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Online Teacher Roles and Competencies: Voices from Pre-Service EFL Teachers

Mina Basirat[1], Mahboubeh Taghizadeh[2*]

[1, 2] *Department of Foreign Languages, Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran*

*Corresponding author: mah_taghizadeh@ut.ac.ir

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Abstract

Given the prevalence of COVID-19 pandemic and consequently the emergence of more online courses throughout the world, exploring teachers' views about the shift from face-to-face to online environments seems significant. The objective of this study was thus twofold: (a) to investigate the roles EFL teachers take and (b) to determine competencies required to teach online English language courses. Mixed-methods research was conducted, and the participants were 100 MA students of TEFL at Iran University of Science and Technology (IUST). The required data were collected through administering two questionnaires, adapted by the researchers, on online teacher roles and competencies along with two open-ended questions. After carrying out descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and theme-based analysis for the qualitative ones, the results indicated that online teaching roles could be hierarchically ranked as pedagogical, professional, administrative, social, assessment, technological, and researcher. With regard to online teacher competencies, pedagogical, professional, and technological role competencies received the highest mean, while the researcher role competencies gained the lowest one. Pre-service EFL teachers held the view that having knowledge of technology and its use, knowledge of course/content, ability to sustain learners' motivation, online teaching skills, and ability to communicate were other competencies teachers require to fulfill their roles in online English language courses. The findings can provide more insights into how to redesign and map online teacher professional development courses to better prepare potential EFL teachers and boost their quality as online EFL teachers.

Keywords: EFL teachers; Online teacher roles; Pre-service teachers; Pedagogical roles; Teacher competencies

Introduction

Online teaching, according to Oliver (2001), differs from traditional teaching to a great extent, since practice and pedagogy both require multiple changes in order to accentuate the advantages of technology integration. This dramatic shift from traditional classes into online courses has been the compelling concern and strategic planning for many institutes (Miller & Lu, 2003; Schunk, 2016). The growth in the courses having been offered online also lends itself to a change in the nature of teaching and the roles of teachers (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004), making teachers the focus of this demand who are challenged to reconsider the roles they take in such environments (Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2013). The roles of an online teacher are drawn from traditional teacher roles, which are modified and adapted to create effective learning/teaching experiences (McShane, 2004). A number of online teacher roles with miscellaneous terms and descriptions have been identified over the past decades (Alvarez et al., 2009; Anderson et al., 2001; Aydin, 2005; Berge & Collins, 2000; Çağıltay et al., 2001; Coppola et al., 2002; Dennis et al., 2004; Guasch et al., 2010; Hung & Chou, 2015; Salmon, 2003); however, it is crucial to elucidate teacher roles with respect to the required competencies to fulfill those roles within the particularities of the knowledge and skills that online teachers must gain.

Having suggested the competencies for online instructors Klein et al. (2004) argue that the competencies of online teaching are not basically dissimilar to those in traditional classes. Alvarez et al. (2009) assert that demands for the reconstruction and evolution of teacher functions for the integration of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) into online teaching have not come into existence directly; rather, they are implicitly expressed through the changes in the curricula. This reform, which the teachers most of the time perceive as an extra complication to their functions and workload, is considered a need to gain new competencies to enhance the design of teacher professional development programs. Since being an effective online teacher requires wide and varied series of competencies, making teachers prepared to teach online comprises of readiness for diverse competencies in which the subject expert shifts to the performance coach (Alvarez et al., 2009). After the prevalence of the

COVID-19, numerous institutions and universities around the world, including Iran, have started offering online courses, especially online English courses, and more teachers have been asked to teach such courses. Despite the fact that studies on online teacher competencies and roles are of great significance for giving insight into the possibility of how to support and train online teachers, the literature on online teaching still falls short to deeply investigate the roles and related competencies of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers for teaching online English language courses. And, since the extent of implementing these competencies and roles in teacher education and professional development programs may change based on the contexts and culture, having a thorough investigation on online teacher roles and competencies in the context of Iran or any other context, where English is taught as a foreign language, seemed essential. Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the roles EFL teachers play in online courses, and the competencies they require.

