



A Case Study on Needs Assessment of English Language Teachers' In-Service Training Courses

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Abstract

This study investigates English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' needs and desires with regard to the in-service training courses (ITCs) programs in Marand, East Azerbaijan province, Iran. 21 EFL teachers at both junior (N=10) and senior high schools (N=11) participated in this study. The data concerning the participants' mentioned needs and desires were gathered by means of a structured interview. The data on ITCs programs, i.e. methodology/pedagogical skills, language improvement, and linguistics, were collected through the ITCs programs list which has been archived in the Office of Human Resources in Marand's Department of Education from March 20, 2000 to March 20, 2015. The results of the study indicated that methodology/ pedagogical skills were the most required component for participants, with the other two components, i.e. language improvement and linguistics, lying respectively in the second and third ranks. In terms of the participants' desire as to the ITCs programs, language improvement was found to be their most desired component, with the other two components, i.e. methodology and linguistics, being respectively the second and third favourites of the participants. Checking the ITCs programs against the participants' needs and desires revealed that the ITCs programs offered to them were somewhat in parallel with their needs, but not with their desires.

Keywords: Needs Assessment, EFL Teachers, and In-service Training Courses

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Introduction

Language teachers' knowledge bases

Following Thomas (1987) description of 'language teaching route', language teachers stand at the centre of the route acting as mediators between language teacher educators at the beginning and language learners at the end of the route (pp.34-35). Language teacher educators,² in fact, trigger language teachers to help language learners master a language. Developing the language learners' mastery of a language, their 'language competence' (both linguistic competence, i.e. competence in language system, and communicative competence, i.e. competence in language use) is the ultimate goal of teaching a language (ibid.). Given the language teachers' central stance in language teaching route, it follows that they have to play a leading and direct role in the fulfilment of the above-mentioned goal. In Thomas's words, "the teacher's role, then, is to impart language competence to the learner".¹ In order for this to happen, the language teachers are required to be possessed of the following two categories of competence plus one category of awareness (see Thomas, pp.34-38 for further details):

1. *Language competence*: the pre-requisite of language teacher competence, which the native speaker has but the non-native speaking teacher needs to develop (Thomas, p.36). Language competence comprises various components as follows:
 - (a) 'formal', subdivided into phonological/graphological, syntactic and lexical well-formedness of sentences; (b) 'conceptual', conceptually well-formed sentences; (c) 'functional', appropriate use of language functions; (d) 'stylistic', appropriacy of utterances in terms of situational factors; and (e) 'informational', appropriacy of utterances in terms of informational context. It is noteworthy that all these five components are present in all the four language skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing (Thomas, p.37).
2. *Pedagogic competence*: comprises the following four components: (a) 'management', concerned with the skills of classroom management; (b) 'teaching', related more directly to the substance of the pedagogic process and is concerned with skills employed in imparting language to learners; (c) 'preparation', concerns skills involved in preparing, both mentally and physically, for teaching; and (d) 'assessment', dealing with the teacher's ability to assess his own performance of the various skills mentioned above.
3. *Language awareness*: explicit knowledge of the language system and how it operates in communication.

It goes without saying that the knowledge categories attained by language teachers in their pre-service training courses are not everlasting; rather they need to be continuously refreshed and developed in teachers' professional life. In fact, professional development is a continuous process that takes place during the teacher's whole professional life (Veiga, 2001, as cited in Mohammadi et al, 2015). Crandall (2001, pp.535-551), through referring to the wise saying that reads as 'teaching is lifelong learning' (which is itself the best part of teaching), has pointed out that completing an academic (teaching) program is really only the beginning of a lifelong quest to better understand our students, ourselves, our discipline,

and the approaches and techniques we can use to help others become competent users of English. Hence professional language teachers are supposed to keep abreast of any development in their profession. One of the motivating opportunities that can make it possible for language teachers to refresh and develop their attained knowledge systems is *in-service training courses* (ITCs).

In-service language teacher training courses (ILTTCs)

ILTTCs are aimed at paving the ground for language teachers to refresh and update what they have attained in their pre-service training courses at universities or teacher training colleges. With the mentioned goal of ILTTCs in mind, the main question which is in fact the underpinning of the present paper is that what programs are and also should be included in ILTTCs.

In terms of the ‘content’ of ILTTCs programs, Cullen (1994), focusing on English language teaching (ELT), has pointed out that ITCs in English as a foreign language around the world usually consist of the following three main components:

1. *Methodology/pedagogical skills³ component*: in this component different methods and techniques for teaching English are explored, and the various classroom skills the trainee needs to teach successfully are discussed and practised.
2. *Linguistics component*: a primarily theoretical component which would include one or more of the following topics: theories of language and language learning, the place of English in society and the school curriculum, and awareness of language itself which includes a study of English grammatical and phonological systems with the emphasis on increasing the trainees’ understanding of how the language operates, rather than their mastery in the use of it.
3. *Language improvement component*: this component is aimed at improving the general language proficiency of the trainees. Language improvement component may be specifically linked to the kind of language the teachers will need to use in the classroom, e.g. for giving instructions, eliciting ideas and suggestions from the students, a kind of ESP for English teachers.

