



EXPLORING IRANIAN EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE ONLINE IN-SERVICE TRAINING

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Abstract:

It is widely acknowledged that in order to improve the quality of education in schools, there is a need to place pedagogy and its training implications at the center of teacher education reform. This study investigated the EFL teachers' perception of the online in-service training. In doing so, an adapted 30-item questionnaire, having been piloted, was administered to 32 Iranian high school English teachers out of a total population of 40 teachers selected based on convenience sampling in Fouman and Somesara high schools in Guilan, Iran. Next, to add depth and detail to the participants' responses to the questionnaire, a five-item interview was conducted with volunteer participants. The results of analyses revealed that there was not any statistically significant mean difference in the perceptions of male and female teachers about online in-service training (INSET). However, statistically significant differences were found among the teachers in terms of their university degrees and teaching experiences. The teachers were reported to view online programs as an essential tool needed for teachers' professional development. The findings can be utilized pedagogically by teachers as an encouraging factor to attend the online INSET courses and, most importantly, by education administration to hold such courses more effectively.

Keywords: quality of education, Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions, online in-service training

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1. Introduction

Without a shadow of doubt, education is one of the main concerns all over the world as it can bring about learning experiences to lead students from the darkness of ignorance to the light of knowledge. Teachers play a key role to bring about this transformation.

Historically, there has been a shift in the philosophy of teaching and learning. Shifts in this area show a deviation from INSET approaches observed by Borko, Jacobs, and Koellner (2010), in which teachers were expected to learn a clearly defined body of skills through a well-specified process, often delivered in one-shot workshops or courses towards online INSET which is an ongoing process during the period of teaching practice.

With the great changes in the systems of education in the world, teacher education and teacher training have also undergone some changes due to the emergence of communication technologies. The use of online INSET supported by distance learning materials and school has been strongly advocated as a way of closing the gap between theory and practice (Mattson, 2006), and raising the quality of teaching and learning in schools (O'Sullivan, 2006). Teachers now receive training online instead of attending INSET courses.

2. Review of Literature

INSET, which is a part of life-long education, aims to provide employees with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that would enable them to become more successful, productive, and happy individuals in their professional lives (Uline, 2001). Fullan (2001), further argues that increasing the quality of the education system and instruction, not only the teacher but also all the school personnel should attend INSET programs for the same purpose.

Researchers have also considered the componential gains of INSET programs differently. For example, some researchers (e.g. Brown, 2007; Rahimi, 2008; Tippelt & Amoros, 2003) include knowledge and skills that a professional gain to manage and run the profession within the structure of the work place as crucial components. They argue that professional knowledge and professional skills of EFL teachers help the students to learn the subject matter, guiding them towards the outlined educational objectives, providing them with knowledge, and directing them to know and apply the language.

How to administer and how to deliver INSET is very critical. Considering the fact that science and technology have improved in recent decades, more than any other time in human history, their role should be attended to in INSET. Rapidly changing technologies and the need to integrate them into teacher education entails the restructuring of the current program (Amirian, Ghorbani Moghadam, & Moulavi Nafchi, 2016).

2.1. INSET programs in Iran

The INSET programs are organized locally, and each city could design and manage its own in-service education courses in different formats. The most familiar format is the face-to-face one in which the teachers should attend seminars or conferences in the training centers on the weekend or in the afternoon programs. The sandwich format is another stream of the INSET programs through which development packages are handed to the teachers to improve their profession theoretically and practically without attending certain sessions in training centers. The other format is on-the-spot development which brings development sessions in the schools instead of taking the teachers to training centers (Vajargah, 2008).

The INSET programs for the EFL context in Iran is a continuing education which includes training courses emphasizing new theoretical approaches towards the issues relevant to the classroom practice, presenting new materials, introducing new techniques and follow-up activities, improving classroom skills, and pursuing question-and-answer routines derived from the teachers' experience (Narafshan, 2006).

2.2. INSET programs abroad

There has been a number of the studies focusing on teacher cognition, specifically beliefs and the effects of INSET on teaching practices. For example, Borg (2011) investigated the changes in six novice EFL teachers' beliefs after taking an eight-week INSET course. The study revealed that the INSET had an impact on their beliefs; however, it also revealed that the course content could have targeted the exploration of the participants' beliefs more.

