"We Are Given Controlled Content Out of Fear of Parents' Disapproval": English Language Teacher Education Practices in Selected Private Bilingual Schools

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Abstract: The mushrooming of private bilingual schools (PBSs) in large cities of Iran highlights the importance of equipping English teachers in these schools with the required knowledge to hold high-quality English classes. In the absence of publications on the status of English language teaching (ELT) and hence English language teacher education (ELTE) practices in PBSs of Iran, the present inquiry was initiated to explore these neglected aspects in five PBSs in Tehran. In-depth semi-structured interviews with two principals, four English supervisors, and 16 English teachers were used for data collection. Thematic analysis of the data revealed how topics such as teaching methods, materials development, religious values, native and foreign cultures, technological literacy, English accents, use of mother tongue, and teacher reflection were perceived in teacher education practices of the selected schools. This finding can provide policymakers, school principals, English supervisors, and teachers with insights into the value of ELTE programs and the areas needing refinement.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Teacher Education; Teacher Training; Private Bilingual Schools.

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Introduction

English language teacher education (LTE) has become a hot topic in recent decades and varied perceptions of the term have been made (Ball et al., 2008; Farrell, 2017; Freeman, 2016, 2020; Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Richards, 1990, 2008; Tsui, 2011; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). Freeman (1989, p. 30) poses that "language teacher education serves to link what is known in the field with what is done in the classroom, and it does so through the individuals whom we educate as teachers". Richards and Nunan (1990) hold that in teacher education, the departure is from teaching classroom techniques and skills to student teachers to an approach whereby the student teachers gain the potential to develop their own theories and become aware of their learning-to-teach processes. In a more recent scholarly publication, Freeman (2016, pp. 5-6) asserts that teacher education, characterized as "a social activity that deals with the processes of language teaching" is oriented towards "connecting, building, and refining of knowledge". It is worth mentioning that different perceptions of teacher education emphasize the centrality of teachers in varied educational systems and signify that LTE needs to be approached profoundly.

In Iran, ELTE courses include programs of various durations mainly offered by Teacher Training Universities governed by the Ministry of Education, private and public universities governed by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, and Language institutes. Language institutes serve to teach English to students who are not content with their English teaching courses in state schools. Late exposure to English in state schools (Piroozan et al., 2021), low quality of English classes, and not equipping the students with the desired spoken skills in state schools (Dorshomal et al., 2013; Haghighi & Norton, 2017; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015) are among the motives urging a considerable number of Iranian families to enroll their children in language institutes as well as private bilingual schools. PBSs mostly begin teaching English from the primary school age, along with teaching literacy. Most of these schools carry on their task at high school to enable the students to learn various English language skills and subsequently cut their need to enroll in outside-the-school institutes. The rapid growth in the number of PBSs in large cities like Tehran, the willingness of families to enroll their children in such schools (Ahmadi & Eslami, 2011; Farzaneh & Movahed, 2015), and more importantly, the early exposure of children to English in these contexts highlights the importance of educating their English teachers.

According to Tajik et al. (2019), despite many studies focusing on language teacher education globally, relatively few studies have systematically explored ELTE in Iran, most of which have been conducted in the context of Teacher Training Universities and private

language institutes. Examples are comparative works on Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) held in Iran and other countries (e.g., Avanaki & Sadeghi, 2014; Ganji et al., 2018a; Nezakat-Alhossaini & Ketabi, 2013), studies exploring key stakeholders' attitudes toward English language teacher education in Teacher Training Universities (e.g., Gholami & Qurbanzadeh, 2016), and the research documenting the status of ELTE in private language institutes in Iran (e.g. Ganji et al., 2016, 2018a, 2018b). Notwithstanding such diversity of research on teacher preparation programs in Iran, to our knowledge, no previous study has probed into the status of English language teacher education practices of PBSs. In light of the rising prevalence of private bilingual schools in densely populated urban areas (Ahmadi & Eslami, 2011), this study was commenced to investigate the curricular content of English Language Teaching Education in a selection of such institutions in Tehran. Specifically, this study sought to address the following research query: What pedagogical content is imparted to English language teachers during ELTE practices at private bilingual schools in Tehran?

By teacher education practices, we mean all relevant courses offered, workshops presented, and activities conducted, either before or during teachers' real teaching practices in the schools by the school authorities, including the school principals and teacher educators, to improve teachers' teaching qualifications. This operational definition corresponds with the theoretical definition of teacher education posed by Freeman (2016). To him, teacher education is a "social activity that deals with the processes of language teaching" which focuses on "connecting, building, and refining of knowledge" (pp. 5-6). It should also be noted that the terms teacher education, teacher training, and teacher preparation are used interchangeably throughout the manuscript.

In light of the crucial role of teacher education programs in producing competent educators, the results of this study may serve as a guide for bilingual schools in designing teacher education courses that align with the specific needs of language teachers while preparing them for the evolving demands of the field. By analyzing existing teacher education programs, curriculum developers and policymakers could determine the content and direction of teacher preparation courses. By addressing a neglected area in the literature of ELT by examining ELT practitioners' beliefs about the existing training practices in bilingual schools, this study could inspire ELT teacher preparation communities worldwide to prioritize investigating bilingual schools' ELT practitioners' understanding of training programs. Given the global significance of teacher education, the outcomes of this study could be applicable to teacher training programs in other countries as well.

Review of the Literature

Bilingual Education

The literature on bilingual education yields varied, yet complementary, definitions for this concept. In a recent study, Sulik (2020, p. 198) defines bilingual education as the "teaching of academic content in two languages, in a native and second language". Correspondingly, Genesee (2004, p. 2) has specified bilingual education "as education that aims to promote bilingual (or multilingual) competence by using both (or all) languages as media of instruction for significant portions of the academic curriculum". Other, more detailed, characteristics of bilingual education have been captured by intellectuals favoring immersion programs. According to Björklund and Mard-Miettinen (2015), immersion education is one type of bilingual education introduced to provide more opportunities for kindergarten children to be exposed to language. Swain and Johnson (1997) elaborate on crucial features of immersion education which should be considered as a continuum. According to them, in this type of education, L2 is the medium of instruction; the immersion curriculum parallels the local LI curriculum; overt support exists for the LI; the program aims for additive bilingualism; and exposure to the L2 is largely confined to the classroom. They, further, explicate different varieties of immersion language, like immersion in a foreign language, immersion for majority-language students in a minority language, immersion for language support and language revival, and finally, immersion in a language of power. Additionally, Swain and Johnson elucidate various types of immersion programs, which can be differentiated by the time of exposure to the immersion program- namely early, mid, or late; extent of immersion- full with no use of L1 in curriculum or partial with as little as or less than half of content subjects taught through the L2; the ratio of L1 to L2 at different stages within the immersion program; and attitudes towards the culture of the target language, among others.

