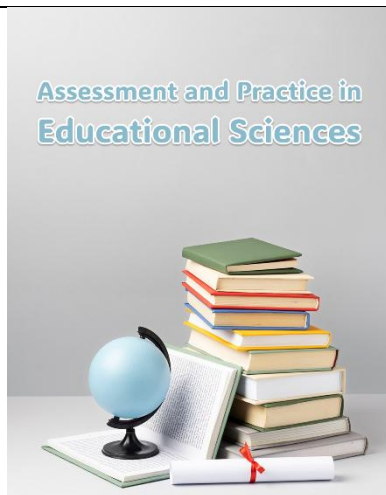




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What Makes an Effective EFL Teacher? Insights from Iranian Elementary-Level Learners

ABSTRACT

Identifying what constitutes teacher effectiveness from learners' perspectives is considered a significant factor in enhancing the learning process, particularly at the elementary level where teachers' performance plays a pivotal role in learning outcomes. Effective English teaching at the elementary level demands knowledgeable teachers who can deal with low-level learners. The present study sought to examine the perceptions of Iranian EFL learners regarding teacher effectiveness at the elementary level. To this end, a grounded theory design was selected for it. The study sample included 50 male and female learners, selected via available sampling. To collect the data, a semi-structured interview was implemented. Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. The results revealed the following key perceptions, identified for learners' perceptions: Creating a meaningful educational setting, integrating technology into teaching, parents' involvement, creating motivation through engagement, using collaborative learning, and the employment of L1 in the teaching and learning process. The findings have several implications for various stakeholders including EFL teachers, learners, teacher educators and curriculum developers in teacher education.

Keywords: Effective teacher, EFL learners' insight, Elementary-level teaching

Introduction

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, teacher effectiveness has emerged as a critical element shaping the quality of instruction and learning outcomes, particularly at the elementary level. Numerous scholars have emphasized that effective EFL teaching involves much more than mastery of linguistic content—it is an intricate interplay of pedagogy, communication, emotional competence, and classroom management tailored to developmental needs of young learners (1, 2). Purnomo (2023) aptly describes an effective teacher as one whose ultimate goal is the achievement and growth of students, underscoring a learner-centered ethos (3). The characteristics of effective teaching become even more consequential

at the elementary stage, a period when students' foundational attitudes toward language learning are formed and solidified. The necessity for skillful, empathetic, and reflective teachers at this level becomes evident when one considers the unique emotional and cognitive profiles of younger learners who require differentiated instruction, consistent support, and engaging environments (4). As Kianinezhad (2023) notes, elementary-level EFL teachers must be equipped with the capacity to go beyond rote instruction and instead offer adaptive strategies that account for students' evolving needs and diverse learning contexts (5).

In recent years, the role of EFL teachers at the elementary level has become increasingly complex due to broader educational transformations. The integration of technological innovations, the growing influence of parental involvement, and the emerging importance of socio-emotional learning are reshaping expectations for language educators (6, 7). For instance, as Alhajiri and Alshuraiaan (2023) argue, EFL teacher effectiveness is no longer limited to delivering grammatical or lexical knowledge—it encompasses the ability to apply relevant TESOL methodologies that resonate with both the cognitive and affective domains of young learners (8). Further complicating the picture is the widespread recognition that effective language teachers must be interculturally competent, empathetic, and emotionally intelligent, particularly when working with students at formative stages of development (2). This shift necessitates a deeper understanding of what learners themselves perceive as effective teaching. As learners are the primary beneficiaries of instructional practices, their perspectives on teacher effectiveness can offer invaluable insights into the qualities that truly facilitate EFL learning. Unfortunately, as Bowman (2013) points out, many existing teacher evaluation models fail to capture these learner-based insights, focusing instead on institutional or managerial benchmarks (9).

