Presenting a Model for Promoting the Professional Competency among EFL Teachers: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper addressed the issue by presenting a model for promoting the professional competency of EFL teachers in Iran.

Methodology: In order to accomplish the purpose of the study, the grounded theory was adopted to investigate EFL expert teacher's (key informants) articulations, experiences, and concerns about the subject and to develop a theoretical model across the participants; therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to 21 expert EFL teachers (EFL faculty members, teacher trainers, supervisors and EFL teachers) who were selected through snowball sampling. Interview data, were analyzed with a grounded theory approach using constant comparison method.

Findings: Major findings of the study suggested a multi-dimensional model of professional competency highly relevant to EFL teachers: cognitive/language skills competence; attitudinal/behavioral competence; and management competence. The interviewees also suggested that these competencies are under the effect of such influential factors in Iran as curriculum, individual characteristics, management and organization support, community, information technology, and media.

Conclusion: Furthermore, as a consequence of professional competency, it was clarified that EFL teachers' competencies affect their values, enthusiasm, communications and practice and most importantly support their professional life long development. Policy makers and teacher training programmers can hopefully benefit from the presented competency model while making adaptations in teacher training both at pre-service and in-service levels.

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1. Introduction

The importance of powerful teaching has become increasingly significant in contemporary society. Standards of learning are now higher than they have ever been before, as citizens and workers need greater knowledge and skills to survive and succeed. Education becomes progressively important to the success of both individuals and nations, and growing evidence demonstrates that among all educational resources teachers' abilities are especially crucial contributors to students' achievement. So, teachers' profession in 21st century exposed them to various challenges in the form of work demands, intellectual, new ideology and issues related to society acceptance (Kereluik et al., 2013; Guo, 2014). These challenges require EFL teachers to own a high level of psychological endurance in terms of both mental and physical. Therefore, teachers' competencies are the most significant factors in determining the success of students. Teachers have no longer played the role as the presenter of contents alone but must serve as an effective guide for higher order thinking and facilitator as well (Guzey & Roehrig, 2012).

Competence is a composite and descriptive set of attributes, abilities, skills, and insights of the teachers that is involved in the process of training and in feedback to their position, students, parents, colleagues, policymakers, and community to continually improve the educational output. Evaluation of this type of competence should be based on four dimensions of knowledge, skill, attitude and commitment (Tröbst et al., 2018). Generally speaking, competent teachers from all disciplines share similar qualities; however, EFL teachers differ from the teachers of other subjects in a number of ways which may be related to the nature of English as a subject. In particular, Brog (2006) states that these differences can be said to include the contrast between native and non-native speakers of English, the focus on skill rather than objectives, the centrality of communicative abilities to the classroom, and the subsequent adoption of different teaching methods and activities.

The qualifications required of teachers, are referred to as professional competence which include cognitive, attitudinal, emotional, social, ethical, knowledge, and skill components (Tröbst et al., 2018). Some experts, such as Huntly (2008), classify teachers' professional competence in the areas of professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional commitment. Professional knowledge is the content and cognitive knowledge. Professional practice refers to the design of learning, the creation of a learning environment, and professional commitment refers to participation, leadership, communication and ethics (Al-Mufti, 2018).

Various factors influence the professional development of teachers. Some factors are information technology as well as educational equipment (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012). Many experts emphasized the role of curriculum content in their research and also pointed out that curriculum and methodology or modern teaching practices influence teachers' professional competency (Neves de Jesus & Conboy, 2001). Community factor and empowered management are other factors that are strongly effective in improving the professional competency of teachers (Hammersley & Woods, 2019).

The same factors also go for foreign language teachers. Professional development is a continuum starting in initial teacher education (e.g. pre-service training), carrying on through the induction phase and continuing throughout the rest of the teacher carrier (e.g.in-service training). But first, we have to be aware of the ways to overcome the difficulties to provide the needed guidance and help the teachers set more realistic goals for personal and professional development (European Commission, 2013). English is a compulsory subject in Iranian Education; it is formally introduced into secondary schools as a content subject and is examined during the Final National Examination. At university level, English is a requirement for all faculties and undergraduate majors. However, as Young, et al. (2014) state, for students at elementary and secondary school levels, access to qualified EFL teachers having enough competency is critical. So English language teaching requires a specialized knowledge obtained through both academic study and practical experience (Richards, 2011).

Studies done by the authors show that scientific, documented and reliable research on the successful modeling of professional competency in the field of EFL teachers is extremely limited and not much comprehensive. Therefore, evaluating, designing, and validating efficient models of professional competency in this field can be effective in enhancing the quality of performance of Iranian EFL teachers.

