

Iranian EFL Teachers' Professional Success in High Schools and Private Language Institutes: A Comparative Study

Zeinab Roosta*

Department of Foreign Languages
Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shiraz, Iran

E-mail: roostaneda@yahoo.com

Mohammad Sadegh Bagheri

Department of Foreign Languages
Shiraz Branch, Islamic Azad University
Shiraz, Iran

E-mail: bagheries@gmail.com

Abstract. The present study aimed to investigate professional success among Iranian EFL teachers in two different teaching contexts namely high schools and language institutes concerning their years of teaching experience, gender, level of education and socioeconomic status. Data were gathered from among 61 teachers and 600 students chosen from various private English language institutes and high schools in Shiraz, Iran. The instrument used in the study was a questionnaire developed by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009). Results indicated that professional success of male teachers is higher than that of female teachers. Findings further illustrated that there is a significant positive relationship between English teachers' professional success and their education level and socioeconomic status. Finally, it was found that English teachers' professional success is higher among institute teachers compared with their counterparts.

Keywords: Professional success, high schools, language institutes, Iranian EFL Teachers, teaching English

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*Corresponding author

1. Background

The final aim of any educational planning is to help students grow in various cognitive, individual and social skills and knowledge necessary to function occupationally and socio-politically in society (Fullan, 2001) and teachers' role in successful preparation of students is indisputable. Whether the students will be the open-minded and the informed people of tomorrow or unaware members of society will depend on teacher knowledge, teacher education and especially teacher professional success (Rizvia, 2010).

One of the most important contributions of research on teachers' professional success is that the beliefs that teachers hold about teaching and learning influence their effective teaching (Calderhead & Shorrock, 1996; Pajares, 1992; Thompson et al., 2004). Obviously, teacher knowledge, goals, and teaching contexts influence what happens in the classroom. In fact, Pajares (1992) argued that what teachers view as professional success was influenced by their beliefs in significantly different ways. Studies indicate that teachers' professional success is formed during their schooling years as students and from their experiences, and their observations of other colleagues (Ball, 2003). Kagan (1992) referred to teacher professional success as a particularly provocative form of personal knowledge, defined as teachers' implicit theories about learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught which can be a professional standard for teacher development.

According to Borg (2001), teachers' beliefs on professional success are strongly tied to their pedagogical attitudes. This definition is related to what Borg (2003) called teacher's thought, knowledge, and beliefs as well as their relationships with effective teaching in EFL classrooms. Teachers' professional success is their cognition, thoughts, and knowledge about what should be done in foreign language classes (Bas-turkmen et al., 2004). Language teachers' beliefs about the way of effective language teaching and their perceptions about classroom teaching are two crucial factors that influence their professional success (Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Glisan & Philips, 1996).

According to Ethell and McMeniman (2000, p. 88), successful teach-

ers “have a larger knowledge base from which to draw” and usually “organize knowledge more efficiently in complex interconnected schemas and utilize it more effectively”. Thus, it is essential for successful teachers to have both superior subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. As Batten, Marland and Khamis (1993) stated, students’ views of the qualities of good teachers embody not only being friendly and humorous, but also respecting and encouraging the students. Biggs and Moore (1993) also mentioned that the personal traits that make a great teacher comprise being enthusiastic, encouraging, humorous, fair, flexible and organized.

Elizabeth et al. (2008) set out a model for defining teacher’s success. They proposed that in order to define teacher success, not only should we pay attention to personal and professional qualities, but also we should take contextual factors such as teachers’ personal context, school context, and context beyond school into account. As far as personal qualities are concerned, Elizabeth et al. (2008) also presented a number of personal characteristics like patience, sense of responsibility, caring for students, and enthusiasm. In terms of professional qualities, they pointed to factors such as clear presentation of the instructional materials, the ability to enhance students’ understanding, arousing motivation in students, and effective classroom management.

1.1 Factors influencing professional success

There are a number of factors, both student-related and teacher-related, that can influence teachers’ professional success. Ferguson and Brown (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of research regarding the correlation between teacher certification test scores, teacher quality, and student achievement. They argued that student test score gains were an imperfect measure of what we really want to know. Because other factors such as student, home, school, and community characteristics affect achievement as well, teachers deserve neither all of the credit for success nor all of the blame for the failures” (p.134).

