EFL teachers' recruitment and dynamic assessment in private language institutes of Iran

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Abstract
The critical role and effect of teacher assessment in ELT has been ratified by researchers among whom are Darling-Hammond (2000); Knox (2002); Bailey (2006); Davison & Cummins (2007); and Blum (2009).Taking this issue into account, this exploratory study seeks to investigate the underlying criteria of both recruiting and assessing in-service EFL teachers in private language institutes of Iran. To this aim, five of the most well-known and expanded language institutes in this country were selected. Their procedures for employing teacher applicants and later on assessing their in-service performance have been obtained, analyzed and discussed in this study. Interviews with the supervisors along with analysis of application forms, observation sheets and other relevant documents illuminated the procedures and criteria of teacher entry and assessment in the target setting. Findings are presented more in depth in the Results and discussion section.

Keywords: dynamic assessment, teacher recruitment, EFL, private sector.

1. Introduction

Any discussion on the nature and quality of teacher assessment in education can begin with a short reference to the concept of assessment in general and consequently linking it to the targeted area for evaluation. Hence, the introductory section here tends to take the same direction.

1.1. Evaluation Concept

Knox (2002) provides a truly insightful conceptualization of evaluation projects, their participants, goals and effectiveness considerations. According to him any evaluation project depends on contributions from severalpeople who share in the effectiveness of the educational program. They include learners, instructors, coordinators, policy makers, and funders.Thestakeholder often engages in evaluation in relation to decisionsabout what to achieve and how to achieve it. Clarifying the expertiseand expectations of your main stakeholders can help you decide on the focus of a specific evaluation.

As described by Zeichner (1999), studies with the aim of educational evaluation take different forms one of which is action research (utilization). The opportunities for such research are usually arranged by teachers themselves, a school district, union, university,state education department, regional lab, association, or various other sponsors and cosponsors (cited in Knox, 2002). Whatever the form or the extent of similarity, each evaluation possesses its own uniqueness. Even in case of several evaluations of the same system, course or the like although the final results might be similar, the *process* each has passed through should be considered carefully to access a better and fairer point of view to base our judgment on.

1.2. Evaluation in ELT

According to Davison & Cummins (2007), evaluation has always been of great significance in policy and practice of ELT. It is, in fact, connected to many aspects of TESOL including teacher development, teaching methodology and curriculum design.

More specifically, teacher preparation and the need for educational reform have been topics of much discussion in recent years. As pinpointed by Sullivan (2004),teacher assessment, like student assessment has become to be perceived as a frustratingly complex task. Teachers have been demanded to prove that they have demonstrable teaching competencies, and teacher selection and preparation programs have begun to be standardized. An instance of such standardization is The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) founded in 2002.

The criteria of teacher recruitment are always set in advance. These criteria can vary from one school to another, but there might be similarities in structure as well. Initial selection is usually done. Pre-service teachers are offered training courses with pre-specified goals and within the required time limits. In-service teachers' performance is regularly supervised or observed by the supervisors in charge whose qualifications and responsibilities are described in detail by Bailey (2006).

1.3. Statement of problem

There have been several books on teacher evaluation in the last 20 years (e.g.Millman, 1997; Millman & Darling-Hammond, 1990; Stronge, 2002). No one yet has brought together a coherent set of research papers on the work of a *national* professional body attempting to establish a system of teacher evaluation for career development: for example, the process of developing teaching standards; the development of evidence gathering methods for assessing teachers' performance on the standards; the setting of performance standards; and the selection and training of teachers to

provide reliable assessments of the evidence that applicants submit (Ingvarson& Hattie, 2008).

The focus of the present study is on teacher evaluation methods on the national level and attempt is made to gather evidence for the existing selection criteria and assessment standards in the private sector.

1.4. Purpose of study

As previously mentioned, this researchas an exploratory study aims to scrutinize the underlying criteria of recruiting EFL teachers and later on the process of assessing their in-service performance. The setting is comprised of the private English language institutes of Iran.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What are the criteria and procedures involved in the recruitment of EFL teachers in private language institutes of Iran?

