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*Iranian Journal
of
Language Teaching Research*
ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Urmia University

Factors Influencing Teachers' Cognitions and Practices Underpinning Listening Instruction in Iranian Private English Language Institutes

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ABSTRACT

Exploration of second language teacher cognition in general and factors influencing it in particular has attracted the attention of many researchers over the last four decades. The study presented here explored potential factors that influenced teachers' cognitions and practices with regard to listening instruction and the development of this skill among learners in the thus far under-researched context of Iran. An exploratory and interpretive approach was adopted. Data were collected over a four-month period in private English Language institutes in Iran. Eight teachers' classes were observed 64 times, followed by 32 stimulated-recall interviews. Findings indicated that contextual factors, followed by learner variables and teachers' teaching experiences, were the most influential elements in shaping teacher cognitions and listening classroom practices. Teacher education was ranked as the least influential factor. There are some implications for strengthening the development of listening skills. These include the importance of experienced teachers' cognitions in improving teacher education and professional development courses, and being more consciously aware of the exacerbating effects of some contextual factors on listening instruction.

Keywords: Contextual factors, listening comprehension, teacher training courses, teacher cognition, teaching experience

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Received: 5 Oct. 2020

Revised version received: 3 May 2021

Accepted: 19 June 2021

Available online: 1 July 2021

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 10.30466/ijltr.2021.121044

Introduction

Language teaching in general and listening pedagogy in particular can be influenced by a range of elements. Teacher cognition is a key factor among these elements since what teachers believe permeates all aspects of language teaching (Borg, 2015). Teacher cognition can be defined as “what teachers know, think, and believe and how these relate to what teachers do” (Borg & Burns, 2008, p. 457). Teacher cognition is a multi-faceted and complex construct that demonstrates the existence of a strong connection between different aspects of teaching such as beliefs, plans, and decisions behind classroom practices (Borg, 2015; Golombek, 2015). As Borg (2015) notes, the construct has attracted scholars' attention over the past four decades. There is a reciprocal relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practices. While teacher cognition clearly shapes classroom practices, teachers' reflections on and experiences in the classroom also influence their cognitions (Breen et al., 2001; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999).

Listening is now regarded as being of central importance in language teaching. However, a number of scholars (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Vandergrift, 2007) have noted the need for an increase in research focus on this macro-skill. Vandergrift and Goh (2009) also asserted that for many years this skill has been an undervalued and neglected component, frequently developed incidentally via language exercises that relied on spoken language. More recently, Graham and Santos (2015) pointed out the lack of a principled approach and research attention to listening pedagogy that signal an on-going need for advancement in this area.

Vandergrift and Goh (2009) argued that the development of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches has brought listening to the fore as an important skill, particularly with regard to face-to-face interactions. However, in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context like Iran, contextual factors have meant that the skill of listening has not necessarily received sufficient attention in EFL classrooms (see, e.g., Hayati, 2008). The study presented here aimed to shed light on the factors that shape teachers' cognitions with regard to developing learners' listening proficiency in the EFL classroom in Iran, and the reciprocal relationship between underlying beliefs and classroom practices. In addition, our knowledge about factors influencing English teaching in the Iranian context has thus far been limited. While a number of influential factors have been identified at universities and high schools in the public sector (e.g. Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Eslami, 2010), there is a need for a study that focuses on these factors in private English institutes. Since listening plays an essential role in second language learning, identifying factors that impact on listening pedagogy from the perspective of both beliefs and practices could serve to improve EFL teaching in Iran. As we explain in more detail later, public sector provision of EFL courses, strongly influenced by a grammar-translation approach, is arguably in need of significant reform. An investigation into the more communicatively-oriented work of private EFL institutes may raise issues that could inform developments in the public sector.

The study also aims to contribute to listening pedagogy by going beyond classroom practices to investigate what factors influence teacher cognitions and, in turn, teachers' teaching methods. A primary concern was not the techniques teachers employed, but why they adopted these methods to help students practise the skill of listening. In light of Graham and Santos's (2015) assertion about an unprincipled approach, findings might reveal discrepancies between classroom practices and recommendations offered by scholars. Findings may also inform scholars, teacher educators, and curriculum and materials developers about required improvements in listening pedagogy, both in and beyond Iran. The research question that guided this study is as follows: What factors shape experienced teachers' cognitions and classroom listening practices in Iranian private English Institutes?

Literature review

A few studies have investigated listening pedagogy by studying teachers' stated beliefs and classroom practices (Graham & Santos, 2015; Graham et al., 2014) or by offering a description of the class environment (Siegel, 2014). These studies are, however, limited in number.