To ensure a better understanding of online teaching and consequently to design professional development programs for online teachers, taking a deeper look into the definitions of online teachers' roles is necessitated. Considered as one of the pioneers in describing teacher roles in virtual environments, Berge (1995) originally classifies online teachers' functions into four different areas, which highlight the demand for communicative competencies. The four categories include (a) pedagogical role: ameliorating the learning in the form of discussions, (b) managerial role: designing and organizing the logic behind the discussions, (c) social role: promoting working together, and (d) technical role: catering a proper technological environment for the learners (Berge, 2008; Berge & Collins, 2000). Berge and Collins (2000) also assign several roles for online moderators, which are manager, facilitator, expert, filter, editor, marketer, discussion leader, and helper. Gold (2001) considers social, intellectual, and organizational roles fundamental ones for e-moderators. Developing a conceptual framework to measure, improve, and understand teaching presence within educational computer conferences, Anderson et al. (2001) suggest the roles of facilitating discourse, instructional organization and design, and direct instruction for online teachers.

In order to define online competencies and roles, according to Goodyear et al. (2001), a group of distance education experts suggests a framework involving eight roles for online teachers, which include advisor/counselor, process facilitator, assessor, content facilitator, researcher, technologist, manager/administrator, and designer. Adding to this list of roles, Dennis et al. (2004) identify three other roles, namely resource provider, metacognition facilitator, and co-learner. These 11 roles are further categorized into two main roles: (a) central roles associated with interactions are content facilitator, process facilitator, metacognition facilitator, assessor, advisor/counselor, resource provider, and technologist and (b) peripheral roles associated with previous or after central interactions are co-learner, designer, manager/administrator, and researcher. Having adapted the list of Goodyear et al. (2001), Aydin (2005) reported Turkish online teachers' perceptions of online roles as instructional designer, content expert, and materials producer.

Focusing on the altering pedagogical roles in asynchronous environments based on teachers' views on their functions, Coppola et al. (2002) suggest cognitive, affective, and managerial roles for online teachers. Williams (2003) further suggests leader/change agent, instructional designer, trainer, and instructor/facilitator roles. Bawane and Spector (2009) obtained opinions of 21 experts, mostly from the USA and India where English is either their mother tongue or their second language, about the priority and the importance of eight online teacher roles, namely professional, advisor/counselor, social, pedagogical, technologist, evaluator, administrator, and researcher. They found that the highest ranked roles by the respondents were pedagogical and professional roles, whereas the lowest ranked role was researcher. As a part of their research objectives, Martin et al. (2019) investigated the views of eight faculty members in the United States and found that the five roles of course designer, facilitator, mentor, subject matter expert, and content managers were assumed to be significant for online instructors.

Having analyzed various studies, Alvarez et al. (2009) suggest that teacher roles in virtual learning environments follow three directions: social role, planning and design role, and instructional role. They also state that,

especially in collaborative contexts, the social function itself can be linked to several roles, such as coach, tutor, mediator, facilitator, and moderator. Varvel (2007) identifies (a) administrative role: involving the processes necessary to function effectively within general institutionalized ethics as well as the given legal and institutional settings; (b) personal role: involving the mental and physical abilities of the instructor and his/her attributes; (c) technological role: being related to mere use of technology apart from pedagogy; (d) pedagogical role (subcategorized into assessment, instructional delivery, and instructional design): being the largest category since it is primarily involved with instruction; and (e) social role: providing value to the social functions that online instructors are anticipated to possess in a student-centered and social learning environments. According to Varvel (2007), although an online teacher not capable of functioning based on the administrative setting might be a well competent facilitator, she/he may lose the chance to show her/his capability because of legal or policy violations. Investigating different dimensions involved in online teacher roles, Hung and Chou (2015) suggest the roles of course organizer, assessment designer, discussion facilitator, technology facilitator, and social supporter.

Each of the roles noted in the literature is determined by a set of competencies required to fulfill the roles. Competency, according to Varvel (2007), refers to appropriate prior attitudes, knowledge, and abilities measured against a minimum standard in an online classroom in order to efficiently and effectively accomplish a task. Furthermore, given the interpretations and definitions of professional competencies, two points of view have been proposed. Competency is firstly considered a personal ability or skill referred to as behavioral efficacy (Spencer & Spencer, 1993) and secondly a strategic behavior aligns with the potential to adjust performance to the demands from the context (Westera, 2001). In the first view, competency is individually regarded as a cognitive structure to fulfill roles and implement tasks align with standard expectations (Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Competency as strategic behavior subscribes to meaningful learning, and since it is socially situated, instructors and their expectations shape and determine the content of competencies to function successfully in professional contexts (Westera, 2001). The second point of view seems to

be appropriate for comprehending the nature of online teaching and the design of teacher training programs (Alvarez et al., 2009).

