



University of Tehran press

Iranian State School English Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Competence: Exploring the Role of Gender and Teaching Experience



Afsheen Rezai *✉ 0000-0001-9010-0168

Department of Teaching English, Faculty of Humanities, Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi University, Borujerd City, Iran.
Email: afsheen.rezai@abru.ac.ir



Zeinab Azizi ** 0000-0002-7492-1932

Department of Teaching English, Faculty of Humanities, Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi University, Borujerd City, Iran.
Email: zeinab.azizi@abru.ac.ir



Azam Naserpour *** 0000-0002-2398-7616

Department of Teaching English, Faculty of Humanities, Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi University, Borujerd City, Iran.
Email: aznaserpour@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

As English teachers' professional competence may be affected by different factors, it is necessary to investigate Iranian English teachers' perceptions of professional competence with respect to the role of gender and teaching experience. Hence, the aims of the present study are two-fold. First, to explore the Iranian state school English teachers' perceptions of professional competence and its components. Second, to investigate the role of gender and teaching experiences in the Iranian state school teachers' professional competence. To this aim, a total of 338 state school English teachers, including both genders were selected through a random sampling method. The participants responded to the professional competence questionnaire, developed and validated by Khodadadi and Maghsoodi (2020). The collected data were analyzed using the calculation of the percentage of each item, a Freedman test, an independent sample t-test, and a one-way ANOVA. Findings evidenced that the professional competence components, including knowledge, skills, and attitudes were considered important by the participants. Additionally, the results documented that there was not a statistically significant difference between the male teachers and female teachers concerning their professional competence. Furthermore, the results disclosed that there was not a statistically significant difference among the participants of different teaching experiences. The study ends with presenting a range of implications and suggestions for further research.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received: 03 May 2022
Received in revised form
09 July 2022
Accepted: 11 July 2022
Available online:
Spring2023

Keywords:

Professional competence;
Knowledge; Skills;
Attitudes; State school
English teachers; Gender;
Teaching experience

Rezai, A., Azizi, Z., & Naserpour, A. (2023). Iranian State School English Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Competence: Exploring the Role of Gender and Teaching Experience. *Journal of Foreign Language Research*, 13 (1), 109-128.



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Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jflr.2022.342541.952>

* Afsheen Rezai is an assistant professor in applied linguistics at University of Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi. He has published over 30 articles in local and international journals. His areas of interest include second language testing and assessment, teacher education, and online education.

** Zeinab Azizi is an assistant professor in applied linguistics at University of Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi. She has published over 30 articles in local and international journals. Her areas of interests include online education, Socio-cultural studies, and teacher education.

** Fatemeh Tajfirooz is a graduate student of Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (TJFL) at the University of Tehran.

*** Azam Naserpour is visiting lecturer in applied linguistics at University of Ayatollah Ozma Borujerdi. She has published many articles in local and international journals. Her areas of interest include teacher education, second language acquisition theories, and online education.

1. Introduction

Teachers are the most important pillar of any educational system that guarantee its success to achieve the educational goals. In order for teachers to function properly and play their educational role optimally, they must have the necessary professional competence (Khodamoradi & Maghsoodi, 2020; Namaziandost et al., 2021). Competence was taken from the Latin word *competia*, which means action, insight, skill, and responsibility in doing a task (Gnitecki, 2005). Mukhamadovna et al. (2020) define competence as a complex combination of knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and willingness of individuals to perform effectively in a specific field. In this regard, Richards and Schmidt (2002) define competence as the skills, knowledge, and, behavior that an individual needs to achieve effective performance in their job duties. Therefore, the word competence includes three main components of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The knowledge means awareness of the contents or information that an individual obtains through experiences and study. The skill means the ability of an individual to perform the job duties. And, the attitude refers to an individuals' desire toward the job and its duties (Soepriyatna, 2012).

In education, teachers' professional competence is a concept that appeared with the educational reforms around the world (Fazlali et al., 1996; Mulder, 2014; Rajaeenia et al., 2021). Bailey (2006) defines teachers' professional competence as "what teachers should know and be able to do" (p. 210). In another definition, Soepriyatna defines teachers' professional competence as "the skills, knowledge, and behaviors they need to carry out effective teaching" (2012, p. 38). Based on this, professionally qualified teachers have necessary and sufficient knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Therefore, not everyone can be a successful teacher (Rinantanti, 2015), because teaching is a very complex profession, including a wide range of personality traits, professional abilities, and specific knowledge (Cole & Chan, 2009).

