

Academic Major Change: Exploring the Experiences and Views of MA TEFL Major-Changers and University Instructors

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Abstract

Annually, a good number of Iranian students who have completed their undergraduate studies in non-English-related majors apply and enroll in Master's level Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) programs. Although evaluating MA TEFL program in Iran from university instructors' and students' perspectives has so far been the subject of several studies, the experiences and views of these TEFL major-changers have not been duly explored. To address the existing gap, in this qualitative research, the experiences of major-changers studying TEFL at MA level in three state universities in Tehran have been investigated. Besides, six TEFL university instructors were asked to share their perspectives concerning major-changers attending MA TEFL programs. In the main, the findings revealed that motives like interest in pursuing an English teaching career rather than a job related to their former major; gaining the required competency through attending crash courses held by university exam preparatory institutes; facing challenges in acquiring the specialized discourse of the community; and witnessing realities which ran counter to their prior supposition, as discussed by the major-changers and the instructors, formed part of the lived experiences and views of these major-changers.

Keywords: academic major change, lived experiences, major-changers, master's level, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) program, university instructors

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1. Introduction

Based on the regulations set by Iranian Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), bachelor's Level graduates (BA) are allowed to continue their studies in majors other than the ones previously studied. Among master's level programs (MA), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) major is one of the favourite higher education programs in Iran for not only English-related majors, namely, English Translation, English Teaching, and English Language and Literature but also those who have already completed their undergraduate studies in a variety of non-English related disciplines (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). MA TEFL is a two- to three-year program which "aims at training qualified persons for teaching English at universities or institutions of higher education and also fulfilling the needs of the society regarding experts in the field of research in language teaching issues" (Gholami Pasand, 2013, p. 1). It is, therefore, no surprise to see students with degrees in Natural Sciences, Engineering Sciences, and Arts and Humanities applying for and enrolling in MA TEFL programs.

Nonetheless, entering a fairly bewildering world that necessitates a good command of linguistic and interdisciplinary theories, pedagogical models, language assessment, and disciplinary research literacy, these students often face more challenges in comparison to those coming from English-related majors due to their lack of preparation or acquaintance with the requirements of this academic discipline. While some universities attempt to take remedial actions by proposing some technical introductory or prerequisite courses, other universities prefer to relinquish the responsibility of making up for the lacks to the major-changers themselves.

Over the last decade or so, evaluating MA TEFL programs in Iran from university instructors' and students' perspectives has been the subject of several studies (Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018; Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013; Foroozandeh et al., 2008; Moiiinvaziri & Razmjoo, 2016; Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014; Sotoudehnama & Fakhari, 2016; Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). In another strand, studying the reasons for changing majors or "academic major migration" (Foster, 2013) by college and university students as well as their perspectives and appraisals of their new fields of study has been of interest to many researchers (e.g., Badamchi & Gha'emKhani, 2015; Firmin & MacKillop, 2008; Jalili Farahani & Alidoost, 2013; Marade & Brinthaup, 2018; Maroufi & Adak, 2018; Rashidi Pouya, 2017). Nonetheless, despite the fact that academic migration from non-English majors to MA TEFL program is a continuing trend and these students constitute part of

Iranian TEFL population, their lived experiences including their motives, challenges, and evaluation of the program they have attended or are currently attending have garnered inadequate attention. The issue bears significance since unless the voices of these major-changers are acknowledged and appropriate measures are taken, their personal and professional lives and their future performance as English teachers might be affected (Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018; Moivaziri & Razmjoo, 2016). To address the existing gap in the body of research, in this qualitative research, the lived experiences of major-changers studying TEFL at MA level in state universities were investigated. Besides, TEFL university instructors' views concerning major-changers in MA TEFL programs were sought. The research questions guiding the study were:

1. What are the experiences and views of major-changers attending MA TEFL program?
2. What are TEFL university instructors' views regarding major-changers attending MA TEFL program?

2. Literature Review

2.1. MA TEFL Program in Iran

MA TEFL program is one of the populated programs in Iran (Gholami Pasand, 2013; Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). Offered by both state and private universities, the program admits over three thousand students every year. The applicants for universities are chiefly selected via an annually-administered high-stakes University Entrance Exam (UEE hence after) constituting of general language proficiency section (containing grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension subsections), and technical section measuring their knowledge on Language Testing, Teaching Methodology and Linguistics via multiple-choice items.

To succeed, TEFL exam applicants may prefer to take MA prep-courses or mock exams designed and held by preparatory institutes. Upon admission, matriculated students are required to pass around 34-credit compulsory and elective courses; write up an academic proposal; and then present and defend a thesis, within the maximum length of three years (six semesters) in order to be eligible to graduate. Although a non-thesis track in which students take more courses instead of writing up an MA thesis has been piloted for a short period of time, doubts have been cast

on its legitimacy more recently (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015).

Similar to other contexts in which examining MA TEFL programs and their effectiveness or impacts have been a burgeoning interest (Farrah, 2019; Obeidat & Shehadeh, 2020; Soontornwipast, 2008), evaluating MA TEFL program in Iran from university instructors' and students' perspectives and from various angles has been the subject of several studies. Investigating the quality and effectiveness of the program (Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013; Foroozandeh et al., 2008), the factors affecting attendees' demotivation (Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014), the challenges or "hurdles" candidates of TEFL confront during their stay in the program (Moiinvaziri & Razmjoo, 2016), the effect of the program on self-efficacy of experienced and novice student-teachers (Sotoudehnama & Fakhari, 2016), and the voice realization of the students in the designed syllabi of the program (Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018), to mention some, are among the relevant researched topics. In the main, the findings of the studies have shown "a gap between" what MA students "studied in their MA program and what they actually encountered in the real work situations" (Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013, p.552). Lack of contentment with financial support, educational amenities or campus conveniences, university instructors' conducts and discipline-specific competencies, learning and teaching contents and materials, adequate endorsement of practical courses, as well as qualms about career prospect and economic outlook of the field of study have also been shown in several studies (Moiinvaziri & Razmjoo, 2016; Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014). Nonetheless, familiarity with academic research and improvement of technical pedagogical knowledge have been reported as the merits of attending the program (Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013; Sotoudehnama & Fakhari, 2016).

