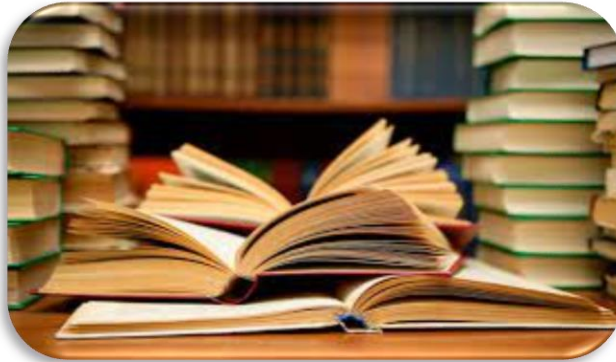**Research Paper**

Exploring EFL Teachers' Perception of Professional Development Needs in Post-Covid Era: Does Gender Make any Difference?

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ABSTRACT

English language teaching (ELT) is an indisputable phenomenon in modern society which is influenced by many factors. Among various factors, professional development constitutes a main concept of English language teaching, and a look at the history of ELT research shows that this concept has attracted the attention of researchers in the field. This study aimed at exploring EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID era, taking the role of gender into account. To this end, a basic interpretive design was employed. A group of 20 (10 males and 10 females) Iranian EFL teachers who were selected through available sampling participated in the present study. The required data for the present study was collected through an open-ended questionnaire. To analyze the data, qualitative thematic analysis was done. Data analysis led to the extraction of the following themes for male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19: Teaching methodology knowledge, Good relationship with students, Content knowledge, Psychological knowledge, Assessment knowledge, and Language knowledge. Moreover, the following themes were extracted for male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era: Classroom management skills, Team teaching skills, Socio-affective skills, Communicative skills, Creative thinking skills, Reflective teaching skills, Motivational skills, and Technological skills. Further, it was revealed that EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era were different. Finally, the findings indicated that gender does not play a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs. The results have some implications for EFL teacher educators, teachers, teacher education, curriculum developers, and researchers.

Key Terms: *COVID-19, Gender, Perception, Professional Development, Professional Development Needs.*

INTRODUCTION

English language teaching (ELT) is an indisputable phenomenon in modern society which is influenced by many factors. Among various factors, professional development constitutes the main concept of English language teaching, and a look at the history of ELT research indicates that this concept has piqued the curiosity of researchers in the field (Rokhyati, 2015).

According to Sancar et al., (2021), teachers' professional development is essential for students' achievement. They noted that defining professional development can be challenging due to its multidimensional nature and its dynamic evolution throughout a teacher's career. Similarly, Gupta and Lee (2020) regarded teacher professional development as a crucial factor in student achievement. According to Rokhyati (2015), professional development is essential for teachers. Teachers with professional expertise and up-to-date knowledge will make teaching and learning in the classroom more effective and meaningful. The students will feel that the class is important because the material they learn is useful to them. Such teachers will make their students respect them. Obviously, professional development occurs over time. Therefore, it can be influenced by environmental conditions.

As one of such conditions, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced COVID-19 as a global public health emergency on 30th January 2020, and subsequently as a pandemic on 11th March 2020 (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is defined as an illness caused by a novel coronavirus now known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2, formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China (Raoofi et al., 2020). The pandemic was associated with several side effects and reactions at different levels. One of the remarkable societal results of the outbreak of COVID-19 was the increase in educational settings closures, which denied millions of learners from impartial learning (Toquero, 2020). By the end of 2020, more than 190 nations including Iran closed their educational places to moderate the prevalence of COVID-19. According to Raoofi et al. (2020), among various consequences of the dissemination of the COVID-19 pandemic, education around the world has dramatically changed. Education in general and English language teaching in particular have switched to online teaching, whereby teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. This hypothesis can be put forth that such changes have influenced, among other things, the professional development of EFL teachers. To empirically prove it, more investigations are required.

