

An appraisal study of in-service English teacher education in Iranian mainstream education: Teachers' voices

Mahmood Reza Atai¹

Professor of Applied Linguistics, Kharazmi University

Seyyed Asadollah Asadi

Ph.D. Student of TEFL, Kharazmi University

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Abstract

Among the prevailing channels for L2 teachers to develop professionally, in-service teacher education programs (INSTEPs), or "continuing professional development" (Johnson, 2004, p. 652), are echoed in the literature. The present study probed Iranian L2 teachers' perceptions regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the current INSTEPs held by the Ministry of Education. More specifically, the researchers examined various aspects of English teacher development, including the teachers' appraisal of the current teacher evaluation scheme and the alternatives adopted by the teachers in order to update their pedagogic content and support knowledge. Data were collected through a questionnaire developed for the purposes of this study and administered to a representative sample of Iranian L2 teachers (n = 1234) who participated in some formal teacher development events in Iran. The results indicated that self-reliance was practiced by the teachers and they highlighted the pressing need for improving their own general English proficiency. Further, the teachers voiced their dissatisfaction with the existing teacher evaluation system and worked for some alternatives. The findings may promise implications for planning and practice of the

¹ Corresponding author: atai@khu.ac.ir

current Iranian INSTEPs and provide clues for further research directions.

Keywords: English teacher education, in-service teacher education, pedagogic content knowledge, support knowledge.

1. Introduction

Having completed their pre-service programs, language teachers assume the responsibility for an unending quest to explore an abundance of variables in their teaching profession including those potentially influencing their students' learning, those affecting their knowledge of language teaching, techniques of teaching language skills and components, and many other overt and covert parameters. In other words, assuming that teachers "learn to teach through teaching" (Edwards, 1996, p. 100), the new career is indeed "the beginning of a lifetime of professional growth" (Crandall, 2001, p. 551). This means that, as Graves (2009) indicates, there is not any terminal competence for language teachers, implying their permanent probe for development. Since teachers play a key role in language education, their professional development should receive primary attention (Ur, 2002). Further, there is a consensus among all teachers that, as Johnston, Pawan, and Mahan-Taylor (2005) argue, regardless of the degree of expertise and experience they have gained, teachers need continuous professional development. Above all, the key to the success of all financial and educational supports to meet the communication needs of all language learners across the world, as Savignon (2002) puts forward, is to educate the teachers.

Among many available sources for L2 teachers to develop professionally, in-service teacher education programs (INSTEPs), or what Johnson (2004, p. 652) calls "continuing professional development," is considered prominent. INSTEPs are usually held by language teaching professional associations, university faculties, and ministries of education, and they take various forms, "ranging from award-bearing year-long courses in universities to the

relatively informal meetings of teacher groups on a self-help basis" (Widdowson, 1990, p. 100). These programs provide excellent opportunities for teachers to share their experiences, to keep themselves up to date, to broaden their teaching knowledge (Singh & Richards, 2009), to search various possible solutions for their practical problems, and, even, to become familiar with potential research areas. At the very least, as Widdowson (1990) points out, they make teachers feel they are members of a professional community.

In spite of their inevitability for L2 teachers and their prevalence in language pedagogy circles, INSTEPs and their numerous explicit and implicit thorny issues have been taken for granted by researchers around the world (Freeman, 2002). The author then addresses some major concerns revolving around INSTEPs, including the role of schools in assisting L2 teachers to learn to teach, the role of similar sociocultural environments in teachers' learning (for example, workshops and intensive programs on L2 teacher education), the way these contexts can be organized to aid novice teachers learn how to teach, and, finally, the development of experienced teachers. These and a wide range of other questions have remained under-researched in the Iranian context, too, especially in the Iranian mainstream education (Beh-Afarin, 2007). Therefore, the main objective of this study was to explore the professional development of the Iranian L2 teachers, specifically the INSTEP planned for high school English teachers (HiSETs) in the Iranian context, and the resources they draw upon to upgrade their pedagogic content and support knowledge.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Why INSTEP?

The field of L2 teacher education has made a transition from a viewpoint that was substantially fuelled by tradition and intuition than by proposition (Freeman & Johnson, 1998) to a perspective that attempts to reconstruct the field based on research on language teacher education (Vélez-Rendón, 2002). At the course of the decades, tradition and intuition were replaced by training (Richards

&Nunan, 1990), through which student teachers were exposed to a set of techniques and skills, which in turn led to “development era” (Burns & Richards, 2009, p. 2) when language teachers are equipped with strategies and mechanisms to develop their personal theories and become aware of how they learn to teach.

A brief glance at the literature further indicates that theoreticians’ and experts’ arguments dramatically highlight the vitality and necessity of INSTEPs in teacher development (Burns & Richards, 2009; Tomlinson, 1988; Widdowson, 1990). Probably among many available sources of teacher development options, none of the alternatives have been as much extensively discussed, practiced, and probed as INSTEPs. Widdowson (1990), at the end of his explanation of pragmatic language pedagogy, concludes that the fruitful implementation of this concept exclusively depends on INSTEPs. By the same token, Tomlinson (1988) urges caution in taking for granted the necessity and value of INSTEP for teacher development since teachers do not have sufficient time to deal with the flow of complicated theories, mainly formulated by applied linguists. Similarly, Edge (1985) views INSTEPs as obligations in language pedagogy. Altogether, the persistent peril of theory-to-practice gap has raised these arguments and has sought solutions in equipping teachers to bridge the space.

