Original Article

Evaluation of Grammar-focused Courses in Iran's B.A. TEFL Curriculum: A Fit-Gap Analysis of Knowledge and Skills Needed and Delivered

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Abstract

In education, aligning curriculum with students' current and future demands is crucial for fostering effective teaching practices. This study highlights the essential need for curriculum evaluation, particularly in grammar-oriented courses within undergraduate Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) curricula in Iran. The evaluation aimed to examine the alignment between academic offerings and the theoretical knowledge and practical skills required to meet students' current and future demands. Specifically, this fit-gap study identified discrepancies between the content delivered and students' perceptions of what is essential for their professional preparedness. The focus was on three specific courses"Grammar and Writing (1)" "Grammar and Writing (2"" an"Advanced Grammar and Writin" with insights gathered from 120 senior students who had completed all three courses. Three semantic differential scales were developed, validated, and administered, followed by statistical analysis using t-tests to assess levels of under-preparation and over-preparation in grammar knowledge and skills. The findings revealed that TEFL students generally considered themselves overprepared i"Grammar and Writing (1" found a balance i"Grammar and Writing (2" and felt underprepared i"Advanced Grammar and Writin" These results indicate a need for curriculum revisions to enhance the effectiveness of grammar-focused courses in addressinstudents' communicative needs, particularly in applying grammar to real-world contexts. This study's implications are particularly relevant for curriculum designers and policymakers, emphasizing the urgency of aligning educational outcomes with the evolving demands ostudents' practical language needs.

Keywords: Curriculum Evaluation, Fit-Gap Analysis, Over-preparation, Undergraduate Grammar-focused Courses, Under-preparation

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1. Introduction

Organizations that provide services must continuously satisfy the needs and expectations of their clients, making it essential for managers and decision-makers to examine users' perceptions of service suitability, quality, and efficiency. This understanding and examination is crucial for making informed decisions that satisfy customers and achieve organizational goals in competitive environments. In the higher education sector, Kuo and Ye (2009) emphasize the growing focus on service quality, recognizing students as clients. Educational institutions are increasingly viewed as places of instruction and as providers of educational products and services (Borghi et al., 2016). As such, regular evaluation of programs and curricula becomes essential to assess their effectiveness and facilitate necessary improvements. Continuous assessment ensures that processes yield desired outcomes and enables optimal refinement (Alavi et al., 2022; Rezvani & Farsimadan, 2025; Rezvani et al., 2016). Comprehensive evaluations demonstrate a curriculum's success and progress while providing valuable insights for stakeholders to effectively communicate its impact. This information is essential for maintaining financial, academic, moral, and public support, which is critical for the sustained success and relevance of educational initiatives; as Rossi et al. (2004) note, without evaluation, potential problems and defects may remain unnoticed and unresolved.

Systematic approaches to evaluation have a long history dating back to the mid-twentieth century, with influential models shaping assessment efforts. Tyler's Objectives-Centered Model (1950), widely employed in large-scale assessments, progresses systematically through various interconnected steps. Scriven's Goal-Free Model (1972) challenges the assumption that goals or objectives are indispensable in the evaluation process. Stake's (1975) Responsive Model prioritizes stakeholders' concerns, placing them at the forefront of determining evaluation issues. Eisner's (1979) Connoisseurship Mode emphasizes qualitative appreciation. These approaches have paved the way for more recent models, such as the gap analysis model of service quality introduced by Parasuraman et al. (1985), which holds particular relevance in marketing education literature. In essence, a gap analysis serves as an outcomes assessment tool that is particularly effective for measuring the servicreceivers' attitudes and perceptions, as noted by Davis et al. (2002). This approach in the educational evaluation context is believed to offer indirect or even direct indicators of student satisfaction, dissatisfaction, and the overall quality of a

curriculum (Alavi et al., 2024). When students or graduates express their under- or over-preparation or adequacy in relation to specific areas of knowledge or skills, it provides valuable insights into their perceived importance and contributes to gauging program effectiveness (Alavi et al., 2022).

The Bachelor of Arts TEFL curricula in Iran encompass a variety of courses designed to enhance students' English proficiency and prepare them for subject-specific courses. Essentially, these TEFL courses serve as foundational groundwork during the initial two years of the baccalaureate program, after which students transition into more specialized coursework. While students typically acquire basic grammar rules in earlier educational stages, the TEFL curriculum aims to further develop and extend their language proficiency. Therefore, grammar courses are strategically introduced at the outset of the BA TEFL program, requiring students to apply their knowledge in diverse contexts, including sentences, paragraphs, and various opportunities for language use.

In the present study"knowled' pertains to the theoretical understanding students acquire about the English language, specifically focusing on grammar as a component of their competence. On the other hand"skil' refer to the abilities and capabilities students possess in producing oral and written language, as well as in reading and listening comprehension, reflecting their performance. The manifestation of grammar rules (knowledge) in advanced courses, such as paragraph writing, essays, or articles, indicates the extent ofstudents' skills and the quality of grammar instruction they have received. The study aims to address the recurring issue of assessing the proficiency-developing courses' ability to meet requirements and exigencies, a concern that has often been overlooked by curriculum evaluators (Rezvani et al., 2021).

