



Transition to a PhD Program in TEFL: A Cross-Sectional Account of Students' Concerns

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Abstract

Nowadays, studying in higher education is not as uncomplicated as it seems to be, particularly in PhD programs. Given the complex interplay of multiple variables affecting one's experience in such programs, there is a mounting need for probing more into the ways in which PhD students' lives are affected by these factors, and how their transition trajectories emerge. The present study explored the elements which shape PhD students' lives, and how they interact with each other. Employing an ecological model framework, this cross-sectional study investigated how present as well as graduate students' lives were affected in different phases of the program. To this end, ten PhD students or graduates of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), representing early, mid, and completion phases of the program, were interviewed to qualitatively elicit the views they harbor toward the program. The findings emanating from the content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that multiple factors in tandem mold students' perceptions of the program. The most notable extracted themes embraced dissatisfaction with academic procedures, satisfaction with university professors, and challenges related to the students' private lives.

Keywords: Ecological model, Experiences, PhD students, TEFL, Transition

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Introduction

Transition to a higher education program appears to be a crucial phase in individuals' academic lives. This type of developmental change occurs along with numerous challenges for the graduate students. There is plentiful support suggested by the previous research that acknowledges those transition complications postgraduate students confront. For this reason, an increasing number of scholars and researchers have highlighted the importance of taking into account postgraduate students' personal and educational experiences in order to resolve the challenges they face and, hopefully, make reforms in PhD programs accordingly (Son & Park, 2015). One of the outstanding projects that has generated interest in doctoral students' experiences was Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) undertaken by Higher Education Academy (HEA) in 2007. The project intended to establish a form of *standard industry* to gather evidence about experiences of postgraduates in UK (Turner, 2015).

It is generally accepted that the incorporation of candidates' experiences may lead to satisfactory improvements within higher education programs which, in turn, results in productive academic outcomes. A standard hypothesis has been that there are diverse factors affecting postgraduate students' academic lives in an interactional manner. Those factors include postgraduates' personal as well as occupational and social concerns. An ecological framework to language education claims that any type of program needs to integrate the educational system into applicants' real-life complexities. As Van Lier (2004) has put forward, an ecological model of education attempts to integrate "new methods of research that take account of the full complexity and interrelatedness of processes that combine to produce an environment" (p. 4). Elsewhere, Van Lier (2000), in more complex terms, has suggested that an organism performs in accordance with his/her surrounding context that either provokes or impedes any course of action. Similarly, Reed (1996) has related the ecological linguistics to the concept of *values* in research and education and contended that educational settings are necessarily being affected by those values associated with the practitioners. Hence, an ecological framework seeks to consider and study educational contexts within the complexities and diversities of the people involved in that particular context.

A good amount of research has reported on the labyrinthine factors concerning higher education programs. Recently, several investigators have turned to individual aspects that served the leading roles in postgraduate students' academic success. It is noteworthy to mention that a majority of those studies have examined international PhD students and the challenges they faced (Anderson, 2014; Jiani, 2016; Seeto, Homewood, Thogersen, Trawoger, Manathunga, Reid, & Holbrook, 2014; Son & Park, 2015). One of the major themes of higher education research has been the process of supervision and its contribution to PhD candidates' educational outcomes (Hansen & Herrmann, 2016; Seeto et al, 2014). Instructional grounds and their clarity and purposefulness have been another issue addressed by previous higher

education researchers (Roksa, Trolan, Blaich, & Wise, 2016). Finally, Hartley, Gopaul, Sagintayeva, and Apergenova (2015) argued that how policy-related reforms in PhD programs may enhance the quality and potentials of educational organizations.