The prioritization of online teachers' competencies is varied based on the online teaching context (Baran et al., 2011). Given the culture and context of online teaching, more important than other competencies are technological (Egan & Akdere, 2005), assessment (Aydin, 2005), and communication ones (Williams, 2003). Apart from suggesting communication competence, Williams (2003) also identifies three other competencies, which are management and instruction, instruction and learning, and technology use. In addition, Williams considers interpersonal and communication skills the top dominated competencies.

Reid (2002), moreover, lists more than 500 competencies for online tutors classified into content expertise, technical knowledge, course management, evaluation, and process facilitation. Defining e-moderator competencies, Salmon (2003) groups the competencies into five domains of personal characteristics, understanding online process, technical skills, communication skills, and online content expertise. Considering the input drawn from the personal experiences, research, and instructional theories, Shank (2004) classifies competencies for asynchronous instruction into five categories of facilitation, administrative, technical, evaluation, and design.

Given the fact that teaching online courses significantly varies from face-to-face (F2F) courses and that teachers need to have additional competencies, Moorhouse et al. (2021) investigated the competencies online teachers require to use interactions to facilitate synchronous language learning. They distributed a questionnaire to 75 tertiary English language teachers in universities. The findings of their study indicated that online teachers viewed online classroom management and online interactional and technological competencies as the important competencies to teach synchronous online classes.

Regarding online instructor competencies, Martin et al. (2019) also carried out an exploratory study. Having reviewed the literature and interviewed eight faculty members in the United States, Martin et al. conclude that online instructors need to have technical competencies and general competencies, including content expertise, willingness to teach, learning

assessment skills, course design skills, and knowledge of how learning occurs. To explore significant competency areas affecting online instruction, Farmer and Ramsadale (2016) reviewed the literature and found five areas of competency, namely leadership and instruction, tools and technology, community and netiquette, instructional design, and active teaching.

Different areas of competencies supporting an online instructor, according to Dennis et al. (2004), include discipline expertise, communicational, pedagogical, and technological competencies. Klein et al. (2004) also provide five categories of competencies, namely professional foundation, instructional strategies/methods, planning/preparation, management, and assessment/evaluation. Developing a competency list for an online instructor according to the needs of a specific program, Varvel (2007) differentiates knowledge-based and performance-based competencies. Determining the competencies with a group of experts, Bawane and Spector (2009) suggest that there is a varied set of competencies that online instructors are supposed to acquire, and the amount of their application depends on the roles they are required to fulfill and the type of support and resources available. Alvarez et al. (2009) argue that provided that the aim of teacher training is to build up competencies, the training should focus on minimum set of specific competencies for diverse tasks and roles. Moreover, considering the particularities of each context socially and organizationally, various roles are formed in accordance with the tasks carried out by online teachers (Alvarez et al., 2009).

Given the literature review, there have been some studies investigating online teacher roles (e.g., Alvarez et al., 2009; Bawane & Spector, 2009; Goppola et al., 2002; Martin et al., 2019; Varvel, 2007) and online teaching competencies (e.g., Bawane & Spector, 2009; Farmer & Ramsadale, 2016; Martin et al., 2019; Moorhouse et al., 2021; Reid, 2002; Varvel, 2007). However, it seems the roles and competencies of online teachers, especially pre-service ones, in an EFL context have not been thoroughly investigated. It is worth noting that competencies are operationalization of online teaching roles, and the responsibilities and skills related to roles have been elaborated with competencies. Therefore, the present study was conducted to shed more light on the roles and competencies required for teaching online English language courses. It is assumed that the findings could help

teacher educators enhance pre-service teachers' awareness of their teaching roles in the online teacher professional development programs offered to them. Therefore, the following research questions were addressed:

RQ1: What roles do EFL teachers take to teach online language courses?

RQ2: What competencies do EFL teachers require to teach online language courses?

Method

Participants

This study was run in the second semester of the academic year 2020 with 100 Iranian MA students studying Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) either in the F2F classes (n = 40) or at the e-learning campus (n = 60) of IUST, which is considered one of the pioneer universities offering TEFL courses in higher education. The participants, who were also considered as pre-service EFL teachers, recruited on the basis of availability sampling procedures. In other words, 77 female (77%) and 23 male (23%) students with their age ranged from 23 to 53 years were willing to cooperate and were asked to respond to the items of the instruments. It is worth noting that during their MA program, all the participants, both from the F2F classes and e-learning campus, had attended the course of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL). The students of the course mostly had become familiar with various technological tools and software theoretically rather than practically. Moreover, all the participants had not had any experience of teaching online English courses when the study was conducted.