It is noteworthy that the above-mentioned components are respectively reminiscent of *pedagogic competence*, *language awareness* and *language competence*, the three knowledge categories required of language teachers to possess so as to impart language competence to the language learners.

The ‘should be’ aspect of ILTTCs programs captures the language teachers’ *needs* and *wishes* as to what programs they both require and desire to enjoy in ITCs. Cullen (1994), citing Berry (1990)’s study in Poland, has touched upon the necessity of meeting the needs or responding to the wishes of the teachers themselves in planning ITCs programs. With regard to the mentioned necessity, Sandholtz (2002, as cited in Uysal, 2012) has noted that an important requirement for an effective in-service education program for teachers (INSET) is to place trainee teachers and their realities at the center and to involve teachers in both the planning and the execution phases of an INSET activity. The reason why language teachers’ needs and desires should be prioritized in planning ITCs programs is that it is language teachers, rather than language teacher educators or ITCs planners, who

are directly involved in imparting language competence to language learners. Thereon, the present paper has centred on English language (EL) teachers' *needs* and *wishes* as to the content of ITCs programs in Iran.

English language teaching in Iran

In Iran, English is taught as the compulsory foreign language on the junior and senior high school curriculum. The senior high school English curriculum spotlights reading skill with the other three skills, i.e. writing, speaking and listening, being marginalized. In contrast, the junior high school English curriculum, having been recently introduced new communicative textbooks, is aimed at equalizing all the four language skills in terms of priority.

As to the school teachers of English in Iran, they are all non-native EL teachers, and like other EL teachers worldwide, they are in need of developing their teaching profession. As previously mentioned, one of the motivating situations for teachers' professional development is ITCs, which are likewise offered to Iranian EL teachers.

Regarding ITCs for EL teachers in Iran, Kazemi and Ashrafi (2014) have noted that "teacher training courses in Iran are usually predetermined packages of 4 to 5 hours of instruction which are mostly theoretical in nature. In effect, the current teacher training courses in Iran suffer from various shortcomings which make them potentially inadequate when it comes to equipping teachers with sufficient knowledge and expertise that is necessary for their career. In regard to the mentioned shortcomings, Birjandi and Derakhshan (2010)'s study revealed that most teachers were not motivated enough to attend the programs. Furthermore, teachers stated that there was not any needs analysis before these training programs. The participants demanded that the aims and contents of the in-service programs be determined on the teachers' needs, and moreover, teachers with different levels of education and experience should receive different in-service programs.

Somewhat inspired by the above-mentioned shortcomings and points, the present study tries to conduct a needs assessment of EL teachers' ITCs in ELT context of Iran. Therefore, it seeks to answer the following two questions:

RQ1: What is the content of ITCs programs? Specifically speaking, which component(s), i.e. methodology, linguistics and language improvement, are included in the programs?

RQ2: What are the EL teachers' needed and favorite ITCs programs?

Methods

Participants

The participants of this study were 21 male (N=9) and female (N=12) EL teachers at both junior (N=10) and senior high schools (N=11) in Marand, East Azerbaijan Province, Iran. The participants held varying university degrees ranging from Associate of Arts (AA) through Bachelor of Arts (BA) to Master of Arts (MA) in ELT. 3 participants had AA with 16 and 2 ones having respectively BA and MA.

Instruments

A structured interview was employed to elicit information about EL teachers' needs and wishes as to the content of ITCs programs. The structured interview questionnaire consisted of two items: (1) ranking the three components of the ITCs programs on the basis of necessity, (2) ranking the mentioned three components on the basis of desire.

Data collection procedure

As previously noted, the present study pursues two types of data: (a) the content of ITCs programs and (b) EL teachers' needed and desired ITCs programs. The content-oriented data were collected through the ITCs programs list archived in the Office of Human Resources in Marand Department of Education. The second type of data, i.e. the structured interview data, was gathered through e-mail, telephone, and face-to-face interview.

Findings

To conduct a needs assessment of EFL teachers' ITCs in ELT context of Marand, the present study explored both the content of the ITCs programs offered to EL teachers in Marand from March 20, 2000 to March 20, 2015 and the teachers' needed and favorite ITCs programs. The results of the study will come under three headings: (1) the content of ITCs programs, (2) teachers' needed ITCs programs, (3) teachers' desired ITCs programs.

The content of ITCs programs

As table 1 below shows, out of 731 hours of EL teachers' ITCs in Marand in the above-mentioned time-span, 280 hours (38/30%) were allocated to junior high school teachers while 451 hours (61/70%) were offered to senior high school teachers.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution of ITCs Programs

	Methodology	Linguistics	Language Improvement	Row Totals
Junior High School	200	0	80	280
Senior High School	341	110	0	451
Column Totals	541	110	80	731

In addition to the mentioned quantity difference between junior high school and senior one in regard to the components of ITCs programs, there holds a distribution difference among the components: as the first and second rows of Table 1 above indicate, while junior high school teachers were not allocated any *linguistics* programs, senior high school teachers were offered no *language improvement* programs.

