

Original Article

The Professional EFL Teacher: A Qualitative Exploration of Iranian University Lecturers' Attitudes toward EFL Teacher Professionalism

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Submission date: 18-04-2023

Acceptance date: 14-08-2023

Abstract

This qualitative study explored Iranian university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism. Based on a researcher-developed protocol, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 14 university lecturers from State and Islamic Azad universities of Tehran, Karaj, Urmia, and Tabriz, Iran, whose teaching experiences ranged from 6 to 19 years, to delve into their attitudes and experiences toward EFL teacher professionalism. The interviews drew upon emergent methodology to categorize the interviewees' value-laden comments into five major attitudinal themes of the meaning of EFL teacher professionalism, the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher, establishing rapport and positive relationship with students, colleagues, and administrative staff in a professional EFL teaching context, resolving possible organizational conflicts in a professional EFL teaching context, and the role of ethics in EFL teacher professionalism. The findings illustrated that professional university lecturers are expected to establish authority and certain relationship boundaries with students and maintaining these boundaries will keep professor-student relationships purely professional. Further, adhering to professional standards and ethics, preventing discrimination in the classroom, developing classroom management skills, fostering student autonomy, giving constructive feedback, and developing mutual respect, politeness, and trust might create a favorable environment as well as increased productivity at work. Besides, educational stakeholders and policymakers are expected to design certain guidelines and allocate the resources required to help university lecturers develop as professionals.

Keywords: Attitude, EFL Teacher Professionalism, Professional EFL Teacher, Professionalism

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1. Introduction

Given the highly competitive nature of the job market today, it is more crucial than ever to establish and maintain a set of standards and benchmarking criteria for all professions. In addition to ensuring high operational quality, standards foster a professional atmosphere of best practice processes that empower businesses to confidently develop systems, rules, and policies (Ibrahimova, 2022). This occurrence highlights the need to update teachers' occupational requirements and credentials to keep up with modern advancements like other occupational groups in other businesses. Professionalism, which is regarded as one of the essential components of efficiency in the workplace, becomes more prominent at this point (Demirkasimoğlu, 2010).

The importance of teacher professionalism is derived from the fact that the teaching profession has a significant impact on both the quality of education and community life (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020; Unsal et al., 2017). Professionalism may be defined in a number of ways based on the job being done and the fundamental principles of the field (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020). Professionalism in education has meant different things to different individuals in different eras (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020). The notion of professionalism and the pictures it conjures up in individuals' minds will probably vary depending on the context (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). Professionalism is defined by Adiguzel et al. (2011) as a service provided by individuals who receive training in their specific disciplines and are assisted by professional organizations. Given the long and rich history of professionalism, Evetts (2018) noted that it is initially viewed as a professional value and is regarded as a valuable motivator for employees.

According to Adiguzel et al. (2011), the current climate's quick changes and advancements call for occupational professionalism. Besides, the following criteria must be fulfilled in order to be considered professional: (a) The existence of groups or professional associations relevant to the profession, (b) The independence to act despite working conditions, (c) Continuous and thorough education, (d) Implementation of the service while taking societal interests into account, (e) Possessing the necessary skills and credentials to perform in a specific field, (f) The responsibility to abide by the established guidelines of the profession, and (g) Being receptive to ongoing research and advancements made using scientific approaches and methodologies. Adiguzel et al. (2011) pointed out that being professional at work requires knowing the finer nuances and

utilizing them. Further, the importance of being a professional increases with work complexity. To put it another way, professionalism entails completing a task with the fewest errors feasible. Professional traits include acknowledging one's limits as a professional in the field, developing one's professional talents, working well in a team, possessing a sense of responsibility and knowledge of the field, and respecting peers (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020).

Creating professional teachers is the main goal of teacher education programs (Tatto, 2021). However, there is a great deal of variation in how professionalism is defined and achieved in different fields (Tatto, 2021). Aspirational goals for the professions are highlighted in Gardner and Shulman's (2005) extensive empirical study of the professions. These characteristics range from building a knowledge base to creating professional communities dedicated to serving the interest of societal welfare ethically. However, perceptions of teachers' professionalism, and particularly perceptions of their professional competence, are hotly debated (Tatto, 2021). Teacher educators are presently working in a challenging and hostile work environment (Hautz, 2022). Global education systems are undergoing substantial reforms that are marked by measurement, accountability, and quality assurance. This change has created new standards for teacher professionalism (Hautz, 2022).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, there have not been any qualitative studies in the literature on the attitudes EFL teachers hold toward teacher professionalism in Iran. Thus, this research topic has remained under-researched and this prompted the researchers to undertake this study. To this end, the current study aimed at exploring Iranian university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism. By investigating university lecturers' attitudes, EFL educators and teachers can gain insights into the nature of EFL teacher professionalism.

2. Literature Review

Since numerous meanings have evolved over time and in the conflict between competing stakeholder groups and their interests, it is crucial to locate concepts of teacher professionalism in relation to changing social, historical, and political settings (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010). Professionalism is used in a variety of contexts and is challenging to define. For instance, in everyday speech, it often refers to a paid activity as

opposed to one that is undertaken voluntarily. Professionalism is also employed to categorize the respectability of various occupational groups (Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). Professionalism in the business world often refers to the anticipated behavior of individuals in particular sectors and is typically associated with success (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005).

Depending on the educational setting, it is feasible to state that definitions of teacher professionalism highlight the importance of teachers' professional credentials, such as being good at their job, accomplishing excellence, and meeting the highest requirements. In its simple sense, a professional teacher is an individual who is paid to teach; in its highest sense, it refers to educators who stand out among their peers and follow the highest standards (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010). When instructors consider excellence as a crucial standard for evaluating their behavior and attitudes, professionalism is improved. To put it another way, the highest standards serve as the criteria for measuring professionalism (Demirkasımoğlu, 2010).

