

Examining English as Foreign Language Instructors' Perception of Pedagogical Competence: Iranian High School, Institute and University Instructors in Focus

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Abstract

Pedagogical competence plays a crucial role in teachers' qualifications in different contexts. Teachers' pedagogical competence in teaching different language skills has a great influence on students' achievement. As a result, having enough information about teachers' pedagogical competence may determine the quality and efficacy of teaching. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to examine Iranian EFL teachers' perception of their levels of pedagogical competence in English language teaching. A mixed methods design was utilized for data collocation. The data were collected from 375 EFL teachers in the quantitative and qualitative phases, respectively. The participants were selected through convenience sampling among those who were teaching English at different institutes ($N=125$), high schools ($N=125$), and universities ($N=125$) in Tehran and Khuzestan, Iran. In order to reach the purposes of the current research, the participants were required to fill out one questionnaire, namely English language teachers' pedagogical competence, and one interview. To analyze the raw data, descriptive and inferential statistics were applied. Findings revealed that there were not any significant differences among the high school, language institute, and university EFL teachers' overall means of pedagogical competence. The results of the current study may be beneficial to language institute administrators, EFL teachers, teacher trainers, and materials developers.

Keywords: pedagogical competence, EFL teachers, institutes, high schools, universities

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1. Introduction

Teachers can be a key to effective learning in any educational system and their higher level of pedagogical competence significantly correlates with the quality of teaching and learning (Greenier, 2018). Berchini (2017) asserts that pedagogical competence is the ability to teach and manage student learning which includes designing and implementing learning, understanding of students, evaluating learning outcomes, and developing students to actualize their various potentials. In higher education, the pedagogical competencies of language teachers pertain to their quality of teaching in the profession. Thus, as a means to attain educational goals and have proficient learners, teachers' level of pedagogical competence for delivering the specified materials to the learners in the curriculum is prominent (Firman et al., 2019). As mentioned by Mustafa (2013), teachers' pedagogical competence in teaching different language skills has a great influence on students' achievement. Previous studies (e.g., Adıguzel, 2017; Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al., 2016) have highlighted the importance and capacities of pedagogical competence in the process of teaching. In fact, assessing English language teachers' pedagogical competence level, as a determining factor in the quality of teaching can predict the quality of teaching practice in different contexts, and language learners' achievements, consequently (Hakim, 2015). Therefore, having enough information about teachers' pedagogical competence in English language classrooms is very important and should be investigated more. To bridge this gap, the current study was conducted to assess and compare Iranian institute, high school, and university teachers' levels of pedagogical competence in English language classrooms.

2. Literature Review

Over the last few years, pedagogical competence has been professionalized step by step and has been considered as one of the main important goals and predictors of professional development (Oldsjo, 2010). The traditional perspective of EFL teachers' pedagogical competence was mainly related to a challenge and problem of practice in the classroom by means of which teachers can expand different teaching circumstances to generate conditions for language learning by using diverse methods and actions through their knowledge and competencies (Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al., 2016). Oldsjo (2010) criticized this view because it was very poorly designed and did not take into account the criteria and scientific perspectives in teaching and learning English. In fact, based on the traditional view, pedagogical competence just was considered as teaching ability in the classroom. Babadjanova (2020) believes that having the ability to teach in the classroom is not enough to assess English language teachers' pedagogical competence and other factors namely teachers' preparatory and planning, individual differences, management, assessment procedure, and monitoring learners' abilities in the classroom are also important. Thus they introduce three other factors namely assessment, management, and preparation.

