Evaluating the In-service Online Teacher Training Courses of the 12th Grade Secondary Schools in Iran from the Teachers' Point of View

Firoozeh Mohammadian[1] , Ardeshir Danesh[*2]

Department of English Language and Literature, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran. [1]

[*]Department of English Language and Literature, Boroujerd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Boroujerd, Iran. [2]

Abstract

This study presents a critical diagnosis of in-service teacher-training activities offered to English language teachers in Iran and aims to investigate whether those teachers were fulfil their expectations. Forty-one English-language teachers participated in this study. Data were collected from 41 secondary-school teachers of English as a foreign language, using a general evaluation questionnaire prepared by Uysal (2012). To analyze the data, the researcher used the frequency and a t-test to answer the study's questions. According to the results, Iranian EFL teachers believed that the contents of teacher training programs were far from the reality of the actual classroom situations. The results also revealed that the teachers were not satisfied with their in-service teacher-training activities, which did not fulfill their needs. In this study, the teachers also offered suggestions for the subsequent in-service programs to be held effectively.

Keywords: Distance learning (online learning), Evaluation, In-Service Education, Teacher Education

Introduction

Educational and training institutions are taken into consideration the contraptions of improvement and development in every society. One of the pillars of these institutions is experienced and knowledgeable instructors who lead the youth of their society to high objectives through their own knowledge and practice. Thus doing, they work to improve their own society. To possess such teachers in societies, they must participate in classes of training, retraining, internship, and in-service training (Soltan-ol-gharaie, 1994). Continuousness is the basic concept underlying 'lifelong education.' High-quality education is based on teacher quality, and 'continuousness' is one of the essential factors in teacher training. 'Continuous Professional Development—CPD' consists of four similar parts: 1) pre-service or initial teacher education; 2) in-service teacher training (INSET); 3) further education; and 4) vocational training/education, which is the underlying principle of 'lifelong education' (ECA, 2006, p.7).

A glimpse at a review of literature depicts that many countries consider in-service training (hereafter INSET) programs as significant for teacher professionalism since such programs play an essential role in increasing the quality of education. These programs focus on creating a change in the teachers' behavior after they start their profession. Such programs provide life-long support for teachers. Teachers usually participate in INSET programs after their initial education to boost their efficiency and professional development. In other words, INSET programs are either means for some teachers to keep in touch with the recent developments in their respective field, or for some others an opportunity to refresh and broaden their previous knowledge as well as their teaching skills practice and management ability to cope with the problems in future. Teacher education programs can function as an essential link between a nation's institutions of higher learning and the public they are designed to serve (Shahmohammadi, 2012).

Unfortunately, reviewing the literature does not reveal any systematic, planned in-service Foreign Language Teacher Education program in Iran. Although there are very few special courses for an English teacher to take each year, teachers mostly claim that they pass these courses because their certificates are valuable in their evaluation. Teacher educators in charge of these classes are usually those who are accessible and have not received any professional training for the task; the content of the classes is generally determined by the

teacher educators' ability and not based on any specified content. In addition, teachers' needs and motivations are not usually considered.

Most of the time, new teachers feel that they have not adequately been prepared to face the real teaching context in classes. They usually think that two or three sessions of observation are not enough to make them a skillful teacher; the pre-service courses they took mainly were general, reasonably theoretical, and not directly relevant to their teaching obligations, and thus much of what they need to know has to be learned after entering the job (Richards & Farrel, 2005). On the other hand, experienced English teachers are proficient in class management and teaching skills; however, they feel they need to be updated with the new changes in foreign language teaching concepts and methodology and the use of technology as a device in their teaching. Therefore, the need for an in-service teacher development program is strongly felt. The most important thing that must be done is the evaluation of the in-service programs.

Recently, in Iran, the holding of in-service programs has been changed, and these programs hold online, and it would be beneficial to assess both the teachers and the attitudes towards online INSET. The in-service programs for English books in high school, vision 1,2,3, were held online. This study was contributed to evaluate and examine the effectiveness and the extent to which online in-service training courses influence the performance of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and identify their needs, pros, and cons in these courses. There is a need for research to evaluate EFL teachers' online in-service training courses to reveal the program aspects that need to be improved and maintained from teachers' perspectives.

