

## Factors Affecting Iranian TEFL Postgraduate Candidates' Research Productivity: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Developing research performance has become an important theme in Iranian higher educational institutions as other national and international academic institutions across the world. However, the research performance of Iranian Teaching English as a Foreign Language postgraduate candidates has been argued to be limited. In order to increase their research productivity and develop their capacity in this regard, the first critical step is to understand the influences which are associated with their academic research performance. This qualitative study focuses on a group of TEFL postgraduate candidates from five major Iranian universities with the purpose of investigating the motivational influences in conducting research, their perception of research value, and their understanding of research environment which is required for research productivity. Interviews were conducted with 20 candidates from the sample universities. It was revealed that the research related activities and efforts of the participants were driven by both external and internal needs and motivations. A multi-dimensional value was accorded to research; however, the academic research environment and requirements were the subject of various concerns. The results of this study offer several future implications for departmental and institutional research administrators to further support TEFL postgraduate candidates' research development.

**Key words:** Research Productivity, Influences, Iranian TEFL Postgraduate Candidates

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

Research is generally accepted as one of the most prominent sources of generation of knowledge, which enjoys an important status in increasing national and international success in the present era which is mainly based on knowledge (Abbott & Doucouliagos, 2004) and it is one of the core principles of innovative fields such as TEFL. The theoretical discussion on students' and teachers' needs, problems and their possible solutions have improved dramatically alongside with the publication of research methodology books to assist TEFL professionals in conducting research by the experts of the field. However, there are few empirical studies which have examined the perceptions of professionals of TEFL related to research, and the extent to which they are engaged in research in practice (Borg, 2009).

In contrast with Western countries, a few studies have investigated TEFL instructors' and academics' perceptions and research engagement in the Eastern countries and Asia. Reviewing the literature, Hiep (2006) examined research culture of TEFL academics in Vietnam's institutions through a qualitative methodology. He found out that Vietnamese TEFL academics held a positive view toward research as part of their academic their academic courses and also a means of reflection of the classroom practices.

However, multiple sources such as shortage of time, inaccessibility of the research sources, and lack of skill in research procedure influenced their research production. Different from Hiep, Borg (2007) investigated research engagement and its influencing factors of Turkish TEFL teachers through a quantitative methodology and found out that English teachers held a traditional view on research. They believed research was only quantitative consisting of long questionnaires and data analysis which was done empirically. There were also reports on some doubts and uncertainties on the advantages of research on their career improvement among TEFL teachers. Lack of time, the restrictions and conditions of the work place, and difficulties in comprehending research were frequently cited as reasons of not conducting research.

A review of existing literature reveals that there is a need to explore the value of research as perceived by Iranian TEFL post graduate candidates and psychological impacts associated with their research related engagement and the production of publications.

### Research Problem

The increasing dominance of English in Iranian higher education has led to an urging call for high-quality professionals

who are masters of English studies in a foreign language context. Research and publishing articles is a means of reaching higher quality performance as teachers. The higher education system in Iran inspires postgraduate candidates to strive for national and international reputation; however, no serious project has been carried out to explore the influences which are associated with Iranian TEFL postgraduates' research performance and their motivations to conduct research.

Over the past decades, the professionals' role as researchers has become more significant as they perceive the overall institution and how individual academics are compensated (MacGregor, Rix, Aylward, & Glynn, 2006). Therefore, it is worthy to explore how the value of research is perceived by Iranian TEFL academics and how their belief has changed about research. It is to be explored what psychological impacts are associated with their research engagement, related activities and research production which highly standard for the publication. These are all issues that need to be examined and elaborated considering TEFL academics.

### Significance of the Study

The changes in Iranian higher education makes it necessary for Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates to develop their own research profile. On the other hand, the candidates' research needs to address educational and social issues and to enhance classroom performance bring about their perception of the academic research.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Firstly, this research aimed at examining Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' research perceptions, and the influences which are associated with their research productivity. Secondly, it adopted a qualitative approach to gather data which could be used to set up a more productive system in which TEFL teachers can benefit from a more effective research environment. Furthermore, it would also shed light on existing literature on the topic.