The grammar courses introduced to TEFL students at Iranian universities, as outlined in the curriculum policy documents provided by the Ministry of Sciences, Research, and Technology, aim to develop a robust foundation in English grammar and writing. In the initial course""Grammar and Writing (1" which accounts for four credits with four hours of instruction per week, students are expected to achieve a relative familiarity with English structures, including the identification and application of various parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives. This course emphasizes the active practice and production of sentences, serving as a prerequisite for the subsequen""Grammar and Writing (" course. Similar in structure and credit allocation""Grammar and Writing ("" aims to enhance

studen" understanding of advanced English structures and the ability to produce simple, compound, and complex sentences, as well as descriptive paragraphs. Mastery of this course is essential before progressing to th""Advanced Grammar and Writi" course, which focuses on prescriptive, descriptive, and transformational grammar. Offered for two credits over two hours weekly, this course is intended to enable students to analyze and synthesize different sentence types while reinforcing their grammatical knowledge. Finally, th" "Advanced Writi" course builds on these competencies, targeting the development of advanced writing skills. By the end of this course, students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in writing paragraphs, essays, and articles, applying advanced techniques such as outlining, crafting topic sentences, and ensuring unity and coherence through effective punctuation.

This study was motivated to gain a deeper understanding of the quality of grammar courses in TEFL curricula from the perspective of senior university students in Iran. The investigation aimed to assess the extent to which these courses encompass the skills and knowledge areas deemed essential for TEFL students, comparing the content delivered by instructors. The focus was specifically on grammatical points considered necessary for TEFL majors. Additionally, the study examined whether a gap exists betweestudents' perceived knowledge of grammar and the actual skills they felt adequately prepared to use to meet the demands of subsequent courses.

2. Literature Review

Evaluation is a critical process aimed at enhancing the quality of one's work and that of others by identifying and addressing weaknesses through a continuous cycle of research or trial and error to achieve sustainable success. In the context of curriculum evaluation, Wall et al. (2004) define evaluation as a purposeful, systematic, and meticulous process of collecting and analyzing information to document program effectiveness, establish accountability, and identify areas needing change and improvement.

As articulated by Nation and Macalister (2010), curriculum evaluation involves a comprehensive examination of all aspects of curriculum design to determine whether a course is optimized for effective teaching and learning. This evaluation encompasses both the assessment of course outcomes and the processes involved in planning and execution (Rezvani et al., 2016). Therefore, curriculum evaluation serves as a crucial final stage in

the development of a tailored curriculum. The primary objective of this process is to gain validation from stakeholders and provide justifications for the selection of a particular curriculum (Alavi et al., 2022, 2024; Altaieb, 2013; Rezvani et al., 2021).

Experts in evaluation have identified several key characteristics of effective evaluations, emphasizing that they should be honest, inclusive, and replicable. A well-planned and meticulously executed evaluation must be tailored to the specific program while leveraging existing knowledge and resources related to evaluation practices. In the context of ELT, evaluation involves the systematic collection, analysis, and interpretation of information concerning teaching and learning processes. The primary aim is to facilitate informed decision-making that enhances student achievement and contributes to the overall success of educational programs (Genesee & Upshur, 1996; McMillan & Schumacher, 2014; O'Malley & Valdez-Pierce, 1996; Rea-Dickens & Germanie, 1993; Stiggins & Chappuis, 2018).

Moreover, the perceptions and satisfaction of students or service recipients, who are key stakeholders in education, are critical for evaluation. Their perspectives on language learning significantly influence their expectations of the course, their engagement with the class, and their likelihood of achieving success and satisfaction in their language-learning journey (Horwitz, 1988). Understanding these perceptions provides valuable insights for educators and educational institutions, enabling them to design effective and engaging language learning experiences that align with students' expectations and goals.

Research on service quality gap analyses, a relatively recent methodological approach, began to gain traction in the 1980s. However, it has only been in recent years that educational services have been recognized as a distinct category of service. This paradigm shift has arisen in response to increasing global and local competition, prompting higher education organizations to adopt a market-oriented perspective to sustain their operations and meet the evolving needs of students (Deming, 1986; Judd, 1998, as cited in Thams, 2005; Lambertz, 1998).

One example of this shift can be observed in a study conducted by Mantovani, Gouvea, and Conejero (2013), which aimed to assess quality gaps in a distance Public Administration undergraduate course. The researchers employed a quality gap model to analyze ten courses within the System of Open University in Brazil, incorporating perspectives from both course coordinators and students. The study's findings indicated

that institutions frequently fail to adopt a market-centered approach, which undermines their ability to make informed decisions regarding their courses. Consequently, these institutions lack a defined process for identifying students' expectations, thereby hindering the development of quality strategies and policies that are informed by these expectations.

In another study, Davis et al. (2002) conducted a gap analysis on a university course in the United States. This analysis compared the perceived importance of key skills and knowledge areas relevant to current employment withstudents' perceptions of their academic preparation in marketing education. Upon identifying a gap, the researchers found that "marketing alumni perceive that they were under-prepared in skills and over-prepared in some designated knowledge areas" (Davis et al., 2002, p. 218). As a result, they recommended a reassessment of the curriculum to address these deficiencies.

Similarly, a study by Karakaş (2012) evaluated the Teacher English Education Program in Turkey and uncovered that the program's weaknesses outweighed its strengths, despite the comprehensive coverage of pedagogical and theoretical components. These findings collectively underscore the importance of aligning educational programs with both student needs and real-world expectations to enhance curriculum effectiveness and prepare graduates for professional success.

In the context ofIran's education system, limited research has been conducted on educational offerings and service quality, particularly within the realm of language education. Notably, a study by Norouzinia et al. (2016) examinedstudents' perceptions and expectations of educational service quality through five dimensions: assurance, responsiveness, empathy, reliability, and tangibles. Their findings indicated that students' expectations consistently exceeded their perceptions across all five SERVQUAL dimensions, revealing a significant quality gap between students' anticipated and actual educational services. This trend was corroborated by Nabilou and Khorasani-Zavareh (2014), who found thatstudents' expectations of educational services were not adequately met, concluding that perceptions of educational conditions fell short of expectations.

