A Comparative Study of the Teaching Challenges Faced by Newly-hired and Experienced Teachers Teaching at Different Age Levels

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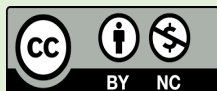saharhayat1996@gmail.com

Abstract

Iran Language Institute (ILI) plays a crucial role in teaching English in Iran and offers a comprehensive Teacher Training Course (TTC) for the teachers before their being employed. Still, these teachers encounter difficulties in different areas, but there are few studies investigating the teaching challenges of EFL teachers teaching at ILI. Thus, this study investigated the teaching challenges of newly-hired and experienced teachers, teaching at different age levels. The data were gathered data through 100 classroom observation forms belonging to 18 kids' teachers, 47 young-adults' teachers, and 35 adults' teachers (69 experienced and 31 newly-hired). We also interviewed with 5 kids' teachers, 5 young-adults' teachers, and 6 adults' teachers. It was revealed that young-adults' teachers faced fewer challenges than kids' and adults' teachers. Besides, experienced teachers encountered fewer problems than newly-hired teachers. The results of the observation forms were different from the interviews. However, time management was the only problem which was mentioned in the interviews, observation forms, and different age levels. According to the teachers, the reason behind these challenges was the intensive syllabus, old books and videos, and teachers' having to follow a series of fixed teaching steps.

Introduction

Nowadays, almost all people around the world use English for communicative, scientific, and cultural purposes. Thus, English teaching and learning are not limited to certain countries and have expanded all over the world. In many EFL countries where English is not widely used in the society, it is taught at institutes, colleges, and high schools. The obvious dominance of teaching and learning English in Iran, in comparison to other languages, cannot be denied. Akbari (2015) argued that teaching English in developing countries, especially Iran, is a demanding and challenging task. In such EFL contexts, teachers who are mostly non-native English speakers play a primal role in students' success or failure (Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014). The work of teachers at schools and institutes plays an essential role in students' English education (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2005; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Hagger and McIntyre (2006) argued that since novice teachers are mostly unaware of the realities of teaching and might face challenges in this regard, they need to be trained regularly. Nonetheless, teaching challenges are not typical just for novice teachers.

One of the typical methods to become aware of the teaching challenges of the teachers is conducting classroom observation. This can be planned versus unexpected observation, video versus in-person observation, and participant versus non-participant observation. According to Martinez et al. (2016), observation often helps teacher appraisal and improvement systems and provides them with a strong formative anchor for professional development. Ganji et al. (2018) also noted that observation is among the ways in which teachers can develop their skills professionally. According to Kennedy (2010), classroom observation is one of the effective methods for teaching practice in a natural setting. Recent, researchers have been working on observation protocols to the relationship among classroom practices, teacher effectiveness, and students' achievement (Bell et al., 2012; Hill et al., 2012; Mihaly et al., 2013). Classroom observation has recently attracted several researchers' attention (Bruns & Luque, 2015)

English teachers working in ILI are required to teach based on ILI methodology, a series of steps which must be followed one by one. That is why all the teachers need to take an initial TTC, where they are taught how to teach each skills or component in their classes. For each age level (kids, young-adults, and adults), ILI enjoys its own teaching methodology. Educating the learners is of great importance in ILI, thus ILI teachers are regularly observed by well-qualified supervisors and observers. The observation is done using some checklists with specific items, based on which the teachers are evaluated. Different aspects of the teachers' performance are mentioned in the classroom observation forms, which is filled out by the observers and supervisors. Despite the fact that ILI teachers pass a TTC at the beginning of their employment and are frequently observed, they still face challenges during their teaching.

There have been a large number of studies in the field of teaching challenges (Akbari, 2015; Aliakbari & Saeedi, 2022; Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014; Safari & Rashidi, 2015). According to Akbari (2015), teachers and students have to deal with several serious problems related to students, teachers, textbooks, teaching methods, evaluation, curriculum, and political problems. However, to the best of researcher's knowledge, there is no research investigating

the teaching challenges at ILI, as an important and the oldest language institute in Iran. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating the teaching challenges of the newly-hired and experienced teachers while teaching at different age levels. The research questions are as follows.

1. What are the teaching challenges faced by ILI English teachers while teaching at different age levels of (kids, young adults, and adults)?

2. What are the main reasons behind and possible solutions for teaching challenges encountered at these levels?

3. What are the teaching challenges faced by ILI newly-hired and experienced English teachers?

4. What are the main reasons behind and possible solutions for teaching challenges encountered by ILI newly-hired and experienced English teachers?