Teachers often earn less money than those in occupations requiring a similar degree of education. They also work with young individuals who lack political power and are therefore less valuable politically (Goodwin, 2021). Evetts (2018) describes a new professionalism that adheres to organizational principles rather than those of the occupation. She describes this as a change from ideas of collaboration, collegiality, discretion, and trust to rising degrees of managerialism, bureaucracy, standardization, evaluation, and performance review.

There is a profession where practicing ethics is the actual practice that is being done. This is the teaching profession (Shuilleabhain & Seery, 2018). Some have come to the conclusion that a higher level of professionalism does not always improve the quality of public service or the status of its practitioners. This conclusion is based on a growing suspicion that professionals are the only ones who benefit from professionalism as well as a suspicion that the language and discourse of professions protect these professions from general public scrutiny (Shuilleabhain & Seery, 2018).

Few studies have examined what teaching professionalism actually entails, as reported by Tichenor and Tichenor (2005) in their study on several descriptions of professionalism in the classroom. In the same vein, Snoek (2010) noted that instructors

typically confront high social expectations regarding their professionalism; as a result, professionalism poses a barrier to teaching.

Traditionally, the term teacher professionalism refers to an understanding that shields instructors from external criticism of their expertise and fields. This means that professionals have a degree of autonomy within their own expertise and perspective (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020). In contrast to the conventional understanding, the emphasis on professionalism in teaching is also highlighted within the context of “neoliberal education reforms.” With the implementation of new managerialism, which holds teachers accountable for educational inadequacies, teacher professionalization might be seen as the solution to every issue. This viewpoint is structured and manageable. Through external accountability systems like productivity, standards, and performance indicators, it specifies measurement procedures (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020).

According to Korkmaz and Unsal (2020), professionalism is a combination of autonomy, professional knowledge, and responsibility. With respect to autonomy, it should be identified if teaching is a profession or not. It should also be explained how teachers decide what knowledge base to employ. Under the professional knowledge component, nurses and lawyers get information through actual practice, whereas teachers mostly struggle with the issue of how to acquire knowledge before teaching it professionally. However, autonomy is a prerequisite for responsibility, which is strongly tied to the notion of accountability. Although teachers’ obligations are clear within the framework of the law, they may have different responsibilities depending on political and social developments (Snoek, 2010). The following traits of teacher professionalism are listed by Snoek (2010):

(1) Professional autonomy, teachers’ control over their own work; (2) willingness to become involved in entry to the profession; (3) participation in professional societies; (4) a focus on professional commitment and honesty; (5) public accountability for outcomes of professional performance; (6) a strong knowledge base that underpins professional activities; (7) lifelong development of the members of the profession; (8) collaboration with colleagues and stakeholders; and (9) support for the innovation of the profession.

Teachers’ professionalism is influenced by their skills, perceptions on their profession, and their interactions with their managers, students, and colleagues (Yirci, 2017). Professionalization includes three components: the behavioral component, which

includes teacher competence and learning-enhancing strategies; the attitude component, which deals with teachers' perspectives toward their jobs; and the intellectual component, which deals with teachers' knowledge (Evetts, 2018). Professional teachers are the only individuals who devote most of their time to both raising and teaching children. Parents and the other adults are all too busy with household chores and problems to spend much time with the kids. After several generations, society would stop developing if instructors were not involved in raising and educating children and it would simply be impossible for a new generation to maintain social, economic, and cultural advancement (Sobirjonovich, 2021). Professionalism is described as a certain set of personal qualities of an individual that are crucial to the productive performance of work. Pedagogical professionalism is also characterized as a quality of a number of interconnected elements which indicate a particular educational system that satisfies the social order of society (Sobirjonovich, 2021).

The growth of teaching professionalism is a significant issue in the field of education, but it is a complicated concept that is tied to numerous issues and has been approached from a variety of perceptions (Sobirjonovich, 2021). Pre-service and in-service instructors' attitudes toward their profession have a direct impact on how their teaching practices evolve and how committed they are to this profession (Sobirjonovich, 2021). Due to the potential for transition shock, some teacher educators are concerned that the difficulties of regular classroom activities may drive early career instructors to put their preconceptions aside once they encounter their actual teaching practices (Rodríguez et al., 2019).

Professionalism is a crucial factor in teachers' roles as educators and is obtained through a thorough education which offers a body of knowledge allowing one to accomplish a job that others without such qualifications could not, and this knowledge is the foundation for a professional teacher (Mayer & Mills, 2021). Concepts of teacher professionalism have changed over the past ten years as a result of greater accountability, standards, performance evaluation, and teacher testing. They have also been influenced by alternative career paths that prioritize professional training and expertise over formal education (Mayer & Mills, 2021).

Menter and Flores (2021) pointed out that another important factor for measuring professionalism is the relationship between professional education and professionalism.

For instance, professional training of doctors, engineers, and lawyers is a well-established component of university education in the majority of countries. These professions also have self-governing professional bodies that regulate entry into each field and have the power to exclude anyone from practicing in those fields if they violate their codes of conduct. We can see that things are more complicated for teachers. Teachers' professional development has not always been associated with universities. In many nations, training colleges and normal schools have a long history and have lower academic status than universities. Moreover, there are circumstances where the teachers' professional development is moving away from university education and apprenticeship kinds of craft learning are being enhanced. Teachers' professional associations exist in many nations, although they lack the same degree of autonomy as those of other occupations (Menter & Flores, 2021).

Teacher professionalism has been examined by different scholars from different aspects. For instance, Abednia (2012) examined how a critical teacher education course assisted Iranian EFL instructors in reconstructing their professional identities and used grounded theory to evaluate pre- and post-course interviews with seven instructors, as well as their class discussions, reflective journals, and diaries. Three significant transitions in their professional identities were demonstrated: from romanticizing and conforming to dominant ideologies to critical autonomy, from no teaching orientation to a critical teaching orientation, and from a technical and linguistic viewpoint to an educational perspective toward EFL teaching.