While the above-mentioned studies provide insightful findings of the current status of MA TEFL program in Iran, they have not taken into consideration the views of those students who have migrated to the field from other disciplines. Despite the issue receiving scant attention in the field of TEFL, the literature reveals that investigating the reasons for academic transition by college or university students, exploring their views about their former and current fields of study and the psychological and socio-cultural factors which are at work in their decision for changing major have attracted the attention of researchers in different geographical and academic contexts (e.g., Badamchi & Gha'emKhani, 2015; Firmin & MacKillop, 2008; Jalili Farahani & Alidoost, 2013; Marade & Brinthaup, 2018; Maroufi & Adak, 2018; Rashidi Pouya, 2017). Considering the current literature,

the phenomenon is briefly fleshed out below.

2.2. Academic Major Change

Academic major change, also called academic major migration, “refers to the decision a student makes, for any number of reasons, to switch from a formerly declared major to another field of study” (Foster, 2013, p. 1). Numerous factors have been recognized to be at work in encouraging college or university students to switch out of their academic majors. *Intrinsic* factors like personal traits, values, self-efficacy, autonomy; academic passion in a subject matter (Badamchi & Gha'emKhani, 2015); desire to reverse a premature or impulsive decision once made (Foster, 2013; Firmin & MacKillop, 2008); frustration with or repulsion toward former field of study (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008), inter alia, and *extrinsic* factors like parents' and peers' recommendations or controlling behaviours (Zafar, 2012); failing grades or poor academic performance in a major (Maroufi & Adak, 2018); social status associated with a major (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008); potential career outlook like financial advancements and job security (Firmin & MacKillop, 2008; Marade & Brinthaupt, 2018) are among driving forces the findings of diverse surveys and investigations in various geographical locations have shed light on.

Exploring Iranian university students' reasons for changing majors, whilst or after completion of their undergraduate degrees, has also attracted the attention of a number of researchers. The comparative ease of admission to a certain program at postgraduate level and the possibility of continuing education to PhD level (Jalili Farahani & Alidoost, 2013); economic forces (e.g., job market, tuitions); characteristics of the former and current major (e.g., tediousness or toughness of the previous major, attractiveness or comparable ease of the present major); and personal characteristics (e.g., interest in the current major, lack of interest or competence in the former major), as well as acquaintance with influential intellectuals, heightened self-awareness and bravery in taking risks, religious beliefs, and membership in certain committees (Badamchi & Gha'emKhani, 2015; Maroufi & Adak, 2018) have been identified to be at work by relevant studies.

Against the backdrop of academic major change and MA TEFL program evaluation, the present study is a modest attempt to probe into the lived experiences of major-changers attending MA TEFL program in Iran.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The present study undertook a qualitative approach to delve into the experiences of non-English-related students attending MA TEFL programs in Iranian public universities. The data was collected from two main groups of informants including 25 MA TEFL students and six university instructors. The main criterion for the selection of student-participants was graduation in a major other than English-related major at bachelor's level. The participants were purposively selected from three groups of MA students of TEFL including nine freshmen (newly entered students passing first semester), eight sophomores (students passing their third or fourth semester), and eight graduates (those who had completed their studies within a time span of one year). They were selected from three public universities in Tehran, namely, Alzahra University (a female-only state university), Khatam University (a non-profit university), and Shahid Rajaee University (a teacher training university). The rationale behind choosing these three sites was the high number of non-English major students admitted to MA TEFL program at these universities.

The 25 student-participants who agreed to take part in the interviews were all female, ranged from 23 to 53 in age, and had bachelor's degrees in a variety of non-English majors as shown in Table 1. They all had received various advanced certificates in English like FCE (5), CAE (16), CPE (1), and IELTS (3) and had started learning English in different ages from childhood to adulthood.

Table 1
Number of Student-Participants and Their BA Degrees

No.	Previous BA	Frequency
1	Computer Science	12
2	Anesthesiology	1
3	Information Technology	1
4	Mechanical Engineering	1
5	Library Science	1
6	Theology	1
7	Chemical Engineering	1
8	Engineering Physics	1
9	Electrical Engineering	1
10	Biology	2
11	Natural Resources Management	1
12	Hospital Administration	1
Total		25

The second group of participants consisted of six TEFL university instructors with at least 10 years of university teaching experience. They were selected from different universities in Tehran including Alzahra, Sharif, Science and Research Branch of Islamic Azad University, Khatam and Allameh Tabatabaee Universities on the basis of their accessibility and willingness to take part in the interview. All of the instructors, except one who had MA in both TEFL and Psychology, had earned PhD in TEFL or Applied Linguistics from different universities in Iran or abroad and were teaching TEFL at MA level at the time of study.