Literature Review

The challenges faced by English teachers in Iran are similar to those of a broader global context in which educators encounter diverse obstacles. There are several studies conducted by Iranian researchers with regard to teaching challenges of Iranian English teachers. Aiming to pinpoint the obstacles faced by Iranian English teachers while teaching English in secondary schools of Iran, Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014) conducted a survey study, collecting data from 180 EFL teachers in 150 secondary schools through a questionnaire. The results revealed that teachers were disappointed by their low level of proficiency in speaking English and using technology during the instruction. They reported that teachers were also willing to be trained in how to plan lessons and perform their teaching more effectively. In the same vein, Akbari (2015) searched for the different factors that brought about teaching challenges in Iranian high schools. These factors were students, teachers, textbooks, teaching methods, language assessment and evaluation, curriculum, and political problems. This study was a review of previous studies, and the collected data was analyzed through content analysis. Akbari (2015) argued that one of the main teaching challenges for teachers is students' low motivation since Iranian students do not feel the urgent need to learn English due to the limited use of English in the society. The other source of problem was that Iranian high school teachers have to "prepare" their students just for the final exams and Konkor (Iranian University Entrance Exam) rather than teaching them the skills for the appropriate use of language. In another research by Aliakbari and Saeedi (2022), aiming to investigate the job challenges that the junior and senior high school EFL teachers encounter in Iran, data were gathered through questionnaire and interview revealed seven main challenges. The seven challenges concerned textbooks, teachers, learners, social problems, spaces and educational facilities, educational systems, and social contexts. Again, in the context of Iran, a comprehensive exploration of English teaching challenges was done in Kariminasab et al.'s (2023) study on 728 English teachers in Iranian schools. It shed light on challenges like teaching mixed-level classes, behavior discipline, activity and material selection, and teacher training gaps. It must be pointed out that all these studies were conducted in Iranian junior and senior high schools, in which different books, teaching methods, and teachers are employed. The current study is different from the reviewed studies in terms of

design, instruments, and setting which are content analysis, classroom observation forms and interview, ILI respectfully.

Expanding beyond the Iranian teaching context, Chen and Goh (2011) explored teaching challenges faced by EFL teachers in China, revealing teachers' weak language competence and pedagogical knowledge. Additional studies from diverse international contexts, namely Indonesia, contribute to this discourse. Wulandari's (2019) research on English teachers in rural junior high schools in Indonesia, highlighted challenges such as curriculum implementation, student competence, limited teaching media, and insufficient teacher development. Mahmud's (2020) qualitative case study in Indonesia revealed challenges faced by beginning teachers, including pedagogical, professional, social, and personal aspects. Despite professional training, novice teachers encountered substantial challenges, emphasizing the need for continuous professional development and support during the early years of their teaching careers. Lomi and Mbato's (2020) qualitative study further underlined challenges encountered by novice EFL teachers in Indonesia, including classroom management and limited school resources.

In the same vein, Zamin et al. (2022) examined challenges faced by preschool teachers in Malaysian schools where English is used alongside Malay, identifying issues related to diverse educational backgrounds, hence suggesting continuous training for addressing these challenges. Tran's (2021) investigation in Vietnam shed light on the challenges faced by novice EFL high school teachers, emphasizing school context challenges as particularly prominent.

The challenges of novice EFL teachers are not exclusive to Iran and Southeast Asia. Sali and Kecik's (2018) exploration in Turkey and Belatrech's (2018) study in Algerian secondary schools revealed common difficulties in classroom management, foreign language teaching, and social interactions. Amin and Rahimi's (2018) study in Iraqi Kurdistan provided insights into the adaptation challenges faced by novice EFL teachers, emphasizing issues related to establishing relationships with students and navigating social status.

Finally, In Myanmar, Nwe's (2023) study explored challenges faced by experienced and inexperienced EFL teachers concerning learner autonomy. The research revealed nuanced differences between the two groups, with experienced teachers highlighting cultural influences on motivation and inexperienced teachers expressing concerns about classroom management. This investigation contributed valuable insights into the specific challenges encountered in implementing learner autonomy within the Myanmar language classroom context. The exploration of issues spanning Iran, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and beyond underscores the shared struggles of educators, setting the stage for an in-depth investigation into the distinct challenges encountered by ILI newly hired and experienced teachers at different age levels.

The theoretical framework for understanding these challenges often draws on theories of teacher cognition, which explore how teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and attitudes influence their practices (Li, 2020). Additionally, sociocultural theories provide insights into how interactions between teachers and their environments affect teaching practices and teacher development. These theories are crucial for analyzing how external factors such as textbooks,

curricula, and societal expectations interact with internal factors like teacher beliefs and competencies (Li, 2020).

In synthesizing these perspectives, it becomes evident that EFL teaching challenges are not isolated incidents but part of broader systemic issues that affect educational outcomes. This realization calls for comprehensive strategies that address both the immediate needs of teachers and the structural reforms necessary to support effective teaching practices.

The novelty of this study lies in the fact that all the previous Iranian studies addressed the teaching challenges of Iranian high schools teachers (Akbari, 2015; Aliakbari & Saeedi, 2022; Behroozi & Amoozegar, 2014; Kariminasab et al., 2023), most of them used questionnaires as the data collections tools, and did not consider the age level and experience factor while checking the challenges. Thus, this study at the ILI, which aims to delve deeper into the specific challenges faced by newly-hired and experienced teachers across different age groups, is quite different from the previous studies regarding context, aims, and data collection tools. By employing a mixed-methods approach using classroom observations and interviews, this study seeks to provide nuanced insights that can inform targeted interventions to support EFL teachers in their professional journeys.

Method

Design

This study was designed to examine the teaching challenges that ILI newly-hired and experienced teachers encounter while teaching at different age levels. It followed a descriptive design and used content analysis design, gathering data from the observation forms filled out by observers and supervisors of ILI and interviews. There is no treatment in the study, and the study just reports on the challenges faced by teachers. It can also be considered analytic and comparative too since the researchers looked for the reasons for the encountered challenges and the solutions to these problems too. The teachers are compared in three different age groups and two experience groups, hence comparative.