Adopting grounded theory approach, the present study aimed to identify the different dimensions, components and indicators of EFL teacher's competency, along with its effective factors and consequences through interviewing expert EFL teachers. The main questions of the semi- structured interview were as follows: 1. what constitutes foreign language teachers ' professional competency for you? (How do you define professional competency of EFL teachers?) 2. What are the indicators of EFL teachers' professional competency? 3. What are the components of EFL teachers' professional competency? 4. Do you think your professional competency is affected by some factors? If yes, which factors and how? 5. Do you think teaching affects/ed your professional competency? 6. If yes, how? In your opinion, what are the main challenges in promoting professional competency? 7. What are the barriers and facilitators in promoting professional competency? 8. What activities do you think are useful- available to promote your professional competency? 9. How important is it for you to achieve professional competency? for your job? for your institution? for your students? 10. What is your experience as a teacher of the foreign language regarding professional competency and promoting it? (in terms of years, institutions, outside classroom activities, motivations etc.)

2. Methodology

The advantage of choosing qualitative research methodology is that it studies people in perfectly normal, rather than artificial, laboratory situations. It also includes other features such as theory building and clarifying the complexities of a phenomenon (Dalton, 2019). Applying grounded theory -The grounded theory approach was adopted in this study (Mercer, 2011) to investigate EFL teachers' articulations, experiences, and concerns about the issue and to help to develop a theoretical framework across participants; therefore, semi-structured interviews were applied in the qualitative section of the research because the semi-structured interviews with well-planned and open-ended questions fit the grounded theory approach well (Liao & Zhao, 2012).

The statistical population in the study consisted of 21 EFL expert teachers holding at least Master Degree in English and had executive and on-the-job training during their service at decision-making levels. This group was called informed experts who participated in the interview process. The sample size was determined by applying saturation principle. Saturation occurs when adding more participants to the study does not result in additional perspectives of information (Dornyei, 2007). These participants included 8 females and 13 males (12 Ph.D. holders; 4 Ph.D. candidates, and 5 M.A. holders) who volunteered by answering an invitation initially sent to them by the researchers. They involved 4 top high school English language teachers, 5 expert teachers in English language institutes who act as teacher trainers, too; 9 English language faculty members at universities, and 3 managers in English language institutes who act as supervisors, too.

The invitation spread and snowballed. As a result, 21 participants came from different language educational centers and universities in Tehran and Karaj. With this inevitable purposeful sampling, it would be fair to assume that the participants were EFL teachers interested in the topic of professional competency. Meanwhile, before participating, all the interviewees were given a written statement of the project's aims and a copy of the guidelines. They were informed that if they agreed to participate, their views might be quoted anonymously in publications. Ten main questions were constructed according to the purpose of the study and in line with G- theory coding paradigm. Then, they were sent to six academicians in ELT departments at two universities to get expert's opinion and check the feasibility of the data collection tool. After receiving suggestions for some revisions of the content and some ambiguities, the researchers started the interview. The length of the interviews varied from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. The interview questions invited the interviewees to reflect on, describe and discuss their teaching experiences about their professional competency.

After the 21st interview, the main and sub-factors were replicated and the researchers became saturated, it meant that the new data did not differ from the previously collected data and saturation was obtained, so the interview got stopped. As stated above, utilizing " theoretical sampling" (purposeful sampling), the above ten main questions were changed to some extent for different participants based on

the information obtained from the previous ones so that the plan should line up with the purpose of the study to fill the existing data gaps (Dornyei, 2007). Validity- To ensure the validity of the instrument and to ensure the accuracy of the findings and the researchers' point of view, valuable insights of the professors familiar with the field of study and the academic experts in the field were taken into account. Participants were also simultaneously assisted in analyzing and interpreting the data. According to Dornyei (2007), this kind of validation is called "respondent validation" or "member checking" which contributes to the generalizability of findings.

Reliability- In this study inter-rater agreement (peer -check) and intra- rater agreement (test-retest reliability) were used to calculate the reliability of the interviews. To increase the objectivity of interpretation, transcribing and analyzing the data were done by the two coders separately and the rate (percentage) of in-subject agreement was reported by two coders. According to Mays and Pope (2020) in control analysis, the in- subject agreement should be 60% or more for an interview which is a method for reliability analysis.

