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## Exploring Foreign Language Teachers Recruitment Criteria: A Qualitative Study

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## Exploring Foreign Language Teachers Recruitment Criteria: A Qualitative Study

### Abstract

Although qualities of effective language teachers have been well specified and well researched, recruiters may not be aware of these qualities or, in the light of local constraints, they may ignore these qualities and apply their own criteria. To uncover the criteria which are actually applied in recruiting language teachers, this qualitative study purposively sampled 15 supervisors who were in charge of recruiting language teachers in private language schools of Sari, the capital city of Mazandran province and then theoretically sampled their perspectives and analyzed them in line with the principles and procedures of grounded theory. Iterative data collection and analysis revealed that the participants considered nine qualities including educational background, professional experience, management skills, mastery over language skills and subskills in recruiting language teachers. The findings have clear implications for both recruiters and language teachers.

### Keywords

Recruitment Criteria, Language Teachers, Supervisors' Perspectives, Qualitative Study

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## Exploring Foreign Language Teachers Recruitment Criteria: A Qualitative Study

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*Although qualities of effective language teachers have been well specified and well researched, recruiters may not be aware of these qualities or, in the light of local constraints, they may ignore these qualities and apply their own criteria. To uncover the criteria which are actually applied in recruiting language teachers, this qualitative study purposively sampled 15 supervisors who were in charge of recruiting language teachers in private language schools of Sari, the capital city of Mazandran province and then theoretically sampled their perspectives and analyzed them in line with the principles and procedures of grounded theory. Iterative data collection and analysis revealed that the participants considered nine qualities including educational background, professional experience, management skills, mastery over language skills and subskills in recruiting language teachers. The findings have clear implications for both recruiters and language teachers. Keywords: Recruitment Criteria, Language Teachers, Supervisors' Perspectives, Qualitative Study*

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### Introduction

The field of language teacher education is no longer in its infancy since there are many language teacher education programs in different parts of the world; hence, is not difficult to find certified language teachers throughout the world. Nonetheless, in many Asian countries, language teachers are mainly recruited based on native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992). Because of the troubled relations between Iran and the Western countries, finding and recruiting native speakers is almost impossible for private language schools of Iran. Under such conditions, language teacher recruiters favor those who have a high level of speaking proficiency or those who lived part of their life in an English-speaking country. As Ostovar-Namaghi and Hosseini (2015) state, "In some contexts professionally untrained teachers are recruited simply because they are native speakers, while in some other contexts professionally untrained teachers are recruited simply because they can speak English fluently" (p. 839). Since these teachers are not professionally qualified, they fall short of supervisors' expectations. This qualitative study aims at voicing supervisors' concerns and exploring their suggestions for improvement. The findings of this study will be a set of language teacher recruitment criteria driven from the supervisors' perspectives. Coupled with theory-driven qualities of effective teachers, these criteria are hoped to shed some light on the process of language teacher recruitment.

## Review of Literature

Since teachers are the only people who are in tune with the heartbeat of the students, they play an important role in achieving educational goals. Professionalism is of utmost importance since professional teachers have a greater impact on educational outcomes. Considering the necessity and importance of professionalism, in what follows we will review characteristics of effective teachers which underlie the notion of professionalism.

### *Characteristics of an Effective English Language Teacher*

To be qualified to teach, teachers should be endowed with unique characteristics of the field as well as the general features of an effective teacher (Steinberg & Horvath, 1995). With a focus on general characteristics, Brown (1978) suggests that a good language teacher is someone who empathizes with his students, insures the presence of meaningful communicative contexts in classroom and encourages students' self-esteem. On the other hand, Sanderson (1983) focuses on pedagogic knowledge and states that an effective teacher predominantly uses the target language, has a clear pronunciation, stress and intonation, gets students involved in activities and is flexible with regard to objectives. Similarly, Neil (1991) emphasizes "teacher knowledge of the subject to be taught" and "skill in how to teach that subject." Therefore, to be qualified to enter the teaching profession, teachers should possess both general and field-specific features of effective teachers.

Along the same lines, Miller (1987) states four major issues related to the concept of being an effective teacher: (1) effective characteristics; (2) teaching skills; (3) academic knowledge; and (4) classroom management. Effective characteristics refer to issues such as establishing positive relations with the students and showing interest in learners. Teaching skills consists of a teacher's knowledge about the subject, pupils, curriculum, and also effective use of the teaching methods and materials. Academic knowledge addresses teachers' subject knowledge and the ability to teach their subject to their students. And finally, management refers to maintaining the necessary discipline for instruction to take place effectively.

In this vein, Darling-Hammond and Berry (2006) also highlight the importance of knowledge of subject matter for teachers. According to them a teacher's knowledge of subject matter plays a significant role on students' achievement. Likewise, Gudmundsdottir (1987) defines subject-matter knowledge as "teacher's understandings of the subject she/he teaches" (p. 6). Besides subject-matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills are among the underlying constructs of an effective English language teacher (Park & Lee, 2006). Vélez-Rendón (2002) defined subject-matter knowledge as what teachers know about what they teach and pedagogical knowledge as what teachers know about teaching their subjects. In other words, subject-matter knowledge in foreign language education refers to the target language proficiency in many cases, whereas pedagogical knowledge alludes to second/foreign language acquisition theories, teaching methods, and testing. Shulman (1986) argued that pedagogical knowledge included ideas, concepts, analogies, explanations, and demonstrations used to make the subject-matter comprehensible to students. Shulman's argument reveals that foreign language learning theories and teaching methods are essential domains of foreign language education. These theories and methods should be studied in-depth and be at the core of foreign language education programs for prospective and in-service teachers.

