

A Comparative Study on Professional Competencies of Iranian EFL Teachers at Public and Private Sectors

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Abstract

The major purpose of the present study was to examine the differences between professional competencies of Iranian EFL Teachers at Public and private sectors and the role of gender, field of study, educational status, and years of teaching experience in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies. A sample of 300 EFL Iranian teachers were chosen based on convenience sampling and were assessed through the EFL Teachers' Professional Competencies scale. After gathering the questionnaires, data was analysed by SPSS. According to the results, 1. There were significant differ-

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ences between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors with respect to their level of competencies, and teachers at private sectors had higher levels of competencies, 2. There were significant differences between male and female EFL teachers with respect to their competencies, 3. There were positive significant relationships between the four sub-constructs of teachers' competencies and experience, 4. There was a significant difference between four types of field of study (teaching English, English literature, English translation and others) with respect to their competencies, and those majoring in teaching English had the highest level of competencies, and 5. There were significant differences among three educational levels (BA, MA, and PhD) with respect to their competencies, with PhD and BA holders having the highest and lowest levels of competencies, respectively. This study may be the only piece of research that has increased EFL professionals', including EFL teachers', knowledge regarding factors affecting their competencies. Also, the results of this study can be used by teacher employment institutes such as language institutes, and education and training organizations to employ the most competent EFL teachers.

Keywords: Professional competencies; private sector; public sector; gender; years of experience

Introduction

The teaching profession involves particular knowledge and abilities. In fact, it is a professional designation which needs flexibility, competitiveness, and good leadership abilities, which can come from individual ability and talent (Nur Mustafa, 2013). Teachers are expected to work systematically, consistently and creatively (Arifin 2002). Teachers must be constructive and make every effort to get better the standards of education so that the quality of teaching and learning is enhanced. Therefore, teachers must be responsive towards the newest progress in the educational world today. According to Sutadiputra (1985), constant thinking and acting, in a consistent and continuous way could develop a competent person who possesses knowledge, skills, values and a basic approach towards carrying out something. Professional career involves thinking out of the box and away from ordinary routines. This is what it means by professionalism via effort and training. Competencies will manipulate a person's work performance in accomplishing his responsibilities as a social representative to the learners (Nur Mustafa).

The concept of competency was first defined at individual level by Drucker (1985), the classic author of management literature. He defined competency as a capacity of an employee to offer superior performance in allocated tasks. Carr (2000) refer to competency as useful implementation of individual capacities characterized by practical skills and attitudes needed to guarantee successful professional performance. The clearest definition, however, is probably the one offered by Pavecivius and Kekyllte (2008) that sees competency as a combination of professional knowledge, capacities and aptitudes as well as an ability to apply them following the prerequisites of work environment. Rahaman (2010,

cited in Hosseinnia et al., 2019) illustrated that the teacher's professional competencies incorporate knowing and understanding students' needs and their learning process, subject matter knowledge, curriculum, the education framework and the educator's role. Professional competencies also include abilities such as subject application, classroom strategy, classroom administration, evaluation and recording. According to Wright and Horn (2013), education can be improved by enhancing the teacher's competency.

There is general agreement that professional competencies are important features of student outcomes in most, if not all, degree programs. The agreement on what is truly intended when talking about professional competencies is however not as global, nor is there compromise as to how these competencies should be improved or evaluated. Professional competencies are both general and specialized to a field of study or specific context (Ilanlou & Zand, 2011); competencies referred to in this study pertain to the field of English language teaching.

Regarding the Iranian EFL context, English is taught in two different educational sectors: Public and private (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Riazi (2005) claims that teaching and learning English in the public sector is mainly directed towards knowledge of the language and its usage rather than functional communication or use. Thus, Iranian language learners usually tend to attend private language institutes to learn English because of the shortcomings in the public sector (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Kazemi & Soleimani, 2013). This has led to the rise of a new booming market in the Iranian private sector for ELT education and increasing numbers of students and teachers (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2014). In addition, teachers working in the public sector enjoy a relieving sense of having a permanent career. Therefore, there might be some differences between private and public teachers' competencies.