To calculate the test- retest reliability of the interviews, several interviews were selected as samples and each was re-coded in a short interval of time. The codes were then compared at two intervals for each interview. Data analysis - As the interviews were completed, they were first listened to again and transcribed. The transcripts were then read through repeatedly. This initial process allowed the researchers to immerse in the data, become more familiar with it, and identify initial points of interest. This stage was followed by the process of open coding, which involved identifying concepts in the data. Conceptual labels were given to incidents, events, and happenings, in order to be able to analyze them as potential indicators of phenomena (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

In axial coding, the next step, the concepts identified were labeled in the transcripts and organized into categories with the help of constant comparison of data, codes, and emerging categories. These coding help us to build theories in an inductive process (i.e. Grounded Theory) (Scott & Medaugh, 2017). As a result of the process, the coded concepts represented abstractions derived from the responses of many participants. All the above- mentioned coding and data analysis in qualitative part were done by the help of MAXQDA software. It is a world-leading software package for qualitative and mixed methods research analyzing all kinds of data – from texts to images and audio/video files, websites, tweets, focus group discussions, survey responses, and much more. Developed by and for researchers, MAXQDA is at once powerful and easy-to-use, innovative and user-friendly, as well as the only leading QDA software that is 100% identical on Windows and Mac (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019**).**

3. Findings

In attempting to present a model for promoting professional competency among EFL teachers, the following research questions were formulated by the researchers: 1- What are the indicators, components, and dimensions of professional competency among EFL teachers? 2- What are the factors that affect the professional competency among EFL teachers? 3- What are the consequences of professional competency among EFL teachers? 4- What are the implementation mechanisms (strategies) for promoting professional competency among EFL teachers? 5- What are the facilitators and barriers to promoting professional competency among EFL teachers?

As mentioned above, after defining the main research questions, the collected interviews were coded by defining characteristics and dimensions. In the first step, it was necessary to identify the semantic units (Table 1) which was approved by the supervisors and advisors:

Table1. Primary semantic units derived from interviewees' answers

Semantic units
• I know enough about my abilities, values and interests and how my cognitive skills are developed.
• I am proficient in using the knowledge, abilities, and interests of students in the classroom.
• I have enough language proficiency and knowledge in all 4 English language skills and subskills
• I am skilled in using appropriate teaching methods related to the subject of the lesson.
• I have enough inter- cultural knowledge(ICC) and know the linguistic/ and cultural similarities and differences between

L1 &L2)

- I am aware of the students' learning capacity and their background knowledge and experience and have the ability to change or correct them while working.
- I understand how different teaching methods can meet students' individual needs.
- I know how to design learner-centered instruction to encourage the learners' self-regulation and meta- cognition.
- I am aware of how to organize and present subject knowledge and to vary it according to meet students' learning needs and the language learning context.
- I know different learning/ teaching strategies and resources.
- I have the ability to design instruction to build learners' higher order thinking, communication and problem solving skills.
- I am efficient in updating my knowledge and have the ability to adapt my knowledge with new findings, ideas and theories.
- I have the knowledge and skills to use information communication technology (ICT) in learning process.
- I have the capacity to keep detailed assessment information to guide students learning process.
- I am committed to teaching students and serving the school as a professional member of teaching profession community.
- I believe that EFL teachers' sense of responsibility and accountability is based on their value/ attitude.
- I recognize and respect students' ethnic, cultural, and religious differences.
- I love students and English language teaching.
- I have a high regard for each one's right to education and treat all students fairly.
- I am committed to the values and rules of society respect social, linguistic, and cultural diversity of students and their community.
- I motivate students' curiosity, tolerance, honesty and kindness by engaging them in active listening, dialogue, and questioning to facilitate and support learning.
- I believe in lifelong learning.
- I have a sense of humor, cheerfulness and flexibility.
- I can create a safe and effective learning environment for all students.
- I can apply different strategies for managing students' behavior.
- I can set learning goals, plans and organize, and manage lessons.
- I can adapt myself to new teaching situations and changes.
- I can motivate students' interests in learning utilizing different strategies.
- I have the ability to make the best use of time.
- I can engage students in lifelong learning.
- I have the ability to communicate and work with other teachers, parents and local community to improve learning environment for EFL learners.
- I have the ability to collaborate with colleagues and work together to develop my own practice through learning from other teachers.
- I know the importance of inquiry and research based learning to improve teaching practice.
- I have the ability to create, select, evaluate, and use university and community resources to advance learners.
- I have the ability to analyze, evaluate and reflect on my activities, evidence, and data and self -assess to strengthen students' effectiveness.
- Adequate budget allocation for EFL teachers (to increase motivation or to empower EFL teachers)
- lack of proper monitoring mechanism.
- Lack of sufficient budget allocation for professional development programs
- Unstructured or discontinuous programs
- Lack of evaluation and ethical selection of EFL teachers in the way of hiring EFL teachers.
- Lack of in-service training and lack of knowledge in intercultural differences among EFL teachers
- Existence of cumbersome rules for the use of outstanding and expert EFL teachers
- Leaving EFL teachers after hiring and not evaluating them regularly.
- Lack of attention to the role of EFL teachers as educational leaders

After coding the semantic units and reaching saturation (when no new categories or codes were obtained from new text analysis or interviews), the categories were then categorized based on the similarity of the codes, and finally 34 categories of qualitative data emerged. The table below is the result of open, central

and selective coding that has been done with the contribution of supervisors and consultants as well as research literature.