As stated earlier, different issues have been extensively studied in regard to higher education programs and post graduate students. Moreover, those studies have been specific in focus and restricted to merely one among diverse factors affecting postgraduate education including supervision and instruction within programs. A limited range of studies has examined the transitional process in which PhD students involved (O'Donnell, Tobbell, Lawthom, & Zammit, 2009; O'donnell, Tobbell, & Zammit, 2010). However, less attention has been paid to candidates' personal perceptions and expectations of the program to which they applied. In fact, evidence on whether postgraduate students are satisfied with the educational program they are afforded is presently inconclusive. Besides, the issue as to the extent to which the opportunities offered by the higher education programs accord with the expectations that PhD students form prior to entering the program is still not completely understood. Thus, it is desirable to carry out additional surveys in order to obtain an in-depth comprehension of what attitudes PhD students hold toward the higher education programs considering a large number of significant factors. Furthermore, it is of interest to examine the possible challenges doctoral students deal with after they have entered a particular program and also the consequences of the aforementioned transitional process.

Borrowing insights from ecological perspective, the present study explores the elements that may play a determining role in postgraduate students' educational success. Indeed, this cross-sectional study takes into account a substantial number of factors including supervision, career development and social life, comprehensive exams, faculty support, research projects and assignments, and viva sessions and intends to probe their influence on PhD candidates' academic experiences. Moreover, in order to adopt a more comparative view, the present study introduces a novel procedure for evaluating postgraduates' academic experiences by choosing candidates who are at different stages of higher education programs. This may pave the way in achieving a clear picture of the improvements, if any, which may occur within the program in each academic year.

PhD programs as communities of practice

Transition into a doctoral program is a complex process, which is worthy of being studied in its own right. Few attempts have been made to gain a fuller understanding of the different aspects of this transition, which seems surprising, given the high number of students in this group, and also given the high stakes position of postgraduate students in almost every society. One explanation for this lack of research is that upon entrance, doctoral students are assumed to already possess the skills required by postgraduate programs, on the grounds that during their studies in undergraduate courses they have been familiarized with the challenges and

requirements placed on students in academic contexts, as O'Donnell et al. (2009) argued. However, this assumption has been refuted by studies which have probed into the experiences which postgraduate students go through. One such study is O'Donnell and Tobbell (2007), which reports on an attempt aimed at exploring the transition of adults to higher education, mediated by a program which was developed to assist in that transition. Employing a communities-of-practice framework, they interviewed their participants, who were adults entering postgraduate programs. Qualitative analyses yielded three main themes which gave direction to their identity trajectories: peripheral participation, academic practices, and belonging. The researchers invoke identity-related discourse to analyze their findings, stating that the categories they identified revealed students' desire to participate in the practices of the higher education community, which made it possible for them to gain access to the community and belong to it, which subsequently required diverse and unpredictable identity trajectories, as a sign of their learning.

The usefulness of a community of practice framework to discuss postgraduate students' transition experiences is beyond any doubt. The discourse of this framework introduces concepts that prove pertinent to discussions of student experiences in academic environments. A community of practice is any group of individuals, who form a society with a specific purpose, and who, to achieve the desired goals of the society, engage in constant interactions with each other; these group members share similar attitudes, hold similar beliefs, and follow similar actions. Any community of practice is accompanied by a collection of goals, values, assumptions, and practices, which give meaning to the context-specific moment-by-moment actions of its members. Membership in a community of practice involves the adoption of the assumptions of the group and following the established practices of its members, in the face of life event. In simpler terms, it involves thinking and doing like the members of the group, provided that entry to the group is granted to the individual (Wenger, 1998).

What is significant in this framework, which is perfectly related to the focus of this paper, is the recognition of the multiplicity of identities group members adopt. Depending on one's interests and life requirements, individuals may take part in the practices of more than one community and, therefore, form different identities, although there may be overlaps between and among these identities (Wenger, 1998). In this framework, there is a move away from the traditional conceptions of learning, as something which happens as a result of transfer of knowledge from one person to the other – the so called banking system of education; rather, learning is defined as the shifts in identity, as a result of engaging in the practices of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, the individual is not viewed as an element at the mercy of environmental forces; instead, the agency of the individual in the process of learning is stressed, such that there is a recognition of their role to negotiate the different identities in the face of life events and contextual elements which interact to shape the specific identity the individual adopts.