In the realm of language education, two parallel fit-gap studies conducted by Alavi et al. (2022, 2024) assessed the satisfaction of Iranian EFL teachers regarding their pre-service education, particularly in developing assessment literacy. A total of 200 teachers, with equal representation from private (n = 100) and public schools (n = 100), participated in these studies. They rated the importance of various aspects of assessing theirstudents'

English proficiency against their perceived preparation from pre-service language assessment courses. The findings indicated a consensus among teachers from both contexts on the high importance of certain areas of language assessment knowledge and skills. However, the fit-gap analysis revealed a considerable disparity between the perceived importance of these areas and the level of preparation provided by their pre-service education, especially concerning assessment skills. Across both groups, teachers expressed feelings of under-preparation in fulfilling their crucial roles in assessing their students' English proficiency and progress. Follow-up interviews further emphasized their calls for enhancements in pre-service education programs to better equip EFL teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge for effective assessment.

With limited research on curriculum and course evaluation in Iran's higher education for English studies, there is a considerable opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of current educational curricula using a fit-gap approach. This methodology highlights the differences between what educational curricula offer and the actual outcomes and provides a deeper understanding of curriculum effectiveness from diverse stakeholders, particularly students. Addressing these identified gaps contributes to the academic conversation about educational quality in Iran and supports efforts to enhance student learning outcomes while preparing skilled educators who can meet the changing demands of the classroom. Moreover, gap analysis studies typically seek to clarify student preferences and levels of preparation through various models, including preferences-satisfaction, importance-satisfaction, importance-preparation, and importance-performance (McLeay et al., 2017). In this study, the importance-preparation gap framework evaluates Iranianstudents' perceptions of the preparation they received and the importance of English grammar within the TEFL major. It aims to understand the quality of grammar courses from the perspective of senior university students, focusing on whether these courses cover essential skills and knowledge for TEFL students. More specifically, the primary purpose of this research was to address the following question:

1. Is there a significant gap between the knowledge and skills delivered through the three grammar-focused TEFL courses in Iranian universities and the knowledge and skills students genuinely need?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine the educational curriculum that incorporate grammar courses at the university level in Iran. Utilizing a survey research design, the study implemented semantic differential scales to assess both the importance of specific areas within grammatical knowledge and skills, as well as the level of preparation provided by the courses in the TEFL curriculum.

3.2. Participants

The study involved a total of 120 participants, comprising 51 males and 69 females. Participants included senior students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) from Yasouj, Shiraz, and Kazeroon state universities. The ages of participants ranged from 22 to 47 years. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of the study sample.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Variables		Frequency	Percentages
Gender	Male	51	50.0
	Female	69	50.0
Age	22-27	87	72.5
	28-33	15	12.5
	34-40	12	10.0
	41-47	6	5.0
University	Yasouj	43	33.33
	Shiraz	38	41.66
	Kazeroon	40	25.0

3.3. Instrumentation

To evaluate participants' perceptions of the importance of knowledge and skills acquired in grammar courses, as well as the adequacy and preparation provided by course content, three Likert Semantic Differential Scales—each featuring six response options—were developed and utilized. The initial scales, comprising a total of 55 items, were designed to

capture various aspects of grammatical concepts within the curriculum and to measure respondents' views on the significance of grammatical structures for their academic and professional development, as well as their perceived readiness in these areas. The first scale, entitled "Grammar and Writing (1) Course," contained 19 items based on curriculum outlines to assess the quality of education. The second scale included 19 items aimed at gathering students' opinions on the importance and preparation related to the grammatical structures covered in the "Grammar and Writing (2) Course." The third scale, consisting of 17 items, evaluated respondents' perceptions of their skills and knowledge in the "Advanced Grammar and Writing Course," encompassing both classroom and practical applications.

Once the scales were developed, they were reviewed by two university TEFL professors to examine their face and content validity. The professors were informed of the study's objectives and research methods. Based on their evaluations and feedback, some items were excluded or merged, resulting in three revised scales with 14, 14, and 12 items, respectively (see Tables 2, 3, and 3 below). Following this evaluation, a pilot study was conducted with 30 students from Yasouj University, who shared similar characteristics with the main study sample within the same academic major, to establish the reliability of the scales using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The resulting reliability assessment indicated a Cronbach's alpha coefficient consistently exceeding 0.76, thereby confirming an appropriate level of reliability for the intended measures.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The study utilized survey scales distributed to 145 Iranian B.A. TEFL senior students, comprising both male and female participants who had successfully completed their grammar courses. Instructions were provided in Farsi to facilitate the survey-taking process. Although participants had the option to complete the scales immediately, many opted to take them home for later completion, resulting in an 87 percent return rate. Ultimately, 120 scales were adequately completed, while a few were returned incomplete. The surveys were disseminated both in person and through various communication platforms, including email, WhatsApp, and Telegram, ensuring broad accessibility. Participants were approached directly and via communication platforms to enable immediate and convenient data collection. All respondents were informed about the study's

objectives, their rights to confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants to ensure compliance with ethical research standards.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

Following the data collection phase, the researchers systematically entered the students' responses into the SPSS data processing software, focusing on evaluations of three grammar courses: Grammar and Writing (1), Grammar and Writing (2), and Advanced Grammar and Writing. Total scores and mean values were calculated to facilitate further statistical analysis. The researchers computed item ratings related to knowledge and skills, employing a series of dependent samples t-tests to examine potential differences between the knowledge and skills presented in the grammar-focused courses of Iran's B.A. TEFL curriculum and those that students perceived as necessary for their academic development. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS software (version 26) to effectively address the research questions outlined in the study.