Graham et al. (2014) administered a questionnaire to 115 teachers of the so-called Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) working in state secondary schools in England, and teaching learners between the ages of 11 and 14. Findings revealed that while teachers strongly agreed that it is possible to teach learners how to be effective listeners, their stated listening practices were more towards completion of listening activities rather than teaching of listening strategies or improving listening skills. Thirteen teachers were subsequently observed and interviewed, and findings confirmed the questionnaire results that teachers seldom teach listening (Graham & Santos, 2015). Siegel (2014) attributed lack of focus on teaching listening to teachers' lack of pedagogical knowledge. In an investigation among ten EFL university lecturers (three Japanese teachers of English and seven English as first language [L1] teachers) in five tertiary institutions in Japan, he found that listening instruction was mostly characterised by comprehension questions, not teaching listening strategies.

Findings of the above studies reveal that the field would benefit from further research into the factors that shape teachers' beliefs and practices, as well as discrepancies between stated beliefs and classroom practices. A consideration of factors that can affect teachers' beliefs and classroom practices will help us gain a better understanding of listening pedagogy. Key influences include learner variables, contextual factors, teachers' own prior and current learning and teaching experiences, and disciplinary knowledge gained from teacher education programmes (Burns et al., 2015; Nishino, 2012).

With regard to learners, studies have indicated that teachers' perceptions of learners' needs, wishes, learning style, and language proficiency level can have significant effects on their use of particular approaches (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Nishino, 2012). Some scholars have also found that teachers modify their classroom practices so that they can be more compatible with their students' expectations, language proficiency level, and perceived and articulated needs (Nishino, 2012; Schulz, 2001).

A broad range of contextual factors has also been identified in the literature as affecting teachers' cognition and classroom practices. These include mandated curricula, the availability of materials, unrealistic expectations of parents, school regulations, assessment requirements, classroom layout (class size and classroom setting), and insufficient resources (Nishino, 2012). Woods (1996) distinguished between external and internal sources, and found that, with regard to external components, contextual factors (e.g., students' prior learning experiences, explicit curricula) shaped teachers' decisions. Internal aspects of teacher cognition included keeping sequential and coherent connections between different pedagogical decisions, understanding how prior decisions can reduce the complexity of actions arising from the current decision, and managing discrepancies between their own expectations and the outcomes of an activity. These contextual factors may constrain teachers from putting particular beliefs about effective additional language (L2) teaching into practice and explain apparent discrepancies between teacher cognition and classroom practices (Basturkmen, 2012).

Another contextual factor that has been acknowledged by researchers is the effect of teaching materials on teacher cognition and classroom practices (Guerretaz & Johnston, 2013; Tomlinson, 2012). Teaching materials can play the role of curriculum and influence classroom practices

regarding the topic, type and organisation of classroom discourse (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013). Given the essential role that textbooks often play, some teachers depend on them as the main authority and educational source in classrooms (Tomlinson, 2012). Graham and Santos (2015) found from their observational data that almost half (47%) of the sources of listening materials in secondary school MFL classrooms in England were taken from the textbook. These listening materials tended to enable students to complete listening tasks without any challenge in terms of cognitive and affective engagement by students. There can also be discrepancies between prescribed and actual use of textbooks in classrooms as teachers adapt what is in them based on perceptions of learners' needs and teachers' pedagogical goals (McGrath, 2013; Zacharias, 2005).

Two other factors that can influence the relationship between teachers' cognitions and classroom practices are teachers' prior learning experiences as learners, and their teaching experiences. Teachers arguably initially learn how to teach by means of their long experience as learners (Borg, 2009). That is, their prior experiences shape their cognitions and filter their decisions about practices in classrooms (Borg, 2003; Mansour, 2009). It has been argued that teachers consciously encourage or overlook some educational practices due to the influence of their own positive or negative experiences as learners (Ellis, 2006; Reeves, 2009).

In addition to teachers' experiences as learners, on-going experience also influences teachers' cognitions and practices. Nunan (1992) compared nine English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers' interactive decisions in Australia, using experience as a variable, to clarify the possible difference that experience might make. He concluded that novice teachers were more preoccupied with issues related to class management, while their experienced counterparts placed more emphasis on language issues. Gatbonton (2008) also found that the most strongly emphasised influencing factor for novice teachers was student attitudes, while experienced teachers gave more emphasis to language management (the language that the students need to be exposed to and the language that they produce). These differences can be attributed to the effect of teaching experience as an influential factor that can change teachers' cognitions and in turn influence their classroom practices. Teachers try various classroom practices and change their ideas or priorities based on new experiences over time.