### Research Question

The principal objective of this study was to gain some insights into Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' research perception and the factors which influence their research engagement and performance. A research question is addressed in this study and its leading themes are TEFL postgraduate candidates' perception about research, and the factors which influence this perception. The research question that guided this study is:

- What factors are associated with Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' research productivity?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Research and Research Productivity

Research is defined "as the creation of the new knowledge and/or the use of existing knowledge in a new and creative way, so as to generate new concepts, methodologies and understandings" (Australian Research Council, 2018, p. 9).

In this definition, research includes all kinds of studies and activities which are in line with research clients' needs, generation and improvement of new knowledge, and their implications in life.

Both Ramsden (1994) and Ito and Brotheridge (2007) mentioned that there is often a distinction between research related activities and research productivity, or in other words, research inputs and research outputs. Research activities, research inputs or research engagement may include studying research and research methodologies, acquiring research related grants, carrying out projects, reviewing proposals, supervising graduate learners' projects, editing journal articles, refereeing papers, discussing research with one's colleagues, and having exchanges with other scholars all over the world (Pratt, Margaritis, & Coy, 1999). This definition was opted for in this study.

On the other hand, research outputs or productivity emphasizes the products or outcomes of research. The publication such as books or solo chapters of the books, presentations in conferences, articles published in journals and research grants which are gained are usually the measurement criteria of research productivity (Adkins & Budd, 2006; Ito & Brotheridge, 2007). Research activities and productivities were reported to be positively related to each other, and it was revealed that professionals' research related activities help improve their publications of their research work (Ramsden, 1994).

This study conceptualized research productivity in Iranian context including: articles which are published in journals, papers which are presented in conferences, published books, and membership of a research project, as these criteria were mainly used for research productivity measurements in studies about TEFL professional in Asian countries (Dai & Zhang, 2004; Gao, 2006; Jiangwei, 2001; Zhang, Wang, Guo & Yu, 2003).

### Professionals' Understanding of Research Production and being a Researcher

Professionals' perception related to the importance and value of research have been examined in different studies in many empirical studies. Bruce, Pham and Stoodley (2004) reported five various directions in research experience and the perception of research value including the fulfilment of individual goals, using the benefits of teamwork in research, the contribution of knowledge, dealing with the research clients' needs, and working on the international problems. A hierarchy which began with the individual significance and then expanded to a wider sphere was also formed based on these five categories.

Considering the notion of being a researcher, four dimensions were identified by Akerlind (2008) which included intention of research, the process which is involved in research production, the research objects, and the outcomes. Consequently, four levels of understanding were revealed through the analysis of these dimensions: 1. In the lower level category, meeting the institutional requirements and doing the academic obligation was the meaning of research; 2. The second lower level in which the research was

taken to arouse the individuals' recognition in their field; 3. In the higher level, the academics have undertaken research to pursue their personal interests; 4. In the highest level, the main theme was the desire to add up something to the international knowledge in their field of study and benefit the world.

The comprehensiveness of the categories represented a shift from the self-centered image of using the research to the benefit of the researcher in using it to the multi-dimensional benefit of national and international aspects. It also demonstrated a turn from extrinsic motivation of individuals to improve in their jobs and seek fame in their fields through research, into an intrinsic motivation such as satisfying ones' interest and curiosity which contribute to alter some changes in the larger world.

### **An overview of Professionals' Research Performance and Associated Influences**

One of the interesting subject areas in research has been the influences which are related to TEFL professionals' research performance. In the past four decades or so, research performance studies and relevant influences have increased dramatically (Hemmings, Rushbrook, & Smith, 2007). The range of these kinds of research is not limited to individual's research productivity but also deals with the departments' and faculties' production of research. Nevertheless, most of the related studies have emphasized research productivity of professionals, due to the fact that their' research performance is expected to represent the related institutions and departments and they are also considered their students' role models in the area of knowledge related to their field of study (Bai, 2010). Due to the dominant role and value of research in higher education and institutions in both developed and developing countries, exploring the academics' and individuals' research performance is prevailing.

Although various studies have operationalized research productivity differently, the majority of them defined research productivity in terms of publishing articles, gaining research related grants and the citation related factors (Adkins & Budd, 2006; Ito & Brotheridge, 2007). In spite of their similarities in research productivity measurements, they have used different methodologies. Some researchers used the academics' own report on their number of research papers and acquired grants (e.g. Ito & Brotheridge, 2007; Xie & Shaumann, 1998) the while the self-reported information and data which was carefully checked in comparison with valid databases, were used in other studies (Fox & Milbourne, 1999). Besides, some researchers also have used the bibliometric sources of information about grants or publications (Tien, 2007).