3.2. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews prudently devised under the supervision of two TEFL experts and piloted with one student and a university instructor were the main data collection instrument in the study (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The students' interview (Appendix A) comprised of questions about the reasons for their shift over from previous major to TEFL; the information and expectations about TEFL MA program they had prior to their admission; the process of getting prepared for MA university entrance exam; the impressions, reactions, as well as challenges and problems they faced at different phases through their study; how they self-evaluated themselves in comparison to classmates holding English-related bachelor's degrees; their views about offering or not offering prerequisite courses and their necessity; and their views about their future educational and career outlook, to mention some. The TEFL instructors' interview guide (Appendix B) also consisted of questions eliciting opinions about the policy of admitting MA TEFL students from non-English-related majors; the challenges they had observed TEFL major-changers faced at different phases throughout the program; their opinions about offering or not offering prerequisite courses and their necessity; *inter alia*. The approximate time allocated to each interview was thirty minutes; however, some interviews took longer. All the interviews were audio recorded, with the interviewees' consent, and then transcribed verbatim—through putting down the exact words used by the interviewees, “broken sentences, interruptions, and other aspects of the “messiness” of casual conversation” (Poland, 1995, p. 292)—for preliminary and intensive data analysis.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis, a common method to analyze interviews in qualitative inquiries, was applied (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). To closely examine the data and to identify common themes or patterns of meaning, the interview transcripts were initially read and re-read meticulously several times; responses to similar questions were checked and juxtaposed; preliminary codes were assigned to segments of data; and eventually relevant codes and their excerpts were combined under categories. Working together, two of the researchers of the study collaborated in coding the segments of the data multiple times, exchanging the rationales for clustering them into categories, labeling and relabeling the categories, and resolving the disagreements orally. For example, the initially-developed categories of “Inhibiting Factors” and “Problem with Academic Writing” were agreed to be subsumed under a more overarching category of “Changes and Challenges”. Having come up with the categories, another researcher of the study rechecked the categories, the examples drawn from the data, and English translation of the Persian excerpts to substantiate the credibility of the coding process.

3.4. Trustworthiness

As common in qualitative inquiries, a number of strategies were deployed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. Collecting data from multiple groups of purposively-selected individuals, namely, freshmen, sophomores, graduates, and university instructors as well as the presence of multiple researchers collaborating with each other in collecting and analyzing the data—also called *triangulation* by using “multiple sources of data” and “multiple investigators”—shore up the *credibility* of the findings of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and show that the study’s findings are not “simply an artifact of ... a single source, or a single investigator’s blinders” (Patton, 2015, p. 674). Furthermore, detailing the process of collecting and analyzing the data, plus bringing ample evidence supporting each extracted category, presented in the form of quotes from the participants’ interviews, suggest the consistency and *dependability* of the findings. It is hoped that the transparent description of the context, scope, limitations, and results of the study aid other researchers to apply and *transfer* the findings to their own contexts (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

4. Findings

4.1. Analysis of the Students' Interviews

4.1.1. Initial Motives

The analysis of the interviews with MA TEFL major-changers showed that these students had decided to continue their higher education in a major other than their bachelor's degree due to various reasons including "lack of interest" in their former field of study or finding it "too difficult" (mentioned by eight); failure in finding a relevant, rewarding or satisfying job after graduation (mentioned by seven); intermission in the studies due to marriage, child birth, etc. making them feel separated from their prior major (mentioned by four); assuming that getting admission to TEFL major was less arduous than their undergraduate major (mentioned by three); current "unavailability of higher education studies for certain bachelor's degrees" (mentioned by one) or a combination of several reasons. However, in case of the majority of the participants, their prior background in English and English teaching were the determining motives for converting to TEFL at MA level. In other words, since almost all of the student-participants had started learning English at an early age, had received various English advanced certificates; had already taken teacher training courses in language institutes; and had taught English either as a private tutor or institute teacher for various periods of time, they felt that they were more "interested" in pursuing a career in English teaching rather than performing a job related to their academic major. Having worked as English language teachers, they had realized that they needed to change their career track onto a professional one by acquiring more academic knowledge about their career, beyond the general knowledge often transmitted in institutes' courses. Besides, they assumed that getting a degree related to English teaching was a way for getting promoted to higher levels of teaching or receiving pay raise. Zhaleh, a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajaei University with a BSc in Computer Science and Parisa, a TEFL freshman at Alzahra University who had completed her undergraduate studies in Anaesthesiology explained the case as follows:

Zhaleh: I studied Computer Science...I was always good at English and I liked this major, but I did not like Computer major. Because of that, I chose TEFL since I had a background in English.

Parisa: I loved to continue my studies but there are still no master's and

doctorate program for my former major, Anaesthesiology, in Iran. And because I teach English, I felt that I needed to learn more about it.

On the other hand, there were two participants who had decided to continue higher education in TEFL simply because they were tired of staying home and wanted to beat boredom by studying at university. As they had studied English for an extended period of time, the first option crossing their mind was studying an English-related major at university. Shirin, a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajaee University with a BSc in Computer Science stated:

Shirin: I had married, and I was at home and bored. My parents and my husband encouraged me to continue my education... I searched about TEFL and I learnt that the rate of admission was comparatively higher than other branches like Translation and there were more universities....

Besides personal motives, it seems that the role of context especially colleagues could not be ignored in kindling these students' interests. The participants stated that they had enquired about this field of study from their colleagues who were MA candidates or graduates of TEFL. They mentioned that they often enjoyed watching their colleagues talking about technical topics and how they exchanged their viewpoints. For example, Marziyeh, a recent graduate of TEFL with a BSc in Engineering Physics explained:

Marziyeh: Before becoming an English teacher, I didn't know that such a major existed. I learned about it through my colleagues at language institute and became interested in it ...and asked them about the courses they studied... .