Furthermore, Salehizadeh et al.'s (2020) study aimed to explore how EFL instructors would characterize professionalism as competence and performance. The researchers collected the data through a questionnaire from 281 language school and university instructors in four different cities of Iran and used structural equation modeling to develop a three-factor model, which is supported by Richards's (2010) study. This model explored three factors, including competence, performance, and techno-pedagogical competence, as closely matching the components of professionalism developed by Richards (2010). The results demonstrated that, at least theoretically, the majority of participants agreed with Richards's approach.

In her study of teacher professionalism, Goodwin (2021) draws our attention to the sociology of professions and debates over whether teaching should be considered a semi-

profession rather than a full profession when considering the professionalism of teachers. Her investigation of the official entrance requirements for teaching in the US, Australia, and Hong Kong is the main focus of her paper. She discovers that both the US and Australia share a strong commitment to the efficient delivery of curricular material, while Australia places a stronger focus on study and inquiry than the US. In contrast, the document describing criteria for teaching in Hong Kong highlights the significance of love and health, with the teacher appearing to have considerably more autonomy than in the other two contexts. Therefore, definitions of teaching might vary greatly depending on the context, at least in terms of the terminology used to refer to the profession.

In another study, Mayer and Mills (2021) explored certain similarities and differences in the definitions of teacher professionalism in Australia and England. They noted that, to some degree, the similarities arise from the historically close relationship between Australia and England and the policy learning processes between the two countries. For example, one of the similarities is that research on teacher education is rarely used in policymaking in Australia and England. Thus, both contexts place a lower priority on research than they do on practical skills. They discovered that there is a desire to develop a classroom-ready teacher through pre-service programs by examining official reviews and policy documents in each context. Then, they pointed out that the process is characterized as education in Australia.

In another recent study, Tatto (2021) examined the status of teaching as a profession using the framework developed by Gardner and Shulman (2005) from their empirical study of the professions in the US. Bernstein's sociology of knowledge was also used to describe how recontextualizing agents struggle to control the interpretation of professionalism in education. She employed data from an international study on university-based teacher education to demonstrate attempts to define the professional knowledge required for teaching and the great degree of variation in the possibilities given to teachers to acquire such knowledge. These evaluations made it evident that teacher education is crucial to maintaining the teaching profession. Ultimately, she noted that in order for the education sector to assure teachers' professional development, an inquiry culture in university-based teacher training programs must be taken into consideration.

More recently, Amelia, et al. (2022) studied the principal's role as a supervisor in developing teacher professionalism and reported that, in addition to having expertise in

science, professional teachers are also expected to be experts at using effective teaching strategies, learning techniques, and resources to motivate students. Their knowledge of the educational world is also of paramount importance and this is inseparably linked to their supervisors' guidance. Therefore, teacher supervision is carried out to develop and enhance skills in the teaching and learning process. Moreover, teachers can fulfill their obligations and responsibilities as professional educators by building a friendly learning environment and establishing effective communication.

The term attitude has been defined variously by different researchers. Latchanna and Dagnev (2009) defined attitude as a key factor in comprehending individual behavior and a complex mental state entailing feelings and beliefs. Tufan and Gudek (2008) identified attitude as a condition that is learned to react to individuals, occurrences, and ideas in a desirable or undesirable manner; it is described as a mental process that guides individuals' behaviors. Attitude is also defined as a tendency to understand behavior by drawing conclusions from actions that are not directly witnessed (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020).

An attitude is "a relatively enduring organization of beliefs around an object or situation predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner" (Rokeach, 1971, p. 180). Freeman (1989) defined attitude as "a stance toward self, activity, and others that links intrapersonal dynamics with external performance and behaviors" (p. 36). Students' attitudes toward language teaching have been examined in sociolinguistics and second language acquisition research for decades. However, language instructors' attitudes toward supervision have received no attention (Bailey, 2006).

Attitude is the predisposition of the people to judge some symbol or object or aspect of their world in a positive or critical manner (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020). Opinions are considered as the verbal expressions of attitudes. However, attitudes might be expressed in nonverbal behavior as well. Attitudes involve both the affective core of liking or disliking, and the belief or cognitive elements that can describe the object of the attitude, the characteristics of the attitude, and its relations to other objects. It can be concluded that all attitudes involve beliefs, but not all beliefs are attitudes (Korkmaz & Unsal, 2020).

Freeman defined attitude as "a stance toward self, activity, and others that links intrapersonal dynamics with external performance and behaviors" (1989, p. 36). Moreover, it is described as the way teachers perceive and think that may lead to the action they will take related to their teaching practices in the class (Freeman, 1989).

This study gives contributions to the literature on EFL teacher professionalism from Iranian university lecturers' attitudes and subscribes to the global framework of professional teaching standards developed by Education International and UNESCO (2019) as its theoretical framework. This framework confers the greatest importance to professional teaching standards and highlights the significance of defining and specifying teaching standards in order to provide a fair and high-quality education for all students. It is noteworthy that three domains of teaching knowledge and understanding, teaching practice, and teaching relations are at the center of this framework of professional teaching standards.

EFL teacher professionalism in Iran plays a critical role in the development of the education system and the way in which teachers perceive it. Despite its significant role, the body of research on teacher professionalism in the Iranian EFL setting is scant. The present study makes a unique contribution to this field as it offers a detailed account of the Iranian university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism.

Accordingly, the following research question was posed to address the aim of this study:

1. What attitudes do university lecturers hold toward EFL teacher professionalism in Iranian universities?

3. Method

3.1. Design and Context of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted to explore Iranian university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism at State and Islamic Azad universities of Tehran, Karaj, Urmia, and Tabriz, Iran, in the winter of 2023.