Researchers in education have done several studies to discover and assess the competencies of an excellent teacher and effective teaching and have divided those competencies into different categories. Hosseinnia, et al. (2019), for instance, explored the components of EFL teachers' professional competencies and developed and validated a model and a scale of EFL teachers' professional competencies in the public and private sectors in Iran. Their model is considered as the theoretical framework of this study. However, there has been little focus on the possible differences between private and public teachers' competencies. Also, there has been little focus on the examination of some factors which may influence EFL teachers' competencies in Iran. The factors considered in this study are the teaching context (private and public), gender, years of experience of teaching, field of study, and educational status. These factors may affect the level of EFL teachers' competencies (Ansarin et al., 2015). For instance, learning English in the private sector is more functional and communicative than the public sector (Riazi, 2005). Also, according to Ansarin et al., females perform better than males in terms of critical reflection. Thus, considering this factor is justified. In addition, it is supposed that the more experienced and knowledgeable teachers are, the higher their level of overall competencies will be. Ansarin et al. argued that teachers' years of experience affects their lev-

el of pedagogical and critical reflection. Therefore, the factors of teaching years of experience, field of study, and educational status are considered in this study. Regarding the importance of teaching competencies for EFL teachers and learners, the study reported here is an initial step in ascertaining the factors which influence the level of competency. EFL teachers require to foster their professional competencies in ELT domain and to raise their awareness about various factors affecting their professional competencies. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine the role of gender, field of study, educational status, and their teaching years of experience in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies by answering the following research questions.

Q1: Are there any significant differences between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors with respect to their level of competencies?

Q2: Are there any significant differences between male and female EFL teachers with respect to their competencies?

Q3: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' competencies and its sub-constructs and their teaching years of experience?

Q4: Is there any significant difference between four types of field of study (teaching English, English literature, English translation and others) with respect to their competencies?

Q5: Is there any significant difference between three Educational Status (BA, MA, and PhD) with respect to their competencies?

Empirical Studies

The concept of teacher competency has gained impetus over the previous decades. Westera (2001) believed that the teachers' professional competencies refer to their knowledge in the subject matter and in general pedagogy which influences what they teach and how they teach.

The review of teacher evaluation investigations in the Iranian English language teaching literature indicates that Iranian researchers have mostly studied the procedures of teacher evaluation in the private sector (e.g., Akbari & Yazdanmehr, 2011; Ostovar-Namaghi, 2013).

Concerning Iranian language program evaluation standards in the public sector, Atai and Mazlum (2013) argued that EFL teachers in the public schools are evaluated the same way as other teachers, such as geography teachers. In this respect, Navidnia (2013) developed a model and offered assessment procedures for English teachers in public schools in Iran. Atai et al. (2016) also explored standards of professional competency of adult-level Iranian EFL teachers in the private sector and developed and validated a questionnaire to assess their professional competency. Hosseinnia et al. (2019) developed and validated a model and a scale of EFL teachers' professional competencies at public and private sectors in Iran.

Taking into consideration the factors of context, gender, field of study, and educational status and teaching years of experience in EFL learning in Iran, Haddad and Yamini (2011) in their study found that Iranian EFL teachers in the

public sector have a poor language proficiency level. Elsewhere, Kazemi and Soleimani (2013) in a study observed that Iranian English language teachers in the public sector do not have enough knowledge of language skills and teaching strategies. In addition, Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) indicated that the private sector in Iran is regarded as the second body to language teaching and complements the public sector and compensates its weaknesses. In a similar vein, Shariatifar et al. (2019) tried to explore the components that constitute high school EFL teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge through a review of the related literature and investigation of high school EFL teachers and teacher educators' perspectives. Their content knowledge factor analysis explored three components, namely knowledge of the principles of language teaching methodology, knowledge of linguistics, and language proficiency. Their pedagogical content knowledge factor analysis explored three components of knowledge of teaching and assessing the components of the curriculum, knowledge of developing, planning and managing language teaching, and knowledge of developing and evaluating instructional materials.

Nevertheless, there have been no studies to examine the role of gender, field of study, educational status, and their teaching years of experience in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies. It is the goal of the study reported here to fill this gap in the literature and to examine the role of mentioned factors in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are 300 EFL teachers teaching at different language private institutes (N=157) and public high schools (N=143) in Iran. Their selection was based on convenience sampling and the participation was entirely voluntary. They were both females (N=105) and males (N=195) in different age ranges (20-29 = 106, 30-39 = 150, 40-49= 35, over 50=9) and years of teaching experience (below 15=139, over 15=161). The teachers had all majored in various subfields of English such as teaching (N=110), literature (N=105), translation (N=71) and other fields of study (N=61) at B. A. (N=153), M. A. (N=100) or PhD (N=47) levels.