Regarding the effects of INSET courses on teaching practices, a number of researchers have focused on novice teachers (Borg, 2008; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell, 2012; Kanno & Stuart, 2011; Mann, 2008). In a large scale study, focusing on the outcomes of a CELTA course on novice teachers, the study done by Borg (2008) revealed that although there was some success in adapting teaching techniques to the classroom, one of the participants mentioned that "*the teaching techniques she learned from the course did not work in her teaching context*" (p. 115).

Given the literature reviewed, it would be beneficial to assess teachers' attitudes towards online INSET in order to discover and develop more effective ways of preparing teacher education programs at all levels to meet the challenges of a changing society. In so doing, the present study addressed the following questions:

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the online in-service programs from the perspectives of Iranian EFL teachers?

Is there any statistically significant difference among Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions about online INSET programs with reference to their years of experience, gender, and university degree?

3. Methodology

According to the research questions, this study favored a mixed-method design. The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data was followed by qualitative analysis of a semi-structured interview.

3.1. Participants

The main sample of the participants included 32 Iranian high school English teachers out of a total population of 40 teachers available practicing teaching in Fouman and Somesara high schools in Guilan, Iran. They were chosen based on convenience sampling as one of the main types of non-probability sampling methods. The participants were of both genders with a 28-55 age range, and three to 20 years of teaching experience. They were of three different degrees, namely BA., M.A. candidates, M.A. holders, and PhD candidates in the fields of English Language Translation, English Language Teaching, English Language Literature, and Linguistics. Six teachers, with the same characteristics of the main sample population, who participated in the questionnaire stage, were chosen for the semi-structured interviews.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1. Questionnaire

In order to investigate the high school English language teachers' perceptions of online INSET program, a researcher-adapted questionnaire based on the literature and findings of other related studies was used. The questionnaire was adapted from the study done by Amirian et al. (2016). The questionnaire was assessed on a five-point Likert scale ranging 1 (strongly agree), 2 (agree), 3 (neutral) 4 (disagree), or 5 (strongly disagree). It must be mentioned that the questionnaire contained two sections. In the first section included a demographic box which gathered information on the participants' gender, years of teaching experience, age, and university degree. In the second or main section of the questionnaire included 30 items related to the respondents' perceptions of the online INSET program.

3.2.2. Validity and reliability of the questionnaire

Considering the fact that the questionnaire was already standardized and utilized in previous studies, its validity and reliability were estimated again for the purpose of the present study. In order to save the validity, the researcher first tried to gain experts' opinion through distributing the questionnaire among two experienced instructors practicing TEFL at Islamic Azad University at Rasht Branch, Iran to eliminate ambiguities or difficulties in wording.

In the second stage, the reliability of the questionnaire was achieved through a pilot study that was administered to a sample representative (10 high school teachers) of the total sample population. Cronbach alpha was used to estimate the proportion of variance that is systematic or consistent in a set of test scores. Then, the final version of the research instrument was developed based on feedback on this draft, and the

researcher administered the questionnaires to 32 high school English teachers in the educational year of 2019 (See Appendix A).

3.2.3. Interview

To add depth and detail to the results of questionnaire and to cover all aspects of the issue in question and to answer the questions in the researchers' mind not covered in the questionnaire, a five-item semi-structured interview was conducted with six volunteer participants.

The participants were asked questions to provide context for the teaching as well as details about how they designed contents and conducted their teaching based on the programs. They were also asked to comment on how online INSET affected their teaching practices, understandings, and beliefs. At the end of the interview, the participants had the opportunity to provide any additional information they believed to be important to understanding their practices.

In the next stage, the interviews transcribed and analyzed by the researchers, and were finally verified and coded. Once the coding was completed, a second rater was invited for an inter-coder reliability check. The Cohen's Kappa was conducted to calculate the ratio of coding agreements. The inter-rater agreement calculated was 0.88, which indicated an almost perfect agreement. Confidentiality of the questionnaire was respected and maintained at all times. The informed consent of the participants was sought and given, without coercion.

4. Results

Thirty-two teachers from 10 different schools in Fuman and Somesara, Iran participated to respond to the questionnaire items.

4.1. Descriptive and inferential analyses

4.1.1. Gender difference

To determine whether there is a difference between male and female participants' opinions about online INSET, mean and standard deviation were calculated and, a variance analysis was run (Table 1).