A qualified teacher must have the basic knowledge to do the job duties well. This

knowledge includes sufficient knowledge of teaching content, educational methods and approaches, curriculum and educational content, characteristics of learners and their individual differences, educational organization, and its goals (Shulman, 1991). When a teacher has the necessary competence, she/he is familiar with the educational content and is proficient in the way of teaching them, has complete knowledge of the students and their way of learning, knows how to prepare the lesson plan and prepare the desired educational materials, knows the evaluation methods, and knows how to use them, knows how to communicate effectively with students, is proficient in creating and maintaining a safe, fun, and challenging learning environment in the classroom, is skilled in managing his classroom, is constantly improving her/his professional knowledge, and participates in professional development activities (Murray, 2009).

In relation to English teachers, as Richards (2011) points out, in order for an English teacher to be efficient in doing the given job duties, she/he must be professionally competent. This professional competence includes having sufficient mastery of the four language skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing), sufficient mastery of language components (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation), sufficient mastery of content knowledge, sufficient mastery of organizational and work environment knowledge, sufficient knowledge of the teacher's scientific and personal identity, educational reasoning skills, the ability to communicate between second language learning theories and educational applications in the classroom, and membership in specialized and professional groups in the field of language education. In general, the professional competence of English teachers includes educational, personal, social, professional, and language skills.

Considering that the professional competence of English language teachers is very important and has received a lot of attention in the past few decades, it is necessary to examine this key concept in detail in Iran. Although the previous studies have focused on determining and explaining the professional competence of

teachers in Iran (Khodamoradi & Maghsoodi, 2020; Mousavi et al., 2016; Saberi & Sahragerd, 2019), the perceptions of English language teachers in state schools have received scant attention. In exact words, most of the previous studies have been conducted with the aim of designing and validating professional competence questionnaires. In addition, there has been a scarcity of research to investigate the role of gender and teaching experience in the professional competence of English language teachers in Iranian state schools. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the English language teachers' perceptions of professional competence. Also, this study purported to investigate if there was a significant difference between the professional competence of male and female English language teachers. Further, the current study was to examine if there was a significant difference between the professional competence of English language teachers with different teaching experience. The results of this study can provide a deep understanding of the role of gender and teaching experience as two determining factors in the professional competence of English language teachers in Iranian state schools.

2. Literature Review

Teachers' Professional Competence

Many education experts believe that the quality of any educational system cannot exceed the quality of the teachers who work in that system (Barber & Mourshed, 2007; Rezai et al., 2022). Therefore, the evaluation of the quality of teachers has always been one of the concerns of those in charge of education. For this purpose, the term of teachers' professional competence in teacher education has always received considerable attention. Richards (2011) considers teachers' professional competence as a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that change and expand according to the needs of the educational system. In the literature, various definitions, models, and frameworks have been presented for teachers' professional competence. In the model presented by Huntly (2008), professional competence includes three major components, including professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional commitment. From this point of view, the professional knowledge is related to content knowledge, mastery of new educational methods and approaches, and

knowledge of learners. It defines professional practice as a teacher's ability to design educational materials, create a suitable and attractive learning environment for learners, and evaluate their learning and performance. And, the professional commitment refers to ethical conduct, correct and constructive interactions with learners, and proper classroom management.

In another model presented by Koster and Dengerink (2008), the teachers' professional competence is divided in five main components. The first component is specialized knowledge that includes technical information necessary for training. The second component is communication skills to communicate with learners. The third component is the management skills to adjust the curriculum according to the educational system and time management. The fourth component is educational skills that are used to identify the needs of learners, prepare appropriate educational materials, design learning activities, and use new technologies in education. And, the fifth component is behavioral competence, which entails commitment and a sense of responsibility, eagerness to learn and develop professional competence, and honesty.

According to the results of several studies on the current needs of educational environments, the nature of changes in these needs over time, and new educational theories, the National Institute of Education Singapore presented a model for teachers' professional competence that included three main components: knowledge, skills, and values. The knowledge component includes knowledge in the field of teaching theories, knowledge of curriculum planning, knowledge about the educational environment, content knowledge, self-knowledge and learner knowledge. The skills component includes teaching skills, communication skills, reflection skills, classroom management skills, and personal skills. The component of values includes things such as job commitment, belief in lifelong learning, belief in cooperative learning, belief in the educability of all students, belief in individual differences of students, and sense of responsibility.

The Turkish Ministry of Education has presented a new model of teachers' professional competence, which includes three main components: professional knowledge, professional skills, and attitudes and values

(Uztosun, 2018). Specialized knowledge, subject knowledge and regulatory knowledge constitute professional knowledge. Professional skills include classroom management skills, teaching process management skills, and the skills of preparing and holding tests and assessments. The attitudes and values consist of adherence to moral values, belief in participation and teamwork, belief in professional development, positive attitude towards learners, and adherence to moral values.