4. Results

To identify gaps in participants' perceptions of their knowledge and skills related to under-preparation and over-preparation, we administered survey scales to students at three state universities: Yasouj, Shiraz, and Kazeroon. These scales evaluated the perceived importance of grammar development and the level of preparation received from their courses. Using a two-section six-point Likert scale, we assessed respondents' self-evaluations of under-preparation, over-preparation, or balanced preparation. The data highlighted discrepancies between participants' views on grammar development's significance and their self-reported preparation. We conducted a series of paired samples t-tests to further investigate these gaps, as detailed below.

4.1. Gap Analysis of Importance and Preparation for Grammar Knowledge and Skills in the"Grammar and Writing (1) Cours"

We used inferential statistics to assess the differences in mean scores among groups, focusing on the importance of and preparation for grammar knowledge and skills in the"Grammar and Writing (1) Course" To achieve this, we conducted a series of paired samples t-tests, with the results presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Gap Analysis of Students Perceptions of Importance of Knowledge and Skills vs. Preparation Provided by the 'Grammar and Writing (1) Cours' (N=120)

Item	area	Importance	preparation	t-value	*p*-value
		Knowledge (K) and skill (S) means			
K1	Knowledge of Tenses in English, their usages and their different and specific functions.	3.87	4.88	-9.38	0.000
K2	Knowledge of verbs (e.g.: auxiliary and modal verbs, regular and irregular, transitive and intransitive, stative, two (or more) word verbs, verb plus preposition and verb plus particles.	3.92	5	-8.90	0.000
K3	Knowledge of adverbs (of manner, frequency, time and time relationship, intensifiers, and place) and their regular and irregular patterns, use, and examples.	3.74	4.82	-8.58	0.001
K4	Knowledge of nouns, (ir) regular plural nouns, (non) count nouns, possessive nouns, and quantifiers before nouns.	4.93	3.74	9.50	0.010
K5	Knowledge of pronouns: (e.g. personal, impersonal and reflexive pronouns and agreement with generic and collective nouns and indefinite pronouns and basic subject-verb agreement).	3.85	4.82	-7.27	0.000
K6	Knowledge of adjectives (simple, comparative, and superlative) and order of adjectives before nouns and their adverb forms.	3.85	4.90	-7.27	0.000
K7	Knowledge of definite or indefinite articles and their usage.	4.84	3.54	9.53	0.013
K8	Knowledge of Tag Questions and the exceptions in variety of sentences.	3.75	4.85	-8.12	0.001
S1	The skill to write proper spelling of words, word formation, parts of speech and derivation of words and apply appropriate punctuation marks in	4.80	3.73	6.85	0.022

	sentences				
S2	The skill to change declarative to interrogative and positive to negative to write correct simple sentences or paragraphs using different tenses	3.70	4.82	-8.04	0.000
S3	The skill to write diverse sentences using correct word order (e.g.: subject +verb +object plus proper adverb and adjective orders and irregularities)	3.87	4.85	-7.52	0.000
S4	The skill to utilize proper pronouns in interrelated sentences and ability to identify their noun referents in longer texts	3.81	4.73	-7.11	0.000
S5	The skill to produce various sentences with modals and their different functions	3.67	4.56	-5.78	0.010
S6	The skill to use proper tag questions in different tenses and sentences considering exceptions	3.66	3.90	6.87	0.069

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Number of participants = 120

Table 2 shows that, based on the gap analysis, 10 out of 14 areas related to grammar knowledge and skills in the 'Grammar and Writing (1) Course'—specifically, K1, K2, K3, K5, K6, K8, S2, S3, S4, and S5—were perceived as "over-prepared" by the respondents. In these areas, students rated their mean scores for preparation higher than the importance of grammar knowledge (M_imp < M_pre). This difference was statistically significant, with an alpha level in the paired samples t-test of less than 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). Conversely, in 3 out of 14 areas—K4, K7, and S1—respondents considered themselves "under-prepared," as their mean scores for the importance of knowledge and skills were higher than their preparation levels (M_imp > M_pre). In these areas, participants felt they had not received sufficient preparation for grammar, and this difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). One area, S6, demonstrated a balance between the importance and preparation levels. In this skill area, there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the importance and preparation levels (M_imp ≈ M_pre), as indicated by a non-significant alpha level ($p > 0.05$).

4.2. Gap Analysis of Importance of and Preparation for Grammar Knowledge and Skills in the"Grammar and Writing (2) Cours"

Given the gap identified between the levels of importance and preparation for grammar knowledge and skills in the"Grammar and Writing (1) Course" it was essential to examine the knowledge and skill areas in the"Grammar and Writing (2) Cours" to assess any under- or over-preparation among participants. To accomplish this, we conducted a series of dependent samples t-tests, and the results are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3

Gap Analysis ofStudents' Perceptions of Importance of Knowledge and Skills vs. Preparation Provided by the'Grammar and Writing (2) Cours' (N=120)