In addition to quality, quantity was modified using grant values, journal rankings or impact factors related to research publication counts (Fox & Milbourne, 1999). For example, Fox and Milbourne investigated the professionals' research productivity in the field of economy in Australia. They divided the refereed Australian journals into four levels by the journal ranking synthesis which was published in the earlier

studies. After the ranking, the weights 1, 2, 3, and 4 were allocated to journals respectively.

There is controversy over conceptualization of productivity in research as published articles and books, or as published articles, books and acquired grants in research (Neumann, 1992). However, research administrators and scientists' perceptions were compared which revealed the fact that among 25 statements which described the indexes related to research productivity, they all ranked publication and grants as the top two indexes.

To follow the conventions of the field, this study on the assessment of Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' research productivity adopted complete research projects and published research articles and books as productivity measures, with journals' ranks, the book publishers, and completed projects of research as the quality criteria.

The reported influences related to professionals' research productivity were very diverse. These studies include: those which were interested on the impact of a single influence such as gender (Tower, 2007); those who analyzed departmental and institutional influences (Abott & Doucouliagos, 2004); those which focused on more than one influential category (Bland, Center, Finstad, Risbey, & Staples, 2005). In later studies, however, two categories were identified as the main ones which included individual influences and departmental and institutional influences.

Although there is discrepancy over the items which were included in each category, the individual influences which are related to research productivity are categorized as demographic data (age, gender, year of teaching experience, and the highest educational degree), psychological data (the motivation and self-confidence to do research), and academic data (research related training, connections and individual research strategies). On the other hand, departmental or institutional influences which are related to research productivity are categorized as time of research, the culture related to research, resources of research, encouragements, and institutional type and size.

Some general information associated with influences which impact academics' research productivity, has been presented in the above overview. However, it was not likely and necessary for this study to investigate all the associated factors discussed in existing literature due to the irrelevance of some of them to the objectives of this research and some of them were subjects of ethical constraint. For example, the academic origin which is a controversial topic in Iranian context in which professional from lower ranking educational institutions try to hide or avoid, was excluded from this study. In the following section, those influences which are believed to be relevant to professionals' research performance in Iranian context are examined in details.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

This study used a qualitative methodology in order to focus on the influences associated with Iranian TEFL post-

graduate candidates' research performance. In this regard, the qualitative interviews focused on a sample of individuals to come to a detailed description and knowledge of the problem. Accordingly, interviews were used to fulfill the research objective and a criterion in the selection of interview participants was that they were chosen from the departments which could provide the most sufficient information.

The research was conducted in Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' authentic educational setting, where their experiences and perceptions were investigated without any control from the researcher. This research also focused on the participants' current experiences and perceptions, which were associated with research in their everyday life. Therefore, the qualitative data was collected through the interviews as the best choice.

In line with the objectives of the study, a within-subjects design was used due to the thematic nature of interviews in which two or more themes were obtained from each interview and each main theme contributed to the construction of the whole picture.

### Participants

The interview participants were selected from different branches of main higher education institutions in five provinces of Iran including Guilan, Qazvin, Ardebil, Mazandaran, and Urumie from a total of 100. All these higher education institutions had TEFL departments. In this regard, firstly, the head of each English language department was approached and research profiles of a total of 100 were investigated with the assistance of their course instructors. Then the interviewees were chosen based on typical case sampling (Ary, Jacobs, Irvine, & Walker, 2018). The interviews were conducted with 20 postgraduate candidates (10 males and 10 females) typically 4 from each province. Their age ranged from 25 to 32, and they were studying at the second year of their academic education at TEFL masters' program in their educational institution. Second year candidates were purposefully selected as the "Educational Research course" is introduced as one of their curriculum courses at the second year of master's program in Iran.

The participants were also selected according to the variations in their academic title, and teaching experiences, so that the research could consist of various experiences and views on research. In addition, the participants were chosen based on the principle of providing the best understanding of the issue under the investigation.

