A Comparative Study of Internal and External Assets and Teachers' Professional Performance: Insights from English Language Teachers in the context of Iran

Leila Anjomshoa[1], Mehri Haddad Narafshan[2]

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ABSTRACT

Teaching foreign/second languages is a demanding occupation, with levels of challenge increasing for teachers across the universe. Given that language teachers' awareness of their profession and a pleasant sense of job performance are central to their ability to teach well, the current study explores internal and external assets, both of which have been demonstrated to play a prominent role in educational contexts by looking into the classroom performance. The research aimed to explore teachers' reflections on teaching profession and the challenges they experience during their professional performance in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context of Iran. In this regard, the study adopted qualitative data collection procedures, and the work took place over a period of three months. Data were obtained from interviewing 50 teacher participants, who were selected according to the convenience sampling. The study findings indicate that we need more research and reflections on assets that underlie English teachers' performance. In effect, a complete awareness of performance could provide teachers with a more effective form of professionalism. Results point to the need to a clear understanding of challenges experienced by English language teachers in Iran as they contribute to this stressful profession. Given the fundamental role(s) played by teachers, it is promising that the current research contributes to a better understanding of how language teachers can develop in their profession.

[1] Department of Foreign Languages, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran, Email: leila_anjomshoa@yahoo.com
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Kerman Branch, Islamic Azad University, Kerman, Iran

1. Introduction

Teaching is believed to be one of the most stressful occupations (Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald, Taylor & Millet, 2005; McIntyre, McIntyre, & Francis, 2017) across the universe. Moreover, the fantastic changes in educational policies have caused dramatic pressures on teachers at all stages (TengkuAriffin, Bush, & Nordin, 2018). In this regard, they need to adapt quickly to any changes in educational system and its consequences, the rapid development in technology heightened demands for students' personal and academic development and increasing expectations from parents and society (Khan, Yusoff, & Khan, 2014). They also have to fulfill multi roles and responsibilities in different dimensions of their profession, especially teaching, curriculum design, and professional development. Although the concept of teaching as only one of the roles of a teacher has been globally accepted, effective teaching means to follow professionalism in all aspects of the profession (Chaplain, 2008).

Accordingly, Etejere and Ogundele (2008) note that any country that ignores the education quality of its citizens will hardly experience change and may not be among the developed nations of the world. With this in mind, the quality of educational services is basically ranked by the quality of their teachers for the success of the whole system. Furthermore, there is enough evidence that teachers have great potential to affect students' future achievements (Akob, 2016; Orhon, 2012; Panda & Mohanty, 2003;Soodmand Afshar & Hamzavi , 2017; Stronge, Ward, and Grant, (2011). In fact, the teachers' role is not restricted to the transmission of knowledge. It includes increasing their confidence, motivating their goals, boosting their self-esteem and providing an appropriate learning climate (Williams & Burden, 2000). Therefore, studying affective characteristics among teachers is a fundamental area of research that has the potential to shed light on what constructs professional teacher performance (Moafian & Ghanizadeh, 2009).

Regarding the developments in technology and instructional changes, educational settings face certain challenges and issues related to teachers' performance (Asrar-ul-Haqa, Sadia Anwarb, & Hassanc 2017). In this case, different studies (Ebmeier & Ng, 2005; Stronge & Hindman, 2006; Sutton, 2004; Zhang, 2007) have pointed out different assets, such as affections, personality, interpersonal skills, and cognitive style important to teaching performance. Previous research shows that using both subjective and objective measures in teacher performance evaluation can help to improve teacher quality (Rockoff & Speroni,

2010). However, there is a need to set norms based on actual job performance before any evaluation system can be designed. In other words, it is difficult to differentiate teachers who are excellent from those who are just effective or even ineffective. The same concerns have been raised recently by Bush, Glover, Ng, and Romero (2016) with regard to formal standards of excellent teachers' performance. Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) argue that in order to ensure that the qualified teachers become expert ones, it is essential to know what it is like to be one.