Literature Review

Nowadays, the use of communication technology has become an essential part of the teaching-learning process. The emergence of new technologies prompted educators to understand and apply these technologies for classroom use. Online learning is defined as an innovative form of distance education that delivers instruction to a remote audience, using computer networks as the primary medium. In particular, online learning has captured the attention of many educational institutions throughout the world. As a result, over the past few years, the number of online courses has increased to accommodate the increasing number of

students interested in online learning. The rationale underlying the application of new technology is attributed to many economic, political, and societal factors. These factors include low cost, full access to various learning resources, and the ability to provide high-quality learning to off-campus learners providing students with more opportunities for interaction with instructors, access to diverse learning resources, and development of specific skills, such as time management (Al-Jabri, 2012).

Although online learning has got a special place in modern education, however, when applied in teacher education learning, the attitudes towards online may be different. As noted by Dam and Blom (2006), if the online teacher education programs are well-designed to create new opportunities in teacher education, the cost of teacher training activities can be reduced. Hence, research shows that online education via the web allows learners to develop new learning experiences by managing self-directed learning and sharing information and ideas cooperatively and collaboratively. Online in-service programs with the removal of time and space barriers will provide more teachers with getting instruction at any time and place.

As Freeman (1989) argues, there are mainly three kinds of intervention a teacher educator can carry out in teacher education. First, the directive option that the teacher educator decides, comment on the student-teachers teaching, give suggestions for change. It is the teacher educator who is the class authority. He directs and organizes all the activities; the student teachers should accept and follow the model. Second is the alternative option: the teacher educator chooses a point from practical teaching and then prepares alternative ways to handle that point in the actual situation. The student teachers can select one or more options and then express their reasons for accepting or rejecting an opportunity. The purpose is to develop student teachers' awareness of the selections and make decisions about what and how to teach. Finally, a non-directive option follows the client-centered therapy through which the client discovers and comes to a conclusion. The purpose of a non-directive choice is to help the student teachers to clarify the perception of what they do in the classroom, and the teacher educator needs not to accept or reject it, but they should discuss it.

After graduation, teachers can enter the job and teach English in classes. Most of the time, these new teachers feel that they have not adequately been prepared to face the real teaching context in classes. They usually think that two or three sessions of observation are not enough to make them a skillful teacher; the pre-service courses they took mainly were

general, reasonably theoretical, and not directly relevant to their teaching obligations, and thus much of what they need to know has to be learned after entering the job (Richards & Farrel, 2005). On the other hand, experienced English teachers are proficient in class management and teaching skills; however, they feel they need to be updated with the new changes in foreign language teaching concepts and methodology and the use of technology as a device in their teaching. Therefore, the need for an in-service teacher development program is strongly felt.

Shahmohammadi (2012) has attempted to study the state of pre-service and in-service programs for teachers in Iran. She specifically tried to find out the aims of in-service programs, their organization, nature of the curriculum, the methods of teaching, and evaluation techniques, educational agencies involved in this program, and its strengths and weaknesses. A questionnaire was used to collect data from the target group. After administering some interview sessions on government officials and teacher educators, she concluded that recent student-centered learning and qualitative assessment changes had brought teaching closer to the ideal status. However, her findings revealed that there were specified and defined objectives; the organization was satisfactory. On the contrary, a study conducted by Birjandi, Derakhshan, and Hesari (2010) in Iran revealed that most teachers were not satisfied with the in-service program; they believed that the program could not boost their proficiency level.

Birjandi and Derakhshan (2010) conducted another study. They sought to explore the perceptions of Iranian EFL instructors and teachers regarding in-service programs presenting an ideal status. Their findings indicated that instructors and teachers had different perceptions of these in-service programs. Though most teachers were satisfied with these programs, they were not motivated enough to attend these programs. Furthermore, most instructors favored improvements in the educational plans and programs since they were not satisfied with the in-service programs. Teachers needed to be motivated to participate in these programs, and the instructors were to address the needs of the teachers attending these programs.