### Instrument and procedure

The interviews were semi-structured and one to one with predetermined interview questions which were adjusted according to the previous literature on the topic and they were utilized as a data collection instrument to find out the factors behind candidates' research performance. The internal validity of questions was achieved through examination of peers and checking of the members under

the research. They were also validated through continuous feedback from the TEFL post graduate candidates who were interviewed. Colleagues were also consulted for their advice and suggestions and the tentative interpretations were used.

The data-base related to this study was kept so that the information used as evidence is available for other external examinations.

The interviews were mostly constructed in university classrooms during the second semester of academic year 2017-2018 and each interview took 20 to 30 minutes. English was chosen as the language of interviews (as the interviewees were all TEFL postgraduate candidates who were fluent in English), transcribed and audio recorded. In order to check accuracy, the interviewees were also shown the transcribed copies of the interviews.

Open-ended questions were used in the interviews, and some predetermined protocols of interview were followed; however, flexibility in form and order of questions was a critical point to consider especially when in-depth explorations of the participants were made. The interviewees were allowed to voice their perceptions and opinions. Participants' perception of research, their motivation in conducting research, their experiences of difficulties in conduction research, and their recommendations on building research capacity were the focus of the interview.

### 3.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was done concurrently with the process of data collection in this research. The preliminary analysis of transcribed interviews led to emergence of tentative and reflective categories which were used in further collection of the data.

Ongoing data analysis assisted the researchers in deciding on the sufficiency of the data. When the emergence of new themes stopped, the researcher ended the data collection process. After the whole data were collected and transcribed, an analysis was carried out based on which the preliminary findings were confirmed, tailored, and replaced (Merriam, 1998). The researchers achieved an understanding of participants' view by eliciting the story behind the data, and letting themes and categories to emerge from it. The analysis of qualitative data proceeded in two directions: from within-case analysis to cross-case patterns.

The thematic data analysis was carried out based on Creswell's (2008) model of qualitative data analysis. To analyze the data, first the transcribed texts were coded by locating the segments of the text and assigning relative codes to each segment as a label. These codes were the words or phrases which were used by the interviewer and the interviewees. Then the relationships were built among the primary codes. Then the researchers listed the codes and deleted the redundant ones. Through the elimination of similar and redundant codes, the broader themes emerged. The researchers then used the revised list of coded words to analyze the transcriptions to check if they entailed reoccurring patterns (Merri-

am, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates the coding process. (Creswell, 2008, p. 267).

Based on Creswell's (2008) model, the researchers read through the first interview to get a general opinion about it. Then based on the content, the transcript was divided into segments. Then the segments were labeled with themes such as "primary motivation" and "changes in motivation". When coding process was finished, the researchers found some similar codes which occurred while labeling the later segments of information. In such a situation, similar codes were collapsed into a broad theme. During this process, firstly the researchers compared and contrasted categories or themes, and then synthesized them.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Interview Findings

The interviews were conducted to explore the participants' research related perceptions and factors influencing their research engagement and research productivity to develop a sound knowledge of the topic. This section presents the findings obtained from the interviews.

The data sources included transcriptions from interviews with 20 TEFL postgraduate candidates. The results are organized into classifications capturing the themes which were recurring in the interviewees.

The themes emerged from the interviews were collated and organized into five categories:

1. Perception of the research value
2. Perception of the research requirements of institutions
3. Personal difficulties in research paper composition
4. Research inhibitors and facilitators related to departments and institutions
5. The requirement of a healthier research culture and personal research assistance

### Perceptions of the research value

There were two themes in relation to the participants' perception of the research value: changing values and purposes of research and rhetorical positive value of research. Table 1 summarizes their perception of value of research.

*Changing values and purposes of research:* The participants experienced some changes in Iranian higher education research purpose in the past five years. Six of them described some changes in their purpose for doing research and their belief about the importance of research which respectfully demonstrated some aspects of a change in requirements of institutional research as well as their career development stages in the past five years. These candidates who had worked for more than five years had an unclear or no idea about research when they first started working as a professional. They said that they didn't know much about research in the first years and they had only watched others doing it. All interviewees reported an experience of doing book reviews and preparing term papers; however, writing an article did not start until there was an urge for a course completion, their thesis score or a pay raise in their job.

Interest and motivation to learn motivated them to be engaged in research related activities, besides the factors which were mentioned earlier. In contrast, there was a turn in research value from negative to positive for some of the interviewees. They first believed that research was boring and contributed nothing to teaching when they first started engaging in research related activities. After their practical experience, they were more confident in reading academic articles which involved technicality.