Instrumentation

EFL Teachers' Professional Competencies Scale

The EFL Teachers' Professional Competencies Scale (see the Appendix) aimed to explore EFL teachers' professional competencies in their profession. It was developed and validated by Hosseinnia et al. (2019). The responses are based on a Likert Scale. This scale includes 50 items and assesses EFL teachers' professional competencies in six subscales: personality factors (7 items), interpersonal factors (4 items), professional factors (14 items), factors related to teaching materials (6 items), learner factors (12 items), and assessment factors (7

items). The reliability of this scale was obtained through Cronbach’s alpha which was .967, and its validity was measured by running CFA through the Structural Equation Modeling approach. The scale enjoyed acceptable validity. Table 1 summarizes the result of Cronbach’s alpha for this scale.

Table 1.
Number of Items and Cronbach Alpha Indices for the Teachers’ Competencies Questionnaire

Scale	Subscales	Number of items	Cronbach alpha
Teachers’ Competencies	Personal	7	.807
	Interpersonal	4	.747
	Professional	14	.936
	Materials	6	.810
	Learner	12	.883
	Assessment	7	.797
	Overall Competency	50	.967

In order to examine the validity of the designed Teachers’ Competencies Questionnaire, Confirmatory Factor Analysis was used. Based on the CFA analysis, the association between each sub-factor of the proposed model was analyzed and the results can be seen in Figure 1. To check the model fit, goodness of fit indices were used. The CFA model with all factor loadings can be seen in Figure 1.

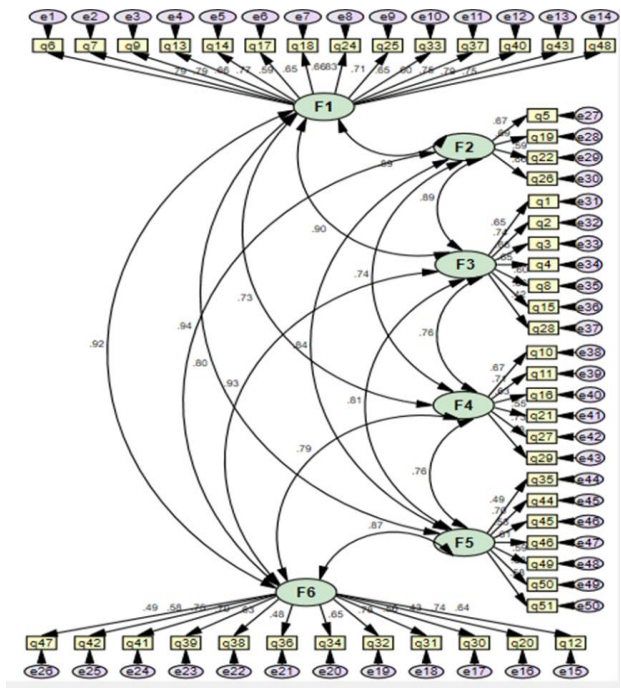


Figure 1. CFA model of the Teachers’ Competencies Questionnaire
Note: F1= Professional, F2=Interpersonal, F3= Personal, F4= Material, F5= Assessment and F6=Learner.

As Figure 1 illustrates, teachers' competencies questionnaire has 6 sub-constructs. Loadings of the first factor, i.e., Professional with 14 items, ranges from .53 to .89. Loadings of the second factor, i.e., Interpersonal with 4 items, ranges from .59 to .88. Moreover, loadings of the third factor, i.e., Personal with 7 items, ranges from .42 to .85. In addition, loadings of the fourth factor, i.e., Material with 6 items, ranges from .55 to .73. Loadings of the fifth factor, i.e., Assessment with 7 items, also ranges from .49 to .76. Finally, loadings of the sixth factor, i.e., Learner with 12 items ranges from .42 to .79.

Goodness of fit indices are reported in Table 2 below. In this study, χ^2/df , GFI, CFI, and RMSEA indices were used. To have a fit model, χ^2/df should be less than 3, GFI and TLI should be above .90, and RMSEA should be less than .08.

Table 2.
Goodness of Fit Indices

	χ^2	df	χ^2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Acceptable fit			< 3	> .90	> .90	< .08
Model	3502.958	1160	3.01	.91	.92	.08

As Table 2 shows, all the goodness of fit indices are within the acceptable range. Therefore, the scale enjoyed acceptable validity.