Another important trait to be considered in defining the qualities of effective teachers is the issue of professionalism. Teacher professionalism is often referred to as knowing how to teach efficiently. According to Wang and Lin (2013) acquiring pedagogical knowledge

through professional training represents an essential part of teacher professionalism. Hence, professionalism needs to be cultivated through well-designed or accredited teacher training programs.

### *Certification*

In many countries teacher qualifications that are considered to be related to student learning have become desirable targets of teacher education reform. Some of these reforms call for the professionalization of teacher education by making it longer, upgrading it to graduate programs, and regulating it through mechanisms of licensure, certification, and promotion aligned with standards (Darling-Hammond, 1998, 1999; Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thorenson, 2001; Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

The research on teacher certification and its impact on students' achievement are still unconvincing. While teachers' educational background may vary, they are easier to identify and measure than other abstract indicators of teacher quality. Leak and Farkas (2011) argues that degree level, coursework, and certification level are all aspects that have been looked at as components of teacher quality that could help to explain changes in student achievement. According to them degree level signals time that teachers have spent learning content knowledge and pedagogical skills, coursework shows the development of content knowledge in a specific area, and certification shows that teachers have met certain standards that are accepted and agreed upon by administrators, researchers, and expert teachers. It is taken for granted that teachers with high qualifications and educational background are considered effective teachers who can promote students' learning. Research has shown that teachers working in the area in which they are certified yield more influence over students' learning than their uncertified counterparts (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Darling-Hammond, Berry, & Thorenson, 2001; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000). For administrators, high qualifications mean that a teacher has invested time in being trained, and that s/he has the necessary skills to be an effective teacher.

In the Chinese educational system, teacher quality depends on teacher education background, teaching awards and teacher rank to identify qualified teachers, at first, policymakers use teacher education background to screen individual teachers for prerequisite training and ability. Second, policymakers have developed a system where teachers bestow teaching awards to one another based on results from classroom audits. Finally, they are routinely ranked to find out if they should be promoted (Chu et al., 2015).

### *Experience*

Teaching experience is also believed to be one of the most important aspects that make up teachers' qualities (Johnston, Pawan, & Mahan-Taylor, 2005; Yeh, 2005). According to Freeman (2001) teachers who have been working for less than three years are viewed as novice, while those working for five or more years are "experienced." Alatis (2007) also argues that experience contributes to teachers' theory building. Alatis mentions several aspects that make up teachers' theory building. These are teachers' experience as a language learner and as a teacher, professional development (training), and classroom practices, and teaching reflection. These all become teachers' collections of cognitive information. The collection of cognitive information then shapes the teachers' characteristics and their characteristics are represented in their daily teaching activities along with their teaching career development. The differences between expert and novice teachers relate to complexity and sophistication of their thoughts about teaching. Experts tend to be more analytical, more aware of complexity and have more enriched conceptual repertoires

regarding teaching than novices (Dunkin, 2002). Regarding teacher knowledge in the classroom, experienced teachers are differentiated from novice teachers on different grounds. Barnett and Hodson (2001) view teacher knowledge as including classroom knowledge, professional knowledge, academic and research knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (PCK).

Efficacy beliefs of novice teachers are related to stress and commitment to teaching, as well as satisfaction with support and preparation. Novice teachers who have a high sense of teacher efficacy find greater satisfaction in teaching, have a more positive reaction to teaching, and experience less stress. Efficacious beginning teachers rate the quality of their preparation higher and the difficulty of teaching lower than those who are less efficacious. Efficacy beliefs of experienced teachers seem resistant to change. Evidence suggests that the input teachers receive during pre-service programs are different from the input they receive after they enter the profession teachers are in the field (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy & Hoy, 1998) Based on their pre-service education, they are cognizant with universally applicable principles of teaching but as Ostovar-Namaghi (2010) states, they enter the profession with little or no knowledge of the culturally valued modes of thought and action. In the process of socialization not only do they modify their previous knowledge but also develop the situated nature of teaching knowledge.

Tsui (2003) summarized characteristics of experienced and novice teachers and reported two differences. To start with, expert teachers are more efficient in planning, autonomous and flexible in both planning and teaching. They are also able to recognize meaningful patterns quickly. Similarly, Hogan, Rabinowitz, and Craven (2003) compared novice and expert teachers and mentions that experts differed from novice ones in 4 main characteristics: (1) expert teachers were found to plan both long-term (overall curriculum) and short-term (lesson plan), while novices tended to focus on short-term planning; (2) the strategies that were planned by expert teachers to teach specific skills were more than the ones used by novice teachers; (3) unlike expert teachers who perceived of the class as comprised of unique individuals, novice teachers saw the class as a whole; and (4) student achievement was important for expert teachers, while novice teachers paid more attention to class interest.

### *The Sense of Self-Efficacy*

One of the main intrinsic factors in human beings refers to self-efficacy which takes its origin from Bandura's (1986, 1995) social cognitive theory. He defines this concept as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1995, p. 2). Consequently, self-efficacy is not concerned with how much expertise the individuals possess; rather it deals with making evaluation of how successfully they can perform a set of actions with regard to their real capabilities (Bandura, 1986).

One feature that might influence how teachers effectively perform their job in the classroom is their sense of self-efficacy. In this direction, Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy (1998) define teacher self-efficacy as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (p. 22). Teacher self-efficacy can influence the various dimensions of the teaching profession. In relation to the effects of self-efficacy on the behaviors of teachers in the classroom, high self-efficacious teachers are more persistent in challenging situations, more resilient in unsuccessful situations, and more hard-working with struggling students (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998). Therefore, as Woolfolk Hoy (2004) states, teachers' sense of self-

efficacy is viewed as a “cyclical process” in which more sense of self-efficacy causes more endeavor, persistence, and superior action resulting in an enriched sense of self-efficacy and vice versa.