Parallel with its necessity, the knowledge base of INSTEPs has been extensively discussed in the literature. Johnson (2009a, 2009b), for instance, maintains that knowledge base, or in Day’s (1991) term the information that prospective teachers should acquire, lays the infrastructure of a particular profession. The knowledge base in L2 teacher education answers three fundamental questions of:

- (1) the content of L2 teacher education programs: What L2 teachers need to know;
- (2) the pedagogies that are taught in L2 teacher education programs: How L2 teachers should teach; and
- (3) the institutional forms of delivery through which both the content and pedagogies are learned: How L2 teachers learn to teach. (p. 11)

In essence, it is the knowledge base of L2 teacher education based on which decisions are made about not only how to prepare

L2 teachers, but also what they need to know and be able to do in order to enter and linger in the profession.

The base draws both an inclusive and exclusive boundary in the sense that it characterizes those who are professionals and those who are not. The prevalent misconception of native speaker, for instance, as the ideal teacher is notoriously rooted in the invalid knowledge base of L2 teacher education, for such a conception holds that what a professional L2 teacher needs to know is to necessarily possess a native-like proficiency. However, it was argued (Richards, 2008) that teachers need two strands of knowledge to teach effectively: knowledge of classroom teaching skills and pedagogic issues as well as knowledge about language and language learning. The core of knowledge is composed of pedagogical content knowledge, that is, how to transform content into accessible and learnable materials, and practical knowledge. Pedagogic content knowledge entails those areas of knowledge that the L2 teachers need in order to teach English language. For instance, Day (1991) believes that TESOL materials, evaluation and development, as well as teaching reading and writing belong to this constituent. Support knowledge, in contrast, is fed into INSTEPs from various disciplines including psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, SLA, and so forth (Day, 1991).

Similar to theoreticians, researchers have also been attracted by the INSTEPs as multi-faceted adventures and investigated both macro and micro parameters of the programs. Reflecting on his experience of running short INSTEP in Indonesia, and gathering information through informal meeting with the ex-participants of the programs, Tomlinson (1988) expressed his growing concern for the trainees' inability to materialize the instructions they received in the INSTEPs. Therefore, Tomlinson concluded that instead of one-shot INSTEP, teachers should take part in successive INSTEPs, each of them followed by constant observation and analysis of trainees' real classes interspersed by delivering constructive feedback to them. Further, Halbach (2003) examined the effect of critical reflection on teachers' course of methodology on student teachers' personal theory of language teaching. The results showed that a sizeable minority of the trainees was able to critically reflect

on the content of the INSTEP, so little change was observed in the teacher students' attitudes.

Likewise, Angelova (2005), working on a group of native English teachers, studied the way their knowledge about language changed as a result of particular applied linguistics instruction. The researcher employed mini-lessons in a language that the trainees did not speak as a pedagogical tool to make the participants feel what L2 learners felt. The findings indicated that the mini-lesson assisted the participants to grasp the main concepts in SLA, mainly error correction and also helped them link these concepts with practice. Lamb (1995) also reported the reactions of student teachers who participated in a program designed to help them actualize communicative activities in their teaching. The author observed that at the end of the program the participants were able to name only four main issues covered in the course and forgot the rest. Confusion was the second reaction that some of the teachers felt in the sense that they did not know how to put some of the techniques into practice.

2.2 L2 Teacher Education in Iran

Pre-service English teacher education for the Iranian ministry of Education is done in colleges for teacher education and teacher education centers (Fallahi, 2000). As a result of the changes in administrative policies that occurred to centralize teacher education centers under one organization, Payambare A'zam University has become the agent of preparing L2 teachers for the state schools since 2005. Currently, 113 teacher education centers across the country educate teachers for the ministry, where the Iranian L2 teachers along with the teachers of other subject matters are trained and educated.

However, INSTEPs, as one of the critical opportunities for teacher development, is planned and implemented by the ministry of Education. All the policies are made by the top authorities in the ministry, issued to the National English Language Secretary (NELS), a group of English teachers in Ardabil who were appointed to mediate between the ministry of education and the head teachers,

those English teachers who are appointed as the heads of English Teaching Groups. The policies are then delivered to the head teachers in the central bureaus of education in 31 provinces. These heads then communicate with the head teachers in each educational district, those English teachers who take the position of the head of English Teaching Group in different small towns in each province. The head teachers do, in fact, apply all these decisions without any role to interfere in this top-down process. Specifically, the modules to be taught as well as the time and number of sessions are all decided on and dictated by the ministry.

The schematic representation of different hierarchies of L2 teacher education system is illustrated in Figure 1.