Instruments

Two questionnaires were used in this study. First, the online teacher roles scale was developed by the researchers based on reviewing the studies of Varvel (2007) and Bawane and Spector (2009), since they explored and offered comprehensive online teacher roles and competencies compared to other studies. The questionnaire aimed to determine the significance of online teachers' roles and included seven roles of pedagogical, administrative, professional, social, assessment, technological, and researcher, asking participants to be put the roles in order of significance. At the end of this scale, the participants were also asked an open-ended

question about the roles a teacher should take in order to teach online English language courses.

To determine the critical competencies required to teach online language courses from the perspective of pre-service EFL teachers, the online teacher competencies scale with 31 items was developed based on Varvel's and Bawane and Spector's studies and in line with the online teacher roles chosen in the first questionnaire. Following the specified roles in online teacher roles scale, the first section of this questionnaire consisted of seven categories of competencies: pedagogical (7 items), administrative (4 items), professional (4 items), social (5 items), assessment (4 items), technological (5 items), and researcher (2 items). At the end of the scale, an open-ended question about the competencies a teacher should have in order to fulfill the roles of teaching online language courses was asked to indicate the pre-service teachers' opinions about other competencies for online teaching.

Procedure

In the first step, the roles in the online teacher roles scale were selected based on reviewing the literature. Since numerous roles were suggested in the literature, the most frequent terms were used in the online teacher roles scale. For instance, Varvel (2007) suggested the instructional design, instructional delivery, and pedagogical roles; however, because the two first roles were subdivisions of the last one, the pedagogical role was utilized in the current study. Varvel further notified administrative, personal, technological, assessment, and social roles. Similarly, Bawane and Spector (2009) recommended eight roles based on a review study on the online teaching roles coupled with obtaining experts' opinions about the priority of the identified roles. Given the purpose and the context of this study, seven online teacher roles (i.e., pedagogical, administrative, professional, social, assessment, technological, and researcher) were finally selected. Based on the importance of each role and their significance for effective teaching, teachers were asked to range each role on the scale of one to seven (i.e., number one represented the least important role, while number seven the most important one). The respondents were also instructed to specify each number to each role just once so that none of the numbers could be repeated in each line and column.

Given the roles of teachers in online teacher roles scale, the competencies underlying the roles appeared in the first questionnaire for online teacher competencies scale were gathered based on Varvel's and Bawane and Spector's studies. Varvel (2007) specified 247 online teacher competencies for the seven roles used in his research. The comprehensive list of roles from Bawane and Spector (2009) similarly comprised of 19 competencies allocated to all roles. Therefore, by merging and modifying the competencies of the two studies related to the specified roles in online teacher roles scale, the teacher competencies scale consisted of 31 items, which appeared as a five-point Likert scale (1 = very little, 2 = little, 3 = moderate, 4 = much, and 5 = very much).

The final version of the instruments was written on Google Forms, and the link was sent via WhatsApp to the participants. On the first page of the form, the participants were asked of their gender and age. The importance of their participation was also emphasized and the necessary instructions for answering the items of each scale were given. They were also assured that their responses would be in full compliance with ethical principles, kept confidential, and only used for the research purposes. It is worth noting that all the participants had attended a CALL course provided by the English department of IUST and were already in a WhatsApp group in which the required materials of the course were provided by the instructor. Therefore, the instructor was asked to share the link of the questionnaires in the WhatsApp group of the course. All the 100 participants, for whom the link was sent, answered all the items of the questionnaires. The internal consistency of the questionnaire on online competencies was also estimated through Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficient was .92, indicating a high internal consistency of the responses provided by the participants to the items. Considering the construct validity of the questionnaire on online competencies, the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) coefficients of concordance were 0.80, exceeding the suggested value of 0.6 by Kaiser (1970). In addition, the attained values of X2 in Bartlett’s test of sphericity for the questionnaire reached the statistical significance (p = .000). Principal components analysis indicated seven components of competencies with the eigenvalues passing 1, explaining 65% of the variance.

Design

This study entailed a descriptive research design to explore pre-service EFL teachers' competencies and roles of online teaching. To this end, a mixed-method research design was employed, and qualitative data were obtained. The frequency, mean, percentage, and rank could be descriptive statistics and all were qualitative aspects of a research. There was not also any inferential statistics.