RQ2: What are the criteria and procedures involved in the assessment of these teachers' performance during their service?

1. Review of Literature

Thaine (2004) distinguishes two major forms of teacher evaluation, formative and summative assessments. Examples of the first type can be self or peer evaluation, while the example of the second type could be portfolios that focus on a trainee teacher's autonomous individualized development. The focus of our research will be more on the formative one which is more of a dynamic nature and continues throughout the teacher's in-service performance. Nevertheless, we tend to divide the literature into two parts: teacher *entry* and *assessment*. By the first, we mean the prerequisite qualifications for applicants to be selected and enter an instructional environment including certifications, age, personality factors, etc. By the second, we imply the procedures of dynamic assessment of teachers after their entry and during their workingexperience.

1.1. Teacher entry

Darling-Hammond (2002) mentions *teacher certification* as a strengthening issue for teaching effectiveness, and considers it as a legitimate condition in teacher selection. The necessity of this criterion was previously questioned by Walsh (2001); however, it has been well defended by the former researcher. Another teacher attribute found consistently as a selection criterion for teachers is *verbal ability* along with *subject matter knowledge*, as suggested by Walsh (2001).

Among theother common admission categories are *letters of recommendation*, a personal *interview*, and *work experience* with children or adolescents (Ishler, 1984; Lamen& Reeves, 1983; Watts, 1982, cited in Duquette, 1993).

In addition to the aforementioned features, usually there is a need for some educational *training courses* prior to the actual teaching in class. Several issues become of importance in this training. The weight of each depends on the priorities defined in the curriculum. Darling-Hammond (2000) evaluates the standards set by the National Board for ProfessionalTeaching Standards (National Board or NBPTS). Among these criteria, she points out knowledge of subject matter and, especially, the knowledgeof teaching and learning acquired in teacher education as strongly correlated with teacher performance in the classroom.

O'Meara and MacDonald (2004) acknowledge the significance of worldwide initiatives in the area of standards for teachers. They point out the dearth of research in how teacher education programs are responding to the standards agenda. Their paper in the same year positions standards as integral to the recontextualization fields for teacher educators and their programs.

Dole, Nokes and Drits (2008) highlight the necessity of including cognitive strategy instruction in teacher training courses especially for

those who are going to teach reading comprehension. They view this as a transition from research to practice.

1.2. Teacher assessment

As Thaine (2004) puts it, second language teachers now operate in a world where learners, employers, and quality assurance agencies require some kind of guarantee of ability that is in some way measurable. Typically, these expectations of professional competence are articulated by means of criteria that aim to judge a teacher's performance.

One issue to take into account is that of *context*, as reminded by Darling-Hammond & Snyder (2000). With this regard,cases, portfolios that assemble artifacts of practice, exhibitions of performance, and problem-based inquiries are some of the tools used to capture important attributes of teaching and reasoning about teaching.

Another commonly used way to evaluate in-service teachers is to refer to their learners' performance. According to Glazerman et al. (2010), teacher assessment based on the contribution they make to the learning of their students, *value-added*, has become an increasingly popular but controversial education reform policy.

Blum (2009) talks of a *growth-oriented* teacher evaluation plan. In this process, a wide range of opportunities are provided for all employees to develop skills necessary to perform their work with quality. And, teacher evaluation has a focus on identifying and developing skills teachers need to implement *standards-based* reform.

In the similar vein, Darling-Hammond & Snyder (2000) use the notion of*authentic assessments* of teaching. Under this title, they include opportunities for developing and examining teachers' thinking and actions in situations that are experience-based and problem oriented and also include or simulate actual acts of teaching. Such acts

of teaching include plans for and reflections on teaching and learning, as well as activities featuring direct interaction with students.

