually divided into two modules. Whereas the first module (the first 2 years of students' studies) aims at enhancing students' general proficiency in English, the second module emphasizes on enriching students' theoretical knowledge. The focus on the practical aspect of becoming a teacher is relatively scarce, and students find little opportunity to practice teaching in real classrooms. In addition, teachers act as the sole source of knowledge transfer information to the students (Moghaddas & Zakeri, 2012).

Students ought to attend an entrance exam to be accepted in (post)graduate and programs. M.A. and Ph.D. students have to prepare and defend a thesis in order to be able to graduate. Although the recent policies of the government have mostly focused on the localization of education, there are still students travelling to other cities for studying, residing in dormitories and eating at university cafeterias.

Whereas ELT in Iran, as in many other developing countries, requires fundamental studies on its different aspects (e.g., the design of the program, the presented curriculum, the enrolment, and graduation of competent applicants), the amount of research in these areas is comparatively limited (Shahmohammadi, 2012; Shamsipour Nodehi & Mehrabi, 2013), leaving lots of uncertainties about the problems inhibiting the required amount of development and progression in EFL teacher education program (Mirhassani & Beh-Afarin, 2004). Consequently, getting an accurate picture of the needs and constraints of this program calls for a more thorough investigation of its different aspects.

3. Studies on EFL Training and Trainees in Iran

Research on EFL teacher training/education has gained more importance during the last few years. Among the few studies assessing EFL teacher education in Iran, Moghaddas and Zakeri (2012) investigated the weak and strong points of this program, using a postmethod era's point of view. In their paper, they explain the changes in Iranian EFL teacher education from the past to the present, and after criticizing the present state, they provide some general suggestions for its improvement, including giving more attention to teachers, clarifying educational ideologies, centralizing the decision-making, and solving teachers' financial problems.

In another study, Nezakat-alhossaini and Ketabi (2012) made a comparison among Iranian, Turkish, and Australian teacher training programs while giving their special attention to EFL classes. They not only concluded a need for substantial changes in different aspects of teacher training program in Iran, including the study hours, course content, employment, and practicality, but also a particular need for reconsidering the EFL teacher training for its low quality training system.

While criticizing the present situation of Iranian EFL teachers' performance evaluation, Navidinia et al. (2015) proposed a new model for EFL teacher performance appraisal. Mohammadi et al. (2015) described the state of preservice teachers' assessment in the field of language testing in five teacher training centers. The results showed that the majority of the questions in the exams emphasized the superficial and rote knowledge, not paying enough attention to the depth of the content.

A great majority of other studies consider student-teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards different issues. In one study, Ketabi, Zabihi, and Ghadiri (2014) investigated the epistemological beliefs of 92 Iranian student-teachers towards learning/teaching using two questionnaires. The results showed that the Iranian preservice EFL teachers believed in innate and fixed nature of knowledge in learning/teaching. The authors explained these findings as the outcome of the centralized system of education in which teachers have neither enough autonomy nor adequate knowledge of reflective teaching. They further suggested for a more localized and process-oriented system of education that empowers students and teachers.

Ghonsooly, Khajavy, and Mohaghegh Mahjoobi (2014) explored 107 EFL teacher trainers' sense of self-efficacy and metacognitive awareness, using two questionnaires in order to predict their academic performance measured by grade point average (GPA). The findings indicated both metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy as the predictors of GPA. Moreover, Shirani Bidabadi and Yamat (2010) investigated the learning style preferences of 92 TEFL Iranian students using a questionnaire and concluded that the majority of the students considered themselves as communicative learners.

The abovementioned studies as well as similar research carried out in this regard can certainly have beneficial implications for the improvement of the EFL teacher education program. Nevertheless, it seems that for creating radical improvements in the quality of EFL preservice teacher education, further research on the fundamental components of this system is required. This study, as part of an effort towards this aim, investigated the problems facing Iranian EFL student-teachers during their education.