3.2. Participants

The participants of this study included 14 Iranian EFL university lecturers who were selected through convenience sampling from several State and Azad universities in Tehran, Karaj, Urmia, and Tabriz, Iran. Table 1 provides information on the participants. The university lecturers comprised 12 females and two males. Their ages ranged from 29 to 40, with 6-19 years of teaching experience. The participants had Ph.D., or they were Ph.D. candidates or students in TEFL, translation studies, or English language and literature. It

should be noted that the names of the participants are not disclosed in the study to maintain anonymity.

Table 1.

Demographic Background of the Participants

Participants	Academic Degree	Field of Study	Years of Teaching Experience
1. University Lecturer 1 (UL1)	Ph.D.	TEFL	19
2. University Lecturer 2 (UL2)	Ph.D.	TEFL	13
3. University Lecturer 3 (UL3)	Ph.D.	Translation Studies	9
4. University Lecturer 4 (UL4)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	15
5. University Lecturer 5 (UL5)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	13
6. University Lecturer 6 (UL6)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	12
7. University Lecturer 7 (UL7)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	11
8. University Lecturer 8 (UL8)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	10
9. University Lecturer 9 (UL9)	Ph.D. Candidate	TEFL	8
10. University Lecturer 10 (UL10)	Ph.D. Candidate	English Language and Literature	8
11. University Lecturer 11 (UL11)	Ph.D. Candidate	English Language and Literature	7
12. University Lecturer 12 (UL12)	Ph.D. Student	TEFL	13
13. University Lecturer 13 (UL13)	Ph.D. Student	TEFL	7
14. University Lecturer 14 (UL14)	Ph.D. Student	TEFL	6

3.3. Instruments

In order to answer the research question of the study, semi-structured interviews based on the interview protocol developed by the researchers were conducted. The initial items for the interview protocol were developed based on a thorough review of the related literature and the researchers' teaching experience and expertise. Besides, the researchers set up one group interview session with two university lecturers in order to initially try out the

interview questions and revise them in light of the given comments and suggestions. Moreover, in order to validate the interview questions, two associate and assistant professors in Applied Linguistics commented on them. The interviews drew upon emergent methodology to categorize the interviewees' value-laden comments into five major attitudinal themes namely, the meaning of EFL teacher professionalism, the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher, establishing rapport and positive relationship with students, colleagues, and administrative staff in a professional EFL teaching context, resolving possible organizational conflicts in a professional EFL teaching context, and the role of ethics in EFL teacher professionalism. (See the Appendix for the complete interview protocol.)

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

As this study was attitudinal in its scope and nature, it employed the principles of qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) to collect data, investigate the participants' attitudes, and find out the answer to the research question of the study. Most of the qualitative studies that intend to explore the theory inherent in the data inductively and deductively follow an emergent methodology. Thus, this study intended to focus on the insightful attitudes regarding EFL teacher professionalism that appeared from the data through employing the procedures followed by Miles and Huberman (1994). It must be noted that the researchers supplemented this approach with an in-depth content analysis (Dawson, 2002), a method in which a researcher analytically examines interview transcripts and assigns codes to the emergent concepts. Thus, in line with Harwood et al. (2009), the researchers conducted interviews to investigate the university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism in Iranian universities.

In order to achieve the desired goals of the study, the researchers developed a set of interview questions for university lecturers. It is worth mentioning that the researchers followed a semi-structured interview protocol and asked more open-ended questions, allowing for a discussion with the interviewees rather than a straightforward question-and-answer format. The interviews with the university lecturers were conducted either face-to-face or through Skype, lasting between 45 to 55 minutes, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim by the researchers. The transcripts were sent to the participants through email for verification and possible modification.

It is noteworthy that all participants were required to provide informed consent. Participant's agreement to participation in this study was obtained only after a thorough explanation of the research process. Consent to record the interviews was also asked from them. Further, the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants were preserved by not revealing their names and identities in the data collection, analysis, and reporting of the findings. Privacy and confidentiality of the interview environment were managed carefully during interview session.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

The researchers manually coded and categorized the transcribed data to identify “value-laden instances” (Silverman, 2000) which indicated the university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism. To help readers track each participant's contribution, the researchers assigned a code name to each participant. For example, UL1 stands for University Lecturer Number 1 (see Table 1). Further, significant to note here is the wording of the interview extracts. As is evident in the results, some of the interviewees' comments on a single question mentioned the same opinion, and the voices were mostly similar. Thus, when reporting the numbers and identities of the interviewees who raised a similar issue, the researchers provided a number of sample extracts taken from the participants as support for an issue. Therefore, the researchers analyzed and reported the transcriptions based on the research question and research purposes in order to explore the attitudes university lecturers held toward EFL teacher professionalism.

The validity of this study was established using a technique known as respondent validation (Golafshani, 2003). Accordingly, the transcripts were sent to the participants through email for verification and possible modification. Afterward, the researchers tested the initial results with the participants in order to improve their trustworthiness. Further, it should be noted that the researchers used multiple coding; also referred to as consistency checks or intercoder reliability (Barbour, 2001) to promote reliability of the findings. Accordingly, two additional researchers independently analyzed the data to reduce the bias and the findings were revised based on their feedback.

4. Results

The research question of this study dealt with the attitudes university lecturers held toward EFL teacher professionalism. In this section, the researchers report and describe university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism by employing supporting extracts from the interviews. The teachers participating in this study were asked five questions.

4.1. The Meaning of EFL Teacher Professionalism

The first attitudinal theme of the interviews was the meaning of EFL teacher professionalism. All of the participants defined teacher professionalism as a dedication to the teaching profession and the knowledge, skills, and practices that they must have in order to be professional university lecturers. Further, they spoke about the importance of cultural awareness and excellent classroom management and interpersonal communication skills and noted that teacher professionalism is an ideal to which professional EFL teachers aspire to distinguish themselves from other teachers. The following comments from UL2, UL5, UL7, and UL10 elucidate these points, respectively:

“In a professional EFL setting, teachers are expected to be reliable, assertive, well-organized, and capable of controlling the classes efficiently and making accurate judgments. Moreover, developing curriculum and designing a syllabus for classroom before the course even starts is crucial, and it should be thoroughly explained to the students at the beginning of the semester. On the other hand, cooperation and teamwork among students are encouraged and they are aware of their responsibilities in a professional classroom.”