Research Instruments

The data collection tools of this study were the semi-structured interview and observation forms filled out by the supervisors and observers. These forms consisted of 18 forms of kids' teachers, 47 forms of young adults' teachers, and 35 forms of adults' teachers. Thus, the main instrument was the observation forms which showed the teaching problems of teachers in detail. All of the forms contained ten criteria, according to which the observers analyzed the teachers' performances during the observed sessions. Each criterion is evaluated based on 10 points. Thus, the teacher's total performance is a mark ranging from 0 to 100. These factors are:

1. Following the methodology and syllabus

2. Effective presentation of the lesson based on the learners' comprehension of the lesson without using mother tongue

3. Effective error-correction

4. Active participation of all the learners

5. Building a good rapport based on mutual respect

6. Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools

7. Time- management

8. Inspiring and motivating students

9. Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments

10. Teacher's language competence

The criteria outlined above are crucial for effective EFL teaching and are deeply rooted in a blend of educational and psychological theories that emphasize structured, interactive, and learner-centered approaches (Deci & Ryan 2008; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Curriculum theory and instructional alignment underscore the importance of adhering to a well-defined methodology and syllabus, ensuring that teaching methods and assessments are directly connected to learning objectives (Iskandar & Ahmad, 2022). Theories of comprehensible input and second language acquisition advocate for presenting lessons in ways that are slightly challenging yet understandable without reverting to the learners' mother tongue, enhancing language acquisition through meaningful exposure (Freeman. D, 2001; Gass, 2013). Interactionist theory supports effective error correction by highlighting the role of feedback in helping learners recognize discrepancies between their use of the language and standard norms (Bonna, 2023; Mitrovic et al, 2013; Zhang et al, 2021). Constructivist and social constructivism theories emphasize active learner engagement and the construction of knowledge through social interactions, while humanistic theories focus on creating a supportive and respectful learning environment that fosters mutual respect and empathy (Hartman, 2020). Although these observation forms were based on various theories and have been used and revised in ILI for several uses, they had open-ended questions at the end so that the observers could add other areas or aspects to the form. Besides, all these supervisors and observers are trained in observing the classes and are chosen from among the most experienced ones. Thus, it is safe to sayt that they were standard instrument for the observation. Nonetheless, this study made use of interviews to make sure that no point was missing.

The next instrument used in the study was semi-structured interviews. We interviewed with 16 teachers who had more challenges in their teaching. These were 6 adults' teachers including 4 experienced and 2 newly-hired teachers, 5 young-adults' teachers including 3 experienced and 2 newly-hired teachers, and 5 kids' teachers including 2 experienced and 3 newly-hired teachers. To be fair, the researcher interviewed with 3 participants including an adults' teacher, a young-adults' teacher, and a kids' teacher face to face. The interviews were conducted either online or face to face. The face-to-face interviews were done in two branches of ILI in Kerman and were recorded. For the online interviews, the participants sent their answers as voice files via social media through either they felt comfortable such as Telegram, Instagram, and WhatsApp.

There were 3 questions asked for the interview:

- What were your teaching challenges in ILI?

- What are the reasons behind each challenge?

- What is your suggestion or solution to deal with each challenge?

Participants and Setting

The researchers collected 100 classroom observation forms through convenience sampling and snowball sampling. These classroom observation forms belonged to 18 kids' teachers, 47 young-adults' teachers, and 35 adults' teachers. There were 69 observation forms of experienced teachers vs. 31 forms of newly-hired teachers. Out of 18 kids' classes, we had 11 experienced and 7 newly-hired teachers. Out of 47 young-adult teachers, we had 35 experienced and 12 newly-hired teachers. Finally, out of 35 adults' teachers, we had 23 experienced and 12 newly-hired teachers. In addition to the observation forms, we interviewed with 16 participants after checking the information contained in the forms.

Iran Language Institute (ILI), one of the oldest language institutes in Iran, has been observing its teachers since establishment. ILI was established in Iran since 1926. The old name of this institute was Iran-America institute. Nowadays, this institute has more than 300 branches in 135 cities, with over a million language learners each year. In ILI, several languages such as English, French, Germany, Arabic, Spanish, Italian, Russian, and Turkish are taught (ili.ir, n.d.).

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

As mentioned before, the researcher collected data through convenience and snowball sampling. Since one of the researchers is an ILI teacher, she asked some of her colleagues (supervisors) to send their observation forms. Moreover, these supervisors asked several observers, supervisors, and teachers to send their observation forms. This process went on until there were 100 supervision forms. The data was gathered from different branches in different provinces such as Kerman, Fars, Khorasan Razavi, and Lorestan. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and the interview data were analysed through content analysis.

Results

Research Question One

Each observation form included 10 main points (explained in the instrument section), based on which the performance of teachers was assessed. Since there were 18 kids' teachers, and each point is worth 10 scores, the total score is calculated out of 180. Research question one focused on the challenges of teaching at different age levels, thus the results are presented in 3 levels of kids, young-adults, and adults in each factor. The table below shows the statistics related to the scores of teachers teaching kids. The number below each score shows the number of teachers obtaining that score. Since there were 18 kids' teachers, the number of teachers in each row is 18, the "*Total*" column shows the total score of all the 18 teachers, and the "*Mean*" column presents the mean score of the teachers on those principles.