As can be inferred from the definitions and models presented above, the teachers' professional competence can be summarized in three main components, namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes. If a teacher intends to be effective in the teaching profession, she/he needs to have the necessary competence in these three main components. It should be noted that in the present study, to investigate the English language teachers' perceptions of professional competence in Iranian state schools, a questionnaire, developed by Khodamoradi and Maghsoodi (2020) was used to measure these three components.

Examining Teachers' Professional Competence in the Previous Studies

In the past, some studies have been conducted on teachers' professional competence across the world. Here, we critically review a few of them to lay the groundwork for the present study. In the research conducted in China, Yuwono (2005) reviewed the previous studies to determine the professional competence of English language teachers. The results evidenced that the professional competence of English teachers included basic knowledge for teaching, educational effectiveness in enhancing knowledge acquisition and intellectual characteristics that support continuous professional development, professional development in the community of practice, and coherence of professional development work. Also, Celik et al. (2013) compared the attitudes of English language teachers in Turkey and Lithuania regarding professional competence. Their findings showed that the English teachers in Turkey considered their professional development activities irrelevant, while the English teachers in Lithuania consider them

useful. Additionally, in another study conducted in Indonesia, Rinantanti et al. (2017) examined professional competence from the perspectives of English language teachers. The results uncovered that the majority of the participants (91.8%) believed that they had sufficient and necessary professional competence. Also, in another research conducted by Babanoğlu & Yardimci (2017) in Turkey, the professional competence of English language teachers in state schools and private language schools was examined with respect to the role of gender and age. The findings revealed that the participants had a positive attitude toward the development of professional competence. For them, the important components included lifelong and continuous professional development, self-confidence, and belief in the teaching profession. Further, the results showed that teachers of the private language schools were more concerned about developing their professional competence than teachers of state schools. Also, the results showed that gender had some effect on teachers' attitudes toward professional competence in favor of female teachers, while age was not a determining factor on their attitudes toward professional competence.

In the Iranian context, Pishghadam and Moafian (2009) investigated the role of multiple intelligences in the success of teachers' professional competence in language schools with respect to the role of gender. The results showed that gender is not a determining factor in the professional success of the participants. Moreover, in another study, Saberi and Sahragard (2019) developed and validated a questionnaire to measure the professional development of English language teachers in Iran. They prepared a questionnaire containing 18 items and asked 142 English language teachers in Shiraz to answer it. Their results led to the preparation of a questionnaire that measures two components: self-regulation and other-regulation. Also, in another study conducted by Mousavi et al. (2016), TESOL (2003) questionnaire measuring the standards of professional competence of English language teachers was examined in the Iranian environment. For this purpose, the perceptions of English language teachers who taught in private schools were surveyed. They argued that mastery of intercultural skills,

planning, management, and implementation of instruction is an appropriate assessment needed by all English language teachers in Iran. Also, the participants stated that describing the language and understanding the processes of language acquisition and development are of great importance in evaluating the professional competence of English language teachers. Likewise, Hosseinia et al. (2019) examined the professional competence of English language teachers in state schools and language schools. The results showed that there is a significant difference between the professional competence of English language teachers in state schools and language schools, so that teachers who teach in language schools have higher professional competence. Finally, in another study, the professional competence of adult-level English language teachers who taught in private schools was investigated by Atai et al. (2017). The findings showed that professional competence includes the components of professional skills, classroom management, planning skills, assessment skills, intercultural skills, understanding second language processes, and language description.

As may be inferred from the above-reviewed studies, although the perceptions of English language teachers regarding their professional competence have been examined in Iran, most of these studies have been conducted with the aim of developing and validating a questionnaire. Another limitation with them is that the number of participants was not large enough to gain a valid understanding of the professional competence of English language teachers in state schools. Also, the roles of gender and teaching experience as two influential variables have not been investigated specifically. Therefore, in response to these gaps, the present study investigated the following research questions:

1. What are English language teachers' perceptions of professional competence in Iranian state high schools?
2. Is there a statistically significant difference between the male and female English language teachers concerning their professional competence in Iranian state schools?
3. Is there a statistically significant difference between the English language

teachers' professional competence with different teaching experience in Iranian state schools?