Teacher Education

Ever since the idea of teacher preparation attracted the attention of scholars, extensive changes have occurred in its theoretical and operational definition. As Freeman and Johnson (1998) maintain, before the mid-1970s, teacher preparation was predominantly influenced by the process-product paradigm, viewing teaching as specific behaviors and practices for effective outcomes. Teachers were considered passive recipients in this behaviorist model. In more recent years, the profession of teaching has evolved beyond the simplistic interpretations of instruction previously associated with behavioral approaches. Contemporary perspectives, known as socio-cognitive views of teaching, have replaced these outdated conceptions

(Johnson, 2006). This shift has led to a multifaceted examination of teacher development, encompassing professional, cognitive, social, and contextual dimensions (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Richards & Farrell, 2005). Richards (1990) presents teacher development as a bottom-up approach that emphasizes discovery and inquiry and values aspects such as teachers' knowledge, attitudes, teaching methods, and beliefs, incorporating clarification, observation, self-reflection, action research, problem-solving, and project work into teacher education. Freeman (1989) delineates the disparity between training and development approaches in teacher education by stating that development is a strategy aimed at exerting indirect influence on multifaceted and interconnected aspects of teaching through complex interventions, whereas training involves direct intervention by the collaborator to address specific components of a teacher's instructional practices.

Consequent to the growing understanding on the part of scholars regarding the complexity of the mental life of teacher candidates, research on teachers' cognition opened up a new era for the researchers to explore the thought processes teachers are involved in before, while, and posterior to their class routines. In addition, the knowledge base or the information that student teachers need to know in ELTE became a vital issue attracting the attention of many researchers. Richards (1998) clarifies six dimensions that comprise the core knowledge base in second language teacher education (SLTE): theories of teaching; teaching skills; communication skills; subject matter knowledge; pedagogical reasoning skills and decision making; and contextual knowledge. Having a broader perspective, Freeman and Johnson (1998) identified two main categories in the discourse on teaching within the knowledge base: "grounded" and "a priori". The former concerns knowledge obtained from actual classroom practice, as elucidated by Vélez-Rendón (2002), while the latter pertains to knowledge derived from the discipline itself. A review of related literature suggests that researchers have reformed their perceptions of the knowledge base over time. Richards (2008), for instance, introduced the terms explicit knowledge, which encompasses pedagogical content knowledge and practical knowledge, and implicit knowledge, which includes teachers' theories, beliefs, and practical actions. More recently, Freeman et al. (2019, pp. 15-16) clarified four different generations of knowledge, each of which flourished as a reaction to the deficiencies of the preceding ones: disciplinary knowledge, teaching knowledge as pedagogy, teaching knowledge as in-person, in-place and knowledge-for-teaching. The increasing focus on teachers' cognitive processes within second language teacher education research has also led to investigations into various terminologies used to describe teachers' knowledge base, such as

moral knowledge base (Akbari & Tajik, 2012), personal practical knowledge (Sun, 2012), and pedagogical knowledge base (Akbari & Dadvand, 2011; Akbari & Tajik, 2009). Additionally, research on teacher cognition has delved into teachers' beliefs regarding various aspects of their teaching, as outlined by Borg (2003).

Along with the advancements in uncovering the theoretical basis of language teacher preparation programs, in a parallel line of inquiry within SLTE, there have been researchers with a practical concern and enthusiasm to discern the minutia of teacher preparation programs in their local context. Demir (2015), for instance, examined the effectiveness of a pre-service ELTE program at a Turkish university, revealing dissatisfaction among participants due to the program overlooking their needs. Agudo (2017) explored an EFL teacher education course, finding positive perceptions of pedagogic competence and teaching skills but emphasizing the need to focus on managerial competencies. Grazzi and Lopriore (2020) critically examined Italian teachers' knowledge and attitudes toward World Englishes (WE) and English as Lingua Franca (ELF), indicating a necessity to reframe ELT courses for enhanced awareness.

In the context of Iran, empirical studies centered on ELTE are of two main types. The first type encompasses publications unveiling the current status of ELTE in language institutes as well as varied branches of Teacher Training University via scanning teachers' and teacher trainers' perceptions towards the courses offered in their workplace. Rezaee and Ghanbarpour (2016), focusing on an ELT context, critiqued the prevalence of the craft model in transmitting knowledge to student teachers in TTCs. Gholami and Qurbanzadeh (2016), through examining key stakeholders' attitudes toward English language teacher education programs in the Teacher Training University context, unveiled a pressing need for TTCs to emphasize knowledge-building and knowledge-applying subjects. Ganji et al. (2018b) assessed TTCs presented in selected English institutes, revealing mismatches between teacher applicants' needs and institute focus, along with challenges like insufficient knowledge of student teachers in general English and teaching methodology; lack of experienced and certified trainers; and lack of a written syllabus. Tajik et al. (2019) highlighted novice teachers' prior experiences being overlooked in TTC design. Aliakbari and Tabatabaei (2019), who evaluated teacher education programs at varied branches of the Teacher Training University, identified a significant gap between the first-year group's expectations and the last-year group's evaluations of these programs. Concurrently, Mahmoodi et al. (2019) employed Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's four-level model (2006) to examine the effect of in-service education and training (INSET) on grade 11th EFL teachers' knowledge base in Guilan Province. They approved the beneficial role of INSET classes in teachers' reactions, learning, and behavior.