Table 1. *Results of Observation Forms of Kids' Classes (18 teachers)*

	Points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean
1	Following the methodology and syllabus	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	4	7	4	156	8.66
2	Adjusted level of classroom language	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	7	2	5	148	8.22
3	Effective error-correction	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	4	4	6	151	8.38
4	Active participation of all the learners	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	6	5	6	159	**8.83**
5	Building a good rapport based on mutual respect	0	0	0	0	0	1	2	5	4	6	150	**8.82**
6	Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	7	3	5	154	8.55
7	Time- management	0	0	0	0	0	4	2	6	4	2	142	**7.88**
8	Inspiring and motivating students	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	5	4	4	151	8.38
9	Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	7	3	5	154	8.55
10	Teacher's language competence	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	10	3	2	145	8.05
11	Total score											**1510**	**8.43**

Firstly, the highest mean score was 8.83 out of 10, which was achieved in item 4. This indicates that the teachers are particularly successful in fostering an environment where all students actively engage in the learning process. This was followed by item 5, 8.82, which was related to creating a friendly relationship with the students. Thus, it can be seen that teachers can create a non-threating and relaxed atmosphere, involving all the students in the class discussions. On the other hand, it can be seen that teachers were not good in managing their time (7.88). It must be mentioned that these mean scores are not low at all, but they are the lowest among these ten factors. The mean scores of other 8 items range from 8.22 to 8.55.

To gain further insights, it would be valuable to gather further data interviews to understand the underlying reasons behind these scores. To ground this, we interviewed with some teachers to identify the reasons and solutions. According to 6 kids' teachers who were interviewed, the followings are the main teaching challenges, reasons behind them, and some possible solutions

Table 2. *Interviews with 6 Kids' Teachers on Challenges, Reasons, and Solutions*

The Challenges	The Reasons		The Solutions
Teachers are not allowed to use mother tongue in the class	It is one of the rules of ILI		Allowing a judicious use of the mother tongue
Learners cheat a lot in online classes and exams	Parents sometimes become the students' supporters and partners in cheating	Students must turn their webcams on at least for oral tests.	
The lack of learners' interest in language learning	The heterogeneous classes might be the reason (especially in the high level classes of the kids).		Place the students based on their real levels of proficiency not the age level
Difficult to be creative in the class activities and teaching	The intensive and time-taking syllabus and teaching procedures	Reducing the amount of materials for each semester.	
Time-management	Some sessions are so intense especially in this age level that the teachers have to skip some parts in the syllabus.		This can be dealt by changing the syllabus. Devoting enough time for each step and activity in the syllabus.
Inspiring and motivating the students	Teachers cannot be creative, being the slave, the fixed teaching method suggested. Old and out of date videos		This can be dealt by changing the syllabus and updating videos as well.

Based on the data collected, it seems that teachers in ILI face a range of challenges while teaching kids. Opposite to the observation forms, teachers mentioned challenges in creating a good learning environment, making the learners interested, and being creative in their class routine. However, in line with the quantitative results, they had problems with time management as well as inspiring and motivating the students. Generally, it is shown that the main reason behind all these challenges is the number of materials included in the syllabus and the fixed teaching methodology which must be followed exactly. That is why most of the teachers believe that the syllabus should be changed. Another challenge identified in data is cheating in online classes, which is facilitated by parents who become accomplices in the process. To address this issue, participants suggested requiring students to turn on their webcams during oral tests to prevent cheating. The next table provides some quantitative information with regard to the teaching challenges of 47 young-adults teachers.

Table 3. *Results of Observation Forms of Young-adults' Classes (47 teachers)*

	Points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean
1	Following the methodology and syllabus	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	13	8	22	422	8.97
2	Adjusted level of classroom language	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	8	13	22	429	9.12
3	Effective error- correction	0	0	0	0	0	2	5	9	7	24	422	8.97
4	Active participation of all the learners	0	0	0	0	1	0	3	10	11	22	425	9.04
5	Building a good rapport based on mutual respect	0	0	0	0	1	0	4	6	11	25	430	**9.14**
6	Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools	0	0	0	0	2	0	5	5	13	22	422	8.97
7	Time-management	0	0	0	0	2	3	2	9	12	19	410	**8.72**
8	Inspiring and motivating students	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	12	12	22	431	**9.17**
9	Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	14	7	22	422	8.97
10	Teacher's language competence	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	10	21	15	426	9.06
11	Total score											**4239**	**9.01**

This table shows the mean scores of 47 ILI teachers teaching young-adult's classes based on the observation forms. The lowest mean score was seen in the time management item, which is very important for every teacher. In fact, this was the number one challenge for Kid's teachers too. To address this issue, teachers need to prioritize the most important tasks, allocate a limited time for each activity, make use of technology, and ask for colleagues' advice. On the upside, teachers were quite successful in "Inspiring and motivating students" (9.17) as well as "Building a good rapport based on mutual respect" (9.14). Among these two, the latter case was also reported by Kids' teachers. Overall, it indicates that the teachers have been successful in providing a positive learning environment. To obtain a better understanding of the challenges, we conducted interviews with five young-adults' teachers.