Table 1: The Means and the Standard Deviations of the Gender Groups

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation
Men	4.23	0.12
Women	4.16	0.13

As seen in Table 1, mean of female participants is ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.13$) and is approximately close to male participants ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.12$). As the variance analysis shows, there is no difference between men and women about online INSET program.

According to Table 2, with alpha set at $p < 0.05$, there was not a statistically significant mean difference in the perception scores about online INSET according to gender.

Table 2: Variance Analysis of Online INSET and Gender

Source of Changes	Degrees of freedom	Sum of squares	Mean of square	Statistics	Probability value
Gender	1	1.51	0.051	0.142	0.709
Error	38	13.680	13.680		
Total	39	13.731			

The F statistics is equal to 0.142. This statistic is not a great amount, and the probability value is 0.709. Since the probability is higher than the F, the hypothesis at a significant level of $\alpha = \%5$ fails to be rejected. It can be claimed that men and women do not see online INSET program differently.

4.1.2. Years of experience

There were three groups of teachers in terms of their teaching experiences, namely 3-5, 5-10, and over 10 years of teaching experience. The results revealed that there was a significance difference among teachers in terms of years of experience (Table 3). In addition, the mean for the first group ($M = 5.50$) with $p = 0.00$ is smaller than 0.05, and it indicates a meaningful difference among the groups.

Table 3: Means for Years of Experience

Years of experience	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
3.5	7	5.50	3.028	.957
5-10	10	6.56	4.325	1.132
over 10	15	8.89	5.859	1.625

To find out whether there was any statistically significant difference among teachers' opinions in terms of years of experiences, a one-way ANOVA was carried out (Table 4).

Table 4: One Way ANOVA for Years of Experience

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.359	3	1.090	4.070	0.008
Within Groups	9.372	35	0.268	6.125	
Total	13.731	38			

According to Table 4, the F statistics is equal to 4.070., and the probability value is 0.008. Since the F statistics is greater than the probability value, the hypothesis at a significant level $\alpha = \%5$ is rejected.

4.1.3. University degree

The participants were of three university degrees namely, Bachelor (B.A.), Master (M.A.), and PhD. According to Table 5, the mean of for the teachers of B.A., M.A., and PhD. were

6.20, 5.35, and 4.98, respectively with $p = 0.00$ that is smaller than 0.05. It indicated a meaningful difference among the groups.

Table 5: Means for University Degree

University Degree	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Bachelor	18	6.20	3.088	.987
Master	12	5.35	3.043	.852
PhD	10	4.98	3.010	.789

Finally, to find out whether there was any statistically significant difference among teachers' opinions in terms of their university degrees, a one-way ANOVA was carried out (Table 6).

Table 6: One Way ANOVA for University Degree

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.625	3	2.812	4.691	0.015
Within Groups	22.182	37	0.600	7.225	
Total	27.807	40			

According to Table 6, the F statistics is equal to 4.691, and the probability value is 0.015. Since the probability value is smaller than the F, there is no reason that the hypothesis in a significant level $\alpha = \%5$ to be confirmed.

4.2. Interview report

A. What are your opinions about online INSET?

With respect to items nine ($M = 1.75$) and ten ($M = 1.71$), teachers expressed that they desired such programs involve them actively and enable them use and share their teaching experiences and use other colleagues' experiences. They complained that sometimes in-service programs were inefficient, and did not lead to anywhere. As it is demonstrated, the majority of the teachers (67.6%) are at ease with computer and they favor online program more than traditional programs. Forty six percent of the participants reported that they did participate in online programs.

B. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online INSET?

Regarding item 11 ($M = 2.38$) through item 20 ($M = 1.94$), about 50% to 70% of the teachers emphasized the advantages of online programs. With regard to items 21 ($M = 1.94$) and 22 ($M = 1.93$), about 70% stated that there should be sufficient facilities to implement such programs. They stated that the education office or Ministry of Education should pay for the internet charges of online programs.

C. What factors should be taken into account in offering online INSET?

With respect to item 24 ($M = 1.98$), 75% believed that for the sake of the effectiveness of the program, the participants could be given an opportunity to control the process of their own development and choose the topics and activities they need to investigate.