The second category of studies in the Ira9nian context comprises comparative explorations of ELTE in Iran and other countries. Ganji et al. (2018a), for instance, compared the local TTCs held in Isfahan, Kermanshah, and Boushehr institutes with international ELTE courses named CELTA. They found that in contrast to the international teacher trainees, the Iranian student-teachers' wants were not taken into consideration in planning the TTCs. Along the same line of inquiry, Rajaeenia et al. (2018) compared EFL pre-service teacher education in Iran with that of four other countries- namely, Germany, Japan, Singapore, and the US. The authors predicted that Germany and the US developed a more sophisticated teacher education system than the other three countries.

As the preceding paragraphs revealed, ELT scholars have penetrated varied aspects of teacher preparation programs through various lenses. However, the diversity of the aspects of SLTE brings one to the conclusion that more comprehensive research is needed in this area. Having this in mind and admitting the vital role of teacher preparation programs in educating qualified teachers, along with the role attached to bilingual schools in the publications of the field and the absence of explorations of SLTE in these contexts, prompted us to devote an extended amount of time to examine the content of SLTE practices in selected bilingual education contexts of Iran.

Methodology

The Bilingual School Settings

The context of this study consisted of five PBSs in the north of Tehran. A purposeful sampling technique was used to select the schools. Based on Patton (1990, p. 169), purposeful sampling helps obtain "rich information" about the phenomenon under investigation. Regarding the school districts, those in the northern parts of Tehran (districts 1 and 3) were chosen for two reasons: first, it seemed easier to access bilingual schools in these districts as the density of PBSs is higher in the north of Tehran; second, one of the researchers of this study was quite familiar with the context of bilingual schools in these districts as her son had attended one of them during his primary grades. Schools A and B merely taught boys and had no branches. School C had branches for both genders at primary and secondary levels. School D taught girls and boys in separate buildings, besides having an international section for international students. Finally, school E had branches at primary and secondary levels for boys and girls. Due to the fact that schools followed similar policies for teaching English and English language teacher education, in their male and female contexts, data collection specifically concentrated on the girls' branches of Schools C, D, and E.

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At the same time, only the primary school branches of the selected schools which taught pupils from preschool to grade six were chosen for gathering required data. This decision was based on the observation that not all PBSs had their secondary school branches. This decision is further justified by the fact that the secondary school branches seemed to prioritize other goals like preparing the students for the university entrance exam over advancing the students' level of language proficiency or providing higher exposure to the English language in general language teaching and content teaching classes.

English Hours. As Table 1 illustrates, the amount and time of exposure to English varied across different schools, with School B presenting the highest time of exposure.

Table 1. English Teaching Hours of the Selected Schools

School	Amount of exposure	English class time
A	Grades 1, 2, and 3: 100 minutes each day Grades 4, 5, and 6: 100 minutes three days a week	All English classes are held in the afternoon following their Persian courses.
B	All grades: 120 minutes every day	All English classes are held in the afternoon following their Persian courses.
C	All grades: 45 minutes daily	Floating, starting from 10:35 – 2:35
D	All grades: 90 minutes daily	All English classes are held in the afternoon following their Persian courses.
E	All grades: 45 minutes daily, except Wednesdays	Floating, starting from 9:30- 3:00

Subjects Taught in English. Contrary to the features announced in the existing discussions on bilingual education and the need for the immersion curriculum to parallel the local L1 curriculum (as stated by Swain & Johnson, 1997), our PBSs pursued distinctive bilingual education methods. School A employed pamphlets for science and math across all grades, while school B's general English books covered science, math, geography, and history. School C limited English instruction to science and math for upper-level students on specific days. Despite declarations from the participants in schools D and E about not teaching science and math in their English classes, the analysis of their websites revealed these subjects were indeed taught in English. Overall, there seemed to be disparities in how teaching varied content in English was treated in different schools.

Participants

Participants of this research included four English supervisors, 16 English teachers, and two school principals selected through a purposeful sampling technique. Among the supervisors, three had their MA in English, and one was a PhD holder (Supervisor A) and university professor; the latter, who possessed a wealth of expertise in managing the English departments of numerous PBSs, had served as a TTC trainer for approximately 17 years. Schools B and E's English departments were supervised by experienced teachers, conducting no teacher preparation courses at the time of data collection. School C's English department was administered by the supervisor of a language institute who used to hold training courses for the school's English teachers in the last years, but no TTCs were offered at the time of data collection. Finally, an experienced teacher held regular in-service TTCs in school D. The age ranges of the supervisors spanned from 35 to 51 years with an average of 38 years. All of them were female.

Except for Sarah, who had lived in the United States for 18 years and had obtained an MA in Psychology, the other 15 English teachers had passed at least three to five credit units in English Language Teaching Methodology during their BA program. Considering outside-the-school TTCs, all the teachers except for two had attended workshops on teaching English and four of the English teachers were CELTA holders. The demographic characteristics of the participants included a range of ages from 24 to 48, with an average age of 32; except for one English teacher, they were all female. The two school principals did not provide us with their personal information, as they were prohibited by the founders of the schools.

Data Collection Technique

To explore details of English language teacher education programs of selected PBSs, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants. According to Tracy (2020), semi-structured interviews are characterized by their inherent flexibility and organic nature. Such interviews involve the utilization of open-ended questions and prompts, facilitating a nuanced understanding of the interviewee's perspectives. They enable the interviewer to actively engage with the interviewee, demonstrating attentiveness, adaptability, and a willingness to relinquish control of the conversation. This approach also affords interviewees the opportunity to express their viewpoints in a comprehensive manner, free from the limitations imposed by rigidly structured questioning.

Procedure

To obtain the school principals' consent for gathering research data, one of the researchers initially sought approval from the Ministry of Education and the Departments of Education and Training in two districts (Districts A and B). The researcher was provided with the names and addresses of four PBSs in District A. In this District, challenges arose, with one school denying its bilingual education in English and refusing entry, resulting in the researchers' inability to collect data from the first school. The researcher faced initial reluctance from the supervisor of the second school but secured cooperation after ensuring data confidentiality. The interview sessions included a 75-minute session with the supervisor and semi-structured interviews with three teachers. Two teachers took part in 30-minute face-to-face interviews, while another participated in a 100-minute interview conducted via Google Meet. Similar challenges initially occurred in the third school of District A. In this school, interviews were carried out with the supervisor for about 75 minutes and two teachers, one for around 30 minutes and the other for about 40 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded for later analysis. Data from the next school was gathered somewhat differently, with the principal emailing the recorded responses of the participants. Later, the researcher could arrange face-to-face interview sessions with the school principal and supervisor, which took about 70 minutes. In addition to the three schools, the researchers were introduced by a colleague to a BA student teaching in a bilingual school. Initially hesitant, he eventually agreed to participate in a one-hour online interview after assurances of data confidentiality. He also introduced two of his colleagues, one of whom was interviewed in the school setting and another via Google Meet, each for one hour. District B presented obstacles, as officials denied the existence and even legitimacy of bilingual schools in Tehran. This limited data collection to one school, whose English supervisor was an old colleague. The supervisor, principal, and five English teachers of this school warmly participated in interviews—both in-person and online, lasting between 20 minutes to an hour. Other schools of this District, despite their websites' indication, declined participation, persisting that they were not bilingual schools.