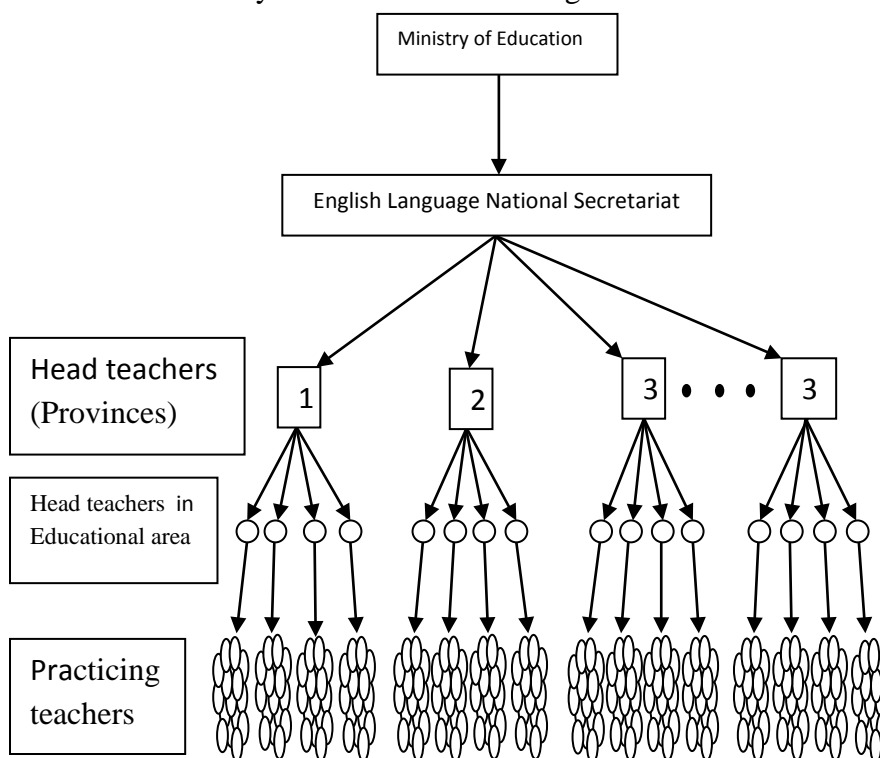


Figure 1: Hierarchical structure of the current system of L2 teacher development

Regardless of the INSTEPs, teacher evaluation, which offers an exceptional circumstance for teachers to develop professionally, is

not effectively conducted by the ministry. As Atai and Mazlum (2013) imply, Iranian L2 teachers are not treated as professional members of the corresponding educational community but as practitioners whose performances are evaluated by the principals of the schools following the generic criteria commonly used for all teachers, including subject-matter teachers.

Explorations into the INSTEPs held by the ministry indicated that the current system suffers from a detrimental lack of coherence, absence of a solid theoretical and research basis, and the diversity of goals and routes taken by different stakeholders (Beh-Afarin, 2007). Moreover, Atai, Babaii, and Mazlum (2012) found that stakeholders at different layers of the system sometimes held contradictory views regarding the INSTEPs. While policy makers believed that the INSTEP were the major sources which HiSETs exploited for professional development, English head teachers perceived Weblogs and e-mails as the second source. English teachers, however, ranked their personal search for new ideas as the most common and electronic sources as the least common. Furthermore, the authors illustrated a wide gap between macro policy and classroom practice. Composed together, these studies attempted to draw a thumbnail sketch of the INSTEPs run in different contexts by concluding that the INSTEPs held by the ministry were much far from effective. However, rarely has any investigation been conducted to uncover the alternatives Iranian L2 teachers adopt to develop professionally, and to explore various facets of the formal INSTEPs.

3. Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer the following questions:

1. What sources do Iranian high school English teachers (HiSETs) draw upon in order to refresh their pedagogic content knowledge and support knowledge of English language teaching?
2. What are the judgments of the HiSETs with regard to the validity of the current system of teacher evaluation conducted by the ministry?

3. What are the perceptions of HiSETs about the advantages and disadvantages of the current INSTEP held by the ministry?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

A sample of 1,236 HiSETs from 86 educational districts across the country with a spectrum of five core characteristics of gender, age, experience, degree and field of study participated in the study. The practicing teachers were randomly selected from 26 provinces of Alborz, Ardabil, Boushehr, East Azerbaijan, Fars, Gilan, Hamedan, Isfahan, Kerman, Kermanshah, Khorasan (Razavi), Khuzestan, Kohkiluyeva Boyer Ahmad, Lorestan, Markazi, Mazandaran, North Khorasan, Qazvin, Qom, Semnan, SistanvaBaloochestan, South Khorasan, Tehran, West Azerbaijan, Yazd, and Zanzan. The profiles of the participants are displayed in Figure 2.

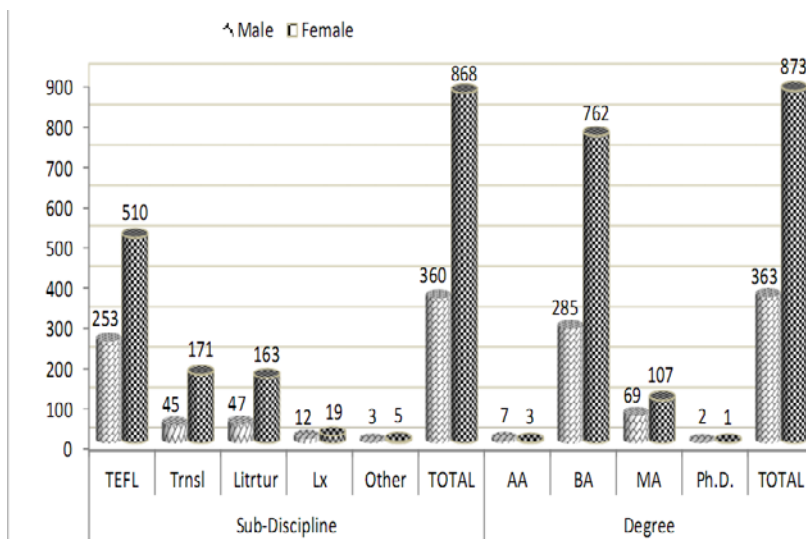


Figure 2: Profile of Participants' Degrees and Disciplines

Note: Trnsl = Translation; Litrtur = Literature; Lx = Linguistics

For the purpose of logical and quantitative sampling, the demographic information of the whole population, including their

gender, degree, and teaching experience (year), was first weighed and then fed into Matrix-Laboratory (MATLAB) software. As a result of 700-time iteration of the data (each time, the software clustered the areas by considering the interaction between the different characteristics of the population), the whole country was pulled apart into four clusters.

4.2 Instrument

In order to elicit the required data, a questionnaire (see Appendix) containing 69 items was designed and piloted for which a reliability index of 0.80 (Cronbach alpha) was obtained. Regarding the first research question, three factors of classrooms, academics, and colleagues were extracted through exploratory factor analysis. Three factors of specialists, non-specialists and alternatives were also extracted for the second question. The advantages of the INSTEP were divided into cognition, proficiency and context, while the disadvantages yielded two factors of educatees and educators.