Data analysis

SPSS 20 was used to analyze the data. For all options of the items of the roles and competencies scale, descriptive statistics were first run to analyze the responses of pre-service teachers to the categories of online teachers' competencies and roles, and the percentage of each item was calculated. In addition, for the data driven from the open-ended questions, theme-based analysis was performed to determine the most recurrent patterns in the participants' responses to the questions. In other words, the participants' responses to the two open-ended questions were coded, classified, and analyzed. Further, some samples were provided for the emergent themes.

Results

Pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of online teacher roles

To seek out the importance of the identified roles according to participants' ranking, a scale with seven roles was administered, and pre-service teachers were asked to rank order the roles on the scale of one to seven. Considering the order of importance, the most significant role received number seven, while the least significant one received number one. The frequency of responses for each role is highlighted in Table 1.

Table 1
Pre-service EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Online Teaching Roles

	Rank Frequency						
Roles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Pedagogical	8	7	7	5	12	21	40
2. Administrative	12	16	10	12	23	21	6
3. Professional	3	2	9	18	28	20	20
4. Social	10	8	23	32	10	11	6
5. Assessment	8	18	31	10	17	8	8
6. Technological	15	30	10	14	7	12	12
7. Researcher	44	19	10	9	3	7	8

Table 1 indicates the frequency of pre-service teachers' ranking for online teaching roles. It can be stated that pedagogical roles obtained rank 1 from 8 teachers, rank 2 from 7 teachers, rank 3 from 7 teachers etc., and a similar approach can be considered for other roles and their related ranks. The data shown in Table 1 were further analyzed with Friedman test in order to calculate the average rank for each role. The average ranks gained for the roles are shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Average Rank Score of the Roles

Roles	Pedagogical	Administrative	Professional	Social	Assessment	Technological	Researcher
Mean	5.29	4.05	5.06	3.81	3.66	3.52	2.61
Rank	1	3	2	4	5	6	7

As indicated in Table 2, pedagogical roles obtained the highest priority, which was followed respectively by professional, administrative, social, assessment, technological, and researcher roles. An open-ended question about other roles an online teacher can take in order to teach online language courses was also administered to the participants. While 16% of whom considered pedagogical and technical roles mentioned in the questionnaire as the most important ones, others' responses were presented hierarchically as follows: facilitator (24%), guide (21%), instructor (20%), evaluator and assessor (17%), materials developer (13%), manager (13%),

motivator (13%), leader (12%), collaborator/communicator (9%), researcher (6%), and resource (5%).

Pre-service EFL teachers' perceptions of online teaching competencies

To explore online English language teacher competencies, a competencies questionnaire was administered. It included seven categories related to the competencies of the seven specified roles: pedagogical role competencies, administrative role competencies, social role competencies, assessment role competencies, technological role competencies, and researcher role competencies. To identify the items obtained more positive responses and those obtained few positive responses, the percentage of prospective teachers' perceptions of the competencies for each role is provided in the Appendix. It is worth noting that the combination of 'Much' and 'Very Much' categories is reported as positive responses, whereas that of 'Very Little' and 'Little' categories is considered negative responses.

As shown in the Appendix, the highest agreements on the online teacher competencies were respectively related to 'technological role: online instructor should be able to have the knowledge and ability to use the resources to enhance teaching and learning' (95%); 'pedagogical role: online instructor should be able to maintain a valid and useful syllabus' (94%); 'pedagogical role: online instructor should be able to manage the time and course effectively' (93%); 'pedagogical role: online instructor should be able to select instructional strategies, tasks, or materials based on learners' needs and ability' (92%); 'technological role: online instructor should be able to select the appropriate resources' (92%); 'pedagogical role: online instructor should be able to sustain learners' motivation' (91%); and 'assessment role: online instructor should be able to actively engage learners in self-assessment and setting their personal goals' (91%).

On the contrary, the highest disagreements were obtained by 'researcher role: online instructor should be able to conduct research on classroom teaching' (11%); 'researcher role: online instructor should be able to interpret and integrate research findings in teaching' (9%); 'social role: online instructor should be able to resolve conflicts in an amicable manner' (9%); 'social role: online instructor should be able to be flexible when working with colleagues' (8%); and 'technological role: online instructor should be able to model and teach ethical and legal practices for using

technologies' (8%). In order to identify pre-service teachers' viewpoints about the seven categories of online teacher competencies, descriptive statistics were calculated, and the results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of Online Teacher Competencies

