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TTC for TEYL: From Assumed Competence to Observed Performance

Saeedeh Shamsaee[1,*] & Mohammad Ali Shams[2]

[1] Mazandaran University of Science and Technology, Babol, Iran
[2] Babol University of Medical Sciences, Babol, Iran

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Abstract

The present study aimed to educate a group of young teachers through a TTC for TEYL while evaluating their assumed competence and observed performance. Fifteen student teachers participated in a 5-session online course and maintained their involvement through offline group discussions between weekly sessions. After the course, they were given a 25-item questionnaire to express their subjective assessment in regard with the effect of the TTC on their teaching competence, and were also required to develop multimedia TEYL materials reflecting their actual grasp of the presented content. A chi square test showed that the answers given to 11 items of the questionnaire across five dimensions of TEYL namely motivation, mediation, maturation, manipulation and modulation produced significant coefficient reflecting the teachers' perception of their abilities. In addition, two independent raters scored their performance on the task. The assumed competence and the observed performance were quantified and analyzed in a linear regression model to see if the former can predict the latter. Moreover, the individual and collective reactions of the student teachers both to the contents of the online course and issues raised in the offline discussions were examined via educational discourse analysis. The findings set the ground for designing and assessing future TTC courses in TEYL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teacher education in Iran is still young, and when it comes to teaching English to young learners (TEYL), the need for established and effective teacher training courses (TTC) is felt the most. This is rather consistent with the global realization with regard to the dire need for research-based benchmarks in this area. A wide range of evaluation systems might be presented for assessing the efficiency of TTCs for TEYL; however, one has to be able to select among the frameworks based on the objectives of evaluation. In addition, the nature and mechanisms of TTCs are variously designed according to the factors contributing to the educational markets available in each country. We first describe course at hand, and then elaborate on its empirical counterparts along with theoretical rationales only when it is really needed for the sake of operational accuracy and clarity.

* **Corresponding Author:** Saeedeh Shamsaee, English Department, Mazandaran University of Science and Technology, Babol, Iran. **Email**: saeedeh.shamsaee@mustmb.ac.ir

It is worth mentioning that this approach is inspired by action research agendas which have recently been celebrated by both educational researchers and teacher educators more than ever.

In action research, practice is not confined by theory; first practical problems are dealt with based on experience and then a research framework is adopted to explore and evaluate the extent of failure or success achieved in practice. The researcher's experience in TEYL and Teacher Education was organized in a TTC, and the present study was conducted to evaluate it. Specifically we were interested to examine both subjective perspectives and objective output associated with the course; therefore, we first educated the student teachers, then examined their opinion about the effectiveness of the course and finally scored their performance by examining the teaching material produced by them at the end of the course. We designed an online 5-session workshop for the student teachers who were interested in embarking on a TEYL career. The online space, which at first might seem a liability imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, proved to be a blessing in disguise, and helped us come up with innovative lesson plans and creative assignments. Due to a general negligence toward the significance of TEYL itself, the currently available TTCs in this area are even further deprived of updated contributions and field-associated improvements. The five sessions were allocated to five dimensions of teacher education identified in our literature review. To examine the effect of the TTC on the student teacher's perception of their abilities and also its relationship with their actual teaching performance, the research questions were formulated follows:

1) How do student teachers react to the five dimensions of TCC for TEYL presented during the training course?
2) What do they assume (while answering a questionnaire) about the effect of the course on their teaching competence?
3) Does their assumed competence meaningfully predict their observed performance on a material development task?

The following five sections elaborate on the five dimensions and their background in applied linguistics. As mentioned above, we adhere to the principle of operational clarity, and avoid being entangled in a web of vague theoretical citations.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Motivation in TEYL

There are two main dimensions for teaching motivation in TEYL: willingness and confidence. However, these two concepts may appear in various wordings. Strakova (2015) who worked on the self-efficacy of pre-service trainees uses the term "readiness". Sad (2015) labels these two dimensions as perception of efficacy and willingness to teach. His study shows that almost half of the variation observed in perceived efficacy can be explained by teachers' perception of their language proficiency. In other words, the more proficient the teacher assume they are, the higher is the chance of being confident about their capability in teaching English to young learners. In another project, Camlibel-Acar (2017) asked a group of young teachers about their perceived capability and readiness to teach English to young learners before and after a TTC, and found that although the quantity of the responses had not changed significantly, the quality of their arguments had definitely increased. Dealing with immature learners who are totally immersed in their newly discovered emotions is painfully demanding. In the absence of an intrinsic motivation, one needs a very powerful extrinsic reason to accept such a challenge. Our first session was set to disillusion student teachers and help them face the reality of the issue at hand. Although the challenges imposed on ELT practitioners because of the expansion of TEYL have been discussed for at least two decades (see Cameron, 2003), most student teachers who embark on TEYL are under the

wrong impression that it is easier to teach children because their language needs are much easier to handle, and even the least level of proficiency and teaching aptitude on the part of the teacher would suffice to meet their needs.

