Journal of Philosophical Investigations
Print ISSN: 2251-7960 Online ISSN: 2423-4419
Homepage: https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir

The Philosophy of Teacher Immunity: EFL Teachers' Perspectives

Mohammad Zohrabi[1] | **Abdolreza Khalili**[2]

[1] Corresponding Author, Associate Professor of English Language and Literature Department, University of Tabriz, Iran. Email: mohammadzohrabi@gmail.com
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English Language, University of Maragheh, Maragheh, Iran. Email: a.khalili@maragheh.ac.ir

Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 01 December 2023
Received in revised from 28 December 2023
Accepted 28 December 2023
Published online 29 January 2024

Keywords:
EFL teachers, teacher education, teacher factors, teacher immunity philosophy

ABSTRACT

Teacher factors encompass the teachers' cognitive and affective characteristics that are likely to affect their instructional efficacy. Language teacher immunity is one of the affective factors that determines the teachers' psychological well-being in their settings. The present study strived to itemize the factors in novice and experienced EFL instructors' teacher immunity philosophy. To this end, first, the researchers used convenience sampling for selecting 62 EFL teachers including 38 novice and 24 experienced teachers at ten prominent language institutes in Tabriz (Iran) as the participants. Second, they conducted 30-minute interviews with the participants for determining the factors that influenced their TI philosophy using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol. Lastly, they used thematic analysis in order to particularize the main factors in their teacher immunity philosophy. The findings of the study indicated that while the novice teachers considered external support as the main factor in their philosophy, the experienced teachers regarded their internal strength as the decisive factor that influenced their teacher immunity philosophy. The findings may have practical implications for teacher education courses in foreign language contexts.

Cite this article: Zohrabi, M. & Khalili, A. (2024). The Philosophy of Teacher Immunity: EFL Teachers' Perspectives. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 17(45), 330-346. https://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2024.59889.3664

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Publisher: University of Tabriz.
https://doi.org/10.22034/JPIUT.2024.59889.3664

Introduction

In the field of language instruction, the researchers have been concerned with teacher factors in recent decades (Ahmadi & Eghbali, 2022; Cirocki. & Farrell, 2017; Hosseini, Hosseini, Sobhaninejad, & Mohamadi Nik, 2022; Khalili, Dobakhti, & Zohrabi, 2023; Miri, Mehrnia, & Latifi, 2022; Soodmand Afshar & Doosti, 2016 Teo, Khazaie, & Derakhshan, 2022; Wong & Law, 2002; Zohrabi & Akbarzadeh, 2023). Edara (2021) defined language teacher factors as the set of teacher internal features which are likely to have a conspicuous impact on the language teachers' pedagogical efficacy in the context of the classroom. Likewise, Farrell (2015) pointed out that these factors encompass the affective and cognitive teacher characteristics which govern the language teaches' academic behavior and instructional practices in their workplace. The scrutiny of the recurrent teacher factors in the pertinent empirical studies of language teaching shows that *Teacher Immunity* (TI) has received considerable attention in this field. Hiver (2015) introduced this construct into the field of language instruction to expound on language teachers' psychological health in their academic settings. He defined TI as the protective psychological cover that safeguards the teachers against the stress-inducing contextual variables. More specifically, he drew a comparison between biological immunity and psychological immunity and considered language teachers' TI as the immune system of the psychological well-being.

Hiver's (2015) development of TI had serious repercussions in the field of language teaching due mainly to its effects on the empirical studies of teacher factors. More specifically, this novel construct attracted the researchers' attention to the consequential role of language teachers' psychological tensions in their pedagogical failures and spiritual burnout (Farrell, 2019). Moreover, it prompted the researcher to delve deeply into the nature of TI. Consequently, the researchers strived to provide detailed information on this construct. The examination of the further studies of TI indicates that they have followed two distinct lines of research. First, the early studies of TI that were conducted by Hiver and his colleagues (e.g. Hiver, 2016, 2017, 2018; Hiver, & Dörnyei, 2017) have mainly made an endeavor to underpin its psychological validity, determine its main sub-components, and to itemize its types.