4.3 Procedure

In the first phase, the instrument was piloted with 86 HiSETs in order to probe the underlying factors and the reliability of the instrument. It is worth noting that since from the outset the questions were organized discretely under different headings, factor analyses were separately conducted for each module, utilizing Principle Components Factoring (PCF) with varimax rotation. In the second phase, the data were collected in 2010-2012 educational year. A cascade fashion was adopted to approach the target population as contacts were made with the head teachers in different provinces during their annual meeting in Tehran, who connected the researchers with the head teachers in educational districts across the country. The instrument was then posted to the heads who distributed the questionnaire among the HiSETs during their either INSTEPs or biannual teachers' meeting. That is, the respondents filled out the instrument during one of their developmental sessions formally and systematically held by the ministry. The participants

were, then, required to rate the items in a four-point Likert scales of 1 (agree) to 4 (disagree) and 1 (never) to 4 (always). It is worth mentioning that in order to avoid any probable misunderstanding the participants were exposed to the Persian version of the questionnaire.

The completed questionnaires were then posted back to the researchers. Totally, around 2,500 questionnaires were sent to the teachers, of which 1,399 copies of the instrument were returned. In other words, the return rate was 55.96%. Eventually, the researchers received 1,238 completed questionnaires after discarding 149 maltreated ones (i.e. those questionnaires whose respondents either systematically selected only one choice or left the items unanswered and incomplete). Based on the pilot study and the researchers' observations, the respondents spent an average of 15 minutes to complete the instrument. The responses were then analyzed by assigning percentages to the answers.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Sources of Updating Pedagogic Content and Support Knowledge

The first question was posed to explore the various sources HiSETs drew upon to develop professionally. Table 1 reports the participants' responses to this research question.

Table 1: Sources the participants reside on to enhance their pedagogic content knowledge

	1	2	3	4
Relying on my own creativity	5	23.3	55.5	16.2
Doing research	9.9	51.7	32.8	5.6
Observing and critiquing my teaching practice	7.5	30.9	49.1	12.7
More experienced HiSETs	6.8	33.1	47.2	12.8
Observing and critiquing my colleagues' teaching practice	18.5	43.6	31.6	6.3
Studying books on TEFL	6.5	32.3	47	14.2
Attending at TEFL conferences	25.2	48.7	19.8	6.2
Taking part in internet forums	47.3	39.5	10.6	2.5
Reading TEFL journals	12.3	54.2	26	7.5
Attending the biannual meeting held by the educational group	19.4	32.9	30	17.7

An appraisal study of in-service English teacher

Reading electronic sources (books, papers, ...)	16.2	27.5	8.4
	47.9		

Note: 1= Never; 2= Seldom; 3= Usually; 4= Always

As Table 1 illustrates, among the available sources to update their pedagogic content knowledge, the teachers gave the minimum priority to “academic” sites, including electronic forums and texts; the teachers held that they seldom (32.3%) and never (6.5%) consulted TEFL books and only 14.2 % of the respondents assumed that they always did so. The teachers perceived that attending TEFL conferences and reading TEFL journals were not usually practiced by the teachers. Likewise, virtual environments, (inter)national conferences, research and TEFL journals were hardly referred to by the participants. They never (47.3%) participated in electronic forums, and they seldom (54.2%) read TEFL journals. The respondents expressed that they usually (47.2%) consulted their more experienced colleagues for new techniques and ideas to implement in their classes. More importantly, what attracted the teachers as the pool of novel ideas was classroom practice; they usually (49.1%) come up with new practical ideas through observing and critiquing their own teaching practice. In fact, the respondents assumed that novel practical ideas always (16.2%) and usually (55.5%) stemmed from their own creativity.

Although Atai et al. (2012) found that electronic sources were scarcely referred to by the teachers, this does not necessarily mean that all the HiSETs suffered from technophobia. Rather, this might be because of their inaccessibility to the Internet and similar sources, and even if they had access to they found the presented materials either irrelevant to or ineffective for their educational context. Further, the teachers’ limited computer literacy might account for the restricted use of the electronic sources. It can also be argued that the tenuous connection between the teachers and academic community, reminiscent of what dominated language education till 1990s (Richards, 2008), should be fortified, or the existing disjunction gradually threatens to erode the teachers’ practice. The teachers’ disinclination to reconcile with the academics, which was restricted to TEFL textbooks, might derive from the fact that they found such cooperation futile or even

counterproductive, as a noticeable proportion of the respondents asserted that the INSTEP did not settle down many of their dilemmas. Moreover, the top-down nature of the current communication system between the practitioners and policy makers in the Iranian context (Atai et al., 2012), might account for the weak link between the teachers and academic community.

The results also reveal that while the participants developed a poor tie with researchers and TEFL specialists they instead established a close intra-group connection with their experienced colleagues. Such an intra-community bond, which introduced an excellent chance for novices to socialize into new teaching community (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, &Thwaite, 2001), was most probably formed because of the distance between theory and practice which was reflected in Farrell's (2006) observation. He argues that teacher education agencies have failed to prepare prospective teachers to come into terms with future real context which in turn leads to reality shock experienced by beginning teachers. Thus, they start seeking solutions for the unresolved issues from their more experienced colleagues. The existing collaboration between the less and more experienced teachers in the Iranian context also reinforces our assumption that practicing teachers with various ranges of experience need different types of INSTEP whose contents should be specified after a sound and thorough needs analysis. The crucial issue of experience was addressed in the literature (Goodwyn, 1997; Tsui, 2009), but the concern remains still controversial as to whether experience can be considered as one of the vital variables for determining the contents of INSTEP or not. Specifically, should teachers with a wide range of experience be exposed to different types of materials? If yes, how should the diverse strata of experience be specified? Murray's (2002) study, for instance, illustrated that experience did play a role in the outcome of the INSTEP, for the novice did not foster a satisfactory ability of error detection at the end of a course designed to maximize the trainees' ability to detect the students' errors.