4. Objectives and Research Question

Most EFL teachers including Iranian teachers would not feel ready for their job after finishing their training (Kashef, 1999; Nunan, 2003; Peacock, 2009; Pham, 2001). This might be a good indication of the fact that they had not received proper preparation for their future occupation. In recent years, the effect of teacher education programs on training more capable teachers has received greater attention,

and different scholars have largely emphasized the unsatisfactory status of EFL preservice education (Nunan, 2003; Pham, 2001). Perceiving the present setbacks in teacher training would suggest a need for further investigation into the preservice teacher education program. One of the major steps in this regard could be investigating the challenges that such student-teachers would face during their education. Acquiring a thorough understanding of their problems would be very beneficial in enhancing EFL preservice teacher education.

Perceiving a grounded theory approach, we tried to present a model for the career challenges facing Iranian EFL M.A. candidates with the hope that the obtained results could provide valuable guideline for designing a much more developed, satisfactory, and beneficial curriculum in the field of TEFL in Iran.

In line with the objectives, the present study sought the answer to the following research question:

- What are the perceived career challenges facing prospective Iranian EFL M.A. candidates?

5. Method

This inquiry employed a qualitative approach and, more specifically, a grounded theory approach to study the hurdles faced by Iranian EFL M.A. candidates. The nature of the study was exploratory, searching for the common experiences of student-teachers. As these experiences were unique and personalized and no preconceived hypothesis was presented for the gathered data, the grounded theory was feasible for this study. In a grounded theory, "a researcher does not begin a project with a preconceived theory in mind. Rather, the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 12). In other words, an in-depth analysis of the data is done, and through processing, the researcher's thoughts and impressions emerge in the form of a theoretical concept (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

5.1 Participants

The participants were 30 EFL M.A. candidates (14 males and 16 females) studying in Shiraz University, Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman, Islamic Azad University of Kerman, and Islamic Azad University of Sirjan who attended in personal semistructured interviews and focus-group interviews. The samples were selected from the two state and Azad universities, as they are considered as the two major universities of the country providing better conditions for their students compared with other smaller colleges or universities. The M.A. students were selected as the participants because we believe that they are more engaged with some issues like doing research, writing a thesis, or having jobs than B.A. students.

Furthermore, they spend more time on the campus in comparison to Ph.D. candidates, having a closer experience of the universities' situations and facilities. The participants of the personal interviews were selected based on snowball sampling, as the first nominated student named another student whom he or she considered to be resourceful and cooperative as well as being willing to do the interview and have his or her voice recorded. For the focus-group interviews, the participants were selected based on availability sampling and the students' consent to attend the interviews. The number of the interviewees was limited to this number, as from this point no, new information was forthcoming and data saturation was reached.

5.2 Instrument

The main data collection instruments were semistructured personal and focus-group interviews. Interviews provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena in comparison to what is obtained from quantitative methods like questionnaires (Silverman, 2000). The participants in the semistructured interviews included 18 (8 males and 10 females) EFL M.A students from state and Azad universities in three cities of Shiraz, Kerman, and Sirjan. The participants were asked some basic questions regarding what kind of challenges they faced during their studies for M.A., and what they thought was the source of these challenges. Meanwhile, the participants were free to add any new point(s) at the end of the interview.

Furthermore, in order to elicit the participants' views in interaction within groups, two focus-group interviews were also conducted following the same procedures. As the setting in focus groups is less threatening, it helps the participants to feel safe and discuss their perceptions, experiences, and beliefs (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1998). Each focus group consisted of six students with two males and four females from Islamic Azad University of Sirjan for the first focus group, and three males and three females from Bahonar University of Kerman for the second focus group.

5.3 Data Collection

Following the review of the available literature, personal and focus-group interviews were conducted in order to yield an in-depth, rich understanding of the students' experiences and feelings regarding the career challenges they faced during their M.A. studies. The participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and their consent was obtained. In addition, we asked for the participants' permission to audio-tape each interview for the purposes of qualitative analysis. The students were asked some core questions regarding the challenges they faced during their studies like: "Are you experiencing any problems regarding your studies in