4.1.2. Expedition Preparation

Expounding on their lived experiences, the majority of the participants stated that getting prepared for MA UEE was challenging to them. To get prepared for the exam, they had largely studied the books or packaged sets available in the market, designed specifically for university entrance exam, instead of referring to recommended MA exam references which sounded too "difficult" or complicated to them. Some had also taken part in special courses like Language Testing, Teaching Methodology, Linguistics, and General English held by preparatory institutes—which chiefly provided them with exam cram notes and test-taking strategies— or had taken the institutes' practice exams or mocks. In their opinions, the entrance

exam prep-courses had aided them to get acquainted with the field; equipped them with basic academic background knowledge required for program entry; and made it easier for them to get integrated with the TEFL discourse community later. Zhaleh, a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajaee University and Maryam, a TEFL sophomore at Khatam University, both holding a BSc in Computer Science, described the expedition as follows:

Zhaleh: ...Studying for master's entrance exam was very difficult to me. My general English was not bad but General section of the entrance exam was difficult. Technical books were difficult too. Each page that I studied was replete with vocabularies that I did not know their meaning.

Maryam: For me prep-courses were great because I had no idea about this field of study. At first the classes were too difficult to me but gradually I learnt how to study.

Contrary to those major-changers who had entered the field either by attending the prep-courses or by self-studying the references, there were a couple of student-participants who frankly stated that they had gained admission to MA TEFL program with very limited or no prior preparation. Sahar a TEFL sophomore at Khatam University who was in her mid-twenties narrated:

Sahar: I got my BA and MA in Natural Resource Management. ...I did not study for TEFL university entrance exam at all ...even an hour. I just answered General English questions of the exam and left the technical ones unanswered...

4.1.3. Feelings of (Un)belonging

The interviewed students talked about if they felt a sense of belonging to the academic community they had joined. They elaborated on the subject by reference to several issues including the initial impression they had got from their instructors, the process of getting acquainted with the academic discourse of the TEFL community, and the comparisons they made between themselves and those classmates who had entered the program from a relevant undergraduate major.

While the majority of the students recalled that their initial encounter with instructors was “pleasant” and welcoming, five of them felt that the instructors treated them with “contempt”—as they assumed that they lacked “sufficient academic English knowledge”—or “looked surprised” when they learnt that they

held highly irrelevant degrees like Anesthesiology or had decided to study TEFL despite completing their undergraduate studies in “top-ranked degrees” like Electrical and Mechanical Engineering or “prestigious universities”. Leila a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajae University with a former degree in Library Science and Mina, a recent graduate of TEFL from Alzahra University who had completed her undergraduate studies in Computer Science, explained:

Leila: The instructors looked surprised but they did not show any negative reactions and reciprocally we had good feelings towards them.

Mina: The instructors' reaction was good...except for one who said that he was sorry for TEFL major as everyone with any previous degree could take part in the university entrance exam and get admission

More than half of the students also expressed that their relative unfamiliarity with the academic discourse of the community including “specialized terminologies” and technical concepts, reading technical books and research papers or reflecting on them, as well as their lack of “confidence” and “participation” in class discussions made them initially feel alienated from the world they had stepped in and it had taken them some time to gain recognition of the academic community discourse. For instance, Zohreh, a TEFL sophomore at Shahid Rajae University with a BSc in Computer Science narrated:

Zohreh: I really felt depressed the first few weeks...and I thought that choosing this field of study was a mistake. I could not understand what the instructors said or what they wanted me to do. It was not only my case. Even the students who had studied English Translation or other majors said everything was tough for them. I thought that I did not belong to here...but gradually I got used to its difficulties... .

Despite initial sense of alienation, more than two-thirds of the students stated that they “did not observe remarkable differences” between themselves and those who had completed their undergraduate studies in English-related majors, and even on some occasions their experiences in English teaching and their background in other domains “aided” them to have a say in related matters. Elmira and Mahdiyeh, TEFL graduates from Alzahra University with a BSc in Statistics and Computer Science, respectively, explained:

Elmira: I suppose we were all in the same level. There were a couple of students who were great because of their general English proficiency and their teaching experiences...but as a whole we were not very different...If we who had come from

different majors studied well, we could keep up with others...

Mahdiyeh: *In Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) class the instructor asked me to help as he knew I had studied Computer and because I was interested in CALL, I was very active in the class. My thesis was about CALL too...*

4.1.4. Changes and Challenges

In narrating their experiences, the student-participants also referred to the changes they could notice in themselves having attended MA TEFL program as well as the challenges they were struggling with. Besides personal and social aspects like “improvement in general English language proficiency”, “increase in self-confidence” and “social status”, they explained that through the program they had enlarged their “theoretical and pedagogical knowledge base” regarding language teaching, developing teaching materials, designing tests, and doing research, and had become “more qualified teachers”; which could possibly promise brighter career prospects. For example, Sahar a TEFL sophomore at Khatam University with an MA degree in Natural Resource Management and Elaheh, a TEFL sophomore at Alzahra University with a BSc in Electrical Engineering, who both worked as language teachers in private language institutes, explained their changes as follows:

Sahar: *It enhanced my understanding about what I did in my own classes and I can now resolve the teaching problems I run to more academically. I used to do things solely based on my experiences but now I feel I can act more academically.*

Elahe: *I got to learn many things and many things changed. I used to observe many things in my teaching without knowing the theories behind them. I learnt about the reasons for many things and why they were right or wrong.*