In terms of teacher education courses, it is generally acknowledged that such programmes can have an important effect on teachers' cognitions and preconceptions (Borg 2011); however, mixed results have emerged from studies on this topic. For instance, some scholars such as Burri et al. (2017), and Busch (2010), have claimed that teacher education can change teachers' cognitions to some extent. On the other hand, other studies (e.g. Peacock, 2001; Urmston, 2003) have found no clear evidence of modification in teachers' cognitions; teachers' beliefs were quite resistant to change as a result of teacher education courses such as a BA course in teaching EFL or ESL. Borg (2011) argued that teacher education courses can have considerable impact on teachers' beliefs, although he acknowledged that this impact can be variable.

The present study

While previous studies have shed light on a range of factors shaping teachers' cognitions and classroom practices, the extent to which each factor can be influential is not completely clear. Researchers have mostly focused on the effect of one influential element such as teacher education courses (Borg, 2011; Burri et al., 2017) or teachers' teaching experiences (Gatbonton, 2008). There is arguably a need to take into account all potential factors in a study in order to achieve a broader picture of how these factors can shape teacher cognitions and their reciprocal relationship with classroom practices. In addition, potential factors that can influence teachers' cognitions regarding teaching listening skills have thus far not been addressed. Therefore, the

study presented here investigated the extent to which several factors can form and inform teachers' cognition and classroom practices concerning listening pedagogy. The study built on Borg's (2003) conceptualisation of factors that form teachers' cognition. Fig. 1 provides the framework that informed this study, and illustrates modifications that were made to Borg's articulation of the inter-relationship between teacher cognition and classroom practices to account for all potential factors. The effect of learner variables (e.g., learners' needs, expectations and proficiency level) is separated from contextual factors that can directly influence teacher cognition and classroom practice. The effect of teaching materials is also added to the contextual factors, as this was not sufficiently addressed by Borg as an influential factor. This framework might also enable other teachers and researchers in similar contexts to consider potential hurdles and opportunities in teaching listening, and how to keep to a minimum the exacerbating effects of a number of factors.

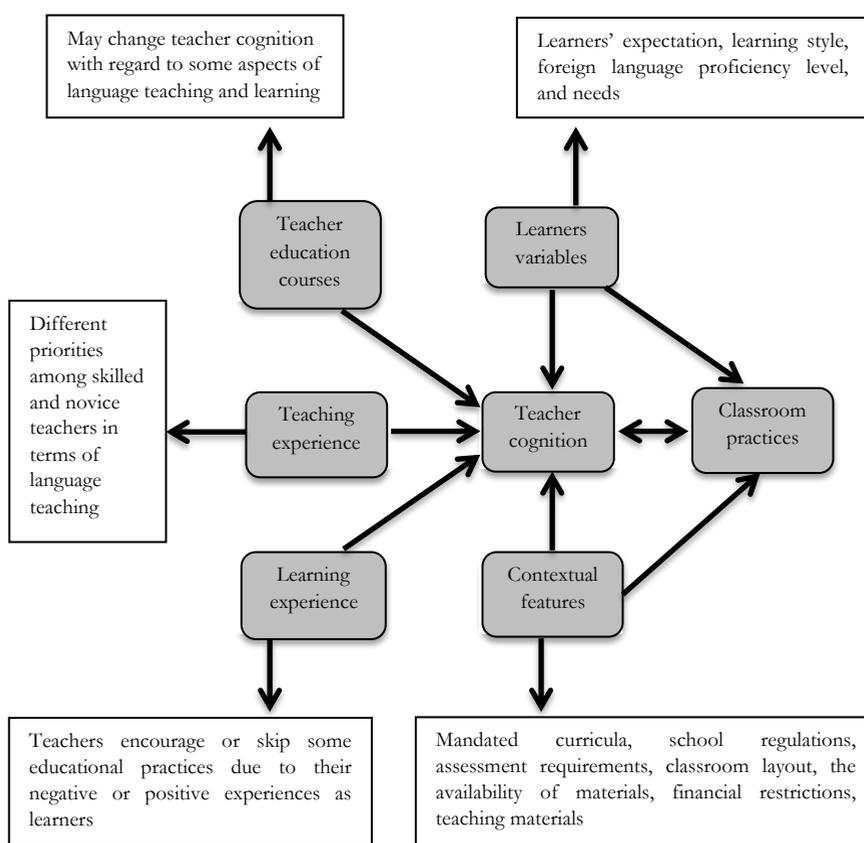


Figure 1. Relationship between Teacher Cognition, Classroom Practices and Influential Factors

The Iranian context

A number of constraints influence English courses in Iran. English is the predominant foreign language taught in Iran and is taught as a compulsory subject in the public education system.