M.A.?" "Can you describe some of these problems that you mentioned?" And, "are your problems limited to university or you are having personal problems, as well?" The interview continued in order to gather specific and in-depth information by asking the interviewees to elaborate on the points mentioned without imposing any ideas on them. The interview questions were designed and asked in English, but with the purpose of a better communication and facilitation of expressing ideas, the interviewees were allowed to use their L1 (i.e., Persian), if needed. The focus-group interviews were also guided by some key questions, and the participants were given an opportunity to provide detailed descriptions of their experiences regarding the challenges they faced during their education. We acted as moderators, facilitating the discussion and encouraging all the members to participate. A typical personal interview lasted about 45 min, but some extended more than that. The focus-group interviews continued about 75 min, and different ideas and opinions were brought into contact. The number of the students being interviewed continued up to the point that no new information was attained and data saturation was reached. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis.

In order to check the credibility of the obtained data, member-checking and peer-debriefing were used. For the member-checking, the participants were asked to review the drafts and emerging themes from the research to assess and garner feedback about the accuracy of the interpretations. The peer-debriefing involved an external check of the research by a graduate colleague who was provided with the raw data and our interpretations and explanations in order to review and ask questions about the research to ensure the study made sense and the interpretations from data were plausible and accurate.

5.4 Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews were directly transcribed in order to avoid any bias. After transcribing, we got familiar with the data through reading and rereading the transcriptions. Then, we made some notes as a preliminary step to provide a coding scheme. Next, the raw data were codified to develop concepts and themes from the data, using the constant comparative method and the coding paradigms of the grounded theory approach, that is, open, axil, and selective codings (Ary et al., 2010). The students' sentences were selected as the basic unit of meaning. The units with the same coding were put together to form categories which were 1 level above the codes in open or preliminary coding. In this way, we detected a wide range of concepts and categories regarding the challenging factors which were reduced later. Then, we tried to develop the core categories by generating the connections among the different (sub)categories applying the axial coding. Finally, in selective coding, some categories were integrated to create an overall model for factors challenging the Iranian EFL M.A. candidates.

Assessing the dependability of data codification was done using interrater agreement. Some of the transcriptions were randomly selected and given to one of the colleagues having a lot of experience in qualitative research to do the coding based on the coding rubric identified by the researchers. After the peer had coded the data, the results were compared to the original one using the formula of "Reliability = No. of agreements/total number of agreements + disagreements*100" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 64). The reliability was found to be 85% for the analysis. Finally, the differences were discussed, and the modified model was presented with six themes, and the various codes under each theme were determined.

6. Results and Discussion

The participants talked about the different problems that they had experienced; after analyzing the results, these problems were categorized into six types as follows:

a) **Problems with teachers:**

The process of teaching would be a difficult task, as teachers' job is very demanding that requires a lot of patience, knowledge, empathy, and a great ability in social interaction. However, the misbehavior of teachers described as *didactogency* by Lewis and Riley (2009) is "a faulty education that harms students, physically, psychologically or educationally" (p. 418). Lewis and Riley, further, categorize teachers' misbehavior as those things that teachers do that should not do to the students and those that they have to do, but fail to do which are called *commission* and *omission*, respectively. The results of the interviews showed teachers' misbehavior as one of the problems that almost all the students were experiencing. Some of their comments are the indication of the seriousness of this factor:

- Student # 4: *Some teachers are not available. They are coming from other cities or have other responsibilities . . . . They mostly consider the theoretical aspects of the courses and do not work on the practical aspects. Therefore, most of the students do not know how to teach or be a good teacher . . . . Students do not have a role model.*

- Student # 10: *Most teachers do not take sufficient advantage of the class time. They come late and leave early . . . . They do not have enough knowledge and do not provide enough materials . . . .*

- Student # 16: *Some teachers are very strict. They introduce an enormous amount of resources which students cannot master during just one semester . . . . This puts a great deal of stress on the students, additionally under such conditions the students' progress would not be desirable.*

- Focus Group # 1: *Some teachers do not have enough knowledge to present to the students . . . . Their behavior towards the students is not appropriate. They are rude and harsh and the students cannot disagree with any of their decisions because if they do, they will not be able to pass the course anymore.*