1.2 Attributes related to professionally successful teachers

The attributes related directly to professionally successful teachers’ instructional decisions are discussed here. These might include: discern-

ing the need for instructional differentiation (Langer, 2001; Molnar et al., 1999; Weiss et al., 2003); holding appropriate expectations for student learning (Peart & Campbell, 1999; Palardy, 2008; Wentzel, 2002); poignant questioning (Allington, 2002; Cawelti, 2004; Stronge et al., 2011); and creativity in using teaching strategies (Vasutova, 1998; Riley, 2003). The establishment of an appropriate climate for learning in the classroom (Stronge et al., 2011; McBer, 2000; Hattie, 2011) has also been defined as a key characteristic of a professionally successful teacher. Classroom climate or discipline has been described by Durkheim (1961, p. 149) as the morality of “a small society.” Indeed, researchers argue, if there were no order in the learning environment (or space) then little planned learning would occur. Subject specific knowledge is clearly critical for professionally successful teaching, but some authors have argued that even more important is the ability to enable others to develop their own inquiry into and understanding of the subject matter (Nieto, 2003). Professionally successful teachers are masters and mistresses of their subject: they know and understand the subject and their enthusiasm for the subject stands to make the subject come alive and thus become intriguing as well as accessible to others. The professionally successful teacher, in contrast to just a subject expert, also understands what elements of the subject might not be easily comprehended by others (Nieto, 2003).

1.3 Teachers’ professional success and related factors

Previous research has suggested the role of a number of factors in teachers’ professional success. One such factor has been teacher’s degree. When examining the influence of teacher degree level on teachers’ professional success, many of the results are not positive. Goldhaber (2011) states that the measures of teacher quality that are used by most public school systems to screen candidates and determine compensation, certification, experience, and education level have been well researched, but there is little definitive empirical evidence that these characteristics, defined in general terms, are associated with higher teachers’ professional success. The vast majority of research conducted indicated that a teacher with a master’s degree had no additional positive impact on professional

success over a teacher with a bachelor's degree (Clotfelter et al. 2005; Hughes & Bartlett, 2010; Harris & Sass, 2011).

Another influential factor as suggested by the related literature has been teaching experience. The role of educators' experience on the achievement of professional qualities has been concentrated on by Johnston et al., (2005). Their study uncovered that educators' experience takes a vital part in the development of instructor's performance skill. Through examination of the research, it has been found that years of experience can be correlated to professional success, although sometimes it is a weak correlation. For instance, Hanushek and Rivkin (2006) conducted a research on teacher quality. They then suggested that the correlation between years of experience and professional success is statistically weak in many instances, and therefore cannot contribute to a strong assumption of the effect. In addition, their results revealed that teaching experience is positively correlated with higher professional success even though findings about its meaning vary.

Another factor that has been found to be related to teachers' professional success is their gender. There is a vast body of research, which demonstrates that gender is an important variable which must be considered when clarifying the functioning of classes. Dordinejad and Porghoveh (2014) researched the relationship between EFL instructors' gender and their success, supposed by learners, showed that there was no critical distinction between male and female teachers' success. As indicated by the findings of this research, EFL instructors' gender did not determine their success as perceived by learners. In addition, Statham, Richardson, and Cook (1991) found that gender differences continued even after controlling for course level, class size, and teacher's rank. According to a study by Alibakhshi (2010), it could be concluded that personality and gender do not influence Iranian EFL teachers' teaching efficacy, and that both male and female teachers have the same sense of teaching efficacy. Therefore, teaching efficacy is not a personality related variable.

With this in mind, the present study aims to investigate whether there would be any significant difference in EFL teachers' professional success in high schools and private language institutes concerning factors such as experience, level of education, socioeconomic status, and

gender. Specifically, the study seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1) In terms of years of teaching experience, is there any relationship between the professional success of Iranian EFL teachers in high schools and that of those in private institutes?
- 2) Does EFL teachers' professional success differ as a function of gender in schools and institutes?
- 3) Is there any relationship between the professional success of Iranian EFL teachers in high schools and that of those in private institutes based on their level of education?
- 4) Concerning socioeconomic status, is there any difference between the professional success of Iranian EFL teachers in high schools and that of those in private institutes?
- 5) Is there any significant difference between the professional success of Iranian EFL teachers in high schools and that of those in private institutes?