ELT research in Iran has mainly addressed foreign language policies (Kiany et al., 2011), problems in English language teaching (Jahangard, 2007; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010), curriculum design (Atai & Mazlum, 2013), and practicality of some methodologies (Hayati & Mashhadi 2010; Riazi, 2005). Despite the global trend of qualified teacher performance, relatively little research has been devoted to examining the predictors of English language teacher performance in Iran. Therefore, the current study focuses on internal and external predictors, both of which have been demonstrated to play a prominent role in teacher performance in EFL contexts.Teaching and learning in EFL contexts have recently encountered significant problems and challenges. The changes in academic policies, the technology age needs, and the public expectations all force educational centers to equip learners with effective teaching in English learning as well as in other fields to be equipped for future educational achievements and survive in a world full of competitions. To this end, the research questions derived from the goal of the study are twofold:

1) What do teachers perceive as the central characteristics of teaching in EFL classrooms?
2) What are English teachers' reflections on challenges encountered during their teaching performance?

2. Literature review

In Iran, English is formally taught in secondary schools to the students aged between 13 and 18 years. English textbooks are designed and developed by the Ministry of Education. After the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, for industrial, economic, and agricultural self-sufficiency, reading skill was given a higher priority when setting ELT program goals (High Council of Cultural Revolution as cited in Atai & Mazlum, 2013). However, criticisms have been raised by experts in the field of English language on the following bases. First, arguments have been made that the grammar translation method dominates Iran's education system

(Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Jahangard, 2007; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi, 2005; Riazi & Mosalanejad, 2010). Second, the need of learners and their families for learning English communicatively is not met by the formal English curriculum (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010; Pishghadam & Saboori, 2014; Riazi, 2005). Even the officials in the Ministry of Education found the public sector inadequate in meeting students' needs (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). These criticisms by both the officials and independent researchers have led to a change in English language policy in Iran, attempting to design and develop a communicative language teaching based curriculum **(**Baniasad-Azad, Ketabi & Tavakoli, 2016). The background studies about teachers' performance in Iran and other parts of the world show that developing professional skills has gradually gained more and more importance to make sure that coordination is made between the teaching and course objectives and the learning needs of their learners. Generally speaking, teachers' performance is a perplexing procedure that can be affected by numerous elements (Ahmed et al., 2012; Al-Thumali, 2011; Babai Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009; Nadeem, Shaheen Rana, Lone, Maqbool, Naz, & Ali 2011; Navidnia , Kiani, Akbari, & Ghafar Samar 2014) which are typically categorized into internal and external assets.

2.1. External Assets

Considering the effective external factors, teacher education plans are essential to a strong teaching force to facilitate teachers be sufficiently prepared for their jobs. Strong programs can reduce the shortage and increase the performance of new teachers (Giacometti, 2005). Proper work life balance, the next external factor, can be achieved when an individual is able to fulfill all his/her needs in respect of family, work, and society. Within the social sciences, there is much contemporary concern regarding work-life balance (Warren, 2004). With increasing demands and pressures of work-life, conflicts between work and personal roles seem to be increasing. Work-life balance is a term that is always used in context of employees in general, but nowadays teachers are found to be overburdened due to their academic work load and career issues (Hakanen et al., 2006). All this adds to the stress among teachers leading to imbalanced job performance. Moreover, boundaries and expectation are positively related to EFL teachers' performance. This relationship is confirmed by Eklund, (2008) and Kavak et al. (2012) who found a significant positive relationship between boundaries and expectation and EFL teachers' performance. The importance of salaries to the recruitment of high-quality teachers has also been studied as an external issue in great detail. While the

popular view is that teacher pay is relatively low and has not kept up with comparable professions over time, new claims suggest that teachers are actually well compensated when work hours, weeks of work, or benefits packages are taken into account. Whatever the case, the many unique features of the teaching profession have almost certainly complicated efforts to compare its compensation to that of other professions (Allegretto, Corcoran and Mishel 2004). In the same line, Fairman and Mackenzie (2012; 2015) believed that collaboration and a sense of community within the faculty improve when coworkers share professional relationships and teachers are found to work more effectively when they are a part of a teaching team that challenges each other to perform jobs effectively and feel pride in themselves, their job, and their team. Additionally, teachers are most likely to try new teaching methods and collaborate with peers when they feel comfortable in a positive environment. Work relationships form due to various reasons, but bonding with fellow employees whether inside or outside the realms of the school can provide the bonds that satisfy these needs (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; 2015).