One way to access how teachers actually perform in class situation is *observations* made typically by supervisors. This procedure, as described by Stufflebeam, Madaus and Kellaghan(2002) consists of visiting a very few classes, usually withadvance notice and using checklists or subjective judgment to determine whetherappropriate practices are occurring during the visit.Bailey (2006) elaborates on the notion of *language teacher supervision*, supervisors' varied roles in professional contexts, roles of teacher supervisors in general education, supervisory skills and so on.

Controversies abound in whether these observations are truly indicative of the teacher and learners' behavior in class. Other suggestions are made including *unseen observations* in language classrooms by Powell(1999) and Quirke(1996)based on astructured self-evaluation conducted by the individual teacher and thendiscussed with the supervisor (cited in Bailey, 2006). The other end of the continuum can be *surprise observations* as can be seen in figure 1. Here, Bailey (2006) sketches a scale that can tip in the direction ofeither supervisor control or teacher control over scheduling classroom observations:
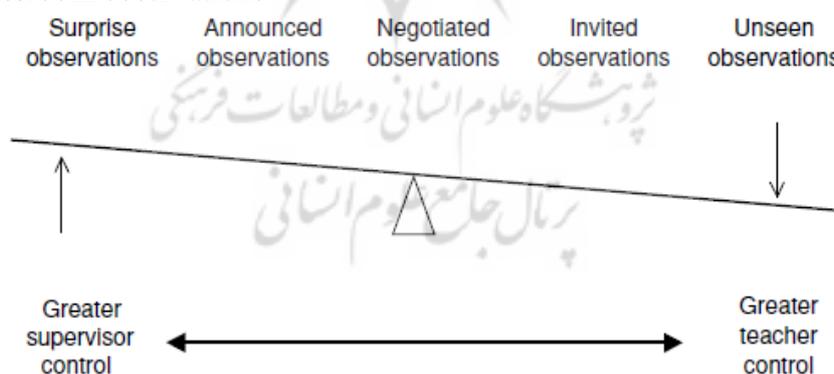

Figure 1.Supervisor and teacher control over arranging classroom observations

Steinmetz (2002) introduces an evaluation model called the Discrepancy Evaluation Model (DEM) which can very well be used to evaluate in-service teachers. The key elements in this model are *S* implying the Standard, *P* standing for the Performance and *D* referring to the discrepancy between the standard and the actual performance. Here, the evaluator's role is as a facilitator who guides the clients in setting the standards and goals and then evaluating the program and based on the findings make either adaptations to the standards or make improvements to the practices. The component analysis of the teacher in-service program is illustrated as the following in this model:
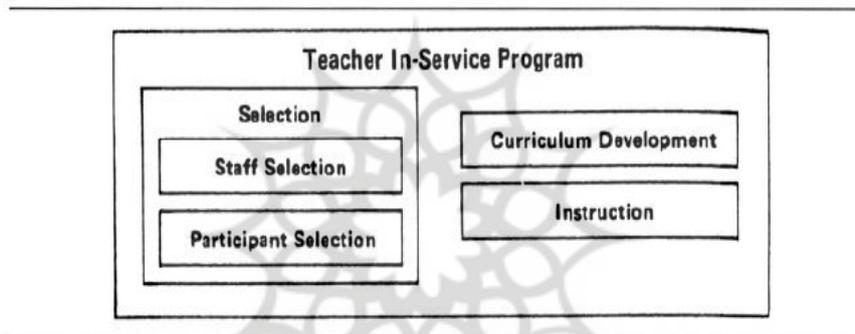