3. Method of the Study

Setting and Participants

To collect the required data, a total of 338 English language teachers in Khorramabad City and Borujerd City were selected using a convenience sampling method. Convenience sampling method is used by researchers to select a number of available individuals to participate in a study within the framework of the number and size of the sample (McKay & Gass, 2016). They included both male (n=228) and female (n=110). The participants worked in guidance schools (n=165) and high schools (n=175) and they held different degrees, including B.A. (224), M.A. (110), and Ph.D. (n=4). They aged from 20 to 59 and they fell into three groups in terms of teaching experience: 1-10, 11-20, and 21-30. To access the participants, the first researcher referred to the education departments in Khorram Abad City (district one and two) and Borujerd City. In a friendly atmosphere, he spoke to the department's secondary education vice-chancellor and explained the objectives of this research. They agreed to give him the phone numbers of teachers. Since this research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and all the English teachers had installed the WhatsApp app on their smartphones, the researchers sent them the necessary explanations in a podcast. The researchers sent the podcast to 425 English teachers, and a total of 338 teachers agreed to participate in the present study and answer the electronic questionnaire. The researchers emphasized to the participants that their participation in the present study is voluntary, their responses would remain confidential with the researchers, and they would be informed about the results of the study.

Instruments

In the present study, the professional competence questionnaire of English language teachers, designed and validated by Khodamoradi and Maghsoodi (2020) was used to gather the required data. The questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part includes demographic information, such as teaching experience, gender, major and educational qualification. The second part includes questions measuring three factors,

namely knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The knowledge factor includes 12 items and measures concepts, such as research knowledge, educational knowledge, linguistic knowledge, information and communication technology knowledge, content knowledge, psychological knowledge, knowledge of curriculum planning and curriculum content, knowledge of educational content, knowledge of learners, and organizational knowledge. The skills factor includes 14 items. They measure concepts, such as time management and teaching skills, skills in using educational technology, test making skills, motivation skills, literacy skills, resource management skills, action research skills, participation skills, problem solving skills, class management skills, teaching skills, self-assessment skills, coordination skills between different components, and data-based decision-making skills. The attitude component includes 10 items. They measure concepts, such as having a sense of responsibility and commitment, believing in continuous learning, believing in correct approaches in education, being committed to moral principles, understanding students' feelings and conditions, believing in reflective teaching, feeling responsible for all students, believing in group and collaborative learning, believing in the principle of individual differences, believing in innovation and growth, and having correct approaches in education. It rests on the assumption that the English teachers who have high professional competence have sufficient knowledge, necessary skills and the right attitude to teaching. It should be noted that the reliability of the questionnaire was measured through Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.92$), which was acceptable for the present study. Also, the validity of the questionnaire had been checked through exploratory factor analysis and confirmatory factor analysis. However, the researchers gave the questionnaire to two university professors of Applied Linguistics at Lorestan University who had published several articles in the field of teacher education and invited them to assess the content validity of the items. Although they confirmed the general validity of the questionnaire, based on their comments, some minor modifications were made in terms of language and content. Afterward, the researchers invited two experts in translation to

translate the questionnaire into Persian. Finally, the original version of the questionnaire and the translated text from Farsi to English were compared. It was found that, they were highly similar concerning the content. The primary purpose of the translation was to assure that the participants' responses to the items were reliable and valid.

Data Collection Procedures

After selecting the questionnaire and evaluating its reliability and validity based on the objectives of the present study, it was distributed among the participants. For this purpose, the researchers sent the digital form of the questionnaire to the participants via WhatsApp and provided the necessary explanations to them through a podcast. They were asked to answer the questions of the questionnaire carefully and if they encountered a problem while answering or a question was incomprehensible to them, to contact the researchers so that the necessary explanations would be provided to them. It should be noted that the questionnaire started with a digital consent form for participating in the present study. The participants who were willing to participate in this research entered the response stage after signing the digital consent form.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data were analyzed in line with the research questions. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS, version 22. In addition to calculating the mean and standard deviation, the response percentage was calculated for each questionnaire item. Here, the aim was to determine the percentage of the participants who agreed with the content of the given item. Additionally, Friedman's test was used to determine which sub-factors had the greatest impact on the participants' professional competence. To answer the second research question exploring if there was a statistically significant difference between the professional competence of the male and female English teachers in Iran, an independent sample t-test was used. Also, to answer the third research question examining whether there was a statistically significant difference between the professional competence of the English teachers with different teaching experiences, a one-way ANOVA was used.

