The Challenges Faced by English Teachers in Iranian Schools and Their Training

Farhad Kariminasab[1], Shaban Najafi Karimi[2*], Amir Marzban[3]
[1]Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Qaemshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr, Iran
[2]*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Qaemshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr, Iran
[3]Associate Professor, Department of English, Qaemshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr, Iran

Abstract
The major objectives of this research were to develop an understanding of the challenges faced by English teachers in Iranian schools and their training. The research was carried out on a sample of 728 English teachers from junior and senior high schools in 32 provinces of Iran. Self-reporting questionnaires were conducted as a survey method. The results of this study indicate that the biggest challenges faced by English teachers seem to be teaching mixed-level classes, managing behavior discipline, choosing appropriate activities and materials, and relating to students. Around one-third of teachers had no pre-service training in teaching English before teaching students; the problem is compounded by a lack of support and in-service training, and three-fourths of teachers didn't have any in-service training. Approximately half of those surveyed did not have probationary periods; in addition, four-fifth of them had no support during their first of teaching. Overall, many teachers felt not well prepared for teaching English. Overall, the evidence from this study recommends that current teachers' training programs should be modified and outlines some recommendations to overcome these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Several studies have shown that there has been a growth in demand in demand for English Language Teaching to students globally since the late 1990s, (Ellis & Knagg, 2012; Emery, 2012; Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011). According to The British Council, English is spoken at an intelligibility level by some 1.75 billion people around the world that's one in each four. They estimate that two billion people are using it or learning to use it. Data from several sources have identified the majority of English speakers have learned English as a second or foreign language rather than acquired it as native speakers; because of this, learning has taken place to a certain degree in the formal English classroom (Bourne, 1996; Gray, 2010a; Hall, 2011; Holborow, 1999). According to Pinter (2006), for many learners, the English teachers are the main source of language input; in the same vein, Moon (2000) notes, "the only source" (p. 14). Similarly, English teachers are in increasing demand in Iran too; the expansion of English Language students over the last five decades has fueled a need for training numbers of EFL teachers to teach these students. In December

*Corresponding Author's Email:
s.najafi.k@qaemiau.ac.ir

2017, the Human Resources Planning and ICT Center of the Ministry of Education of Iran reported that the total number of public and private students in Iran's schools is 14338403. According to this report, 3310748 students study in junior high school and 2617850 students study in senior high school. Ministry of Education of Iran without careful consideration of who was going to teach the English language to EFL students introduces this language as a compulsory subject in junior and senior high school. Emerging from the existing literature is a sense that teaching students in schools in Iran presents different challenges and requires different skills. At the same time, doubts are expressed related to those teachers' quality along with their training or education of them.

Research-based publications into effective practices for teaching young learners continue to be quite rare (Copland & Garton, 2014); while there are some studies (Emery, 2012; Enever, 2011; Garton, Copland and Burns, 2011; Rixon, 2000) it seems to focus on the English teachers challenges on the state-maintained sector around the world and not in Iran. The English Language Teaching sector in public schools within many Iranian provinces may influential, yet there seem to be few studies focusing specifically on English teachers' challenges and their practices in this sector, perhaps as a consequence of the diversity of such schools across Iran probably are difficult for them to identify research population. Nevertheless, schools are places in Iran where English teachers usually work during school hours with students. Consequently, this study set out to determine teachers' challenges and what is happening in public schools regarding both classroom practice and teacher development, and advance existing knowledge of this area by providing new data from current English teachers in Iran. This study, therefore, attempts to explore not only the Iranian English Language teachers' challenges but also the people who work in that area and, as a result, complement previous and continuing research with a new dimension. Additionally, the areas in which teachers themselves feel they need more

training are highlighted. These are discussed at length and form the basis of a training framework that might supplement or replace current training. To achieve the aim of this study, the research has the following objectives: An initial objective of the study was to identify major challenges facing EFL teachers in schools today.

Another important objective of this study was to investigate how far training and development programs support teachers of English in meeting the everyday challenge of teaching students.

Two research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ1. What are the major challenges that teachers of English as a foreign language face in Iranian schools?

RQ2. What opportunities for training are available to those teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW
Major Challenges Facing EFL Teachers Today

According to Gay (2002), novice teachers may face various challenges in teaching students with diversity if they are not familiar with culturally responsive teaching (CRT). McLaughlin (1992) argues that English language learners are often considered problematic, due to their cultural and linguistic diversity.

Many scholars hold the view that managing disruptive behavior is particularly challenging (e.g., Emery, 2012; Moon, 2000; Richards and Pennington, 1998; Numrich, 1996; Veenman, 1984).