### *Language Proficiency*

Indeed, foreign language proficiency has been considered a crucial variable important to foreign language teaching (Buchmann, 1984; Lafayette, 1993; Schulz, 2000). Buchmann (1984) argued that teachers' command of a foreign language made it possible to use the target language in class, personalize lessons according to students' backgrounds, and facilitate effective lesson planning. More specifically, Lafayette (1993) speculated that the recommended level of teachers' foreign language proficiency ought to be the advanced level as determined by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Schulz (2000) indicated that the adequate linguistic proficiency required for effective foreign language teaching should be determined imminently.

Although features of effective teachers abound in the literature, there has always been a heated debate on the superiority of native English speaker teachers (NEST) over non-native English speaker teachers (NNEST). This preference might be attributed to the fact that many English learners and administrators believe that NESTs are the ideal teachers. As Phillipson (1992) asserts, this superiority is called “the native speaker fallacy” which refers to unfair treatment of qualified non-native speaker teachers. This perspective is biased since it ignores all the features specified in the literature for effective teachers and judges teachers on the basis of their language background.

Kaplan (1999) questions discriminatory hiring practices and suggests, “teachers of English to speakers of other languages should be hired on the basis of their qualifications as teachers, without reference to the relative native-ness of their English proficiency.” He contends that “the ability to speak, hear, read and write some variety of English” is important, but so is the “ability to teach in the particular environment.” (p. 6). Widdowson (1994) argues that NESTs have an advantage in the “context of language use” but not necessarily in the “context of language learning” (p. 387). Medgyes (1992), while maintaining that NESTs have an advantage because of their high proficiency in the target language, argues that NNS teachers also have an advantage in serving as a good learning model. He also argues that NNS teachers, in addition to speaking the learners' L1, are able to share the difficulties they experienced and their learning strategies with learners. Since teachers are either native or non-native speakers, Medgyes (2001) proposes four hypotheses which differentiate them: (1) they differ in terms of language proficiency; (2), they differ in terms of their teaching behavior; (3); the discrepancy in language proficiency accounts for most of differences found in their teaching behavior; and (4), they can be equally good teachers on their own terms” (p. 434).

Similarly, a number of scholars (Johnson & Johnson 1998; Stern, 1983) have defined native speakers' characteristics as follows: subconscious knowledge of rules, intuitive grasp of meanings, ability to communicate within social settings, range of language skills, creativity of language use, and ability to produce fluent speech. Medgyes (2001) characterizes NNESTs as “good role models, effective providers of learning strategies, suppliers of information about English language, facilitators of language learning as a result of shared mother tongue” (p. 436).

Keeping the above-mentioned theoretical perspectives in mind, a number of empirical findings show that effective teachers:

- should possess personal characteristics like enthusiasm, friendliness, being passionate for teaching, self-confidence, responsibility, leniency (Arikan, Tasher & Sarach-Suzer, 2008; Calabria, 1960; Chen, 2012; Feldman, 1976; Salahshour & Hajizadeh, 2012; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001)
- should have mastery over the target language, good knowledge of pedagogy and use particular techniques and methods (Babai & Sadeghi, 2009; Brosh, 1996; Feldman, 1976; Miller, 1987; Park & Lee, 2006; Pettis, 1997; Wichadee, 2010)
- should have high self-efficacy beliefs (Bobbett, 2001; Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003; Tshannan-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998)
- can be either native or non-native English speakers but NESTs are superior to their NNESTs counterparts in language proficiency (Mahboob, 2004; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014).
- should have a certificate in language education since it positively affects students' gains (Chu et al. 2015; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000).
- should be experienced since this feature positively affects students' achievement (Klitgaard & Hall, 1974; Murnane & Philips, 1981).
- should have higher academic degrees since their academic background gives rise to a higher sense of efficacy (Campbell, 1996; Cantrell, Young, & Moore, 2003; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993).

### **Purpose of the Study**

As the review clearly shows, the field is rich in terms of theoretical perspectives concerning qualities of effective teachers and it seems that recruiters can make informed decisions in recruiting qualified teachers because many of these qualities have been empirically tested. What is missing, however, is the extent to which language teacher recruiters are aware of these qualities and the extent to which they actually apply them in recruiting teachers. Moreover, language teacher qualifications are far from universal since there are lots of contextual constraints that make recruiters decide against their professional knowledge and judgments. Thus, the field is in need of qualitative studies that explore the criteria, which are actually applied, from the whole repertoire of theoretically justified and empirically verified qualifications in recruiting language teachers. To fill in this gap, this data-driven study aims to explore supervisors' perspectives on language teacher recruitment in private language schools of Sari, the capital city of Mazandaran province, north of Iran, and uncover the criteria they actually apply in language teacher recruitment. As a second objective, it aims at uncovering the rationale behind supervisors' and recruiters' choice of one criterion over another.

### **Research Context**

Language education in Iran is run under two separate sectors with different objectives. Language education in public high schools aims at developing students' reading proficiency with a focus on vocabulary and grammar. This is justified on two grounds. First, the time allocated to language education in the overall high school curriculum is not sufficient to cover all language skills. Second, knowing that English is the language of science, technology, and medicine, the language education curriculum in public high school focuses exclusively on reading to enable students to read academic texts after they enter the university. English is the dominant international lingua franca; however, there is an ever-



increasing number of pre-literate and literate learners who need to develop their basic interpersonal communication skills. To respond to this emergent need, the country has witnessed a mushrooming growth of private language schools in the past few years. One of the challenges of these language schools is hiring qualified language teachers, since due to the nature of language education in public high schools, supervisors running these private schools believe teachers teaching in the public sector are not qualified and more to the point due to post-revolutionary problems of the country, they cannot hire qualified teachers from English speaking countries. Amongst these challenges, they exercise their personal judgment which is biased towards speaking proficiency at the cost of other features of effective language teachers.