When talking about the challenges they had faced while studying TEFL, almost all the 25 student-participants spotted “academic writing” as the most problematic area. Since their previous writing experiences were limited to “simple writing tasks”, writing required written assignments in MA program like reaction paper, article critique, proposal and more importantly thesis seemed too demanding to them. Lack of previous background and novelty of the experience; not having received “proper training” on writing at language institutes; and marginal status of this skill in comparison to other skills in the mainstream system of education in Iran

were among the reasons they set out which made academic writing struggling for them. In describing her situation, one of the freshman students stated that “I feel like a person who wants to learn swimming and should be plunged into the sea. I have been plunged and I’m still floundering and haven’t learnt swimming”. Leila a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajaei University with a former BA degree in Library Science and Bahareh a TEFL sophomore at Alzahra University with a BSc in Chemical Engineering shared their concerns as follows:

Leila: Now, my most important concern is about writing proposal. ... After that, there is the problem of writing thesis having its own difficulties. I know nothing about academic writing, and I have no experience in it. ...When I studied in institutes, we just had simple writing activities, but I have never learned how to write academically.

Bahareh : Writing is very important to me and I feel weaknesses in it. I have never learned writing essays, proposals and academic writings...There was an MA Advanced Writing Course in which the instructor could familiarize us with how to write references and how not to commit plagiarism to some extent but definitely it wasn't sufficient... .

Furthermore, juxtaposing the students' views showed that 21 of the student-participants, both those who had taken required prerequisite courses like Teaching Methodology and Language Testing, and those who had not, were of the opinion that they “had not found prerequisite courses very useful” as the topics covered were often “repetitious” and they had already got “familiar with them” either in “university entrance prep-courses” or the time when they studied for UEE. Mina, a recent graduate of TEFL from Alzahra University who had completed her undergraduate studies in Computer Science, explained:

Maryam: We passed Methodology and Testing prerequisite courses...We had already studied all the topics for UEE and everything was repetitious ...Instead we could have taken more practical courses like Advanced Writing.

Accordingly, they felt that such courses should only be offered to those students who have “no prior background”; though it could be discouraging for some. To their eyes, since the two-credit Advanced Writing course commonly offered during the first semester of MA program did not come up to scratch, the commonly-offered prerequisite courses could be replaced by courses which aided them to improve “general English proficiency” and “writing skill”.

4.1.5. Expectations, Misperceptions and Realities

The meticulous analysis of the interviews also revealed that all the interviewed students had some expectations, preconceptions, or misconceptions about what would happen during their education in the field of TEFL before admission. Not surprisingly, some of these expectations had been realized, while others had remained *unfulfilled* or proven to be *mistaken*. One of the major unfulfilled expectations that almost all the 25 students explicitly or implicitly pointed out was “inclusion of more practical”, rather than theoretical, courses in the field. They were complaintive about too much focus put on studying and memorizing “theoretical issues”; particularly the ones which have lost their momentum. This caused some to harbor doubts or negative feelings about the path they had chosen. For instance, Samira and Mona, TEFL graduates from Alzahra University with BScs in Computer Science and Engineering Physics, respectively, expressed their expectations as follows:

Samira: *I thought that TEFL would be more practical. I thought it was like Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) held in institutions and I suppose it should be so. Students should demonstrate their teaching abilities so that their problems would be resolved. Simply studying a bunch of textbooks and theoretical stuff you are already familiar with and most of which are outdated is useless.*

Mona: *My presupposition was that at MA level we take a good number of practical courses making us prepared for teaching...but I soon realized that we did not have practical courses and they were chiefly theoretical. The only practical course we passed was Practicum which was not a required course.*

Being burdened by bulky syllabi which required them to study “large bulk of materials for each course” and do various “term projects” and “assignments”—making them feel overwhelmed, stressed out, or demotivated—was another issue raised by nearly half of the interviewed students. To them, such an intense academic “pressure” and “expectation” at MA level ran counter to their prior supposition. As an example, Saeedeh a TEFL sophomore at Khatam University who had already studied Biology described her case as follows:

Saeedeh: *At first I thought that everything was easy to manage and we had plenty of time...but the instructor expected us too much and required us to write proposal and articles in the first semester...I was very confused and did not know*

how to write articles. The instructors expected that because we had been admitted to this field of study, we had to be capable of managing the affairs. They did not make any distinctions between English and non-English major students...it was so tough and confusing to me...

Expecting to enhance their own “general English proficiency” was another supposition held by almost one third of the students. Nafiseh, with a former degree in Biology explained:

Nafiseh: Before attending the program, I assumed that my English proficiency would develop greatly but this did not happen since you must already have a very good command of English prior to entering the field. ...This was the mistake I made, though I see improvements in my pronunciation and speaking...

Three of the students also stated that contrary to their initial expectations, some of their instructors were not as competent or “knowledgeable” as they had anticipated or did not treat them respectfully. Boring classes, transmission-based teaching style, lack of “student participation”, and use of “outdated materials” in some courses were also mentioned by more than half of the students. Mona, a TEFL graduate from Alzahra University with BSc in Engineering Physics and Leila a TEFL freshman at Shahid Rajaee University with a former degree in Library Science shared their experiences as follows:

Mona: ...When I saw that one of the instructors mispronounced words, it negatively affected my attitude towards instructors. Although we had very knowledgeable instructors, there were also ones who were weak both in speaking and in their area of expertise ...and that's awful for a state university.

Leila: Our Teaching Methodology class was very dull. The instructor simply turned on his laptop and started reading the slides monotonously. It should have been a very attractive and useful course, but there was no student participation.... However, the situation was quite different in Testing class.