English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum planning by Iran's Ministry of Education has uncovered that the lack of an ELT syllabus document is a significant influencing factor. In addition, materials developers have appeared to adhere strictly to the priorities as stated by the High Council of Cultural Revolution and the Ministry of Education, in particular to focus on improving students' reading skills for the purpose of studying scientific texts (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). Notwithstanding the importance of listening, the skill of listening in the L2 is not currently taught in public schools and universities in Iran.

Researchers in the Iranian context (Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Eslami, 2010) have asserted that there are inadequacies with regard to teacher education courses, syllabus documents, analyses of students' needs, and evaluation of students' language proficiency. Policy plays an essential role in teaching English in Iran, and political influences also constrain the design of English language teaching curricula (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010).

Dissatisfaction with teaching methods in the public education system and a substantial increase in the number of English learners over the last decade have also resulted in class sizes of up to 50 students. These two factors have led to a growth in the number of private EFL institutes (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015) that adhere to principles of CLT and learner-centred approaches to language teaching and learning (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Therefore, an investigation into what teachers think and believe in this context will likely raise issues that may be helpful in informing thinking and practice in the public education space in Iran, which is arguably in need of reform. It may also enable principals and curriculum developers (regardless of sector) to be aware of potential factors that have negative influence on practice. Teachers in public schools and universities may benefit from these findings with a view to reconsidering and enhancing practice with regard to the skill of listening.

Methodology

Participants

This research was conducted in seven private English institutes in the north of Iran, Rasht. Since teaching experience, teaching context, and teacher education courses might influence teachers' cognitions and classroom practices, purposive sampling was adopted to select participants according to a set of predetermined criteria. These criteria were:

- Teaching solely at private English language institutes,
- a Bachelor's or Master's degree in applied linguistics/ TESOL,
- at least three years of full-time teaching experience in TESOL, and
- willingness to participate in the study

Eight teachers (six females and two males) who were educated in Iran participated in this study. Their L1 was Farsi. Each participant had a Bachelor's or Master's degree in teaching English and a minimum of three years of teaching experience.

Classes

All seven institutes in this study operated in a similar way and used a similar curriculum and pedagogy. Instruction was typically organised into four to five semesters per year. Each semester comprised 20 sessions and each session lasted 90 minutes to two hours. The majority of learners were secondary school students at public schools, and classes were held in the evenings. Classes took place two or three times a week. The number of students ranged from six to 14 in each class. The predominant approach was communicative, and teaching materials were drawn from internationally available course books based on this orientation such as *American English File* (Oxford University Press) and *Interchange* (Cambridge University Press). English language was the medium of instruction, and teachers avoided using students' L1 (Persian) as much as possible. Most classes were well equipped with the Internet, large-screen TVs, computers (only for teachers); however, two classes were less well equipped and provided only CD players and TVs.

Data collection and analysis

Teachers who agreed to take part in observations and interviews contacted the primary researcher directly to arrange a meeting. During the meeting, the researcher answered teachers' questions about how the research would be conducted. This initial meeting was followed by a semi-structured interview of around half an hour with each teacher (See Appendix A). This enabled the researcher to explore how teachers conceptualised teaching the skill of listening in terms of emphasis on the skill and difficulties encountered, the approaches teachers adopted to instruct in the skill of listening, their beliefs regarding these approaches, and potential factors influencing their beliefs and classroom practices. The semi-structured interviews were followed by observations. Each teacher was observed twice per week. The schedule was one stimulated-recall interview after every two observations. Over a period of four months, six to nine observations of 90-minute classes were completed for each teacher. Dependability in data collection was enhanced by following the same procedure for all participants. All observed classes were audio-recorded, and interviews were conducted on the day following the two observations. Audio episodes related to teaching listening were used to stimulate teachers' cognitions underlying their classroom practices (See Appendix B for an example).

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently, and there was an iterative process between data collection and analysis. Inductive and deductive data coding procedures were adopted (Dörnyei, 2007). The audio-recordings of the interviews were fully transcribed and entered into a qualitative data analysis computer programme (NVivo). Transcripts were then read several times by the primary researcher, and initial codes were assigned. The coding process involved a range of activities, including labelling extracts of the transcribed data with codes, examining codes for overlap, and grouping codes into broader themes. Data were coded inductively and comparatively by comparing one unit of information with the next, looking for recurrent information. For example, in response to a question about activating background knowledge, one teacher said, 'my experience shows that when students know about the text, I mean the topic, they understand the listening task better' (Elham, second interview). This answer was coded as 'the effect of teaching experience on teaching listening.'

The second-level coding went beyond descriptive labelling of relevant data segments to capture more coherent and cohesive categories to explore influential factors in shaping teachers' cognitions and listening classroom practices.