This study was motivated by teachers' dissatisfaction with language teacher recruitment criteria expressed in the teachers' lounge during the tea break. Being practitioners ourselves, we did our best to address this concern by exploring and conceptualizing supervisors' perspectives on recruitment. This study is not funded by any agencies and it reflects our interest in language teacher education.

### **Research Method**

Following Glaser (1998), a classic grounded theory (CGT) approach was used in this study to generate a substantive theory abstract of "time, place, and people" (Glaser, 2009, p. 24). The constant comparative method together with iterative data collection and analysis were the guiding principles for simultaneous data collection, data analysis, and coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

#### *Participants*

The participants of this study were supervisors who were in charge of recruiting EFL teachers in Sari, the capital city of Mazandaran Province, north of Iran. Instead of following a statistical sampling procedure, we purposively selected experienced supervisors who were willing to share their views with us. Having explained the purpose and rationale of the study and having sought participants' informed consent, we interviewed 15 supervisors from various language institutes of Sari. The participants were both male and female supervisors aging between 28 to 45 years. Their professional experience ranged between 6 and 17 years. As for their academic background, 3 had earned their B.A. in English literature, 9 had earned their M.A. in TEFL and the rest had earned their Ph.D. in TEFL.

#### *Data Collection*

Prior to data collection, we obtained ethical approval from Mazandaran Bureau of Education (MBE). Having read the rationale behind CGT approach, MBE approved of the interview guide that contained the grand tour question: "What criteria do you usually use to recruit foreign language teachers for your language institute?" Furthermore, we sought informed consent of the participants and ensured them that: (1) they can withdraw from the study at any stage; (2) the information they provided will not be revealed to any third parties; and (3) the final report will not reveal their real identity.

To avoid any preconceptions (Glaser, 2014), we collected a first set of data through the grand tour question. We used several follow-up questions that came to us as the interview progressed. To encourage the supervisors to elaborate on their perspectives, we used the "six C's" (Glaser, 1978, p. 74). The "six C's" is a code that classifies data into general categories: causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariance and conditions (Glaser, 1978). We

also made field notes during and after interviews and compared these with the recorded interviews. Subsequent interviews evolved in line with the concepts being developed. When we found that the elicited information was redundant and superfluous, which meant that theoretical saturation had been reached, we stopped data collection and analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

We transcribed all the interview data verbatim and started analysis by reading through transcripts line-by-line. While reading, we constantly kept the central question of the CGT method in mind: “What is this data a study of, and what category does this incident indicate?” (Glaser, 1978, pp. 57-58). Glaser (1978) defines the line-by-line approach as the second rule that governs open coding. Throughout the entire process we also wrote memos, which helped us to conceptualize the incidents that we found in the data. After the initial five interviews, the main criteria for language teacher recruitment emerged from the data and the direction in which to take the study during theoretical sampling became clear to us. Many of the concepts we found during open coding were directly or indirectly related to language teacher recruitment.

Through theoretical sampling, we conducted ten additional interviews to deepen our understanding of recruitment criteria, to fill in the missing links and disambiguate the convoluted concepts and categories. During selective coding we tried to identify further concepts and the properties and dimensions of previously emerged concepts. By writing memos, we were able to conceptualize the data. Coding interviews yielded 120 conceptual categories. With further analysis, we were able to redistribute the 120 codes into nine categories denoting the criteria supervisors used to recruit foreign language teachers.

## **Results**

### *Educational Background*

The initial stage of the teacher admission process in private language institutes is submitting a hand-written resume. Among the participant institutes, nine of them required a resume. The major criterion which is evaluated in applicants' resumes is their educational background. This part of a resume consists of any educational credential or other certificates of the applicants. Among the institutes which participated in this study there is a contradictory view among supervisors on applicants' educational background. While some supervisors are very strict and precise about this criterion, other recruiters are doubtful about its use. Reiterating the importance of educational background, one of the participants said:

When an applicant delivers his resume, I look at his educational background. Those whose fields of study are anything but English will be eliminated. I do not accept language certificates such as IELTS and TOFEL. These applicants may have excellent language proficiency but experience shows that in most cases they are not efficient teachers. I prefer those applicants who have a bachelor degree and of course, those with higher education are more likely to be recruited.

Employers are now looking for the very best employees and they are judging applicants on the basis of education and learning and the legitimacy of the credentials they earned throughout their studies. Having a qualification shows recruiters that applicants are able to learn and take on new challenges. One of the participants explained:

Having a qualification is essential in applying for a teaching job in our institute. When I read applicants' resumes, I prioritize those who have a university degree. And I strongly believe that they have to be educated in one of the English fields, i.e., translation, linguistic, literature or TEFL. In my opinion, applicants whose field of study is English are better prepared for the job because they are cognizant with the theories of learning and teaching.

On the other hand, some of the participants do not see educational background as a necessary condition for language teaching. They prefer those applicants who have native-like proficiency. One of the participants explains:

For me there are lots of other criteria which are much more important than educational background, one of which is the applicant's speaking proficiency. If the person has an acceptable speaking ability, there is no need to ask him about his educational background. He may even have some other certificates or be a graduate from our institute. Applicants who have graduated from our institutes are even better prepared for the job than those applicants who have a university degree.

It seems that the salient characteristic of a good and effective teacher is his or her speaking ability which works as a mask that covers all other deficiencies. Most of institutes consider speaking proficiency as the most important recruitment criteria and ignore other characteristics. One of the supervisors said:

In our institute, we have some really good teachers who have studied management and engineering, but they are fluent English speakers. In contrast, there are many teachers with a BA or MA in TEFL who do not meet this basic requirement. In our institute having a university degree in English is not important at all.