According to Kennedy (1989), without knowledge of language teaching, teachers just left with some random techniques.

Smith Liu and Meyer (2005) claim that classroom management issues can lead to teacher dissatisfaction and work against retention among them, Similarly, Reupert and Woodcock (2010) point out that these issues are big challenges, particularly among new teachers. Classroom management is also a big concern to policymakers, administrators, parents, and academics in the education field as they may influence students learning (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008).

Ho, (2003) and Wedgwood (2007) claimed that Overcrowded classes are common in across countries of the world. As noted by Li (1998) English teachers point out this makes it impossible or difficult to shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered instruction because, for example, they cannot monitor their student's performance in English class. Similarly, according to Hoque (2009) in Overcrowded classes teachers cannot monitor their students' pair work and group work. According to Copland and Garton (2012), the role of a teacher is very crucial as they have a responsibility to create an environment in which students learn English skills effectively. Doing this faces English teachers with different types of challenges. Moon (2000) claims these include practical matters such as selecting and sequencing appropriate activities, finding appropriate materials, assessing the learning outcomes, and identifying and planning appropriate topics and resources. Other issues teachers can face in schools are devising suitable tasks and engaging learning activities for students (Lindstromberg, 2004), and managing large classes (Emery, 2012). While alternatively certified teachers may bring years of experiential knowledge to the classroom; yet, Washer (2000) claimed: "alternatively certified teachers who have not received formal teacher training may lack major skills such as "resource allocation, pedagogical skill development, and developing a peer network" (p. 133). In the same vein, Berry (2004) held the view that formal education prepares teachers for standards-based reform training and helps them by providing pedagogical strategies.

English teachers' training

Cameron (2001) claims that there is a misconception in the English Language Teaching (ELT) industry that teaching English to learners is a simple process that can be done by teachers who have not been qualified and trained in English Language Teaching. The acute obstacle for teachers of students who study the English language is insufficient pre-service and in-service training (George 2009; Navarro 2008; O'Brien 2011; Reeves 2006; Short and Fitzsimmons 2007). Research such

as that conducted by Walker et al. (2004), indicated that 87 percent of teachers in schools received no training in ELT. This lack of teacher preparation programs raises some important questions about the effects of instruction and the inadequacy of teachers' understanding of how to deal with second language learners (Clair 1995), help individuals with different backgrounds and needs (Nelson-Barber 1999), Academic adjustments for coursework and performance of English language learners (O'Brien 2011), and in general, working with English students (Ortiz et al. 2006; Reeves 2006).

Many types of research and studies have been published about issues in Language Teaching around the world (Crookes, 2003; Harmer, 2001; Richards and Nunan, 1990; Scrivener, 2013; Ur, 1996). Investigating global practices in teaching the English language to students formed the central focus of a study by Garton, Burns, and Copland (2002) in which the researchers found that the pre-service and in-service preparation of teachers of English students must be impressively strengthened. According to them the needs of in-service teachers' training are vitally necessary; they indicated that many English teachers in the ELT industry did not start their profession as teachers of young students. Richards and Farrell (2005) believed that for the long-term development of English teachers as well as for the long-term success of the whole programs in which they teach, the need for in-service training is particularly necessary. Allen (2007) believed that teachers' training is required in shaping teachers' self-confidence and in improving their performance in class.

Several researchers have reported that many English teachers experience difficulties that may be related to university-based teacher preparation programs at university so they can't adequately confront a range of challenges during the first years of teaching experience (Liston, Whitcomb, & Borko, 2006; Whisnant et al., 2005). Feiman-Nemser (2003) claimed that novice teachers have vital learning needs that must be grasped in advance in contexts of teaching. According to Wong (2004), through effective mentoring programs, policymakers

should match novice teachers with a more experienced ones, the beginning teachers in today's system of education may be representativeof the next generation of teachers whose successes will influencethe outcomes of complete generation of students.

METHODS
Participants

The research was carried out on a sample of 728 English teachers from junior and senior high schools in 32 provinces of Iran. Just over half the sample (56%) was female and the other (44%) were male. All of the participants worked in state schools, in urban areas (69%), the age of the participants ranged from 20 to 66 years old, and all of them were educated at a university.

Instrumentation

According to World Health Organization (WHO), COVID-19 is a global pandemic that endangers the health and enforced social distancing for the whole world (World Health Organization, n.d.). Researchers find a method to overcome this problem and maintain the health of the participants in this study, this study adopted the cross-sectional survey electronically through Google Forms. The main advantage of this method is that allows researchers to make inferences about a larger population and they can access large and geographically diverse samples of data to be collected in an efficient, economic, and standardized manner (de Vaus, 2002; Dörnyei, 2009) in this way, participants were also kept away from the risk of Covid 19 disease.