Previous studies have identified a close relationship between authorities support and teacher performance (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This relationship helps and guides the newcomers to strengthen their pedagogical skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Langdon, 2011). A recent study on good supportive practices by Pennanena, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen (2016) showed how safe group work in the system can push teachers to success. Success in promoting academic internationalisation depends on safe cooperation between the participants: managers and teaching staff and must be managed within the resources available to the system (Maudarbekova & Kashkinbayeva, 2014). Moreover, teachers' working conditions affect their performance providing quality education and working best in a healthy, safe environment (Eklund, 2008).

2.2. Internal Assets

Teachers' feeling committed is considered as a major place of internal concern in educational contexts throughout the world, which could mainly be due to its effect on learner results and overall school efficiency (Marshall, 2015). If instructors are not satisfied with their careers and are not committed to their educational centers, both instructors and learners will be suffering (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2006). The studies of Davis and Wilson (2000) and Ebmeir (2003) have emphasized that job satisfaction and feeling committed to an

organization are the basic elements to job performance. Knowledge to cope with difficult situations in educational settings was the other internal challenge mentioned in different studies. Review of literature shows that a high level of content ability and pedagogical skills helps teachers to cope with the demanding conditions in their work place and empowers them to overcome existing barriers (Ibrahim, Aziz, & Nambiar, 2013).Quality of instruction and learner success are consequently affected by the wellbeing of teachers (Day & Gu, 2009; Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2008) as well as their own life satisfaction (Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008; Woolfolk Hoy, 2008). To comprehend the nature of teaching, language teachers' wellbeing is of great importance. It is also important to notice how they get over the stresses and strains of being a language teacher and how they may negotiate these relationships. When these processes are fully understood, the profession generally can take informed action to more proactively support language teachers and their well-being, not only for the value of the teachers themselves, but also for the sake of the students whom they teach. A great understanding of educational research in previous years has shown that teaching motivation is important for teachers' educational practices and students' learning (e.g., Richardson, Karabenick, & Watt, 2014; Schiefele& Schaffner, 2015). There is a difference between a teacher who consistently try to improve his/her teaching skills after all training courses and the one whose aim is only finishing a work day with the least workload.

Consequently, the central aim of this paper is to understand how teachers perceive and reflect on English language teaching. Past research has shown that teachers' achievement goal orientations are associated with their attitudes towards help-seeking (Butler, 2007; Nitsche, Dickh€auser, Fasching, & Dresel, 2011), their educational practices (Retelsdorf, Butler, Streblow, & Schiefele, 2010; Retelsdorf & Günther, 2011), their coping behavior and their well-being in the workplace (Parker, Martin, Colmar, & Liem, 2012). Accordingly, one way of contributing to this line of research is conducting more contextualized research. To the authors' best knowledge, no qualitative study previously addressed the challenging factors on EFL teachers' performance. Therefore, this research intends to bridge this gap by carrying out a qualitative study in the context of Iran.

3. Research Method

3.1. Participants

This study was embedded in three universities, two of which are public and one private, five private institutes and ten public high schools in Kerman City, Iran.The participants of this study were sampled from 50 EFL teachers who aged between 21and 60 years old with 1–30 years of teaching experience. There were 33 females and 17 males from different socio-economic backgrounds. They majored in different branches of English – English Literature, TEFL, Translation Studies and those teachers who did not major in English were highly qualified to teach it. With regard to qualifications, 29 teachers had a B.A., 16 M.A. and 5 Ph.D.

3.2. Instrument

The study employed a qualitative research design, and interview was the main tool for exploring the teachers' reflections on teaching profession and the challenges they experience during their teaching performance. To this end, a semi-structured interview was designed to elicit information about the research questions. To determine the content validity, interview questions were reviewed and approved by five English language teachers at Bahonar University of Kerman and Islamic Azad University.