In general, the results of these studies have supported the construct validity of TI and have shown that it may have positive or negative impacts on language teachers' psychological health. In this regard, Hiver and Dörnyei (2017) pointed out that TI may become *productive* and might ameliorate the language teachers' capability to overcome the psychological obstacles to their effective language instruction in the context of the classroom. Furthermore, as they explained, TI can take a *maladaptive* form and may turn language teachers into cynical individuals who dislike changes, dissent from novel pedagogical views, and are overwhelmed by the stressors in their academic environments (Zohrabi & Bimesl, 2022). In addition, the results of these studies have helped the researchers to particularize the sub-components of TI. Hiver (2017) noted that the factor

analysis of the EFL teachers' results on TI questionnaire enabled him to itemize seven sub-categories of TI including *resilience, burnout and attitudes towards instruction, coping, affectivity, instruction self-efficacy,* and *openness to change*. He explained that, resilience referred to teachers' ability to adapt themselves to diverse teaching conditions without being overwhelmed by the stressors. Moreover, burnout involved the teachers' psychological exhaustion due to contextual stress-inducing variables. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes towards instruction showed their perspectives on the social worth of theory professions. In addition, coping and affectivity showed the teachers use of emotion-management strategies and ability to regulate their negative feelings respectively. Additionally, instruction self-efficacy showed the teachers' attitudes towards their own pedagogical capabilities and efficacy. Lastly, openness to change characterized the teachers' proclivity to acclimatize themselves with the developments in the field of language teaching. Second, the following studies of TI used the above-mentioned TI sub-components and types to expound on EFL teachers' TI in different contexts. For instance, a number of studies (e.g., Farrokhi, et al., 2023; Taghvaininia & Mirzaei, 2017) have strived to determine the relationship between EFL teachers' TI and their personality traits. Other studies (e.g. Rahmati, Sadeghi, & Ghaderi, 2019) have tried to determine the effective of the EFL teachers' reflection on the amelioration of their TI. Moreover, certain studies (e.g., Dobakhti, Zohrabi, & Masoudi, 2022b; Maghsoudi, 2021; Songhory, Ghonsooly, & Afraz, 2018) have focused on teacher education courses and have tried to examine the pre-service language teachers' TI types. Furthermore, some of the pertinent studies (e.g. Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020) have scrutinized the reasons behind the differences between the EFL teachers' TI in different academic settings. Lastly, a group of the related studies (e.g. Ahmadi, Amiryousefi, & Hesabi, 2020; Atefi Boroujeni, Tahririan, & Afzali, 2021; Dobakhti, Zohrabi, & Masoudi, 2022a; Wang, Derakhshan, & Azari Noughabi, 2022) have investigated the role of teachers' personal factors in the prediction of their TI.

Nonetheless, the researchers have disregarded the EFL teachers' philosophy of their TI. More specifically, they have not scrutinized these teachers' underlying conceptions, postulates, and contentions that result in the formation of their TI in second and foreign language in various academic settings (e.g. language institute settings) and foreign language contexts including the EFL context of Iran. Moreover, the relevant studies have not determined the degree to which the EFL teachers' experience might affect their TI philosophy. The present study made an effort to deal with this issue in Iranian context. To this end, it made an effort to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the factors that influence Iranian novice EFL teachers' TI philosophy?
2. What are the factors that influence Iranian experienced EFL teachers' TI philosophy?
3. Are there any differences between the factors that influence Iranian novice and experienced EFL teachers' TI philosophy?

Materials and Methods

Design

In this study, the researchers adopted the *qualitative* design to research to answer the raised research questions. Creswell (2011) noted that, researchers adopt this design when they do not have adequate information on the examined variables and intend to explore the nature of the research problems. Likewise, in the present study, the researchers did not have any expectations about the EFL teachers' TI philosophy and made an effort to explore the factors that were likely to affect this philosophy in academic settings.

Participants

Considering the objectives of the study, the researchers used convenience sampling for selecting 62 EFL teachers at ten prominent language institutes in Tabriz (Iran) as the participants of the present study. The researchers used Wong and Law's (2002) guideline on teacher experience for distinguishing novice teachers from experienced teachers. That is, they classified the teachers whose experience was less than five years into the novice category. On the other hand, they classified the teachers whose experience exceeded five years into the experienced category. The selected participants had a B.A., M.A., or PhD in English Language Teaching, ranged in age from 26 to 49, and were native speakers of Azeri or Persian.