Figure 2. Component analysis of teacher in-service program in DEM

There exists an input-process-output analysis among these components. If numerical values are attributed to the components of such program, the abbreviated input-process-output description for each might look as in Figure 3.
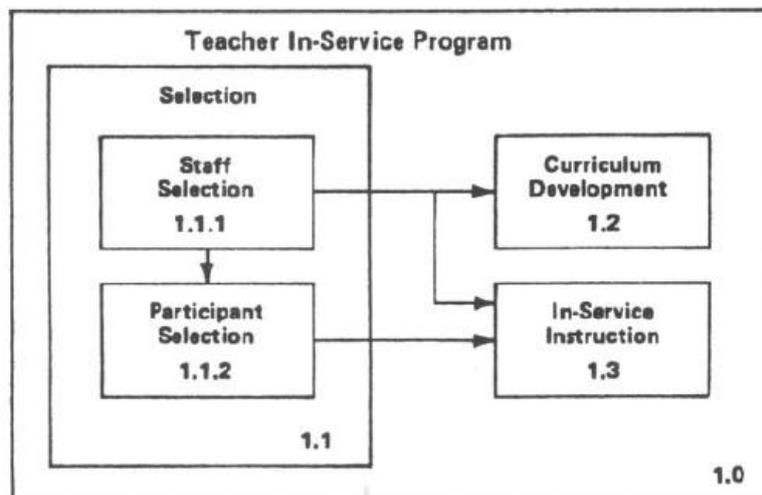
Figure 3. Program network

The output of 1.1.1is used as input to 1.1.2, 1.2, and 1.3. In other words, the teacher trainers will beinputs to the participant selection, curriculum development, and in-service instruction activities (Steinmetz, 2002). More details on the model can be obtained fromStufflebeam et al. (2002).

2.   Methodology
2.1. Setting

Among the private language institutes of Iran, 5 of the most well-known with the highest number of annual registrationhave been selected. They include:

-   **Iran Language Institute (ILI)**: affiliated with the Ministry of Education of Iran; founded in Tehran in 1304; now holds around 200 branches in Iran and 24,000 students in the country.

-   **Safir Language Institute of Iran**: founded in 1378 in Tehran; holds over 40 branches in Iran; has got about 800 EFL teachers nationwide; holds both GE and ESOL exam preparation courses.

- **Kish Institute of Science and Technology**: founded in 1367 first with the aim of instructing sailors and then specifically teaching English; now holds more than 72 branches in 17 provinces of the country; has got 1500 teachers and over 360,000 students internationally; holds both GE and ESOL exam preparation courses.

- **Rah Pouyandegan Cultural Institute**: affiliated with the International Communication Center, and the Ministry of Culture & Islamic Guidance and the Ministry of Science of Iran; founded in 1385 in Mashhad; now holds branches in Iran and also Malaysia and Armenia; is among the few language institutes that have obtained an ISO standard; holds mainly ESOL exam preparation courses but does also have GE courses.

- **Tehran Institute of Technology**: founded in 1361 in Tehran; has published over 1300 academic books; its English department holds both ESP and GE courses and also ESOL exam preparation courses.

2.2. Instrumentation

No pre-designed instrument was employed for data gathering. This step, as further described in *Procedures,* was mainly carried out through interviews, voice-recording and the internet to get information on the history and background of the institutes. However, the materials which were obtained from the institutes and used for analysis consist of observation forms, demo evaluation sheets, application forms, course charts and so on.

2.3. Procedures
2.3.1. Data collection

The data in this study have been gathered in several steps. Initially, it was attempted to arrange for personal meetings with the supervisors of the target institutes. The meeting sessions were tape-recorded. The major questions were about how they would select among teacher applicants (teacher entry criteria) and then how they would evaluate their in-service teachers. At the end of the session, the researcher received the observation sheets or other relevant documents. The recordings were later transcribed. In cases where personal meeting was not feasible, on-the-phone interviews were made. Some parts of

the data are according to the experience of the researcher as an informant who has been working with 3 of these institutes so far. Additional information on the background and current status of the target institutes were obtained via the websites belonging to each institute. The data collection procedures were carried out within two weeks in late winter 2012.

2.3.2. Data Analysis

The data have been analyzed qualitatively by reviewing the documents, recordings, web-based information and the researcher's experience as an informant. The results are presented in figures and statements.

3. Results and Discussion

The results of the analyses are presented in two sections: teacher entry and teacher assessment. This is in line with the aim of study and the related review of literature.