3.2.1. Teachers' Interview

The semi-structured interviews were based on an interview guide, linked to the research questions, and focused on challenges of teaching profession. The interviews started with an exchange of greetings with the participants, and although there were predetermined interview topics, there was extra time for free discussions to clarify aspects that were not clear. The main interview questions were as follows: What sort of goals help you stay committed to learning and teaching? What does teaching mean to you? What would you recommend to be done in improving your teaching performance? What are the challenges you encountered during your teaching performance? As noted by Gray (2004), researchers also used probes and clues to provide more depth and insight, especially by giving more explanations or providing examples of incidents to describe the nature of their profession.

3.3. Procedure

Before starting the research, formal permission to do the study in target institutes and schools was obtained from the head teacher, and research approval was granted from the university research committee. After we received the approval from the institutes, high schools and universities, one of the authors met principals of five different institutes, ten high schools and three universities and explained the objectives of the study. The study explored English teachers' reflections on internal and external assets they encountered performing their teaching profession with different personalities and in different classroom climates. The researchers sought consent from the individual teacher participants and they were made aware of the confidentiality of the data, particularly for future publication purposes. Participants were informed of their ethical rights as participants in the research, including the willingness to take a break or withdraw from the interview at any time. After receiving the participants' agreement, 85% of teachers approached agreed to participate in the study, and all of them were interviewed. Face to face and semi-structured interviews conducted at the teachers' convenience, lasted about 30-40 minutes each and were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees for future transcription.

3.4. Data Analysis

For the purpose of data analysis, a systematic qualitative approach was employed in this study. All tape-recorded interviews were transcribed completely, and the transcripts were returned to the participants for extra comments, giving them a chance to check what they had wanted to say. The transcripts were then subjected to data analysis. Participants were identified by a code number, and information relating code numbers to individuals was removed upon completion of the data analysis. Thematic analysis began with a careful reading of the transcribed data to get familiar with the content. Then, the data were read again and again for coding purposes. This step involved looking for words, phrases, sentences, and whole paragraphs that provided an understanding of the teachers' professional performance. Then, the initial codes were categorized based on their similarities and overlaps. Next, by making connections between categories, subcategories were chosen to give the categories greater explanatory power. It should be noted that data analysis was conducted by two principal researchers and to increase the reliability, one of their colleagues checked the

process of extracting themes from transcriptions until all of them agreed that no further categories could be extracted from the transcripts.

4. Findings

The findings of the study are presented thematically based on the coding of the interview data and document analysis. The data were transcribed completely, as suggested by Bogdan and Biklen (2003). Using thematic analysis of the interviews, from a total of 100 incidents, we formed three categories related to the meaning of teaching profession and seven categories related to teaching challenges as follows:

4.1. Teaching Profession

All teacher participants of the study described a dynamic nature of their profession based on their experiences within their professional life. This part focuses on teachers' perceptions that help them stay committed to learning and teaching. Almost all teacher participants believed that the way teachers see their profession shapes the nature and the quality of their performance.

4.1.1. Self-Improvement

This category focuses on teachers' perception of their profession as a change which means a chance to better meet skills needed. As stated by Abdullah et al. (2006), a highly motivated teacher with positive attitudes would always try for the best in his or her teaching performance. 60% of the teachers believed that teaching to them means self-improvement. The teachers believed that there are times when students seem uninterested in learning and disturbing to the classroom environment. There are different studies and educational programs for improving student behavior. But personal experience at the classroom may be the best way to show how to turn a disruptive student into a motivated one.

> *Teaching is one of those great professions that you learn something new every day. On a fully professional level, teaching opens your eyes to a variety of things you may never have seen before. I teach to learn something new (Teacher No. 1).*

> *Effective teachers are the ones who enter this demanding career to change their personality. They make it their goal to learn and improve the quality of education using their live classroom experiences (Teacher No. 2).*

4.1.2. Students' Future Change

The following category focuses on students' future change whereby teaching to 30% of teachers means shaping students' personal and professional future and educating the students to make the world a better place to live. In these examples, the teachers encourage students to understand themselves and the need to change.