Table 1 also reveals that for both groups of teachers, *methodology* component was prioritized in ITCs planning, which is in parallel with what occurs in most parts of the world. As Cullen (1994) has pointed out, it is probably true to say that in most parts of the

world the main emphasis in English language teacher training, especially on in-service courses, is on methodology, and that the teacher's proficiency in the language itself is largely taken for granted.

Teachers' needed ITCs programs

The analysis of the data on participants' 'need' in relation to the ITCs programs revealed that *methodology* is the most required component for participants, with the other two components, i.e. *language improvement* and *linguistics*, lying respectively in the second and third ranks. Specifically speaking, 57/15 percent of the participants ranked the *methodology* component as the most needed one to be included in ITCs programs, with 23/81 percent and 19/04 percent of the participants ranking *language improvement* and *linguistics* as respectively the second and third most required components.

Table 2 below shows that methodology component is the topmost priority for both groups of teachers, with the other two components being almost equally of much lower priority.

Table 2: SCHOOL * NEED Cross tabulation

	NEED			Row Totals
	Methodology	Linguistics	Language Improvement	
Junior High School Teachers	60%	20%	20%	100%
Senior High School Teachers	54/54%	18/19%	27/ 27%	100%

Teachers' desired ITCs programs

Data analysis of the participants' 'desire' as to the ITCs programs indicated that 71/43 percent of the participants ranked *language improvement* as their most desired component, with the other two components, i.e. *methodology* and *linguistics*, being respectively favourites of 23/81 percent and 04/76 percent of the participants.

Table 3: SCHOOL * DESIRE Cross tabulation

	DESIRE			Row Totals
	Methodology	Linguistics	Language Improvement	
Junior High School Teachers	0%	10%	90%	100%
Senior High School Teachers	45/46%	0%	54/54%	100%

Table 3 above displays the summary results for both junior and senior high school teachers' desire as to the mentioned three components to be included in their ITCs programs. As the table indicates, language improvement component is the topmost favourite of both groups of teachers; however, the two groups are in favour of language improvement component with different degrees, i.e. 90 percent of junior high school teachers vis-a-vis 54/54 percent of junior high school ones. The table also shows that linguistics and methodology components are of no interest to respectively senior and junior high school teachers.

In the following, the content of the ITCs programs (see Table 1) which were offered to both junior and senior high school English teachers will be checked against their needs (see Table 2) and desires (see Table 3).

As to the junior high school teachers, the ITCs programs were somewhat in parallel with the teachers' need, but not with their desire. To be specific, 71/42 percent of the junior high school teachers' ITCs programs were allocated to methodology, the component which is mostly required by the teachers (60% of them), but of no interest to them (0% of them). Furthermore, language improvement component which is the topmost favourite of the junior high school teachers (90% of them) was not sufficiently included in the ITCs programs (28/58% of them). Given the results of linguistics component, it follows that though it is somewhat required by the teachers (20%) and to a lesser extent (10%) favoured by them, it was not allocated any program.

With regard to the senior high school teachers, the volume of methodology component (75/60%) in their ITCs programs has been consistent with their both need (54/54%) and desire (45/46%). Linguistics component volume, with 24/40 percent of the total ITCs programs, satisfied the teachers' need (18/19%), but the component is of no interest to them (0%). The third component, i.e. language improvement, was entirely overlooked in ITCs planning. Specifically speaking, language improvement, though the topmost favourite component of the senior high school teachers (54/54%) and their second most required component (27/27%), was not included in the teachers' ITCs programs.

Conclusion

English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers around the world in general and in Iran in particular are in need of upgrading their related specific knowledge in order to function satisfactorily in their career. To meet the aforementioned need, teachers may desire to attend the in-service training courses (ITCs) which are periodically held to help them promote their career-specific knowledge. But the main question which comes to mind is as follows: do all the ITCs programs satisfy the EFL teachers' exact needs and desires? Having been conducted in Iran's EFL context, the present paper has tried to probe into the above-mentioned question and hence investigated EFL teachers' needs and desires as to the ITCs programs in Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran. The results of the study indicated that while the ITCs programs offered to EFL teachers in Marand were, though not completely, in parallel with their needs, they did not satisfy the teachers' desires. Taking the results of this study into account, the ITCs planners are recommended to offer any in-service training programs in accordance with the EFL teachers' both needs and desires.

Notes

- 1- Following the same logical progression, it follows that educators of language teachers, to fulfill their role (in the achievement of the ultimate goal of teaching a language), need competence to impart competence in language (Thomas, 1987).
- 2- As to the language teacher educators, they need to be possessed of two more knowledge bases than those required of language teachers. The two additional knowledge bases are as follows: (a) *methodological competence*: competence in teaching how to teach language; and (b) *Pedagogico-*

linguistic awareness: explicit knowledge of pedagogic-linguistic theory (see Thomas, 1987, pp.34-35) for further details).

3- From now on, the term *methodology* will stand for *methodology/pedagogical skills*.

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