To devise the interview questions, we drew inspiration from existing scholarly works and sought guidance from professionals in the field to ensure their pertinence and suitability. Subsequently, to guarantee the reliability and validity of the interview questions, we undertook a content analysis to confirm their comprehensiveness in addressing all relevant topics. Furthermore, we had multiple experts review the questions to ensure their validity and accuracy. Lastly, we conducted a pilot study with a small group of participants to evaluate the efficacy of the questions and identify any potential issues or areas for improvement.

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data collected in this study, thematic analysis was employed, which encompasses four stages: initial or open coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). During the initial coding stage, tentative codes were generated through multiple readings of the data. In the focused coding stage, these tentative codes were compared for similarities. The major codes and main categories were subsequently formed based on the similarities identified. Axial coding was then applied to the resulting categories until categories and subcategories were finalized. In the final stage, theoretical coding was utilized to specify possible relationships between categories that had been developed during the focused coding stage. The application of these stages resulted in the identification of themes related to ELTE in some PBSs in Tehran, providing detailed insights into the content of these programs.

Credibility

The concept of credibility refers to the extent to which the results of a study are trustworthy and relevant. As Tracy (2010) explains, credibility may be achieved through various strategies such as detailed descriptions, specific examples, triangulation or synthesis, multiple perspectives, and participant reflection, all of which were implemented in the current study. First, to grasp concrete details of the issue of our concern, lengthy interviews were administered. Next, to address triangulation, first, we probed into the perspectives of multiple groups of participants through in-depth interviews, which permitted us to attain multivocality as well. Furthermore, for member reflection, in addition to inquiring about the research participants' attitudes toward our data analysis, the other two researchers checked the early versions of the analysis of the transcripts by one of the researchers who collected the data. In most cases, there were agreements between all parties. Considering the study's ethical aspects (as stated by Tracy, 2010), we assured of the participants' willingness to cooperate by requesting them to fill out the research consent form. To address their ambiguities, we explained the details of our exploration. Additionally, their further concerns were responded to. Moreover, we promised to use pseudonyms for the participants', the schools', and the districts' names to comply with ethical considerations. And finally, for the respondents' convenience, all the interviews were arranged according to the participants' schedules.

Results

Upon reviewing the interview transcripts, we could extract eight major themes related to the content of teacher education programs of selected private bilingual schools: teaching methods, materials development, religious values, native and foreign cultures, technological literacy, English accents, use of mother tongue, and teacher reflection.

Teaching Methods

The examination of transcripts from interviews disclosed that the majority of participants from diverse educational settings cited the primary focus of the programs as providing teacher candidates and teachers with instruction in teaching methods, pedagogical approaches, techniques, activities, and linguistic abilities that are congruent with the textbooks utilized in their respective schools. The following example elucidates the prominence of teaching methods for our interviewees:

> *We held some workshops for teachers to introduce our regulations and the system of our school. We presented our books because our books are rarely taught in the country… It has limited publications. In workshops, we work on how to teach our books and pamphlets, specifically, we focus on techniques and activities for teaching language skills and components.* (Leili, school E supervisor)

In addition to their recollections on the primacy given to varied teaching methods and techniques for teaching their school book, participants of schools A and D made specific references to the dominance of talks on task-based language teaching (TBLT) in their teacher preparation program. This is evinced in the following quote:

> *First, we got familiar with TBLT, the method used in this school, and learned what a task means… Then, as an activity, we were asked to develop proper tasks for the intended pages of the book* (Zahra, school A teacher).

As the preceding excerpts exhibit, in all schools, programs planned for teacher preparation predominantly centered on orienting teacher trainees/teachers towards teaching methods, skills, and sub-skills favored by the school authorities for teaching their specific materials. In addition to the school supervisors, one of the schools benefitted from the training on teaching methods provided by the publisher of their English book. Besides zooming in on this theme in their educational plans of action, the school supervisors stressed the significance of profiting from teachers' guidebooks accessible in the schools for their instructors. Interestingly, in several instances, the school supervisors noted that they, at times, relied on their teachers' prior experience for teaching their books.

Materials Development

On account of the merit of familiarizing teachers with the knowledge of developing appropriate materials for their own particular class context in teacher preparation programs, we were curious to find out if this practical undertaking is pursued in the programs we studied. Surprisingly, we found that the school decision-makers were not concerned with instructing teachers in the knowledge required for this practical pursuit in their teacher preparation programs. As a consequence of this neglect, all of our teacher participants utilized extra-curricular materials accessible through the means they were already acquainted with. Examples are content- including songs, cartoons, movies, and videos- available on relevant websites, like YouTube. In rare cases they aimed to develop materials or to reformulate the existing ones, they were found to be content with utilizing video maker and editor applications like In Shot or making PowerPoint slides. The excerpts below provide vivid evidence of these outcomes:

> *We mostly use PowerPoint presentations in our classes, plus films. For example, if the first unit of the book is about school supplies, I choose lots of songs from YouTube and use the one that is proper for the class based on the student's level. We make PowerPoints ourselves… They are about issues like the synonyms of the words or the grammatical points. We use them so that the class is not just looking at the board. When there is a PowerPoint, a light is turned on and off, and the monotony is removed. We also provide educational videos from YouTube for the pupils* (Zahra, school A teacher).