In addition to their colleagues' experiences, the participants introduced practice as the prime source of developing their pedagogic content knowledge and support knowledge. This means

that the teachers were either consciously or subconsciously aware of the role of the context and reflected on their practice to gear their teaching with contextual constraints. As Richards (1990) and Goodwyn (1997) retain, experience alone is far from adequate for professional development, so it should be integrated with reflection to encourage professional growth. Giving almost equal weights to both reflective practice and the colleagues' experience for development, the participants represented a counterexample of Borg's (1998) argument which suggests that reflective teaching overestimates the teacher as an independent developer and underestimates the role of the other teachers who can trigger ideas in a teacher's mind.

Although the implementation of reflective teaching in the Iranian ELT context was an obvious advantage since self-observation, according to Gebhard (2005), is at the heart of all professional development, this does not mean that the running practice of reflection was adequate and should not be modified or promoted. English teachers should be systematically and financially supported, as Akbari (2007) implies, for reflection due to its qualitative and multidimensional nature is a complex and time consuming process. We are not still sure whether the participants were mature enough to conduct reflective teaching and judge the outcome as better or worse. The issue implies that the Iranian L2 teachers should be trained on how to implement reflective teaching. This is because, as Schön (1987, as cited in Breen, 2007, p. 1074) justifies, although the notion of reflection is based upon the assumption that knowledge is embedded in practice and should be excavated by practitioners we should notice that "problems in practice do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures. Indeed they tend not to present themselves as problems at all but as messy indeterminate situations".

5.2 Teacher Evaluation

The second research question addressed the HiSETs' perceptions about the validity of the current L2 teacher evaluation scheme practiced by the ministry. The responses are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Participants' perceptions about the validity of the current teacher evaluation scheme

	A %	FA %	FD %	D %
The procedure for choosing the good teacher is done based on research and scientific principles.	10.4	21.6	8	60
The current system of HiSETs evaluation is perfect.	6.2	27.3	13.8	52.7
A separate scheme should be designed to evaluate the teaching of HiSETs.	56.7	34	3.3	6.1
The performance of one English teacher should be evaluated by other HiSETs.	35.5	42.3	7.7	14.6
High school students should also systematically evaluate the performance of the HiSETs.	28.1	45.5	8.1	18.3
The supreme teaching festival is a perfect opportunity for a HiSET to display all her skills and abilities.	11.3	38.3	15.2	45.2
Students' parents should systematically evaluate the performance of HiSETs.	12.4	36.2	13	38.3
HiSETs should be ranked based on the effectiveness of their performance.	40.3	39.1	7.3	13.4
The current scheme of HiSETs evaluation is also used for the evaluation of subject teachers.	56.3	35	2.7	5.9
The evaluation of HiSETs should be done just by TEFL specialists (head teachers, university professors etc.).	56.4	33.2	2.8	7.6
The principal and other administratives who are not TEFL specialists are valid sources to evaluate the HiSETs' practice.	13.5	23.5	10.7	52.2
Head teachers and other supervisors should pass a special course on HiSETs evaluation.	65.6	26.5	3	4.9
Every two or three years, all HiSETs should take a standard test of language proficiency, like TOEFL, to retain an acceptable level of general English.	51.6	35.7	3.2	9.5
In order to evaluate the performance of HiSETs working in different contexts (urban and rural areas, non-profit schools, schools for the gifted, etc.) different evaluation checklists should be developed.	59.8	30.5	3.1	6.7

Note: A=Agree; FA= Fairly Agree; FD= Fairly Disagree; D= Disagree
 Note: A=Agree; FA= Fairly Agree; FD= Fairly Disagree; D= Disagree

While 21.6% of the respondents fairly agree and 10.4% agree that the procedure for screening teachers was implemented based on research findings and scientific principles, 68% held the opposite view. The trainees' dissatisfaction with the current selection

procedure was cross-checked through two parallel items. Relatively half of the teachers (60.4%) voiced that the supreme teaching festival did not afford an optimal space for an English teacher to demonstrate all his or her skills and abilities. Further evidence for the participants' resentment derives from the teachers' disagreement (62.9%) with the perception that non-TEFL specialists, including the principal and other administratives, were not valid sources to appraise the HiSETs' practice; about one third of those who responded (37%) trusted the current assessors.

Although the non-TEFL specialists did not win the respondents' confidence, other English teachers did. A great majority of the trainees (approximately 78%) trusted their colleagues as evaluators; only a minority of them (22.3%) disfavored their colleagues. By the same token, approximately half of the teachers (45.5%) fairly conceded that the students should be added to the evaluators. All these ideas were further supported by the respondents' perceptions about the alternatives. More than half of the trainees, supported by one third of their colleagues (35%), considered that the running scheme for teacher evaluation was a generic checklist used to assess the performance of any subject teacher, not specifically English teachers'. Consequently, they believed that a separate evaluation scheme for English teachers should be developed. What reinforced the inadequacy of the running evaluation system was the respondents' strong consensus (89.6%) that the TEFL specialists, including university teachers and researchers, were sufficiently qualified to appraise their performance. Similarly, an overwhelming consent (92%) existed among the practicing teachers for the idea that if the head teachers and supervisors were to fulfill their role as evaluators they should receive professional and technical instructions on appraising the practice of English teachers.