4. Results

The first research question examined the English language teachers' perception of professional competence in terms of three components of knowledge, skill, and attitude in Iranian state schools. As Table 1 shows (Appendix 1), concerning the knowledge component, almost 96 percent of the respondents thought that the knowledge of child development psychology is significant. Almost 97 percent of the respondents believed that the content knowledge is important. 100 percent of the participants agreed that the background, institution, and organizational knowledge (i.e., knowledge of the workplace) is important. Almost 94 percent of the English teachers opined that curriculum preparation and curriculum knowledge are crucial. Almost 98 percent of the respondents confirmed that education (i.e., historical, philosophical, sociological knowledge) is important. About 94 percent of the participants were of the opinion that the computer literacy is important. Almost 88 percent of the respondents stated that it is important to know learners' needs and their previous knowledge. About 87 percent of respondents agreed that the linguistic knowledge (i.e., vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, spelling, and pronunciation) is significant. Almost 100 percent of participants opined that the knowledge of educational content (i.e., use of educational knowledge in specific situations) is important. Almost 99 percent of English language teachers thought that the academic knowledge (e.g., knowing theories, approaches, and methods in general) is important. About 94 percent of the respondents believed that research knowledge is important. And, almost 96 percent of participants agreed that knowledge of strategies and technical knowledge is important (Appendix 1).

Regarding the skill component, almost 68 respondents thought that the action research skills (doing research in the classroom) are important. Almost 85 percent of the participants believed that the skills of designing assessment and measurement tools (test design) are important. Almost 96 percent of English teachers believed that the classroom management skills are significant. Almost 97 percent of respondents believed that collaboration skills (the ability to communicate with school staff and the

workplace) are crucial. Almost 97 percent of respondents opined that skill coordination (e.g., organizing learning elements to work well together) is important. Almost 97 percent of participants approved that data-driven decision-making skills (i.e., making decisions based on data and evidence) are important. Almost 94 percent of English teachers agreed that the skill of creating enthusiasm (i.e., creating motivation in students) is significant. Almost 90 percent of respondents believed that language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing) are important. Almost 90 percent of the participants believed that the skill of managing materials/resources (making good use of available resources) in school is important. Almost 92 percent of respondents confirmed that learning skills (i.e., applying theories in a real context) is significant. Almost 99 percent of the participants had the attitude that having problem solving skills is important. Almost 91 percent of the respondents agreed that the skill of reflection and evaluation of one's work is important. About 98 percent of participants stated that technology skills are important. Also, 97 percent of English teachers approved that the time management/lesson planning skills are important.

Concerning the attitudes component, almost 90 percent of the respondents mentioned that cooperation with other colleagues is important. Almost 98 percent of respondents agreed that it is important to believe in the individual differences of students. About 90 percent of the participants believed that belief in innovation and personal development of the teacher is important. Almost 90 percent of English teachers affirmed that it is important to believe in lifelong learning. About 92 percent of respondents thought that it is important to believe in reflective teaching (i.e., getting feedback from learners to improve their teaching). Also, almost 92 percent of the participants agree that caring for all students is important. About 87 percent of English language teachers confirmed that it is important to have commitment and a sense of responsibility. Besides, almost 95 percent of the respondents agreed that having the right attitude toward teaching and learning is important. Almost 95 percent of participants opined that it is important to show concern for professional ethics (e.g., following rules and ethical principles). And

almost 97 percent of English teachers thought it is important to understand students' feelings and problems (empathy).

As reported in Table 2, the results showed that all the sub-factors had a decisive role in the English language teachers' professional competence because the p-values were less than the Sig. value (0.05). Additionally, the researchers investigated which the sub-factor had the greatest impact. For this purpose, they used the Friedman test. As shown in Table 2, the M = 4.59 and SD = 0.19 for knowledge, M = 4.51 and SD=0.20) for skills, and M= 4.48 and SD= 0.26 for attitudes were calculated, respectively.

Table 2

Results of Mean, Standard Deviation, and P-values of English Teachers' Professional Competence Components

Component	M	SD	Sig.
Knowledge	4.59	.19	.034
Skills	4.51	.20	.054
Attitudes	4.48	.26	.41

The researchers used the Friedman test to determine if there was a significant difference between the sub-factors.

Table 3

Results of Friedman Test

N	338
Chi-Square	5.62
df	2
Asymp. Sig. a. Friedman Test	.31

As shown in Table 3, there was not a significant difference between the sub-factors in relation to their role in the professional competence of English teachers ($\chi^2(2) = 5.62$, $p = 0.031$). That is, the sub-factors of knowledge, skills, and attitudes played an effective role in forming the English teachers' professional competence.

The second research question examined if there was a significant difference between the male and female English language teachers concerning their professional competence in Iranian state schools. To answer this research question, an independent sample t-test was used. Prior to running this statistical procedure, the researchers checked if the collected data were normally distributed. For this purpose, they run the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. As reported in Table 4, since the significance level (sig) 0.082 for all the variables was greater than the test level (0.05), the researchers assured that the data were normally distributed.