As it is understood from the students' responses, most students were not satisfied with the performance of their teachers (21 individuals, 70%). Unfortunately, there is not a proper teacher-observation and supervision in most Iranian universities, and the teachers have the authority to decide on their own method of teaching, examination, and assessment. The students are not allowed to criticize or question their teachers' decisions; if they do, there might be consequences. It seems that the current system of teacher education is based on the traditional top-down approach in which students are just receivers of some discrete parts of knowledge. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) argues, "such a transmission model of teacher education is hopelessly inadequate to produce self-directing and self-determining teachers (p. 182).

b) **Lack of educational facilities and amenities:**

Another problem that most students face is lack of educational facilities. This factor could have a crucial and significant role in higher education where student-teachers are trained for their future occupation. They have to be able to gather sufficient knowledge and expertise through the use of facilities such as the Internet, journals, video projectors, up-to-date resources, and so on. However, most students were dissatisfied with the condition of these facilities:

- Student # 6: *The speed of the Internet is so low that you cannot download a short article . . . . There are no special Websites to download journal articles and if there are we have to pay in dollars which is not possible as we do not have credit cards in our country.*

- Student # 8: *Lack of enough classes is very problematic for us and it forces us to change the location of our class each week . . . . There are not enough resources available in order to do research . . . . There are no classes available for student-teachers to teach for practice teaching or do experiments . . . .*

- Student # 16: *Our dormitory is very crowded without any facilities. There are too many people living in one room, and I cannot concentrate when studying . . . . There are not enough bathrooms . . . . The quality of food and services in university cafeteria are very low. Sometimes, you cannot eat because it is fatty or smells.*

Most students were very displeased with the available facilities in their universities (22 individuals, about 73%). They complained about the condition of the dormitories and university cafeteria, as well as lack of adequate research facilities. The participants believed that this lack of facilities, equipment, and desirable learning conditions would result in poor quality of future teachers. For students to learn, it is necessary to be able to access up-to-date resources from books to journals, workshops, and opportunity of teaching classes in order to familiarize themselves with the latest developments and achievements and gain practical experience. This factor would certainly need special attention from lower-level authorities like presidents of universities to higher-level authorities in the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology.

c) **Financial problems:**

A large number of M.A. candidates have to earn money, alongside studying in order to support their families or pay their educational expenses. Although the admitted students in daily courses of state universities do not pay any tuition, there are still other expenses like buying books, printing, copying, typing, living in dormitory, and food expenses. The students attending night courses and Islamic Azad University not only have to pay for these expenses, but also a considerable amount of money as their tuition for each semester. When the students were asked about their financial setbacks, they described their problems as follows:

- Student # 2: *The university tuition is very high and you have to add the dormitory and commuting expenses to that amount, as well . . . .*

- Student # 9: *As M.A. students, we have to make a lot of copies of different documents and print a lot as well. However, there are no allowance is available . . . .*

- Student # 14: *I am employed, but for attending my classes, I have to work part time, but the amount tuition is so high that I cannot cover my expense with the salary of a part time job . . . .*

- Student # 18: *Having financial problems might cause the students to skip classes . . . . Books are very expensive . . . . The low amount of student loans cannot cover tuition or other expenses . . . .*

Most students believed that financial problems would have a diverse effect on their academic performance (24 individuals, 80%). The high and rising costs might result or may have already resulted in institutions of higher education to become just a place for instruction other than doing research. Furthermore, financial problems could cause students to suspend or even leave their studies. Universities are also under a lot of cost pressure, and they try to compensate for this problem by

increasing tuition rates, lowering the amount of student loans, or decreasing the quality and quantity of the available facilities (Johnstone & Marcucci, 2007). Hence, the financial problems that the students are facing need special attention in order to improve their efficacy as future teachers as well as the quality of higher education.