Instrumentation

The researchers developed a four-item semi-structured interview protocol for examining the factors in the novice and experienced EFL teachers' TI in their relevant academic settings. In order to develop this protocol, first, they invited three university professors of Applied Linguistics and three professors of Philosophy to a focus-group interview session. Second, they encouraged them to discuss the diverse factors that might influence the teachers' TI philosophy and recorded their approximately one-hour discussion. Third, they used thematic analysis for identifying the main themes in the recorded focus-group interview text. Fourth, they developed the protocol items based on the extracted themes. Fifth, they provided the participants of the focus-group interview and asked them to comment on the content validity of is items. Lastly, they modified the protocol items on the basis of the participants' comments.

Research Methods

Focus-Group Interview

Colucci (2007) pointed out that focus-group interview is a qualitative research technique which enables the researchers to determine the similarities between the experts' views on certain issues. As he explained, in this method, experts are encouraged to express their attitudes towards the various aspects of the relevant issue and to justify their contentions using evidence. Consequently,

this method empowers the researchers to develop an understanding of the experts' collective perspective on the relevant variables. In the present study, the researchers used focus-group interview method to determine the Applied Linguistics and Philosophy experts' collective perspectives on TI philosophy.

Respondent Validation and Expert Validation

Rubin and Babbie (2008) noted that the qualitative researchers are able to guarantee the credibility of their study using member checking which may take two forms including respondent validation and expert validation. As they explained, respondent validation ensures the researchers of the validity of their transcribed data and expert validation makes them sure about the validity of their developed instruments. In this study, the researchers used respondent validation for checking the truthfulness of their interview data and expert validation for ensuring the content validity of their semi-structured interview protocol.

Thick Description

Hammersley (2008) pointed out that thick description helps the qualitative researchers to ensure the transferability of their findings to the other settings and contexts. As he explained, in this method, the researchers provide detailed information on the process of data collection and analysis for making sure that the other researchers can replicate their study in their own settings and contexts. Accordingly, in this study, the researchers explained their data collection and analysis processes in detail to guarantee its transferability.

Peer Review

Grinnel and Unrau (2008) argued that peer review constitutes a research method that is used for examining the confirmability of the findings of the study. According to them, in this method the researchers invite their expert peers to comment on the consistency of their findings. Therefore, in this study, the researchers asked two of their peers who were professors of Applied Linguistics to provide them with feedback on the consistency of their findings regarding the participants TI philosophy. In order to expedite these experts' analysis, the researchers provided them with adequate information on the various phases of the study ranging from participant selection to the interpretation of the findings.

Audit Trail

Koch (2006) noted that audit trail is a research method which is mainly used in the field of accounting in order to examine the frauds or miscalculations of the firms. Moreover, Akkerman, Admiral, Brekelmans, and Oost (2006) stated that, in the field of language teaching, audit trail refers to the written description of the researchers' methodological choices which enables the other researchers to examine the confirmability of the findings based on their objectiveness. Considering

this issue, in the present study, the researchers kept a written account of the steps of their study to ensure the objectivity of their decisions and the confirmability of their findings.

Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2012) defined thematic analysis as the analysis method which is used for determining the underlying patterns in qualitative data. As they explained, in this method, the researchers are required to closely examine the transcribed data, determine the similar quotations for specifying the codes, integrate the similar codes with each other, and to extract the themes based on the integrated codes. Accordingly, in the present study, first, the researchers read the transcribed interview data multiple times to acquaint themselves with the data. Second, they highlighted the similar quotations and developed the primary codes in the obtained data. Third, they integrated the primary codes with each other and itemized the themes in the data on the novice and experienced teachers' TI philosophy. Fourth, they invited their peers to help them to name the extracted themes. Finally, they reported the pertinent themes in the data.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that the evaluation criterion of the qualitative studies is their trustworthiness. They defined this construct as the degree to which the researchers are confident in the utility of their data collection methods, the effectiveness of their data analysis techniques, and the truthfulness of their interoperations. Moreover, they itemized four sub-components of trustworthiness including *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability*, and *confirmability*. As they explained, credibility refers to the accuracy of research findings. Moreover, transferability determines the possibility of the generalization of the findings to similar settings and contexts. Furthermore, dependability is a measure of the consistency of the findings. Lastly, conformability determines he congruence between the participants' perspectives and the researchers' interpretations of the data. Considering these issues, in this study, the researchers took advantage of respondent validation, thick description, peer review, and audit trail research methods for ensuring credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings of the study respectively.