However, it can be observed that although professional development has been addressed in several local and foreign studies (e.g., Asadi & Motallebzadeh, 2013; Birjandi & Bagherkazemi, 2010; King, 2012; Lin et al., 2015; Wichadee, 2011), EFL teachers' professional development needs have not received adequate attention (Zein, 2016). More importantly, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, EFL teachers' professional development needs have not been explored in post-COVID era, taking the role of gender of teachers into account. Therefore, the current study aimed to examine EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era, with a focus on gender. Accordingly, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What were EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19?
2. What are EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era?
3. Is there any difference between EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era?
4. Does gender play a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional Development

This section reviews more recent studies on professional development in chronological order. Lin et al. (2015) addressed the impact of teacher professional development programs on students' learning. The findings indicated that teachers had a positive attitude toward the proposed program and perceived it as effective and efficient in fulfilling different needs. The other finding was that the proposed program had an important influence on the students' learning. Rokhyati (2015) conducted a survey study to describe the relationship between English teachers' professional development and their self-confidence in teaching. Data analysis indicated a significant correlation between teachers' professional development and self-confidence in teaching English. In a study by Heydari and Abbasian (2016), the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' professional development and job burnout was examined among Iranian EFL teachers. Zein (2016) investigated EFL teachers' professional development needs and identified three needs categories including the needs of teachers in terms of language, needs of teachers in terms of pedagogy, and needs of teachers in terms of knowledge. Sezer et al. (2019) examined the opinions of school administrators toward the professional development of classroom teachers. As shown by the results, they perceived communicational skills, technology-using skills, pedagogical content knowledge, planning skills, material designing, and using skills as professional development components of classroom teachers. Soodmand Afshar and Ghasemi (2019) addressed EFL teachers' perspectives of professional development in Iran. The outcomes of this study indicated that the participants conceived that professional development improved their pedagogical knowledge base, improved the learning outputs of learners, and helped teachers be aware of their pedagogical shortcomings and abilities and those of their peers. Fazlali (2022) tackled EFL teachers' professional development and commitment. Data collection was done via Teachers' Professionalism and Organizational Commitment Questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. The results revealed that educators' professional development as well as their commitment level were significantly high. Furthermore, there existed a positive correlation between the professional development of EFL educators and their level of dedication. Moreover, the qualitative results showed that teachers were willing to learn professional skills. They considered assessment skills, organizational skills, and classroom management skills as important dimensions of professional skills. Khezrab et al. (2023) investigated Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of professional practices in higher education. To achieve this aim, a researcher-made questionnaire and observation were utilized to collect the data. It was concluded that pedagogical skills and interactional skills were significant in building the professional skills of teachers.

Gender Differences in Teaching

Teaching is a complex and multi-faceted concept according to Cruess et al. (2014), which is characterized by the demonstration of core values, ethical behavior, and competence in a particular profession which are under the influence of gender. The fundamental aspects of teaching are ethical conduct and integrity, which include honesty, trustworthiness, and adherence to ethical principles in professional practice, which are gender-affective as stated by Miles et al. (2018). As Miles et al. (2018) pointed out, teachers are supposed to show a high level of awareness, expertise, and competence, which is acquired through education, training, and professional development in line with gender peculiarities.

Harrison et al. (2020) assert that continuing professional development is a crucial component for professionals to augment their knowledge, expertise, and competencies, and to stay abreast of the evolving demands of their profession, congruent with gender-based roles. Collaboration and collegiality which are both gender-tied are also indispensable facets of teaching, as teachers frequently work in teams and engage in effective communication, cooperation, and respect for an array of perspectives. Leadership

constitutes a significant aspect of professionalism, given that professionals might assume leadership roles within their professional associations or organizations, which can promote a constructive work culture and advocate for the interests of the profession (Wagner et al., 2019).

Teachers' Needs of Professional Development

EFL teachers' needs of professional skills play a paramount role in providing quality teaching and consequently, improving EFL learners' learning and achievement. The importance of needs of professional skills of teachers has been increased. Hosseinpoor et al. (2020) addressed the correlation between job performance, self-efficacy, and professional needs of teachers. A correlational research method was employed. The results indicated that a significant relationship exists between job performance and self-efficacy. Moreover, job performance and professional needs were significantly correlated among teachers. Aparicio-Molina and Sepúlveda-López (2023) explored EFL teachers' perspectives on professional development needs. To this goal, a qualitative design was selected using focus group interviews. According to the results, teachers identified their capacity to take responsibility of their professional training by reviewing work routines, emphasizing learning as a conducive factor, and being influential in all steps of a collaborative work framework. Ilgan and Basaran (2023) examined teachers' views on professional needs. It was uncovered that teachers participated in peer coaching activities, professional development activities, and self-directed activities to fulfill their professional needs. Vakili (2023) sought to determine the influence of professional development needs and job values on the job performance of Iranian teachers. For this purpose, a survey correlational design was utilized. The results unveiled that professional development needs effect on job performance was significant. Also, it was shown that job values mediated this effect significantly.