By the same token, based on Kolb's (1984) model, Olsson et al. (2010) concluded that pedagogical competence is not only a teaching skill but refers to a much broader concept and its components which can be divided into overlapping types namely, observation of teaching and students learning, real teaching activities (pedagogical practice) to improve students learning, planning to enhance pedagogical practice, and underlying theories of teaching and learning. In fact, pedagogical competence is directly related to teaching and educational qualifications. Classroom management is one of those important qualifications which refers to the teacher's potential to handle and run the learning and teaching process in the classroom. The potentiality to design a lesson plan, the interaction between teacher and learner, the ability to select appropriate methods and media for learning, and teachers' performance are the other teaching and educational qualifications (Aimah et al., 2017). Masten and Coatsworth (1998) mention that teacher's active engagement in the classroom can increase their competence. In this case, teachers can impact students' learning and achievement effectively and will be categorized as effective teachers with high pedagogical competence (Kagan, 1992).

Epstein and Hundert (2002) defined pedagogical competence in the teaching process as the interplay of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivational variables that all instructors need to have as an effective teacher in the classroom. In addition, Orland-Barak and Wang (2021) assert that how teachers teach in the classroom depends on their attitudes, personality traits, and knowledge acquired professionally. Moreover, other factors such as teachers' beliefs about themselves, learning, research in the process of teaching, and teaching are considered as very important components of pedagogical competence. Klem and Connell (2004) believe that teachers with high levels of pedagogical competence are sensitive to learners' needs, feelings, and nurturing. They avoid harsh disciplinary practices and respect their students' perspectives. In contrast, teachers with low levels of pedagogical competence are less willing to consider students' opinions and ignore them in front of others by humiliating them.

Moreover, Mulyasa (2005) believes that competent teachers are those who can manage their classroom environment effectively, make full use of resources, and teach productively. In fact, competent teachers with a high level of pedagogical competence help their students to reach high academic achievements and try to turn them into questioning and creative students with high skills (Mustafa, 2013). As a result, the concept of competent teachers is tied to their success in teaching and learners' achievements. To reach this position (i.e., competent teacher), teachers should be able to be knowledgeable about the curriculum, communicate with students actively, manage information, solve problems, and understand the difficulties faced by their learners (Edmond & Hayler, 2013).

So, teachers' role in the educational system is vital for students' success and competent teachers act as a bridge between the curriculum and the learner in any educational system (Berry & Van Driel, 2013). As teachers' role in any education system is vital to guarantee higher educational quality, considerable efforts should be made to improve the quality of teaching and increase their

efficacy and professionalism. In so doing, they need to have different competencies such as personal competence, pedagogical competence, and also innovation in the process of teaching (Aimah et al., 2017). Mustafa (2013) states that an English language teacher's pedagogical competence has a great influence on students' achievement. Therefore, having enough information about teacher's levels of pedagogical competence can be seen as an important predictor of teaching quality in the class and students' language learning achievements.

Due to the importance of pedagogical competence much research has been done on English language teachers' pedagogical competence. For example, Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) examined the pedagogical competence of Iranian high school English language teachers. The participants were required to answer a 53-item questionnaire of pedagogical competence and a semi-structured interview. Findings indicated that teachers with different ages, experiences, and genders generally had positive perceptions of pedagogical competence. Also, Rahman (2014) found that the levels of pedagogical and professional competence of junior high school science teachers have a significantly positive effect on their quality of teaching. Besides, Hakim (2015) analyzed the contribution of teacher competencies to the performance of learning. Findings revealed that having partial competence namely social competence, pedagogical, professional competence, and personal competence had a statistically significant positive effect on learning performance.

Although different studies have been done on EFL teachers' pedagogical competence (e.g., Adıguzel, 2017; Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al., 2016; Hakim, 2015; Rahman, 2014), to the best knowledge of the researchers, to date, no study has compared the levels of EFL teachers' pedagogical competence in the universities, high schools and institutes contexts simultaneously. Accordingly, current research was an attempt to fill this gap. In this regard, the following research questions were addressed here:

- Q1: Are there any statistically significant differences among high school, institute, and university EFL teachers' levels of pedagogical competence in teaching the English language?
- Q2: What are Iranian instructors' beliefs about pedagogical competence concerning English language teaching?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A total of 475 Iranian EFL teachers selected through convenience and purposive sampling methods, took part in the current research in three different phases. In the first phase, 100 male and female EFL teachers with the age range of 25-45 ($SD=2.11$, $M=29$) were selected to check the reliability of the questionnaire in a pilot study. In the next phase, 375 male and female EFL teachers with the age range of 24-47 ($SD=2.22$, $M=31$) who taught English at different institutes, high schools, and universities each with 125 participants were selected by convenience sampling for the main phase of the study. Furthermore, in the qualitative phase of the study, 30 EFL teachers were

selected through *convenience* sampling as representatives of all three groups each with 10 participants to elicit the required data. Their age range was 28-43 ($SD=1.88$, $M=30$) and all of them had more than 5 years of teaching experience. In addition, Persian was the first language of all participants in the current study.

3.2. Instruments

The current study utilized a pre-designed and validated scale and an interview as follows:

3.2.1. English Language Teachers' Pedagogical Competence Questionnaire

For the purpose of assessing the pedagogical competence levels of the participants, a pre-designed and developed Likert scale questionnaire was used. This questionnaire was developed by Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) and had already been validated through factor analysis and consists of 53 items under 7 constructs namely assessment, preparation, management, teaching, belief, subject mastery, and attitude. It ranges from 5 to 1 to assess EFL teachers' pedagogical competence level. In this regard, the result could vary from 1 to 5. The higher the mark, the greater the level of pedagogical competence in teaching the English language participants. The allocated time for answering this questionnaire was 30 minutes. The reported Cronbach's alpha reliability for the scale in a pilot study and the main phase of the study was calculated to be 0.89 and 0.79, respectively. Three ELT experts, who were Ph.D. holders of Applied Linguistics, confirmed the validity of the scale and mentioned that the questionnaire was suitable for the context of Iran.

3.2.2. Interview

In order to catch Iranian EFL instructors' beliefs about their pedagogical competence in English language teaching, a semi-structured interview which was designed by Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) was applied to this study. This interview consisted of 18 questions under seven subcategories namely subject mastery, preparation, attitude, teaching, assessment, management, and belief. The time devoted to holding this interview was 20 minutes for each participant.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

To reach the purposes of this research and answer the research questions, the data were collected from a questionnaire and an interview in three phases. In the first phase (i.e., pilot study) and the second phase (i.e., main study), the online version of the English language teachers' pedagogical competence questionnaire, produced via Google Forms was used. The survey link was sent to the participants through messaging on social networks (e.g., Eitaa & *iGap Messenger*) and email. So, in the pilot study, a total of 100 questionnaires were collected to check the reliability of the scale before starting the main study. To check the participants' level of pedagogical competence

in the main phase of the study, a total of 357 questionnaires were collected from 21 language institutes, 28 high schools, and 31 universities after nearly six months.

In the last phase of the study, a semi-structured interview was run to elicit EFL instructors' perceptions of their pedagogical competence in English language teaching. In so doing, among those who participated in the quantitative phase of the study, 30 EFL teachers were selected by *convenience* sampling as representative of all three groups (i.e., institute, university, & high school) each with 10 participants to elicit the required data. The process of conducting interviews was recorded for easier analysis. After the administration of the interview, thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data. In fact, the conducted interviews were first transcribed, and then analyzed by two colleagues and were finally verified and coded. That is, after transcription, similar responses were categorized as a theme to shape the required reports for the qualitative question. For the quantitative question, to compute the score, first, the researchers must add up all the individual item's scores and then, they must calculate the weighted score by dividing the total score by the number of items. Accordingly, a score of five reflects one's higher level of pedagogical competence. Finally, after coding, the collected data in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of this study were analyzed.

3.4. Data Analysis

The following statistical procedures were performed on the data to answer the questions presented in the current study:

- 1) To test the quantitative question, one-way ANOVA was run to examine any statistically significant differences among high school, institute, and university English language teachers' levels of pedagogical competence.
- 2) To examine the qualitative question, thematic analysis was used to report Iranian instructors' beliefs about pedagogical competence concerning English language teaching.