### *Professional Experience*

Another essential factor in recruitment concerns applicants' years of experience. Professional experience provides an important avenue through which pre-service teachers develop and demonstrate the professional standards. Professional experience involves engaging in all aspects of the teaching process, in different settings and with a range of learners. One of the participants explained the difference between new and more experienced teachers:

Another important criterion in the resume is applicants' years of experience. For our institute recruiting experienced teachers is very critical. Of course, the difference between a novice and an experienced teacher is well-understood. For one thing, new teachers have low level of self-efficacy and classroom teaching time. And in some cases, new teachers struggle to provide effective instruction in their classrooms because they spend class time keeping order among students. In other words, they are more involved in classroom management than teaching.

In some institutes, recruiters recognize applicants' years of experience as a key factor in their decisions. The underlying assumption is that experience promotes effectiveness and also enhances the knowledge, skill and productivity of learners. Some of the participants consider this factor as an essential one and they even go further and describe a good language teacher as the one who has several years of teaching experience:

Of course, one of the most salient features of a good teacher is his ability to teach. And he can only gain this ability through experience which can be achieved through trial and error. It means that the teacher should implement a special technique in the classroom and assess its outcomes in order to make sure that the technique is useful in facilitating learning. Therefore, I only focus on those resumes in which the applicant has at least three years of teaching experience.

On the other hand, there are some institutes who are hiring less costly novice teachers- often energetic college graduates- and involve these inexperienced teachers in teacher training courses in order to gain the required expertise. One of the participants clarified the point and explained:

Of course, we welcome experienced teachers with open arms; however, most of our applicants are novice and have just graduated the university. Considering other factors like personality and their educational background, rather than excluding these novice teachers, we give them an opportunity to prove themselves, provided that they take the crash teacher training program we offer.

Novice teachers do not enter the teaching profession with blank slates. They have their own beliefs, ideas and strategies. However, some supervisors claim that it is easier to change novices' beliefs and adopt them in accordance of their institutes' standards. In line with this, one of the participants explains:

It is understood that everyone has to start from somewhere. And I think it is unfair if we do not give the novice teachers a chance to start their professional jobs. In my opinion, we can mold novice teachers based on our own rules and beliefs. I am pretty sure one who deserves to be a teacher will gain the expertise required to be effective and successful.

Educational background and professional experience of applicants seem to be the two most important factors in evaluating applicants' quality and competence. However, in addition to these two factors, they evaluate teachers' grammar, spelling and their hand-writing.

### *Mastery of Vocabulary and Knowledge of Grammar*

The next stage of teacher admission process is asking applicants to take a proficiency test. However, not all institutes measure applicant' proficiency. In most cases, they heavily rely on applicants' speaking ability. In eight participant institutes, supervisors evaluate applicants' proficiency through an exam which is either the same or an adapted version of an international English language proficiency test like the TOEFL.

Participants believed that grammar is the structural foundation of our ability to express ourselves. The more we are aware of how it works, the more we can monitor the

meaning and effectiveness of the way we and others use language. One of the participants explained:

Having a good command of English grammar can be beneficial for applicants both in their speaking and writing ability. In multiple choice questions of grammar, applicants are faced with some tricky grammatical points. Only those applicants who have prepared themselves for the test can answer these grammatical questions.

The importance of grammar cannot be neglected in teaching and learning a foreign language. When it comes to English language teachers, good English grammar becomes exceptionally noticeable. Participants believed grammar is the language model; hence, teachers should improve their knowledge of grammar and structure. One of the participants explained:

Grammar is the glue that holds words and sentences together in order to convey a special message. Since knowing grammatical is part and parcel of teachers' communicative competence, it is crucial for the supervisor to assess the extent to which the applicants are grammatically competent. EFL teachers should have a full command of English grammar and they should also be able to expose the correct form to students.

Not only did the participants reiterated the role of grammar, they also believed that vocabulary size is a very good predictor of language ability and a prerequisite for reading and listening. It is evident that low vocabulary size negatively affect the process of reading comprehension. While the tool for the construction of text meaning is syntax, the cornerstone of any text interpretation of the meaning is undoubtedly the lexicon. One of the participants mentions:

Another module in this exam which should be assessed is applicants' vocabulary knowledge. The size of a person's working vocabulary is both a measure of educational attainment and a key to academic and career success. Applicants should have in mind that to be successful in reading, writing, listening and more importantly in speaking, it is crucial that language teachers enlarge their vocabulary.

In addition to teaching grammatical rules, English teachers must help their students extend their vocabulary. And in order for that to happen, teachers need to be lexically competent. One of the participants explains how students judge a teacher who may have limited vocabulary knowledge:

Perhaps the greatest tool a teacher can give students to succeed in their education is a large and rich vocabulary. Unfortunately, students expect a lot; they consider the teacher as a dictionary. It means that they expect the teacher to know all the English words. If the teacher falls short of their expectations or if s/he is unable to answer word-related questions, they will quickly stigmatize him of being illiterate.

### *Writing Skill*

Writing skill seems to be the most difficult skill for an EFL teacher. Amongst the supervisors who participated in the study, few of them assess and evaluate applicants' writing skill. The usefulness of a writing exam seems to be dependent on the level a teacher is going to teach. Only when the teacher is hired to teach at high levels of proficiency, do the recruiters check his or her writing skill. Explaining the occasions in which the applicant's writing is not assessed, one of the participants added:

Evaluating applicants' writing skill is time-consuming. In our institute, we don't consider applicants' writing skill, unless we hire him or her for advanced level. Actually, most of the time, we appoint experienced teachers who are competent and qualified for teaching writing skill for advanced levels not the newly-employed teachers.