D. What factors encourage teachers to attend online INSET?

Concerning item 25 ($M = 1.93$), 70% believed that, today, online programs are essential. As far as the remaining items are concerned, approximately 40% to 70% of the respondents stated that traditional programs are suitable for the computer-illiterate. Ninety-one and a half percent of the participants had computer with 90% internet access at home. Nearly 48% of the teachers considered themselves as average computer users, and 30.7% thought of themselves as advanced users.

E. What are your suggestions and recommendation on improvement of the process in such courses?

Regarding item eight ($M = 1.72$), the majority of the teachers (89.7%) deemed that the time for the program should be suitable to encourage participation; besides, the interviewers reported that they are not sometimes duly informed of programs.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed at finding answers qualitatively and quantitatively to two questions. Based on the results, it can be claimed that the importance of needs analysis including needs identification, assessment of learners' abilities, and assessment of the teaching environment should be taken into account when planning or developing teacher training services since identifying and satisfying the needs of teachers determine the applicability of the service provided. On the basis of findings of the current study, the active participation of online INSET participants during the application of these programs should not be ignored.

To answer the first question of the present research which asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the online INSET from the Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives, the following points in three domains of present situation, desired situation and lacking situation can be presented.

Generally, the six interviewees said that they would like to attend such online-in-service programs for their in-service professional development (See Appendix B for a sample of teachers' expressions of the online INSET program).

5.1 Present situation

The online INSET program:

- provides the latest educational theories,
- offers training on concepts and scientific developments related to our subject matter,
- provides convenient condition.

Desired situation

The online INSET program should:

- increase our knowledge in daily teaching,
- be a goal-oriented practice.

The lacking situation

- These programs are not goal-oriented.
- They are offered by some non-experts without sufficient knowledge in their fields.
- They have been held without any results.

The findings indicated that the participants in the context of online INSET programs can practice by trying out new things, modeling new experiences while experiencing and trying out new things; the participants can take advantage of opportunities in order to boost their professional development. These findings are supported by the study done by Tok and Dos (2010) in Turkey because the teachers believed that online programs would increase the teachers' technology skills and would be more useful than traditional in-service education.

It was found that the newness of technology is challenging to some teachers, and they try to avoid using it or have little use of technology in their teaching practice. The study by Birch (2011) in the educational system in Japan, which sought for teacher's perceptions of an INSET program aiming to improve the communicative competence of English learners through observations and recall interviews, indicated that the participant integrated the aspects she learned from the INSET course into her lessons, but it caused some difficulties as this was a new territory for the participant.

The teachers' reaction to the use of online INSET was positive and they believed in the beneficial use of the program for teachers and learning in particular. In this regard, Harumi's (2005) investigation of the online INSET program in Japan also showed that the online INSET course changed teachers' teaching practices after they had attended the course.

6. Conclusion

INSET programs at an institution should be planned and executed well in order to ensure the expected benefits of INSET activities. INSET programs, especially designed for teachers, must bring solutions to the problems they encounter in education program holders need to appreciate the advantages of such programs. Thus, when planning a program, they need to consider time flexibility, needs, cost, availability of internet, and setting. In a nutshell, respondents preferred online training to the conventional method because of its flexibility and convenience. Online courses could be a convenient way of perusing professional development for teachers to study from their own location, in their own time.

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Appendix A: The questionnaire instrument