4. Results

4.1. Results of the First Research Question

A one-way ANOVA was run to compare the high school, language institute, and university teachers' means of pedagogical competence in order to probe the first question of this study. Prior to running the main statistics, the assumption of normality was reported in Table 1.

Table 1

Skewness and Kurtosis Indices by Types of Institutes

Place	N	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
High School	125	-.757	.217	-.431	.430
Language Institute	125	-.785	.217	-.527	.430
University	125	-.721	.217	-.458	.430

The normality assumption was checked by reporting the skewness and kurtosis indices. The values of skewness and kurtosis were lower than ± 2 . It can be concluded that the assumption of normality is retained. Besides the assumption of normality, one-way ANOVA requires groups to be homogeneous in terms of their variances. So, the results of the Levene's test were reported in Table 2.

Table 2*Test of Homogeneity of Variances Pedagogical Competence by Types of Institute*

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Based on Mean	1.264	2	372	.284
Based on Median	.790	2	372	.455
Based on Median and with adjusted df	.790	2	365.305	.455
Based on trimmed mean	1.184	2	372	.307

As displayed in Table 2, the non-significant results of Levene's test ($F(2, 372) = .790, p > .05$) indicated that the three groups enjoyed homogenous variances in pedagogical competence. Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics for the three groups on pedagogical competence.

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics Pedagogical Competence by Types of Institute*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
High school	125	3.86	.771	.069	3.73	4.00
Language institute	125	3.67	.892	.080	3.51	3.83
University	125	3.66	.850	.076	3.51	3.81
Total	375	3.73	.842	.043	3.64	3.81

The results showed that the EFL teachers teaching in high school ($M = 3.86, SD = .771$), language institute ($M = 3.67, SD = .892$), and university ($M = 3.66, SD = .3850$) had almost the same means on pedagogical competence.

In order to probe if there are any statistical differences between the three groups' means of pedagogical competence, the main results of one-way ANOVA were calculated and displayed in Table 4.

Table 4*One-Way ANOVA Pedagogical Competence by Types of Institute*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.344	2	1.672	2.376	.094
Within Groups	261.820	372	.704		
Total	265.164	374			

The results ($F(2, 372) = 2.37, p > .05, \eta^2 = .013$) revealed that there were no statistically significant differences among high school, institute, and university EFL teachers' levels of pedagogical competence in teaching the English language and the null hypothesis was supported.

4.2. Results of the Second Research Question

In order to probe Iranian instructors' beliefs about pedagogical competence concerning English language teaching, thematic analysis was used. In the *preparation section*, most of the high school, institute, and university teachers mentioned that they make a lesson plan and use a particular format. For example, one teacher noted, "I always use printed copies of lesson plans to manage my process of teaching in the classroom. I usually use a particular format of lesson plan because it supports effective teaching and learning by providing a clear, organized, and consistent framework for instructional planning." Some other teachers, referring to the three levels mentioned that it's not necessary to have a lesson plan in the form of printed copy and they usually utilize their own experience based on students' needs. For example, one institute teacher mentioned, "As we taught the same books for many years we follow a lesson plan by heart."

Considering the *teaching category*, most of the high school, institute, and university teachers claimed that they updated their overall knowledge of the teaching of the English language and tried to seek new methods and techniques for teaching and some of them mentioned that although it's necessary to be up to date in this context we must follow the specified procedure for teaching. For example, one university teacher noted, "I tried to be up-to-date in terms of English language teaching and use a wide variety of methods in the process of teaching." In addition, some of the teachers cited that they take part in workshops to enhance their quality of teaching methods and learn new skills and strategies. For instance, one high school teacher cited that "The need for holding workshops is obvious. The education department in the district or region must define these kinds of workshops which usually they don't do that." Moreover, one institute teacher mentioned, "I attend workshops to increase my knowledge of teaching and be familiar with new strategies for teaching." In contrast, a small portion of the teachers claimed that attending workshops is not very important for them. For instance, one institute teacher cited, "I search my needs through other methods such as consulting with EFL experts and studying different books and papers." Moreover, most of the teachers claimed that they have the flexibility to use different educational teaching aids in the classroom and some of them refuse to use such tools in their process of teaching. To give an example, one university teacher highlighted, "Although I am familiar with different educational aids, using them is hard and time-consuming and also in this context teachers must follow a predetermined syllabus and lesson plan provided by the Iranian education department."