The findings of qualitative studies are also shaped by researchers' personal interpretations and participants' accounts, and there is therefore no benchmark by which to establish dependability

(trustworthiness) in the traditional sense (Wolcott, 2005). Mindful of these constraints, efforts were made in this study to achieve dependability and consistency by triangulation (employing different sources of data), and precision in data analysis. In order to assist any similar future studies that may want to follow the approach adopted in this study, the primary researcher created an audit trail with detailed descriptions of how data were collected, coding categories derived, and decisions made.

Results and discussion

Table 1 gives information about the identified factors that influenced teachers' cognitions and listening classroom practices. The five main categories identified were contextual factors, learners, teaching experience, teachers' experience as learners, and teacher education courses. The numbers in the table indicate the frequencies with which each influential factor was mentioned by teachers in the interviews, and the total number of occasions of mention.

Table 1
Factors Influencing Teachers' Cognitions and Classroom Practices

Teachers' names (pseudonyms)	Elahe	Majid	Nina	Rana	Sanaz	Shilan	Sina	Vida	
Factors									Total
Contextual factors	4	9	6	15	1	9	9	8	61
Learners	4	9	9	6	4	3	9	5	49
Teaching experience	4	0	2	5	4	9	2	2	28
Teachers' experience as learners	2	2	3	0	0	0	1	1	9
Teacher education courses	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	1	5

While the observation and interview findings revealed that teachers placed emphasis on teaching listening and acknowledged the importance of this skill, a range of factors had negative effects on practice. Due to time limitations, some teachers skipped a number of listening activities that might have drawn on authentic materials, and only one teacher encouraged extensive listening. Teachers believed that the curriculum developed by principals in the private English institutes needed to place more emphasis on listening by providing more time and allowing teachers to use more supplementary listening materials.

It was also found that teacher education courses appeared to have limited effect on classroom practices and shaping teacher cognitions. However, the available textbooks enabled teachers to make their classroom practices more organised. Teachers trusted these materials, as they believed that knowledgeable scholars had developed these textbooks and that following the activities included in these books would improve learners' listening skills. For countries like Iran where it seems that teacher education courses do not offer much in terms of enhancing listening instruction, teaching materials thus played an essential role in perceived enhancement of the skill.

Contextual factors

The effect of contextual factors was the most frequently stated element in the interviews. The entire group of eight teachers referred to contextual factors on 61 occasions. Contextual factors in this study were divided into three categories: teaching materials (course books, mentioned 30 times), limited time (mentioned 22 times), and curriculum makers (i.e., the principals of Institutes as those who decide on the curriculum, mentioned nine times). These three categories are described below.

The effect of teaching materials on teachers' classroom practices was perceived as the most influential factor. Six teachers (except Sanaz and Vida) placed emphasis on this factor. Teachers noted that the frequency of listening instruction depends on the coursebook. For example, 'it [how often listening is taught] depends on the book and the number of listening tasks in the book' (Rana); 'I must say that every other session I teach listening, I think it depends on the book exactly' (Sina). In explaining some classroom practices, teachers stated that they only followed their course books and what is expected to be taught. Nina explained:

Exactly the task was this, that they needed to listen and take notes, because of that I did ... because of the instruction in the book I asked them to take note ... I was supposed to do that as it was the goal of the task in the book.

As Majid said:

I have to say I am very dependent on the book that I teach, because when I'm using American English File I'm using a different way, I'm teaching a different way when I'm teaching World English book ...

Six teachers strictly followed the textbooks and their teaching method was influenced by these materials. It was also observed that all teachers tried to follow all steps designed for the listening tasks in their coursebooks, supporting a finding of Tomlinson's (2012) study that teaching materials are the main authority in some classrooms. These can play the role of curriculum and influence classroom practices based on the topic, type and organisation of classroom discourse (Guerrettaz & Johnston, 2013).

Although all teachers followed all listening tasks in their teaching materials, two teachers (Elahe and Shilan) sometimes modified listening tasks because they believed that those modifications were necessary to teach some listening tasks more effectively and to better suit their learners. For instance:

I think this book we are teaching, Interchange, doesn't have so many tasks that can be done, doesn't involve students that much ... so I try to add more things such as speaking, guessing, such as following up questions to the task to keep students more involved. (Elahe)

Some experienced teachers, it appears, have enough self-confidence and knowledge to make some modifications to listening tasks, thereby, in their perception, making most of them more achievable and interesting for the learners. This is also compatible with earlier findings that there are some discrepancies between prescribed and actual use of textbooks in classrooms based on learners' perceived needs and teachers' pedagogical goals (Zacharias, 2005). The current findings suggest that teachers and curriculum developers need to place more emphasis on the effect of teaching materials due to their influence on classroom practices. Findings indicate that even experienced teachers can become subject to the influence of textbooks. While Woods (1996) enumerated a number of internal and external factors that shape English language teaching, the

effect of teaching materials was not addressed. The necessity of investigating the effect of teaching materials as one of the most influential factors in shaping classroom practice is evident.