Besides, another unfulfilled expectation shared by the graduate-participants was about “career” promotion. Contrary to their initial expectation, getting an MA degree in TEFL had not provided them with opportunities to get promoted at work. Mina, a recent graduate of TEFL from Alzahra University who had completed her undergraduate studies in Computer Science, explained:

Maryam: I supposed it to be livelier...with good potentials to make a lot of

money. But after admission, I realized that it...did not aid me financially either. I used to teach university students at a language institute prior to my admission to TEFL program, and I am still working there after graduation without any pay raise.

4.2. Analysis of the Instructors' Interviews

4.2.1. Knowledge Decline

At another phase of the study, we sought the opinions of six TEFL university instructors about major-changers attending MA TEFL programs. What concerned the interviewed university instructors the most was the ongoing decline to the English knowledge of all the students at MA level, "both those with relevant and irrelevant undergraduate degrees". They alleged that as the universities, upon the permission of MSRT, have increased the number of students that can get admission to TEFL MA program, "even students with low language proficiency and professional knowledge" can enter the program. According to them, in the past, entering university, specially a state-run one, was "pretty tough" particularly for those who wanted to convert their major as they had to make hard efforts to be able to get admission to a university; as a result, only those who were eligible and had the required abilities could enter the university. Due to this general decline, the differences between students with English and no-English related degrees "were not very noticeable". For instance, Alzahra University instructor, a woman in her late thirties with over ten years experience of teaching at universities stated:

Dr. Dehghani: *Unfortunately, due to current circumstances, even those students who have studied English-related majors do not have advanced English language proficiency and professional knowledge. Since the level of the students has declined, we can't see tangible differences between students with relevant and irrelevant undergraduate degrees.*

4.2.2. Chances and Challenges

Despite leveling criticisms at the current policy of adopting students, four of the instructors explicitly alluded that the presence of students from non-English "backgrounds" could be a precious chance as their technical knowledge and background in other domains could not only provide them with opportunities to

look at language-related matters from different perspectives but also pave the way for conducting “interdisciplinary” studies. Sharif University instructor, a young professor in his mid-thirties with around ten years experience of teaching at universities, and Azad University instructor with over twenty years of teaching experience explicated:

Dr. Rasooli: *Because they have a background in another field of study, sometimes the topics they suggest are really interesting. For example, I had a student who had studied IT and together we came up with an interesting interdisciplinary thesis topic. This is an advantage.*

Dr. Azizi: *TEFL students who have completed their undergraduate studies in other majors are of great help in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. For example, one of them who he has studied Nursing is now helping in ESP of Nursing.*

On the other hand, all the six instructors explicated that “academic writing” was one of the areas TEFL MA students, in general, and those entering the field from irrelevant undergraduate studies constantly struggled with. They were emphatic that offering prerequisite courses related to writing was necessary. They referred to the undesirable quality of the academic “research papers”, “proposals” and “theses” written by the students and their lack of required qualifications for academic writing. Khatam University instructor explained:

Dr. Maleki: *Students, in general, and these students in particular are weak in writing and usually don't write theses themselves and ask others to do so for them. So offering academic writing as a prerequisite course is a necessity... and university should make them pass two to three credits of academic writing.*

Besides, they also discussed how the former universities students with degrees irrelevant to English had graduated from could play a role. According to the instructor-participants, those students who had graduated from “top-ranked universities” experienced less challenges to acclimate themselves with new circumstances as they were accustomed to educational standards. Below is an excerpt:

Dr. Rasooli: *Most of the students not only come from other majors, but also from a lower-ranked university. In my opinion, although undergraduate university cannot be determining, it could be influential. When they come from a top-ranked university to a same level university, there is no specific problem because the standards are the same. But, when you want to enter from a lower-ranked university and another major, the situation would certainly get worse.*

4.2.3. Expectations, Misperceptions and Realities

In their talks, the interviewed university instructors maintained that the majority of students with non-English related bachelor's degrees entered MA TEFL program based on some false presuppositions; the most important of which was "improving their general English proficiency" while what they encountered in actuality were highly specialized courses for which sufficient background knowledge was required. This discrepancy between what was expected or presupposed and what actually happened was "depressing" for some. For instance, Azad University instructor stated:

Dr. Azizi: A big mistake that major-changers make is that they come to TEFL to improve their general English. While, this major is Educational Science delivered in English, and they should pass courses such as psycholinguistics, sociolinguistic, and courses like these ...and when they enter the university and they find out that they don't study general English, they will be depressed.

5. Discussion

The present study was a modest attempt to explore the lived experiences of 25 female students who all had the common experience of completing undergraduate studies in non-English-related majors and converting to TEFL at MA level, as well as six TEFL university instructors' perspectives on the phenomenon. In the interviews, the student-participants shared their experiences and views about their motives to apply for TEFL program; the ways by which they were prepared for the expedition; their initial impressions and feelings; the challenges they faced or were facing; and how the reality they were living with accorded or discorded with their prior expectations and perceptions.

Considering the motives, *intrinsic* factors like frustration with or repulsion toward former fields of study due to their tediousness or toughness and *extrinsic* factors like inspirations from colleagues; the comparative ease of admission to TEFL program at postgraduate level and its higher admission rate; the possibility of continuing education to PhD level as well as the possibility of career promotion were seen to be at work. Such findings partially resemble the findings of other studies that investigated the reasons for major changing by graduate students in different disciplines (Badamchi & Gha'emKhani, 2015; Firmin & MacKillop, 2008:

Jalili Farahani & Alidoost, 2013; Jaradat, 2017; Marade & Brinthaup, 2018; Maroufi & Adak, 2018; Rashidi Pouya, 2017). The common feeling of discontent with former fields of study among Iranian major- changers or finding them inapt lays bare the truths overriding the mainstream system of education and university admission policies in Iran. Having taken the centralized UEE which is almost the sole criteria for admission to public and accredited universities, high school graduates have to choose a university major chiefly based on their performance in the exam and their overall grade-point average—not disregarding others’ influence or assumptions—rather than their own personality, aptitudes, goals, values or abilities and thorough understanding of the chosen major. Hence, in case of making a wrong decision about choosing the right major, the psychological, personal, social, and economic ramifications could be disappointing or even irreparable.