The usefulness of a writing exam depends on what level the teacher is going to teach. In most institutes, supervisors assign the newly-employed teachers to teach basic levels. Due to this reason, applicants' writing skills are not evaluated as a recruitment criterion. One of the participants explains:

It is well understood that writing skill is one of the most difficult skills for Iranian teachers and students. I myself have deficiency in writing a well-developed essay. Well, it is not essential to assess all applicants' writing skill. Because not all of them are competent in teaching writing, so we just assess their speaking ability, their grammar and vocabulary not their abilities to write.

Some supervisors, however, are strict on applicants' writing skill. They believe that an effective teacher is one who is competent in all language skills. Applicants should be able to use some complex sentence types and have an understanding of the relevant tenses and structures. One of the participants explained:

At the end of multiple-choice questions, there is a writing task. This task aims at assessing applicants' use of correct and appropriate grammar and the range of sentence types they produce. Knowing grammar is one thing and being able to use grammar to express your intentions is a horse of a different color.

Supervisors considered applicants' writing style as the most cherished asset. Participants believe that having a rich vocabulary and grammar repertoire helps applicants to do better on the writing module since these two factors are the essence of communication. One of the participants mentions:

There are several criteria which should be evaluated on applicants' writings. One of the criteria which should be considered is the way applicants organize their ideas. The words and the grammar they use to form their ideas can have a great effect on our decision. Sometimes, correct use of sophisticated words and complex grammar can show applicants' knowledge.

### *Speaking Skill*

Participants complained that applicants are mainly recruited based on their speaking proficiency. Language schools favor teachers who have a high level of speaking proficiency. Teachers of English who are not competent enough in this skill are often perceived as having a lower status than their counterparts, and they also face discriminatory attitudes when applying for teaching positions. Along these lines, one of the participants explains the importance of this skill and clarifies that teachers with deficiencies in mastering their speaking ability are marginalized in their profession:

Well, as is the case with most institutes, we always look for a teacher with native-like proficiency. Unfortunately, this skill can mask all other deficiencies. It has become a norm that a good English teacher is necessarily a good English speaker. To be honest, in an interview session the final decision will be made based on the applicants speaking ability irrespective of whether he shows any acceptable level of proficiency in other areas or not.

For the majority of learners, the ultimate goal of studying English language is to be able to communicate in English. Hiring teachers with native-like speaking proficiency reflects the stakeholders' pressure. Language schools try to satisfy their customers, i.e., the students, by providing them with what they expect. Language learners judge teachers on the basis of their speaking performance and supervisors cannot be ignorant of learners' preferences. Sharing her concern, one of the participants stated:

A great majority of language learners enroll in private language schools to improve their deficiencies in speaking ability; hence, language learners and even their parents' yardstick of success for a teacher is his or her speaking skill; they consider an effective teacher as the one who has a great speaking skill. To please our students, we hire those teachers who satisfy our students' needs. For example, once an applicant came here and asked for a job, he was neither an English student nor had any experience in teaching, but he grew up in an English speaking country. Well, there was no need to go through all the process of recruitment. I just had a 20-minute-interview with the applicant and made my decision that he is the perfect one for the job due to his influential speaking ability.

Although some language schools act in line with stakeholders' preferences and hire language teachers on the basis of their speaking proficiency, still there are some other schools who believe that having native-like proficiency in speaking is not sufficient and some additional judicious and reasonable criterion should be borne in mind. One of the participants shared his point of view:

Speaking proficiency is just one of the determinants of teaching efficacy. To me, a teacher who lacks any academic qualifications and teaching experience but has a perfect speaking ability cannot meet the basic requirements of our institute. I assume that a good EFL teacher is not only capable of using the language but also knows the proper ways of teaching it.

Although speaking is the channel through which teachers open their knowledge and experience to language learners, it cannot guarantee teaching efficacy. As noted by the

participants, professional knowledge of language teaching and professional experience should carry more weight in recruiting language teachers. Another supervisor who was against the idea of recruiting applicants based on their speaking proficiency:

Recruiting applicants based on their speaking ability sounds unprofessional. Having native-like proficiency is not enough to consider a teacher perfect and effective. Let me give you an example. Once I was fascinated by an applicant's speaking skill who was originally from an English-speaking country. I trusted him and gave him a class because his speaking was impeccable. But he could not teach even the simplest grammar items. Actually, he was not cut out to be a teacher. All I am saying is that focusing on an applicant's speaking ability and ignoring other criteria lead to hiring teachers who will fail in carrying out their professional responsibilities.

### *Professional Knowledge*

Teachers' teaching styles are shaped by their professional knowledge and skills. If a teacher believes in structuralism and behaviorism, he or she will automatically focus and present students with the formal properties of language and focus on repetition and practice to help learners develop new language habits. More specifically, teachers' professional practice is shaped by their professional knowledge. Thus, prior to being given the permit to teach English, applicant's professional knowledge should be critically evaluated. One of the participants described how she evaluates the professional knowledge of applicants:

When the first decision is made based on applicants' speaking ability, some more technical questions will be asked in order to evaluate their professional knowledge. For example, I may ask what the applicant will do in a class where there are two really slow students. Or I may ask about the techniques the applicant will use to keep students actively involved during a lesson. These types of questions will make it clear whether they are familiar with the theories of language learning and teaching or not.

Teaching is not just a technical job that involves applying abstract rules but is one that involves making decisions informed by knowledge and understanding of the unique contexts within which teachers are working as well as by their educational values and beliefs. In short, teachers have to make judgments about an approach to see whether it is suitable and desirable for a specific group of learners. One of the participants explains:

I usually ask the applicant to teach a conversation for a specific level of proficiency and check his or her versatility in facilitating the learning process through the use of appropriate techniques. To choose an appropriate technique, he should have developed a wide repertoire of techniques during in-service and pre-service teacher education programs.