Table 4 *Results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

English language teachers' professional competence	Variable
Sample size	338
Parameters of normal distribution	Mean
	SD
Smirnov-Kolmogorov test statistic	.46
Sig.	.082
Test result	It is normal

After ensuring that the data were normally distributed, the researchers used an independent sample t-test. For this test, first, the variances of two societies were examined. In other words, the test of equality of variances precedes the test of equality of means. Then, Levene's test was used to test the equality of variances. Therefore, if the significance level of Levene's test was greater than 0.05, the

assumption of equality of variances was accepted. It is necessary to examine the mean scores of the two groups concerning equality of variances. But if the assumption of equality of variances was rejected, it was essential to examine the mean scores of two groups in the case that the variances of the two groups were not equal.

Table 5 Results of The Independent Sample T-test for Both Genders

Variable	Gender	Mean	Levene's test	t-test		
			Sig.	t-value	Sig.	
Professional qualification of teachers	Male	4.495	.113	.000	-7.593	When the variances are assumed to be equal
	Female	4.607		.000	-7.069	When the variances are assumed to be unequal

As shown in Table 5, the sig. value of Levene's test was equal to 0.113, which was greater than 0.05. Therefore, the variance of English language teachers' professional competence scores was identical in both genders. For checking the mean scores between male and female English language teachers, the first line of the table should be considered. According to this line, the value of Sig. was equal to 0.000, which was less than the value of 0.05. Thus, it could be concluded that the mean scores of the variable of professional competence of the English language teachers between male and female did not show a significant difference. Additionally, the mean score of professional competence among the females (4.607) was not much different from that of the male (4.495). Therefore, it could be

concluded that the professional competence of the male and female English language teachers was the same in the Iranian EFL context.

The third research question explored if there was a significant difference between the professional competence of the English language teachers with different teaching experience in Iranian state schools. To answer this research question, a one-way ANOVA was used. The sameness of the mean of the groups was assessed in a way of if the significance level of the test was greater than (0.05), the mean of the variable scores were the same among different groups, and if the significance level of the test was less than 0.05, at least the mean scores of the two groups were not equal. To identify which groups had a significant mean difference, post hoc tests were used.

Table 6 Results of the One-way ANOVA for the Participants with Different Teaching Experience

Variable	Sources of changes	Sum of square deviations (SS)	df	Mean square deviations (MS)	F	Sig.

Professional qualification of English language teachers	Between Groups	.065	2	.033	1.736	.178
	Within Groups	6.31	335	.019		
	Total	6.375	337			

As presented in Table 6, the Sig. level for the professional qualification variable of English language teachers was greater than 0.05 and was equal to 0.178. Therefore, the mean scores of professional competence of the teachers in three levels of teaching experience showed no significant difference. It means that the professional competence did not differ among the English language teachers with different teaching experiences.

5. Discussion

This study purported to investigate English language teachers' perceptions of professional competence in Iranian state schools. Additionally, the role of gender and teaching experience as two effective factors on the professional competence of English language teachers in state schools was examined. The results showed that the participants opined that the components of knowledge, skill and attitude play an important role in determining their professional competence. Resonating with the findings of the present study, Yuwono's (2005) study in China showed that the components of knowledge necessary for teaching, effective teaching in acquiring knowledge, intellectual characteristics and coherence of professional development work constitute English language teachers' professional competence. Moreover, in line with the results of the study, Atai et al. (2017), which examined the professional competence of English language teachers working in private language schools at the adult level, found that their professional competence in the skill components, such as professional skills, planning, evaluation, and intercultural had strengths. In addition, in the study of Saberi and Sahragard (2019), the participating teachers believed that knowledge, skill, and experience

play a role in their professional competence more than any other factor. Also, in agreement with the findings of this study, Babanoğlu and Yardimci (2017), examining the attitude of two groups of state and private school teachers with regard to professional development in Turkey found that both groups have positive attitude toward the principles of professional development such as learning and continuous acquisition of knowledge. Similarly, in line with the results of the study, Rinantani et al. (2017) found that most teachers assessed their professional competence as good and favorable.

This part of the findings indicating that the skill component of the English language teachers' professional competence is of paramount importance receives support from the Applied ELT theory, proposed by Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012). Emphasizing the content and practical knowledge of language learning programs, this theory relies on the attitude that language classes can be a suitable platform for transferring knowledge to achieve life skills (Navari et al., 2017). In accordance with the findings of the study, Khodamoradi and Maghsoodi (2019) found that the attitude component, including topics, such as belief in practical teaching, responsibility, innovation and continuous learning, has a significant impact on the professional competence of English language teachers. In this respect, Sherman et al. (1997) argue that teachers' understanding and attitude of their professional competence is the most important aspect of professional development. It implies that the more positive experience of learning teachers have, the more inclined to integrate these experiences in education. In fact, teachers' positive attitudes have an effective role in their professional competence. As Mulder (2014) states, improving teachers' professional competence depends on the optimal quality and all-round professional development. In this

regard, Huntly (2008) argues that sufficient knowledge and successful experience of teachers have a positive effect on their professional performance.