An excellent example of a study which made use of communities of practice perspective is Tobbell, O'Donnell, and Zammit (2010). Applying this framework to the context of postgraduate studies, they considered the postgraduate program as a community of practice, with its own field-specific discourse and domain-specific practices. They were interested in investigating the subjective experiences of students in their transition to postgraduate programs. To achieve this end, they employed multiple data collection tools including one-to-one interviews, focus groups, longitudinal e-mail diaries, classroom observations, document analysis, and one-to-one interviews with staff. Their analyses pointed to the significant role that out-of-campus life event play in shaping student experiences of their postgraduate life. They also talked about the “power of silence” in relation to the “reified practices” of the community. The participants in their study were treated as “expert” students by the university, who did not need any help regarding their transition to their studies. The researchers argued that such a construction of learners would make the job of transition a challenging one, and the students had to negotiate the situation and undergo identity shifts which may not be the optimal one. However, the students displayed their preference for making relationships and interacting with other members, hoping to make this transition more efficient. The ensuing duality posed a challenge to the students, and the researchers noted that “...the practice of independence is encouraged by an absence of information rather than an active facilitation of helpful practices” (p. 274).

Not all of the studies which have attempted to unravel the mysteries surrounding postgraduate programs have employed a communities-of-practice framework. Tobbell and O'Donnell (2013), for example, resorted to a sociocultural framework, which identifies a number of distinct layers of influence that comprise students' social environment. These are the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono levels of influence, hierarchically. They analyzed their data and discussed their findings in terms of to which of these layers the theme they detected belonged. A number of data collection tools were used, including one-to-one semi structured interviews, focus group interviews, observational field notes, e-mail diaries, and document analysis. Participants were 230 postgraduate students including doctoral students, masters Research students, taught masters students, and 6 staff members, 50 of which were interviewed and 180 of which were observed. One of their findings was the lack of support students received and the desire on their part for independence, all the way from micro to macro levels. Another major finding in their study was the need expressed by the participants to establish relationships with other – and probably more competent – individuals, in order to gain access to their knowledge and expertise, so that the process of transition to their new social space could be facilitated. Their field notes and interviews with staff members revealed that the construction of microsystems through informal classroom discussions which promoted classroom interaction were emphasized by the students. Overall, they argue that postgraduates need “...ongoing and targeted support not only from their teachers, but also from their wider social relationships” (p. 135).

The need to look into postgraduate students in their transition in other fields has also been acknowledged. West's (2012) study sought to do this in the field of counseling and psychotherapy. Carrying out a formative evaluation of the students' perceptions and experiences of their transition to master's degree, which formed the basis for later interventions, she employed a questionnaire and came up with three main findings. The first was that the students found the process of transition a challenging one, and the second finding was that they viewed subject-specific instructions as the most helpful and did not have access to the assistance provided to them by the university. Her third main finding revealed students' needs in a number of skills which included instruction on academic writing style, guidance in literature searching and journal finding, and the need for a community of practice learning. However, West's study suffers from a number of methodological shortcomings among which are the lack of clarity in procedure, insufficient information about the participants, and unclear data analysis processes.

Method

Context of study

The present study was conducted in the Iranian universities that offered intensive PhD programs. In fact, the main target of this paper is to report on the qualifications of those programs and to discover whether they accord with the expectations of those involved in them as well as with the current standards for a typical PhD program. In Iran, postgraduate students need to take part in a nationwide entrance exam and follow-up interviews in order to be admitted to PhD programs. In the case of interviews, the passing criteria are different across universities; however, the earlier entrance written exam is held with the same standards for all the applicants.