“EFL teacher professionalism is regarded as reflecting on teaching, displaying exclusive behaviors, traits, and standards that reflect teachers' knowledge and expertise in their field, and striving to stand out from other instructors by upholding the concept of the professional teacher.”

“Teacher professionalism is the extent to which teachers are dedicated to their job. In addition, I believe that in a professional learning environment, teachers enjoy working with students, and are positive, enthusiastic, regular, patient, energetic, and kind in the classroom. Therefore, this uplifting energy may inspire students and improve the learning atmosphere.”

“EFL teacher professionalism is characterized as the knowledge and skills that EFL teachers must have in order to be successful educators and it must be highlighted that

professional EFL teachers play a critical role in helping students achieve success in the classroom.”

4.2. The Characteristics, Requirements, and Responsibilities of a Professional EFL Teacher

The second attitudinal theme of the interviews described the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher. As the sample extracts from UL3, UL4, UL8, and UL10 reveal, eight university lecturers (UL1, UL2, UL3, UL4, UL8, UL9, UL10, and UL11) reported that professional EFL university lecturers are expected to consider diverse language learning styles, reflect on teaching and teaching objectives, encourage students’ participation, assess students’ performance, record and update the outcomes of students’ assignments, collect data about their development, accept feedback to improve instruction, attend teacher development seminars and events regularly, be patient, polite, punctual, modest, creative, supportive, and sympathetic, prevent discrimination in the classroom, dress professionally, smell good, and maintain personal hygiene at work, complete assignments and required documentation on time, obey classroom norms, and ensure that each student has an equal chance to adhere to the highest teaching standards and codes of conduct.

“In my view, professional English language instructors possess higher levels of patience and understanding. Also, along with pedagogical knowledge and teaching expertise, professional instructors have a deep understanding of the materials they cover and are committed to continuous improvement.”

“Well, professional EFL university lecturers possess a good mastery of English language, have sound pronunciation, focus on students’ achievement, develop their confidence and communicative skills, and monitor their progress.”

“I think that professional EFL teachers make creative, autonomous, and expertise-based decisions about their profession, watch their body language, move around when they are teaching, uphold the dignity of their students, deal considerately with them, and avoid humiliating them, showing favoritism, and giving up control.”

“Professional instructors have an important role in directing their students’ success. Therefore, they teach well, offer clear explanations, employ diverse teaching activities,

create interesting classes, possess effective classroom management skills, and establish strong relationships with their colleagues as well as students.”

Furthermore, UL5, Ph.D. candidate in TEFL, with 13 years of teaching experience, highlighted the significance of promoting student autonomy, dealing fairly with students, respecting them, and giving constructive feedback. In this respect, she pointed out that:

“A professional EFL teacher is expected to be fair and ethical in the classroom, develop student autonomy, facilitate language learning opportunities, integrate language skills, reduce students’ stress levels through supporting and respecting them, encourage social and peer work in the classroom, use motivational language, and provide valuable feedback.”

Besides, all interviewees asserted that thinking critically, studying continuously, carrying out research, deepening their teaching knowledge, developing classroom management skills, being assertive and serious, making learning their professional responsibility, building up their existing teaching expertise, inspiring learning, mentoring students, surrounding themselves with articles and books, showing respect, interest and caring for students, performing the role of a counselor, directing students to more knowledge, assisting them in growing further, assisting students in exploring their abilities, strengths, and talents, having complete control over curriculum and teaching strategies, adhering to professional standards and ethics, focusing on the efficacy of the pedagogy employed in each class, devoting time to considering pedagogy and pedagogic research, doing everything to ensure successful outcomes for students, developing assessment measures, evaluating each student’s performance, and making accurate judgements are among the important responsibilities of a professional EFL university lecturer.

On the other hand, UL2, Ph.D. in TEFL, with 13 years of teaching experience, put under the spotlight the significance of establishing authority and certain relationship boundaries with students and asserted that maintaining these boundaries will keep professor-student relationships purely professional. Moreover, she emphasized the importance of using email and pointed out that professional professors never give their personal cellphone numbers to their students or arrange personal meetings with them. Her following statement demonstrates these points:

“I believe that professional professors do not become friends with their students, do not establish personal relationships with them, and do not hang out with them, because being too friendly with students will lead them to not respect their professor's authority. Therefore, professional professors always set some boundaries in their classes, maintain the prestige of teaching profession, and develop their relationships with students in a professional and appropriate way. Thus, they do not let emotions affect their behavior toward their students. In addition, during my teaching experience, I noticed that, for almost all of my colleagues, giving their personal cellphone numbers to students seemed quite natural; however, I totally disagree with them. I never give students my cellphone number and they can contact me through my email address.”

Further, UL1 noted that professional university lecturers never gossip or complain about their colleagues or administrative staff in the classroom. In this regard, she indicated that:

“Professional instructors are expected to be noncommittal to their students and concerned about their colleagues, even if they hear something terrible about other instructors from their students. Furthermore, they should always remember that what they say in their classes is not private and might be shared.”

4.3. Establishing Rapport and Positive Relationships with Students, Colleagues, and Administrative Staff in a Professional EFL Teaching Context

Another major theme of the interviews explored university lecturers' attitudes toward rapport and positive relationships with students, colleagues, and administrative staff in a professional EFL context. In this regard, nine interviewees highlighted the significance of developing mutual respect, politeness, and trust, identifying students' interests and aspirations, being passionate about teaching, calling students by their first names, rewarding students' comments verbally or nonverbally, making eye contact with students, using email to increase availability to students, developing empathy and trust by asking students about the challenges they are facing, assisting them in resolving their problems, and advocating for them. The following statement from UL7 demonstrates these points:

“Since I believe rapport is important to students' success, I offer words of encouragement, respect my students' perspectives, and support them. For instance, I implicitly ask my students what they like or dislike about class and often put myself in my

students' shoes to understand their emotions, difficulties, and experiences and address their needs."