Table2. Open, Central and Selective Coding

Selective coding	Central coding	Open Coding
Cognitive-language Skills Competence	Self-cognition and language knowledge	I know enough about my abilities, values and interests and how my cognitive skills are developed.
		I am proficient in using the knowledge, abilities, and interests of students in the classroom.
		I have enough language proficiency and knowledge in all 4 English language skills and subskills
		I am skilled in using appropriate teaching methods related to the subject of the lesson.
		I have enough inter- cultural knowledge(ICC) and know the linguistic/ and cultural similarities and differences between L1 &L2)
	Knowledge of the learner	I am aware of the students' learning capacity and their background knowledge and experience and have the ability to change or correct them while working.
		I understand how different teaching methods can meet students' individual needs.
		I know how to design learner-centered instruction to encourage the learners' self-regulation and meta- cognition.
		I am aware of how to organize and present subject knowledge and to vary it according to meet students' learning needs and the language learning context.
	Knowledge of the learning process	I know different learning/ teaching strategies and resources.
		I have the ability to design instruction to build learners' higher order thinking, communication and problem solving skills.
		I am efficient in updating my knowledge and have the ability to adapt my knowledge with new findings, ideas and theories.
		I have the knowledge and skills to use information communication technology (ICT) in learning process.
		I have the capacity to keep detailed assessment information to guide students learning process.
Attitudinal-behavioral competence	competence based on values and ethics	I am committed to teaching students and serving the school as a professional member of teaching profession community .
		I believe that EFL teachers' sense of responsibility and accountability is based on their value/ attitude.
		I recognize and respect students' ethnic, cultural, and religious differences.
	Competence based on attitudes	I love students and English language teaching.
		I have a high regard for each one's right to education and treat all students fairly.
		I am committed to the values and rules of society respect social, linguistic, and cultural diversity of students and their community.
	Competence based on interests	I motivate students' curiosity, tolerance, honesty and kindness by engaging them in active listening, dialogue, and questioning to facilitate and support learning.
		I believe in lifelong learning.
		I have a sense of humor, cheerfulness and flexibility.
Management competence	Competence related to classroom	I can create a safe and effective learning environment for all students.
		I can apply different strategies for managing students' behavior.
		I can set learning goals, plans and organize, and manage lessons.
		I can adapt myself to new teaching situations and changes.
	Competence related to educational atmosphere	I can motivate students' interests in learning utilizing different strategies.

|		I have the ability to make the best use of time.
		I can engage students in lifelong learning.
		I have the ability to communicate and work with other teachers, parents and local community to improve learning environment for EFL learners.
	Performance competence/development competence	I have the ability to collaborate with colleagues and work together to develop my own practice through learning from other teachers.
		I know the importance of inquiry and research based learning to improve teaching practice.
		I have the ability to create, select, evaluate, and use university and community resources to advance learners.
		I have the ability to analyze, evaluate and reflect on my activities, evidence, and data and self -assess to strengthen students' effectiveness.