This oversimplification contributes to a false teaching confidence that vanquishes at their first real teaching experience. Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) provide a rather comprehensive review of the global challenges faced by TEYL practitioners, and call for a more realistic approach. Therefore, aiming to help them build a rather realistic confidence, we first informed the student teachers with a combination of empirical evidence and real-life examples that exhibited the main difficulties associated with language classrooms for children. This might seem quite counterintuitive since to motivate, one usually uses the positive side of things; however, in our approach disillusionment was considered an indispensable part of the foundation needed for establishing an enduring motivation. In Woolfolk's (2008) words, defines self-efficacy is a "teacher's belief that he or she can reach even difficult students to help them learn" (p. 361); however, if the teacher is mistaken about the meaning and instance of that "difficulty", their assumption of self-efficacy will be false. Therefore, if a young teacher maintains that they are confident and willing to teach children, but they are unaware of the real difficulties of TEYL, the confidence is false, and the willingness is soon to be vanished. In addition, perceptions need to be constantly updated. Concepts such as teaching motivation and self-efficacy cannot remain intact when the whole world is involved in a pandemic. For this very reason, a researcher such as Dorsah (2021) tries to redefine difficulties of teaching and reconstruct the concept of "teaching readiness" when remote learning has become a must rather than a fancy option. In accordance with this view we assumed that real pedagogical affection is based on true knowledge and realistic vision as opposed to transitory fantasies about the teaching profession. The current research has focused on the extent of the effect exerted by our treatment (training course) from the perspective of the teachers.

Mediation in TEYL

Medium-awareness plays a vitally important role when teaching English to children. As Ratminingsihm, Mahadewi and Divayana (2018) emphasize, the success of any TEYL program is closely associated with the teachers' grasp of the most recent information and communication technologies. In their ICT-based approach to TEYL, the teachers were educated to be updated with regard to progressive platforms and fully equipped mediating systems played a central role; the results of their TTC study show that such an approach has a significant effect on the young learners' enthusiasm and concentration during learning hours. The recognition of the determining place of E-learning in TEYL is not a recent development; around twenty years ago, Chujo and Nishigaki (2004) tended to the issue and designed an interactive TTC workshop in which student teachers could discuss and come up with their individualized online frameworks. Teacher educators who train young teachers for teaching English to young learners cannot ignore the crucial importance of emerging technologies; as Pin (2013) puts it, a balanced use of such technologies is a must for teachers who have to deal with young learners' emerging minds; this is now even more obvious given the global necessities for remote learning. As mentioned earlier in the section on motivation, in a very recent study, Dorsah (2021) examined pre-service teachers' readiness for remote learning in the wake of COVID-19. This study was important to us both for its methodological integrity and realistic approach to the issue of mediation in teaching. Dorsah's emphasis on online leaning readiness and emergency remote teaching are well in line with the mediation dimension in our TTC and the questionnaire that sought to assess its effect on the teachers' competence. The idea was to make the young teachers aware of the dire need for a mastery of online mediating systems and devices; their reaction will be discussed in our results.

Maturation in TEYL

Our operational definition of maturation can be explained in three areas namely attention, connection and parenting. Teaching maturity in TEYL, as we defined it in the present study, refers to the teachers' ability in examining children' learning behavior, communicating with them and playing the role of contemporary parent during the learning hours. The last component is also associated with the issue of parent involvement since building a parent-like relationship with young learners requires help from the parents themselves. The teachers' life history (micro level), and their relationship with other factors in the relevant educational context including parents (meso level) is crucially important in TEYL (Sowa, 2017). She explains how the interaction of these two levels forms teacher's identity as one of the caregivers in the eyes of the children. In TEYL, teacher becomes the third side of a triangular relationship which had been previously managed only by children and their parents. The above- mentioned maturation is in fact the teacher's efficacy in becoming an effective third party in the triangle.