Procedure

This study was implemented to examine the role of gender, field of study, educational status, and teaching years of experience in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies. The data collection done through the EFL teachers' professional competencies questionnaire started in May, 2019 and ended in July. The researchers explained the aim of their research to the EFL teachers and provided instructions on filling the questionnaire. The questionnaires were distributed by hand, telegram, and via email. After the data was gathered, it was analyzed using SPSS software. Next, independent a sample t-test was utilized to compare the public and private teachers' competencies. Also, for examining whether teachers' competencies differ significantly between genders, an independent-samples t-test was performed. In addition, in order to find the association between Years of Teaching Experience and teachers' competencies, Pearson correlation was conducted. Furthermore, to examine whether there is any significant difference between four types of fields of study (Teaching English, English Literature, English Translation and Others) as well as between the three educational levels (BA, MA, and PhD) with respect to their teacher' competencies, one-way ANOVAs and the post hoc Scheffe's tests were run.

Results

Q1: Are there any significant differences between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors with respect to their level of competencies?

To answer the first research question aiming at examining whether teachers' competencies differ significantly between public and private sectors, an independent-samples t-test was performed. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of teachers of public and private sectors in teachers' competencies. Results of the independent-samples t-test is presented in Table 4.

Table 3.

The Descriptive Statistics of Teachers of Public and Private Sectors in Teachers' Competencies

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Competencies	Public	150	146.3867	37.22411	3.03934
	Private	150	171.7200	27.19211	2.22023

As Table 3 illustrates, the mean score of private teachers in overall teachers' competencies (171.72) is higher than that of public teachers (146.38). To find out whether or not these differences are significant, a t-test was run.

Table 4.

The Results of the Independent-Samples T-Test

	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Overall Competency	-6.731	298	.000	-25.33333	3.76390

Levene's test indicated the homogeneity of variance on the Overall Competency. As indicated in Table 4, there are significant differences between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors with respect to their level of competencies ($t=-6.73$, $P < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Q2: Are there any significant differences between male and female EFL teachers with respect to their competencies?

To answer the second research question aiming at examining whether teachers' competencies differ significantly between genders, an independent-samples t-test was performed. Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of male and female teachers in competencies. The results of the independent-samples t-test for gender difference is presented in Table 6.

Table 5.

The Descriptive Statistics of Male and Female Teachers in Competencies

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Competencies	Female	159	167.3648	30.34786	2.40674
	Male	141	149.6809	37.40499	3.15007

As viewed in Table 5, the mean score of female teachers in the teachers' overall competencies (167.36) is higher than that of the male teachers (149.68).

To find out whether or not these differences are significant, the results of the t-test are to be examined.

Table 6.
The Results of the Independent-Samples T-Test for Gender Differences

	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Overall Competency	4.517	298	.000	17.68393	3.91537

As indicated in Table 6, there are significant differences between male and female EFL teachers with respect to their competencies ($t = 4.51$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

Q3: Is there any significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' competencies and its sub-constructs and their teaching years of experience?

In order to find the association between Years of Teaching Experience and teachers' competencies, Pearson correlation was conducted. Table 4.5 shows the results of correlation between Years of Teaching Experience and different sub-constructs of teachers' competencies.

Table 7.
The Results of Pearson Correlation between Years of Teaching Experience and Competencies

	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	competencies
Experience	.101	.112	.173**	.198**	.208**	.183**	.168**

**Correlation is significant at the level of 0.01

Note: F1= Professional, F2=Interpersonal, F3= Personal, F4= Material, F5= Assessment and F6=Learner.

As it can be seen in Table 7, there are positive significant relationships between four of the sub-constructs of teachers' competencies and their experience. Among six sub-constructs of teachers' competencies, assessment (F5) ($r = .20$, $p > .05$) has the highest relationship and Professional ($r = .10$, $p > .05$) has the lowest relationship with experience. In addition, there is a weak positive significant relationship between overall competencies and years of teaching experience ($r = .16$, $p < .05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Figure 2 illustrates the scatter plot of the correlation between years of teaching experience and overall competencies.