As shown in the reviewed studies, the existing literature is replete with studies addressing teachers' professional development from various angles; however, no study, to the best knowledge of the researchers, has addressed EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era, with a focus on gender.
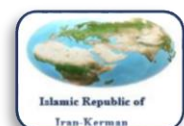
METHOD

Design of the Study

A basic interpretive design was employed to achieve the objectives of the present study. The basic interpretive design was the best choice for this study since this approach best suits exploring individuals' perceptions. In the basic interpretive design, the researcher aims to comprehend the meaning constructed by those involved in a phenomenon or situation (Ary et al., 2019).

Participants

A group of 20 (10 males and 10 females) Iranian EFL teachers selected through available sampling participated in the present study. Data saturation was achieved with this sample size. The teachers were teaching at private language institutes in different cities of Iran. The mean age of the participants was 43. They possessed B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in different fields of English language education including TEFL, Translation Studies, and Linguistics. They had 7 to 26 years of teaching experience. In picking up the participants, research ethics was observed. That is, the participants' consent was taken, they were informed of the purpose of the study, and they were assured that their personal information would remain anonymous and confidential.

Instrument

The required data for the present study was collected through an open-ended researcher-made questionnaire. It included four open-ended questions which were asked from the participants via Telegram. The questions were designed through consulting the previous research (e.g., Zein, 2016). There was no time limit for answering the questionnaire. A team of three EFL university professors validated the content of the open-ended questionnaire. The questions are presented in the Appendix.

Procedure

Data collection of this study started with selecting the sample from the target population. Thereafter, a telegram group was created and all the participants were added there. Then explanations regarding the purpose of the study were provided. Then, the researchers explained the aims of the study and asked them to kindly participate in the study. Also, she assured them that their anonymity would be ensured and the confidentiality of their private information would be respected. Next, the participants were kindly invited to answer the questions of the open-ended questionnaire in the Telegram without any time limit.

To analyze the data, qualitative thematic analysis was done. In so doing, in the first step, that is the familiarization step, the researchers sought to know the data and got a thorough overview of all the data that were collected before they started analyzing the data. More specifically, they tried to be familiar with the data by taking notes or looking through the data. In the second step, that is the coding step, the data was coded. It involved making some phrases and sentences of the text bold or highlighted and coming up with some codes that represented the content of the bold or highlighted parts. In this step, the researchers highlighted or made bold all the sentences or phrases that were perceived as relevant. In this way, some codes were extracted which allowed the researchers to get an overview of the recurrent points and meanings in the data. In the third step, which is generating themes, the codes were looked over to identify the recurrent patterns in them and extract the themes. In so doing, related and similar codes were combined to reach a single theme. Moreover, the codes which were non-relevant were omitted. In the fourth step, which is reviewing themes, the extracted themes were reviewed by the researchers to ensure about their accuracy and usefulness. To this end, the researchers returned to the data to compare the themes against it. If any problems were identified with the themes, they were broken down, combined, or omitted. In sum, in this step, the researchers tried to make themes more useful and accurate.

It should be noted that the data were collected once. That is, all the data were collected in post-COVID-19 period. However, two questions of the questionnaire were related to teaching before the COVID-19 pandemic, and teachers were to answer these two questions with a view to that period. It is pertinent to note that the responses of male and female participants were separately analyzed to investigate whether there is any difference between male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era.

RESULTS

The First Research Question

Through qualitative thematic analysis, the following themes were extracted for male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19:

1. Teaching methodology knowledge
According to male teacher 1 (MT1):

EFL teachers' professional development is directly related to their knowledge of teaching methods. Since teaching English can be challenging, teachers need to know various methods to choose the best one.

In the words of female teacher 6 (FT6):

Teaching at different levels requires using different methods. Therefore, EFL teachers must be familiar with various teaching methods.

According to male teacher 8 (MT8):

No teacher can attain professional development without familiarity with and use of teaching methods. Teaching methods are the main parts of EFL teaching.

2. Good relationship with students

As stated by MT 3:

Students are very sensitive to teacher behavior. For this, teachers' relationship with students should be very good.