Design

The mixed methods design was adopted as a systematic approach to investigate the Iranian practices in teaching English to students in schools by gathering data and performing computational, mathematical, and statistical techniques. The researchers collected data from English teachers by using sampling methods and conducting online surveys, the

results of which were presented in the form of numerical. The pilot sample consisted of EFL teachers in schools and included both females and males. The first draft of the survey questionnaire was conducted for a small number of samples of 10, then a large number of 95 teachers. An online-based version of the questionnaire that was distributed in May 2021 through Google Forms was constructed as the main sample.

Data analysis methods

An electronic questionnaire contains questions that are presented through Google Forms so they can be answered by participants. The contents of the answers were automatically calculated by Google and presented in Google-generated spreadsheets and charts.

The pilot Word Document questionnaires, however, were downloaded into password-protected folders on the laptop and printed as hard copies. To maintain respondent anonymity, the papers were shuffled and then assign an identifying number or code to each participant sequentially from 1 to 95 with the prefix P for Pilot. The emails and names of participants were kept in the safe folder that aims to protect the identity of the survey participants. The electronic version was easier and quicker and there is no way for anyone to identify respondents.

RESULTS

This section presents and analyzes the data collected from 728 teachers. The overall structure of the study takes the form of the items used to gather data from respondents.

Working in English Language Teaching

Many teachers in the survey were students before they become a teacher (51%), many of them did not start their teaching careers as their first career (37% of them), 7% of teachers did not have a job before becoming a teacher, and 5% were teachers of other subjects (Figure 1, below).

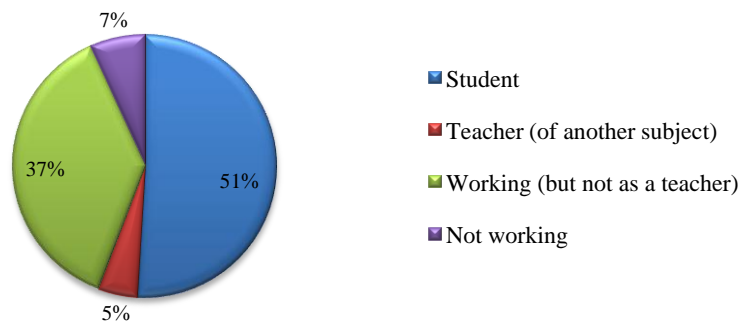**What did you do before you became an EFL teacher?**

Figure 1
Occupations of sample members before became EFL teachers

Around 43 % of the respondents became a teacher because they like to teach English, 35% need a job, and 16% work but not as a teacher while others (6%) have another motivation (see Figure 2 below).
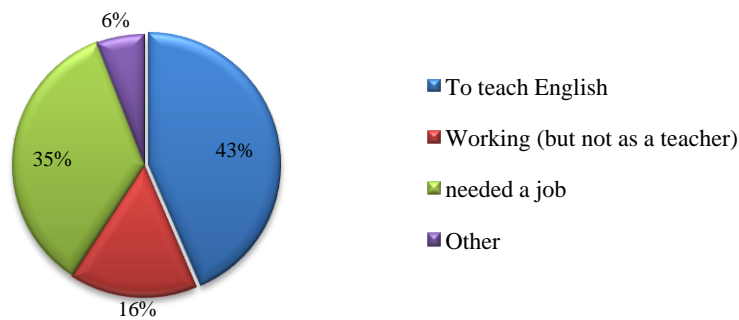
Why did you become an EFL Teacher?

Figure 2
Reasons why sample members entered ELT

Figure 3 below, shows that 32% of participants have taught junior high schools and 30% of senior high schools, 38% both of them and that all have taught teenagers.

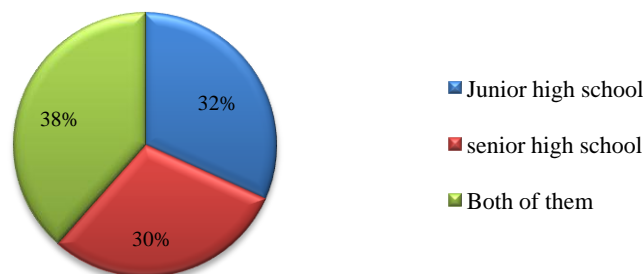**Type of school you teach in most often:**