Procedure

In this study, first, the researchers contacted the management departments of ten prominent language institutes in Tabriz (Iran), informed their managers about the objectives, and obtained their consent to the present study. Second, they asked them to provide the researchers with the contact information of their EFL teachers who had a B.A., M.A., or PhD degree in the field of English Language Teaching. At this stage, the researchers were provided with the contact information of 259 language teachers including 114 male and 145 female language teachers. Third, the researchers contacted the teachers and apprised them of the aims and procedure of the study.

At this stage, 112 language teachers including 43 male and 69 female teachers stated that they did not want to participate in the study due to their busy schedule. Moreover, 56 teachers including 32 male and 24 female teachers stated that they did not want to take part in the study owing to numerous personal reasons. Fourth, the researchers arranged the interview sessions with the teachers. At this point 29 teachers including 20 male and 9 female teachers did not attend the interview sessions. Fifth, the researchers classified the remaining 62 participants to the novice and experienced groups based on their experience. Based on the results of classification, there were 38 teachers (i.e. 17 male & 21 female) in the novice group and 24 teachers (9 male & 15 female) teachers in the experienced group. Fifth, the researchers obtained written informed consent from all of the participants, conducted 30-minute Farsi interviews with them for determining the factors that influenced their TI philosophy, and recorded the interview sessions. Sixth, they used thematic analysis in order to determine the codes and themes in the obtained data. Finally, they used respondent validation and peer review methods for ensuring the credibility and dependability if their findings.

Findings

Factors in Novice EFL Teachers' TI Philosophy

The first research question focused on the factors in the novice EFL teachers' TI philosophy. The analysis of the interview data highlighted the existence of three underlying themes in the novice EFL teachers' perspectives on the factors in their TI philosophy. Table 1 shows the relevant codes and themes:

Table 1. *Codes and Themes in Novice EFL Teachers' Data*

Codes	Themes
Knowledge of language Teaching methods and techniques Scrutiny of different sources	Technical-knowledge-based self-confidence
Teacher education courses Conferences Seminars Workshops	Knowledge-sharing-induced self-efficacy
Collaboration with experienced peers Use of expert advice Contact with leading figures	Consolation-induced self-esteem

As sown in Table 1, the first theme in the obtained data was *technical-knowledge-based self-confidence*. Eighteen of the novice participants noted that their technical knowledge of the theoretical discussions and practical theories of their field influenced their conceptualization of TI. In this regard, participant 6 stated that:

> I believe that TI is mainly a product of technical knowledge of our field. As you know, our actions and practices have to be informed by the theory of the second language acquisition. As a result, the increase in knowledge of our field may ameliorate our perspectives on our TI.

Likewise, participant 22 highlighted the role of new sources in her TI and pointed out that:

> You need to be up-to-date. We lack confidence due mainly to the fact that we disregard the new developments in our field. Most of my colleagues have forgotten about their textbooks and hate reading new books. Therefore, their psychological tension partly stems from their lack of knowledge and negatively influenced their TI philosophy.

Moreover, the second theme in the relevant data was *knowledge-sharing-induced self-efficacy*. Twenty-one of the novice teachers accentuated the role of national and international events in their TI philosophy. For instance, participant 21 stated that:

> I have attended three national and two international teacher education courses. I was not able to translate my knowledge into practice before these courses. Nonetheless, these courses made me aware of the practical consideration of language teaching and enabled me to use efficacious language teaching techniques in my classes. Knowing that I am a capable teacher relieves my psychological tension.

Similarly, participant 17 pointed out that, he attended the different conferences and seminar on language teaching to be acquainted with different points of view on the various issues in the field of language instruction. He noted that:

> We are not able to evaluate the truth value of our perspectives on language instruction without taking account of the different views. I want to highlight the fact that the teachers need to ameliorate their TI by attending different events such as workshops and conferences since their familiarity with various views is likely to help the to deal with their pedagogical weaknesses in their classes.

Lastly, the third theme in the obtained data was *consolation-induced self-esteem*. Nineteen of the novice participants accentuated the consequential role of their more experienced peers' advice in the improvement of their TI. Regarding this issue, participant 2 noted that:

> I seek advice on language instruction techniques from the more experienced teachers in our language institute. Their advice and suggestions pacify me and ensures me about the effectiveness of my pedagogical practices.

Likewise, participant 14 stated that she needed to obtain advice in the effective instructional techniques prior to their use in her classes. As she pointed out:

> I ask the observers many questions in order to ensure that I use the effective teaching techniques. In my opinion, the observers can help us to deal with our anxiety by providing us with expert opinion about the utility of our teaching practices.