Item	Area	importance	preparation	t-value	*p*-value
K1	The knowledge of Passive Voice in different tenses, in modal and statives, as well as passive with Get and Participial Adjectives in simple or complex sentences	3.70	4.75	-7.69	0.000
K2	The knowledge of Noun Clauses and their recognizing in sentences beginning with a Question Word, with Whether or If, with That, and question words followed by infinitives	4.76	3.62	7.94	0.000
K3	The knowledge of Quoted and Reported Speech and understanding them in simple or complex sentences	4.77	3.74	8	0.000
K4	The knowledge of Adjective Clauses:(e.g. adjective clause pronouns used as subject, object or object of prepositions, their usual patterns and also reducing adjective clauses to adjective phrases)	4.78	3.60	8.65	0.000
K5	The knowledge of Gerunds:(e.g.: gerunds as subject, object and object of prepositions, using a possessive to modify a gerund, common verbs followed by gerunds as well as Go + gerund)	3.81	4.80	-7.88	0.000
K6	The knowledge of Infinitives: (common verbs followed by infinitives, infinitives of purpose, infinitives with Too and Enough, passive and past forms of infinitives or gerunds, common verbs	4.75	3.65	9.09	0.000

followed by either infinitives or gerunds)

K7	The knowledge of Causative verbs and verb forms after Let, Make and Help, and using verbs of perception in a sentence	3.55	4.75	-8.67	0.000
K8	The knowledge of conditional sentences and Wishes: True or Untrue (contrary to the fact) in the present or future, AS IF, AS THOUGH	3.61	4.85	-8.53	0.004
S1	The skill to utilize Coordinating conjunctions:(e.g. parallel structure, using paired conjunctions like Both….And, Not only….But also, Either….Or, Neither…Nor in sentences)	3.60	4.78	-7.88	0.038
S2	The skill to use Adverbial Clauses (e.g. using adverbial clauses to show cause and effect, expressing contrast with Even though, While, and Whereas, Adverb clause of condition)	4.81	3.40	10.41	0.031
S3	The skill to reduce adverbial clauses to modifying adverbial phrases (e.g. changing time clauses to modifying adverbial phrases, expressing the idea of"during the same tim" and cause and effect and using Upon+ -ING in modifying adverbial phrases)	4.65	3.42	8.40	0.000
S4	The skill to use Connectives that express Cause and Effect, Contrast and Condition: using Because of, Due to, Consequently, Such…That and So…That. Using So That to express purpose	3.64	4.75	-7.89	0.001
S5	The skill to use Conditional Sentences and Wishes: True or Untrue (contrary to the fact) in the present or future, omitting IF, using AS IF/ AS THOUGH, verb forms following WISH, using WOULD to make wishes about the future	3.94	3.73	8.34	0.151
S6	The skill to write correct sentences using the knowledge of active and passive voice and changing sentences from active to passive and vice versa with confusing verbs of two objects	4.90	3.87	7.06	0.032

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Number of participants = 120

The gap analysis of grammar knowledge and skills in the 'Grammar and Writing (2) Course' reveals that among the 14 assessed areas, 6—namely K1, K5, K7, K8, S1, and S4—were regarded as "over-prepared" by the respondents. In these instances, the mean preparation scores were higher than the mean scores reflecting perceived importance (M_imp < M_pre). The significance level for these areas was below 0.05 (p < 0.05), indicating a statistically significant difference. In contrast, 7 areas—K2, K3, K4, K6, S2, S3, and S6—were identified as areas in which respondents felt "under-prepared." The dependent samples t-tests showed that in these areas, the significance level was also under 0.05 (p < 0.05), with mean scores for perceived importance exceeding those for preparation (M_imp > M_pre). Finally, the area S5 reflected a balanced perception, yielding a non-significant result. In this case, the significance level exceeded 0.05 (p > 0.05), suggesting no statistically significant difference between the perceived importance and preparation levels for grammar knowledge and skills in the 'Grammar and Writing (2) Course' (M_imp ≈ M_pre).

4.3. Gap Analysis of Importance and Preparation for Grammar Knowledge and Skills in the"Advanced Grammar and Writing Cours"

To further evaluate the gap in under-preparation and over-preparation among respondents regarding the grammar knowledge and skills scale of the"Advanced Grammar and Writing Course" a series of dependent samples t-tests were conducted. The findings from the paired samples t-tests are presented in the table below.

Table 4

Gap Analysis of Students' Perceptions of Importance of Knowledge and Skills vs. Preparation Provided by the 'Advanced Grammar and Writing Cours' (N=120)

item	Area	importance	preparation	t-value	p-value
K1	The knowledge of analyzing different simple, compound, complex grammatical sentences in texts or in speech using prescriptive grammar	3.41	4.65	-11.89	0.000
K2	The knowledge of analyzing different simple, compound, and complex sentences in texts or in speech using descriptive grammar	4.86	3.49	11.98	0.000

K3	The knowledge of analyzing different simple, compound, and complex sentences using transformational grammar when applying deep and surface structures.	4.49	4.69	10.96	0.250
S1	The skill to use correct verb forms including (ir)regular verbs, (in)transitive verbs, gerunds and infinitives, conditional verbs, modals, subjunctive, linking verbs, and their formal or informal forms orally or written	4.70	3.61	10.64	0.000
S2	The skill to use the knowledge of adjectives and their adverbs and irregular adverb forms and proper adjective orders in complex sentences or paragraphs orally and/or written	4.91	3.66	10.10	0.000
S3	The skill to construct longer sentences and paragraphs using proper conjunctions, connectives, and relative pronouns written or orally	3.54	4.85	-9.59	0.013
S4	The skill to make correct negative and interrogative sentences in different tenses with correct word orders and inverted structures in some negative and conditional sentences	4.65	3.48	8.95	0.000
S5	The skill to produce sentences with direct and indirect objects, passive word order, delayed subject, and reported speech in longer paragraphs, considering topics sentences, unity, coherence and cohesion	4.75	3.47	9.87	0.000
S6	The skill to make correct sentences using connotations, fixed phrases and idioms orally and written	4.78	3.43	11.37	0.000
S7	The skill to utilize sentences or paragraphs with pronouns, pronoun clauses, (possessive) adjectives and their noun referent in anaphor and /or cataphora	3.30	4.52	-9.30	0.000
S8	The skill to combine sentences by using relative clauses, adverb or adjective clauses and use correct order of adjectives in texts or speech	4.72	3.53	9.72	0.000

| S9 | The skill to apply deep and surface structures to simple and/or complex sentences using transformational grammar | 4.46 | 3.15 | 10.50 | 0.000 |