Another study was carried out by Rajabi, Kiany, and Maftoon (2011). The purpose of the study was to investigate the effects of an ESP in-service teacher training program on the perceptions and instructional practices of Iranian ESP teachers and the students' achievements. The results indicated a significant difference between the achievements of

students who benefited from trained teachers compared to those who received training from the teacher's not attending this program. In addition, Uysal, H. H. (2012) stated that despite the critical importance of in-service education programs (INSETs) for teachers' ongoing professional development, educators often report problems concerning many INSETs. However, due to the lack of systematic evaluation studies of INSETs, especially in the language education field, specific issues in these courses cannot be diagnosed, and they are left unresolved. Therefore, the present study evaluates a one-week INSET offered by the Turkish Ministry of Education to explore its sustained impact on language teachers' attitudes, knowledge-base, and classroom practices. The program is first evaluated against the criteria for effective INSETs suggested by previous literature. Then, data were gathered through course materials analysis, interviews with trainers and teachers, and through a questionnaire distributed to 72 teachers 18 months after the course ended. Findings indicate that although the teachers' attitudes are positive towards the procedure in general, the program has limitations, especially in its planning and evaluation phases and its impact on teachers' practices.

The planning and evaluation stages of the course were seriously problematic, the course had no follow-up component, and the course suffered from various setbacks, such as insufficiency of materials and resources, lack of discussions about teachers' own problems to find solutions to them, uncomfortable setting, and transmission-based presentations. Nevertheless, the most crucial issue was that the course content was not based on the contextual needs of teachers, and the teachers were not involved in the planning and execution phases of the course. This lack of connection between the teachers' own realities and the INSET resulted in low sustained impact, especially on teachers' classroom practices, which supports the previous literature such as Fullan (2001) and Hayes (2000). In this study, teachers expressed a need for more time and resources such as handouts, materials, and CDs for future reference and classroom use. Therefore, technical and technological infrastructure should be provided by government authorities to meet this need. Teachers can also be given opportunities to prepare materials, activities, and games that are more appropriate for crowded classes and low proficiency level students parallel with their textbooks or syllabus.

Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward the current online in-service education programs related to

the twelfth-grade English book (vision 3). To address the purpose of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Did the teachers who participated in this research collectively satisfy the usefulness of the online in-service program?

2. Did the teachers that participated in this research collectively agree that the online in-service program had a perceived impact on teachers' self-perception, motivation, and knowledge-base?

Method

Participants

This study aimed to measure the perceptions of EFL teachers taught in twelfth grade toward the online in-service program, so both male and female teachers took part in this study. 41 of 102 EFL teachers in one social network took part in this study. All of the teachers had 2 to 30 years of teaching experience in high school, and their majors in the study included English literature, translation, and teaching. Their first language was Persian. The participants in the study were 41 high school teachers of English as a foreign language who participated in various online INSET activities organized by the Ministry of Education. The teacher's amount of teaching experience differed from two years to 30 years. Twenty-five of them were female, and 16 of them were male. The majority of the participants had a MA degree in TEFL.

The numbers of the teachers	41
Male	16
Female	25
Degree	BA 18
	MA20
	AD 1
	Doctoral 2

Instruments

The present study used a quantitative method design. Data were collected through both thorough quantitative data collection instruments, and a Questionnaire was applied in this study—forty-one high school EFL teachers, filled in the questionnaire. The five-point scale (strongly agree (5), agree (4), uncertain (3), disagree (2), strongly disagree (1)) questionnaire was intended to reveal student teachers' opinions on the sub-questions in the research question. The questionnaire included items that depend on Uysal's evaluation questionnaire (2012). The questionnaire sought student teachers' opinions of whether the program incorporates some of the essential features of an English teacher education program, what the program components are that should be improved and maintained, and what suggestions they can give to improve the program. There was some advice in the questionnaire to help them to fill it effectively. The questionnaire was prepared to consist of three main parts: The first part included questions about the teachers' demographic information, such as their gender, level of teaching experience, and their qualifications, and the other advice for giving opinions about the features of the online in-service program. The second part included statements related to the INSET course's aspects and the course's impact on teachers' self-perception, motivation, and knowledge-base. In the last part, two questions were asked about teacher's opinions, and they wrote their opinions about online INSET that they had participated in.