After successfully passing the prerequisites, the students formally enter a PhD program in the selected university. Normally, the PhD programs follow similar procedures across different universities in Iran. A normal doctoral program in TESOL encompasses 4 academic years. The first and second year embrace the essential theoretical courses that are covered in three semesters. Having completed the theoretical courses, Iranian PhD students need to prepare themselves for the comprehensive exam in the middle of the second academic year. The exam covers the material offered in the previous courses in the form of a written exam followed by an interview. The third and fourth years are totally research-based during which the students devote their time on writing up their research proposals and dissertations respectively. This type of program which consists of theoretical and project-based components is similar to PhD program implemented in the United States. One last and different point that is worth mentioning with regard to the PhD programs in Iran is related to the viva sessions. While, in some universities, the sessions are held under the control of higher parties such as the Pro-Dean and where students themselves are in charge of defending their dissertations while receiving the least amount of support from their supervisors within the ongoing sessions (e.g. McGill University), the opposite holds true in Iran. Interestingly, Iranian PhD

students have freedom to invite as much audience as they wish and use their supervisors' help and on-the-spot supportive scaffolding during dissertation defense session.

Participants

The participants of this study were comprised of ten male and female PhD students majoring in TEFL at different Iranian universities. Their selection was based on purposive sampling as well as their willingness and availability. Moreover, the sample encompassed first, second, third, and fourth year candidates along with graduate students. Those candidates who were in their second year had completed the required theory-based courses and were preparing for their comprehensive examination. The third and fourth year students had taken the comprehensive exam and were concentrating on writing up their research proposal and dissertation respectively. Table 1 represents the detailed profile of the participants for each of whom a pseudonym is selected in order to ensure anonymity and confidentiality

Table 1. Participants' profile

Pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Academic year	Teaching Experience (Year)	Major	GPA
Melisa	Female	29	1 st year	3	TEFL	19
Sara	Female	26	1 st year	4	TEFL	16.3
Farnaz	Female	26	2 nd year	4	TEFL	16
Amir	Male	30	3 rd year	5	TEFL	17.5
Soroush	Male	32	3 rd year	6	TEFL	16.5
Mania	Female	35	2 nd year	3	TEFL	18
Mahsa	Female	29	1 st year	7	TEFL	19.06
Saba	Female	35	4 th year	9	TEFL	17
Parsa	Male	29	4 th year	5	TEFL	17.8
Masoud	Male	32	3 rd year	5	TEFL	18.5
Total	Female/Male	30.3	1-4 years	5.1 years	-	17.56

Semi-structured interviews

The study employed semi-structured interviews in order to get a holistic and inclusive picture of the challenges PhD candidates dealt with. In fact, semi-structured interviews allowed the participants' thoughts, feelings and experiences to emerge and drive the interview. More importantly, the interviewees were encouraged to elaborate on the issues in an exploratory manner. It must be noticed that the interview themes were extracted from a thorough review of the literature in order to be examined in case of Iranian PhD students. Also, prior to the major study, a focus group discussion among the participants and the researchers was arranged for gathering more ideas with regard to the topics to be addressed in the main

interviews. Furthermore, the PhD courses that were being held in Iran and the experiences of the students and academic staff were used as the other sources for choosing the themes of the interviews. The interview questions went through expert validation in order to ensure the suitability of their content. Specifically, the researchers asked two language experts to recode the data and the inter-coder Kappa coefficient reliability for the suggested themes was estimated to be 0.76 denoting a moderate agreement among the categories as defined by Landis and Koch (1977). Subsequently, the suggested areas included: the candidate's personal challenges, perceived relevance of undergraduate study, supervision process, comprehensive exam, term projects and workload, perceived capabilities, development planning, and strengths and weaknesses of the PhD Program. The interview protocol is provided at the appendix section.

Procedure and data analysis

Participants were interviewed according to the interview guide provided at the appendixes. The channels through which the interviews were conducted included face to face interviews and on-line skype sessions. Each interview took between thirty to forty minutes and was held in students' native language for the ease of discussions. Later, the recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated. Both transcriptions and translations files were emailed to the participants for verification purposes. They were informed that they could modify the translations if they were in contrast with what was discussed in the main interviews. Finally, the transcriptions were content-analyzed in a cyclical manner, and the themes that emerged in the final cycle, were elaborated on, by subsuming minor ones under more inclusive themes. This process continued from the first interview until the end of the data analysis process. Participant anonymity was ensured by keeping their names and identities, as well as the universities in which they were studying confidential. The participants were also informed about the purposes of the study, and were told that the researchers were not aiming for value judgements, and what was important was their opinions regarding the questions asked in the interviews.