The following figure is a conceptual model of the research.
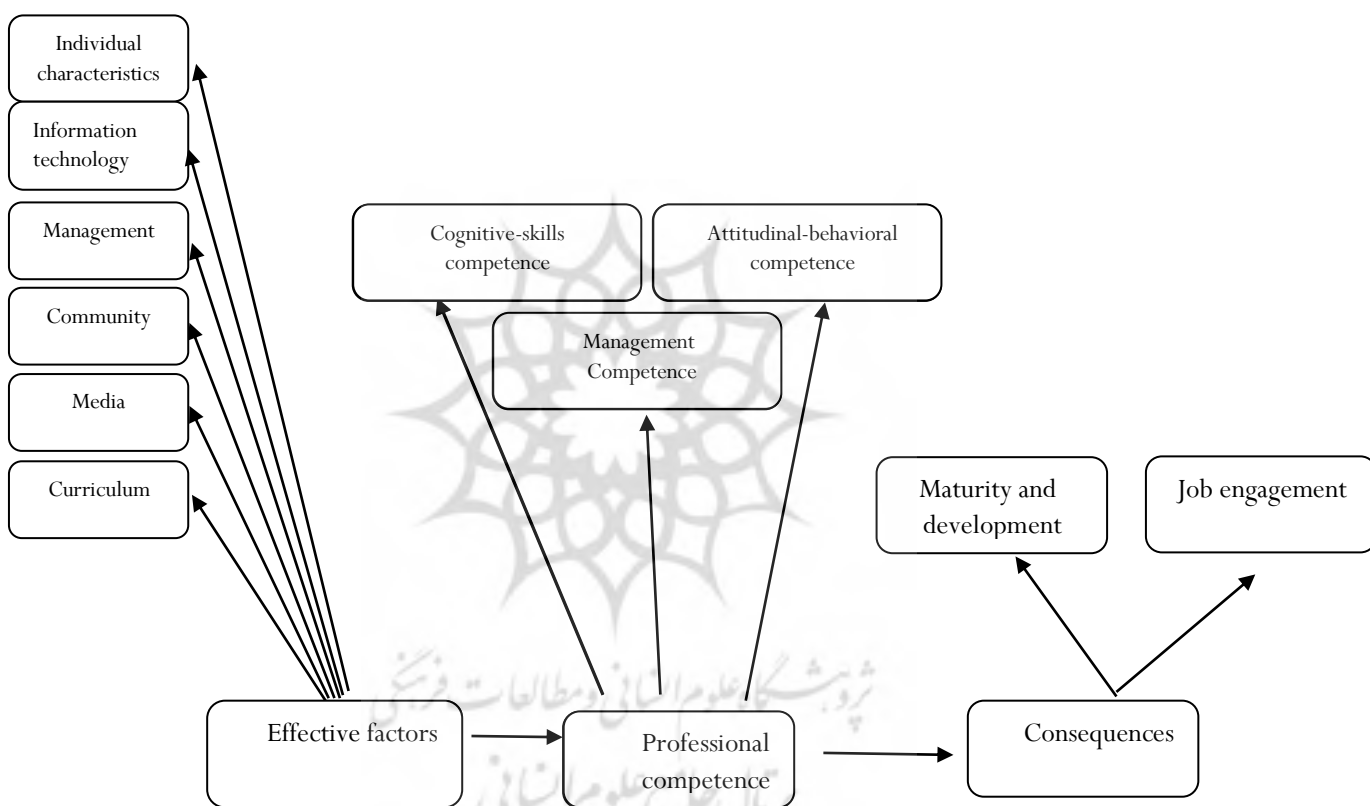
Figure1. Conceptual model of research

4. Discussion

Indicators, components and dimensions of EFL professional competency: The results of the semi structured interview revealed three main dimensions of professional competency: (a) cognitive/language skills competence; (b) attitudinal/behavioral competence, and (c) management competence. Each of the mentioned competencies contains some related components as follows: cognitive/ skills competence (EFL teacher's self-cognition and language knowledge, knowledge of the learner, and knowledge of the learning process); attitudinal/behavioral competence (competence based on values and ethics, competence based on attitudes, and competence based on interests). Management competence (knowledge related to classroom, educational atmosphere, and performance competence). Along with the mentioned dimensions and components, 35 indicators (clearly plausible in Table 2) were identified. Cognitive/language skills competence is the explicit awareness of EFL teachers of their own cognitive knowledge, socio-cultural perspectives and assumptions regarding their teaching, learning process, learners and other aspects of the

profession (Al-Seghayer 2017). It also includes the EFL teachers' content knowledge covering disciplinary, pedagogical and technological skills. This awareness enables them to determine the way in which they approach teaching and thereby helps them develop their professional knowledge and skill necessary to be successful.

The second dimension of EFL teachers' professional competency is their attitudinal/behavioral competence. EFL teachers who develop their personality traits gain more flexibility, adaptability, enthusiasm, fairness, high expectations, a good sense of humor, patience, responsibility, agreeableness, a caring attitude, honesty and respectfulness. According to Badwood (2015), if EFL teachers enjoy their job, have desire to educate, and regard teaching, they can maintain the class dynamics that includes excitement and enjoyment which may in turn cause better instruction, positive learning experiences, and productive language learning.

Finally, classroom management competency encompasses a wide variety of skills and theoretical framework. Martin and Sass (2010) claimed that classroom management goes beyond mere behavior management and supports instruction and gives credit to the relevance of teacher-learner relationship. By promoting this distinctive competency, EFL teachers are more successful in maintaining discipline, and maximize the available class time, and promote comfort, order, and appropriate behaviors. Accordingly, they can develop routines, exercise, proactive discipline, and maintain momentum interest for learning based on the age of learners, the physical environment, and the purpose of instruction.