It is worth mentioning that in some studies, the parent-like role of the successful TEYL teachers appears with alternative wordings, but the nature of the description directs us to the same aspects discussed under the maturation dimension in the present study. For example, in the findings of the study done by Hussein (2014) on the characteristics of exemplary TEYL teachers, the personal features include the following items: inspiring, expressing true love and sincerity, kind, friendly, patient, caring, enthusiastic, attractive, motivating, helpful, creative and communicative. It is hard not to see that many of the above qualities overlap with those of desired parent. The communicative aspect of the maturation dimension is mainly visible in the language used by teachers. Ahmad and Samad (2018) did an innovative study on the proxy-like functions of metaphoric expressions in the speech of TEYL teachers and explained how these communicative components contribute to the formation of teacher's role as a semi-parent who uses parent-like expressions in their communication with young learners. The participants' reaction to the maturation dimension in our TTC will be discussed in our results.

Manipulation in TEYL

Manipulation here refers to teachers' ability in owning the teaching material through planning, tailoring and development. A lack or deficiency of TEYL teachers' manipulative skills would lead to the mechanical use of irrelevant material or the unauthenticated use of standard material. The concept of authentication as a teaching process as opposed to authenticity as a static feature attached only to certain teaching materials was introduced by Nunan (1997). He maintained that beside the authenticity of the materials, learners should be able to relate the material to their own background. Well in case of young learners which have not gained enough autonomy yet, the main burden is on the teacher. Cao (2019) examined the quality of TEYL curriculums in Vietnam and emphasized that materials, class atmosphere and other contextual factors should all work together. In other words, the process of authentication should accompany the authentic products used as learning materials. Rich (2014), in an overview of TEYL research and practice, explained the central role that realistic materials can play in keeping pace with the realities of children's life.

Modulation in TEYL

Modulation in our terms is concerned with language skills and language components in TEYL. During the training course, the student teachers were provided with an insight into the place and priority of each module for young learners. The modulation section in our questionnaire examined the participants' perception of the TTC material across the seven modules. Different groups of teachers, based on their background, might have different priorities in mind when it comes to language modules in TEYL. Wissink and Starks (2019) developed a questionnaire to explore the

teachers' demands for a TTC in TEYL and found a desire for explicit coursework on how to teach reading to young learners. Among the seven modules, vocabulary seems to have been receiving the most share of research. Aukrust (2007) examined the effect of the amount, diversity and discoursal complexity of teacher talk on the vocabulary acquisition in young learners, and found significance in all three areas. The Chujo and Nishigaki's (2004) TTC workshops were focused on methods of teaching vocabulary to children. Szpotowicz (2009) examined the main factors that were assumed to influence young learners' vocabulary acquisition, and emphasized that lexical knowledge must be our first priority in TEYL. Unsworth, Persson, Prins, and De Bot (2015) conducted a similar study and elaborated on the lexical aspects that have a greater role in early vocabulary acquisition among young learners. Chujo et al. (2011) compiled a daily life corpus to be used in TEYL. Their work reflects the idea that vocabulary presented to young learners of English must be rooted in the natural language used by the usual companions not extracted from books that do not match the reality of their life. Hirata (2016) followed the same approach and gave the priority of corpus-based vocabulary lessons in TEYL. Graham, Courtney, Marinis and Tonkyn (2017) found that teacher level of training in language instruction had a significant effect on both grammatical and lexical performance of young learners. To see the reaction of our student teachers toward the issue of modulation, one has to see the results section further below.

3. METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were twenty-two volunteer student teachers who were recruited to be trained in our online teacher training course. They were all BA students of English majors from Kashan and Tehran who felt the need to be instructed on the issue of teaching English to young learners. They had limited experience in teaching and a basic knowledge of TEFL but had not received any academic education with regard to TEYL. The participants were informed that their performance during the course would be later analyzed by the researchers and were also ensured that any information with regard to their claimed competence or observed performance would remain totally confidential. Seven participants were not accessible for the self-assessment phase; therefore, we had to include only the data obtained from the other fifteen.