Results and discussion

Data analysis produced a number of broad themes. The themes were: dissatisfaction with academic procedures, satisfaction with university professors, and challenges related to the students' private lives.

Dissatisfaction with academic procedures:

On several occasions, the participants raised the issue of their dissatisfaction with a number of practices adopted by university, whether by scientific board members or mandated by official requirements. For example, some of them expressed their disapproval of a number of subjects offered by programs, on the grounds that they were of little practical use, or they were outdated from a theoretical perspective. The

following extract is an instance related to the first theme. In this respect, Soroush stated:

1. ... *Besides, the program does not address our career need. After all, we're TEFL students and we will involve in teaching-related jobs in the future. Unfortunately, what we mainly do in the classes includes theoretical grounds in the field and browsing journal articles that are of little help.*

This finding can be possibly interpreted in two ways. First it can be argued that from a community of practice perspective, this finding reveals the discourse of PhD students, who overall agree with this statement. By showing approval for this claim, the participants were indirectly displaying their membership in the community of TEFL PhD students. This fact goes in line with the tenets of communities of practice framework put forward by (Wenger, 1998). In fact, if PhD programs are considered as one variation of communities, the members including the staff as well as the students are responsible for making reforms in the program, since within any community of practice, all the individuals involved contribute to its improvements via solving the common problems, advising each other, and offering creative ideas in a collaborative manner (McDermott, 1999). However, there is nothing wrong with accepting the fact that an individual's immediate context has a role to play in shaping their beliefs and practices' but the significant point is the argument that some of PhD students hold this belief not because they personally agree with it, but because lack of agreement may bring about alienation from one of the communities in whose membership they take pride.

A second interpretation of this finding may be that the participants showed disagreement simply because they disagreed with the inclusion of those courses and practices referred to above. This disagreement may be taken as a natural reflection of PhD students' orientation to practice as opposed to theory. They might align themselves more with practical considerations than showing concern with theoretical discussions or investigations. In fact, a number of segments of the interview data gave testimony to this proposition. The following extract, for example, taken from the interview with a fourth-year PhD student is an example. Parsa pointed out:

2. *I found some of the courses totally irrelevant to our field, such as psycholinguistics Actually, they offered nothing more than boredom and dissatisfaction.*

This general orientation to practical issues may be a signal of their hopelessness of finding academia-related job opportunities. Such careers which by their very nature are more theoretically motivated, are hoped for by PhD students in most societies, at least from a layman's expectation of PhD "people". However, since such job opportunities are extremely rare in the Iranian context, PhD students opt for careers in teaching in environments other than universities, which call for teacher expertise, rather than teacher's expert theoretical knowledge.

Other occasions of student dissatisfaction with university procedures and practices could be detected throughout the interviews. A measure that appears a necessary one to take is to include the candidates' voices and ideas into consideration during the different phases of course planning, design, implementation and evaluation. Entering into discussions with PhD students hoping for arriving at better options and giving at least a minimal weight to the feedback that they provide on the courses they participate in, seems both democratic and essential.

It is worth mentioning at this point that a discrepancy was apparent in the interview talk of the same participant, when he pointed to the

3. “. . . need to include research-based courses in order to update students' knowledge of the modern and fresh areas in the field. I think it is a must for all PhD students to take part in international conference”

This may be taken as a sign of the duality that exists in language teaching/learning circles with regard to practice and theory, a problem which is not specific to Iranian researchers and teachers. One solution seems to be to offer differentiated in-depth programs in each of these two areas; this option appears to be far from feasible in most contexts and also less defensible. A more logical option is to raise the awareness of novices in this field as to the existence of these two tendencies, and assist them in selecting one of these as the area of their personal preference; it follows that PhD programs could be offered to those who prefer academic environments, and teacher education courses to those who are more pedagogically oriented.