d) **Problems with educational planning and curriculum development:**

The objective of establishing graduate programs is to train people with special expertise in order to fulfill the requirements of the society. The office of Planning in Higher Education in Iran presented the total characteristics, curriculum, and syllabus of courses for M.A. on June 20, 1987. In this enactment, the maximum length of M.A. for TEFL is 3 years in which the students have to pass courses and present their theses. The organization and structure of this program is a composite of 28-credit compulsory and 6-credit elective courses, although the number of elective courses can extend to 12 credits. Each student is supposed to prepare a four-credit thesis at the end of his or her education. However, the presented courses in Islamic Azad University are slightly different from the state universities and were lastly presented on July 3, 1995. The students have to pass 18-credit compulsory and 8-credit elective courses and develop a six-credit thesis. When talking to the students participating in the interviews, there were many issues regarding educational planning and curriculum development that they were not satisfied with:

- Student # 5: *The presented curriculum does not endorse the practical aspects of becoming a teacher . . . . We are only studying and working on theoretical aspects of the courses and this does not make us ready to become teachers.*

- Student # 7: *Some of the elective courses are not valuable and related to the purpose of the program . . . . M.A. Entrance Exam is not efficient in selecting matriculated students . . . . There should definitely be some changes in the administration of the exam . . . . Maybe, including an interview or adding listening and speaking questions could be an option.*

- Student # 11: *What is the difference between M.A. and B.A.? We are studying the same thing and nothing is added to our pervious knowledge . . . .*

- Student # 12: *A large number of courses are offered for each semester specially the first two semesters which would make it difficult for us to cover them all . . . . The high rate of admission decreases the quality of this program . . . .*

In general, the students were displeased with the type of presented courses as well as their allocated time (21 individuals, 70%). Another aspect that most students were discontented with was the M.A. Entrance Exam. They believed that

the current method of assessment that is just based on some multiple-choice questions cannot differentiate between efficient and inefficient candidates. Some of them suggested adding an interview to this exam in order to check the students' speaking and listening skills. Some others suggested having predetermined sources for this exam. They believed that as students do not know what sources to study, many of competent students may not have the chance to enter master's programs because they have focused on wrong sources. These students considered the inappropriate entrance exam as the reason for the presence of students with different abilities in one class. Some interviewees deprecated the intensive holding of classes in two successive days. They asserted that they were pressured and tired and could not concentrate on what was taught.

When designing a language curriculum, there are so many issues to consider. Nation and Macalister (2010) present a model of the different parts of the curriculum design. In their model, three general factors (i.e., needs, principles, and environment) are examined. In the course of preparing a curriculum, these factors are recognized as the learners' learning requirements, research on language teaching/learning, and considering the situation in which the courses will be used, respectively. However, what can be concluded from the students' statements is that, at least, some of their needs have not been taken into consideration by the curriculum designers and the responsible authorities. Taking a glance at the dates of the last verification of the TEFL M.A. curriculum can also be a valid proof for the indispensability of its reconsideration.

Today, there have been so many developments in the field of language teaching/learning and, undoubtedly, using these new improvements to form a more useful and practical curriculum could benefit both teachers and students. Moreover, the inclusion of student voice can "guide the curriculum developers in revision of the materials to better enhance the motivational aspect of the overall unit" (Gunckel & Moore, 2005, p. 6).

e) Problems with peers:

Peer effect can have different positive or negative potential effects on students' educational production. In addition, students having different abilities can have significant impact on their classmates' academic achievements, and depending on the magnitude of their influences, they would bring about different degrees of outcomes (Ding & Lehrer, 2007; Epple, Newlon, & Romano, 2002; Graham, 2008). Most M.A. students grumbled about the proficiency level of their classmates and how these weak students have inhibited their development and progress. Another group of students complained about the manners of their peers. They stated that some students are so arrogant and pleased with themselves that do not like to get

involved in group activities or help their classmates. In general, 22 people (about 73%) were dissatisfied with their classmates.