Figure 3
Type of schools taught by sample members

The figure below illustrates almost two-thirds of the participants (69%) said that they teach in urban areas, 13% of them teach in rural areas, and about 18% of the participants teach both of them.
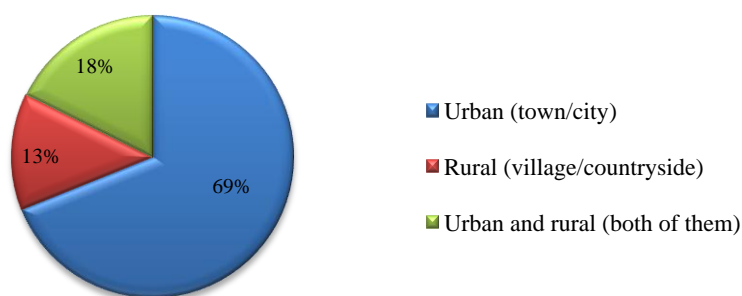
Location of your current school (Urban-Rural):

Figure 4
Location of teacher's school

The surprising aspect of the data was the number of teachers (52%) who teach in the crowded classroom with more than 25 students in it, as shown in figure 5 below:
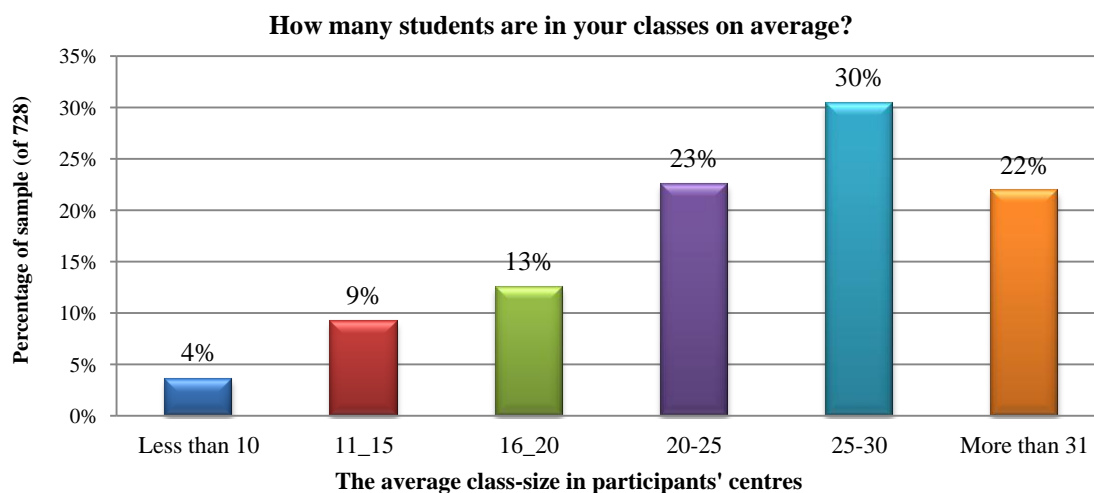

Figure 5
The average number of students in English classes

Teacher training

The main question addressed in this paper asked teachers to reflect on their attitudes to and preparation for working in English Language Teaching (ELT). The purpose of the study was to investigate teacher training and to recognize some challenges of working with EFL students at schools (Research Question 1).

As shown in Figure 6 below, almost two-thirds of the participants (68%) did a pre-service training course before they started teaching and 32% said that they did not.

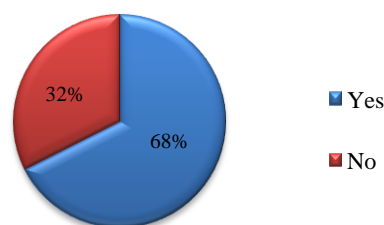**Did you receive any training in teaching English before you enter ELT?**

Figure 6
Teachers who did Pre-service teacher preparation programs

From the data in Figure 7, it is apparent that a majority of respondents (72%) have not received any in-service course since they started teaching.
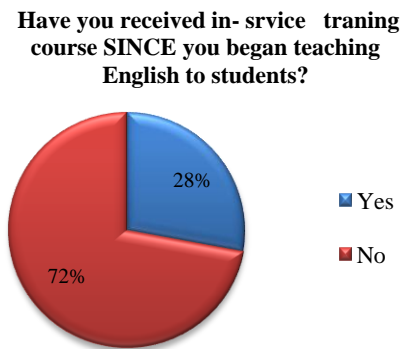
Have you received in- srvice traning course SINCE you began teaching English to students?