Having voiced their opinions about the shortcomings of the current evaluation practice, the respondents also expressed their ideas about a set of alternatives for the existing evaluation scheme. While a minority (13.4%) did not support the idea that TEFL teachers should be ranked based on the effectiveness of their performance, a considerable proportion (approximately 80%) fully accord with the idea. Likewise, a majority (over 85%) of the

practicing teachers endorsed the resolution that all HiSETs should take a standard test of proficiency, like TOEFL, to retain an adequate level of general English. A low percentage (less than 10%), however, expressed their dissent against the inclusion of the test as one of the evaluation criteria. Moreover, the same degree of consensus was reached upon the contextualization of teacher appraisal. Opposed to a small fraction (9.8%), a substantial majority of the participants (90%) perceived that in order to evaluate the performance of HiSETs working in diverse contexts (that is, urban and rural areas, non-profit schools, schools for the gifted, and so forth) quite separate evaluation items should be listed.

The results in this section thoroughly support what Atai et al. (2012) found: The performance of English teachers in the mainstream education was appraised based on the proportion of the students who passed the course. Such an evaluation scheme reflects the process-product paradigm prevalent in the mid-1970s (Freeman, 1996) based on which teaching is led to and measured by a quantifiable outcome, that is, student learning. In other words, the current practice is the direct manifestation of the positivistic trend, or what Richards (1987) termed micro approach, which views student learning as the best indicator of the quantifiable teaching behavior.

Unlike previous investigations, the present study provided the participants with a number of alternatives for teacher evaluation. While the running system entirely neglected the contextual variables in evaluating the teachers' practice, a massive number of the trainees stressed that these variables should be taken into account in the evaluation scheme. A type of hermeneutic evaluation (Freeman, 1996) was preferred by the English teachers. That is, not only should the teaching practice be viewed from the participants' perspective, but contextual constraints should also be taken into consideration. The practicing teachers felt that their teaching was remarkably influenced by the context-specific variables, such as facilities and students' sociocultural/ educational background; the authorities, conversely, are implementing a context-free framework of teacher evaluation.

In addition, most of the practicing teachers consented that the observers and head teachers should complete an introductory course on the principles of conducting observation. The teachers' endorsement for the opinion most probably indicated that there was a wide gap between the observers', that is, the head teachers, and the student teachers' assumptions about the what and how of classroom observation. Bailey (2006) believes that one of the critical issues in conducting observation is that both the supervisor and the teacher should share the same conceptions (opinion) about the elements of observation. Otherwise, other downstream decisions, including teacher evaluation and deciding on the contents of INSTEP, would be prone to unreliability and invalidity. Such a discrepancy is underlined by Murdoch (1998) who contends that observations in almost all cases are carried out to examine whether classroom practice conducted by the teachers adjusts to the principles of good language teaching held by the observers or not. With a similar critical tone, Crandall (2000) asserts that observation has been employed by supervisors for the common purposes of supervision and evaluation.

5.3 Advantages of INSTEPs

The teachers were also asked to express their ideas about the advantages of the current INSTEP; the responses are illustrated in Table 2. More than two third of the respondents agreed that the presented materials were up-to-date and that INSTEP stimulated creativity in the trainees. Most notably, around 80% of the teachers, supported the INSTEPs since the programs provided the HiSETs with excellent opportunities to interact and share ideas with their colleagues. In terms of the general English proficiency, they acknowledged that the INSTEP slightly improved their reading (20.7%), pronunciation (24.3%), listening and speaking (23.5%), and writing (13.9%).

Table 3: Participants' perception about the advantages of the INSTEPs

	A %	FA	FD	D %
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Atai and Asadi

		%	%	
Presenting up-to-date materials	30.6	37.1	10	13.3
Stimulating creativity	30.9	33.3	12.8	13.4
Fostering the pronunciation of HiSETs	24.3	26.7	28.9	20.2
Fostering the writing ability of HiSETs	13.9	18.9	31.6	35.7
Providing opportunities to discuss issues with each other	59.9	22.5	13.2	4.3
Promoting the decision-making ability	34.4	27.5	26.5	11.7
Fostering the speaking and listening ability of HiSETs	23.5	27	27.5	22
Not being based on needs analysis and the HiSETs' ideas	17.5	20.1	31.9	30.3
Fostering the reading comprehension of HiSETs	20.7	24	32	23.3
Providing opportunities to analyze English course books	43.7	25.5	18.9	12
Teaching how to conduct classroom research to solve their context specific problems	24.1	27.6	29.7	18.7
Helping HiSETs to successfully deal with unexpected incidents during teaching	24.3	29.1	30.5	16.1
Discussing contextual constraints, such as short time	28.3	23.8	25.6	22.1

Note: A = Agree; FA = Fairly Agree; FD = Fairly Disagree; D = Disagree

Regarding the content of the programs, the participants saw the INSTEP as sites to review the materials they covered at university. A small group of the teachers (17%), however, entirely thought that the INSTEPs was informed by the needs analysis and was geared to the HiSETs' voice while 30% expressed their discord. An extra merit of the INSTEP was attributed to the opportunity it opened up for the trainees (43.7%) to analyze and evaluate the English course books.

What attracted most of the trainees corroborates what Singh and Richards (2006) pinpoint as one of the major advantages of INSTEP in the sense that these programs offer unique opportunities for teachers to share their experience and keep their knowledge of language pedagogy up to date. The minimum concomitant of such conventions is that, as Widdowson (1990) maintains, they make teachers feel they are members of a professional community.