Since teaching materials had significant effect on listening instruction, it would seem that incorporating more listening activities into textbooks could lead to improving listening instruction. Learners would thus be more exposed to the target language, potentially improving listening comprehension. It has been noted that teachers seldom teach listening, and elements such as teaching listening strategies and listening skills are missing in classes (Graham & Santos, 2015; Siegel, 2014). These important elements might also be added to textbooks and teachers' guidebooks to enhance listening instruction.

The second important element with regard to contextual factors was time. Although teachers emphasised listening instruction as prescribed in the textbooks, all teachers (except Elahe and Sanaz) considered limited time as a barrier in teaching listening. The common reason for omitting a number of listening tasks from the textbooks was due to time constraints. For instance, when Nina was asked why she skipped one listening task and asked learners to just complete it at home, she responded, 'we have just four hours per week and it's really difficult to manage the time ... and we have a lot of things to do and I can't spend time on each extra listening task in the workbook.'

Teachers believed that limited classroom time meant that they could not spend enough time on teaching listening. Similar to other classroom-based studies, consideration for time in the lesson and the course was an important external contextual factor that shaped teachers' decisions (Woods, 1996). A number of teachers' main beliefs and principles underpinning their classroom practices are also strongly connected to covering materials over the expected time (Graham et al., 2014). Concerning the context of Iran, the above findings support those of previous studies that have indicated that teachers regarded the persistent constraint of time as a barrier for the effective teaching of EFL (Hayati, 2008; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). Private English institutes have been established in Iran in response to the lack of sufficient time being devoted in public schools for teaching English. However, the findings revealed that the extra time (3 to 4 hours) in these institutes has not been considered enough by teachers who still feel that they are under time pressure. The implication is that an increase in teaching hours is needed both in private and public contexts in order to improve teaching quality.

The third important contextual factor was the curriculum makers (in this case the principals of Institutes), noted nine times in interviews by four teachers. The principals could influence teachers' classroom practices by making the final decision about the number of sessions and teaching materials that must be covered during a semester. Generally, principals design or develop the curricula in private English institutes in Iran and teachers are mostly required to follow them. Teachers addressed the mandated curriculum as an important factor that can shape their classroom practices. Teachers were not happy with the curriculum as they believed that they had only two sessions a week and had to teach several units. Therefore, they did not have enough time to place more emphasis on the skill of listening. These findings corroborate the claim by a number of scholars that teachers in Iran considered some context-based constraints including mandated curriculum and didactic policies as barriers in teaching English (Hayati, 2008; Mellati et al., 2013), especially ELT curriculum planning by the Ministry of Education in public schools and universities (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). Researchers have also noted explicit curriculum purposes and constraints as influential factors in other contexts (Basturkmen, 2014; Woods, 1996).

Limited time not only had negative impact on teachers' classroom practices, but also seemed to influence decisions made by the curriculum developers. They might have been aware of the importance of listening for L2 learning and familiar with notions such as extensive listening and authentic materials. However, limited instructional time persists as a barrier against emphasising

listening in the curriculum. It seems that curriculum makers considered listening as a skill that will improve on its own, and completing activities in textbooks would be enough to fulfil this purpose.

The effect of learner variables

Findings indicated that learner variables were the second important element (after contextual factors), frequently noted as shaping teachers' cognitions and listening classroom practices. These were noted a total of 49 times across eight participants. Teachers emphasised learners' proficiency level, motivation, needs, and expectations as factors that can affect their classroom practices. All teachers noted that they sometimes changed classroom practices and type of activities to suit their learners. The following excerpts concerning learners' English proficiency demonstrate the impact of learner variables, and that teachers should take into account students' needs and conditions and choose the best classroom activity to suit them. Rana noted, 'if they [students] are at lower levels, I want them to listen and write the text, write the script.' Elahe and Shilan pointed out the effect of their students' motivation on their listening instruction practices. They tried to make listening more interesting by using authentic materials.

The above findings are in accordance with the scholarly literature on this topic, that teachers' cognitions are influenced by their own teaching contexts, and that they need to take into account their learners' needs and conditions (Borg, 2015; Nishino, 2012). In line with earlier findings, teachers' perceptions of learners' needs and language proficiency level can have important effects on their use of particular methodologies (Burgess & Etherington, 2002). However, the steps that teachers took to teach listening were essentially the same regardless of the level of the students. Teachers claimed that they modified classroom practices based on students' needs and motivation, but the limited changes that they made (e.g., replaying the recorded text, asking students to follow a transcript while listening, and discussing the topic of the text before listening) were mainly aimed at completion of the activities, not at addressing learner variables.