> *A teacher should love educating students, and one of the most important goals many teachers set for themselves is to be the best educator they can be. Therefore, what we do inside and outside the classroom is the reflection of an unbelievable desire towards knowledge, deeply engaged by potentials and ideas that change our world. This motive has made me committed to the wants and desires of my students who come into my classes every day. In brief, what makes me committed to my profession is the hope to change the world a better place for my students to live (Teacher No. 4)*

> *Teachers try to inspire students in all aspects of their lives, and for most teachers, their greatest motive is to be the best role model. They try to be someone who attracts and encourages students to strive for change, and teaches them to understand their full strength to become the best they can be. Teachers can inspire demotivated students to participate and act, and even bring introverted ones out of their comfort zone (Teacher No. 6).*

4.1.2. Self-Made Duty

The following examples are the incidents in the category self-made duty referring to teaching as a mechanical practice of routines with no clear intention.

> *I think teaching is my duty. I make efforts to do well because it gives me a feeling that I am doing the right thing (Teacher No. 8).*

> *I will feel guilty if I don't try hard in my profession (Teacher No.10).*

4.2 Teaching Challenges

It cannot be denied that teaching is an inspiring yet challenging career, which is affected by both internal and external variables. It demands broad knowledge of content, curriculum, standards, and skills.

4.2.1. Internal Assets

Teachers' performance is influenced by different internal factors, which are related to teachers' personal and professional values. According to the findings of the present study, lack of motivation and knowledge are among internal factors that shape teachers' performance.

4.2.1.1. Lack of Motivation

The first theme in this section refers to lack of motivation as a dynamic and bidirectional factor. Without doubt, teachers' performance depends on what goes on inside the classroom. The vitality of the classroom comes from the rapport that is created between not only students but also teachers; it is a positive energy both teachers and students share. In effect, teacher motivation has been an important topic (Metcalfe & Game, 2006). Here the focus is on teachers' perceptions of motivation which follow clear criteria regarding the difference between a classroom climate that is hostile and chaotic and the other one that is respectful and supportive. In the following examples, the teachers were motivated with the positive and safe relationship where students feel safe and respected both emotionally and physically. EFL teachers emphasized the need for an inclusive classroom atmosphere in which the students can feel good about themselves and what they are accomplishing in the class.

> *Often, students show troublesome behaviors when I am teaching. Such uninterested and unmotivated students are a real challenge. This behavior of students not only disturbs me but also leads to disturbances in the classroom climate (Teacher No. 26).*

> *I can say that students are at the top of the list because they affect my willingness and motivation very much. If they are motivated and eager to learn, I feel full of energy to teach, but when they are in a bad mood, trying to teach becomes a torture for me (Teacher No. 29).*

> *When most of the time there is silence in the response of the students, my performance is a mechanical motionless one which I don't like. I regret such a demotivating climate (Teacher No. 39).*

4.2.1.2. Knowledge

This category focuses on knowledge. To be able to cope with difficult situations in educational settings was the other mentioned theme. The participants emphasized that a high sense of

professional knowledge empowers teachers and instructors to cope with the demanding conditions in their work place and enables them to overcome potential difficulties.

> *If I feel lack of knowledge in the specific subject that I teach, I don't allow the students to participate or raise questions to challenge my knowledge. Most of the time my performance is not the intended one since I have no knowledge of managing the classroom, organizing classroom events, and following a clear direction in lessons (Teacher No. 8).*

> *If I know different teaching methods, knowing when and how to apply each method, I will prove myself a confident professional teacher. This knowledge helps me understand my students' affections, challenges and fears, act as an effective teacher, and control my emotions (Teacher No. 2).*

4.2.2. External Assets

Teachers' performance is also influenced by a variety of outside factors, which are related to society, system, family, etc. According to the findings of the present study, support, safe relations, training, social status, and financial problems are among external factors, which affect teachers' performance.

4.2.2.1. Support

The incidents in the next theme support depict the teachers' desire to receive support which means to them feedback, freedom, autonomy, and involvement. Teachers' work often includes challenging issues that can destroy teachers' professional life when they feel not being supported by ones around them.

> *As teachers, we spend years in this profession without receiving feedback on our performance or help with our problems. We need institute heads feedback and support to improve our practices on a daily perfect basis ((Teacher No. 40)*

> *For a good teaching, we need the whole system's support which is freedom, autonomy, and involvement in system decision-making (Teacher No.10).*

This incident shows that lack of support can cause considerable emotional distress. The tension between the need to change and teachers' unwillingness stems from lack of understanding, trust, and support.