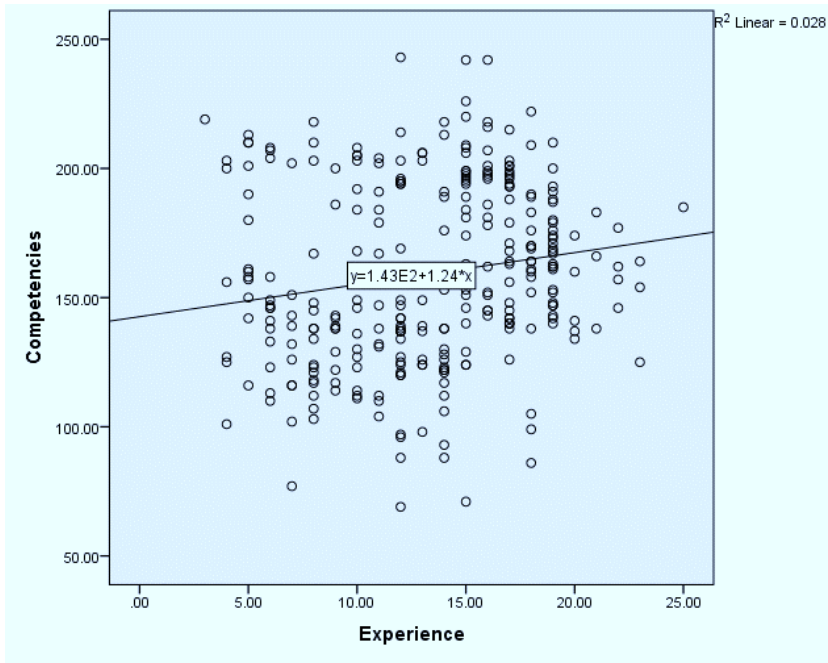


Figure 2. The scatter plot of the correlation between years of teaching experience and overall competencies

Q4: Is there any significant difference between four types of field of study (teaching English, English literature, English translation and others) with respect to their competencies?

To answer the fourth research question, which examines whether there is any significant difference between the four types of field of study (i.e. Teaching English, English Literature, English Translation and Others) with respect to teachers’ competencies, a one-way ANOVA was run to have a better view of the differences. The obtained results are presented below: Table 8 provides the descriptive statistics of the four different groups in terms of competencies.

Table 8.
Descriptive Statistics of Four Different Fields of Study in terms of Teachers’ Competencies

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Teaching English	139	174.338	28.02756	2.37727	169.6376	179.0387	93.00	242.00
English Literature	91	161.175	30.46477	3.19358	154.8312	167.5204	96.00	243.00
English Translation	48	128.812	25.20272	3.63770	121.4944	136.1306	88.00	218.00
Others	22	119.681	39.09377	8.33482	102.3486	137.0150	69.00	214.00
Total	300	159.053	34.92779	2.01656	155.0849	163.0218	69.00	243.00

Table 9 presents the results of the one-way ANOVA regarding the teachers' competencies in four different groups.

Table 9.

The Results of the One-way ANOVA for Subscales of Teachers' Competencies in Four Different Groups

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Competencies	Between Groups	110882.767	3	36960.922	43.093	.000
	Within Groups	253882.380	296	857.711		
	Total	364765.147	299			

As Table 9 indicates, there is a significant difference in terms of overall competencies among the four groups: $F(3, 296) = 43.09, p = .000 > 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. At this phase, the post hoc scheffe's test (see Table 10) was used to show the place of the differences among the groups.

Table 10.

Scheffe's Test for the Differences of Competencies in Four Groups

Dependent Variable	(I) field of study	(J) field of study	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Competencies	Teaching English	English Literature	13.16231*	3.94917	.005	2.9589	23.3657
		English Translation	45.52563*	4.90301	.000	32.8578	58.1935
		Others	54.65631*	6.71993	.000	37.2941	72.0185
	English Literature	Teaching English	-13.16231*	3.94917	.005	-23.3657	-2.9589
		English Translation	32.36332*	5.22440	.000	18.8651	45.8615
		Others	41.49401*	6.95789	.000	23.5170	59.4710
	English Translation	Teaching English	-45.52563*	4.90301	.000	-58.1935	-32.8578
		English Literature	-32.36332*	5.22440	.000	-45.8615	-18.8651
		Others	9.13068	7.54028	.620	-10.3510	28.6124
	Others	Teaching English	-54.65631*	6.71993	.000	-72.0185	-37.2941
		English Literature	-41.49401*	6.95789	.000	-59.4710	-23.5170
		English Translation	-9.13068	7.54028	.620	-28.6124	10.3510

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As it can be observed in the table above, there are significant differences among all of the four groups in total competencies, as marked by the asterisks.

Table 13.
Scheffe's Test for the Differences of Competencies among the Three Educational Levels

Dependent Variable	(I) Status	(J) Status	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Competencies	BA	MA	-24.73375*	4.06132	.000	-34.3003	-15.1672
		PhD	-47.20887*	5.07484	.000	-59.1628	-35.2549
	MA	BA	24.73375*	4.06132	.000	15.1672	34.3003
		PhD	-22.47511*	4.70959	.000	-33.5687	-11.3816
	PhD	BA	47.20887*	5.07484	.000	35.2549	59.1628
		MA	22.47511*	4.70959	.000	11.3816	33.5687

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As can be viewed in Table 13, there are significant differences among all of the three groups in total competencies, as marked by the asterisks. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. Results revealed that among different status groups, teachers at PhD level have the highest level of competencies and those at the BA level have the lowest level of competencies.

Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to examine the role of gender, field of study, educational status, and years of teaching experience in Iranian EFL teachers' competencies. The findings of the first question suggest that the mean score of public teachers in overall teachers' competencies has been higher than private teachers'. According to the findings, there were significant differences between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors with respect to their level of competencies. Thus, teachers at the private sectors reported higher levels of competencies. In this respect, Haddad and Yamini. (2011) in their study referred to poor language proficiency of Iranian EFL teachers in the public sector. Also, Kazemi and Soleimani (2013) in a study mentioned that Iranian English language teachers in the public sector do not have enough knowledge of the four language skills and teaching strategies. On the other hand, Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) remarked that the private sector in Iran is regarded as the second body to language teaching and complements the public sector, compensating its weaknesses.

The analysis confirms that there are significant differences in the level of EFL teachers' competencies between Iranian EFL teachers at public and private sectors. Clearly, teachers working at public sectors enjoy a relieving sense of having a permanent career with no need for further professional development in order to guarantee their job security throughout the whole career path until

their retirement. Though many might not be promoted, they can still feel safe staying at the same position for a long period of time. Therefore, most teachers at public sectors do not challenge themselves that hard to compete, to learn new things, to upgrade and stay updated, and in sum, to professionally develop since they are not asked for it. There might be certain training courses offered or even participated, but they are mostly attended just to earn extra points to have a higher income or some are even obligatory and imposed by the superiors. Hence, the courses cannot be that fruitful, for they are not always participated by truly eager and motivated teachers. Moreover, the routine by which teachers are selected for the public sectors mostly include a mere state standardized submission exam held for all teachers at all different levels, cities, majors and ages, not really measuring their competencies but just a part of their knowledge, with no further complementary measuring tools to validate the whole process such as interviews or any other type of assessments. Consequently, most teachers at public sectors do not have the motivation needed and are not sufficiently persuaded and praised for professional development, and, only after a few years of teaching, severely suffer from burnouts and either quit or just find other jobs next to teaching that can satisfy them much better.

On the other hand, teachers working in private sectors have to go through a truly rough path with many obstacles in order to be able to enter a private school or institute. They have to pass many phases of assessment both written and oral accompanied by practical demos. Even then, there are no promises that they can hold their position for a long time unless they constantly develop professionally and expand their competencies to be able to surpass and outmaneuver their colleagues and counterparts. Furthermore, they are under unceasing observation and supervision by the superiors and rivals. Moreover, if they are capable of setting a right, persistent, somehow addictive relationship with students so as to attract more students for the school or institute, they might once more be on the verge of losing their career. All these daunting, intimidating and, to some extent, encouraging responsibilities of the teachers working at private sectors make them more competent than the other counterparts at the public sectors.

To settle the following issues, the concept of EFL professional competencies and its components should be considered by practitioners, policy makers, teacher employment organizations, and decision makers at public sector in this field. They should care about EFL teachers' language proficiency, knowledge of the four language skills and teaching strategies, as well as other components of EFL competencies at the public sector. Policy makers and decision makers should enrich teacher education and training courses and provide a situation for teachers to develop themselves professionally. In addition, an EFL teacher, like a lifeguard, should be evaluated annually regarding his/her total language proficiency and professional capabilities and should renew his/her scientific and professional and employment license.

Regarding the second goal of the study, the results revealed that the mean score of female teachers in overall teachers' competencies has been higher than

that of male teachers. According to the findings, there were significant differences between male and female EFL teachers with respect to their competencies. The result of this study confirms the result of Ansarin et al's (2015) study. They found that females performed better than males in terms of critical reflection. The result of this study, however, contradicts the result of Mahdi and Al-Dera's (2013) study. These researchers found that female teachers used less of ICT in their instruction than male teachers. Also, the results of this study contradict the result of Soodmand Afshar and Farahani's (2015) study. Their findings revealed that men Iranian EFL teachers performed better than women in reflective teaching and reflective thinking. In addition, Mahmoodi et al. (2017) indicated that no statistically significant difference was found between male and female teachers in terms of their level of classroom management orientations.