When inquired about reasons for lack of attention to materials development, the school E supervisor maintained that *our teachers are qualified in this regard.* A teacher in school E highlighted the time limitation as the main cause of not using extra-curricular materials which alleviates the need to be trained in how to develop materials. A similar concern was shared by another teacher as in the following quote:

> *We did not know anything about materials development because we never needed them. Besides the three main books, we have a grammar pamphlet to teach, so we have no time to bring our own materials* (Pari, school B teacher).

There were a few teachers who cited occasional references made by school supervisors during the online teaching through the Covid-19 pandemic regarding the characteristics of materials teachers used in their classes. Below is an example:

> *Considering the age range of the kids, she emphasized that the materials and the content used should be eye-catching, not loaded with words, and made using*

colorful pictures… This issue was emphasized more when Corona came and teaching became online (Sama, school A teacher).

As the proceeding excerpts reveal, our interviewees were not equipped with the necessary knowledge for materials development in their training programs. Instead, they, mainly, relied on ready-made video clips to supplement their teaching, especially in their math and science classes. Lack of class time for covering additional materials was announced as the main reason for removing the teachers' need to be instructed in materials development.

Religious Values

Another issue explored in the training programs offered to teacher candidates/teachers was the idea of integrating/not integrating religious values into language teaching classes. Our interest in elucidating this aspect was aroused by the understanding that the public and private schools' books on different subjects, primarily those on social sciences and humanities, present religious values, either explicitly or implicitly. The values they present revolve around Islam, which is the dominant religion of the country. Obligatory English books are no exception; the themes introduced all respect Islamic values. This understanding urged us to explore how Islamic values are treated in the English classes of private bilingual schools and if they are devoted space in the English teacher training programs of the schools.

Our exploration of the interviews showed that no subjects on religious values were taught in the schools' training programs. Some supervisors and teachers believed that religious matters were personal; hence, no explicit reference should be made to religion, while respecting religious values. Some of the practitioners pointed out that families expressed reluctance towards incorporating religious topics into the English curriculum, while others acknowledged the difficulty in assisting students in comprehending religious concepts. The following examples extracted from the interviews clarify these points:

Our options in classes are limited. Here, we are given controlled and prepared content out of fear of parents' disapproval (Sanam, school E teacher).

You know it is challenging to make children understand, for example, Ashura [the day of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (PBUH)], … Also the elders, I mean families, are opposed to this issue. That's why we don't discuss religion at all (Zahra, school A teacher).

As the preceding excerpts entail, discussing themes on religion is not welcomed in the English classes of bilingual schools for varied reasons; hence, no relevant talks were recorded in the training programs of the schools. There were only a few teachers who resorted to less

controversial practices integrating religious topics into their class routines. For instance, the school E supervisor maintained that *I generally work on that poem by Sami Yusuf at the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH),* while being aware of the families' resistance towards incorporating religious values into the classes.

Native and Foreign Cultures

Another issue that was explored in the training programs of selected schools was how native and foreign cultures are treated in our selected contexts. Not surprisingly, all of our participants admitted that they introduce and elaborate on foreign cultural themes once they encounter them in their lessons or at a time when they approach the date of those events. A similar tendency seemed to dominate in our participants' approach toward Persian culture. Since no reference was made to elements of the native culture in the books, our respondents discussed them at times of those events or when they aimed to explicate an international or foreign cultural event with an equivalent in the students' home culture. The quotes below provide indications of these orientations:

> *Sure, we integrate home culture into classes. For example, if a chapter is about Christmas, the teacher cannot explain it unless she talks about the Nowruz (Iranian New Year) fest, its costumes, and its habitual actions. How can we teach a foreign element without comparing it with the home culture?* (Dr. Roza, school A supervisor)

> *We mainly focus on international events like Mother' Day, Father' Day [sic.], International Children's Day, or Fireman's Day... English culture is introduced based on the book's content. To talk about our calendar events, for example, last year, we spoke about the Nowruz fest and tree planting day and celebrated them. We made a big poster and wallpaper and gave it to the children to paint. We printed it on a T-shirt for them...* (Zahra, school A teacher).

Surprisingly, the interviews contained some contradictions in the remarks of the participants regarding widely celebrating items of the foreign culture. For instance, although at the beginning, one of the supervisors expressed that the school policies did not allow them to zoom in on foreign ceremonies, she, later, disclosed how a foreign custom, namely Christmas, had gained dominance in their classes, with students celebrating it widely, making handicrafts and decorating the Christmas tree. The following recollection pictures the students' orientation towards traditions of their foreign language in detail:

For foreign occasions, because the school doesn't allow us, we can't celebrate them widely. For Halloween, we made handicrafts, but we didn't let the pupils dress up and be scary [sic.] or scare others because the school doesn't allow us. Our kids love Christmas; if we don't celebrate at school, they have family plans, so we take this seriously. We decorate the class and tree for them. We make handicrafts, and sing the Jingle Bells song (Kiana, school C supervisor).

Another relevant issue extracted from our respondents' recalls was their references to the complication they encountered in expounding some aspects of the home culture in English. A teacher, for instance, maintained that *we don't say anything about why there are eggs on Haft Sin [an arrangement of seven symbolic items whose names start with the letter S], because these are difficult to talk about in English for kids.* Alternatively, one of the supervisors found it problematic to introduce Persian literature to pupils of lower levels.

As the preceding section reveals, though the schools' officials do not seem to have systematic plans for teaching culture in their teacher education programs, both foreign and home cultures are treated fairly in the English classes of schools. Regarding Persian cultural values, still, there seems to be more space needed to elaborate on the cultural, artistic, literary, and historical treasures of the country. Teacher training programs of the schools can instruct teachers in more profound activities to be done to help students internalize these valuable belongings.

Technological Literacy

Considering the fact that online education has gained primacy since the start of the Corona pandemic, in schools worldwide, we were interested in exploring what our private bilingual schools did to enhance their English teachers' technological literacy for online education, if any. The examples below clarify the neglect of this important type of literature in the existing programs:

Well, at first, they gave us some brief introductory explanations, but gradually I learned it by myself. Sometimes I asked my colleagues the questions that I had. But, I mainly learned through practice and trial and error (Shadi, school B teacher).

In the first year, we worked with the students via WhatsApp, but as the conditions continued, one of the engineers cooperating with the school quickly recorded a video and taught all the necessary things. Also, the school's IT official was responsible for the student assessment, not the teachers (Kiana, school C supervisor).