2. Method

The samples for this study were 61 teachers and 600 students chosen from various private English language institutes, and high schools in Shiraz, Iran, who filled in the questionnaires. Using the convenience sampling method, the researcher contacted the high schools and English language institutes which accepted to take part in this study. The selected teachers were diverse regarding four main criteria including gender, teaching experience, academic degree, and socioeconomic status.

Two main research instruments were utilized in the study. The first questionnaire developed by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009) investigated teachers' success in the classroom from learners' point of view. This questionnaire consisted of 47 multiple-choice items based on 5-Likert scale varying from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." The second questionnaire was researcher made and contained 9 items covering general information about EFL teachers such as gender, level of education, experience and socioeconomic concerns.

3. Results and Discussion

The first research question aimed to determine whether there was any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' professional success and their teaching experience in high schools and that of those in private language institutes. To this end, Spearman correlation was used. Table 1 shows the pertaining results.

Table 1. Spearman Correlation Test between English Teachers' Professional Success & Teaching Experience

| Variable | English Teachers' Professional Success | Value |
|---------------------------------|--|--------|
| Teaching Experience (school) | Correlation Coefficient | -0.342 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |
| Teaching Experience (institute) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.672 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |
| Teaching Experience (total) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.348 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |

Results indicate a significant relationship (correlation) between English teachers' professional success and their teaching experiences in both school and institute groups and there is a significant relationship (correlation) between the overall professional success of EFL teachers and their teaching experiences.

The correlation coefficient of school group is(-0.342), showing that there is a negative, reverse correlation between the two variables, so it is concluded that the more teaching experience increases at school group, English teachers' professional success decreases. Correlation coefficient of institute group is (0.672) indicating the positive, direct correlation between the two variables; therefore, it is inferred that increased years of teaching experience at institute group causes increased professional success of English teachers. And finally, the overall correlation between the two variables is (0.348); thus, it is concluded that increased teaching experience generally leads to increasing professional success of English teachers. A few leading studies (Kane, Rockoff & Staiger, 2006) indicated that the effect of teaching experience on teachers' professional success

success is greatest in the first few years. Vigdor (2007) also found that teacher experience has a significant positive effect on student achievement and teachers' professional success, with more than half of the gains occurring during the teacher's first few years, but substantial gains occurring over subsequent years, albeit at a slower rate.

The second research question aimed to investigate whether male and female EFL teachers have different professional success in schools and institutes. Results are shown in Table 2 to 6.

Table 2. Descriptive Data of English Teachers' Professional Success & Gender (Schools)

| Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------|-----|------|--------------------|
| Male | 76 | 3.08 | 0.38 |
| Female | 228 | 2.57 | 0.30 |

Table 3. Descriptive Data of English Teachers' Professional Success & Gender (Institutes)

| Gender | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|--------|-----|------|--------------------|
| Male | 123 | 4.05 | 0.26 |
| Female | 173 | 4.03 | 0.96 |

Table 4. Independent Samples *t*-test of English Teachers' Professional Success & Gender (Schools)

| | Mean | t | df | Sig. | |
|---|--------|------|-------|------|-------|
| EFL Teachers' Professional Success and Gender (schools) | Male | 3.08 | 2.924 | 302 | 0.004 |
| | Female | 2.57 | | | |

Table 5. Independent Samples *t*-test of English Teachers' Professional Success & Gender (Institutes)

| | Mean | | t | df | Sig. |
|---|---------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| EFL Teachers Professional Success & Gender(Institutes) | Male | 4.05 | 0.106 | 294 | 0.916 |
| | Female | 4.03 | | | |

As can be seen, it can be concluded that the professional success of male teachers is more than that of female teachers at school group. However, it was found that the professional success of male and female teachers is the same in institute group.

Table 6. Independent Samples *t*-test of English Teachers' Professional Success and Gender

| | Mean | | t | df | Sig. |
|--|---------------|-------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| EFL Teachers Professional Success & Gender (Total) | Male | 3.68 | 3.991 | 598 | 0.001 |
| | Female | 3.20 | | | |

Overall, it was found out that the professional success of male teachers was significantly higher than that of female teachers. These patterns of findings were consistent with existing studies revealing that male teachers may promote academic achievement (Cappella, Melzi, and Katsifas, 2008). Further, these kinds of results were in disagreement with other findings which revealed that female teachers are better in terms of their classroom management practices and their belief in students' learning ability. They also found that being in a female teacher's classroom was advantageous for language learning (e.g., Canes, Rosen and Rothstein, 1995; Neumark & Gardecki, 1998; Bettinger & Long, 2005; Hoffman & Oreopoulos, 2009; and Carrell et al. 2010).