Previous studies undertaken referred to nearly similar categorization; although some minor differences may be seen. For example, Lubis (2018) in his paper categorized the knowledge base of language teaching system as content knowledge/ pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, and contextual knowledge /process knowledge. In a little different categorization, Atmaca (2017) divided all EFL teachers' competencies into five main domains namely planning /organizing English teaching procedures; improving language skills; monitoring / evaluating language development; improving professional skills in English teaching; and school- family /society collaboration. Also, Selvi (2010) in his study indicated that teachers' professional competency is composed of four main categories: curriculum competency, life-long learning competency, social- cultural competency, and emotional competency.

Factors affecting the professional competency among EFL teachers: For this question, out of the 53 available indicators, 6 main components were identified through the interview: EFL teachers' individual characteristics, curriculum, management system, information technology, community, and media revealed to be the main influential factors affecting professional competency among EFL teachers. Individual characteristics in an EFL teacher may be represented as motivation, being enthusiastic about teaching, feeling of responsibility, and desire for promotion and growth. These positive individual characteristics can inspire EFL teachers for the lifelong learning and ongoing development.

Management support as an effective factor in promoting the professional competency in EFL teachers reflects the managerial approach to professionalism and represents the views of ministries of education, teaching organizations, regulatory bodies, and schools principals and so on to specify what teachers are expected to know and what quality teaching practices consist of (Leung, 2009). Also information technology if available has a vital role in providing access to online based resources or materials. According to Hamzah, et al. (2019), information technology is a powerful tool for transforming learning. It can help affirm and advance relationships among educators and between educators and learners, reinvent approaches to teaching and collaboration, shrink long-standing equity and accessibility gaps, and adapt teaching experiences to meet the needs of learners.

Community and contextual factors necessarily influence EFL teachers' competency because each community contains individuals with different values, norms, religions, ethnicity, linguistic backgrounds, and ways of thinking which may be affected by different cultures. Moreover, curriculum is shown to be very influential in helping EFL teachers enhance their competencies. Unwavering adherence to English textbooks in high schools and English language institutes alone may deny EFL teachers' opportunity to determine the course of the lesson and prevent them from identifying limitations in the textbooks that could be addressed through the applying some creative strategies.

The results of this study would agree with the literature. Rozdi, et al. (2016) emphasized the important role of organization and management support in promoting the professional competency. In the same vein, Elwood and Bippert (2020), suggested the integration of the technology standards and competencies in the movement toward competency-based education and portfolio development. Also, the results of this study is consistent with conclusions achieved by Grangeat and Gray (2007) who highlighted the effects of the organization and the collective work situations to be a main factor for improving teachers' conceptions about teaching.

The consequences of promoting EFL teachers' professional competency: The result of the semi-structured interview revealed that out of the 15 available indicators 2 main components can be categorized as consequences of professional competency: job engagement, and development and growth. As can be inferred, if EFL teachers are professionally qualified, they will gradually become more enthusiastic about teaching and more dependent on their job. This motivation and engagement will obviously lead them to seek the practices and activities for more personal and educational growth and development. This result is in line with a number of research studies. Safa and Azarnejad (2017) in their article indicated the impact of professional competency on the job performance of agricultural conservatory teachers in Northwest provinces of Iran. In the same line, Selvi (2010) suggested some components of professional competency help the teachers become effective while monitoring the students' learning. The results of this study also match with the results of an Indonesian study by Wati (2011) which reported the consequence of promoting professional competency in terms of improving EFL teachers' confidence and motivation for more engagement.
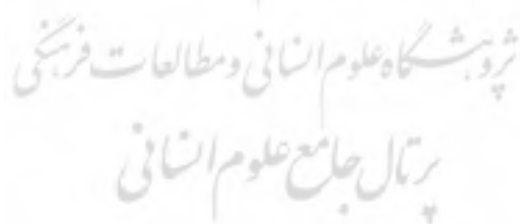
The strategies for promoting EFL teachers' professional competency: The experts in the interviews suggested six main strategies which are mentioned according to priority : selecting proficient and skilled EFL teachers interested in teaching English ; developing an operational plan to improve the professional competence of EFL teachers like in-service training or TTC; allocating resources and implementing programs to develop the professional competence of EFL teachers; considering EFL teachers' opinions on empowerment needs and pre- requisites; highlighting the role of EFL teachers at schools, and finally , regular purposeful and continuous activities in the field of professional development (attending various festivals and workshops, sending abroad, etc.). Some previous studies confirmed the result of this research by justifying the fact that participating in in-service training, in school or government sponsor workshops and conferences enhance the professional competency of teachers. For example, Neeta and Klu (2013) in their paper emphasized that teacher training programs have to be foregrounded in foreign language teachers' professional knowledge. Similarly, Anif et al. (2019) suggested developing post-certification programs and as a powerful strategy for the improving of biology teachers' professional competence. The study also conforms to the result of an investigation by Rahman et al. (2015) which claims that professional competency programs improve EFL teachers' content knowledge.