3.1. Teacher entry

Analyses of the interviews revealed the elements recurrent in the process of teacher selection in private language institutes of Iran as including: application, interview, written examination, training course and internship. The unmarked pattern which can be imagined for teacher recruitment can be illustrated as in figure 4:
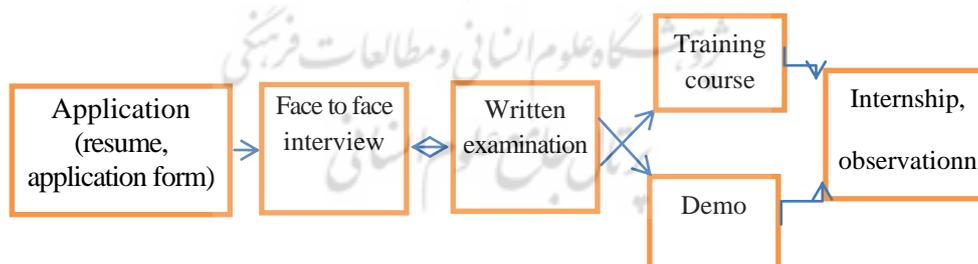

Figure 4. The process of teacher entry

There might be details involved in any of these stages. On the whole they include:

3.1.1. Application

This element was found to be the initial stage of teacher admission process in all the institutes. It was expected to be performed either by filling out a pre-designed application form or submitting a hand-written resume. The main sort of information sought for in this stage as the forms and the interviews show is:

- Personal information: age, gender, marital status, family background

- Educational information: university degrees, dates of education, place of education and relevant proficiency certificates as emphasized by Darling-Hammond (2002)

- Working background: job experiences as corroborated by Ishler, (1984); Lamen& Reeves(1983); Watts(1982)(cited in Duquette, 1993).

- Contact information: postal address, phone number, email address

In the case of resumes, the writing and presentation abilities of applicants are also checked for. Based on this initial information, a number of applicants who do not meet the basic requirements are automatically eliminated.

3.1.2. Interview

This element is also present in teacher admission process in all the institutes. However, it might either follow or precede the written examination. In 3 of the institutes, this stage is done immediately after selecting among the applicants whose resumes or forms have been reviewed. In the 2 other institutes this stage is carried out after the written exam. The sort of information investigated includes:

- Personality features: for instance, whether the applicant is adequately tactful and serious to teach adults, as emphasized in Kish institute; whether s/he is warm and friendly, open-minded and adaptive, etc.

- Appearance: if the appearance, looks and clothing are legitimate for a teacher

- Elaboration on the personal and working information mentioned in resume or application form

- Examination of language proficiency: done either totally directly as in ILI, or preferably tacitly as in Rah Pouyandegan or Kish institutes

- Communication skills: specially speaking skill as stated previously by Walsh (2001) and posing one's opinions and reacting to the interviewer's challenging ideas

Interviews are ordinarily carried out in a face to face meeting of an expert and an applicant in a conversation dyad. There are 2 exceptions here: In Tehran Institute of Technology the applicants recommended by the supervisor's from cities other than Tehran are interviewed on the phone. In Safir, applicants are interviewed in a group all together along with the interviewer. The nature of such an interview is discussion based, and all throughout this process, communication skills and personality factors of the people are examined carefully but tacitly.

3.1.3. Written examination

This element is present in 3 of the institutes, optional in 1 and absent in another. Where it exists it is either the same or an adapted version of an international English language proficiency test: TOEFL or CAE. In an institute like Safir, the exam has been developed by the academic board of the institute itself and based on its exclusive goals. In 3 of the institutes applicants have to pay in advance to the exam. The tests are in multiple-choice, fill in the blanks and matching

format. The writing sections have been omitted and the speaking sectionhas been equated with the interview. The main components that are checked upon are grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension.