- Yes
- No

Figure 7
Teacher's in-service training course since starting to teach

Participant were asked to describe what their current or most recent center was providing in terms of teacher development opportunities from a list of eight that emerged from the pilot study, 54% of the sample reporting they have no organized teacher development program in their centers, they are on their own and 43% of them chose opportunities for informal 'sharing' with colleagues, a minority of participants (10%) indicated that they have in-service education program in their current center, (Figure 8 below):
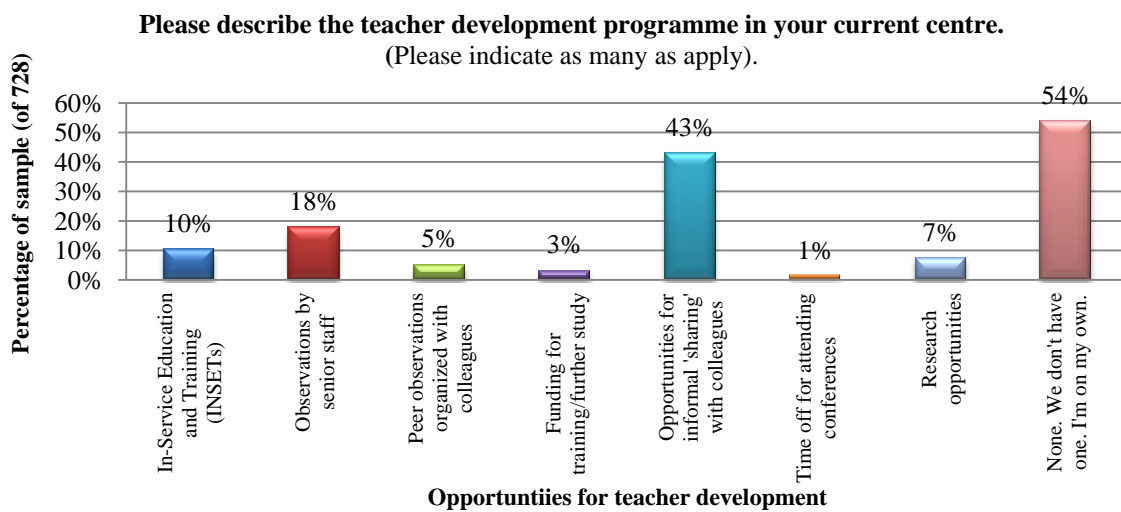
Please describe the teacher development programme in your current centre.
(Please indicate as many as apply).

Figure 8
Possible activities and opportunities for teacher development

As shown in Figure 9 below, the issue became more acute with the lack support in first year of teaching. Almost two-thirds of the participants (71%) said that they had received no formal support in first year of their teaching:
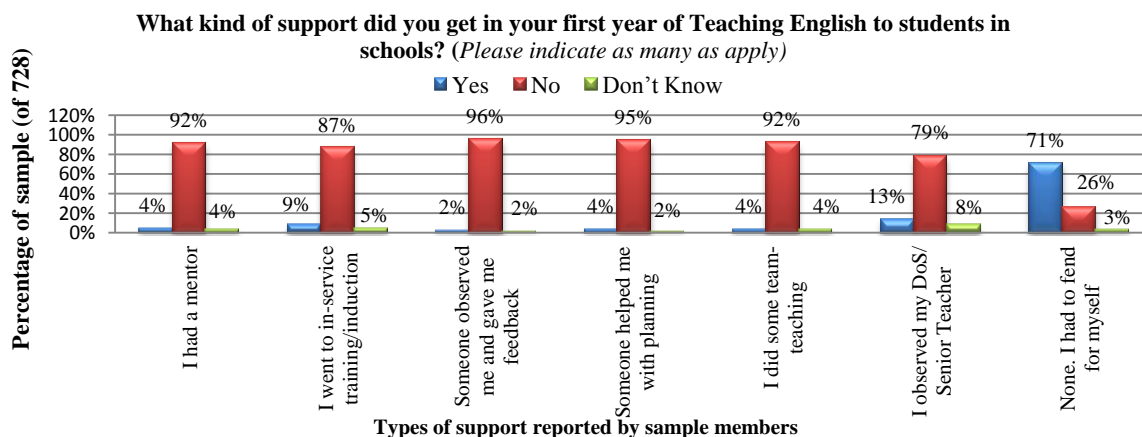
What kind of support did you get in your first year of Teaching English to students in schools? (*Please indicate as many as apply*)

- Yes
- No
- Don't Know

Figure 9.
Support provided to EFL teachers in first year of teaching

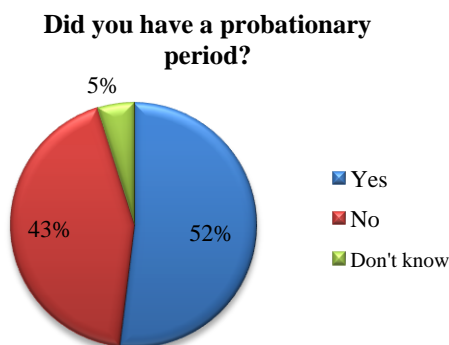43% of participants said they did not have any probationary periods (Figure 10 below):

Did you have a probationary period?