*Rhetorical positive value of research:* Fourteen interviewees were generally positive about research value, as well as particularly research impact on instruction. However, their skepticism of benefits of conducting research in teaching practice increased by their experiences of involving in

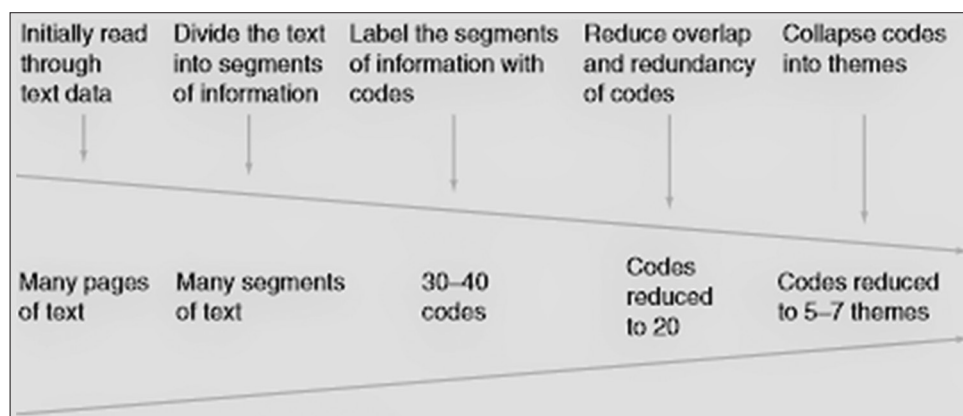


Figure 1. Qualitative research coding process, reported by J. W. Creswell

Table 1. Summary analysis of the TEFL postgraduate candidates' perceptions of the value of research

Theme	<i>f</i>	Illustrative sentences
Changing values and purposes of research	6	job promotion goals have changed the purpose for conducting research
Rhetorical positive value of research	14	I believe research is helpful in my career as a teacher; I am sure about this but I doubt the extent to which it can be helpful

research related projects conducted in a haphazard manner. Whereas they stated that research is necessary as a part of TEFL candidates' professional job, they had doubts about its being useful at the same time.

### **Perception of the research requirements of institutions**

Four themes emerged considering candidates' perception about the institutional research requirements which are summarized in Table 2.

*The critical role of research in promotion and annual assessments:* A career in teaching in educational system in Iran is mainly divided into three categories: Teaching as an official employee of the government, teaching as an employee of an institution, teaching as a private tutor.

Composing the research papers is mainly the requirements of job promotion in the first category (teaching as an official employee of the government). Five interviewed participants believed that research was mainly involved in decisions on their promotions; they also mentioned an increase in the research requirements over the past ten years. A point to keep in mind is that all five participants were employed as teachers or university instructors by the government.

*Effects of research requirements on TEFL academics:* Both positive and negative effects seemed to have been involved in research requirements. A few participants mentioned the positive effects. However, it seemed like the negative effects were more than the positive effects for the postgraduate candidates. The interview participants identified the following points as the negative effects: Concerns about teaching and research quality, early careers' developments, and TEFL postgraduate candidates' emotional states.

Four participants voiced their concerns about the tension between teaching and research, and they believed that some

postgraduate candidates might waste their time and energy on research instead of practical teaching related studies which can affect early career candidates more than the others.

### **Personal difficulties in research paper composition**

The interview participants identified multiple areas of difficulty in conducting research. Common difficulties among the TEFL postgraduate candidates who were interviewed included writing, publishing, reading and conducting the actual research. The summary analysis of participants' difficulties is stated in Table 3:

*Constraints related to time:* Despite some differences in their age, year of education and research engagement and research area of interest, the interviewees had similar types of difficulty in their research effort. Time constraints as an obstacle in research was mentioned by fourteen participants. For them, the primary conflict with research was teaching workload and it was even more of a difficulty for early career candidates who had to concentrate on developing their teaching methodology, and doing their research activities related to their courses at the university. They believed that concentrating on teaching takes most of one's time.

*Difficulty in composing articles and publishing articles:* composing an article and publishing research in a valid international journal was believed to be the most difficult by all the interviewees.