Moreover, in a patriarch society as Iran, women have always had to work and try harder to be able to prove themselves and to be able to fight for equal rights and to overcome the sexist obstacles they face on their way to be successful in their careers. Therefore, they do their best to be more competent to compete with their male counterparts and manage to get and hold not only better and higher but more deserving positions as English language teachers in Iran. In addition to sociological reasons, this difference may stem from their psychological differences to a large extent. For instance, according to Khodabakhshzadeh et al. (2018), women are more creative in teaching than men. In addition, female teachers are reported to be more reflective than male teachers (Poyraz & Usta, 2013; Rashidi & Javidanmehr, 2012).

Regarding the third goal of the study, the results indicated that there were positive significant relationships between four sub-constructs of teachers' competencies and experience. Among six sub-constructs of teachers' competencies, assessment had the highest relationship and professional had the lowest relationship with experience. In addition, there has been a weak positive significant relationship between overall competencies and years of teaching experience. The results of this study are in line with those of Partovi and Tafazoli's (2016) as well as Shohani et al.'s (2014) study. Partovi and Tafazoli (2016) found no relationship between EFL teachers' self-regulatory and years of teaching experience. Similarly, Shohani, et al. (2014) indicated no statistically significant differences in empowerment based on years of teaching experience. Nevertheless, the results of this study contradict what was reported by Ansarin, et al. (2015). These researchers found a significant relationship between teachers' pedagogical and critical reflection levels and years of experience. In addition, these findings are in line with the findings of Zolfaghari and Ashraf (2015), who found a highly significant positive relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' assessment literacy and teaching experience.

Additionally, the present study demonstrates a correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' competencies and the relevant sub-constructs and their years of teaching experience. The data suggest that the more experienced the teachers are, the higher their level of overall competencies will be. Undoubtedly, as

teachers experience working with more students with diverse interests, abilities, cultures, emotions, backgrounds, social and financial status and many other distinctions, they grow to be more skillful and knowledgeable. Thus, they tend to earn more competencies as they gain more expertise working with all these differences in different environments and departments that adds up to their versatility and competencies. Being a successful and resourceful teacher who manages to please diverse tastes and needs of a wide range of learner types and also being a really effective teacher capable of dealing with different teaching experiences and settings demands an immense knowledge base which is surely not gained overnight and needs years and years of reading, researching, experiencing and passing through many demanding challenges and tests. All these cannot be realized but by years and years of teaching experience. That is why more years of experience make a teacher earn higher competencies.

The results obtained regarding the fourth aim of the study showed that there had been a significant difference in the overall competencies of the four groups. According to the findings, there was a significant difference between four types of field of study (teaching English, English literature, English translation and others) with respect to their competencies. Results revealed that considering different fields of study, teachers majoring in Teaching English had the highest level of competencies and those in fields other than English had the lowest level of competencies. No previous studies were found in the literature regarding the relationship between the significant differences between Iranian EFL teachers' competencies and its sub-constructs and the four fields of study to discuss and compare the results. The results indicated that among different fields of ELT, Teaching English yielded the highest level of competencies. Undeniably, teaching involves fostering and adopting principles from a very wide range of fields such as psychology, research, statistics, testing and assessment, technology and development, cultural and social studies, neurosciences, biology and human growth, even anatomy, etc., which is clearly why teachers having majored in ELT and studied all these principles have a higher level of competencies compared to others who graduate from other fields of English Language, as also suggested by the data. Definitely, the more knowledgeable the teachers are, the higher their level of professional competencies will be.

The results of last question of the study showed a significant difference in overall competencies of three educational levels (i.e., BA, MA, and PhD). Results revealed that among the three different groups, PhD holders had the highest level of competencies and BA graduates had the lowest level of competencies. The results of this study confirm those of Aliakbari and Azimi Amoli's (2014) study. They found that, the higher the educational level, the bigger the mean for the responses toward critical pedagogy items. They also indicated that the teachers having a PhD degree were found to have higher critical pedagogy awareness in comparison to those having MA and BA degrees.

Clearly, as teachers move along the way of their educational path towards higher education and higher degrees, they gain more knowledge, expertise and skills through studying, experimenting, doing research and practicing. On this

road, teachers or better say travelers, learn to have more responsibility, awareness, leadership, moral and ethical principles, organizational skills, commitment to excellence and resourcefulness. Not only that, they also learn to be better decision makers, problem solvers, creative and critical thinkers, and communicators with better technological skills. Consequently, when teachers achieve all these valuable traits, they become more competent, and as the data indicates, among different educational levels, PhD holders have the highest level of professional competencies.