Figure 10
Teachers with probationary periods

These factors may explain why almost 60% of the p 436 participants said they felt not well prepared or completely unprepared to begin teaching students at schools (Figure 11):
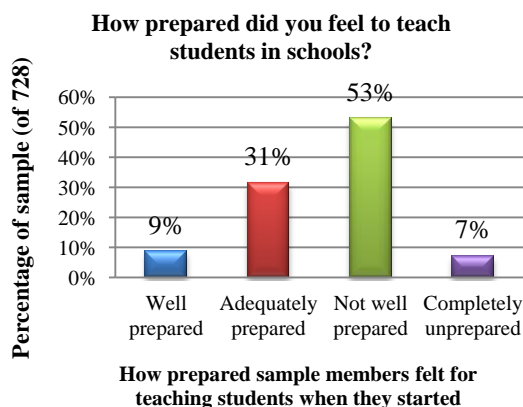
How prepared did you feel to teach students in schools?

How prepared sample members felt for teaching students when they started

Figure 11
How prepared participants felt for teaching students when they started teaching

In terms of what participants valued most in in-service workshops training ses-

sions or, this study indicate that teachers' needs was seen as the most valuable element by just over half of the sample (52%), other items in order of importance are practical content applicable to classroom (30% of sample), an interesting range of participants/trainers (10% of sample), and discussion of theory and ideas (9% of sample) see figure 12 below:

Which of following items are most important to you in an in-service training session?
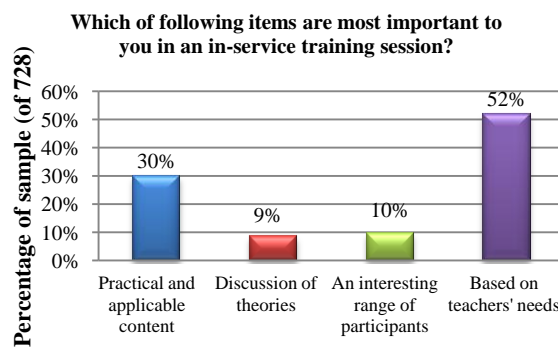
Aspects and elements of Training Workshop and In-Service Education as rated by teachers

Figure 12
What teachers value most in an In-Service Education and Training Session

Teacher challenges

This section of the study required respondents to the questionnaire answer to a list of 8 challenges reported by members of the pilot sample. Participants were asked to indicate how challenging they thought each item would be for English teachers. The most challenging were identified as teaching mixed level classes (79%), managing behavior discipline (63%), choosing appropriate activities (56%), relating to students (44%), just knowing where to start (55%), , and motivating students (41%) see figure 13 below:
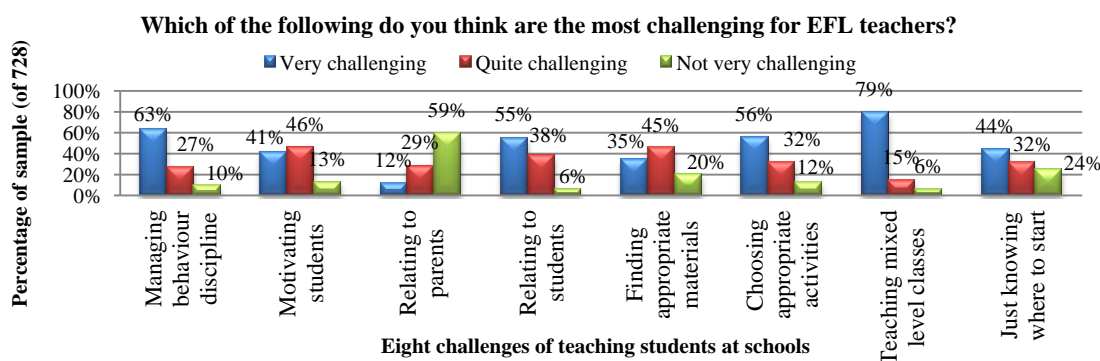
Which of the following do you think are the most challenging for EFL teachers?

Eight challenges of teaching students at schools

Figure 13
Challenges of teaching

DISCUSSION

Teacher's challenges

The first question in this study sought to determine: what are the major challenges that teachers of English as foreign language face in Iranian schools? The most challenging were identified are teaching mixed level classes, managing behavior discipline, choosing appropriate activities, and relating to students (figure 13). In the following, we will discuss these issues separately.