> *We are eager to learn new skills and practice new technologies to help our students achieve the most. But we need support to improve our craft and change our view. Give us the time we need to apply new practices in an atmosphere of understanding, trust, and support — as opposed to fear, stress, and shame (Teacher No. 41).*

Teachers also complained about lack of parental cooperation and guidance with them. They believed that a student can become successful only when parents support his teachers. But in fact, parents start attacking teachers when their kids complain about the teacher. Parents like to defend their child without knowing their child's behavior and problems.

> *Parents don't always cooperate. From parent conflicts or an unsupportive administrator to a lack of state funding, we often feel underappreciated. Not having the support we need makes it hard to feel successful in the classroom (Teacher No. 43).*

4.2.2.2. Safe Relations

This category focuses on teachers' safe relations with others. Colleagues understand the value of teamwork in decision making and conflict resolution. Almost all teachers knew the benefits of collaboration, but some of them preferred to keep their comfort zone. The first example stresses the inner desire to collaborate with other teaches but the sense of denial due to its restrictions and difficulties. It describes a clash between a teacher's desire to collaborate with other teachers and personal norms, with which teachers do not always feel comfortable. In this incident, the teacher bent under their comfort zone pressure.

> *Restrictions and difficulties in relation to collaborative work, such as time and working conditions exist in our system. Lack of training in collaboration, and affections such as low motivation and self-esteem also make collaboration difficult. We all know the importance of interpersonal relationships, but most of us try to avoid collaborations that take us out of our comfort zone (Teacher No. 45).*

The next examples are concerned with the willingness to collaborate with colleagues. English language teachers approved that the desire to achieve common instructional goals, to accept

colleagues' constructive feedback and opinions, to share successful instructional experiences with them, and to support one another in difficult situations in the educational setting were noticeable elements that constitute an educational team with a strong sense of effective performance. Working in an educational setting which is characterized by collaborative atmosphere and shared responsibility improves teachers teaching values and beliefs and tremendously influences their professional performance.

Collaboration is a friendly relationship to create a safe atmosphere in workplace. Working with other members can make work fun. As there's success in unity, I much prefer to work in a team (Teacher No. 36).

Group work is a great opportunity to broaden my horizons and learn from others. We can discuss our tactics and share useful sources of learning and teaching. I sometimes ask my colleagues for help and advice since I believe changes practically happen if members share their ideas and experiences. Collaboration seems essential when I want to make important decisions or face some serious challenges in my workplace (Teacher No. 37).

4.2.2.3 Training

The two following examples are the incidents of the category training. In today's knowledge-based society, professional development of teachers is a basic condition to qualify their teaching. All teachers need the chance to update their professional knowledge throughout their career and become experts in their field.

Teaching training classes causes change, progress, and confidence for teachers, especially novice ones. Teaching has positive effects on the development of our profession since it helps to change the way classrooms are managed. It motivates teachers to become more engaged, effective and interested to achieve better quality outcomes in a flexible healthy climate (Teacher No. 28).

Teaching is a demanding and challenging profession. We need opportunities to learn professional values and standards. Teachers need to assess all aspects of their teaching practice to guarantee they are fulfilling the learning needs of their students. We need professional training to know new methods, modern materials, and effective styles to improve our performance (Teacher No. 33).

Teacher training establishes standards for students' achievement and guarantees high-quality teaching. It ensures that the teaching that learners receive and the learning they experience has a positive and effective impact on their general and academic life (Teacher No. 32).

4.2.2.4. Social Status

The next incident of the category, social status, focuses on the teachers' sense of others' approval.

Teachers are challenged with the task of facilitating children's intellectual growth and preparing them to meet the challenge of future life. We expect that such demanding job would enjoy high status and considerable respect and reward within society, but as we see this is not the case: while teachers in some countries enjoy high salaries and comfortable working conditions, in our country we have to do different jobs in order to survive (Teacher No. 47).