- Student # 3: *Some of my classmates do not have the necessary accuracy and fluency in English and this has had an undesirable effect on my own abilities . . . .*

- Student # 15: *Some of my classmates create tension with their inappropriate behavior . . . . They do not know the proper way of social interaction . . . . They are mean and try to make the situation difficult for other students with the goal of attracting teachers' attention towards themselves . . . . If they receive any new information regarding given homework or a change in the exam date, they try to conceal it from the others . . . .*

- Focus Group # 2: *Students, whose B.A. is not TEFL, are very weak and negatively influence the pace of the lesson . . . . The number of admitted students is so high and this has caused incompetent individual attend M.A. program which would have a very negative effect on our progress . . . .*

The measurement of peer effects at the classroom would be very difficult, due to the limitations of data and methodology (Burke & Sass, 2008). This complex measurement may be caused by the "three basic interrelated problems: the determination of reference groups, the problem of correlated effects and the reflection problem" (Boucher et al., 2014, p.6). The existence of such obstacles should not inhibit language scholars/researchers from attempts to uncover the effects of this factor on students' academic progress although research on different levels of education, especially in higher education, has largely neglected this factor in the Iranian context.

f) Personal and social problems:

University students may experience some challenges due to the demands of an unfamiliar situation, stress of work, or some other personal reasons unconnected to their academic life. These problems could interfere with individual students' motivation to exert effort in their courses. Twenty-three of the participants (about 77%) regarded personal and social problems as one of the challenges they had faced during their studies for M.A. One of the challenges that some of the interviewees faced was balancing their personal life with their academic life. This group of students, who were mostly married females, stated that they had felt unprepared to deal with this great burden of responsibility and could not achieve a manageable balance between their life and studies, especially in their first semester.

- Student # 17: *I have a lot of responsibilities at home. I am married with two children. On the one hand there is my family who expect me to carry out all my duties the same as before and on the other hand, university teachers who expect me to be a fulltime and studious student . . . . Sometimes, I start doing my homework from 11 pm until the time that I could not open my eyes . . . .*

Another group of students were complaining that having jobs, commuting to another city, and being away from their families posed some problems. Furthermore, there were some students who were dissatisfied with the way that having an M.A. in TEFL was valued in society. They believed that lack of social prestige, jobs, and sufficient income for their field of study inhibited them from striving for greater efficiency:

- Focus Group # 1: *We do not have enough motivation to study hard. What happens after our graduation? The possibility of getting employed is very low. The best expectation would be finding a part-time job at a language institute that would offer a very low salary . . . . Being a language teacher is not among the high prestigious jobs and most people fail to appreciate its value . . . .*

Different personal and social problems experienced by the students might lead to their high levels of stress and anxiety. Some of these difficulties might result in their academic failure or even withdrawal from university. These issues need to receive considerable attention from authorities, faculty, staff, and university professionals due to their relevance to the students' academic success. Although almost all universities are equipped with counseling centers for students, some are not efficient enough and have some limitations such as weakness in advocacy, poor information, lack of staff confidence, structural and organizational problems, as well as inefficient use of their available potentials. In addition, some of these centers lack participatory planning and management problems (Peykari, Tehrani, Hashem, & Djalalinia, 2011). Therefore, promoting these centers and their services alongside informing students of their services might assist the students in encountering and coping with their personal and social problems.

7. Presented Model of Challenges Facing Iranian EFL M.A. Candidates

As mentioned above, the model was induced from the close examination of the interview results and utilizing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) systematic approach for coding and analyzing the data through which 31 categories and six themes were obtained, and the final model was presented (see Figure 1).

a. Problems with teachers:

- They do not use a proper teaching method and style (mostly lecturing and ignoring the practical aspects of the lesson).

- They do not have an appropriate behavior towards the students.

- They are not proficient enough and lack the necessary knowledge regarding their expertise.

- They lack discipline and do not make proper use of the class time.

- They are not available, and students do not receive proper feedback.

- They introduce a vast number of teaching materials for each course and exert pressure on the students.

- Teachers with different levels of strictness handling the same course cause students to experience discrimination.

b. Lack of educational facilities and amenities:

- There are not sufficient resources for research, including access to high-speed Internet, academic Websites, and up-to-date resources at the university library.

- Students do not receive any cooperation for doing research projects (e.g., teaching in classes or working with other organization like the Ministry of Education).

- University publications and computer sites are not provided with high-tech equipment.

- Dormitory and dining facilities do not provide appropriate services.

- Student automation and university Websites do not provide adequate and suitable information to students.

c. Financial problems:

- The costs of accommodation, meals, tuitions, and books are too high.

- Typing, printing, and copying materials cost a lot, and no extra allowance is provided for students.