Table 4. *Interviews with Five Young-adults Teachers on Challenges, Reasons, and Solutions*

The Challenges	The Reasons	The Solutions
Time-management	The heavy syllabus. It requires a large amount of work per session.	Changes in the syllabus. Having classes with fewer students.
Teachers' pedagogical knowledge is not up to date	Most experienced teachers do not update themselves in regard to new teaching techniques and just study ILI's old books.	Holding some special courses, lectures, and workshops for teachers.
Teachers often find it difficult to be creative in the class	The fixed syllabus does not let the teachers think about the things other than following the teaching steps.	Syllabus designers should change the methodology and syllabus. There should be some optional techniques for teaching.	
Students get bored with the class activities	The old methodology of ILI which is based on repetition. ILI methodology includes many drills.	To make developmental changes in the methodology. Changing the nature of the exercises.
Inspiring and motivating the students	Some teaching materials in ILI such as videos and songs are so old which makes students and even teachers bored.	Changing and updating the materials is the only solution.

Based on Table 4, young-adults teachers faced challenges in time-management, inspiring and motivating students, making students interested in the class activities, being creative in teaching, and teacher's pedagogical knowledge. As it can be seen, time-management is a top challenging area as it was revealed in the observation forms too. However, others are areas which were claimed by teachers as challenging in the interviews but not in the observation forms. To put it in a nutshell, teachers' challenges can be divided into instructional area (time-management, pedagogical competence, and difficulty in being creative) and the affective area (not being able to inspire and motivate the students as well as having students who are bored). The main reasons for all these problems were mentioned to be two factors, i.e. the old teaching materials, and the fixed teaching methodology dictated by the institute. That is why making changes in the syllabus, updating the materials, and leaving some space for teachers' creativity and freedom were mentioned as solutions. The last set of problems, reasons, and solutions are related to teachers who teach adults, for which the data were collected using 35 observation forms and six interviews.

Table 5. *Results of Observation Forms of Adults' Classes (35 teachers)*

	Points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean
1	Following the methodology and syllabus	0	0	0	7	6	0	4	6	6	6	248	7.08
2	Adjusted level of classroom language	0	0	0	2	10	2	2	10	4	5	250	7.14
3	Effective error- correction	0	0	3	2	2	4	2	12	4	6	257	7.34
4	Active participation of all the learners	0	0	0	0	2	0	4	13	5	11	297	8.48
5	Building a good rapport based on mutual respect	0	0	0	0	5	2	2	9	5	12	288	8.22
6	Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools	0	0	2	2	8	4	3	7	2	7	243	**6.94**
7	Time- management	0	0	0	4	3	5	3	8	4	8	262	7.48
8	Inspiring and motivating students	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	7	10	12	307	**8.77**
9	Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments	0	0	0	2	5	3	1	6	5	13	281	8.02
10	Teacher's language competence	0	0	0	0	3	2	1	9	9	11	297	8.48
11	Total score											**2730**	**7.79**

As the results suggest, making good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools was reported to be the most significant challenge for adult's teachers. However, it is encouraging to see that the mean score for this point is 6.94, indicating that many teachers used the teaching materials or online platform tools almost effectively. Meanwhile, following the methodology and syllabus and appropriate use of classroom language were other areas in which the mean scores were low. However, it is worth noting that all areas, except for item 6 scored above 7, indicating that most ILI teachers at adults' age level were successful in their teaching practices. It is interesting to note that like young-adults' teachers, adults' teachers were best in inspiring and motivating students. Another aspect worth noting is the variance in scores across different factors. For instance, the factors "Following the methodology and syllabus" and "Effective error correction" show a wide range of scores, from 4 to 10. This indicates that some teachers might be more aligned with the prescribed methodology and syllabus than others, while some of them deviated from the agreed-upon route and taught in their own way. In order to find out the reasons and solutions for the teaching challenges at adults' age level, we interviewed with 6 ILI teachers.

Table 6. *Interviews with Six Adults Teachers on Challenges, Reasons, and Solutions*

The Challenges	The Reasons	The Solutions
The reluctance of the students	Lack of interest in learning English. Parents force the students to attend the classes	Using interesting materials and active engagement.
Ineffective classroom equipment wastes the class time	Some classroom equipment in ILI are of low quality or so old.	Purchasing and changing new classroom equipment.
The heterogeneity of the learners	Some teachers in previous terms evaluated the students unfairly.	Training teachers how to evaluate the students. Use institute's exam papers.
Time-management	ILI syllabus requires a large amount of work in some sessions, whereas there is a considerable additional time left in some other sessions.	Developmental changes in the syllabus and reducing the number of students to 20.
The students misunderstand the teacher's language most of the time.	The strictness of the ILI in not using the mother tongue.	Allowing a judicious use of the mother tongue, adapting the classroom language
Classroom management	Sometimes, the classes are so crowded that the teachers do not find enough time to engage all.	Reducing the number of students to 20.