Mixed-level classes

Mixed-level classes have been found to be one of the greatest challenges to 79% of Iranian English teachers. Teaching such mixed-level students in schools presents additional challenges for many teachers such as trying to integrate students, balancing topics, materials and learning activities, understanding and accommodating the school's operational pressures , whilst trying to meet student's needs.

Valentic (2005) describes a mixed-ability class means that a teacher has students who have various levels of abilities in fluency and accuracy, grammatical knowledge, size of vocabulary, receptive (reading, listening) and productive skills (peaking, and writing.). There are many effective teaching strategies and technique that may help English teachers in mixed-level classes to facilitate their students learn English language effectively. These strategies and technique should be taught to teachers to help them better cope with some challenges they face e.g. Pedersen and Kronborg (2014) suggest that some of the student-centered methods include; asking students to complete a worksheet or activity, game competition, dramatization, and extra homework would help teachers to teach effectively in mix level class.

Managing behavior discipline

According to Conroy et al. (2008) poor classroom management can interfere with learning and teaching. The results of present study indicate that another potential challenge of teachers (63%) as shown in figure 13 may involve classroom management.

Westling (2010) points out that most teachers do not use appropriate classroom management strategies and techniques. Using strategies that encourage appropriate, prosocial behavior and increase meaningful interactions will result in more successful and classroom environments for both teachers and students. According to Walker and Walker (1991) problems can also arise in classes when students do not know what is expected of them. Similarly, in (2008), Conroy et al. argues that the first step of an effective classroom management program is the use of antecedent-Behavior-Consequence (ABC). Teachers can recognize and try preventative techniques to prompt positive and appropriate behavior and reduce challenging and disruptive behaviors can be presented by learners.

Choosing appropriate materials and activities

According Yalin, (2003), one of the main factors which will ensure efficiency in learning is the use of materials. The results of this study indicate that selecting good and appropriate instructional materials for the Iranian English teachers is surely not an easy task (Apendix2, Figure 13), Choosing appropriate activities is a very challenging for 56% of participant.

In order prevent and address these common challenges, it is better that teachers use a variety and range of practical activities including developing creativity and imagination through creative writing, games, drama stories, songs, rhymes, and mime (Brewster, et al., 2002; Cameron, 2003; Hughes, 2001: Rixon, 1992).

According to Johnson K. (2008), in order to plan a foreign language teaching need analysis is necessary. What is informing us just how much, and for what reasons our students will need which foreign languages, it is the process of needs analysis. Thus, the information gathered about students' need analysis can be helpful to define the language learning goals or sometimes to select the most relevant material for the English language syllabus.

Relating to students

This study has shown that relating to students has been forth biggest challenges to the overall challenges of English teachers in Iran. Almost

half of the participants (44%) said that they didn't have good relationship with students.

Studies which were focused on teacher-student relationships from teachers' perspectives indicate that constructive and positive teacher-students relationships correlated with students' higher academic achievement (improve academic excellence) and draw them into the process of learning, school adjustment, pro-social behavior, and act as key role in mediating students' later school success [Midgley, Feldlaufer, Eccles 1989; Hamre, Pianta 2001; Stuhlman, Pianta 2001; Pianta, Stuhlman 2004]. In a study which set out to determine teacher-student-relationships impact, researchers found that teachers with stronger relationship-building skills increased student's achievements and improve their performance in schools (e.g. Roorda 2011; Durlak et al. 2011).

Opportunities for training

As discussed above, it is clear that the demands and challenges presented by teaching students are very abundant. Without understanding how EFL teachers are trained and prepared, meeting those challenges can be difficult. Overall, these results indicate that teachers have diverse needs and different ways of coping with challenging situations. In order to address these challenges, researchers investigated how teachers are trained in Iran. One of the main questions addressed in this research is: What opportunities for training are available to English teachers?

Recent finding from this research suggests that formal pre-service and in-service training of teachers do not seem to meet the needs of EFL teachers. Although, two-thirds of the participants (68%) did a pre-service training course before they started teaching, the results in section indicate that 32% teachers did not get this basic training (Figure 6). As a result of this, many EFL teachers appear to be teaching without the basic training they might need because they have to do so under the terms of their contracts. The issue became more acute with the lack of in-service training support, 72% of teachers didn't have any in-service training (figure 7). Richards and Farrell (2005) argue that "Opportunities for in-service training are crucial to the long-term development of teachers as well as for the long-term success of the programs in which they work" (p. 1). In the same way, participants were asked to describe what their current center was providing in terms of professional development opportunities, 54% of the sample reporting they have no special teacher development program in their centers, they are on their own