The facilitators and barriers to promoting EFL teachers' professional competency: In the interview, the EFL teachers suggested 12 facilitators and 8 barriers. The most mentioned facilitators according to the priority include: updating classes based on information technology; assigning resources needed to EFL teachers; improving the theoretical skills of EFL teachers (empowering EFL teachers pedagogical/ content knowledge; paying attention to meritocracy; conducting Class Action Research (CAR), and follow up activities; reflection(of specific classroom or practices) and extensive critical works (like peer observation); more collaborative works like lesson study and lesson plan; upgrading EFL teachers' self-confidence and self-efficacy through increasing their fluency and accuracy (upgrading their language proficiency)monitoring; coaching, and supervision or guidance from supervisors and collaboration with universities ;pre-service and in-service training, meaningful evaluation, adequate budget allocation for EFL teachers(to increase motivation or to empower EFL teachers) . The findings of the study are consistent with Graves (2009) who pointed out that lesson planning is a pre-requisite for language teachers. As cited in Cambridge English Teaching Framework (2015), action research, reflective teaching, teacher research, and classroom observation are the key facilitators to develop professional competency. Similarly, Richards

(2011) suggested that teachers can engage in critical and reflective review of their own practices throughout their professional development.

Oppositely , according to interviewees' view, the most important barriers to promoting professional competency among EFL teachers were mentioned as the lack of proper monitoring mechanism; lack of sufficient budget allocation for professional development program; unstructured or discontinuous programs; lack of evaluation and ethical selection of EFL teachers in the way of hiring them; lack of in-service training and lack of knowledge in intercultural differences among EFL teachers; existence of cumbersome rules for the use of outstanding and expert EFL teachers; leaving EFL teachers after hiring and not evaluating them regularly , and the lack of attention to the role of EFL teachers as educational leaders. The findings of the study match the results of all of following studies in a way or another. For example, Anif et al. (2019) in their article reported that the constraints EFL teachers encountered in the implementation of activities were absence of guidance, supervision and funding issues. Sulistiyo (2018) mentioned many difficulties to overcome on the way of promoting the professional competency of English language teacher such as limited internet access, limited post-graduate activities like continuing further study or joining a workshop or action research; conducting comparative studies and funding and time problems.