Unlike the challenges mentioned in the kids' and young-adults' levels, the teaching challenges in adults' level were related to the teachers themselves, not the syllabus or teaching methodology. To put it in simpler terms, these were the teachers who could not motivate the students, did not manage the classes well, had weak time-management, did not adapt their classroom language, and did not assess the students fairly. The only teaching challenge which was brought about by the institute directly was the inefficient and old facilities. However, despite what was reported in the observation forms by the supervisors, teachers themselves argued that motivating adult students was one of the most significant challenges. Finally, time-management seems to be the most common challenge for teachers teaching at all three levels. In order to handle these problems, both the institute's authorities and the teachers need to take actions. The institute can buy new and up-to-date equipment, hold in-service courses, reduce the number of students in each class, and use final exams which are not developed by the class teacher. The teachers are required to adapt their classroom language in order to avoid misunderstanding, provide clearer and easier instructions, employ group and pair work, use more interesting activities, and assess students fairly.

Research Question Two

For the second research question, we focused on identifying the teaching challenges faced by the newly-hired and experienced teachers of ILI to see what teaching challenges they encounter. Tables 7 and 8 represent the related quantitative and qualitative data based on the observations and interviews with newly-hired teachers respectively.

Table 7. *Results of Observation Forms of 31 Newly-hired Teachers*

	Points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean
1	Following the methodology and syllabus	0	0	0	2	4	4	3	4	5	9	240	7.74
2	Adjusted level of classroom language	0	0	0	0	5	2	4	6	3	11	250	8.06
3	Effective error-correction	0	0	0	0	4	3	1	11	6	6	247	**7.05**
4	Active participation of all the learners	0	0	0	0	0	5	2	8	6	10	262	7.48
5	Building a good rapport based on mutual respect	0	0	0	0	0	1	5	8	6	11	269	8.67
6	Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools	0	0	0	2	4	3	5	3	3	12	252	8.12
7	Time-management	0	0	0	2	4	1	3	9	6	6	241	7.77
8	Inspiring and motivating students	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	5	5	16	279	**9**
9	Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments	0	0	0	0	4	2	2	8	4	10	246	7.93
10	Teacher's language competence	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	9	9	8	268	8.64
11	Total score											**2554**	**8.04**

The first thing is no aspect got the mean score of 7 or less which means that even newly-hired teachers have faced a few challenges in their careers. Firstly, the newly-hired, ambitious, and energetic teachers were good at inspiring and motivating students, obtaining the highest mean score (9). On the contrary, the most challenging area for the newly-hired teachers was effective error-correction with the least mean score (7.05). A little better than this area, "active participation of all learners, following the methodology and syllabus, time-management, and appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments" had mean scores 7.48, 7.74, 7.77, and 7.93 respectively. To identify the reasons behind the challenges and solutions, we interviewed with seven newly-hired teachers at all age levels. To delve into details, below is the table:

Table 8. *Interviews with Seven Newly-hired Teachers on Challenges, Reasons, and Solutions*

The Challenges	The Reasons		The Solutions
Asking for instruction in mother tongue	The previous teachers used mother tongue for instruction.		Instructing in the r tongue. Using extra marks to motivate students use English
Cheating in online classes	It is easy to cheat especially with the help of the parents.		Stop holding online classes, provide some speed tests in online classes, asking the students to turn their webcams on during exams.
Some students are not at the same level of proficiency as the classmates	Some teachers in previous terms evaluated the students unfairly		Training teachers how to evaluate the students
Time-management	The ILI syllabus requires a large amount of work in some sessions, whereas teachers have extra time in other sessions.		Developmental changes in the syllabus ducing the number of learners to 20 students at most.
Not having modern advanced classroom equipment	Some classroom equipment in ILI are low-quality or are so old	Purchasing and changing new classroom equipment is the only solution.	
Inspiring and motivating the students	Teaching materials such as videos and songs are so old	Changing and updating the materials is the only solution.	
The lack of interest	Some students are not appropriate for the level of proficiency.		Setting standard and appropriate achievement and placement tests
Classroom management	Sometimes, the classes are so crowded that the teachers do not find enough time to teach effectively.		Spending less time on some part of the instruction. Placing 20 students in each class at max

It seems like there are several challenges for newly-hired teachers. Talking about the sources, these challenges are presented by students (lack of interest, cheating in online classes, and asking for instruction in mother tongue), brought about by the institute (not having advanced classroom equipment), or related to teachers (classroom-management, inspiring and motivating students, and time-management). However, the fact that some students are attending classes which are not at the same level of proficiency as theirs can be attributed to both teachers and the institute evaluation policy and practice.

To get into more details, the problems, reasons, and solutions are presented one by one. First, students' asking for instruction in their mother tongue was one of the challenges, which arises when students have passed their previous terms with teachers using their mother tongue for instruction. This could be tackled by limiting the number of times students ask for mother tongue, assigning positive points for speaking English, or even reducing the students' score who uses mother tongue a lot. Second, cheating in online classes, which did not exist in the observation forms was a new and temporary challenge since there will be much fewer online classes nowadays compared with the COVID-19 pandemic era. Potential solutions include ILI discontinuing online classes, providing speed tests that are difficult to cheat on, or requiring students to turn on their webcams during oral exams. Third, students were not at the right level of proficiency. This challenge was mentioned through interviews but not seen in the observation forms. This challenge could be resolved by training teachers in assessment or using standard exams. Time-management and classroom management problems were also present in the list, both of which can be related to the syllabus. Thus, reducing the number of materials in general, dividing the number of materials between the sessions fairly, and decreasing the number of students can be solutions for these difficulties.