In ILI, besides the acceptable score in the written exam, holding at least one of the following certificates is required:

- Senior Proficiency Certificate (the highest achievement degree offered by the institute to its graduates)

- B.A. or higher degree of TEFL, Translation or English Literature

- Score above 100 of TOEFL iBT, above 600 of TOEFL PBT, above 7.5 of IELTS, CELTA or DELTA

Evaluation based on the exam results varies among the institutes. In Kish institute, for instance, the exam results are both norm- and criterion-referenced. There is a certain score above which applicants can teach adults. Below that score, they fail or teach children. Moreover, in accordance with the number of teachers the institute needs, those who pass will be selected form the top rank down. In ILI, scores will not be announced. The ranks are important and decisive in passing. The few candidates who manage to pass will be authorized to be interviewed.

3.1.4. Training course (TTC)

This is ordinarily an intensive course carried out within a week instructed by an expert or the supervisor of the institute usually from the main office. During this course, teacher trainees are acquainted with the dominant approach or methodology adopted by the institute, the course materials, class arrangement, management, short-term and long-term goals, teaching techniques and other relevant issues.

In 3 of the institutes, namely Kish, Safir and ILI this element is of great significance and inevitable for all applicants. In the other 2, there

is no training for experienced teachers and just a brief introductory meeting with the supervisor for less experienced ones.

When there is a training course, there is necessarily a demo session at last to see the extent to which trainees have internalized the issues emphasized in the course and learned to apply them. In this stage, trainees are required to teach part of a lesson in the target textbook in the presence of the trainer, supervisor(s), other teachers and other trainees. The audience play an active role as so-called students and the presenter is expected to do the right thing and to say the right words in the challenges s/he finds him/herself in.

Demo presentation can be very crucial in the final recruitment decision as is the case in ILI, or can be viewed milder and merely as a legitimate end to the whole course as in Kish. Usually there is no real failure atthis stage as the trainees whose performance cannot be accepted are provided with a second chance to take part in the course and try the final practice. However, the loss of time and expense will be left totally to the applicant. This becomes a problem especially when the training course is held only in the main officeas is the case for ILI. For every interview, TTC and demo applicants need to go to Tehran which adds to the costs.

3.1.5. Internship

This stage is obligatory in 4 of the institutes and optional in 1. The requirement is to attend experienced teachers' classes for a couple of sessions (the number is decided by the supervisor),observe the more experienced teachers' class management and instruction closely and to make notes. There is a debriefing meeting with the supervisor once the internship is over and the trainee is perceived to be prepared to begin his/her job.

As the results for *Teacher entry* revealed, English language institutes in Iran follow basic stages in a more or less similar order. The nature and quality of these elements, however, seem to be more important than their presence or absence. Attempts can be made to make interviews more interactive and authentic as tried out by Safir institute. The applicants' time and money can be saved by sending the institute's delegates to towns and cities to hold the interviews or lead the training courses. Second chances can be provided for the applicants who did not perform well on the interview due to reasons other than proficiency such as stress. Furthermore, the validity of examinations can be augmented through using more productive tests which have at least one writing task undeleted.

3.2. Teacher assessment

Once trainees manage to enter the system, they realize that the evaluation process still runs and their performance along with that of their colleagues will regularly be monitored by the supervisor or educational experts. This forms a dynamic type of in-service assessment which was found to be common among the EFL institutes in the present study.Therefore, now we attend to class observations as previously introduced by Stufflebeam, Madaus and Kellaghan (2002) in the *Review* section.