Teaching experience

The effect of teaching experience was the third commonly stated factor. Seven teachers referred to their teaching experience to explain the beliefs and principles underpinning their listening instruction. They believed that their teaching experience was helpful when it came to assisting their learners to tackle the barriers they encountered in listening. They argued that teaching English for a long time and working in different institutes enabled them to predict students' difficulties and choose different activities to improve students' listening skills. The following comment from Sina exemplifies the effect of this factor: 'my experience helps me a lot and it gives me clues to deal with different students and different problems.'

When explaining some classroom practices, teachers stated that their teaching experience informed a number of their listening classroom practices. For example, when Shilan was asked why she asked learners to repeat sentences after she paused the recording, she replied, 'according to my experience, repeating is very important for listening because I can check some details ... I can check some of the words with them [students].' Sina described why he clarified or previewed the task requirements: 'according to my experience, if students know that, what the subject of the listening is, it somehow helps them to focus. It helps them to concentrate.' These excerpts show that teachers draw upon a range of classroom practices based on experientially mediated beliefs about how they can improve learners' performance in listening. These findings confirm the claim by a number of scholars that teaching experience shapes teachers' cognitions and filters their decisions in classrooms (Gatbonton, 2008; Richards, 1998).

It was interesting that a number of teachers in their first semi-structured interview pointed to their teaching experience as the most important factor in shaping their cognitions and classroom practices. However, after the observations and during their stimulated-recall interviews they mostly referred to contextual factors to justify their classroom practices. This appears to demonstrate that even experienced teachers may overestimate the influence of their teaching experience. It also indicates that classroom realities can hinder teachers from putting their experience and knowledge into practice. The discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and classroom practices can also be attributed to these contextual factors. Finally, teachers stated that there was limited opportunity to share their experiences regarding effective listening activities with novice teachers or curriculum developers.

Teachers' experience as learners

The effect of teachers' own experiences as learners was the fourth commonly stated factor in interviews, with five teachers mentioning this on nine occasions. Whereas three teachers (Rana, Sanaz, and Shilan) never talked about the effect of their learning experiences on their listening pedagogy, two teachers avoided using a number of classroom activities based on their negative learning experiences. For example, one participant stated, 'I don't like to give them homework, I don't know why, maybe because when I was a student, I didn't like homework a lot, that's why I think maybe it was so boring' (Majid). Nina and Vida chose to give more attention to listening due to the difficulties they had experienced in L2 learning and a subsequent recognition of the importance of listening in English learning. Nina said, 'when I was a learner, I had some difficulties with different parts of, you know, listening. I know it was important, but my teachers unfortunately didn't help me a lot.'

The above findings corroborate Borg's (2009) argument that teachers learn how to teach by means of their long experience as learners. They also confirm the claim by a number of scholars that teachers' learning experiences shape their beliefs and principles and filter their decisions in classrooms (Borg, 2003; Mansour, 2009). It can be said that teachers do not necessarily need to have positive experiences during their language learning to improve their teaching skills. Even teachers' negative experiences could enable them to realise what works in a class and which classroom practices would result in helping learners to improve their listening skills.

Teacher education courses

Findings showed that the effect of teacher education courses appeared to be less influential than other factors. Only four teachers on five occasions believed that these courses helped them when teaching listening. However, these teachers did not refer to their courses at university. Rather, they just considered a number of short in-service professional development courses held by the private English institute where they were working. Vida commented, 'in the TTC [teacher training course] in our institute, we learned some methods and we studied some books ... We learned how to teach. For example, first pre-teach the new words then write a question on the board.'

Findings indicate that the effect of teacher education courses may not be a major factor shaping teachers' thinking and acting. Half of the teachers did not refer to teacher preparation courses at university and only four teachers referred to in-service teacher development courses. They believed that the courses helped them to meet the standard of knowledge and proficiency that is required for teaching in private English institutes. Findings in this study contrast with those of a number of studies that have shown that teacher education programmes play a role in changing teacher cognitions (Ferguson & Donno, 2003; Mattheoudakis, 2007). However, they support the findings of another study in Iran that teacher education centres were not very successful in training English language teachers and providing them with necessary practical knowledge for

teaching (Nezakat-Alhossaini & Ketabi, 2012). Also, it seemed that in-house teacher development courses held by private English institutes for in-service English teachers had a limited effect. They were, however, apparently more effective than the courses provided by teacher education centres managed by the Ministry of Education and universities.