- The amount in student loans is inadequate.

- Earning money alongside studying reduces the quality and quantity of learning in students.

- No allowance is available for doing research and preparing the thesis, or the allocated amount is very small.

d. Problems with educational planning and curriculum development:

- Curriculum is mostly theoretical, and the practical side of becoming a language teacher is ignored.

- The presented courses are either useless, or their allocated weekly hours is very limited.

- The M.A. university exam is not appropriate in some aspects (e.g., the content, the format of questions, and a lack of predetermined resources for the exam).

- A large number of courses are offered in the first 2 semesters, and students are not able to learn them properly.

- Classes are usually held consecutively over two days, and students feel exhausted.

e. Problems with peers:

- The possibility for people with non-English degrees to participate in the TEFL M.A. exam results in admission of students who do not have the necessary levels of knowledge and ability.

- Some students' low levels of knowledge, especially in general English and skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking, has an undesirable effect on their classmates' quality of learning.

- Some students have bad manners, and their lack of cooperation creates problems for the others (e.g., lack of cooperation in determining assignments or test dates, behaving arrogantly, and not sharing their knowledge with their peers).

- The high rate of admission in the M.A. program causes the acceptance of some students who do not have the necessary knowledge and ability for this level, and they create problems for their peers.

f. Personal and social problems:

- Being married, having children, having a job, and family problems (e.g., sickness) cause academic problems.

- Lack of jobs or sufficient income reduces the incentive for students to study.

- Some students have to continue their studies because of pressure from family or rivals.

- Commuting to another city is problematic for nonlocal students.

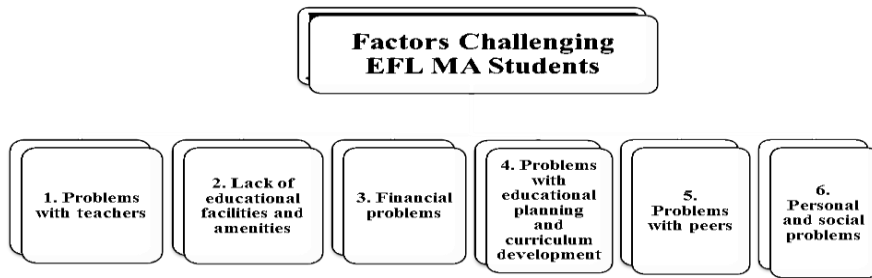- Being away from the family is problematic for nonlocal students.

Figure 1. Presented Model for Challenging Factors Facing Iranian EFL M.A. Students

8. Conclusion

All students when entering college or university would have to make a series of adjustments. However, adult students would certainly face more obstacles such as balancing job, family and education, managing finances, or networking with peers. Such problems make the effective learning difficult for the students, and their personal, academic, social, and professional success depends on their ability to manage these aspects of their lives.

In this study, the factors challenging the Iranian graduate student-teachers of English as an L2 were investigated, and six factors including problems with teachers, lack of educational problems and amenities, financial problems, problems with educational planning and curriculum development, problems with peers, and personal and social problems were obtained. Unfortunately, few studies have explored the difficulties that graduate adult students might face during their studies; as a result, there has not been much effort to assist the students in need. Although these factors may not have a direct relation to the immediate role of university administrators, faculties, and their staff, there is a certain need for understanding the students' fears, concerns, and challenges (Hatch et al., 1996). Institutions of higher education, by taking the comprehensive initiatives to incorporate different domains of academics and learning, career, treatment, finance, and psychology, can try to provide services that can meet the personal, psychological, social, and educational needs of their students.

We tried to shed some light on the problems that the Iranian M.A. EFL students experience, using their own perspectives. Although the study was conducted interviewing the students from just three cities of Iran and cannot be generalized to all Iranian university students, the provided information could help the faculty in a better understanding of TEFL preservice teachers so that better teachers could be trained. We hope that the findings could have the potential to provide a drive for further investigation in the area of language teacher education and diminishing the problems that graduate students are confronted with. Hence, it is recommended that further follow-up studies need to be conducted over the mentioned problems in order to explore their influence and alternative solutions.

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