A further finding verified by Atai and Khaki (2006) and Atai et al. (2012) relates to the teachers' critical need for general language proficiency. Theoretically, as Freeman and Johnson (1998) point out, today's practice of language teacher education still reflects the transmission model and skill-based theories. The authors' concern mirrors Schulz's (2000) view that the progress of teacher education has been "disappointedly small" (p. 516) which has, in turn, resulted in failure to educate language teachers with acceptable language proficiency. Such a failure is more foregrounded when we consider that a language teacher is also a language user (Trappes-Lomax, 2002) who should acquire an appropriate level of proficiency to handle classroom communication while teaching. Freeman (1996) also supports the idea that due to the deficient proficiency NNS teachers of English need INSTEP to maximize their language skills in general and oral proficiency in particular. The elicited responses accord with Gonzalez's (2003) data which uncovered the professional needs of 66 L2educatees in Columbia. Since most teachers felt that their language proficiency had drastically minimized after entering the profession, they underlined the language component as an extreme urgency. Such an incidence is verified by Beh-Afarin's (2007, p. 47) report that around "70% of senior high school teachers failed in an achievement test on a newly developed pre-university book."

5.4 Disadvantages of the INSTEPS

The second part of the third question targeted to elicit the HiSETs' perceptions about the shortcomings of the current INSTEP run by the ministry. Table 3 displays the teachers' responses.

Table 4: Participants' perceptions about the shortcomings of the current INSTEP

	A	FA	FD	D
	%	%	%	%
The INSTEPS are mostly teacher (educator)-centered.	45.4	34.1	9.2	11.4
The INSTEPS are too short.	44.7	32.2	7.9	13.1
The presented topics and materials are repeated.	39.9	39.2	9.9	11

Atai and Asadi

The syllabus is not based on needs analysis.	47.3	34.3	8.8	9.5
The educators are not familiar with school contexts.	17.9	33	13.9	35.3
No specialized sources are introduced in the INSTEP.	40.1	32.5	11.7	15.7
The educators are not TEFL specialists.	10.4	27	14.7	47.7
The INSTEP do not suggest practical techniques.	29.3	35.8	14.1	20.8
The INSTEPs is not based on systematic planning.	39.2	34.8	9.9	16.2
English teachers are not motivated to participate in the INSTEP.	41.6	33.4	9	15.8
The methodology adopted by the educators is inappropriate for the INSTEP.	24.2	41.1	12.6	22.1
The INSTEPs are not equipped with computer or OHP.	41.1	27.9	11.5	19.5
Many of the questions posed by HiSETs remain unanswered at the end of these courses.	38	34.9	11.6	16.3
Most HiSETs take part in the INSTEPs to get the certificate not to learn.	52	29.1	7.8	11.1
The INSTEPs are held during the educational year, they spoil the sequence of the daily classes.	31	30.9	11.8	26.2
The INSTEPs is not followed by any sort of follow-up supervision to check whether the presented materials are implemented in real language classrooms or not.	51.2	32.2	5.1	11.6

Note. A=Agree; FA= Fairly Agree; FD= Fairly Disagree; D= Disagree

One of the notorious pitfalls of the INSTEP associated with the teachers' reluctance to attend these programs. Nearly half of the respondents believed that their colleagues displayed unwillingness to take part in the INSTEP. Almost the same size of the trainees (52%), supported by a significant minority (29.1%), concurred that most HiSETs attended the INSTEP mainly for the principal purpose of getting the certificate. It seems that this reluctance might be explained if the other drawbacks of the programs are analyzed; that is, more than two third of the teachers believed that a plethora of the questions posed by trainees remained unanswered at the end of these programs. A small group of the trainees (16.3%), however, stated the opposite opinion. More explanations for the teachers' demotivation might stem from both the high percentage of those who did not favor the facilities of the INSTEP (69%), and those who did not appreciate the methodology adopted by the educators (63%).

The inefficiency of the INSTEPs, as the teachers' responses indicated, might find its roots in planning the programs. Needs analysis, for instance, was not carried out in the planning and administering stages of the programs while it was required, according to Dubin, and Wong (1990), to be conducted from the outset. Lack of needs analysis would result in the incongruence between the course contents and the educatees' needs and may cause reluctance on the part of the student teachers. A further negative consequence of this apparent discrepancy, as the percentage of the responses indicated, accounts for the fact that a significant number of the educatees' dilemmas were not addressed till the end of the formal INSTEPs. The unresolved agendas might be critical issues that would influence classroom practice negatively and, by implication, the teachers' professional career. These observations imply that without practical relevance, the materials presented in the INSTEPs would result in "tissue rejection," the term Holliday (1992, p. 403) borrowed from medicine so as to describe the practitioners' refusal of irrelevant arguments raised in INSTEPs.

In addition, the results of this section are consistent with what Tomlinson (1988) experienced in running short INSTEPs in Indonesia and expressed his growing concern for the ineffectiveness of the programs since the trainees were unable to materialize the received instructions. He concluded that running any short INSTEPs ran the risk of destroying the trainees' morale, damaging their confidence, and losing their competence. To tackle the problem, Tomlinson recommended that instead of one-shot INSTEPs teachers should take part in successive INSTEP, each followed by constant observation and analysis of trainees' real classes interspersed by delivering constructive feedback to them.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to disclose the alternatives the Iranian L2 teachers take up to foster their pedagogic content and support knowledge, and the deficiencies and benefits of the INSTEP held for the

HiSETs. The results are consistent with those of the previous investigations in that a sense of self-reliance, or in Atai, et al.'s terms (2012, p. 14), "personal investment", by the participants was portrayed, for the teachers mainly preferred their individual efforts to formal and institutional events. Further, serious inconsistencies between the INSTEP and the contextual constraints of ELT were illustrated, foregrounded in the divergence between the teachers' needs and the presented materials in the INSTEPS. The participants also called for not only a structural transformation of the current evaluation system but extensive modifications of the design and administration of the INSTEPS. Taken together, the results revealed that the INSTEP in the Iranian context represented idiosyncratic routes which were a consequence of, according to Atai et al. (2012), the top-down nature of the discourse between the policy makers and practitioners. In spite of all these drawbacks, the formal INSTEP afforded a dramatic event for the teachers to establish and fortify an intra-group association to generate and exchange constructive ideas and practical suggestions.