As evinced in the preceding recollections, for the most part, there were not many deliberate attempts on the part of the school authorities to coach their English teachers on technological literacy. In consequence, some teachers resorted to their own self-directed learning through varied means. School C seemed to provide some assistance by providing introductory clips to their practitioners.

English Accents

The next theme distilled from the transcripts was accent. Bearing in mind the ideas advanced by World Englishes (WE) and English as Lingua Franca (ELF) on the need to respect varieties of English accents, we were puzzled over the type of accent permitted in Iranian bilingual schools. Data revealed the primacy of Standard English in our selected contexts and a disregard for the concepts of WE and ELF.

> *Just standard English is emphasized. When kids learn Standard English, they are understood anywhere in the world* (Dr. Roza, school A supervisor).
>
> *Our supervisor pays too much attention to accents, too much! She believes that children learn the accent in the way we teach them; that's why she always wants us to google the pronunciation of the words we don't know* (Shadi, School B teacher).

Among their reasons for such tendency, respondents highlighted families' prioritizing their children having native-like English accents, which have overshadowed the schools' orientation in their training programs. The following recitation attests to this observation:

> *Our children's families are somehow strict about the accent (with a smile). We say that your kids speak Persian even in the 45-minute English class; how can you expect them to have a good accent?* (Fatemeh, school C teacher).

The above recollections elucidate the domination of adhering to native-like English accents in the schools we visited. Some teachers admitted that *It is challenging to have an accent precisely like the natives* and resented the supervisors' correcting their accents. Some resorted to native podcasts to cultivate their accents so that they could sound more native-like. Notably, one of the teachers uncovered the school policy to recruit teachers with standard accents.

Use of mother tongue

Another theme elicited from the responses of interviewees concerned their orientation towards using the pupils' mother tongue in their classes. School A supervisor seemed to ban teachers from resorting to Persian in their English teaching. Interestingly, during their interview, which was held in Persian in the school setting, on the occasions kids came to their teachers, teachers instantly shifted to English, revealing that they had to pretend they didn't know Persian. Accordingly, the pupils were pushed to converse in English. The excerpt below provides indications of this inclination:

> *We are told that children have to think that we do not know Persian at all… Teachers should not speak in their mother tongue in the presence of children, even with their own colleagues, both in the classroom and in the school environment. This way, children are compelled to use English; if they cannot get their points across in a sentence, they may use words to express their intention. This way, they create meaning and produce language* (Zahra, school A teacher).

In contrast to school A authorities who prohibited the use of the students' native language in the whole school context, supervisors of the other bilingual schools sounded more lenient towards the issue. Though they sounded prone to utilizing Persian in their English classes, they permitted conscious and rare use of their native tongue to save time or make learning happen. This tendency is approved by the following quotation:

> *We mostly try to make children use the second language, but in case a problem happens in the learning process, we may use their mother tongue. There is no problem using their native tongue as long as it helps to learn* (Elham, school D teacher).

As elucidated by the supervisor of school E, the volume of Persian usage in second language classes is also relevant to the pupils' level of language proficiency, as preschoolers need a higher quantity. She announced:

> *There is a percentage in preschool. There is a child who speaks English perfectly, but there are six others who are afraid to talk. If you know child psychology, you will see that this doesn't work for them. So we start with 60 percent Persian and 40 percent English at the preschool level. Then in the upper level, we use fifty-fifty or sometimes 60 percent English and 40 percent mother tongue. We start with 70 percent English and 30 percent Persian in grades two and three* (Leili, school E supervisor).

Overall, as exemplified above, except for school A which bans applying Persian in the whole school context, the other schools seemed more compliant with the deliberate use of the mother tongue to advance students' learning.

Teacher Reflection

Another consideration we had about details of teacher preparation programs of bilingual schools concerned if, and how, teacher reflection is promoted in the existing programs. Beyond any doubt, teacher reflection plays a pivotal role in teachers' professional development. Our contemplation of the interview transcripts revealed that two supervisors promoted teacher reflection through various means. Among the diverse forms of reflection extracted from the data are observation of peers' classes, writing daily reports of one's classes, and self-monitoring through video recording of one's classes, as evident in the excerpts below. Still, two other supervisors seemed unaware of the connotations of teacher reflection and its varied forms, though alluding to some forms of it in their courses, unconsciously. One supervisor admitted that he did not teach this approach to teachers. The following quotation presents the value of peer observation followed by writing reports to school A's supervisor:

> *Novice teachers have the opportunity to observe peers' classes. I even ask the permanent teachers to observe the online courses. After reading Larsen-Freeman's book, I usually ask them to prepare some reports based on their observation, exactly like what Larsen-Freeman did in her book; on one side of the paper, write what you observed, and on the other side, write their feedback. I always tell the teachers that you need to observe classes and reflect on them* (Dr. Roza, school A supervisor).

School E's supervisor exemplified the opportunity the Covid pandemic provided for supervisors as well as teachers committed to their professional development to observe the recorded classes, reflect on them, and take action:

> *You know, because the classes were online, the teachers could watch their class recordings and reflect on them. I always observed some online classes, reflected on them, and asked the teachers to do it themselves… Once, one of my colleagues was very upset and said she watched her recorded online class and noticed that her voice was very loud as if she was shouting at the children. Reflecting on her behavior, she decided to be more conscious of not speaking loudly* (Leili, school E supervisor).

Examining the data of teachers provided us with comparative outcomes. The examples below illustrate various routes of reflection practiced by teachers:

I became aware of the importance of reflection in the CELTA course I completed. There was a time we did this a lot, because, at that time, our classes were observed a lot, and we had weekly counseling sessions about issues we were asked to do in our classes; an example is time management. Now, based on my lesson plans, I write, for example, what is my main focus today, and I do time management and try to reach my goals in each class. I take notes about why it doesn't happen, where I waste my time, why I was behind schedule, and things like that. So, I do reflections, but not all the sessions. I try to have a weekly overview of that week's performance (Fardin, school B teacher).