Categories of Competencies	*Min*	*Max*	*Mean*	*SD*
1. Pedagogical	3.29	5.00	4.39	.45
2. Administrative	2.50	5.00	4.11	.57
3. Professional	2.00	5.00	4.25	.63
4. Social	2.00	5.00	4.06	.73
5. Assessment	1.75	5.00	4.17	.68
6. Technological	1.80	5.00	4.21	.58
7. Researcher	1.00	5.00	3.77	.93

Table 3 indicates that the highest mean for the online teacher competencies belonged to pedagogical role competencies (*M* = 4.39), closely followed by professional role competencies (*M* = 4.25), and technological role competencies *(M* = 4.21), whereas the lowest mean score was obtained by researcher role competencies (*M* = 3.77). Table 3 also shows that the pre-service teachers' responses to the items of pedagogical role competencies were the most homogeneous (*SD* = .45), while those to items of the researcher role competencies were the most heterogeneous (*SD* = .93).

In addition to the online teacher competencies scale, an open-ended question, What competencies should a teacher have in order to fulfill the roles he/she has taken to teach online language courses, was administered, and pre-service teachers' responses are hierarchically reported as follows: knowledge of technology and its use (36%), knowledge of the course/content (32%), ability to sustain learners' motivation (15%), online teaching skills (12%), up-to-date technological and pedagogical knowledge (10%), ability to promote interactivity and collaboration (9%), ability to communicate effectively and having friendly social relationships (9%), ability to teach learners with diverse needs and learning styles (8%), patience (7%), ability to have proper assessment (7%), being professionally flexible (6%), having self-confidence (6%), ability to use resources (5%),

and high level of leadership (5%). Some instances of teachers' responses are listed below:

Knowledge of technology and its use

"Teachers should have sufficient technological knowledge and know how to implement it in the online teaching without difficulty."

"Teachers need specific technological competencies of the software, tools, and basic ICT."

Knowledge of the course/content

"Teachers should have adequate knowledge about the content of the course to be able to effectively teach online courses."

"Teachers should have a complete grasp of the subjects of the course."

Ability to sustain learners' motivation

"Teachers should be able to keep students motivated and active in the online course."

Online teaching skills

"Teachers should be quite familiar with the required skills and strategies to teach online courses."

"Teachers should be expert in instructional, communicative, and technological skills."

Up-to-date technological and pedagogical knowledge

"Teachers should be aware of the latest updates about online teaching methods and the related tools."

"Teachers should be familiar with new technologies, tools, and websites suitable for online teaching."

Ability to promote interactivity and collaboration

"Teachers should have a great sense of interaction and collaboration to be successful in teaching online language courses."

"Teachers should have the ability to encourage learners to collaborate in the class activities and tasks."

Ability to communicate effectively and having friendly social relations

"Teachers should be able to communicate effectively in an online language course and have proper interpersonal interactions in the sense of community that is established."

Ability to teach learners with diverse needs and learning styles

"Teachers should be able to consider the learning styles of his/her students for effective online learning."

"Teachers should choose strategies and tasks related to learners' needs and abilities."

Patience

"Teachers should be highly patient with all students in the classroom and with technology and its related difficulties."

Ability to have proper assessment in an online course

"Teachers should be able to assess students' individual and group performance online and be familiar with the assessment techniques for an online course."

"Online teachers should have the ability to promote self-monitoring strategies for online students and empower them to take responsibility for their own learning."

Being available and flexible professionally

"Teachers should be flexible enough to encounter the difficulties and always be responsive to students' questions."

"Teachers should have flexibility with the tools and time. They should also be open to accept any criticisms or suggestions."

Self-confidence in teaching online

"Teachers should be self-confident and passionate for online teaching."

Ability to use resources

"Teachers should be able to provide appropriate and authentic resources for online learners."

"Teachers should be able to use various resources, which help facilitate online teaching."

High level of leadership

"Teachers should have high level of leadership to make students follow the class rules and take the course seriously."