Although some people running these schools check applicant's professional knowledge, they do not let them use their professional knowledge in practice since they define good practice as the degree of conformity with their own views of learning and teaching. One of the participants explains:



At the end of interview, I ask some professional questions about techniques of language teaching. However, when an applicant gets the job at our institute, s/he should put his or her beliefs behind and work in accordance of our policy. For example, one of the most important principles of language teaching, according to our institute policy, is not to use learners' mother tongue in the class.

### *Planning and Preparation*

To ensure successful learning and teaching, teachers must use a number of skills from their considerable learning armory, one of which is planning. A lesson plan helps teachers to know what to do in class with quite specific activities. It serves as the blueprint for the teacher and the teaching and learning process. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

In a demo session, we ask participants to be prepared to teach a specific subject. It is the applicants' creativity to devise a way to handle the class well and do what is required in the limited time at his or her disposal. A lesson plan prevents wandering away from the subject matter by making the teacher conscious of what he has to accomplish for the day.

Lesson plans should provide teachers with an outline of their teaching goals, learning objectives, and means to accomplish them. It is a reminder of what teachers intend to do and how they intend to execute their plan. It prevents teachers from getting distracted. One of the participants explains:

Applicants should be well aware of the importance of planning a lesson. A lesson plan shows students and supervisors in a demo session that teachers have devoted time and thought about students and their needs. A lesson plan also shows commitment and professionalism of applicants.

Although lesson plans are very important, it should be flexible. Otherwise, it keeps teachers from what happens to facilitate learning. Indeed, a good lesson plan should guide teachers not dictate what should exactly be taught in the class. One of the participants mentions:

The classroom is a complex and relatively unpredictable environment where many things happen very quickly at the same time. Teachers should always be prepared for these unpredicted events and based on that, their lesson plans should also change. For example, students may need more practice, or an activity should be explained more. More to the point, the student may ask a question the explanation of which derails the teacher from pre-specified procedure. Leaving one's plan and answering learners' question makes teaching responsive to the learners' needs.

### *Teaching Techniques*

Emphasizing the role of experience, participants believed that an experienced professional language teacher always follows scientific eclecticism which entails decisions on the most suitable techniques and applying the most appropriate methodology for learner's specific objectives, learning style and context. However, not all institutes permit language teachers to be eclectic in the use of techniques. In this regard, one of the participants explains:

To present a lesson in a demo session, we focus on the techniques the applicant uses while teaching. It is essential for us that the applicants use the techniques suggested by our institute rather than choose from a repertoire of techniques he developed through experience or the ones he received through pre-service teacher education program. For example, in our institute teachers are not allowed to use Persian or learners' mother tongue at all. In teaching vocabulary, the applicants should know several techniques not just simply give the Persian equivalent.

In a demo session, more than anything supervisors try to see if an applicant is a good model of teaching and learning. They want to examine if applicants are effective classroom teachers, confident about their subject knowledge and can present their best performance in the demo session. In this regard one of the participants explains:

One of the most important criteria in this step is the way applicants use various teaching techniques in their teaching performance. For instance, when an applicant is asked to teach a special grammatical item within a limited time, we notice if he has any innovation in teaching the materials. Or in case the applicant used a special technique, he should be able to explain why he chose to teach the materials with that special technique. This ensures us that he knows the theories underlying that technique.

The post-method language teacher is not expected to follow one rigid method. Rather, he or she is expected to follow techniques which: (1) are in line with principles of language learning; (2) provide the learners with opportunities to learn, practice and personalize the teaching materials at hand. Explaining the importance of responsive techniques, one of the participants explains:

In the demonstration session, teachers are assigned some teaching materials and they are recommended to follow the techniques that they think fit. The techniques are evaluated on the basis of the extent to which they activate students' curiosity about a class topic, engage students in learning, develop critical thinking skills, keep students on task, and in general, enable and enhance the learning of course content.

### *Classroom and Time Management*

Teachers play various roles in a typical classroom, but surely one of the most important one is time and class management. Effective teaching and learning cannot take place in a poorly managed classroom. If students are disorderly and disrespectful, and no apparent rules and procedures guide their behavior, the class will be chaotic. In such situations, teaching and learning are next to impossible because learning depends on conscious attention, and in a disorderly and noisy class it is not possible for the learners to pay close attention. In contrast, well-managed classrooms provide an environment in which teaching and learning can flourish. But a well-managed classroom doesn't just appear out of nowhere, it takes teachers' professional knowledge and expertise. One of the participants explains:

Managing classroom precedes applying techniques that facilitate the process of learning and using teaching materials. If teachers fail in managing their classroom, classroom atmosphere is not conducive to learning since students cannot concentrate. Bullies may disrupt the process of teaching and learning, and disorderly students detract students' attention from learning.

Just like classroom management, time management can enhance the valuable work teachers do, reduce the discomforting sense of urgency and burden and allow learners to enjoy the fruit of their hard labor fully. In line with this, one of the participants explains:

Time management is important because it helps teachers prioritize their work. Teachers should be aware of their need to have really good time management skills in order to finish their responsibilities inside the class. If the teacher cannot manage his time, he is forced to skip some important points and leave the classroom without performing what he planned ahead. A lesson plan is useful if and only if the teacher can manage his time.