The second research question also addressed the teaching challenges of experienced teachers; thus, the next table presents the information collected from the observation's forms related to 69 experienced teachers.

Table 9. *Results of Observation Forms of 69 Experienced Teachers*

	Points	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total	Mean
1	Following the methodology and syllabus	0	0	0	5	3	0	3	16	16	26	588	8.52
2	Adjusted level of classroom language	0	0	0	2	3	0	5	21	17	21	589	8.53
3	Effective error- correction	0	0	2	1	2	2	6	15	10	31	594	8.60
4	Active participation of all the learners	0	0	0	0	3	0	5	19	11	31	611	8.85
5	Building a good rapport based on mutual respect	0	0	0	0	5	0	5	15	14	30	606	8.78
6	Good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools	0	0	2	2	4	3	10	12	12	24	566	8.20
7	Time- management	0	0	2	2	5	8	3	10	18	21	560	**8.11**
8	Inspiring and motivating students	0	0	0	0	5	1	5	12	19	27	603	8.73
9	Appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments	0	0	0	2	1	2	2	19	12	31	609	8.82
10	Teacher's language competence	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	22	25	21	616	**8.92**
11	Total score											**5942**	**8.60**

First of all, it is essential to note that in all areas, the mean score is higher than 8.10. This indicates that the experienced teachers of ILI were quite successful teachers in all the ten aspects. Time management, which has been a challenge for almost all ILI teachers so far, has the lowest mean score even among the experienced teachers. This indicates that all ILI teachers, regardless of their experience and the level they teach, have encountered this challenge. Thus,

it is safe to say that the prescribed syllabus is too much to cover. The following areas were, however, the strengths of the experienced teachers: Building a good rapport (8.78), appropriate checking of the dialogue/ reading/ assignments (8.82), and active participation of all the learners (8.85). Finally, the teachers were strongest in the last item, i.e. teachers' language competence (8.92). This finding is quite different from the previous ones, where no group of teachers, regarding teaching experience or level they teach, got the highest score in this aspect.

The researchers also interviewed with 7 experienced teachers to find out the challenges, reasons, and solutions from teachers' point of view.

Table 10. *Interviews with Seven Experienced Teachers on Challenges, Reasons, and Solutions*

The Challenges	The Reasons	The Solutions
Lack of interest and motivation in the learners	The heterogeneous classes might be the reason.	ILI managers should distribute the students based on their level of proficiency not the age level.
The laziness and reluctance of the students	The lack of interest in learning English. Sometimes, parents force the students to attend English classes.	Teachers can motivate the students by implementing different strategies which foster creativity in class.
Students of the class are not at the same level of proficiency.	Teachers in previous terms evaluated the students unfairly.	Training teachers how to evaluate the students appropriately.
Time-management	The ILI syllabus requires a large amount of work and time in some sessions.	Developmental changes in the syllabus. Reducing the number of students.
Some students drop out of the program after passing some terms.	The lack of interests on the part of students. The old methodology of ILI (repetition and drills).	Systematic changes in teaching methodology. Employing more challenging, modern, and encouraging teaching techniques.
The students misunderstand the teacher sometimes.	The strictness of the ILI in not using the mother tongue in the class.	This can be dealt by using the mother tongue as a hint by the teachers.
Teachers often find it difficult to be creative in the class.	The intensive and fixed syllabus do not let the teachers think about things other than following the teaching steps.	Teachers should be given some freedom in their teaching to use other challenging and interesting teaching techniques.

A quick look shows that the institute or teachers do not evaluate the students fairly and objectively, hence teaching multilevel classes is one of the serious challenges. However, it seems that the learners are not motivated and interested, do not participate in class discussions, do not understand the instructions, and even drop out of the institute. Opposite to other reasons and sources of challenges mentioned above, the experienced teachers asserted that the students are not willing to learn English after some years and become demotivated. Besides the institute and the demotivated students, the teachers who are to compensate for the other weaknesses in the educational systems find it hard to be creative in their teaching and cannot manage their

class time successfully. They even responsible for the students' misunderstandings of the instructions since it is their duty to adapt their classroom language and provide simple and clear instructions.

Discussion

Like Chen and Goh (2011), Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014) and Kheirabadi and Alavimoghaddam (2019), we identified inadequate teaching resources and low pedagogical knowledge as severe challenges faced by kids' teachers in this study. The reason is that most institutes, in particular ILI, run a TTC when the teachers are employed at the beginning but do not offer follow-up and complementary courses later. Thus, it is essential to note that EFL teachers need to be updated through different workshops and training programs regularly. Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014), Gholaminejad and Raeisi (2021), and Zamin et al. (2022) found that English language teachers' low level of proficiency and language competence were among the problems they mentioned. This challenge was mentioned by some ILI teachers in the interviews as well. For one thing, most of the Iranian institutes assume that teachers need not be updated with regard to their language proficiency, thus they mostly focus on the teaching techniques and issues in their TTCs.

Furthermore, Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014), along with other researchers, also came up with problems such as too much focus on grammar, limited teaching time (Gholaminejad & Raeisi 2021; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2019), inadequate pedagogical knowledge, and the large number of students in English classes (Gholaminejad & Raeisi 2021) which correspond to the old methodology, time management, teacher's pedagogical competence, and classroom management problems in ILI respectively. All these problems are created by the institute which decides about the syllabus, the amount of materials to teach in each session, and even the teaching techniques to be used in the class. The teachers can possibly update themselves in language competence and pedagogical competence, but they cannot determine the number of students in the classes or the materials top teach.