Meanwhile, UL9 and UL10, having eight years of teaching experience, asserted that professional EFL teachers show students they care about them and value them. This is evident in the following excerpt from UL9:

"Professional EFL teachers care about their students, show support, pay attention to how they speak to students, particularly when they are with their classmates, smile, and show interest in students by asking them questions and listening to them."

Moreover, UL1, Ph.D. in TEFL, with almost two decades of teaching experience, demonstrated that, contrary to popular belief, disciplining students may be a chance to develop a positive relationship with them. Being courteous is the most important disciplinary principle. The relationship we have with a student might suffer if we lose our temper and respond angrily or sarcastically. Concerning this, she pointed out that:

"Constructive feedback is often helpful. Rather than losing my control or responding angrily to a bad or impolite behavior in my classes, I take a moment to relax and communicate in a way that upholds my student's dignity and demonstrates my concern for the student."

On the other hand, all interviewees noted that professional EFL teachers are expected to offer help and establish a positive respectful relationship with their colleagues and administrative staff. This is evident in the following extracts from UL4, UL13, and UL14, respectively:

"Showing my colleagues that they can trust me is a crucial step in establishing strong relationships with them. Therefore, when a colleague tells me something in confidence, I try to be trustworthy and keep it to myself. Additionally, I never participate when I hear gossip."

"Professional English language teachers avoid gossiping, spilling secrets, and talking smack about their head, colleague, or administrator."

"Professional EFL teachers are eager to contribute to meetings, support their colleagues, and help novice teachers navigate the ups and downs of teaching. However, they might respect their fellow teachers' boundaries as well."

4.4. Resolving Possible Organizational Conflicts in a professional EFL Teaching Context

The next attitudinal theme of the interviews identified the participants' attitudes toward resolving possible organizational conflicts in a professional EFL context. The interviewees put under the spotlight the significance of admitting mistakes, apologizing for mistakes, compensating for the mistakes, listening carefully, asking questions to clarify understanding, discovering points of agreement or disagreement, setting up meetings to resolve organizational conflicts, developing cooperation, improving problem-solving skills, setting up and managing group work, being available, reflecting on others' expectations, preventing and managing difficult classroom situations, acknowledging others' emotions, and running meetings individually with students or colleagues if necessary, as well as employing helpful strategies for handling conflicts in a professional EFL teaching context. The following excerpts from UL6, UL8, and UL11 elucidate these points, respectively:

“A professional EFL teacher listens carefully to what a student is saying instead of getting ready to react. Besides, instead of interrupting the student and making generalizations, a professional teacher describes a particular occurrence.”

“When students behave in a disruptive way, professional EFL teachers observe and control their emotional reactions to feelings of being threatened, try to be aware of their body language and what they communicate through their actions, address behaviors, not individuals, maintain classroom standards and norms, reflect on different social identities that make up their classes, take some minutes before and after class to interact with students privately, and address issues fairly and consistently.”

“Professional EFL teachers are expected to run meetings with their students or colleagues to ask them to explain what occurred and resolve conflicts.”

Further, out of 14 interviewees, six (UL1, UL3, UL5, UL6, UL9, and UL13) demonstrated that conflicts are unavoidable and professional EFL teachers often create a safe environment and manage conflicts as they arise. Moreover, they include a non-discrimination policy, listen empathetically, develop empathy to understand others' feelings, and encourage students to respect and appreciate those who disagree with them. The following comments from UL3 and UL5 indicate these points, respectively:

“As a professional EFL teacher, I must recognize conflicts, understand why they occur, handle classroom conflicts, and know that if I cannot deal with conflicts properly, they might have negative impacts on my students’ learning.”

“Conflicts are inevitable and can damage relationships if not handled professionally and properly. Besides, it must be noted that conflicts mostly occur as a result of not having enough opportunities to communicate.”

4.5. The Role of Ethics in EFL Teacher Professionalism

The last major attitudinal theme of the study explored the role of ethics in EFL teacher professionalism. All interviewees pointed out that fostering professional ethics creates a favorable environment as well as increased productivity at work. Moreover, it is worth noting that developing ethical behavior has a critical role in a professional education system, particularly in teaching English as a foreign language. Besides, the interviewees underscored the importance of ethical issues in a professional EFL teaching context and spoke about preventing defensive communication and discrimination against students and colleagues at work, respecting their emotions, feelings, and viewpoints, avoiding bias, being honest, trustworthy, organized, and committed to their work, making students aware of their commitment to ethical issues in their classes, avoiding offensive language, following moral principles, considering their colleagues and students’ faces, and behaving politely and fairly. In this respect, UL1, UL2, UL6, and UL12 provided these statements, respectively:

“In my point of view, university professors play a vital role in students’ lives. Apart from enhancing academic knowledge, they are also responsible for teaching their students invaluable life lessons. Thus, professors with professional ethics might develop their students’ social responsibility, intellectual and mental health, honesty, punctuality, courtesy, accuracy, creativity, flexibility, commitment, trust, and generosity.”

“I believe that a professional professor is expected to adhere to the guidelines set by the head and the dean of department, follow expected rules, maintain appropriate relationships with students and colleagues, keep personal and professional lives different, increase commitment to students and their learning, and develop professional knowledge.”

“Professional EFL teachers must represent accurate information about their qualifications and required licenses, understand the ethics related to teaching profession,

and interact with their students appropriately without taking any advantage. In addition, they may not display favoritism or discrimination toward any of their students. Also, I believe that professional professors must maintain minimal contact with their students outside the university context.”

“Professional university instructors should adhere to an ethical code of conduct to represent professionalism at work.”