As for the type of observations pinpointed by Bailey (2006), 4 of the institutes made surprise observations to add to the authenticity of class performance. Scrutinizing the content of observation sheets provided us with the main issues of assessing teacher's actual performance in class. In this study, a 4-element categorization is suggested, as in figure 5, to subsume all the common issues of concern in observation and evaluation procedures taken by these institutes.
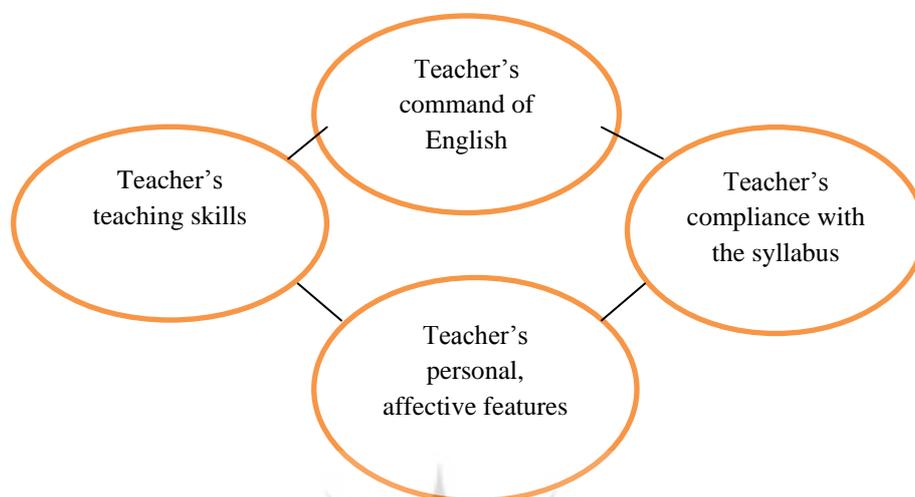
Figure 5.Main elements of in-service teachers' assessment

3.2.1. Teacher's command of English

This involves checking for the teacher's fluency and accuracy in the following areas:

- Accuracy of speech and structure
- Accuracy of pronunciation
- Fluency in speech
- Accuracy of performance in discourse

This is either explicitly stated and included in the observation forms, or considered as part of *Miscellaneous*issues as in Kish institute. Instances of incorrect use of syntax or lexis are jotted down by the observer and later reminded to the teacher in the debriefing session. In some institutes such as ILI, great emphasis is placed on accuracy and even the minor mistakes especially in pronunciation and intonation are carefully recorded in the evaluation sheet. The reason why teacher's accuracy is so much emphasized is attributed, in Rah Pouyandegan, to teacher's role as a model for learners' speech.

Another item which can be subsumed under teacher's command of English can be *level adaptation.* Teacher's command of the language needs to be adapted to the current level of the students. This is an issue whose significance is emphasizedby all the institutes.

3.2.2. Teacher's personal/affective features

Components which can be subsumed under this heading are found to be:

- Teacher's punctuality
- Teacher's rapport with learners
- Teacher's tolerance(particularly in error treatment)
- Teacher's enthusiasm and dynamism as to involve learners more effectively and wholeheartedly

The weight and significance attached to any of these features vary to some extent across the institutes. In ILI, for instance, teacher's punctuality is strongly emphasized as the teacher is expected to set a perfect example for learners. In more communication-oriented institutes such as Rah Pouyandegan and Kish, the second and fourth components are highlighted so as to positively affect learner's class performance and participation. Teacher's tolerance is found to be one of those features heavily checked upon in ILI and Safir even in pre-service interview or demo.

3.2.3. Teacher's compliance with the syllabus

This component investigates the extent to which:

- The expected content of that particular session has been covered
- The educational goals, task or activity goals of that particular session have been achieved
- The steps and the way to present the material in the syllabus have been followed

In terms of abiding by the syllabus, institutes adopt different positioning. Some are quite strict about this issue and leave little space for teacher's creativity such as ILI. The major part of its observation sheet is comprised of the detailed description of the syllabus for that

particular session, the timing, stages, etc. Some other institutes, on the other hand, are more flexible towards the syllabus and are not over-sensitive, like Rah Pouyandegan and Tehran Institute of Technology.