Design and Procedure

Our study was designed in three phases: 1) Teacher education; 2) Subjective self-assessment; and 3) Objective evaluation. The first phase was accomplished via a 5-session online course. Each session was allocated to one of the five dimensions of TEYL explained above. The teacher educator introduced the issue of the session and engaged in online discussions that involved the entire class. These weekly online sessions were accompanied with offline group discussion during the week. What was called the participants' reaction to the course refers to the nature of their participation in the offline discussions during these five weeks. The oral participation was transcribed and added to the written messages already available in the group. The major themes emerged during the discussions reflected the young teachers' reaction to the presented material. Educational discourse analysis was used to extract the themes. The details are later discussed in the result section.

The second phase sought to tap into the student teachers' perspective with regard to the impact of the course on their competence. The self-assessment questionnaire included 25 items in five sections namely 1) motivation; 2) mediation; 3) maturation; 4) modulation; and 5) manipulation. During the third phase a material development task was given to the participants and their performance was scored by the educator based on the very criteria introduced in the online course. In sum, there were three sets of data: a) original frequency data from the questionnaire along with

their converted interval counterparts; b) interval scores produced by two parallel raters; and c) frequency and textual data recorded and analyzed with educational discourse analysis techniques.

Instruments

We had a self-developed questionnaire to survey the student teachers' conceptions and a rating scale to score their performance on the final task. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked by the use of Alpha Cronbach formula, and the inter-rater reliability of the task scores was calculated through a correlation analysis. The former was based on internal consistency of the questionnaire, and the latter was based on inter-personal consistency of the raters who were using the same scoring criteria. The Alpha Cronbach coefficient was 0.82 which is a within the range of fairly acceptable, and the correlation coefficient was found to be 0.83 which is also acceptable. The numbers show that both instruments were reliable enough for the purposes of this study. Both instruments were used to collect the data needed for the inferential statistics presented in the following section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are presented in three sections: 1) The content analysis findings that reflect the student teachers' individual and collective reaction to the course; 2) The chi-square coefficients that show the significantly effective aspects of our TTC as assumed by the student teachers; and 3) The linear regression coefficients that show the extent to which the student teacher's subjectively assumed competence could predict their objectively scored performance.

Textual Data: Reactions to the Course

As explained in the procedure of the study, the oral and written messages exchanged via the WhatsApp group were recorded and color coded for later analysis. The voices were transcribed and added to the written materials that comprised the majority of the textual data. Two lines of investigation were followed in our content analysis: 1) Theme analysis; and 2) Frequency statistics. The former had a qualitative, collective and exploratory nature and was adopted to detect the lines of discussion which were not explicitly mentioned in our defined dimensions, whereas the latter was based on clear counting of specific cases in which a participant was individually discussing one of the five dimensions introduced during the course. It should be mentioned that since the themes are covering issues missed by the course content and the questionnaire, all three of them are directed toward problematic mentalities that function against our defined five dimensions. Table 1 shows the collective results of the theme analysis, and Table 2 shows the individual results of the frequency analysis.

Table 1: Emergent themes in student teachers' collective reaction to problematic issues

	Theme	Semantic Concepts	Pragmatic Context
1	Cultural Dilemmas	Religion, order & discipline, Honesty	Resolving the conflicts
2	Financial Considerations	Salary, Cost effectiveness	Consulting the educator
3	Technical Phobias	Multimedia, Online learning, devices	Complaining about the software

Each theme deals with a certain problem which has been frequently mentioned by different individuals in the course of offline discussions. Every theme is reflected in a series of related key concepts that surface in dialogues and represent important issues to the students. By adding the context column in Table 1, we aimed to avoid a usual negligence in theme analyses which can be called an artificial decontextualization of textual features. It can be argued that the discussed key

concepts and the themes emerging from them need specific contextual clues that build a pragmatic relevance for them. In the absence of informative contextual descriptions, a divergent series of interpretations is possible, and this jeopardizes the scientific unity of the results. For example, when we turn to the theme "Technical Phobias" and look into its key concepts, we have to know if it was brought up as a complaint or a suggestion. The pragmatic context reveals the place of the interlocutors and increases the accuracy of the interpretations. If the pragmatic context in not given to the reader, the textual features can be easily put in an assumed mental context that is far from the reality of the discussions. As mentioned earlier, the themes covered the problematic areas and were recognized collectively. Now we turn to quantitative individual data that represents the share of each participant and the portion allocated to each dimension during the group discussion (Table No. 2).