As put by FT5:

In their relationship with students, EFL teachers should be kind and friendly because this can affect language learning.

According to MT1:

The quality of the relationship between students and teachers is a big advantage for teachers. It contributes to their professional development.

3. Content knowledge

As stated by MT 10:

EFL teachers' knowledge of textbook content plays a vital role in their teaching success. To me, teachers should be familiar with the content of educational textbooks.

According to FT 2:

Having expertise in the content of educational materials is a must for EFL teachers. Mastery over the content of materials is considered a main characteristic of successful teachers in the view of students.

According to MT5:

Every teacher should have command of the topic he or she is going to teach. This helps them to professionally develop. Topic knowledge is of importance in professional development.

4. Psychological knowledge

According to MT 8:

Learning has its psychology which has different principles. Teachers' psychological knowledge helps them better teach to learners.

FT1 stated that:

Psychology has a close relationship with teaching. I think that teachers should try to enhance their knowledge of psychology to know how to behave and interact with students with different types of personalities in their classes.

In the saying of MT10:

Successful teachers are those whose psychological knowledge is high. Development in teaching requires the psychological awareness of teachers.

5. Assessment knowledge

As stated by MT 8:

Assessing English knowledge of students needs technical knowledge of assessment procedures. EFL teachers should use appropriate assessment techniques and methods when assessing learners.

FT 9 stated that:

Assessment or testing knowledge of EFL teachers should be at a high level. This guarantees using adaptive tests which can measure English proficiency of learners.

As discussed by MT1:

Learning level of students should be evaluated by different methods. Therefore, teachers should be skillful in assessment of their students. Otherwise, they cannot develop in their job.

6. Language knowledge

According to MT 1:

English proficiency is the most significant professional development need of EFL teachers. So, EFL teachers need to improve their English proficiency in order to progress in their jobs.

As explained by FT 10:

Knowledge of English language plays a crucial role in the professional development of EFL teachers. Language knowledge is necessary for professional development.

According to MT10:

General language proficiency significantly influences teachers' professional development.

The Second Research Question

Through thematic analysis, the following themes were extracted for male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era:

1. Classroom management skills

In the words of MT 5:

Managing primary-level classes is a complex job for two main reasons: firstly, learners are mostly naughty, and this makes controlling them a hard job. Secondly, learners' English knowledge is limited, accordingly, they frequently switch to their first language. This also adds to the complexity of classroom management. Therefore, EFL teachers should be skillful in managing the classroom.

As put by FT 4:

Classroom management is a basic need for teachers teaching at different levels since some learners are not very familiar with the rules and regulations of the classroom.

According to FT10:

Management of classes is a big concern for teachers. They should handle it skillfully. It may look like a simple task but the fact is that it is very difficult.

2. Team teaching skills

As stated by MT 10:

If group teaching is implemented so that teachers can use each other's experiences of teaching, quality of teaching is increased. In fact, because of its complexity, teaching requires using participatory teaching methods and procedures.

According to FT 4:

A good experience I have faced during my job is forming teacher groups to run team teaching. In this process, for example, a lesson is divided into two parts, and each part is taught by one teacher. This proved to be very effective in solving the difficulties of EFL teaching.

According to MT1:

Collaborative teaching is a key to teachers' professional development. Teachers think and act differently. Therefore, when they teach collaboratively, their performance is developed.

3. Socio-affective skills

As perceived by MT 7:

Teachers need to be involved in teaching emotionally. Emotions are an important part of learners. For this, the affective involvement of teachers can contribute to better learning among learners.

FT 7 mentioned that:

Emotions and feelings are dominant in the character of students. They, because of their age, are under the strong influence of emotions. Thus, teachers need to know their students' dominant emotions and try to regulate their teaching according to these emotions.

FT 3 stated:

Social behaviors and affective relations of teachers with students lead to professional development. Teachers' emotionality is effective in their job success and satisfaction.

4. Communicative skills

The interviewees also believed that teachers' communicative skills play a key role in improving their teaching. By this, they meant teachers' capability to well communicate with parents, higher authorities, learners, etc. This is easily understood from the following interview excerpts:

As put by MT 8:

Teachers should be able to communicate with different groups of stakeholders whose roles cannot be neglected in the outcomes of teaching. They should have regular communication with parents and authorities.