There is no social prestige for teachers since the minimum professional qualification is required to enter the teaching profession, particularly in early childhood and primary education. In addition, teaching is not considered an attractive prestigious profession for young people, and high teacher attrition rates are evident across institutes and some universities (Teacher No. 50)

4.2.2.5. Financial Problems

Next category refers to teachers' financial problems. Interestingly, all participants expressed a similar stance towards the motivating role of income and rewards.

Higher teacher salary is one of the ways of motivating and hiring high-quality teachers. It makes a more supportive climate. It is crystal clear that there is a strong correlation between teachers' income and their performance quality (Teacher No. 48)

The importance of a teacher career as the designer of the students' future demands that only the best and the most qualified members of our society enter this holy profession. But anyone who fails to find an opening in any other position gets into this demanding profession and plays with the future of the whole country. A large number

of our teachers are, therefore, hopeless, demotivated, and frustrated experiencing such a low salary position (Teacher No. 50)

On the whole, the sense of self helps the whole group to shape the common goals, values, and standards. Teaching performance is directly linked to the issue of quality, for it is the professional group as a whole that shapes what standards should apply to its members. Therefore, the system needs a clear understanding about the roles, skills, and wants of a qualified teacher.

5. Discussion

The present study has sought to investigate how teachers perceive and reflect on English language teaching regarding the challenges encountered during their teaching performance. In doing so, we sought to shed light on beginning and experienced teachers' experiences administering a semi-structured interview.

In response to the first research question -What do teachers perceive as the central characteristics of teaching in EFL classrooms?-it becomes clear that to 60% of teachers, teaching means a self-improvement, and the classroom is considered as a field of trial and error. For 30% of participants, students' personal and professional future and educating the students to make the world a better place to live was the most important aspect of teaching. In this way, teaching means encouraging students to understand themselves and the need to change. And 10% of teachers believed that teaching means just a duty. For them teaching was a mechanical practice of repeated routines with no special intention. The teaching career provides a rewarding profession with different pathways for teachers to climb their career ladders. Fuller, Goodwyn, and Francis-Brophy (2013), for instance, argue that having such a scheme allows teachers who are really good at teaching to remain in the classroom. The first duty of a teacher is a high quality teaching to focus on teaching standards and learning preferences, hoping that this would have a positive impact on students' achievement (Stronge et al., 2011). As stated by Hattie (2003), effective teachers take their work seriously and spend time organizing lessons and preparing themselves before any lesson.

Addressing the second question-What are English teachers reflections on challenges encountered during their teaching performance?-we have shown that teachers' performance is influenced by different internal (lack of motivation and knowledge) and external (support,

safe relations, training, social status, and financial problems) challenges. Comparing internal and external assets, the findings show that external assets are stronger than internal ones affecting the teachers' performance. Previous research consistent with our study shows that teaching motivation directs teachers' instructional practices and students' learning (e.g., Richardson, Karabenick, & Watt, 2014; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015). It makes a difference whether teachers see their career as a chance to continuously improve even after their formal training has ended or whether they just want to get through the day while avoiding as much work as possible.

From the current research findings, knowledge to cope with difficult situations in educational settings was the other mentioned challenge in this study. The participants emphasized that a high level of content ability and pedagogical skills helps teachers to cope with the demanding conditions in their work place and empowers them overcome existing barriers. Focusing on English teachers, Ibrahim et al. (2013) note that these teachers are considered as material designers. They are expected to develop creative and innovative materials that can increase students' learning. Teacher's abilities, knowledge, and skill work beyond classroom climate contributing enormously to the larger educational community at the city, country or even the world level when they are involved in developing teaching and learning resources, building items for standardized examinations and inside and outside classroom tasks. In the same line, literature on teacher performance (Fairman & Mackenzie, 2012; 2015) has emphasized the role of collaboration among teachers to improve teaching and learning practices implementing innovative practices and conducting research.