For some participants, writing articles was difficult as it was hard to come up with innovative ideas. Another reason is that they use the same textbooks over and over; therefore, even if they write an article, it would be a reflection about teaching or an integration of literature. The participants have found their own writings very shallow and not rich enough which would be rejected by valid journals.

**Table 2.** Summary TEFL post graduate candidates' perception about institutional research requirements

<b>Theme</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>Illustrative sentences</b>
The critical role of research in promotion and annual assessments	5	It is a critical aspect of education
Leading to teaching quality	6	We would put most of our time and energy on composing research rather than focusing on quality of teaching
Not facilitating early career candidates' development	5	It forces young candidates to put too much energy and time into research
Hurting TEFL post graduate candidates' emotions	4	Some candidates may develop psychological problems due to their disappointment

**Table 3.** Summary of TEFL postgraduate candidates' difficulties in conducting research

<b>Theme</b>	<b>f</b>	<b>Illustrative sentences</b>
Constraints related to time	14	Heavy teaching overcomes doing research
Difficulties in article writing and research publication	20	I think I need more confidence in composing an article
Difficulties in reading research paper	10	Theories are usually very hard to grasp
Difficulties in doing research	20	I think I am not professional enough in research methods
Difficulties unique to some candidates	6	In leading a research project, you have to be connected to a professor or work as a professor

An additional difficulty was publishing research. The interview participants did not know where to submit their articles. They mentioned that they had to go for paid journal publications (those journals which have publication fees for articles), and it seemed like publishing an article is dependent on money rather than the quality of the article.

*Difficulties in reading research:* Another difficulty which was specified by 10 interview participants was the incomprehensibility of academic articles specially those which are published in high ranking journals. Research methodology which was used in the articles and theories were two areas that caused a great difficulty for them. According to some participants, the research methods of these articles were beyond their understanding due to their inadequate research training and experience. Their scope of reading was restricted by a shortage of knowledge in methodologies related to research and disciplinary theories.

*Difficulties in doing research:* All interviewees reported difficulty in carrying out research with a focus on the methodology section in particular. One of the participants, who was introduced to research through university courses and research methodology related books, mentioned that when traditional forms of doing research were not considered in recent research requirements, he just did not know what to do:

"I have no idea where to begin, my experience considering research is not enough, and the books are too theoretical rather than practical".

Early-career candidates expressed their frustration on the initiation of a research work. Some of them declared that they get discouraged and disappointed when they thought about research. They had the intention of conducting educational research, but they were confused and frustrated about the sampling issues of the research.

*Difficulties unique to some of the candidates:* Two of the postgraduate candidates mentioned some disadvantages which created difficulties for them. They believed that less advantage was given to them in their courses as future researchers, and accordingly it was more challenging and harder for them to do research and to compose research articles in comparison with other TEFL postgraduate candidates.

"The fact is that in our university, there is a difference in attention given to other disciplines which are more likely to bring reputation for the university compared to the TEFL discipline. As for English Teaching, a lot of work has been done in the past few years, and it is hard to produce new results and innovative methods; I feel that these are the reasons for the candidates' disappointment with research."

The early-career TEFL postgraduate candidates seem to be the subject of such difficulties more than others since they have focused on their training and teaching preparation and they may be limited by their status at the university and their

workplace.

### ***Research inhibitors and facilitators related to departments and institutions***

In this section, the data concerning TEFL research environment of departments in Iranian universities is reported. Table 4 summarizes the departmental inhibitors and facilitators of research found in the analysis of the interviews.

*Growing of the research culture in TEFL departments:* five interview participants reported a gradual increase in department related support of the research projects, the overall encouragement, and support in particular. According to some of participants, research was given an eminent position in academic assessments.

Reportedly, the administrative efforts included oral encouragements to engage in research, to develop an interest in their own area of research and to ask their instructors and senior candidates for guidance. However, they believed that the management attitude towards the candidates' research production is that of a state of free development, not developing candidates' research awareness actively, and only reminding and requesting them to engage in research and produce research papers. They also added that the leaders are not enthusiastic enough and the information related to the attendance of national conferences is not available for everyone.

The interview participants suggested holding a few research seminars in each academic semester in TEFL departments in which postgraduate candidates would be required to participate. The speeches and question time which follows are very beneficial for the participants. They believed that reading the articles written by the experts is very different from meeting them face to face, being able to talk to them, and asking them your questions which is a valuable experience.