Considering the *Management category*, most of the teachers in the three levels mentioned that classroom management is very important and helps them to control students' behavior and progress in the process of teaching. They mentioned that in an organized and controlled atmosphere in the classroom, English language learning could take place properly and teachers must have special disciplines for better classroom management. In contrast, some teachers believe that limiting students to certain activities and routine classroom activities can decrease students' motivation for learning a language. They also cited that organizing students in the classroom is a

challenge for them. For example, one high school teacher complained, "The focus on controlling students in the class usually takes time and teachers must be ready to face different challenges in the process of teaching." In addition, one university teacher noted, "Students' engagement in the classroom is very important and must be considered as a determining factor to increase learning achievement. I believe that maintaining discipline in the classroom is another important factor which all teachers are obliged to establish in the classroom." In another example, one institute teacher cited, "Managing classrooms and students are very important and help them to control students' behavior and progress in the process of teaching. For classroom management, I always specify different rules and students must obey me in the classroom."

For the *assessment category*, the high school, institute, and university teachers claimed that they follow assessment policy in evaluating their students' progress. They also claimed that they like to attend classroom assessment workshops to learn new methods for assessing their students and only a small portion of the participants mentioned that they don't like to attend classroom assessment workshops. For example, one institute teacher noted, "The current methods of evaluation and techniques are useful and efficient for assessing students' achievements in different phases." Teachers also cited that they prefer to have preplanned assessment and other remaining participants believed that spontaneous assessment is better and they follow this method. For instance, one high school teacher cited, "Preplanned assessments generally offer a more reliable, fair, and comprehensive measure of student learning."

In relation to the *subject mastery category*, all teachers in three levels claimed that they mastered all the skills and materials of the English book. For example, one university teacher claimed, "I have the ability to teach the pre-specified materials and books to students but changing in material is a new challenge for me and this happens when the materials developers and policymakers decide to change the current textbooks." In addition, most of the participants in the three levels claimed that holding workshops can help them to develop professionally through the exchange of information especially when the new book was specified as a course book.

With reference to the *attitude category*, most of the teachers in three levels believed that different factors such as political, economic, social, cultural, historical, and educational facets could have a positive or negative effect on their attitude towards their jobs. For instance, one high school teacher cited, "Factors such as low income, negative attitudes of people about themselves, and sometimes learners' negative behavior in the classroom can demotivate teachers." In addition, the participants cited that their profession was not very valued and respected in society which can result in demotivation. On the other hand, all teachers in the three levels believed that learners' achievement is the only reason which can motivate them to continue teaching despite all mentioned problems. Moreover, most of the teachers mentioned that payment affects their motivation in teaching and some others mentioned that income doesn't have any influence on their motivation. For example, one institute teacher noted, "Love of teaching and students' high achievement makes them happy and payment does not have any effect on their motivation in teaching."

With regard to the *belief category*, some of the teachers in three levels believed that communication in the real world is the main important goal of English language learning. For example, one institute teacher noted, "Communication is the main important goal of language learning. Real-world communication emphasizes the functional use of language which includes speaking, listening, reading, and writing in authentic contexts. This prepares learners to use language naturally and confidently in daily interactions." In addition, some others claimed that improving job opportunity percentage is the main goal of English language learning. The remaining participants claimed that getting a good score and academic achievement is the main goal of English language learning.