Discussion

In this study, prospective online teachers prioritized pedagogical roles as the most important one among all the seven roles. Since online teachers still share the basic functions of traditional teaching, they regarded the

pedagogical role as the most predominant one for online teaching. The subparts of the pedagogical roles are related to the knowledge of course and content, such as time management, interaction management, classroom management, content and course management, instructional strategies and tasks, and fostering learners' motivation. Because all these subparts of the pedagogical roles are significant in online language teaching, it has obtained the highest rank. This finding is in line with that of Bawane and Spector (2009), indicating that the highest ranked roles for online teaching are pedagogical ones. The second ranked roles were professional roles. That could be due to the fact that online teachers need to have the knowledge of the content area and dedicate themselves to education. Online teachers also should not take things for granted in their online language courses and commit to quality teaching. Moreover, due to the ongoing development of technology and abundance of online language courses, online teachers should put effort into their continuous professional development in their career. The researcher roles, on the other hand, were assigned as the least significant roles for an online teacher. Considering the researcher roles as the least significant role for online EFL teachers may be due to the fact that doing action research is not practiced in Iranian teacher professional development courses; hence, the awareness of conducting action research and its impact on online teaching quality is not emphasized. This finding is in contrast with that of Goodyear et al. (2001), who suggested the researcher role as one of the top eight roles for online teachers. The finding of the current study is in line with that of Bawane and Spector (2009), indicating that the lowest ranked roles for online teaching are researcher roles.

Pre-service teachers also stated that the role of facilitator is important for online teachers. That is because online teachers should continuously try to simplify the materials for the sake of learning enhancement by their own classroom management skills, the type of interactions they assign for the tasks, and the kind of syllabus they decide to offer. However, the role of resources was the least significant according to the teachers' views. This may be due to the fact that at MA level, the instructors should not limit students to their materials and encourage them to learn about new issues from diverse sources.

With regard to online teacher competencies, pre-service EFL teachers considered the pedagogical role competencies the most significant in teaching online language courses. That would be because the competencies of pedagogical roles, including selecting instructional strategies, tasks, and materials based on learners' ability and needs, developing and modifying appropriate resources, maintaining a useful syllabus, facilitating participation, sustaining learners' motivation, and improving online learning skills, are important in a way that they bring about online learning success and effective online teaching. In addition, when teachers offer a systematic syllabus, managing the course, content, time, and interaction occurs more effectively. Professional role competencies were reported to be the second significant competencies. The significance of these competences in pre-service teachers' views is due to online teachers' capability to enhance online interaction and collaboration, establish online learning community, and design tasks and strategies in accordance with the learner styles and needs.

Pre-service teachers further agreed that technological role competencies were important for teaching online language courses. This might be due to the fact that with recent advancement of technology and development in methods of online teaching, teachers are required to update their knowledge about online teaching and obtain advanced technological knowledge and capabilities. Teachers, moreover, need to have access to various technological resources, select the most appropriate ones, and know how to use them more effectively based on learners' needs and abilities. In line with this finding, Coppola et al. (2002) argue that since technologies have emerged vastly in today's life at social and participatory levels, re-examining assumptions of and beliefs in the new environment of teaching, learning, and associated ethical practices has become critical for effective online teaching. The finding also supports that of Martin et al. (2019), indicating that online instructors need to have technical competencies.

However, in line with the findings of online teacher roles, researcher role competencies were reported to be the least significant ones for online language teachers. This may be due to the fact that in the context of Iran, the priority for teachers is to merely deliver good teaching rather than doing

research to find out what factors can affect students' learning and even their own teaching in an online language course. However, as novice teachers continue teaching and become more experienced, they may achieve the awareness of the importance of research and its positive effect on developing students' learning and enhancing teaching quality. In other words, if teachers are more experienced, they feel the significance of conducting research in every aspect of their career to promote effective online teaching. However, pre-service teachers do not really feel the importance and effects of research on their online teaching, and consequently, they mostly consider teaching and pedagogical roles and competencies the most significant ones.

They further agreed that pedagogical, professional, and technological competencies are the significant competencies for teaching online language courses. Considering these findings, it can be stated that online teacher's ability to fulfil pedagogical and professional responsibilities is the most significant competence. However, the professional development programs of TEFL almost fall behind to take into account the required competencies and roles for efficient online teaching. Provided that they offer CALL courses to TEFL candidates, they focus mostly on familiarizing teachers with technological tools and their integration into teaching practices and ignore empowering pre-service teachers with pedagogical and professional competencies. These findings are in disagreement with those of Williams (2003) who considered communication competencies as the top dominated competencies for online teachers. The results also contradict those of Egan and Akdere (2005), indicating that depending on the culture and context of online teaching, technology-related competencies are more important than the other competencies.