Lastly, participant 22 underlined the usefulness of consolation with the leading figures of the field of language instruction for relieving his psychological tension. According to him:

> I make an endeavor to seek the leading figures' advice in the practical considerations of my classes. They are highly responsive and answer my email in a very short period of time. Being puzzled is really disturbing and anxiety-provoking for me. Notwithstanding, these figures' advice reduces my anxiety and improves my confidence in my instructional performance.

Factors in Experienced EFL Teachers' TI Philosophy

The second research question examined the factors in experienced EFL teachers' TI philosophy. The analysis of the obtained interview data accentuated the existence of two major themes in these teachers' data. Table 2 provides the relevant codes and themes:

Table 2. *Codes and Themes in Experienced EFL Teachers' Data*

Codes	Themes
Reflective practices	Self-induced confidence
Self-evaluation	
Introspection	
Integrity	Skill-induced psychological insight
Professional conduct	
Emotion-regulation	

As shown in Table 2, the first main theme in the obtained data on the experienced participants' interview data was *self-induced confidence*. Twenty of the participants stated that they were able to relieve themselves from their psychological tension by relying on their own capabilities. In this regard, participant 7 noted that:

> I reflect on my own pedagogical behavior in my classes to specify the effectiveness of my practices. This reflective process makes me cognizant of the reality of the classes and enables me to ameliorate my instructional techniques. The improvement in my teaching has a very positive effect on my confidence in my performance.

Likewise, participant 9 stated that:

> I evaluate my own performance multiple times during the semester. This kind of evaluation ensures me about the effectiveness of my teaching practices. Moreover, it reduces my anxiety due to the fact that it makes me aware of my weakness before the observers' evaluation of my teaching in my classes.

Moreover, the second theme in the relevant data was *skill-induced psychological insight*. Twenty-two of the participants noted that their professional behavior and skills relieved them from their tension and improved their TI. For instance, participant 5 pointed out that:

> I have developed certain skills for controlling and managing my negative emotions. I believe that teaching is mainly affected by the affective variables. Consequently, the ability to deal with the emotion which interfere with the process of teaching can have a noticeable positive effect on the language teachers' instructional efficacy.

Likewise, participant 22 highlighted the impact of her professional conduct in her performance and psychological well-being. As she noted:

> I make an effort to give priority to my professional conduct in my workplace to regulate my negative emotions. That is, I respect my peers' opinions and consider collective success to be more important that individual success. Moreover, I am open to change and evaluate new ideas before rejecting them. I believe that the code of conduct prevents the stressors from disturbing my psychological peace.

Discussion

The first question of the study focused on the factors in novice EFL teachers' TI philosophy. The findings highlighted the fact that *technical-knowledge-based self-confidence, knowledge-sharing-induced self-efficacy*, and *consolation-induced self-esteem* were the major themes in these participants' obtained data. In general, these findings support the findings of the studies that were conducted by Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015, 2016), Gholami (2015), Farrell (2016), Sadeghi and Khezerlou (2016), Akbari and Eghtesadi (2017), Rezaee, Khoshsima, Zare-Bahtash, and Sarani (2018). Ashraafi, Talebinejad, and Shahrokhi (2020), Hendrawijaya, Hilmi, Hasan, Imsiyah, and Indrianti (2020), Kayed, and Kazemian Moghadam (2021), Khadivi, Namvar, and Solymanzadeh, 2022; and Rezai, Namaziandost, and Çakmak (2022). These studies have shown that, the novice language teachers' psychological well-being is mainly influenced by diverse types of external factors.

Pennington and Richards (2016) argued that, in the early years of the service years, the Lange teachers' TI may be heavily influenced by different external factors such as the teaching materials, teacher education courses, and language teaching events among others. As they explained, this issue stems from the fact that the novice teachers do not rely on their own abilities due to their inhibitions and seek experts' advice and support in their academic settings. Likewise, Pelini (2016) noted that, the novice teachers' hesitancy regarding the use if their own practices and their indecision are associated with their profession-induced insecurity. According to him, this issue prompts the novice teachers to give priority to external support in their teaching.

Considering this discussion, it can be argued that, in the present study, the novice teachers' reliance on the external support as the main factor in their TI philosophy stemmed from their profession-related inhibitions and insecurity and negatively influenced their TI.