Nonetheless, and significant enough to make a difference, for majority of the major- changers who participated in this study, it was their prior background in English, on the one hand, and their English teaching experience, on the other hand, which was their prime motive to convert to TEFL at MA level. In other words, despite having studied other majors, they had ended up teaching English either as a private tutor or institute and school instructor. Feeling the urge to expand their career-related professional knowledge or getting a specialist degree were incentives for them to pursue their higher education in TEFL. On socio-educational level, the practice of employing or absorbing English teachers not solely based on their professional knowledge or relevant academic degrees but language proficiency casts light onto teacher recruitment policies in private language institutes in Iran. In other words, it seems that English language proficiency will suffice to entitle someone to teach English. Critiquing the current policy, Sahragard and Ansaripour (2014) argue that “people who have majored in other fields and with no theoretical background in TEFL are teaching English in language institutes only because there is no organization to take care of that” (p. 97). In other words, it seems that EFL teacher recruitment policies in Iran are unclear, and hence the practitioners do not have a clear understanding of how they should be implemented (Bahrapour Pasha, 2017).

Elaborating on their experience of getting prepared for MA UEE, the majority of the student-participants also explained that they had gained the required information about the major as well as exam-passing competency through seeking consultations from preparatory institutes and studying educational packages designed by them. The majority had also taken part in general and technical courses held by these institutes,

which chiefly provided them with exam cram notes and test-taking strategies or had sit the institutes' periodical mocks. A few of the participants also confessed that they had entered the program with very little or almost zero prior preparation. Critically speaking, it seems that lowering admission requirements, increasing admission rate by universities, and the high-stakes MA UEE which basically consists of "memory-based and/or trivial items" (Fazilatfar & Barzegar, 2008, p.10) have made MA TEFL program quite accessible and attainable for major-changers; corollary to which is a general decline in academic knowledge of university students and graduates, as suggested by the TEFL instructors who took part in the study. In other words, as argued by Tavakoli and Hasrati (2015), increase in the number of state and private higher education institutes and enlarging their capacity for admitting postgraduate students with less stringent quality control process over the last 10 years has resulted in "massification of higher education" in Iran.

At another strand, the rapidly growing preparatory institutes, as constituents of a lucrative and competitive cram industry, provide applicants, particularly major-changers, with a shortcut or alternative route to reach their goal shortly, quickly, and efficiently. These institutes through publishing and marketing their designed books, digital and non-digital packages which present the exam contents in a simplified and classified manner; employing trained instructors; offering face-to-face and virtual courses; providing consultations and popularized services; as well as administering prep-exams or periodical mocks have carved out a niche for themselves in the Iranian system of higher education. Although the student-participants of the study largely felt satisfied with the courses they had taken in the UEE preparatory institutes, the growth in the number of these institutes and the nature of knowledge they produce and disseminate characterize commercialization or marketization of higher education (Fairclough, 1993) and its McDonaldization (Holmes & Lindsay, 2018; Najafi, 2015; Ritzer, 1998). According to Fairclough (1993), "institutions of higher education come increasingly to operate...as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers" (p. 143). To achieve their market-wise interests, they largely adopt characteristics of fast-food restaurants by focusing on quantity and efficiency of educational services at the expense of quality and depth of learning; a phenomenon which is called *McDonaldization of the Society* by American sociologist, George Ritzer (1998). These socio-cultural and political aspects were the essences which shaped the

experiences of the interviewed student-participants.

In furthering their lived experiences, the student-participants also explicated that after entering the program, their relative lack of acquaintance with specialized terminologies and technical concepts, as well as their lack of confidence and participation in class discussions initially made them feel alienated from the world they had stepped in and it took them a while to “be in sync” with the community Discourse, “recognize the identities and activities involved in it”, and to be recognized by it (Gee, 1999, p. 20); to use James Paul Gee’s notion of Discourse with capital D. Gee (1999) states that “recognition work creates a Discourse, that is, ways with words, actions, beliefs, emotions, values, interactions, people, objects, tools, and technologies that come to constitute being and doing a student...” (p. 20).

Despite this initial sense of alienation, in case of the major-changers who participated in this study, a number of psychosocial and cognitive factors like warmth and encouragement on the part of some university instructors or simply sensing “no negative reactions” from them; “peer-alignment” or “the feeling that one is similar in important ways” (Micari & Pazos, 2016, p. 380) to those peers who had completed their undergraduate studies in English-related majors; and on some occasions seeing how their language teaching experiences and background in other domains particularly mathematics, statistics and computer aided them to have a say in some subjects, contributed them to overcome their initial lack of confidence or shyness and enhance their sense of belonging and “academic place-making” (Carter et al., 2018). This corroborates the interviewed university instructors’ opinions as they alluded that the differences among English-major and non-English-related degrees are negligible or gradually wane and the presence of major-changers in TEFL could be beneficial by the time they introduce new inter- or trans-disciplinary conceptualizations to the field, broaden its horizons or enrich it. Nonetheless, this process of “academic acculturation” (Elliot et al., 2015) and the incidents or factors that are at work for facilitating or inhibiting it require further phenomenological explorations.