Pre-service teachers need to promote their technological and pedagogical knowledge about effective online teaching and master the ICT for pedagogical purposes and their future online practice. Not only do online teachers need to get familiar with the technologies required for online teaching/learning, but it is also critical to transform their pedagogical approaches and become familiar with their roles and related competencies to meet the required instructional needs of online students. Therefore, teachers new to online teaching need to take time to perceive their various roles,

competencies, and knowledge for effective quality of online teaching, since the awareness of competencies, roles, and pedagogy is also critical for effective online teaching. Online teacher professional development programs need to lay out relevant and efficient competency-based, knowledge-based, and skills-based teacher training courses, considering the online teachers to guarantee their online teaching success. For instance, it is suggested that online professional development courses be sequenced according to the prioritized roles along with making reference to the competencies for various roles.

It is worth noting that the researchers delimited the participants to MA students of TEFL at IUST, while more participants from different universities could have been taken part in the study, and more data could have been obtained. Further, other data collection procedures, including interviews and group discussions, could have been involved. Hence, to gain more robust perspectives of teachers, teacher educators, and stakeholders about online teaching, multiple methods for data collection, such as group discussion, interview, individual journals, and self-report questionnaires can be used in future studies. A comparative study on the experienced and novice teachers' knowledge of online competencies and roles is also encouraged. In another study, the contribution of online teaching roles and competencies to online teacher quality can be investigated. Moreover, in practical terms and for long term results, future researchers can conduct training sessions for pre-service teachers to prepare them to fulfill their online teaching roles. For instance, because of the nature of online teacher roles that are dynamic and multidimensional, there is a need for a more integrated and structured study to help EFL teachers deal with actual pedagogical problem-solving competencies while using diverse ICTs in online courses. Future researchers can also focus on researcher roles since these roles can empower pre-service teachers to conduct needs analysis that ultimately affect their online teaching quality.

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Appendix

Percentages of Online Teacher Competencies of Each Role

Statements	Very Little	Little	Moderate	Much	Very Much
Pedagogical Role Competencies					
In an online course, instructor should be able to					
1. select instructional strategies, tasks, or materials based on learners' needs and ability.	----	----	8	32	60
2. implement the related instructional strategies.	----	----	11	41	48
3. develop or modify appropriate learning resources.	----	1	11	33	55
4. maintain a valid and useful syllabus.	----	----	6	41	53
5. present the course overview to enhance learners' learning.	----	2	20	38	40
6. facilitate participation among students.	----	2	15	36	47

7. sustain learners' motivation.	----	2	7	29	62
Administrative Roles					
8. establish rules and regulations.	----	4	22	45	29
9. manage the time and course effectively.	----	----	7	37	56
10. understand the context in which the institution and its instructors are.	----	2	17	45	36
11. demonstrate the leadership qualities.	1	5	32	35	27
Professional Role Competencies					
12. show dedication to education and commitment to quality teaching.	----	2	15	42	41
13. undertake efforts to update her/his professional development and knowledge in her/his career.	1	3	10	36	50
14. comply with ethical and legal standards related to the use of technology.	----	1	23	30	46
15. be qualified in the field of study and demonstrate knowledge in the content area.	----	3	14	37	46
Social Role Competencies					
16. maintain an appropriate learning environment for online language learners.	----	5	15	35	45
17. promote interactivity and collaboration within online environment.	----	5	15	41	39
18. facilitate a community in which individual differences are respected.	----	6	21	33	40
19. resolve conflicts in an amicable manner.	1	8	20	34	37

20. be flexible when working with colleagues.	1	7	21	38	33
Assessment Role Competencies					
21. monitor individual and group progress.	2	4	16	43	35
22. assess individual and group performance.	2	3	17	41	37
23. evaluate the course and resources.	----	5	9	41	45
24. actively engage learners in self-assessment and setting their personal goals.	----	2	7	50	41
Technological Role Competencies					
25. access various technological resources required.	----	2	10	41	47
26. select the appropriate resources.	1	1	6	46	46
27. have the knowledge and the ability to use the resources to enhance teaching and learning.	----	----	5	46	49
28. assist online language learners with the technology use.	2	3	13	53	29
29. model and teach legal and ethical practices related to the use of technologies.	2	6	21	42	29
Researcher Role Competencies					
30. conduct research on classroom teaching.	2	9	28	37	24
31. interpret and integrate research findings in teaching.	4	5	21	45	25

Biodata

Mina Basirat holds an MA in TEFL from Iran University of Science and Technology. She has been teaching English as a second language for over 14 years. Her research interests span the fields of CALL and teacher education.

Mahboubeh Taghizadeh, PhD in TEFL, is an assistant professor in TEFL at department of Foreign Languages in Iran University of Science and Technology. Some of her current research interests include, but are not limited to, CALL, teacher education, and English for academic purposes; and she has published articles in some national and international journals.