Self-observation was another approach to reflective teaching mostly exercised by school A's teachers, as evinced in the following recollection:

We learned to observe our own classes. We have a notebook where we write everything we notice about each student. For example, on one side of the page, I write my lesson plan; on the other, I write why this plan didn't work today... Dr. Roza always emphasizes that we write our observations about each of the children separately... And we should also note why some methods did not work... Writing about daily teaching helps me a lot. (Hoda, school A teacher).

In contrast to the awareness several school B and A teachers announced of varied techniques of reflection, one of school C's teachers reiterated her sporadic unconscious practice of reflection throughout her classes, as in the next quotation:

We have been doing this for years, even though we were not taught. Unconsciously, we were thinking about what we did that day and what we would do. But after some time, the class unconsciously falls into order and rhythm, and no matter how much you want to get out of that rhythm and order, you can't. I used to do a lot (Bahar, school C teacher).

The proceeding citations provided a glimpse of how teacher reflection was perceived by our participants. A deeper penetration into the data we obtained revealed another issue related to reflective teaching. Surprisingly, some of the more experienced teachers felt needless to observe reflective teaching. The quote below elucidates this resistance towards reflection on the part of some teachers:

No, it is many years that I haven't done this... I know what to do every day in my classes... I don't know if it is right or wrong, but I feel this belongs to the first five

years of teaching, not after 32 years. I don't know why I think this way. I can't accept that now I look at my own teaching; I never thought about it (reflecting on my teaching) (Shadi, school B teacher).

Such resistance observed in the responses of teachers towards reflection seems to contradict the ever-changing nature of the teaching context which necessitates the primacy of teachers' contemplation on their daily routines.

Discussion

As stated previously, language teacher education has been widely investigated in varied contexts in the last three decades, and its pivotal role in teachers' well-preparedness has been verified (e.g. Ball et al., 2008; Farrell, 2017; Freeman, 2016, 2020; Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Mann & Walsh, 2017; Richards, 1990, 2008; Tsui, 2011). Correspondingly, Iranian scholars initiated probing into the issue from diverse perspectives in varied settings. Recall that the majority of the existing explorations have been carried out in the context of universities and private language institutes (e.g. Behzadpoor et al., 2019; Ganji et al., 2018b; Gholami & Qurbanzadeh, 2016; Sadeghi & Ashegh Navaie, 2021; Tajik et al., 2019; Tajik & Pakzad, 2016). Herein, to our knowledge, research on LTE in the context of private bilingual schools is scarce.

Bearing the significance of language teacher education in mind, and to address this overlooked area, we embarked on this study in the context of five private bilingual schools in Tehran to delve into the content of their language teacher education programs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, supervisors, and English teachers. Thematic analysis of data resulted in extracting eight themes, including teaching methods, materials development, religious values, native and foreign cultures, technological literacy, English accents, use of mother tongue, and teacher reflection. As mentioned previously, teaching methods were found to be one of the most dominant themes extracted from the data of participants in various schools. This finding on the primacy of familiarizing teacher candidates with teaching methods corroborates the results in an earlier study by Tajik et al. (2022) who found the dominance of instructing prospective teachers in ELT approaches and teaching methods in English language teacher education programs of language institutes. Even two decades ago, Kumaravadivelu (2001) underscored the need for English language teacher trainees to be informed of the methods of presentation of new materials and concepts by virtue of the diversity of teaching methods and materials and the heterogeneity of learners.

Developing the required teaching skills in teachers/teacher trainees in teacher preparation courses has also been advocated by the bulk of research in varied parts of the world (e.g. Ahmadpour & Kouhi, 2019; Akbari & Eghtesadi Roudi, 2020; Karakas & Yavuz, 2018; Ramezanzadeh & Rezaei, 2018) due to its dramatic effects on the teaching profession.

Regarding the use of technology, as evinced in the preceding section, for the most part, there were not many conscious attempts on the part of the school authorities so as to instruct their English teachers on technological literacy. Consequently, their teachers, mainly, resorted to their own self-directed learning through varied means. School C seemed to provide some assistance by providing introductory clips to their practitioners. The result of this part seems to corroborate Tajik et al. (2019) and Hedayati et al.'s (2018) studies as they found that providing instruction on technology use was missing in the training programs of language institutes. However, the results of the present inquiry in terms of technology use contradict the results of the study conducted by Tajik et al. (2022) who found that the use of technology in EFL classes is emphasized by TTC trainers and they provide their practitioners with examples on how to employ technology tools and introduce relevant websites helping them find appropriate teaching activities. It is also in contrast with the one conducted by Ebrahimi et al. (2016) who emphasized the introduction of corpus linguistics, as a technology tool, in the training programs. Overall, the selected school officials appear to have overlooked the positive effects technology use can exert on language learning and teaching, such as developing projects to work collaboratively, providing learners with authentic materials, and enhancing chances for conversation with other English speakers (as stated by Golonka et al., 2014). Additionally, our participants have ignored the benefits technology can have for teachers' professional development by providing opportunities to share their experience and knowledge with their colleagues (as also suggested by McAleavy et al., 2018).

Our participants, further, exemplified that the issue of culture was not overlooked in their preparation programs. Both Iranian and English cultures were found to be strengthened in our selected contexts. With reference to the foreign cultural themes, teacher trainees in Tajik et al.'s (2022) study shared similar concerns, exposing learners to authentic material by raising cultural topics. According to Kramsch and Hua (2016), the fusion of foreign culture with language learning has gained prominence since the birth of the communicative competence approach, which considers awareness of the target culture as part of language competence. The close relationship between the language and its culture that might become dominant even over the mother tongue and culture of the learners has also been documented

by Jiang (2000). With respect to the value of emphasizing local culture, Akbari (2008) reiterates this orientation as one of the main concepts favored by post-method pedagogy.

In addition to other themes, the majority of our participants were found to be cognizant of the value of promoting teacher reflection for the professional development of teachers. Our contemplation of the interview transcripts revealed that some supervisors promoted teacher reflection through various means. Among the diverse forms of reflection extracted from the data are observation of peers' classes, writing daily reports of one's classes, and self-monitoring through video recording of one's classes. According to Farrell (2007), in EFL contexts, teacher preparation programs need to instruct EFL teachers on the concept of self-reflection and self-evaluation to improve their learners' learning and also their quality of teaching. Kumaravadivelu (2001) had already recognized the need for teacher education to train autonomous teachers who can reflect on their own teaching practice. The current inquiry, further, found that some seemed unaware of the connotations of teacher reflection and its varied forms, though alluding to some forms of it in their courses, unconsciously. Additionally, some supervisors admitted that they did not teach this approach to teachers. This finding seems to agree with Tajik et al. (2022) who found that for their participants, keeping methodological uniformity and following the institute teaching model was mandatory. The TTC trainers of the institutes they explored insisted on teachers' teaching based on the framework offered to them, not being allowed to detach from the model that might result from teacher reflection.