In addition, and not surprisingly, all the major-changers had experienced some professional changes and challenges throughout the program. Expansion of theoretical and professional knowledge was the main change stated by the student-participants. However, both the students and instructors felt that the space provided by the program for enhancing academic writing skill and practicing teaching was not up to scratch. The necessity of offering more practical courses like Practicum which provide TEFL students with actual teaching experiences and prepare them

for their current and future careers instead of focusing on theoretical issues exclusively, on the one hand, paying more attention to academic writing (Mousavi, et al., 2016; Rouhi, et al., 2018), and assigning more credits to writing-related courses like Seminar and Advanced Writing, on the other hand, has also been voiced out by previously-conducted studies (Aliakbari & Ghoreyshi, 2013; Sotoudehnama & Fakhari, 2016; Taheri & Abbasian, 2016). As argued by Taheri and Abbasian (2016), “the existing program courses provide little to average knowledge and information about what...learners actually encountered in the real situation”. Accordingly, they suggest that “curriculum developers should...remove the irrelevant modules and replace them with other courses which can be more practical and useful” (Taheri & Abbasian, 2016, p. 49). Furthermore, the participants of the study assessed the proposed prerequisite courses like Language Testing and Teaching Methodology as “repetitious”. The findings of this study and similar relevant studies suggest that transformations should be made in the design and curriculum of TEFL program in Iran for it to meet the needs and wants of university students. Furthermore, university instructors' occasional unapproachability or their insufficient competencies, their tedious, transmission-like teaching style or deployment of outdated methods and teaching materials were among other issues raised by a number of the student-participants. The recurrence of similar findings in other studies (Ahmadi & Hasani, 2018; Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo, 2016; Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014; Sotoudehnama & Fakhari, 2016) definitely calls for more deliberation and mindfulness on the part of university instructors and curriculum makers.

Besides expressing their felt needs or expectations, the interviewed participants expressed some conceptions they used to have prior to attending the program like improving their “general English proficiency” greatly or its being effortless which seem to be inconsistent with the original characteristics of the program. Such kinds of misconceptions may be due to inadequate information about the nature and scope of the program. Although the majority of the interviewed students in this study expressed their overall satisfaction with the major-change decision they had made, uninformed and intuitive decisions and insufficient understanding about the newly-selected major and its requirements are likely to result in regrets about the educational decision, on the one hand, and academic downfall, on the other hand.

6. Conclusion

In this small-scale qualitative study, the initial motives, changes, challenges, expectations and misperceptions experienced by a number of female MA TEFL students and graduates, who had bachelor's degrees in non-English related majors, as well as six TEFL university instructors' views about the presence of major-changers in TESOL programs were presented. The findings revealed that besides other factors, background in English language learning and teaching, as a shared lived experience, was the main motive which stimulated almost all the student-participants to continue their higher education in TEFL. The majority of the student-participants, except for those who had entered the program with no prior or very limited preparation, had gained the required competency through attending crash courses or taking mocks held by UEE preparatory institutes. This demands the stakeholders to assess the role, status, mission, performance, and products of such institutes in the Iranian system of higher education. Having entered the program, a good number of the participants had experienced a period of "alienation" and "un-belongingness" which had gradually decreased as they had gained more recognition of the community discourse or had aligned themselves with their peers. Partially confirming the findings of the previous studies, both the interviewed students and university instructors recognized "academic writing" as the most challenging area TEFL students in general and major-changers in particular were struggling with, and there were suggestions, as well as expectations, for replacing prerequisite courses with more practical, teaching-related ones. Though more fine-grained analyses and studies are required, we hope the findings of the study would aid policymakers and curriculum developers in adopting policies and designing programs that suit the needs of this population of TEFL.

Nonetheless, the present study is limited on several grounds including the gender of the student-participants (all being female), universities they had been selected from (a few state universities in Tehran), and deployment of interview as the only means of data collection. Re-conducting the study with more varied groups of program attendants would provide more insights on perspectives held by them. Accordingly, the findings of the study could be employed for designing TEFL program evaluation questionnaires that could be administered to large populations of TEFL applicants, students, graduates and university instructors in general and major-changers in particular.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Students Interview Guide

1. Could you provide us with some information about yourself? Age? University degrees? Career experiences?
2. Have you got any backgrounds in English learning? What about its teaching?
3. Why did you choose TEFL? What did you know about TEFL before applying for it? How did you get prepared for UEE?
4. What were your initial impressions about the university, university instructors, classmates, and the courses?
5. To what extent did/do you participate in class discussions? In what courses did/do you participate more? Why?
6. How do you see yourself in comparison to those with English-major degrees?
7. How do you see the necessity of taking prerequisite courses? How do you evaluate the currently offered ones? What courses do you think should be offered?
8. What challenges have you faced so far?
9. What changes, academic and non-academic, do you see in yourself?
10. What did you use to think about the major? What expectations did/do you have? To what extent were they true or were they realized? How satisfied are you with the decision?
11. How do you see your future outlook? Have you got any concerns?

Appendix B

University Instructors' Interview Guide

1. Could you kindly provide us with some information about yourself? Academic background? Career experiences?
2. Generally speaking, how do you see the policy of admitting students with non-English related undergraduate degrees? What are the pros and cons?
3. What do you think the reasons for changing major by them are?
4. How do you see them in comparison to those with English-major degrees? How do you see their class participation? Interest in the discipline? General English proficiency? Technical knowledge? The quality of submitted assignments?
5. What particular challenges, if any, do you see them facing?
6. How do you see the necessity of prerequisite courses? How do you evaluate the currently offered ones? What other courses do you think should be offered?