### **Discussion**

Having analyzed the data, we found that the first step of teacher admission process is submitting a hand-written resume. The most important criteria which supervisors seek to investigate in applicants' resumes were their years of teaching experience and their educational background. The findings clearly showed that supervisors have different opinions about these two criteria. While some of them strongly believed that, years of experience is one of the most essential standards in teacher admission process, other believed that this standard cannot be considered sufficient and necessary. This second group of the participants believed that although experience matters, more is not always better. In keeping with this, a number of studies have investigated the difference between novice and expert teachers in different domains. Having this in mind, Tsui (2003) stated that expert teachers are more efficient in planning and more selective in information processing. Research also showed that experienced teachers differ from novices in the level of their self-efficacy (Zarei & Sharifabad, 2012), class management (Jacques, 2000; Savage & Savage, 2009; Unal & Unal, 2012), students' achievement (Klitgaard & Hall, 1974; Murnane & Philips, 1981). According to Darling-Hammond (1999), teachers with less than three years' experience are less efficient than their colleagues with more experience.

Participants had contradictory views concerning applicants' educational background. A great majority of participants held the idea that only those teachers with related certificate are qualified to enter the teaching profession. This position is in accordance with (Betts, Rueben, & Dannenberg, 2000; Goe, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Wenglinsky, 2000). However, since most institutes heavily rely on applicants' speaking proficiency, holding a certificate in the field was not necessary.

The most important process which is emphasized in almost the institutes covered in this study is the interview. The most important criterion of interview process is the quality of applicant's speaking ability. The findings of the present study revealed that there is a paradoxical perception among supervisors regarding hiring applicants based on their speaking proficiency. A group of participants strongly believed that only those teachers should be employed who have mastered their speaking proficiency. They believed that an ideal and effective teacher is the one who is fluent speaker, accurate, has native-like pronunciation, can use different grammatical points and various vocabularies while speaking. This position is in line with Mahboob's (2004) study which showed that NESTs were perceived to have good

oral skills, a wide vocabulary, and knowledge about their own culture. In his study, Madrid (2004) also found that the main advantage of native teachers is evidently to be found in their superior linguistic and communicative competence of the L2 (English), since it is their mother tongue and they can thus use it with greater spontaneity and naturalness in a considerable variety of situations. The finding of this study is also inconsistent with Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005) who found that NSTs are preferred in their speaking, listening and pronunciation skills. However, the second group of participants was against hiring applicants just because of their speaking proficiency. According to them, applicants' speaking ability is not sufficient to consider them as effective. Maum (2002) argues that people do not become qualified to teach English merely because it is their mother tongue. Medgyes (1994) also favors non-native English-speaking teachers due to their several unique qualities.

Another important criterion for teacher admission in various language institutes is planning and preparation for the demo session. According to the supervisors, applicants should not underestimate the importance of lesson plans for their demo session. According to Celce-Murcia (2002) "a lesson plan is an extremely useful tool that serves as a combination guide, resource, and historical document reflecting our teaching philosophy, student population, textbooks, and most importantly, our goals for our students" (p. 403). Feldman (1976) considers classroom management not only related to management of students' behavior but also to lesson planning of teacher, organizing of the materials, controlling of behaviors, goal-based learning process, supportive atmosphere and maintaining a highly effective teaching and learning experiences within classrooms.

The next important finding of this study is the criteria of class and time management which was evaluated during the demo and induction session. Based on supervisors' opinions, an effective teacher should be able to manage the class time and make order among students. Only in a properly managed class, learning could happen. This finding is in position of various studies about teachers' self-efficacy and their ability to manage their classes (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Henson, 2001; Shohani, Azizifar, & Kamalvand, 2014).

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Freeman and Johnson (1998) categorize the knowledge-base of language teacher education into grounded and a priori. The former is shaped by personal experience and perception; the latter refers to the knowledge received through attending teacher education program. In other words, teaching practice is shaped by (1) personal theories reflecting how language teaching is conceptualized in a given teaching context; (2) grand theories reflecting how language teaching is conceptualized irrespective of contextual constraints. The former is deeply rooted in teaching experience in specific contexts and the latter is deeply rooted in teachers' professional knowledge developed through pre-service teacher education programs. Along these lines, language teacher recruitment cannot deny language teachers' professional knowledge and experience. Nonetheless, as the results of the study clearly show, in most cases teachers are recruited on the basis of their speaking proficiency. As the supervisors clearly indicated, teachers' professional knowledge is evaluated during the interview, in practice, however, teachers' professional knowledge and skills are rarely evaluated. This shows a clear discrepancy between theory and practice of language teacher recruitment.

Recruiters are fully aware of this discrepancy. Although the supervisors participating in this study believe that language teachers should be recruited on the basis of their professional knowledge and experience as elaborated in the results section, in practice they are forced to recruit language teachers on the basis of their speaking proficiency since they claim that: (1) language learners and their parents judge language teachers on the basis of

their speaking proficiency; and (2) TEFL graduates do not meet this criterion despite their proud pedagogical knowledge of language teaching. Aligned with this contextual constraint in recruiting teachers for private language schools of Iran, the results show a consensus among recruiters concerning applicants' speaking proficiency and a controversy reflecting pros and cons concerning other language teacher recruitment criteria.

To alleviate this language education ill in private language schools of Iran and many other similar contexts in Asia, the mutual distrust between stakeholders including language learners, parents, supervisors and employers on the one hand and TEFL graduates on the other hand should turn into mutual trust and this will not happen unless teacher education programs ensure that TEFL graduates have an acceptable level of proficiency before receiving any certificate in TEFL. If a TEFL graduate and an applicant with no academic background in TEFL both have an acceptable level of communicative competence, the recruiters will favor the one with a TEFL degree. To sum up, recruiters will evaluate TEFL applicants' professional qualifications if and only if their language proficiency, i.e., stakeholders' yardstick of success, unequivocally outweighs or equals that of applicants with no TEFL background.

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