Previous studies in line with our study have identified a close relationship between authorities support and teacher performance (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). This relationship helps and guides the newcomers. In this way, experts become the critical friend or buddy to the novice one and work together as partners to strengthen the newcomers' pedagogical skills (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Langdon, 2011). A recent study on good supportive practices by Pennanena, Bristol, Wilkinson, and Heikkinen (2016), in line with our findings, showed how safe group work in a collaborative system can push the teachers to success. Success in promoting academic internationalisation depends on safe cooperation between the participants: managers and teaching staff and must be managed within the resources available to the system (Maudarbekova & Kashkinbayeva, 2014). These findings supported research done by Eklund (2008) who suggested that teachers' mental comfort relates to their

performance. Moreover, teachers' working conditions affect their performance providing quality education and working best in a healthy, safe environment.

The findings of the present study also confirmed the belief that the strong teacher education programs are vital to a strong teaching force so that teachers are adequately prepared for their jobs. Strong programs can diminish the shortage and increase the performance of new teachers (Giacometti, 2005). Furthermore, training program is a key factor in influencing the professional development of teachers and contributes to the improvement of their knowledge if teachers are actively involved in the process (Saiti & Saitis, 2006). Helping a novice teacher becomes effective in the classroom is the purpose of in-service training (Newcomb, 1990) to help newcomers stay in the profession. Therefore, high scores on pre-service and in-service training could be a cause as well as an effect of EFL teachers' performance. This line of relationship is supported by Saiti and Saitis (2006); Kavak et al. (2012); and Chiang (2008) who suggested that high in-service and pre-service training is an effective factor in EFL teachers' performance.

Moreover, boundaries and expectation were positively related to EFL teachers' performance. This relationship is also confirmed by Eklund (2008) and Kavak et al. (2012) who found a significant positive relationship between boundaries and expectation and EFL teachers' performance. They figured out that an increased level of boundaries and expectations are associated with higher level of performance among EFL teachers. Thus, a higher level of boundaries and expectation is a significant factor for the EFL teachers' performance. In short, from a theoretical point of view, the analysis of factors affecting teachers' performance sheds light on teachers' awareness concerning teaching challenges which they are usually reluctant to discuss. From a practical perspective, the findings may help teachers and their mentors in developing educational programmes based on teachers' performance.

Conclusion

Although this study successfully investigated the demanded topic, the findings should be viewed in light of its limitations. The first limitation is that it reflects only the opinion of the teachers participating in the survey. We have limited the present study to some accessible English teachers which might have limited the sample size. We note that a larger sample would be desirable, especially to address questions related to the challenges of teaching profession. Given the recruiting strategy used here, it is not possible to generalize the results

to all language teachers. The second limitation is the brevity of the interview, specifically the small number of questions. In qualitative studies such as this one, researchers must keep the fidelity of measurement, which suggests having more items is preferable, Future studies might use a measure with more items to produce a more fine grained analysis of the challenges of teachers' performance.

Despite the limitations noted above, some concluding remarks can be drawn from the present study findings for the design and improvement of teacher development programs. First, teachers need to develop professionally throughout their career, due to nonstop changes and developments in their everyday experiences and field of education. In other words, teachers need to be able to accept and trust new methods to present an effective performance based on their own reflections and context with regard to the particular groups of students they are teaching. Second, as teachers are placed in practice at classroom, their teaching motives are dynamic affected by both self and context concepts. Accordingly, the maximum opportunities should be provided for teachers to take part in different professional training programs in both the class work and the training courses. Through exposure to different trainings, they can develop an understanding of the difficulties and challenges that surround teachers' professional practices and roles. Further, to achieve the system standards, a safe and supportive environment is necessary in teachers' professional and personal life. Finally, teachers need more time and chance to engage in safe relations with experts in the system.

In order to develop professionally, teachers need the formative collaboration with their coworkers. In this way, teachers can test their thoughts, experience new values, and develop through the process of healthy safe collaborations. In other words, the teachers' own values interact with the new norms through participation, collaboration, and reflection, as result of which, their attitudes about language teaching and their self-understanding as a language teacher are both changed and reshaped. Moreover, in terms of teaching fields, there is a sense of change while the environment in the field is considered highly motivating and supportive. It is hoped that the findings from the present study can contribute to the field of teacher education to better prepare teachers to make more informed decisions about their performance. Although the present state of teaching profession in the field of TEFL may paint a discouraging picture, this and related research shows there are steps that can be taken to remove some of the common barriers experienced by teachers.

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