Procedures

First, designing a questionnaire for evaluating the online teacher training (in-service) was done by the researcher from Uysal's evaluation questionnaire (2012). Some items were added to it based on online INSET. It was reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient value of 0, 90. To determine the validity of the test, two TEFL experts were consulted about whether items are appropriate for the Iranian context and online INSET or not. Some items were added to the questionnaire for online learning. According to their ideas, some items were modified, and some of them were deleted. Then the questionnaire was shared in one social network among EFL high school teachers who took part in online in-service classes to fill it. The questionnaire was shared after six months from the online in-service program. The evaluation questionnaire was sent to the social network that the EFL teachers are the members of it. Out

of 102 teachers, 41 responded positively. This online in-service class was related to the twelfth-grade book (vision3) classes in high school. The result of these questioners was recorded.

Results

The first research question was "Did the teachers who participated in this research collectively satisfy the usefulness of the online in-service program?". For answering the first question, there are nineteen questions in the questionnaire related to the first question, and the results of this part have shown in the tables from 4.3.1 to 4.3.19. As demonstrated, most of the teachers didn't have positive opinions towards the aspects of the online INSET.

Table 1. The planning of the online course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	11	26.8	26.8	26.8
	Disagree	20	48.8	48.8	75.6
	Neutral	1	2.4	2.4	78.0
	Agree	8	19.5	19.5	97.6
	strongly agree	1	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Attention to teacher experience and context

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	18	43.9	43.9	43.9
	Disagree	14	34.1	34.1	78.0
	Neutral	1	2.4	2.4	80.5
	Agree	6	14.6	14.6	95.1
	strongly agree	2	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 3. The content of the online course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	15	36.6	36.6	36.6
	Disagree	18	43.9	43.9	80.5
	Agree	7	17.1	17.1	97.6
	strongly agree	1	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 4. Up-date information of the course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	9	22.0	22.0	22.0
	Disagree	17	41.5	41.5	63.4
	Neutral	8	19.5	19.5	82.9
	Agree	5	12.2	12.2	95.1
	strongly agree	2	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Based on the questionnaire results, most teachers (76%) said the course was not planned and organized well. The course was neither efficient nor effective at fulfilling teachers' educational needs of the teachers. They also expressed that the course in-service training activities have not considered the teachers' experience and the different situations they teach. More than half of respondents (63%) affirm dissatisfaction regarding the content and activities were up-to-date. However, 17% of them declared that the content and activities were new and related to the needs of the teachers.

Table 5. The motivation of the teachers to continue the course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	17	41.5	41.5	41.5
	Disagree	17	41.5	41.5	82.9
	Neutral	2	4.9	4.9	87.8
	Agree	3	7.3	7.3	95.1
	strongly agree	2	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 6. Given opportunities to implement what they learned during the course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	16	39.0	39.0	39.0
	Disagree	17	41.5	41.5	80.5
	Neutral	2	4.9	4.9	85.4
	Agree	4	9.8	9.8	95.1
	strongly agree	2	4.9	4.9	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 7. Useful course for their teaching and professional development

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	14	34.1	34.1	34.1
	disagree	16	39.0	39.0	73.2
	neutral	4	9.8	9.8	82.9
	Agree	5	12.2	12.2	95.1
	strongly agree	2	4.9	4.9	100.0

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Table 8. Providing the theoretical reasons for the activities

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	8	11.4	11.4	11.4
	Disagree	20	28.6	28.6	40.0
	Neutral	12	17.1	17.1	57.1
	Agree	24	34.3	34.3	91.4
	strongly agree	6	8.6	8.6	100.0
	Total	70	100.0	100.0	

As shown in the above tables, the most significant of this study is that more than 80% of respondents endorsed that there were not many opportunities to be asked to design lesson plan online and send and make different micro-teaching based on the other things they had learned in the course, however, the table represents that some of the teachers about 42% believed that the theories of the materials and activities were presented in the course. In conjunction with these, as the illustration suggests, most participants (73%) agree that the course was not valuable for their teaching and professional development.