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that UL2 put under the spotlight the importance of maintaining educational procedures and university rules, performing duties properly, showing commitment toward the EFL teaching profession, students, and their learning, respecting the uniqueness and dignity of each student, exercising integrity in professional commitments and responsibilities, and developing trust, respect, fairness, cognitive development, confidentiality, care, professional judgment, empathy, and professional practice. This participant’s following interview excerpt elucidates these points:

“Actually professional EFL professors respect the honor and dignity of the teaching profession, identify the ethical responsibilities and commitments and foster public trust in EFL teaching profession, enhance mutual respect and trust in the relationships with students and colleagues, and behave in a way which enhances the status of teaching profession.”

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore the attitudes Iranian EFL university lecturers hold toward teacher professionalism. As a result of conducting this research, the researcher found that EFL teacher professionalism was defined as a dedication to the teaching profession and the knowledge, skills, and practices that teachers must have in order to be professional teachers. These findings are in line with some previously conducted studies (e.g. Abednia, 2012; Dehghan, 2022; Demirkasımođlu, 2010; Rimmer & Floyd, 2020; Salehizadeh et al., 2019; Tichenor & Tichenor, 2005). In this regard, Dehghan (2022) asserted that teacher professionalism is a top-down process that is influenced by how the ministry of education, school administration, society, and culture support being professional in their career. Additionally, Tichenor and Tichenor (2005) pointed out that, on the most fundamental level, the term “professional teacher” is characterized as the status of an individual who is

paid to teach. On a higher level, it might also be used to describe educators who represent the best in their profession and set the highest teaching standards.

Furthermore, regarding the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher, the interviewees pointed out that professional EFL teachers are expected to consider diverse language learning styles, reflect on teaching and teaching objectives, encourage students' participation, assess students' performance, record and update the outcomes of students' assignments, collect data about their development, accept feedback to improve instruction, attend teacher development seminars and events regularly, be patient, polite, punctual, modest, creative, supportive, and sympathetic, prevent discrimination in the classroom, dress professionally, smell good, and maintain personal hygiene at work, complete assignments and required documentation on time, obey classroom norms, and ensure that each student has an equal chance to adhere to the highest teaching standards and codes of conduct. Moreover, the participants put under the spotlight the significance of fostering student autonomy, dealing fairly with students, respecting them, and giving constructive feedback. They underscored the importance of thinking critically, learning and studying continuously, carrying out research, deepening their teaching knowledge, developing classroom management skills, and being serious. Further, making learning their professional responsibility, building up their existing teaching expertise, inspiring learning, mentoring students, and showing respect, interest and caring for students were among the other important responsibilities of professional EFL teachers. Besides, they spoke about performing the role of a counselor, directing students to more knowledge, assisting them in exploring their abilities, strengths, and talents, having complete control over curriculum and teaching strategies, and adhering to professional standards and ethics.

These findings are illustrated in the literature by some scholars (Al-Maqtri & Thabet, 2013; Davis, 2001; Sotto, 2011; Stronge, 2002). For instance, Al-Maqtri and Thabet (2013) demonstrated that possessing an excellent mastery of English, particularly sound pronunciation along with actively engaging students in classroom activities are the crucial characteristics of professional EFL teachers. In the same vein, Sotto (2011) stated that professional EFL teachers are expected to encourage their students to think more critically and confidently.

In like manner, Tichenor and Tichenor (2005) underscored the importance of being a role model and advisor for other instructors, respecting students, colleagues, and administrative staff, and communicating effectively with the faculty, colleagues, and students. Moreover, Stronge (2002) argued that professional EFL teachers are required to develop interesting materials and classes, speak fluently and accurately, offer clear explanations, provide excellent notes, and avoid punishing weak and less-proficient students.

On the contrary, one of the participants underscored the importance of establishing authority and certain relationship boundaries with students and demonstrated that maintaining these boundaries will keep professor-student relationships purely professional. Besides, she highlighted the importance of using email and asserted that professional professors never give their personal cellphone numbers to their students or arrange personal meetings with them.

The results of the present study are in contrast to some of the previous studies (e.g., Borg, 2006). For instance, in contrast to the findings of this study, Borg (2006) put under the spotlight the significance of using humor and designing games and pointed out that employing games in language teaching might develop students' participation and motivation and besides, laughing and having fun while teaching help students learn better because the process is more enjoyable, memorable, and engaging.

According to the interviewees' attitudes toward establishing rapport and positive relationships with students, colleagues, and administrative staff in a professional EFL teaching context, developing mutual respect, politeness, and trust, identifying students' interests and aspirations, being passionate about teaching, calling students by their first names, rewarding students' comments verbally or nonverbally, making eye contact with them, using email to increase availability to them, and developing empathy and trust by asking students about the challenges they are facing, assisting them in resolving their problems, and advocating for them were of paramount importance. Besides, the interviewees noted that professional EFL teachers are expected to offer help and establish a positive respectful relationship with their colleagues and administrative staff.

In the same line, Frisby (2018) highlighted the importance of establishing powerful relationships with students, mentoring, protecting, and guiding them. Besides, Ryan and Wilson (2015) asserted that professional EFL teachers might use personal examples, move

around the class during lectures, communicate effectively, and smile in order to establish rapport and positive relationships with their students in a professional EFL teaching context. In addition, they are expected to be available to their students to encourage rapport. In the same vein, Ryan and Wilson (2015) also noted that the quality of teachers' relationships with students can be determined by the characteristics and behaviors of both students and teachers. Therefore, teacher-student rapport may promote positive outcomes for both teachers and students.

Further, regarding resolving possible organization conflicts in a professional EFL context, the participants underscored the significance of admitting mistakes, apologizing for mistakes, compensating for the mistakes, listening carefully, asking questions to clarify understanding, discovering points of agreement or disagreement, setting up meetings to resolve organizational conflicts, developing cooperation, improving problem-solving skills, setting up and managing group work, being available, reflecting on others' expectations, acknowledging others' emotions, running meetings individually with students or colleagues if necessary, employing helpful strategies for handling conflicts, listening empathetically, developing empathy to understand their feelings, and encouraging students to respect and appreciate those who disagree with them.