The findings of the study can also be justified with the fact that the professional competence of English language teachers involves theoretical and practical dimensions (Lengkanawati, 2015). It means that English language teachers' professional competence includes a set of cognitive structures that help them to perform educational duties. From a practical perspective, it can be argued that the English language teachers' professional competence includes a set of high-level mental skills that show their ability to control the complex situations they have been involved in. In this respect, Pishgadam and Moafian (2009) argue that high-level mental skills of English language teachers in different fields (e.g., high intelligence in music or interpersonal communication) play an important role in professional competence and, accordingly, their professional success. From this point of view, it can be argued that the teachers' professional competence consists of micro-factors of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Additionally, the findings of this study may be explained based on Bandura's (1977) Self-efficacy theory. According to this theory, it may be argued that the English language teachers who believed in their ability to organize and implement educational activities may have had better job performance in the educational environment. In fact, according to this theory, it can be argued that the English language teachers may have avoided situations and tasks that were beyond their current knowledge and skills. Conversely, if they were confident in their abilities, they may have been encouraged to step into challenging situations and do the given difficult tasks. Furthermore, the findings of the study may be explained from the perspectives of the Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Along with this theory, it may be argued that the English language teachers' motivation to perform their job duties may have been derived from their psychological intrinsic needs. That is, they may have needed competence (i.e., a sense of self-efficacy), autonomy (i.e., a sense of control) and dependence (i.e., a sense of making connections

with the environment) to handle their job duties. Hence, if the English language teachers' needs were adequately met, it may have created positive effects in their job. These findings are consistent with the results of the previous studies (e.g., Aziz et al., 2014; Wetipo et al., 2015), reporting that teachers' professional competence is the most important determining factor in shaping their job motivation.

Moreover, the results of the present study documented that gender was not a determining factor in shaping the English language teachers' professional competence. In fact, as the findings of the present study disclosed, there was not a statistically significant difference between the male and female participants in terms of their professional competence. In line with these findings, Pishgadam and Zabihi (2011) found that concerning professional competence, there was not a meaningful significant correlation between the gender factor and multiple intelligences to achieve professional success. Moreover, they found that teaching experience had no significant effect on the participants' professional competence. Contrary to the findings of the present study, Babanoğlu and Yardimci (2017) uncovered that female teachers were more interested than the male teachers concerning the components of professional competence, such as continuity in professional development and self-confidence. To explain this finding that the professional competence of the male and female English language teachers were the same, we can refer to the fact that their working conditions might have been the same. That is, because the male and female English language teachers had to perform the same job duties in the same working environment, they might have needed to develop the same knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Finally, this part of the study indicating that teaching experience did not play a decisive role in the English language teachers' professional competence may be ascribed to the fact that during their teaching, they might have performed the same job duties, and, accordingly, this might have made them not put much effort into developing their professional competence.

6. Conclusion and Implications

As mentioned above, this study investigated the perceptions of English language teachers in state

schools towards professional competence. Besides, the role of gender and teaching experience as two determining factors on English language teachers' professional competence in state schools was studied. The findings showed that from the participants' viewpoints, the components of knowledge, skill and attitude play an important role in determining their professional competence. Furthermore, the findings showed that there was not a significant difference between the male and female English language teachers concerning their professional competence. Besides, the findings revealed that participants with more teaching experience did not have higher professional competence. In actual fact, it was revealed that the English language teachers must have sufficient knowledge, necessary skills, and positive attitudes toward their job so as to perform job duties well. In other words, it is necessary for English language teachers to improve their professional competence in the three dimensions of knowledge, skills and attitudes. If they have sufficient knowledge in teaching English language, but do not have the necessary skills and positive attitudes, they cannot perform their job duties well. Put simply, the components of knowledge, skills and attitudes have a direct and mutual relationship with each other and should be considered together. The findings disclosed that the professional competence of English language teachers was not affected by gender and teaching experience, meaning that male and female English language teachers have the same attitudes toward professional competence regardless of their teaching experience. It can be concluded that the professional competence of English language teachers is a multi-dimensional concept that should be given special attention.