In the words of FT 1:

The communication skills of teachers can lead to higher quality teaching. The public opinion in society is that those teachers whose communication skills are good are better.

According to FT4:

Communicative ability of teachers is tied to professional skills. It is a main kind of professional skills. Thus, it plays a role in professional development.

5. Creative thinking skills

As believed by MT 2:

Creativity matters in teaching due to the age of learners. Learners like creativity and learn from it. Thus, teachers should make their effort to incorporate creative thinking in their classes.

As put by FT 3:

Using mainstream teaching methods and procedures does not work for some learners. This makes them bored and unwilling to learn. However, the creative thinking of teachers can reduce this unwillingness and add to their eagerness to learn English.

According to FT1:

Bringing innovation and creativity to teaching is very helpful for teachers' development. In this way, they learn to teach creatively and be different from others.

**6. Reflective teaching skills**

MT1 believed that:

To me, reflection can exert strong effects on the professional development of teachers. By this, teachers can identify the strong and weak points of their teaching, and in this way, they can improve their teaching.

FT 4 believed that:

Recent studies have shown that reflection is an effective strategy for high-quality teaching. This implies that teachers can benefit from reflective teaching in their classes. The positive outcomes of reflective teaching in the short and long term have been shown.

MT1 said:

Teaching reflectively enhances professional development. When teachers teach through reflective teaching, they improve in teaching. This contributes to higher professional development.

7. Motivational skills

MT 7 said:
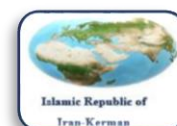
Sometimes, I assign extra points or rewards to motivate students to learn and work together. However, most of the time, I use positive feedback or let them assist me in class activities to do their job well.

FT 5 discussed:

Students should be encouraged by giving them extra points for their activities. Moreover, I sometimes make the top students leaders of their groups. But, giving extra points seems to make them more engaged.

MT1 said:

Professional development needs the motivational capability of teachers. Teachers should motivate students to learn English better. This makes them professionally skillful.

8. Technological skills

According to MT 5:

Today, computers have improved the quality of our teaching. For instance, I use them to type exam questions or make PowerPoint slides to teach grammar or vocabulary. In addition, I surf the net to find interesting contents related to the presented content of textbooks.

As conceived by FT2:

Every skillful teacher should have basic computer skills. Recently, the use of computers in our field has increased. Therefore, they have helped me in different aspects of my job.

According to MT3:

If technology is not used in English teaching, professional development is not achieved. Technology should be integrated to show that teachers are developed in their work.

Results of the Third Research Question

To investigate whether there is any difference between EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era, as seen in Table 1, the themes extracted as EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era are different.

Table 1

EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development Needs before COVID-19 and in Post-COVID-19 Era

Number	Before COVID-19	After COVID-19
1	Teaching Methodology Knowledge	Classroom Management Skills
2	Good Relationship with Students	Team Teaching Skills
3	Content Knowledge	Socio-affective Skills
4	Psychological Knowledge	Communicative Skills
5	Assessment Knowledge	Creative Thinking Skills
6	Language Knowledge	Reflective Teaching Skills

7	Motivational Skills
8	Technological Skills

As shown in Table 1, the themes extracted as EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 were: Teaching methodology knowledge, good relationship with students, content knowledge, psychological knowledge, assessment knowledge, and language knowledge. Moreover, Classroom management skills, team teaching skills, socio-affective skills, communicative skills, creative thinking skills, reflective teaching skills, motivational skills, and technological skills were the themes extracted as teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era.

Results of the Fourth Research Question

In investigating whether gender plays a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs, as shown above, the quotations taken from male and female EFL teachers were categorized under the same themes. This confirms that gender had no significant role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs. For clarification, some samples of male and female teachers' quotations are provided here.

In the words of MT 5:

Managing primary-level classes is a complex job for two main reasons: firstly, learners are mostly naughty, and this makes controlling them a hard job. Secondly, learners' English knowledge is limited, accordingly, they frequently switch to their first language. This also adds to the complexity of classroom management. Therefore, EFL teachers should be skillful in managing the classroom.

As put by FT 4:

Classroom management is a basic need for teachers teaching at different levels since some learners are not very familiar with the rules and regulations of the classroom.

According to MT 5:

Today, computers have improved the quality of our teaching. For instance, I use them to type exam questions or make PowerPoint slides to teach grammar or vocabulary. In addition, I surf the net to find interesting contents related to the presented content of textbooks.