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.
Number of participants = 120

As detailed in Table 4, respondents identified K1, S3, and S7 as areas of over-preparation, with paired samples t-tests revealing a significance level (alpha) below 0.05 (p < 0.05) for these domains. This indicates that participants perceived themselves as over-prepared, as their mean scores for preparation were higher than those for perceived importance (M_imp < M_pre). Conversely, for the areas K2, S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, S8, and S9, respondents rated the importance of these skills higher than their preparation levels (M_imp > M_pre). Inferential statistical analyses demonstrated statistically significant differences in these areas as well, with a significance level of alpha less than 0.05 (p < 0.05), suggesting that respondents felt under-prepared. Additionally, area K3 was assessed as balanced, indicating no significant perception of under-preparation or over-preparation; the statistical analysis revealed no significant difference (p > 0.05) between the mean scores of perceived importance and preparation for this area (M_imp ≈ M_pre).

4.4. Overall Gap Analysis of the Three Courses

To explore the differences in perceived importance and preparation regarding grammar knowledge among the three courses, paired samples t-tests were conducted. The findings, summarized in Table 5, reveal significant results for the Grammar and Writing (1) Course (Sig. = 0.001, p < 0.05). Respondents reported a mean importance score of 52.75 compared to a mean preparation score of 67.45, suggesting a perception of over-preparation. Broadly, it is argued that this over-preparation may stem from their familiarity with the course content due to prior exposure in junior high school. The successful completion of the University Entrance Examination (UEE) prior to their TEFL major further supports this perception, as respondents had practiced the material extensively, boosting their confidence in their grammar skills.

Table 5

A Gap Analyses of Total Importance and Preparation for Grammar Knowledge and Skills Areas in the Three Grammar-Focused Courses

All Courses	Total Importance	Total Preparation	Number of Participants	t-value	Sig. α
Grammar and Writing (1)	52.75	67.45	120	-10.097	0.001
Grammar and Writing (2)	62.08	61.98	120	9.836	0.047
Advanced Grammar and Writing	56.73	41.21	120	14.684	0.000

In the Grammar and Writing (2) Course, students indicated nearly equal levels of importance (Mimp = 62.08) and preparation (Mpre = 61.98), with a statistically significant difference (Sig. = 0.047, p < 0.05). This balance suggests that while foundational grammar concepts were reinforced, new skills were introduced, encouraging students to build on their existing knowledge. For example, the tenses learned in high school progressed to more complex applications in Grammar and Writing (2), such as passive voice constructions and modal forms, reflectingstudents' overall growth in understanding.

In contrast, the results from the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course indicated a perception of under-preparation. Respondents reported a mean importance score of 56.73 against a preparation score of 41.21, revealing a significant gap (Sig. = 0.000, p < 0.05). This disparity implies that students may struggle with essential writing tasks, including paragraph and essay construction, and lack skills in critical areas like analysis (K2), which affects their competencies in related skills (S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, S8, S9). The challenges faced by students in this course might arise from the perceived complexity and disconnect of new topics from practical application. This shift signifies a transition from viewing grammar as a rigid system to embracing it as a practical skill, leaving students feeling frustrated and inadequately prepared for academic writing tasks.

5. Discussion

5.1. Over-preparation

In response to the research question, significant over-preparation was observed regarding key areas (K1, K2, K3, K5, K6, K8, S2, S3, S4, and S5) within the"Grammar and Writing (1" course reveals a significant disconnect between the curriculum content and students' perceptions of their professional readiness. This over-preparation suggests that while students feel confident in their foundational grammar skills, the curriculum's emphasis on traditional grammar rules may neglect the practical and communicative skills essential for TEFL. Consequently, students may achieve a superficial mastery of grammatical structures that does not adequately prepare them for real-world communication or teaching practices. The focus on rote memorization over critical thinking and application creates gaps in their ability to utilize grammatical knowledge in practical contexts. This sense of over-preparation can lead to complacency, causing students to underestimate the need for ongoing learning and skill development, particularly in more advanced courses like"Advanced Grammar and Writing" where they express feelings of being underprepared.

Similarly, in the"Grammar and Writing (2" course, students perceived areas such as K1 (Passive Voice), K5 (Gerunds), K7 (Causative Verbs), K8 (Conditional Sentences), S1 (Sentence Structure), and S4 (Punctuation) as overprepared. Although they acknowledge the importance of these topics for their future TEFL roles, their perception of being overprepared may foster a false sense of confidence that undermines their ability to teach these concepts effectively in real classroom settings. This misalignment indicates that the curriculum prioritizes traditional grammar instruction over the development of pedagogical strategies and critical communicative skills.

The findings from the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course further illustrate this issue, as participants felt overly prepared in areas such as K1 (analyzing grammatical sentence structures), S3 (constructing longer sentences and paragraphs), and S7 (utilizing pronouns and their antecedents). While this indicates a solid grasp of grammatical concepts, it also highlights a disconnect between their perceived mastery and the practical challenges of teaching these skills. This over-preparation may lead to complacency, detracting from their readiness to navigate the complexities of instructing students effectively.