Several Iranian and foreign studies corroborate the results of the current study regarding old teaching materials, prescribed teaching techniques, and assessment procedures. Previous researchers found that teachers had problems with the old textbooks (Akbari, 2015; Gholaminejad & Raeisi, 2021; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2019; Moradian & Ramezanzadeh, 2023), with the prescribed teaching methodology (Gholaminejad & Raeisi, 2021; Kheirabadi & Alavimoghaddam, 2019), and the assessment procedures (Ganji et al., 2018).

In addition, recent studies conducted since 2020 provide a more holistic and updated overview of the challenges that Iranian English teachers face. Alavi et al. (2022) conducted a study on the effects of COVID-19 on TEFL practices in Iran, and one of their key findings was that teachers faced numerous technical difficulties, including lack of digital literacy, and an absence of quality course material for online teaching. Malekolkalami (2020) explored the experiences of Iranian English teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. In her study, she found that despite initial challenges in adapting to remote and blended learning environments, participating teachers eventually developed resilience and implemented coping mechanisms,

which led to some positive changes in their teaching methodologies. However, a critical issue remains the lack of adequate teacher training, particularly related to digital technologies in the EFL classroom. These results reaffirm the need for continuing professional development programs targeted at building English language and tech capabilities among EFL teachers in Iran. Further, to address the challenges brought on by the digital transformation of language instruction, efforts should focus on providing reliable internet connections and accessible digital tools specifically designed to enhance the efficacy of English language learning and teaching. Finally, there needs to be a concerted push for developing a national awareness campaign that demonstrates the practical importance and value of English mastery for the population, especially young learners, as this will likely promote higher motivation and engagement with the target language.

Aliakbari and Saeedi (2022), Gholaminejad and Raeisi (2021), and Noughabi (2017) reported that teachers in Iranian junior and senior high schools had problems with old textbooks, inactive and demotivated learners, and space and educational facilities. These were also reported in this study by the ILI teachers, especially in the interviews.

However, the fact that ILI teachers are not allowed to be creative in their teaching is in contrast to those studies which were focused on Iranian teachers of junior and senior high schools (Aliakbari & Saeedi, 2022; Kariminasab et al., 2023; Noughabi, 2017; Saeed & Jafar, 2015; Tabatabaei & Pourakbari, 2012) because teachers in those contexts had enough time and freedom to display and foster creativity, not having to follow a prescribed methodology as the ILI teachers do.

Conclusion

The current research attempted to investigate the teaching challenges faced by newly-hired and experienced ILI teachers teaching at different age levels including kids, young-adults, and adults. The results of the study indicated an extended range of challenges according to the 100 classroom observation forms. Moreover, the sixteen interviewed teachers confirmed some of these challenges and added some other challenges, the reasons behind, and suggested solutions.

The results of the observation forms were in some cases different from or in a few cases in stark contrast to the findings of the interviews. First of all, analysis of the observation forms revealed that time-management was the number one challenge for both kids' teachers and young-adults' teachers, while adults' teachers had problem with good use of either teaching materials or online platform tools. This shows that teaching at different levels of age could pose slightly different challenges. The next finding was that time-management was not only repeated in two age levels, but also it was the only challenge which was common between observation forms and interview findings. Therefore, it seems that managing the time for ILI teachers is a very common problem, and the teachers mentioned that the main reason is the heavy syllabus to cover, especially in some certain sessions. The other challenges for teachers were that teachers were not allowed to be creative in their teaching and to use mother tongue in their classes, both of which are among the main policies in ILI, where teachers have to follow a fixed series of steps for teaching language skills and components. Cheating in online exams, having classes with students of different proficiency levels, and lack of motivation among students

who are forced by their parents to attend English classes are the last problems encountered by teachers.

Generally speaking, the analysis of the observation forms indicated that young-adults' teachers stood at the first rank (9.01), followed by kids' teachers (8.43) and adults' teachers (7.79). To put it in simpler terms, young adults' teachers faced fewer challenges in their teaching and obtained higher scores in their evaluation forms. Comparing newly-experienced teachers with experienced teachers, it was shown that experienced teachers had a better performance (8.60) than newly-hired ones (8.04). This shows that the experience is effective in this career and it makes the teacher become familiar with different learning styles and characteristics. Therefore, he or she can utilize different students' interests to foster creativity. In addition to showing the challenges, it was revealed that both kids' and young-adults' teachers were successful in creating a good rapport with the students.

It is quite obvious that the number of participants is out of control, and the researcher had to continue with those participants who would be willing to take part in the current research. Although the number of interviewed teachers was not low since the researchers reached data saturation point, increasing the number of observation forms or conducting observations by the researcher might lead to other results and findings. The second limitation is that, according to ILI rules, it is not possible to attend and observe the classes. Thus, the researchers could not observe the classes, and only the supervisors' and observers' form of observation were used in this study. Therefore, for further research, it is suggested to observe the ILI classes in order to investigate all aspects of teaching practices. It is also suggested to include the students' opinions on the teachers' performance as well.

Acknowledgments

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