As conceived by FT2:

Every skillful teacher should have basic computer skills. Recently, the use of computers in our field has increased. Therefore, they have helped me in different aspects of my job.

MT 7 said:

Sometimes, I assign extra points or rewards to motivate students to learn and work together. However, most of the time, I use positive feedback or let them assist me in class activities to do their job well.
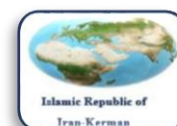
FT 5 discussed:

Students should be encouraged by giving them extra points for their activities. Moreover, I sometimes make the top students leaders of their groups. But, giving extra points seems to make them more engaged. For the full presentation of the perceptions of professional development needs of male and female teachers, readers are referred to Table 2.

Table 2

Male and Female EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Development Needs before COVID-19 and in Post-COVID-19 Era

Number	*Male & Female Before COVID-19*	*Male & Female After - COVID-19*

1	Teaching Methodology Knowledge	Classroom Management Skills
2	Good Relationship with Students	Team Teaching Skills
3	Content Knowledge	Socio-affective Skills
4	Psychological Knowledge	Communicative Skills
5	Assessment Knowledge	Creative Thinking Skills
6	Language Knowledge	Reflective Teaching Skills
7		Motivational Skills
8		Technological Skills

As shown in Table 2, the following themes were extracted as male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19: Teaching methodology knowledge, good relationship with students, content knowledge, psychological knowledge, assessment knowledge, and language knowledge. Moreover, the following themes were extracted as male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era: Classroom management skills, team teaching skills, socio-affective skills, communicative skills, creative thinking skills, reflective teaching skills, motivational skills, and technological skills. It shows that gender does not play a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs.

DISCUSSION

The collected data was analyzed to answer four research questions. Regarding the first research question '*What were male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19?*', data analysis led to the extraction of the following themes: Teaching methodology knowledge, Good relationship with students, Content knowledge, Psychological knowledge, Assessment knowledge, and Language knowledge.

In justifying the findings, it can be said that EFL teaching is a complex process requiring a wide range of knowledge and skills for its development. The multi-faceted nature of the EFL teaching profession makes the role of a variety of types of knowledge including knowledge of different teaching methods, knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of psychology, knowledge of evaluation procedure, and knowledge of language inevitable in its development. EFL teaching goes beyond teaching methodology and subject matter knowledge. EFL teachers need to be knowledgeable in psychology to know how to act and behave in the classroom. They are also required to know how to assess their students' learning. EFL teaching is inseparable from English language knowledge. Mastery of English

language structure, skills, and organization will contribute to higher success in EFL teaching. Further, EFL teachers should be skillful in building good relations with students. Classroom relation is of importance in teaching profession.

The results are in line with Zein's (2016) study which highlighted interactional skills, content knowledge, language knowledge, and psychological knowledge as the primary professional development needs of EFL teachers. Moreover, Cameron (2003), Hamid (2010), Kabilan and Veratharaju (2013), and Le and Do (2012) have enumerated language knowledge as a fundamental requirement for EFL teachers.

Concerning the second research question '*What are male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era?*', the following themes were extracted: Classroom management skills, Team teaching skills, Socio-affective skills, Communicative skills, Creative thinking skills, Reflective teaching skills, Motivational skills, and Technological skills.

To interpret these findings, it is worth noting that the outbreak of COVID-19 has made online teaching a prevalent trend in EFL teaching. Naturally, some specific skills are among the requirements of teaching in online contexts. For instance, successful online EFL teaching cannot be achieved with technological skills. Controlling online classes is different from face-to-face classes since online classes are associated with some complexities coping with which requires specific classroom management skills. Moreover, holding online classes necessitates asking for cooperation from colleagues and this is why team teaching skills have been among the perceptions of EFL teachers of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era. The COVID-19 outbreak generated social and emotional conditions handing which is not practical without socio-affective and communicative skills. Besides, the stress generated by prevalence of the COVID-19 has called for EFL teachers to possess motivational skills so that they can motivate learners to learn English. Last but not least, confronting the challenges of online teaching is not an easy task without reflective skills and thinking creatively. Reflection and creativity are two levers that can help EFL teachers solve the challenges and problems of teaching online.
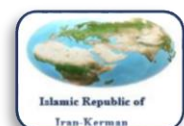
In line with the present study, Choy and Oo (2012), Kaneko-Marques (2015), Minott (2015), Silver (2015), and Soodmand Afshar and Farahani (2015) reported the effect of teacher's reflection on their instructional change and professional improvement. Consistent with the current study, Kaboodvand (2013) explored the perceptions of a group of Iranian language teachers about effective language teachers and reported that the participants considered teachers' language proficiency as a determinant of teacher effectiveness.