At the end of this study, a model based on the grounded theory approach to the professional competence of EFL teachers was presented (Figure 3). The presented model is more comprehensive and transparent than similar previous models because it examines all the components (dimensions, influential factors, consequences) for promoting EFL teachers' professional competency simultaneously. Alongside, in this research, mechanisms (strategies), facilitators and obstacles to improving the professional competence of teachers were investigated to make the model multi-dimensional. It is the researchers' opinion that the conclusions arrived at, are important for any future discussion of the foreign language teacher competencies and it is their hope that EFL teachers' perspectives will be considered in any future creation of contemporary pre-/ in-service training courses by policymakers, educational managers, headmasters, and EFL teachers concerned with developing EFL teachers' quality in Iran.
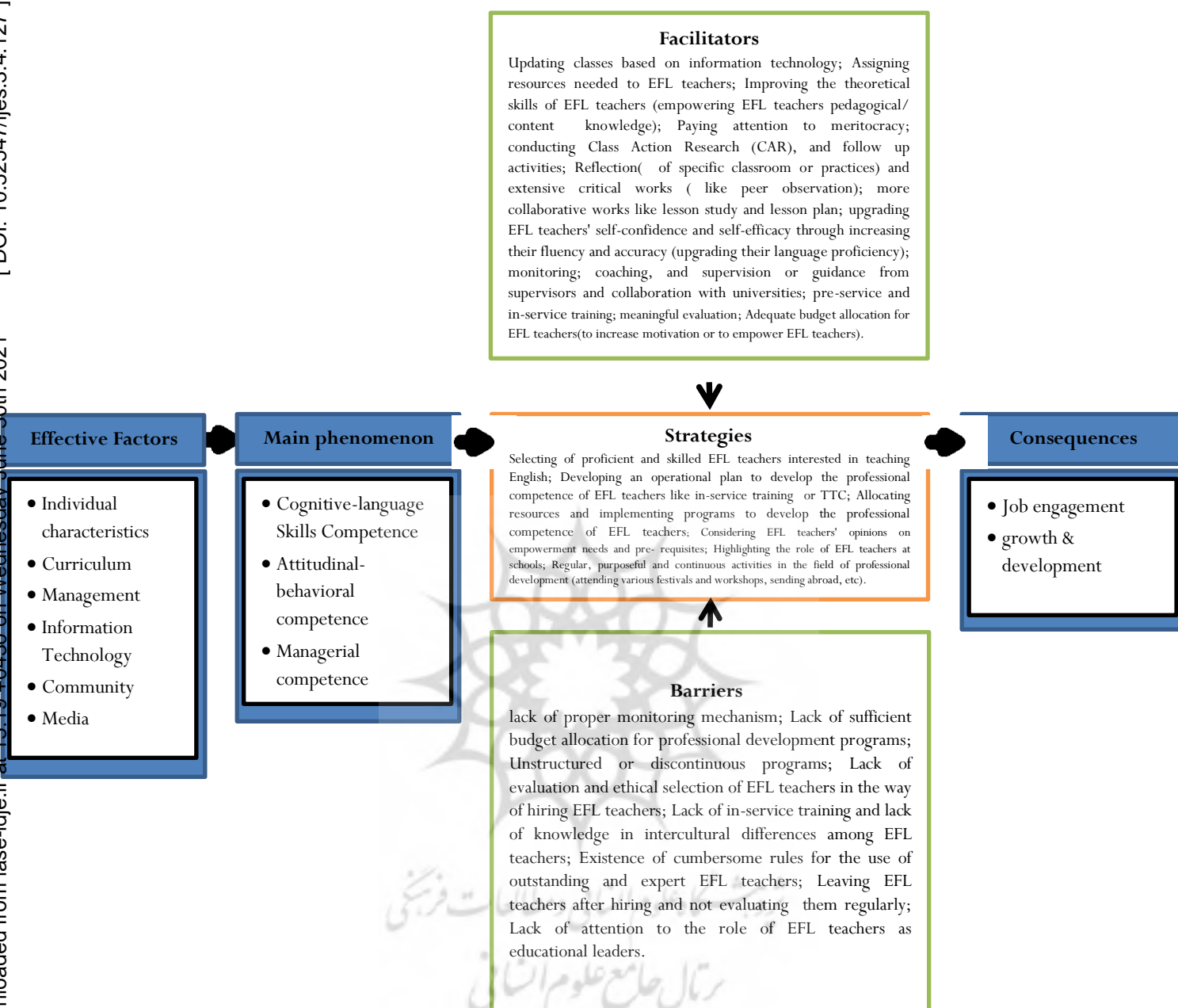
Facilitators

Updating classes based on information technology; Assigning resources needed to EFL teachers; Improving the theoretical skills of EFL teachers (empowering EFL teachers pedagogical/ content knowledge); Paying attention to meritocracy; conducting Class Action Research (CAR), and follow up activities; Reflection(of specific classroom or practices) and extensive critical works (like peer observation); more collaborative works like lesson study and lesson plan; upgrading EFL teachers' self-confidence and self-efficacy through increasing their fluency and accuracy (upgrading their language proficiency); monitoring; coaching, and supervision or guidance from supervisors and collaboration with universities; pre-service and in-service training; meaningful evaluation; Adequate budget allocation for EFL teachers(to increase motivation or to empower EFL teachers).

Effective Factors

- Individual characteristics
- Curriculum
- Management
- Information Technology
- Community
- Media

Main phenomenon

- Cognitive-language Skills Competence
- Attitudinal-behavioral competence
- Managerial competence

Strategies

Selecting of proficient and skilled EFL teachers interested in teaching English; Developing an operational plan to develop the professional competence of EFL teachers like in-service training or TTC; Allocating resources and implementing programs to develop the professional competence of EFL teachers; Considering EFL teachers' opinions on empowerment needs and pre- requisites; Highlighting the role of EFL teachers at schools; Regular, purposeful and continuous activities in the field of professional development (attending various festivals and workshops, sending abroad, etc).

Consequences

- Job engagement
- growth & development

Barriers

lack of proper monitoring mechanism; Lack of sufficient budget allocation for professional development programs; Unstructured or discontinuous programs; Lack of evaluation and ethical selection of EFL teachers in the way of hiring EFL teachers; Lack of in-service training and lack of knowledge in intercultural differences among EFL teachers; Existence of cumbersome rules for the use of outstanding and expert EFL teachers; Leaving EFL teachers after hiring and not evaluating them regularly; Lack of attention to the role of EFL teachers as educational leaders.

Figure 2. The final model of EFL teachers' professional competency

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