The third research question investigated whether there was a significant relationship between English teachers' professional success and

their education level in high schools and private language institutes. Table 7 illustrates the results.

Table 7. Spearman Correlation Test of English Teachers' Professional Success & Education Level

| Variable | English Teachers' Professional Success | Value |
|------------------------------------|---|--------------|
| Education Level (school) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.135 |
| | Significance Level | 0.019 |
| Education Level (institute) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.273 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |
| Education Level (Total) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.224 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |

Results indicated that there was a significant relationship (correlation) between English teachers' professional success and their education level in school group, institute group and both groups. According to school correlation coefficient (0.135), which showed a positive, direct correlation, it was concluded that higher level of education among school teachers would lead to increasing professional success of English teachers. Regarding correlation coefficient (0.273) at institute group, which indicated a positive correlation between the two variables, it is deduced that increasing teachers' education level in institute group would increase professional success of English teachers. Finally, according to overall correlation (0.224) of the two variables, it was concluded that higher level of education of teachers generally caused increased professional success of English teachers. These results lent support to the previous research findings that revealed teachers' professional success differed as a function of level of education (Cizek et al., 1995).

The fourth research question sought if there is any significant relationship between English teachers' professional success and their socioeconomic status in high schools and private language institutes. Table 8 shows the pertaining results.

Table 8. Spearman Correlation Test between English Teachers' Professional Success & Socioeconomic Status

| Variable | English Teachers' Professional Success | Value |
|----------------------------------|--|--------------|
| Socioeconomic Status (school) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.301 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |
| Socioeconomic Status (institute) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.366 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |
| Socioeconomic Status (total) | Correlation Coefficient | 0.352 |
| | Significance Level | 0.001 |

As can be seen in Table 8, there is a positive correlation between teachers' professional success and their socioeconomic status in both groups.

The fifth research question aimed to investigate whether school EFL teachers and institute EFL teachers had different professional success. In this regard, the Independent samples t-test was used to compare teachers' professional success in schools and institutes. Results are depicted in Table 8.

Table 9. Independent Samples t-test of School & Institute English Teachers' Professional Success

| | Mean | | sd | t | df | Sig. |
|--|-----------|------|------|---------|-----|-------|
| EFL Teachers Professional Success (School vs. Institute) | School | 2.69 | 0.34 | -13.413 | 588 | 0.001 |
| | Institute | 4.04 | 0.89 | | | |

According to Table 9, the mean of English teachers' professional success at school group is 2.69 with standard deviation of 0.34; whereas, at institute group it is 4.04 with the standard deviation of 0.89, indicating that English teachers' professional success is higher in institute group as compared with school group.

4. Conclusion and Implications

This study was conducted to determine whether Iranian EFL teachers' teaching experience, gender, level of education and socioeconomic status would influence their professional success. This study also aimed at comparing Iranian EFL teachers' professional success in schools and private language institutes. In this regard, spearman correlation test and independent samples t-test were utilized. The findings indicated that the more teaching experience increases at school group, English teachers' professional success decreases and increased years of teaching experience at institute group caused increased professional success of English teachers. The findings also revealed that the professional success of male teachers was higher than that of female teachers at school group. Findings of this study indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between English teachers' professional success and their education level and socioeconomic status.

As the results indicated, there was a significant difference between the teachers of institutes and those of high schools with regard to their professional success. This might be in part due to different educational context of high schools and language institutes in Iran. While high schools classrooms are more teacher-centered relying on traditional teaching methods, institutes classrooms are mostly communicative providing students more opportunities for language use. In other words, in high schools context, the students are not given more opportunities to communicate with both the teacher and each other. Therefore, many high school students are not motivated to learn because of the non-interactive nature of the foreign language classroom. Such being the case, for teachers certain characteristics are necessary in order to teach more effectively and efficiently and keep their students interested and motivated in learning their L2.

It is hoped that the results of this study will serve as a practical starting point for improvement in the educational system. Material developers and syllabus designers can make use of the findings of this study in order to comprehend the importance of professional success and apply it in designing teachers' books.

Finally, since professional success is a multidimensional construct and other factors such as student factors, school factors and organizational factors may contribute to teacher professional success, conducting a study considering these factors can be effective.

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