Table 2: Student teachers' individual shares in discussion over five dimensions of TEYL

Student NO.	Motivation	Mediation	Maturation	Manipulation	Modulation	Total Contribution
1	124	234	113	342	112	925
2	201	137	200	98	70	706
3	160	198	176	202	245	981
4	164	234	153	124	351	1026
5	321	115	78	200	172	886
6	143	234	132	231	118	858
7	234	125	152	132	362	1005
8	65	166	89	304	253	877
9	254	143	127	321	271	1116
10	124	153	176	156	341	950
11	243	133	145	109	236	866
12	254	123	163	135	152	827
13	199	186	165	263	221	1034
14	234	215	216	117	78	860
15	243	132	221	51	321	968
Total	2638	2157	1993	2345	3121	12254
%	22	18	16	19	25	

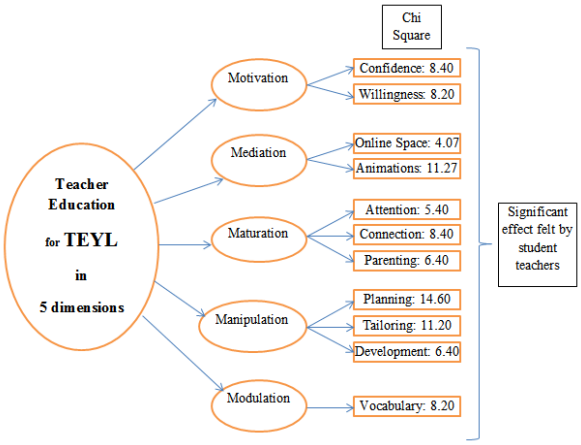

Diagram 1: Student teachers' assumed competence and their significant chi square coefficients

Chi Square: The Assumed Competence

We ran 25 independent non-parametric chi square tests on the frequency data obtained from our 25-item questionnaire. The items were divided into the five dimensions of TTC. Since 14 tests produced insignificant coefficients, here we only focus on the 11 items that did show a meaningful change in the perspective of student teachers. The chi square coefficients in diagram No. 1 show the magnitude of that change as felt and reported by the participants of this study.

The bigger the chi square coefficient, the bigger the effect of TTC on the teachers' competence as felt and reported by them. The participants' answers to the items allocated to the first dimension i.e. motivation shows that from their perspective the contents and discussions of our online course had a significant effect on two aspects of their motivation to teach English to children namely *confidence* to teach and *willingness* to embark on a career with a chi square coefficient of **8.40** and **8.20,** respectively.

With regard to the second dimension i.e. mediation, the two aspects that stand out as statistically significant when one taps into the mentality of the student teachers are *online space* and *animations* with chi square coefficients of **4.07** and **11.27,** respectively. It means that according to the collective opinion of the student teachers, the contents of the online course along with the consecutive offline discussions helped them promote their competence regarding mediation in online TEYL.

The meaningful effect of our TTC on the third dimension, maturation as reported by the student teachers can be seen in the chi square coefficients of three aspects namely *attention* (**5.40**), *connection* (**8.40**) and *parenting* (**6.40**). It means that they think the course has helped them to be more attentive to children, communicate with them and also with their parents. In other words, the student teachers, in a statistically significant way, feel that they have become more mature in their mentality toward young learners of English and their parents.

The fourth dimension of TEYL called manipulation in our study is reflected in the significant results found by the chi square test for the items focusing on three aspects namely *planning* (**14.60**), *tailoring* (**11.20**) and *development* (**6.40**). These numbers tell us that the contents of our online sessions accompanied by the following offline discussions were successful in creating a self-improvement in the student teachers when it comes to issues traditionally discussed under titles such as curriculum planning, syllabus design and material development.

The fifth dimension of our TTC for TEYL focused on modulation of teaching activities across language skills and components. The results of the chi square test on the relevant items show that

it is only *vocabulary* that stands out significantly as reflected in a coefficient of **8.20**. In other words, the student teachers did not find the contents of the course significantly effective in promoting their competence with regard to the other two components or all the four language skills. It was only the discussions revolving around the issue of teaching vocabulary to young learners of English that had a meaningful and positive effect on the relevant competence of the student teachers as reported by them via the self-assessment questionnaire.