The findings of the present study can have theoretical and practical implications. This study may be the only piece of research that has increased EFL professionals'-including EFL teachers'- knowledge regarding factors affecting their competencies. The findings of this study inform EFL teachers to care about their teaching competencies and to try to keep themselves up to date in their profession. The results of this study can be used by teacher employment institutes such as English institutes, and education and training organization to employ the most competent EFL teachers and to help the institutions and schools to have an efficient recruitment, preparing and performance management process in place. Competent teachers will help to have a better quality and employable graduates. Thus, the findings of this study can guide Iranian ELT professionals to work towards setting standards in assessment for Iranian EFL teacher professional development in the 21st century. The findings may contribute to have a united EFL teacher evaluation system in the Iranian context. A further implication of this study is to help curriculum development specialists and national policy makers who design teacher-training policies for public schools and private institutions.

As for the limitations of the study, participants of the study were gathered using convenience sampling from one country (Iran); however, as different countries have different systems of education, this study can be repeated with more participants from various parts of the world and use methods that guarantee a higher level of randomization and at last greater generalizability. This can also set the ground for the cross comparison of the findings. The significant limitation of this study is that teachers' competencies were evaluated by the questionnaire. Further studies can adopt a mixed-method approach and evaluate teachers' competencies using both questionnaires and interviews.

Moreover, further research can be conducted to explore the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' professional competencies with other variables such as students' achievements and teacher-related variables.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Professional Competencies in English Language Teaching

Dear respondent. This survey is designed to explore EFL teachers' professional competencies in their profession. The information you reveal to us through this questionnaire is kept confidential and would be used for research purposes.

A. Teacher's information: Please mark the part that best matches your status.

1. Years of teaching experience: Below 5 5-10 11-15 16-20 21-25 Above 25
2. Gender: Male Female
3. Age: 20-29 30-39 40- 49 Above 50
4. Degree: BA MA PhD Others
5. Your field of study: Teaching English English Literature English Translation Others
6. Sector: Public Private both
7. Context: Small city Big city

B. Please mark the part that best matches your status. There is no wrong or right answer.

No	Statement	Never	A little	Some what	Much	Always
As an EFL teacher, I ...						
1	have a positive attitude towards English language teaching					
2	know exactly what it means to be an ELT teacher (teacher's identity)					
3	demonstrate commitment to my profession					
4	am creative					
5	solve the problems collaboratively					
6	have mastered English like a highly competent English speaker					
7	employ learners' mother tongue favorably					
8	am confident					
9	am an autonomous teacher					
10	provide the most appropriate materials to make the lesson more attractive and perceptive					
11	manage learning & teaching materials with appropriate sequencing of activities					

12	consider learners' individual differences such as their level of intelligence, learning styles and background					
13	am expert enough to overcome the problems					
14	do reflection on my teaching					
15	have a good sense of humor					
16	study the contents to be taught to ensure its thoroughness					
17	comply with ethical standards and fairness through all stages of professional decision making					
18	am interested in doing classroom research					
19	have effective communication skills and am able to create good interpersonal relationship					
20	give learners freedom to initiate talk and be actively involved in the learning process					
21	use authentic social real-life communication situations applying appropriate materials					
22	have a friendly relationship with students and their parents					
23	am a competent lifelong learner and continually develop my profession					
24	am able to effectively manage my class					
25	master certain social qualities like participation in group-oriented activities					
26	make the lesson plan brief, informative, and clear					
27	maintain a professional appearance					
28	conduct innovative activities by the use of new educational technologies in my classroom					
29	know how to cope with difficult and problematic learners					
30	develop critical thinking, and problem-solving capabilities					
31	monitor and control learners' behaviours					
32	diversify the teaching techniques and strategies according to the learning environment					
33	motivate learners					
34	monitor learner progress toward instructional goals					
35	encourage learners to explore and analyze language by themselves					
36	make the lesson enjoyable by creating a fun and relaxed learning environment					
37	give learners every possible chance to use the language					
38	treat all learners in the same way regardless of their beliefs, gender, etc.					
39	have in-depth knowledge of the subject matter to be taught					
40	help learners gain autonomy to self-direct					

	their own learning					
41	identify gains and difficulties learners are experiencing in learning and performing					
42	manage the teaching and learning processes through planning and preparation					
43	am skilled in choosing appropriate assessment methods					
44	inspire assessment strategies that involve learners in self-assessment activities					
45	am qualified to develop valid learner grading procedures					
46	create in the L2 learner an awareness of empathy towards the culture of the L2 community					
47	am experienced and benefit from experiences of other professional members of the community					
48	provide continuous assessment					
49	communicate strengths and weaknesses based on assessment results to learners					
50	clarify and articulate the performance outcomes expected of learners					

Thank you