The Mean and Percentage of Questionnaire Items						
Items	SA%	A %	N %	DA%	SD%	M %
1. I feel at ease with using computer.	14.6	53	4.9	18.3	9.2	2.31
2. I think I will participate in online programs.	6.1	40.9	11.6	31.7	9.7	2.73
3. I have phobia for online equipment.	24.4	7.9	33.5	25	8	2.92
4. If something goes wrong, I will not know what to do to fix it.	12.2	42.7	26.8	9.8	7.3	2.37
5. I think participation in online INSET programs should be done voluntarily.	34.8	53.7	1.8	0.6	9.01	1.67
6. I favor online INSET to traditional INSET courses.	18.3	51.8	9.8	10.01	10.9	2.19
7. I prefer the material to be presented by an expert in the respective field when the course is offered.	28	53	10.4	6.02	2.5	1.81
8. The time schedule of the program should be appropriate for the participants.	29.3	60.4	0.6	0.6	9.01	1.72
9. The instructional activities should provide the active participation of the participants.	27.4	61	1.8	1.2	8.6	1.75
10. Instructional activities should meet online INSET needs of the participants.	29.9	59.1	1.2	1.2	8.6	1.71
11. Online INSET provides better learning experiences.	18.3	40.2	15.9	14	15.6	2.38
12. Online INSET makes the training course more interesting.	22	43.3	14	11.6	9.7	2.19
13. Online INSET gives teachers' opportunity to learn more.	3	36.6	28.7	23.2	8.5	2.79
14. Online INSET enable teachers to interact with each other better.	3	33.5	32.9	25	5.6	2.71
15. Online INSET saves teachers' time and energy enabling them to attend to other activities.	1.2	49.4	31.7	9.1	8.6	2.53
16. Online INSET reduces training costs.	36.6	49.4	4.9	6	3.01	1.67
17. Online INSET facilitate teachers' access to the latest techniques and methods.	27.4	52.4	11.6	6	2.6	1.83
18. Online INSET contributes to teachers' autonomy.	27.4	48.2	12.8	0.3	11.3	1.91
19. Online INSET helps teachers to keep abreast of new technology.	27.4	51.8	12.2	0.3	8.3	1.83
20. Online programs can accommodate a large number of teachers at a time.	21.3	54.3	15.9	0.3	8.2	1.94
21. Administrators should offer sufficient online facilities to implement online INSET	21.3	56.7	13.4	0.3	8.3	1.94
22. Administrators should offer courses for teachers with limited computer skills.	20.1	56.7	14.6	0.3	8.3	1.93
23. The accessibility of the internet and computer facilities should be taken into consideration.	22	54.3	15.2	0.3	8.2	1.93
24. The online INSET needs of the participants should be identified during these programs.	22	50	18.9	0.6	8.5	1.98
25. Today online programs are a necessity.	23.2	51.8	15.9	0.6	8.5	1.93
26. I think traditional programs are better, when it comes to making teachers actively involved in the teaching-learning process.	1.8	29.9	12.8	47	8.5	3.15

27. I think in traditional programs the specific techniques and lessons are modeled by the trainers better.	4.3	36.6	9.8	40.9	8.4	2.95
28. I think traditional programs are suitable for the computer-illiterate.	14.5	30	14.6	40.9	2	1.98
29. In traditional programs teachers collaborate with their peers more.	34.5	17	14.6	32.7	1.2	1.51
30. In traditional programs the physical atmosphere is of more fun.	37.2	42.7	6.1	5.5	1.2	1.78

Appendix B: A sample of teachers' expressions of the online INSET program

1. What are your opinions about online INSET?

"I'll attend such a program if the program includes both latest educational theories, especially those related to language teaching, and teaching practice. What's more, the program should be goal-oriented, that is, it should increase our knowledge in daily teaching."

2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online INSET?

"The challenges of such programs are that these programs are not goal-oriented. They are offered by some non-experts without sufficient knowledge in their fields. These programs have been held in order to pass a course rather than being considered as serious matter. They have been held without any results. They were held in vain, without any aim."

"In-service education facilitates teachers' access to the latest techniques and methods as an online in-service education creates a continuous and accessible environment for teachers. The use of online programs would bring about change in teachers' trend of teaching. They might become familiar with new materials by searching the net."

3. What factors should be taken into account in offering online INSET?

"If the education office does not receive fees for such programs or get the fees through method, or it offers bonus charge for internet connection, that might serve as an incentive; as a results, more teachers will participate in such a program."

4. What factors encourage teachers to attend online INSET?

"In my opinion, the program for in-service professional development should be something that can lead to a goal-oriented practice. It can attract us to follow it willingly and continuously, and we can have it as a base to improve our daily teaching, and share our experiences with our colleagues, and of course, participating in online programs can help us to learn more and further practice toward our development."

5. What are your suggestions and recommendation on improvement of the process in such courses?

"The instructors should be lecturers; they should be experts in the respective area; they should be knowledgeable; they should be among those who are familiar with teaching issues. Those who have been successful in teaching should be invited to share their experiences with other colleagues."

"Sometimes school managers and principals do not inform teachers of programs. We sometimes miss programs; if programs are announced by text messages or phone, it would be convenient."

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