Table 9. The adequate resources and materials such as pdf handouts

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	**strongly disagree**	15	36.6	36.6	36.6
	Disagree	14	34.1	34.1	70.7
	Neutral	8	19.5	19.5	90.2
	Agree	3	7.3	7.3	97.6
	strongly agree	1	2.4	2.4	100.0
	Total	41	100.0	100.0	

Discussion and conclusion

The results revealed that the teachers were not satisfied with the training provided in their in-service training. The EFL teachers believed that the activities of this in-service program were not valuable and more were theoretical since they couldn't use them in their class. Moreover, the results of the t-test revealed that the participants were not satisfied and thought that the training program was not efficient enough for the development and improvement in their performance.

In this study, the participants asserted that teachers were not provided with opportunities for maximum interaction. Therefore, there was not online-mentor support to scaffold the teachers for their problems. The mentors did not offer online continuous and configured consultancy service for the teachers attending the distant in-service training program by giving feedback on teachers' lesson plans and their teaching performances in the classroom, explaining the questions about the points of the content of the subject. Besides, they did not give feedback; the mentors did not assess teachers during the online in-service training via e-portfolios, including sample lesson plans and video recordings of teacher classroom performances.

An in-service teacher-training program aims to enable teachers to develop their knowledge in different aspects such as teaching skills, management skills, evaluation skills of students, and general knowledge and finally apply this knowledge in the classroom, and achieve the proceed behavioral changes. To effectively measure the program's success, the teachers' behaviors and knowledge levels both before and after the in-service teacher-training program should be compared in this study; the teachers disagreed that the online course developed their knowledge in terms of aspects stated. Based on the findings of this study and the other studies, the most critical problem in the different in-service programs is the educators rarely pay attention to the management and linguistic competence, and they do not have any plans for these two factors; however, the teachers need to improve their knowledge about the roles of the students, different styles of students, multi-intelligence, needs of the students and developing their general English.

The results of the study can be used to improve the present in-service program in Iran. First of all, it is the responsibility of the English teachers to improve themselves to those who teach reflectively and move ahead using the last changes in the field of English teaching. The next responsibility deals with the teacher educators and those who are in charge of running the courses. However, this study encountered some main limitations. First, due to time limitations, the researcher could not distribute the questionnaire to more teachers. Thus, the sample size is relatively small and may affect the generalizability of the results. The participants were selected from teachers of different areas and but a few participants in this social network answered this questionnaire. It also makes it challenging to provide a clear picture of Iranian teachers' perceptions of professional development programs. This study could not investigate all factors and variables of the in-service program.

References

Al-Jabri. A. (2012).Saudi college students' preferences for synchronous and asynchronous web
    Based Courses: An exploratory study. Retrieved from http://scholars.indstate.edu/bitstream/10484/3951 /1/ Abdullah%20Al-%20Jabri.pdf

Birjandi, P., & Derakhshan Hesari, A. (2010). Teachers' perceptions of the present and optimum
    status of the in-service EFL teacher preparation programs. *English* language *Teaching,3*(4),
    47-57.

Freeman, D. (1989). Teacher training, development, and decision making: A model of teaching
    and related strategies for language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly, 23,*27-45.

Fullan, M. (2001). The new meaning of educational change (3rd. edition). New York: Teachers
    College Press.

Hayes, D. (2000). Cascade training and teachers' professional development. *ELT Journal, 54*(2),
    135-145.

Rajabi, P., Kiany R.G. and Maftoon P. (2011). ESP in-service teacher training programs: Do
    they change Iranian teacher's beliefs, classroom practices and students' achievements?
    Ibérica, 24: 261 -282.

Richards, J. C., & Farrel, T. S. C. (2005*). Professional development for language teachers: Strategies for teacher training*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Shahmohammadi, N. (2012). Evaluation of teachers' education programs in Iran (Case Study).
    Journal of Educational and Social Research, 2 (2), 127-135.

Soltan-al-gharaie, Kh., (1994). The principles and philosophy of teachers' inservice training.
    Journal of educational technology, 10, 2, 28-29.

Ten Dam, G., & Blom, S. (2006). Learning through participation. The potential of school-based

teacher education for developing a professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education,*

22(6), 647-660.

Uysal, H. H. (2012). Evaluation of an in-service training program for primary-school language

teachers in Turkey. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 37*(7), 14-29.