While some teachers cited that speaking and listening skills are the focus of their classroom, some others mentioned writing and reading are the skills that they focus on in the classroom and other remaining teachers mentioned that grammar and vocabulary are among those skills that they focus on in their classrooms. For example, one university teacher mentioned, "The skills of vocabulary and grammar should be emphasized and should be taught explicitly. Using wrong grammar can make sentences meaningless and also unclear. In fact, it can lead to misinterpretation in the process of communication. On the other hand, utilizing correct grammar in speech and writing makes reading and listening easier to understand and helps learners to achieve higher levels of proficiency in the process of communication." In addition, one institute teacher noted, "Vocabulary teaching allows learners to understand complex texts in academic and non-academic contexts. It also supports their verbal and written communication."

5. Discussion

Considering the first question, findings revealed that there were not any significant differences among the three groups' means of pedagogical competence. In fact, findings indicated that the EFL teachers teaching in high schools, language institutes, and universities had almost the same means of pedagogical competence and had the necessary pedagogical competence in teaching language. Having more than average pedagogical competence in this study showed that policymakers were successful in training their teachers in terms of pedagogical competence. As mentioned by Sari et al. (2021), having average competence in teaching needs a variety of efforts. The findings of this research are consistent with the findings of Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) who concluded that Iranian EFL teachers have partial pedagogical competence in teaching the English language. In addition, the current research's findings are also in harmony with the findings of Cesur and Ertas (2018) who found that the place of teaching (i.e., institute, high school, & university) is not a factor that could influence the competence of the teachers and other factors such as professional preparation (Agudo, 2017) and teaching practice (Aimah et al., 2017) are two main determining factors.

Additionally, the findings of this study can be explained by several factors. Firstly, teachers in various educational settings typically have access to similar professional development resources (Admiraal et al., 2021). Educators can participate in workshops, seminars, conferences, and online courses aimed at improving teaching skills, regardless of their specific environment. This continuous professional development helps maintain a consistent level of competence among teachers (Al-Bargi, 2021). Secondly, many educational institutions follow national or international standards that define the qualifications and skills required for EFL teachers (Nasimi & Ghaemi, 2022). Accreditation bodies and educational authorities set guidelines to ensure teachers meet specific pedagogical benchmarks, which promotes a standardized level of competence. Lastly, collaboration and knowledge sharing among EFL teachers from different sectors also play a role. Professional networks, academic journals, and online communities offer platforms for teachers to exchange ideas and strategies, contributing to a collective level of competence (Parhamnia et al., 2022).

Regarding the second question, the current research examined Iranian instructors' beliefs about pedagogical competence concerning English language teaching. About the issue of *preparation* for teaching, most of the teachers in this study mentioned that having a well-prepared lesson plan is an important point for successful teaching practice in the classroom which can be traced to the fulfillment of the instructional objectives (Lacang, 2007). Regarding preparation and planning, teachers' perception was in agreement with the idea of Gandara et al. (2005) who mentioned that preparation is a key factor in the process of English language teaching and helps teachers to be more confident while teaching different language skills.

Considering the *teaching category*, most of the teachers in the three levels claimed that they updated their knowledge about English language teaching and tried to seek new methods and techniques for teaching. In addition, most of them cited that they take part in workshops to enhance their teaching quality in terms of using new strategies for teaching different skills. Hambacher and Ginn (2021) believed that training activities and education are among those which can help teachers to develop their teaching quality and fulfill the necessary requirements of teachers in the profession.

It means that teachers must update their overall knowledge of teaching and improve their information about new teaching methods through different ways which is in line with the idea of Thosar (2015) who believed that teachers must timely update themselves through attending workshops, conferences, and webinars which help them to be familiar with the latest concepts that are required for professional development to enhance their competences in the field of education.

Moreover, most of the teachers in the three levels mentioned that they incorporate educational aids in their teaching based on their needs whenever possible. Educational aids in the classroom can help a teacher to correlate different concepts and make the learning process more interesting, effective, and meaningful. So, the findings of this study are in agreement with the findings of Namaziandost and Nasri (2019) who believed that different types of educational aids

can be used based on the possibility and needs of students in the classroom which leads to effective teaching and higher achievement.