Satisfaction with University professors

A second major theme that grew out of the interview data was the participants' overall satisfaction with their professors' individual and professional characteristics and the supportive supervision they provide to the PhD students. In most of the interviews with the participants this satisfaction could be identified, although it was to varying degrees. This includes both course-long professors and supervising professors. Typical examples taken from the interview data that indicate this satisfaction in case of Sara and Masoud:

4. “*The main strength of the program was the prominence of its faculty. They were all well-known and knowledgeable in Iranian academic context*”.

Or:

5. “*I'm absolutely satisfied with the role of the professors. They were available most of the time and provided their helpful guidance in times of need. However, the projects required by the professors were useful, but there were more than that I could handle*”.

The general satisfaction with professors may be interpreted by reference to the participants' membership in the community of practice of PhD students, and their

attempts to protect it by showing awareness of their status as PhD students. This status requires them to be less critical of their professors, which is a valued practice in this community, compared to the community of BA or perhaps MA students. This lack of criticalness may have been motivated by the desire for face and respect, and providing it to other members of this community. However, similar to the first theme, this finding can be interpreted more directly as a reflection of the participants' own internal criteria, rather than those of the community. In other words, the students' satisfaction with their professors may be the result of the quality of support they receive from the professors or the assessments they carry out of their professors. A somewhat fragile argument may be that, at this level, students put less demand on their professors, as they believe that it is the students themselves who should shoulder the job of planning and moving in their programs. This lack of expectation from the professors appeared in a few cases in the interviews. For example, Melisa said:

6. *"It is true that the professors have to be knowledgeable, professional, well-mannered and cooperative, but, if you want me to tell the truth, I don't expect much from them Because I think at the PhD level, you gotta have some freedom, which comes from your own knowledge base, and it is this independence that they are trying to build in the students, after all"*.

This can be further explained by the framework suggested by Shank, Walker, and Hayes (1995) in which they referred to the service-based nature of the educational programs where the knowledge is both produced and consumed by professors and students simultaneously. In fact, Shank et al. (1995) considered mutual learning experience as one of the basic characteristics of educational programs in which students find themselves as one part of the learning and lower their expectations from the professors as well as the program as a whole. This finding is partially in concert with an almost similar study conducted Roska et al. (2016) who came to the conclusion that students demonstrate more satisfaction with the faculty only when they are exposed to highly qualified and clear instruction during the courses.

However, student beliefs constitute an area which needs cautiousness. A simple statement may have been originated from any of a number of context-based stimuli. As a result, detecting the source of a single statement may require a fine-tuned investigation of contextual, social and cognitive elements, all interacting with each other and with the learner's belief system. Therefore, more ethnographic studies are required to enrich our understanding of the issue of PhD student's evaluation of their professors. This topic constitutes a significantly propitious one for students to pursue, since their participation in their own courses allows them to adopt the role of a participant observer, a major characteristic of ethnographies.

Challenges related to students' private lives

In almost all of the interviews with the participants this theme could be detected, although in different forms or under varying guises. The participants made

references to the challenges they were facing in their private lives. The significance of these problems were that they were related to the participants' lives and experiences as PhD students in TEFL. In some cases, these problems related directly to their studies, while in others the influence was an indirect one.

One significant challenge was for them to strike a balance between their courses and their lives. It makes sense to expect this problem from this group of students, since PhD students, in contrast to most BA or some MA students, are mostly married and have jobs and careers, and the need to attend to all of these life aspects – lives, jobs, and studies – seems a demanding one. This is partially consistent with what Gayle and Lowe (2007) concluded. The researchers found that half of the students were able to set a balance between life and education, while the other half expressed high levels of anxiety when trying to achieve life-education balance. The extract below belongs to Mania and some of the challenges she has to overcome:

7. *“The reason is because I am a ministry of education teacher, I don't have full control over my working hours, and in the current term one of my work and class times were at the same time This session I have to get permission from the school, next session I ask my professor for permission, it's hard to go on for an entire term like this”.*