Concerning religion, as the preceding sections illustrated, discussing themes on religion is not welcomed in the English classes of bilingual schools for varied reasons; hence, no relevant talks were recorded in the training programs of the schools. There were only a few teachers who resorted to less controversial practices integrating religious topics into their class routines. As one of the authors of this study had her son attend his four years of school in a private bilingual school, she found that many of the families did not have religious priorities. Some enrolled their children in those schools since they had stayed in a foreign country for a while; hence, they enrolled their children in a bilingual school to have daily exposure to the foreign language. In addition, some families were planning to go abroad for some years or arranging to send their children abroad for education. Such priorities on the part of the families who can be classified as upper-level families living in the north of Tehran might justify their ignorance of the value of integrating religious morals into their pupils' classes.

Another theme emerging from the data of the current study was L1 use. As exemplified in previous sections, except for school A which bans applying Persian in the whole school

context, the other schools seemed more compliant with the deliberate use of the mother tongue to advance students' learning. Their preference, however, was the pure use of the foreign language in the class contexts. This finding is in line with the results of the study conducted by Tajik et al. (2022) in which the institutes insisted on monolingualism in ELT, which means English should be taught totally through English except as the last resort such as when teaching in English takes a lot of time. There were some institutes in the current study with similar perspectives that advised their teachers not to eliminate the L1 from the process of teaching a new language and can use it when necessary, to make comprehension better. At the other extreme is Institute A which completely forbade the use of L1 and told their teachers not to use the native language in the classroom for the students to learn to think in the second language. Furthermore, the limited use of L1 as the last resort to keep the pace of teaching in three institutes and the monolingualism policy of the other institute is not in line with Kumaravadivelu's (2003) criticisms on an 'English only' policy in language teaching and the results of the study conducted by McMillan and Rivers (2011) who found that selective use of L1 can enhance learners' communicative abilities in English.

The final theme discovered in this study was English accents. As explicated above, all of our participants manifested their priority for Standard English, disregarding the ideas advanced by World Englishes or English as Lingua Franca. A similar outcome was obtained by Grazzi and Lopriore (2020), indicating that most teachers perceive Standard English as the uncontested reference model. Our result is further corroborated by the findings obtained by Tajik and Mojtabaei (2019) whose ELT practitioners tended to be known as near-native speakers through practicing Standard English in their teaching context, advocating the Western manifestation of English, not as Persian speakers, ensigns of their own country. This might also be taken as an indication of being affected by the homogenizing features of globalization which promotes native accents, among others. This understanding seems to be consistent with the mainstream conceptualization of English which, according to Jenkins (2006), promotes native-like competence or conformity to a native speaker. Our practitioners' prioritizing the native accents might also be indicative of the fact that they consider Western English as the only legitimized variety for teaching and, in consequence, tend to identify themselves with the dominant orientation in the world. This can also be taken as a result of globalization as an imperialistic phenomenon through which, according to Block and Cameron (2002), Western countries try to impose their definitions of what is legitimized and acceptable. Findings of the present inquiry might also be taken as an indication of the prevalence of native-speakersim ideology in the educational system of the country and that this variety is ingrained in teachers'

and students' minds as an acceptable and legitimate variety, that is indicative of the domination of a mainstream orientation towards English in the educational system, as maintained by Jenkins (2006). This finding, additionally, corroborates the assertion made by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012) as to the positive attitudes of Iranian ELT professionals towards the native-like accents or Pishghadam and Sabouri (2011) who highlighted that having a native-like mastery of British and American varieties has even turned into a criterion for the recruitment of Iranian English teachers. This trend in our teachers provides new support for the claims made by Jenkins (2006) that beliefs such as native speaker ownership and the priority of British or American English over other varieties of English are still deeply ingrained in teachers. This finding corroborates the assertion made by Seidhofer (2004) about ELT teachers' perceiving variation as a deviation from native norms and describing them in terms of errors or fossilization.

Conclusions

Recall that in the absence of publications on the existing conditions of teacher education practices of private bilingual schools, the present inquiry was initiated to uncover aspects related to the content of the existing programs. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a number of supervisors, principals, and teachers. Analysis of the transcripts resulted in extracting eight themes, including teaching methods, materials development, religious values, native and foreign cultures, technological literacy, English accents, use of mother tongue, and teacher reflection. This study can have implications for all of those involved in language teaching and learning, namely teachers, teacher educators, learners, syllabus designers, or materials developers, functioning in the Ministry of Education. Additionally, studies of this kind can provide policymakers with assets to update, reformulate, and restructure TTCs to meet the changing demands of education and the contemporary needs of students. In other words, investigating the details of TTCs can help develop more comprehensive curricula for future teacher training programs. After all, the issue of EFL teacher education in Iran is so complicated that a single study cannot address it comprehensively. The present study addressed only five of the most renowned bilingual schools in Tehran so that it would be possible to collect detailed information about each. Hence, it would be a good idea to conduct similar studies, collecting detailed information about other schools' policies towards teacher training courses. Future studies can put their step further, evaluating the efficiency of the programs in promoting different aspects of EFL teacher

trainees' knowledge and skills. Moreover, it is recommended that future avid researchers conduct more studies through different methodologies such as observation of the teacher training practices or think-aloud methods. Thinking aloud method can also be utilized when teachers are attending preparation courses to see how they evaluate the material presented to them.

In qualitative research, such as the present study, specificity holds significant importance, and as a result, we do not assert that our findings are applicable to other contexts. The characteristics of bilingual institutions ought to be examined in their respective environments due to the importance of particularity in qualitative studies. While generalizability is not a concern in this study, its results may offer useful insights into how teacher education practices are carried out in bilingual schools, providing valuable contributions to this specific area of inquiry.

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