The findings of this research reveal that students' sense of over-preparation in grammar might stem from extensive exposure to reading and writing materials, as well as foundational grammar knowledge gained through early interactions with instructors and peers, along with consistent review and practice in classroom settings and exams, including university entrance assessments. This aligns with Sadeghi and Richards' (2016) observation that university English courses often prioritize written proficiency— emphasizing grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension—while neglecting oral communication. Participants' strong familiarity with grammar, developed over nearly a decade of studying English in public pre-university and university settings, enhances their feelings of over-preparation. The focus on grammar instruction, driven by the pressure of UEEs, reinforces mastery of topics central to university curricula. Notably, with extensive language education, TEFL majors naturally feel well-prepared in these areas. This trend mirrors existing literature on grammar instruction, particularly within the Grammar Translation Method frequently practiced in Iran's public English education, emphasizing repetitive practice and grammatical analysis (Safari & Rashidi, 2015).

However, as noted by Assalahi (2013), traditional methods like the Grammar Translation Method often prioritize grammatical rules at the expense of communicative competence. Consequently, students may feel over-prepared in formal grammatical knowledge while lacking confidence in practical language skills (Ekstam & Sarvandy, 2017). This aligns with Tsui's (2003) concerns about an over-reliance on grammar instruction that fails to prepare students for real-world language use.

Additionally, the high stakes of UEE in Iran (Rezvani et al., 2021) further entrench a focus on rote learning and memorizing grammar rules (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2016). Although students may excel in structured grammar assessments, their ability to apply this knowledge in practical contexts often remains underdeveloped. This indicates a critical need for a balanced approach to language instruction that integrates both grammatical knowledge and communicative competence, equipping students to use English in real-life scenarios effectively.

Furthermore, given that the students were deemed over-prepared primarily in grammar knowledge areas rather than skills while supporting Hosseini's (2007) conclusion that grammar-translation can enhance proficiency in grammatical concepts, it also reveals limited achievement in key skills like oral performance. This suggests that traditional

teaching methods may not sufficiently develop students' communicative abilities. Jamshidi Avanaki and Sadeghi (2013) highlight that many Iranian university students struggle with effective communication, particularly in face-to-face interactions, indicating a persistent gap in oral proficiency despite years of language education.

5.2. Under-preparation

The findings of this research indicate a notable under-preparation among students in the Grammar and Writing (1) and (2) courses, particularly in the K4 and S1 areas. This under-preparation appears to be linked to the comparative analysis between English and Persian grammar. A detailed examination reveals that the distinction between count and non-count nouns in English, a concept absent in Persian, confuses students as they learn English. Similar challenges arise when using definite (the) and indefinite articles (a or an), where students often hesitate to determine whether a noun is countable or uncountable, as evidenced in area K7. Moreover, the deficiency in the S1 area may stem from respondents' neglect or underestimation of essential writing mechanics. There is a noticeable lack of emphasis on this aspect in both schools and universities, and there is a widespread shortage of time dedicated to practicing English, which is crucial for developing proficiency (Noughabi, 2017).

The gaps in under-preparation in the Grammar and Writing (2) course may also be attributed to Persian grammar interference with English. This interference manifests in various ways, such as the inverted structure in noun clauses with wh-question words (K2), knowledge of quoted and reported speech (K3), and difficulties composing sentences using active and passive voice. Such tasks are academically demanding and require students' meticulous attention, particularly at an advanced level. Confusion with verbs having two objects can lead to mistakes and incorrect grammar (S6).

As regards the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course, the research findings also reveal a significant gap in student preparation across essential grammar and writing skills, including K2 (analyzing sentence structures), S1 (using correct verb forms), S2 (applying adjectives and adverbs), S4 (constructing negative and interrogative sentences), S5 (producing complex sentences with direct/indirect objects and reported speech), S6 (employing idioms and fixed phrases), S8 (combining sentences with clauses and proper adjective order), and S9 (applying transformational grammar).

The findings indicate that students' under-preparation in the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course can be significantly attributed to the lack of exposure to communicative language learning within the Iranian education system. Many respondents have likely not encountered essential grammatical structures in real-life communication, resulting in a limited understanding of their practical applications. Communicative grammar remains a relatively unfamiliar concept, as English courses in Iranian universities primarily emphasize reading comprehension and prioritize grammar over vocabulary acquisition. Consequently, speaking skills and overall communicative competence receive minimal attention (Anani Sarab, 2016). Most English classes are conducted in Persian, with the exception of courses for TEFL and English literature majors, which typically have limited hours (ranging from twenty to thirty) and may not always be taught by qualified English department staff (Anani Sarab, 2016; Eslami et al., 2007; Khodamoradi, 2024; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008).

Moreover, the deficiencies observed in various grammatical areas can be linked to the complexity of mastering specific structures, such as adjective clauses, and the limited opportunities for students to practice these skills both inside and outside the classroom. The lack of preparation regarding infinitives may stem from their intricate nature and ambiguity, particularly in passive and past forms. The interchangeable use of gerunds and infinitives can further complicate students' understanding and performance, leading to significant confusion (Duffley, 2000; Jama, 2022).

It is also noted that the rapid expansion of universities in Iran has contributed to a misconception among some students that acceptance and graduation can be achieved with minimal effort. This perception has resulted in a devaluation of the importance of grammar in English learning (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018). Students often feel pressured to adhere strictly to the grammatical rules presented in their textbooks, which fosters a focus on traditional grammar instruction in classroom settings and assessments. This approach contradicts the arguments made by Deng and Lin (2016) regarding the limitations of common grammar textbooks.