Regression Analysis: The Predicted Performance

Having elaborated on the non-parametric results, now we turn to the parametric findings. As explained in the method section, each participant received a score based on their performance on the final task. The scoring criteria matched those introduced during the course. These scores provided us with an objective base against which one could compare the subjective statements of the student teachers. The multimedia material produced by the trainees showed to what extent their claims with regard to the efficiency of the course are reliable. In others words, we wanted to know if the claims of efficiency (reflected in the questionnaire) can predict the real outcome (presented in the task) in a statistically significant manner. To this end we used a regression analysis, which is based on correlation coefficients. To be able to calculate correlation coefficients, we first had to convert the Likert scale data into interval numbers so that this new score could represent the students' perspective with regard to the effectiveness of the course. The stronger the relationship between the assumed competence and the observed performance, the more reliable our results would be. Table 3 below presents the results of the regression analysis.

Table 5 has two main sections: the preliminary ANOVA and the main test that is a Linear Regression. The former has to be significant; otherwise, the values of the main test are not applicable. As it can be seen the ANOVA did produce a significant F value, and this allowed us to proceed with the regression results which were also significant in their own terms. To put the latter into perspective, one can imagine a line equation with the assumed competence as the independent variable, and the observed performance as the dependent variable, or in mathematical terms, x and y, respectively. The significance of t=3.69 implies that the variation in students' performance on the task could be predicted to an acceptable extent (58%) by relying on the impact they had attributed to the course. In more clear terms, what the student had imagined to have learned from our course had been translated into their actual performance by 58 percent. Other hidden factors and erroneous variables would naturally account for the unpredicted portion of their performance.

Table 3: Prediction of Student teachers' performance by their assumed competence

ANOVA		Regression		
F	Sig	Beta	t	Sig
18.04	0.00	0.58	3.69	0.00

5. DISCUSSION

The main results can be summed up and compared against the available relevant literature below.

According to the student teachers' collective reaction percentages in our results, the maturation dimension of TEYL was the least discussed. This is consistent with the findings of a series of studies in the literature (see Cameron, 2003; Cao, 2019) that report the underestimation of communicative and affective aspects of TEYL in teacher training programs.

To look outside the box, we tried not to be confined to our own defined dimensions hence tracing student teachers' emergent themes in textual discussions to find the underrepresented and neglected areas that contribute to their teaching anxiety. We realized that young teachers who embark on a TEYL career, in spite of knowing the right path, might remain pinned down by their worries and fears in three main areas: a) cultural dilemmas, b) financial consideration and c) technical phobias all of which are considered main issues in the literature. Pejović (2013) suggest investing in intercultural awareness to resolve the cultural conflict in TEYL. Sowa (2017) argues that our demands from the young teachers should match their financial capacity; of course, it would be effective to promote the latter so that a higher quality of teaching can be expected. Lam (2000) recognized technophobia as a problem worth tending to, and explains how one can help young teachers become technophiles in time. We suggest that the interaction of these problematic areas and their contribution to teaching anxiety be investigated further in future studies.

The most central focus of our study was the relationship between the student teachers' assumed competence and actual performance. Throughout the paper, we kept emphasizing that it is "assumed" competence not the competence itself. In accordance with studies such as Wissink and Starks (2019), Strakova (2015), and Sad (2015), we delimited ourselves to the teachers' perception of their teaching competency because we were interested to tap into the teachers' subjective self-image rather than their repertoire of knowledge. The results showed that what student teachers think they can do in TEYL significantly predicts what they can actually do for the young learners.

6. CONCLUSION

In Iran, TEYL needs teacher education programs more than ever. Although the need is felt globally, meeting it requires local efforts. Therefore, being already involved in this area for several years and with an action research agenda in mind, we held a TTC to educate young student teachers and analyzed the output via descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

We were interested to see what collective and individual reactions we would receive from the student teachers. We also wanted to see if what they think and claim with regard to the effect of our course on their teaching competence can predict their actual performance at least to an acceptable degree. To these ends, we collected textual and numerical data from 1) discussions during the course; 2) answers to our questionnaire; and 3) teachers' performance on a final task. The idea was to first educate the student teachers, then tap into their mentality and finally observe them in action. The results showed that the teachers' performance is meaningfully dependent on their mentality with regard to the priorities of teaching English to young learners and also on their self-image as formulated along the five dimensions of TEYL. The findings can effectively contribute to the current practice of English teacher education in Iran. The future studies can focus on any of the dimensions and delve into their internal mechanism. In addition, transferring this experience into a wide range of educational contexts can yield more reliable results with a higher degree of generalizability and validity.

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