In line with the obtained findings, some implications are presented. First, the education officials at the Ministry of Education are required to hold workshops continuously to develop, improve and update the professional competence of English teachers. In these workshops, it is necessary to pay attention to all three aspects of professional competence, including knowledge, skills and attitudes. Second, professors of teacher training centers and in-service course instructors should pay special attention to the professional

competence of student teachers and English language teachers. They need to use educational materials and teaching resources that can specifically enhance the professional competence of English language teachers in three aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Thirdly, the designers and developers of educational materials for English language courses at the bachelor's, master's and doctorate levels are required to allocate specialized units related to the professional competence of English language teachers in such a way they have to pass these units. Finally, English language teachers in state schools should make the necessary effort to improve their professional competence in three aspects of knowledge, skills and attitudes. To achieve this goal, they can participate in teacher training workshops held across the country, use useful resources published in leading scientific journals, and benefit from their colleagues' experiences. By improving their professional competence, they will have the essential abilities to perform their job duties optimally.

Given the limitations of the present study, some suggestions for further research are recommended. First, since the participants of this study were limited to English language teachers in Lorestan Province, it is needed to conduct more studies with participating English language teachers in other regions of Iran so as to generalize the credibility of the results of this study. Second, as the researchers used only English language teachers in state schools to conduct this study, it is essential to examine professional competence from the perspective of English language teachers in private language institutes. Third, because the present study was of a quantitative type, interested researchers can conduct qualitative studies to investigate the perceptions of English language teachers toward professional competence. Fourth, since this study was cross-sectional, longitudinal studies can be carried out in the future to determine how English teachers' professional competence changes over time. Last but not least, interested researchers can investigate the relationship between professional competence of English language teachers and their job performance by conducting a mixed-methods study.

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Appendix

Table 1

Results of Mean, Standard Deviation, and Percentage for EFL Teachers' Professional Competence

Item	Mean	Standard Deviation	Percentage
I think action research skill (doing small-scale research in the class) is important.	3.37	1.58	67.05
I think assessment tool design skill (designing tests) is important.	4.28	1.09	84.9
I think believing in cooperation and collaboration is important.	4.37	1.20	89.9
I think believing in diversity and individual differences is important.	4.60	0.49	98.20
I think believing in innovation and personal improvement is important.	4.51	0.70	89.3
I think believing in life-long learning is important.	4.50	0.68	89.1
I think believing in reflective teaching (getting feedback from learners for improvement) is important.	4.41	0.64	91.7
I think child development/psychology knowledge is important.	4.68	0.53	96.4
I think classroom management skill is important.	4.54	0.54	96.2
I think content area knowledge is important.	4.74	0.43	97.3
I think contextual, institutional, organizational knowledge (knowing the context) is important.	4.70	0.45	100

I think cooperative skill (school environment relationship skill) is important.	4.63	0.53	97.6
I think coordinating skills (organizing teaching elements to work well together) is important.	4.71	0.50	97.3
I think curriculum development and syllabus design knowledge is important.	4.56	0.61	93.5
I think data-driven decision-making skill (deciding based on data and evidence) is important.	4.67	0.51	97.6
I think educational knowledge (historical, philosophical, sociological knowledge) is important.	4.56	0.54	97.6
I think enthusiasm generation skill (motivating students) is important.	4.65	0.58	94.1
I think having care and concern for all students is important.	4.43	1.00	91.7
I think having commitment and feeling responsible is important.	4.25	1.14	87.6
I think having right attitudes towards teaching and learning is important.	4.73	0.62	95.3
I think ICT knowledge (computer literacy) is important.	4.49	0.60	94.1
I think language skills (listening, speaking, reading, & writing) is important.	4.67	0.81	89.9
I think learners knowledge (awareness of learners' needs, their prior knowledge,...) is important.	4.26	1.15	87.9
I think linguistic knowledge (vocabulary and grammatical knowledge) is important.	4.49	0.92	86.7
I think material/resource management skill (using the available resources well) is important.	4.52	0.67	90.2
I think pedagogical content knowledge (using pedagogical knowledge in a specific situation) is important.	4.76	0.44	99.7
I think pedagogical knowledge (knowing theories, approaches, methods in general) is important.	4.57	0.53	99.4
I think pedagogical skill (applying theories in a real context) is important.	4.49	0.74	92.3
I think problem-solving skill is important.	4.76	0.43	99.4
I think reflective and self-evaluative skill is important.	4.43	0.72	90.8
I think research knowledge is important.	4.69	0.58	93.8
I think showing concern about professional ethics (following moral rules and principles) is important.	4.60	0.58	95.0
I think strategies and technique knowledge is important.	4.57	0.56	96.2

I think technological skill is important.	4.68	0.50	97.7
I think time management/lesson plan skill is important.	4.75	0.50	97.0
I think understanding students' feelings and problems (empathy) is important.	4.48	0.58	96.7