These findings are in line with some previously conducted studies (e.g., Meyers, 2003; Norton, 2008; Valente et al., 2020). In this regard, Valente et al. (2020) illustrated that classroom conflicts will always occur since they are intrinsic to human nature and necessary for emotional development. Thus, it is crucial to confront conflicts and find constructive ways to resolve them while building collaborative relationships and coming up with appropriate solutions. In a professional teaching context, appreciation and harmony coexist and conflicts cannot affect teaching and learning negatively.

In the same vein, Meyers (2003) and Norton (2008) demonstrated that classroom conflicts are inevitable and, in a professional EFL teaching context, teachers may resolve possible organizational conflicts by understanding the causes of classroom conflicts, emphasizing academic concepts rather than personal opinions, conducting a meeting with students or colleagues, brainstorming possible solutions, referring to classroom norms and guidelines, acknowledging students' emotions, listening actively and empathetically, managing conflicts as they arise in the classroom, employing strategies to build a safe classroom environment, building a safe learning environment, sharing authority by

receiving students' feedback, asking students to explain what happened, communicating clear expectations, being aware of negative impacts of conflicts on students' learning, and critically reflecting on both their own and their students' expectations for classroom behavior.

On the other hand, the interviewees' statements revealed that fostering professional ethics creates a favorable environment as well as increased productivity at work. Besides, they put under the spotlight the importance of maintaining university rules, performing their duties properly, showing commitment toward the EFL teaching profession, students, and their learning, respecting the uniqueness and dignity of each student, exercising integrity in their professional commitments and responsibilities, and developing trust, respect, fairness, confidentiality, care, professional judgment, empathy, and professional practice, preventing defensive communication and discrimination against students and colleagues at work, respecting their emotions, feelings, and viewpoints, being honest, trustworthy, organized, and committed to their work, making students aware of their commitment to ethical issues in their classes, avoiding offensive language, considering their colleagues and students' faces, and being polite and fair. Moreover, they underscored the importance of ethical issues in a professional EFL teaching context.

Ultimately, in line with the findings of this study, Zhunusbekova et al. (2022) asserted that professional EFL teachers are required to be committed to ethical norms and standards of teaching, students, and their learning, leadership in learning communities, their own professional knowledge, and continuous professional development, and also foster their students' responsibility, honesty, generosity, accuracy, flexibility, creativity, modesty, and intellectual health. Further, Salehnia and Ashraf (2015) demonstrated that developing teachers' commitment to professional ethics could enhance students' self-confidence. Therefore, professional teachers are expected to show ethical behavior in their online or physical classes. In the same vein, Ibrahimova (2022) underscored the importance of promoting mutual trust and respect and demonstrating responsibility in relationships with students and colleagues to maintain ethical teaching standards and argued that professional EFL teachers are required to contribute to each student's education and welfare, respect the uniqueness and dignity of each student, behave in a way that promotes the status of the teaching profession, and fulfill the responsibilities to the employer and community.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided an in-depth coverage of Iranian university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher supervision and illustrated that teacher professionalism and how it is to be acquired should be a focus of teacher education programs. Further, if Iranian university lecturers are expected to behave as professionals, they must be treated as professionals as well. Thus, educational stakeholders and policymakers are expected to design certain guidelines and allocate the resources required to help university lecturers develop as professionals and succeed at their work.

In accordance with the findings, EFL teacher professionalism influences the role of instructors and their pedagogy, which in turn influences their students' abilities to learn effectively. Besides, professional university lecturers play the most crucial role in directing their students. Therefore, standards of EFL teacher professionalism must be clarified to assist novice teachers in developing teaching and enhancing appropriate evaluation structures.

To sum up, the findings of this study provide some pedagogical implications that might be of benefit to EFL educators, university lecturers, and students. Iranian EFL university instructors, stakeholders, and educators can consult these results as a means of identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis (Hill & Westbrook, 1997) of EFL teacher professionalism in Iranian universities. The SWOT analysis of EFL teacher professionalism might assist Iranian educators and stakeholders in providing professional development opportunities for EFL university lecturers. Further, the results of the study might familiarize stakeholders with the attitudes Iranian EFL university lecturers harbor regarding EFL teacher professionalism and address such concerns in their future practices. Moreover, identifying the characteristics, requirements, and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher might assist university lecturers in improving their pedagogical practices and enhancing their good characteristics.

This study faced certain limitations, which need to be taken into account in interpreting the findings. The first limitation of this study concerns the number of interviewees. Thus, future studies can include more participants to yield more generalizable results. Moreover, the participants of this study were selected from the State and Islamic Azad universities of Tehran, Karaj, Urmia, and Tabriz, Iran. Therefore, it made it a little difficult to provide a clear image of all Iranian EFL university lecturers'

attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism. Therefore, further research can replicate this study with EFL university lecturers from other cities in Iran or even other countries. On the other hand, the interviewees of this study were selected based on convenience sampling. Thus, the study can be duplicated with other procedures to make the results more generalizable. Besides, the study calls for further investigation to explore EFL university lecturers' attitudes toward EFL teacher professionalism in Iran considering the differences in their academic degree, age, gender, and teaching experience.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Protocol: University Lecturers' Attitudes toward EFL Teacher Professionalism in Iranian Universities

How do you define the term EFL teacher professionalism?

What characterizes a professional EFL teacher from your point of view? Explain the requirements and responsibilities of a professional EFL teacher.

How do professional EFL teachers establish rapport and positive relationships with their students, colleagues, and administrative staff?

How do professional EFL teachers resolve possible organizational conflicts with their students and colleagues?

What is the role of ethics in EFL teacher professionalism?