Considering the *management* category, most of the teachers in the three levels emphasized the importance of managing the classroom and students in the classroom. Consistent with the findings of this study, Yazdanmehr and Akbari (2015) found that classroom management is a key component of successful teaching and teachers must have enough ability to manage their students in the classroom. Moreover, most of them follow certain disciplines and mentioned that in an organized classroom which is under the control of the teachers, English language learning will take place efficiently. These findings are in line with the idea of Fantilli and McDougall (2009) who assert that if teachers want to teach effectively, they should put order and discipline in the classroom at the top of their work.

In addition, most of the high school, institute, and university teachers mentioned that organizing students in the classroom is a challenge for them which is in line with the findings of Babadjanova (2020) who found that teachers who have taught at different levels and fields reported that classroom management and how to interact with students with different abilities and behaviors have been one of the most important challenges of teaching in the classroom. With respect to the *Assessment* category, most of the participants claimed that they follow assessment policy in evaluating their students' progress. In addition, they claimed that they like to attend classroom assessment workshops to learn new methods for assessing their students. These findings are consistent with the idea of Jankowski (2018) who mentioned that attending different assessment workshops can help teachers to be familiar with new methods of assessment and keep them up to date in the field. Moreover, most of the teachers in the three levels mentioned that students must be prepared for exams and they should be aware of the time and format of exams in the process of language learning. In agreement with the idea of the teachers in the present study, Beaumont et al. (2011) believed that preplanned assessment can help students prepare themselves and reduce their anxiety which leads to better achievement.

In relation to the *subject mastery* category, all teachers believed that mastery over all skills and subjects of the English books are so important and they have the ability to teach the materials and content of pre-specified books to the learners. The findings are consistent with the findings of Lacang (2007) and Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) who found that having enough knowledge of subjects and overall mastery of content in books play an important role in effective teaching and delivering different materials to the learners in the classroom.

In addition, most of the teachers in the current research claimed that holding workshops can help them to develop their profession through the exchange of information especially when the new book was specified as a course book. These ideas are in line with the idea of Jankowski (2018) who believed that exchanging information among teachers helps them to share their experiences with each other and be familiar with the new methods of teaching and assessment in the field which leads to professional growth.

With reference to the *Attitude category*, most of the teachers in the three levels believed that different factors such as economic and social factors could have positive or negative effects on their attitude towards their jobs. In addition, all teachers mentioned that factors such as payment, low income, negative attitudes of people about themselves, and sometimes learners' negative behavior in the classroom can demotivate them. Consistent with these findings, Kamoh et al. (2013) believe that financial force, payment of salaries, and negative attitudes of persons and learners toward teachers are significant factors that can affect teachers' attitudes toward their work and motivation for teaching.

On the other hand, all teachers believed that learners' achievement is the only reason which can motivate them to continue teaching despite all mentioned problems. The findings are consistent with the idea of Aghajanzadeh Kiasi et al. (2016) who believed that teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards their role in teaching and learning may affect the method they select to teach, and assess their teaching quality. In fact, based on teachers' attitudes, teaching effectiveness depends on their own personality traits, namely love for the profession and student, enthusiasm, and sense of humor.

With regard to the *belief category*, some of the teachers mentioned that communication in the real world is the main important goal of English language learning. In addition, some other teachers in three levels claimed that improving job opportunity percentage is the main goal of English language learning. These ideas are in agreement with the opinion of Pandey and Pandey (2014) who believed that having high communication skills in English can improve the quality of life and create more job opportunities. Furthermore, some teachers mentioned that getting scores and academic achievement are the main goals of English language learning which are in line with the findings of Cekiso et al. (2015) who found that student's overall academic achievement is one of the most important goals of English language learning.