*Constraints related to the workplace of research:* The constraints that were imposed by the department on candidates' research efforts were reported by 15 interview participants. These included encouragement for junior TEFL postgraduate candidates, received guidance about research, time needed for research, and the support of department related to the growth of young active researchers. It seemed to the most of interview participants that no special or substantial support or encouragement existed for young TEFL postgraduate candidates. They believed that the only encouragement can be related to having an advantage over the others in job application.

Research guidance was considered the less organized factor. One of the participants mentioned that the appropriate research related mentoring comes directly from the candidates' thesis supervisor and it seemed to them that without a strong relationship with a supervisor it would be difficult to receive research assistance.

**Table 4.** Summary analysis of departmental and institutional research inhibitors and facilitators

Theme	f	Illustrative sentences
Growing of research related culture om TEFL departments	5	There are more research projects in which candidates are involved compared to the past and candidates are more involved in it
Constraints related to workplace for research	15	Time constraints were provided by TEFL departments

Some of the participants also talked about their concern of research time. They believe that instead of providing blocks of time there are only notifications to remind them of their term paper projects and finding a time to compose an article is totally your own business.

Considering the support from the department given to the postgraduate candidates to facilitate their educational growth into an active researcher, almost all interview candidates believed that individual effort had a more important role compared to the role of the department. On the other hand, talking about their experience in research, almost all the interview participants mentioned the interest, thinking habit, and being hard working as key principles of being productive in research.

### ***The requirement of a healthier research culture and personal research assistance***

The interview analysis revealed that a research culture was being developed among the TEFL postgraduate candidates. However, the interviewees reported that they were not supported enough in conducting research, and there was no departmental level management in research. Table 5 summarizes the institutional and departmental support in research.

*Policy-related support:* In comparison with early-career candidates, it seemed that seniors demanded more policy-related support to produce research regarding the financial resources of it. One of the interview participants who was more engaged in research compared to others recommended that future grants for TEFL postgraduate candidates at the national level would help to increase candidates' research productions. He believed that the standard to measure their research should be the article's influence rather than the number. In addition, he hoped that they would find out measures to enhance the postgraduate candidates' research productivity instead of only playing a role in setting up the requirements.

Another candidate believed that the English department should develop a mechanism to encourage research in which the process of conducting research from the very beginning to the last steps of publishing an article in a high-quality journal is specified in detail so that the candidates would not feel any confusion, pressure and frustration about the research and they would always have a valid and reliable reference for their questions.

*Supporting and encouraging TEFL postgraduate candidates:* Most of the candidates mentioned supporting and encouraging TEFL postgraduate candidates as a critical issue. The primary concern of the candidates seemed to be academic help about research. Fourteen participants emphasized the necessity of building a collaborative and nurturing culture

of research in TEFL departments. Some of them proposed the idea of holding research seminars beside their theoretical seminar courses at the university. One of the participants believed "the university should run some seminars with light and heartwarming atmosphere, in which TEFL postgraduate candidates in both junior and senior years can sit together and collaboratively talk, teach each other and also learn". Furthermore, most of the interview candidates believed that the department should take advantage of young TEFL postgraduates' enthusiasm, by providing more training and conference opportunities for them. This helps them to be induced into research activities more quickly; otherwise, their ambitious and enthusiastic mood considering research would be wasted.

Guidance in research for the interview participants was considered to be the most important factor. They believed without appropriate guidance the candidates would waste two or three years probing pointlessly without any useful lead.

Some candidates suggested working on a mechanism which develops fair competition for TEFL postgraduate candidates for engagement of research related activities and research production. This way everyone has the equal chance of attending a conference or winning funds for training in national and international academic institutions.

Dealing with the candidates' financial problems of publishing research papers was also raised by some candidates as a way of supporting and encouraging them in their research endeavors. There were some concerns that lots of young candidates used most of their time for moonlighting rather than doing research.

### **Discussion**

The influences associated with TEFL postgraduate candidates' research performance can be broadly divided into two categorizations: Individual characteristics, and institutional and departmental environment. These two categories are discussed in the following sections.

#### ***Individual characteristics***

Participants' perception about the individual characteristics which had an influence on their research performance was measured through some interview questions. The weakest area in their self-reported characteristics belonged to having an in-depth knowledge of the field and networking with other professionals of the field.