In summary, against a backdrop of limited efficacy through teacher education initiatives, textbook-driven learning, lack of time, and teachers' prior experiences seemed to shape teachers' beliefs and practices in a context where languages were ostensibly being taught and learned for communicative purposes. These factors have implications for the public sector in Iran, with its stronger focus on more traditional teaching methods, in particular around how teachers might be supported to move beyond the limitations of a textbook in ways that might promote more extensive listening outside of class.

Conclusion, limitations and avenues for further research

The main purpose of this study was to shed light on potential factors influencing teachers' cognitions and practices with regard to the skill of EFL listening in a context where, in contrast to Vandergrift and Goh's (2009) assertion, listening is arguably an undervalued or less emphasised skill. The findings from the present study illustrate that teachers considered the effect of contextual factors more influential than any other elements, followed by learner variables. While a number of studies have focused on just one aspect influencing English teaching (e.g., the effect of teaching experience or teacher education courses), the present work has concentrated on a range of potential factors so as to investigate each factor separately and to discern to what extent a given factor may affect teacher cognition and listening pedagogy. The study has also aimed to clarify which elements within contextual factors particularly influence teaching the skill of listening.

Findings showed that teacher education courses did not have a noticeable effect on shaping teacher cognitions and classroom practices. Therefore, the findings may help those who work in teacher education to be more aware of how, and to what extent, different factors influence teachers' cognitions and classroom practices. Teacher educators can consider experienced teachers' cognitions as an important basis for discussion and reflection on how to improve teacher education and professional development courses. Furthermore, principals of language institutes and curriculum makers might be encouraged to take into account the exacerbating effects of several contextual factors and how to keep the impact of these effects to a minimum. Finally, teachers can be made more consciously aware that some contextual factors, such as large class size, lack of teaching materials, and heterogeneous classes, may have exacerbating effects on their teaching and may hamper teachers from putting their cognitions into practice.

This study was limited in two key respects. That is, it was restricted to seven private English institutes and also to a limited number of teachers who spoke English as an L2. Therefore, further investigations into teachers in Iran, or in other EFL or ESL contexts, drawing on a broader range of institutions and a larger number of participants, will help us to gain a better understanding of listening instruction and teacher cognitions. Further studies might also provide more information about the extent to which contextual factors have exacerbating or beneficial effects on listening instruction in other contexts. Additionally, further research could investigate in more detail what teachers think of other factors such as the effectiveness of teacher education courses and their experience as learners in other EFL and ESL contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Semi-structure interview questions

Questions for the first interview. Can you tell me about ...

your teaching experiences

the extent to which you emphasize the skill of listening

the difficulty of teaching the skill of listening in comparison with other skills

your first priority in dealing with listening tasks (e.g., comprehension, correct answer)

Factors influencing teacher cognition

There are a lot of factors which may shape teachers' beliefs for teaching the skill of listening as below:

Contextual factors (e.g. students, facilities, materials, students' needs, and so on)

The teacher's experience and knowledge

The teacher's experience as a learner

The effects of teacher training courses

Which factors are more important in shaping your teaching beliefs and choosing your classroom practices? Why?

Can you tell which factors are more influential in Iranian context? Why?

Appendix B

Stimulated-recall questions and sample transcript

Interviewer: Before listening, you asked some questions about a monkey. Why? (Observation 1, 3 min 40 sec)

I wanted to know if students know, if students know about that animal or not because they were going to listen or hear something about that monkey. **Interviewer: Just this or anything else?** Because the listening that they were going to listen was about the animal and how it helps ill people to survive or to move that's why I asked them if they know anything about that monkey...

Interviewer: You used a picture, can you tell me why? Because it can get students' attention better and [uh] students can deal with the pictures much better than anything else. If I go through explanations, it takes a lot of time for them looking at the picture it can help them to understand better. **Interviewer: And what type of words do you show with pictures?** Any kinds of words that can be shown by pictures. For example, the objects that are around us...

Interviewer: What did you do here (activating learners' background knowledge)? (4 min 10 sec & 5 min 40 sec)

I tried to provide some parts of the listening that they were going to listen and I tried to explain and make it clear for students that they are going to listen to some disabled people that they are helped by that kind of monkey. **I: Why did you do that?** Because the students didn't have any ideas about the listening and I gave them some information to make it easy for them to understand the listening.

I: Before listening, you wrote some words on board (e.g. assist & dexterous). Why? (5 min 17 sec): because they were some new words that I was sure that the students didn't know about them, they would listen those words in the listening, and by writing them on the board and explaining the meaning it would be easier for them to deal with the listening part.