Furthermore, respondents expressed feelings of being ill-prepared for various aspects of the course, aligning with Burke's (1976) assertion that teachers often prioritize teaching traditional grammar over facilitating writing compositions. This focus is frequently due to time constraints or a lack of skill in providing corrective feedback, ultimately hindering

students' ability to express themselves effectively in both writing and speaking. Addressing these gaps through a more communicative approach to language learning might significantly enhance students' grammatical competence and overall writing skills (Khodamoradi, 2024).

5.3. Balanced Preparation

There were few knowledge and skills areas for which the students felt as prepared as they deemed important. The skill area S6, relevant to the Grammar and Writing (1) Course, elicited a spectrum of opinions from participants regarding their preparation. Overall, the participants expressed confidence in developing a well-rounded skill set in this domain, indicating that the curriculum effectively addressed their perceived needs. They conveyed a sense of accomplishment regarding their preparation, feeling that it was appropriately aligned—neither exceeding their expectations nor lacking rigor.

Additionally, participants acknowledged the skills acquired in the S5 component of the Grammar and Writing (2) Course, recognizing its critical role in their overall development. This acknowledgment underscores a sense of holistic preparation, as they articulated satisfaction with the knowledge and competencies gained over an extended educational period. The perceived simplicity and accessibility of the learning material in both S5 and S6 likely played a significant role in facilitating positive educational outcomes.

In the third area of expertise, which constitutes the final segment of the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course, participants offered insights into their experiences analyzing various simple, compound, and complex sentences through the lens of transformational grammar, particularly about both deep and surface structures (K3) (Chomsky, 1964). The findings revealed that participants felt suitably prepared in this area and experienced a sense of equilibrium in their understanding. Although transformational grammar was introduced later in their grammar education, its clarity and approachability may have contributed to this sense of balance (Yadav & Yadav, 2020).). Furthermore, participants' maturity and experience in language and grammar education likely enhanced their ability to engage deeply with the content, allowing them to focus more effectively on the analytical aspects presented in this segment of the course.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study utilized a fit-gap analysis approach to systematically identify preference gaps within the English Language Teaching (ELT) program. The analysis uncovered specific areas of under-preparation and over-preparation among participants by evaluating both knowledge and skills associated with grammar-focused courses. These identified gaps can serve as a crucial foundation for educational authorities, prompting them to consider potential curriculum and instructional formats modifications. The insights gained from this analysis are intended to guide curriculum developers in refining course content to better align with the actual needs of students, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience.

To further investigate the effectiveness of the grammar courses, a total sample t-test was conducted across three distinct grammar courses. In the Grammar and Writing (1) Course, the results revealed that the mean importance score was notably lower than the mean preparation score. This finding suggests that participants perceived themselves as over-prepared regarding their grammar knowledge and skills. Such a perception may stem from the repeated emphasis on certain grammatical concepts throughout their prior English learning experiences, leading to a sense of redundancy in their educational journey. This over-preparation indicates a need for a more nuanced approach to teaching foundational grammar, ensuring that students are familiar with the material and engage in deeper learning processes.

In the case of the Grammar and Writing (2) Course, the findings demonstrated a more balanced relationship between the mean importance score and the mean preparation score, which were approximately equal. This equilibrium may reflect the respondents' perception of a well-structured curriculum that introduces new knowledge and skills while reinforcing previously covered foundational grammar concepts. Such an approach illustrates the participants' growing understanding of grammatical principles, suggesting that the course design effectively supports their educational development. However, the balance achieved in this course highlights the importance of maintaining a curriculum that continually evolves to meet the changing needs of students.

Conversely, the Advanced Grammar and Writing Course results indicated a concerning trend, with respondents feeling underprepared in nearly all areas of grammar knowledge and skills. The mean importance score was significantly higher than the

preparation score, suggesting that the challenging nature of this course's new and unfamiliar topics requires additional effort and practice for mastery. These outcomes underscore the necessity for a comprehensive and balanced approach to curriculum design and teaching methodologies, particularly in advanced grammar courses. Educators need to recognize these gaps and implement targeted strategies that can help students build the necessary skills and confidence to tackle complex grammatical concepts.

The argument put forth by Eastman and Allen (1999, p. 8) emphasizes the importance of continually examining and evolving curricula and courses, highlighting the dynamic nature of curriculum development and assessment. In light of the findings from this study, it is imperative for course instructors specializing in ELT at universities to engage in ongoing evaluations of their curricula and to implement necessary changes based on their findings. Specifically, areas identified as underprepared or overprepared, particularly within grammar-focused courses, warrant reevaluation regarding curriculum emphasis. Moreover, targeted efforts must be made to address the gaps associated with under-preparation, as these initiatives are likely to enhance the relevance of course content, increase student interest, and ultimately promote greater engagement and achievement.

It is crucial to acknowledge that the results of this study are specific to the particular context, sample, curriculum, and program examined. However, the methodology employed in this research can be replicated in other educational contexts and for various courses, utilizing different methods such as survey studies. Conducting nationwide studies could facilitate comparisons of results across various universities and institutions, thereby helping to identify systematic patterns and address potential gaps in ELT programs.

Overall, the implications of this study are significant for a wide range of stakeholders responsible for addressing the immediate needs of today's students. This includes curriculum designers, developers, materials writers, decision-makers for English as a Foreign Language students, and dedicated teachers. By gaining a clearer understanding of the gaps in knowledge and preparation, these stakeholders can make informed decisions to enhance the effectiveness of ELT programs. Fostering a responsive and adaptive educational environment will improve student outcomes and contribute to the broader objective of advancing English language proficiency across diverse learner populations.

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