Finally, this study shed light on a few dimensions of the INSTEP. However, planning and implementation of INSTEP are multi-faceted phenomena that require an abundance of further investigations. Reflective teaching, for instance, can be qualitatively examined to see whether practicing teachers are competent enough to carry out the task. Investigations are also worth conducting to explicate the design and administration of a practice-oriented or bottom-up INSTEP for the HiSETs. If the current evaluation system is to transform, thorough studies should be carried out to come up with a list of tentative quantitative and/or qualitative criteria to promote the existing practice.

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Appendix: The questionnaire designed and distributed among the participants

I. How do you evaluate your teaching practice?

1. My students comment on my teaching practice.
2. The principal comments on my teaching practice.
3. After the class, I review the teaching practice.
4. The students' parents comment on my teaching practice.
5. While teaching, I analyze and evaluate my teaching practice.
6. My colleagues (other EFL teachers) observe my class and comment.
7. Based on the INSTEP materials, I evaluate my teaching practice.
8. Based on the students' performance on the final exam, I evaluate my teaching practice.
9. The head teacher observes my class and releases academic comments on my teaching practice.
10. I observe the teaching practice of my colleagues and compare mine with theirs.
11. While teaching, I keep journals and analyze them after the class.

12. Based on the students' performance on quizzes, I evaluate my teaching practice.
13. TEFL researchers, including university students and professors, observe my class and comment on my teaching practice.

II. From which of the following sources do you get new ideas for your teaching practice?

14. Relying on my own creativity
15. Doing research
16. Observing and critiquing my teaching practice
17. More experienced HiSETs
18. Observing and critiquing my colleagues' teaching practice
19. Attending the INSTEP
20. Studying books on TEFL
21. Attending at TEFL conferences
22. Taking part in internet forums
23. Reading TEFL journals
24. Attending the biannual meeting held by the educational group
25. Reading electronic sources (books, papers, ...)

III. What are the advantages of INSTEP?

26. The presented materials are up-to-date.
27. The INSTEP stimulate creativity in HiSETs.
28. The INSTEP improve the pronunciation of HiSETs.
29. The INSTEP improve the writing ability of HiSETs.
30. The INSTEP review the materials HiSETs passed at university.
31. The INSTEP provide excellent opportunities for the HiSETs to discuss issues with their colleagues.
32. The INSTEP promote the decision-making ability of HiSETs.
33. The INSTEP improve the speaking and listening ability of HiSETs.
34. The INSTEP are not based on the needs analysis and the HiSETs' ideas.
35. The INSTEP improve the reading comprehension of HiSETs.
36. The INSTEP provide an excellent opportunity to analyze the English course books.
37. The INSTEP teach HiSETs how to conduct classroom research to solve their context specific problems.
38. The INSTEP help HiSETs to successfully deal with unexpected incidents during teaching.

Atai and Asadi

39. The INSTEP discuss contextual constraints, such as short time, unmotivated students, lack of facilities,

IV. What are the disadvantages of INSTEP?

40. The INSTEP are mostly teacher (educator)-centered.
41. The INSTEP are too short.
42. The presented topics and materials are repeated.
43. The syllabus is not based on needs analysis.
44. The educators are not familiar with school contexts.
45. No specialized sources are introduced in the INSTEP.
46. The educators are not TEFL specialists.
47. The INSTEP do not suggest practical techniques.
48. The INSTEP are not based on systematic planning.
49. English teachers are not motivated to participate in the INSTEP.
50. The methodology adopted by the educators is inappropriate for the INSTEP.
51. The INSTEP are not equipped with computer or OHP.
52. Many of the questions posed by HiSETs remain unanswered at the end of these programs.
53. Most HiSETs take part in the INSTEP to get the certificate not to learn.
54. The INSTEP are held during the educational year, they spoil the sequence of the daily classes.
55. The INSTEP are not followed by any sort of follow-up supervision to check whether the presented materials are implemented in real language classrooms or not.

V. What's your idea about the current practice of teacher evaluation?

56. The procedure for choosing the good teacher is done based on research and scientific principles.
57. The current system of HiSETs evaluation is perfect.
58. A separate scheme should be designed to evaluate the teaching of HiSETs.
59. The performance of one English teacher should be evaluated by other HiSETs.
60. High school students should also systematically evaluate the performance of the HiSETs.
61. The supreme teaching festival is a perfect opportunity for a HiSET to display all her skills and abilities.

62. Students' parents should systematically evaluate the performance of HiSETs.
63. HiSETs should be ranked based on the effectiveness of their performance.
64. The current scheme of HiSETs evaluation is also used for the evaluation of subject teachers.
65. The evaluation of HiSETs should be done just by TEFL specialists (head teachers, university professors etc.).
66. The principal and other administratives who are not TEFL specialists are not valid sources to evaluate HiSETs.
67. Head teachers and other supervisors should pass a special course on HiSETs evaluation.
68. Every two or three years, all HiSETs should take a standard test of language proficiency, like TOEFL, to retain an acceptable level of general English.
69. In order to evaluate the performance of HiSETs working in different contexts (urban and rural areas, non-profit schools, schools for the gifted, etc.) different evaluation checklists should be developed.