As reported by some of them, the association with a TEFL professor was a necessity in conducting research and this fact leads to a loss of confidence to start conducting research or to make efforts in leading research projects. Difficulties in read-

**Table 5.** departmental and institutional research related assistance and support

Theme	f	Illustrative sentences
Policy-related support	6	In our country, there aren't lots of funds in social sciences and humanities, so there is an intense competition
Supporting and encouraging TEFL post graduate candidates	14	Some academic seminars should be held by the department so that the candidates can sit together and share their thoughts



ing research articles and understanding the research methodologies and coming up with research topic could also be associated with their lack of an in-depth knowledge of the field.

A large proportion of them also seemed to lack intrinsic motivation in conducting research. This supported the prevailing view about the Asian TEFL practitioners' low research motivation (Chen, 2003) and a low confidence level in conducting research in comparison to actual teaching in classrooms (Dai & Zhang, 2004).

The interview results related to TEFL postgraduate candidates' personal characteristics also demonstrated that conducting research is a desirable activity for a majority of the candidates; however, lack of some characteristics related to individuals could have prevented them from doing research. In this regard, the low rate of Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates' research productivity might not be due to their perception of the value of research, but due to a lack of their self-reported individual characteristics. However, the positive perception could lead to motivate them to develop the desirable characteristics.

#### ***Institutional and departmental research environment***

The participants' responses to interview questions suggested a research environment in which research productivity is not facilitated. It seemed that Iranian TEFL departments and institutions supported a research environment which provides the candidates with the access to journals, books, and references and the candidates constantly get involved in talking about research; however, research training and research guidance workshops were considered as low. On the other hand, a considerable amount of interview participants felt that they are under the pressure of too much teaching and studying workload which prevents them from thinking about research and engaging in it.

The interviews questions on the workplace context also revealed a culture which emphasized the development of research in these institutions. However, the encouragement to engage in research seemed to be more verbal rather than practical and limited to only requesting and reminding the students to produce research papers instead of building an active enthusiasm and awareness.

The literature indicates that the leadership which is provided by the institutions, and also efficient mentoring are significantly influential on individual and departmental research performance (Ito & Brotheridge, 2007; Bland et al., 2005). However, the interview participants also showed some concerns about receiving adequate research guidance from their leaders and their department.

An important area of teacher education was considered as research methodology training by Borg (2003). The Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates, however, seemed to be dissatisfied with their research training. They suggested that besides having it as part of their curriculum, they needed to attend some workshops and some question and answer sessions with the expert researchers of their field to gain appropriate self-confidence to do research and also to come to a better understanding of research and its elements.

Another facilitating factor in research performance was also reported to be collaborative research (Fabel, Hein &

Hofmeister, 2008). The lack of Iranian TEFL postgraduate candidates might have led to fewer opportunities of research and consequently to a zero rate of research performance.

To sum up the instructional research environment, the findings indicate that TEFL postgraduate candidates felt that they were considerably on their own to go through the whole process in composing research papers and were dealing with a great amount of pressure on their research performance. The departments and institutions only provided the candidates with a partial support such as library resources, but they lacked a more comprehensive academic support such as adequate research guidance or research workshops to help them with practical experiences.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Research performance development is a complicated activity which involves both individual aspects and the departmental and institutional factors related to the environment of research. Considering the limited interview sample, the results of this research should be interpreted and looked upon with caution. However, Merriam 's (1998) notion of "reader and user generalizability" can be applied due to the detailed description of findings and the rationale behind sampling in an Iranian context, that is, Iranian TEFL departments and higher education institutions within Iran can transfer the findings of this study by determining the extent they are related to their present situation.

The data in this study suggested that according to Iranian TEFL post graduate candidates there was a shortage of individual characteristics which were needed for doing research. They were mostly negative about their in-depth knowledge of their field, their research training and networking with other research experts and research plans. In addition, the institutional and departmental research environment was also criticized by the interview participants, and while they showed a positive attitude towards the overall emphasis on research in their institutions, and the availability of research resources, they were negative about a more specific type of research support such as workshops of research training and methodology, and guided support related to research. However, to enrich the understanding of diverse aspects of research in an Iranian context, further explorations with a larger sample of participants is needed.

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