Regarding the teachers' belief about their choices of skills to focus on in the classrooms, some teachers cited that speaking and listening skills are the focus of their classroom which is in line with the idea of the researchers (e.g., Kurita, 2012; Rao, 2018) who believed that speaking and listening are two main important communicative skills and must be focused on in the classroom. Furthermore, a small portion of teachers mentioned that writing and reading are the skills that they focus on in the classroom. In agreement with these findings, researchers (e.g., Bernhardt, 2005; Camps, 2017) believed that writing and reading are the skills that should be focused on in the classroom because of their effectiveness on EFL learners' language proficiency and academic achievements.

Finally, some teachers in three levels mentioned that the skills of vocabulary and grammar should be emphasized. In line with these ideas, researchers (e.g., Afitska, 2015; Anjomshoa & Zamanian, 2014) found that grammar and vocabulary are the two building blocks of the language, and without enough knowledge of vocabulary and grammar communication may not happen. They also mentioned that grammar and vocabulary should be taught explicitly. They believed that having

grammatical errors may lead to misinterpretation of the message in the process of communication. The findings are consistent with the idea of the researchers who believed that explicit teaching is more appropriate and effective in teaching grammar (e.g., Erlam, 2003) and vocabulary (e.g., Marzban & Kamalian, 2013) as it aids the speedy mastering of the linguistic elements and vocabulary knowledge. In contrast, most of the teachers mentioned that the skills of vocabulary and grammar should not be focused and should be taught in the context implicitly. These ideas are consistent with the ideas of the researchers (e.g., Afitska, 2015; Nezakat-Alhossaini et al., 2014) who believed that implicit teaching is appropriate and effective in teaching grammar and vocabulary.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to probe the pedagogical competence of EFL teachers in the Iranian educational system. It was found that no significant differences existed among the high school, language institute, and university EFL teachers' overall means of pedagogical competence and they partially have pedagogical competence in teaching language. From the findings of the current research, it could be concluded that based on their perception, teachers have the necessary pedagogical competence in teaching the English language at three levels and did their best to be up-to-date and improve their information about different methods of teaching. They also use their colleagues' experience to improve their level of teaching in all three contexts. Pedagogical competence seems to be one of the most important concepts in teachers' professional development and plays a meaningful role in the quality of teaching and language learning achievements of the learners (Greenier, 2018). It can help teachers to overcome different challenges they may face in the classroom. Current research may have some implications for language institute administrators, EFL teachers, teacher trainers, and materials developers. Having enough information about teachers' levels of pedagogical competence can help English language committees identify shortcomings in the teaching process and focus on improving English teachers' pedagogical competence to enhance the quality of education that will end up with learning achievements. So, in order to enhance the quality of teaching, the responsible organization must take seriously into account the education of teachers at high schools, universities, and institutes. In fact, assessing teachers' pedagogical competence should be a requirement because it can increase teachers' awareness about their level of competencies and force them to be up-to-date which leads to higher learning achievements for learners. Furthermore, the results of this investigation could be beneficial for materials developers. They can use some materials in the textbooks to add teachers' information about pedagogical competence, especially when the time of different organizations is not enough to hold teacher training courses about this important issue.

The results obtained from the present research are based on the perception of teachers. Future studies should include direct observations and analyses of classroom activities to

complement and validate the self-reported data from teachers. This approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of teachers' practices and help identify any discrepancies between perceived and actual behaviors. The participants in the current study were selected through convenience sampling. Therefore, caution needs to generalize the findings of the research to the whole population of EFL teachers. So, in order to enhance the validity and generalizability of the results, other researchers are recommended to use random sampling in their own research while replicating this study. In the current investigation, the data were collected from those teachers who teach English in high schools, language institutes, and universities in Iran. It needs to be noted that the data comes from different contexts, and this may have an effect on the teachers' perceptions. In the current research, the possible effect of gender and teaching experience was not examined. Thus, further investigation would be valuable to probe the causal impacts of gender and teaching experience.

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