Similarly, in the study carried out by Wichadee (2010), participants identified the organization and communicative skills of English teachers as crucial factors for their effectiveness. Likewise, Khojastehmehr and Takrimi (2009) found that communication (social) skills and knowledge were regarded as vital components of teacher effectiveness. Consistent with this finding, Khojastehmehr and Takrimi (2009) reported that EFL teachers regarded social skills and teacher knowledge as the main factors of teacher effectiveness.

These outcomes are also consistent with those of the studies by Dibapile (2012), Khany and Ghoreyshi (2013), and Rahimi and Asadollahi (2012) which concluded that classroom management skills are one of the main concerns of EFL teachers at different levels.

On the third research question '*Is there any difference between EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era?*', as revealed by the results, EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era were different.

In accordance with the results, it can be argued that EFL teachers' professional development needs are not fixed but constructed and re-constructed under the effect of social and environmental factors. Although the public view is that the EFL teaching profession is not that difficult, the reality is something

else. It is not a linear and simple phenomenon but it is interactive and dynamic and influenced by a variety of socially and environmentally-charged factors.

More specifically, for instance, although classroom management skills have been extracted as a theme in male and female EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs in post-COVID-19 era, it was not true about teachers' perceptions of professional development needs before COVID-19.

In comparing this finding with the results of the previous studies, since the researchers could not find a research wherein EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs have been explored before COVID-19 and in post-COVID-19 era, it is not possible to compare and contrast this finding with the previous studies.

In regard with the fourth research question '*Does gender play a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs?*', the findings indicated that gender does not play a role in EFL teachers' perceptions of professional development needs. In other words, male and female teachers expressed pretty similar needs related to both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

A reason behind this finding can be that EFL teaching is a profession wherein a set of transgender factors play a role. It does not mean that the role of gender in EFL teachers' professional development is completely ruled out. However, it implies that the role of other factors that are independent of gender is more dominant. It is documented by the arguments that professional development is rooted in a set of diverse factors which are shared in males and females, among which personal, social, affective, cognitive, and metacognitive factors can be mentioned (Lee, Huang, Law & Wang, 2013). While diversity and variety are there in these factors, they act similarly in both genders in professional elements (Day & Kington, 2008). In comparing these findings with those of the previous studies, consistent with the present study, in the research by Henry and Cliffordson (2013), male and female teachers' professional development was found to be similar.

CONCLUSION

Professional development is essential for keeping teachers' knowledge up to date and ensuring they deliver relevant and effective material to students (Rokhyati, 2015). Based on the findings, it can be concluded that EFL teachers need to continually enhance their teaching methods knowledge, content knowledge, psychological knowledge, assessment knowledge, and language knowledge. Another conclusion from the results is that teaching as a profession involves a wide range of knowledge and skills which should be enhanced if EFL teachers seek professional development. Furthermore, it can be inferred that EFL teachers should practice a variety of skills, such as classroom management skills, team teaching skills, socio-affective skills, communicative skills, critical thinking skills, creative thinking skills, reflective teaching skills, and motivational skills if they want to provide learners with useful instructional practices and materials. Finally, it may be concluded that EFL teachers' professional development is influenced by social and environmental factors. In other words, social and environmental factors such as COVID-19 can have a significant impact on EFL teachers' professional development needs.

The findings suggest several key implications for EFL teacher development. First, EFL teacher educators should focus on the identified professional development needs in their training programs. Second, EFL teachers themselves should actively work on developing the necessary knowledge and skills to enhance their professional development. Third, curriculum developers for EFL teacher education should create programs that address the specific knowledge and skills highlighted in this study. Lastly, researchers can further investigate EFL teachers' professional development needs by considering factors such as age, teaching experience, and other relevant teacher characteristics.

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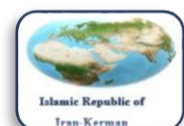
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