In other cases, the participants referred to their family lives as another source of pressure. The need to spend long hours preparing for class discussions or working on term projects necessitated cutting from their leisure time with their families. Amir expressed:

8. *“It's my wife. She doesn't see the problems I have now, and I think she's partly right. They need amusement, especially my child. What can I do? I have a job to do, too. . . . It's too demanding from me”.*

Logistical problems also were a consideration for PhD students, although not specifically for the participants in our study, who were mainly from the city of Urmia. In general, some students are admitted to universities which are distant from their areas of residence. As a result, it is conceivable that some students prefer to commute, others opt for residence in university dorms. Both options can pose difficulties, which in some cases may be grave.

The problem of distance from the target university may influence a student's participation in the community of other postgraduate students in their universities. S/he may be, at times, a stranger to the discourse of this group of students, when “familiarity” with and “being” in the university's home city establishes a further bond between those who share these features. Moreover, simply living in the target city means that more time is available to spend in the university, which further strengthens bonds among the students in these circles, and this forms an advantage from which students from other residential areas are deprived.

Overall, it may be of great help if PhD students receive substantial amount of support from both their families and the authorities in order to keep an acceptable

balance among their lives, jobs, and educations. In Gayle and Lowe's (2007) study, the main reason that caused half of the students to balance out life and education were their abilities in employing different coping strategies and, most importantly, the support and encouragement they got from their families, peers, and the university itself.

Conclusion

The study was aimed at gaining a better understanding of the lives of PhD students, and the experiences they go through during their studies, and their conceptions of these. As such, the present study produced three major themes, which if taken into consideration can improve the quality of lives of PhD students of TEFL in Iran. Policy makers, course designers, and program implementers, as well as students themselves, need to be informed about the different aspects of PhD programs, so that the quality of these programs improves or students enter these programs with a clearer idea of what the requirements are and what challenges they will be facing.

Future researchers may study the perceived problems and challenges from the perspectives of the academic instructors in order to identify the possible contrasts between students' voices and professors' views in regard to the educational programs. Besides, professors' advices to some of the challenges students face and their applicability and effectiveness can be another theme for further investigations. Finally, it is hoped that the issues addressed in the current study would be of great help for both PhD candidates and program organizers in order to plan properly for their higher education and to implement necessary reform within the programs respectively.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. What were you thinking about the program before you entered it? Expectations from the professors, library facilities, opportunities? (Perceived capabilities? Skills required? Ambitions? Hopes for post-graduation possibilities? Did those perceptions and expectations come true after entering university?)
2. How would you compare a PhD course with an MA course? Any differences? In what ways? Anything needed to make the transition from MA to PhD?
3. Strengths and weaknesses of the program, the university, the faculty, and the department compared to other universities? Does it address your career needs? How can it be modified to be of greatest possible help?
4. What were some of the personal challenges you have been facing during the program? How did you adjust your life to the program?
5. What do you think about the subjects/courses offered by the program? Interesting? Relevant? Up-to-date? Out-of-date? Theoretical or pedagogical? Others which could have been included and some that could have been excluded? How is it in other universities?
6. How do you evaluate the professors in terms of their subject matter knowledge, interest, professionalism, research productivity, concern for students' voices? (Their helpfulness in terms of the subject-matters, research activities and private life affairs)
7. What do you think about the term projects required by the professors? Necessary or non-essential? More than you could handle or posing sensible challenge?
8. The comprehensive exam, what do you think about it? Necessary or redundant? Productive or non-productive? Any challenges?
9. Regarding the supervision you have received, how has the quality of that supervision been? Any points of strength or weakness?
10. About your current status, which phase of the program are you in at the moment? What progress have you made? What requirements do you have to meet? What challenges are you facing? (Not meant for graduates)

11. What do you think about your viva? You think you will manage to hold it on your schedule or not? What are the challenges and the opportunities?

Any recommendations for new PhD arrivals, other students, program designers, faculty members?

Authors' Biographies



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