The second question examined the factors in experienced EFL teachers' TI philosophy. The findings indicated that *self-induced confidence* and *skill-induced psychological insight* were the main themes in these participants' data. In general, these findings are in line with the findings of the studies that were carried out by Liao, Ottenbreit-Leftwich, Karlin, Glazewski, and Brush (2017), Collie, Granziera, and Martin (2018), Lindvall, Helenius, and Wiberg (2018), Richards, Hemphill, and Templin (2018), Cirocki and Farrell (2019), Alzahrani and Althaqafi (2020), Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, and Tabatabaeian (2020), Sarıçoban and Kırmızı (2021), and Farrokhi, Zohrabi, and Gholizadeh (2023).

Cirocki and Farrell (2019) averred that experienced teachers mostly rely on their own capabilities in order to deal with the stress-inducing factors in their workplace. According to them, this issue emanates from these teachers' realization of the fat that external support is not able to relieve them from their tension. That is, these teachers are cognizant of the empowering nature of self-induced psychological composure and give priority to their own skills and abilities as the main factors in their TI. Likewise, Richards, Hemphill, and Templin (2018) noted that the experienced teachers' focus on their insight is related to their ability to overcome their job-related insecurity and reflects their professional development and expertise.

Based on these discussions, it can be argued that, in this study, the experienced teachers relied on their internal capabilities and skills as the major factors in their TI since they were aware of the importance of self-induced psychological well-being and were able to deal with their professional inhibitions.

Lastly, the third question examined the differences between the factors in the novice and experienced teachers' TI philosophy. The findings indicated that while the novice teachers depended on external support as the major factor in their TI, the experienced teachers gave priority to their internal strengths. These findings underpin the findings of the studies that were conducted by Rahmati, Sadeghi, and Ghaderi (2018), Baleghizadeh and Amiri Shayesteh (2020), Rahimpour,

Amirian, Adel, and Zareian (2020), and Dobakhti, Zohrabi, and Masoudi (2023). These studies have reported the existence of difference between novice and experienced reliance on various sources of emotional and psychological support n their settings.

Lindvall, Helenius, and Wiberg (2018) stated that the difference between the novice and experienced teachers' reliance on external and internal sources of support stems from the experienced teachers' well-developed teacher identity. According to them, thee teachers are cognizant of their consequential role in the society and derive satisfaction from their self-perceived social worth in their community.

Considering this issue, it can be stated that, in this study, the difference between the factors in the novice and experienced teachers' TI philosophy stemmed from the novice teachers' lack of ability to develop their professional teacher identity as an underlying factor in their TI philosophy.

Conclusion

The present study made an endeavor to expound on the factors in novice and experienced EFL teachers' TI philosophy. The findings of the study indicated that novice teachers considered external support as the main factor in their TI philosophy. On the other hand, experienced teachers regarded their internal strengths as the decisive factors in their TI. Considering these results, it can be averred that there is a need to redress the current teacher education courses. More specifically, there is a need to overhaul the content of these courses and to re-educate their teacher educators. The need to revise the content of these courses emanates from their negligence in dealing with the teacher factors including TI among others. Consequently, there is a need to include a specific module in these courses which apprises the EFL teachers of TI philosophy both prior to the onset of their service and doing their service years. This module might make the teachers aware of the consequential role of TI philosophy development and may empower them to take advantage of their internal strengths including their professional conduct and integrity along with their emotion-regulation capability to deal with the stressors in their contexts and to develop a satisfactory TI philosophy. Moreover, the need to provide the teacher educators with education stems from their lack of adequate knowledge on teacher factors including TI. Most of these teacher educators are experienced teachers who have attended multiple teacher education courses and have obtained their certificates. Consequently, they are predominantly concerned with practical consideration of language instruction and disregard the teacher factors. The re-education course of the educators has to make them aware of the vital role of TI philosophy in language instruction and should prompt them to inform EFL teachers about their internal strengths.

This study had certain limitations due mainly to the fact that it did not control the impact of the participants' personal factors such as their age, academic degree, and gender on the findings. Moreover, the researchers delimited the study by focusing on language institutes in one city as the main research sites. The future studies have to deal with these issues. Furthermore, these studies

need to focus on different academic settings including schools and universities in both second and foreign language contexts. Lastly, the future studies need to develop a reliable and valid instrument of the EFL teachers' TI philosophy using pertinent findings including the findings of the present study.

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