The current study found that many teachers in the survey were students before they become a teacher (51%), many of them did not start their teaching careers as their first career (37%). The transition from student to the first years of teaching remains challenging. According to Bubb (2007), Teacher first year of experience is found to be the most influential period in a teacher's profession and having a strong support system has many positive benefits, if they are to build the confidence, competencies, and attitudes that will keep them successful and happy in their teaching. A number of researchers claim that for many beginner teachers the transition from trainee to their first year of teaching can be stressful (Emery, 2012; Garton, et al., 2011; Numrich, 1996; Senior, 2006; Tsui, 2003) and policymaker can make this transition more successful through immediate, localized training (Borg, 2003; Hall, 2011; Richards, 1998). Nearly 87% respondents who make up the sample received no practical support in their first year (Figure 9). Eraut (1994) writes that "the support of a system of continuing professional education… is essential for sustaining and improving the quality of professional work" (p. 116).

43% of those who were participated in this study indicated that they did not have probationary periods (Figure 10); a probationary period is a period of time for a teacher who is a new recruit to the school to clarify suitability to their role. It help both Ministry of Education and the employee to take into account the teacher's overall capability, performance and general conduct in relation to the profes-

sion in question and evaluate if they meet the requirements. As a result, Miller and Chait (2008) believed that extending the probationary period is an important factor; according to them by extending the probationary period can help policymakers have a longer window of time to evaluating and assessing English language teacher s potential. Probationary period can lead to more evidence-based decisions about which teachers are qualified to continue in the profession.

Over half (60%) of those who participate in this study felt not well prepared or completely underprepared (Figure 11), participant felt they lacked some of the skills and knowledge necessary to carry out teaching about English language, lacked strategies and techniques and for managing classroom behavior and discipline, lacked the knowledge to make well-informed decision on resources, materials, and activities and lacked the knowledge of how students learn English languages. Allen (2007) believed that teacher training and preparation play a vital role in shaping teachers' self-confidence and in improving their performance.

One purpose of this study was to indicate the attitudes' of the EFL teachers toward teachers preparation and training program, seeks to obtain data which will help to identify and meet teacher's needs, to identify the challenges that faced by them throughout their teachers' professional development in order to address these research gaps. In terms of what participants valued most in training sessions or in-service workshops (Figure 12), teachers' need were seen as the most important element by almost half of the sample and then practical content applicable to classroom.

CONCLUSION
The purpose of the current study was to indicate the challenges faced by English teachers in Iranian schools and their training. In summary, these results show that the most challenges of teaching English as a foreign language to Iranian students at schools are as follows: Teaching mixed level classes, and managing behavior discipline, choosing appropriate materials, resource and activities, and relating to students.

Research is carried out in order to identify why these English teachers faces challenges mentioned above. The result indicate that one-thirds of teachers had no training in teaching English to EFL students prior to the start of teaching; the issue seems to be compounded by lack of in-service training and support, three-fourths of teachers didn't have any in-service training. Two-fourths of those who were participated in this study indicated that they did not have probationary periods; in addition, it found that four-fifth of the teachers had taught English language without any support during their first year in teaching, being left, it appears, to 'just learn things on their own'. It is not surprising that just three-fifths of those who participate in this study felt not well prepared or completely underprepared also nearly a third of participants indicated that they did not have job plans.

Taken together, these results suggest Policy makers thus need to understand and to take into account the new challenges. They should help teachers face the challenges have been reported in this study by providing them with strategies and techniques before they start to teach that can help all teachers overcome barriers. Teachers play such a critical role in the education of EFL students. Providing a high quality in-service teacher training programs and pre-service preparation are inevitably necessary. The lack of these training programs creates a further, considerable challenge for EFL teachers

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Biodata

Farhad Kariminasab is a Ph.D. student of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr Branch. His passion for teaching continues in those years he has taught at Islamic Azad University, Farhangian University, and Ministry of Education of Iran. His main areas of interest include teacher education and teaching methods.
Email: *farhad.kariminasab@yahoo.com*

Shaban Najafi Karimi is an assistant professor of TEFL at Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr Branch. His research interests include language skills, discourse analysis, materials development, and teacher education. He has been teaching English at Iranian universities for 24 years and has published in both Iranian and International journals.
Email: *s.najafi.k@qaemiau.ac.ir*

Amir Marzban is an associate professor of TESOL at Islamic Azad University, Qaemshahr branch. His research interests include conversation analysis, L2 reading & writing, CALL, and teacher education. He has published in both Iranian and International journals and also has presented at many international conferences.
Email: *amir_marzban@yahoo.com*