3.2.4. Teacher's teaching skills

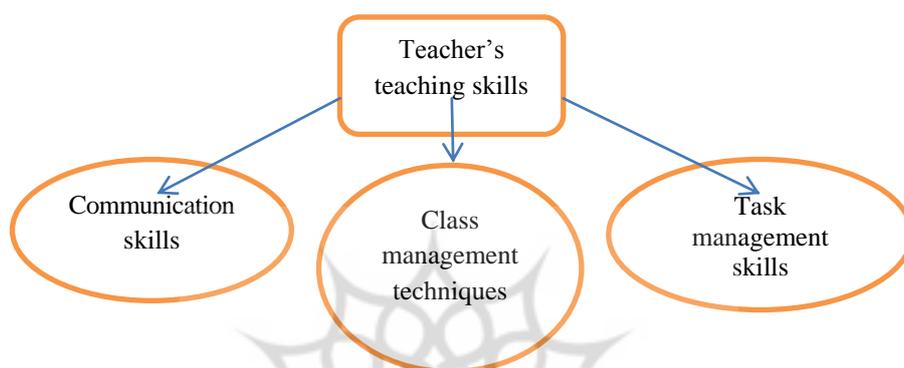A 3-element categorization is suggested here for this component of teachers' assessment as indicated in figure 6:

Figure 6.   Sub-categories of teacher's teaching skills

Communication skills deal with all sorts of interactions between teacher and learners. Among the items stated in evaluation sheets of the institutes are:

-     Teacher's attempts to create communicative situations
-     Managing Teacher Talking Time (TTT) and Student Talking Time (STT)
-     Providing proper amounts of feedback especially in case of errors

Class management techniques can include items referring to:

-     Contextualization (highly emphasized)
-     Use of the board, realia, etc. in class
-     Pace and use of time
-     Heeding to discovery learning

Task management is concerned with teacher's tackling with different aspects of task and activities in class. The items which can be subsumed under this element are:

- Providing clear instructions to the tasks
- Appropriate warm-up and follow up activities to the main tasks
- Monitoring learner's pair- or group work

Observation sessions end with a debriefing which is either immediately after the observed session or adjourned to another day within the week. Observer's role in the debriefing session tends to be more of a *facilitator* type, as introduced in Steinmetz (2002). They try to avoid a prescribing role; tend to be friendly and guide-like. Teachers have the chance to state their impression of the observation process and can write down any special comment they might have on any single point mentioned in the evaluation sheet. These forms close with the signatures of both the teacher and the observer, and end up in the working file of teachers in the institute. A copy, in some cases the original form or the scanned image of the forms from all over the country will be sent to the main office and will be archived.

The results of this regular evaluation will affect teacher's annual pay-rise and level promotion. In the teacher scoring system in one of these institutes (Safir), the final element of which entitled as QT is directly derived from the results of class observations.

4.   Conclusion

The main purpose of this exploratory study was to find the main criteria of teacher recruitment and dynamic assessment in English language institutes of Iran. Findings were indicative of a procedure for teacher admission consisting of application, interview, written examination, training course, demo and internship stages. However, these are merely considered as the pre-service assessment which is to

be continued for in-service teachers. The issues which were attended in teacher assessment were categorized in this study into 4 groups of teacher's command of English, teaching skills, compliance with the syllabus and personal/affective features.

Each of the elements which were found in this study can be further investigated more in depth to check for its quality and probable drawbacks. As an instance reference can be made to the type of observations made in our country, the so-called authentic or surprise ones. To what extent, (if at all), these observations reflect the reality of teacher/student performance can be questioned and investigated. The cost and time wasting nature of part of the teacher admission process can be called attention to and redeemed. The content and quality of TTCs, their comprehensiveness considering their overintensiveness can be further explored. Attention can be drawn to the qualification of the observers and supervisors as well. Bailey's (2006) description of supervisor's roles and requirements is strongly needed to be perused and followed by those in charge of the instructional quality of the institutes.

In conclusion, the researcher hopes the results of this study can at least shed light on the overall view of EFL teacher admission and assessment process in Iran in the private sector. It is also hoped that similar studies are carried out in the nature and quality of EFL teacher assessment in public schools so that the whole system of language teaching in our country can be aided to improve.

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