The limited scope of teacher effectiveness studies in the Iranian context, especially from the perspectives of elementary-level learners, presents a significant research gap. Although studies by Kaboodvand (2013) and Rahimi and Karkami (2015) have addressed certain aspects of effective teaching such as classroom management, emotional rapport, and motivation, these investigations often center on secondary or tertiary levels and overlook the developmental sensitivities unique to younger learners (10, 11). Furthermore, even in global studies that examine effective language teaching, the voices of learners are frequently underrepresented. As Ahmed (2003) argues, teaching at the elementary level presents distinct professional difficulties—including managing active classrooms, catering to learning disabilities, and operating with limited resources—which are often underestimated by top-down educational reforms (12). These challenges necessitate targeted research that is sensitive to the nuanced experiences of both learners and teachers within specific national and institutional frameworks. Thus, incorporating learner perceptions into the discourse on teacher effectiveness is not merely complementary—it is essential for constructing a comprehensive and actionable understanding of quality teaching in elementary EFL contexts.

The challenges faced by elementary-level EFL teachers are numerous and multifaceted. Munday (2022) and Fatehi Rad et al. (2024) identify several structural and interpersonal barriers, such as limited administrative support, lack of access to professional development, and high emotional labor associated with managing young learners (13, 14). Herzallah (2011) and Johnson (2011) further highlight institutional shortcomings that inhibit teachers' professional growth, including inadequate supervisory systems and the absence of collaborative professional learning communities (15, 16). In the Iranian context, many schools still operate under rigid administrative frameworks that limit the application of innovative teaching methods and hinder teacher autonomy. As McCormack et al. (2006) emphasize, effective teacher development requires consistent opportunities for reflection, peer collaboration, and feedback loops—all of which are scarce in many elementary education settings (17). Korthagen (2004) and Moon (2004) support the view that professional learning should be continuous, holistic, and embedded in real-world teaching scenarios, rather than episodic or theoretical (18, 19). However, given the burdens of curriculum mandates, heavy teaching loads, and limited institutional flexibility, many teachers are left to navigate professional growth through informal, self-initiated means, often at personal cost.

Adding to the intricacies of teaching at the elementary level is the changing landscape of language acquisition theories and the growing emphasis on learner psychology. De la Fuente and Goldenberg (2022) underline the importance of using learners' first language (L1) strategically in the beginner foreign language classroom, particularly for cognitive scaffolding and emotional comfort (4). This insight is crucial when teaching younger students who may lack the metacognitive maturity to regulate their own learning in a second language. As Edge (1992) and Underhill (2004) suggest, elementary-level teachers must also be reflective practitioners who engage in cooperative learning and peer exchange to manage the daily pedagogical dilemmas they encounter (20, 21). Collaborative teaching, differentiated instruction, and scaffolding are not mere pedagogical luxuries; they are essential for meaningful engagement and learner achievement at early stages. Indeed, collaborative learning practices have been widely endorsed for promoting student interaction, social negotiation, and deeper language processing—especially among low-proficiency learners who benefit from shared understanding (22). Therefore, an effective elementary-level EFL teacher must possess an integrated skillset that combines content knowledge, pedagogical agility, and emotional intelligence.

The role of technology in enhancing teacher effectiveness at the elementary level cannot be overlooked. According to Yang et al. (2018), integrating digital tools and multimedia applications into reading instruction enhances learner engagement and facilitates comprehension among young students (6). However, access to and proficiency in technology use remain uneven, particularly in less-developed regions. Richards and Farrell (2005) emphasize that digital literacy should be a cornerstone of teacher training and professional development in the 21st century, but many teachers are either inadequately trained or entirely excluded from such opportunities (23). Herzallah (2011) and McIntyre et al. (2017) further caution that excessive workloads, systemic inefficiencies, and time constraints often prevent teachers from incorporating technological innovations in a meaningful way (15, 24). Nevertheless, the potential of e-learning, blended instruction, and gamified learning environments remains largely untapped in elementary EFL classrooms in Iran. As students increasingly become digital natives, it is imperative that teachers develop the requisite technological competencies to engage them effectively. This is especially pertinent in elementary settings, where visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning tools can make abstract linguistic concepts more accessible and enjoyable.

Finally, addressing teacher effectiveness from the viewpoint of learners contributes a unique and necessary dimension to pedagogical discourse. As Kagen (1992) and Ahmed (2003) observe, most teacher development frameworks neglect learners' perspectives, treating students as passive recipients rather than active informants (12, 25). Yet learners, particularly at the elementary level, possess valuable insights into what teaching behaviors, attitudes, and strategies make language learning comprehensible and enjoyable. The current study, by incorporating grounded theory design and privileging learner narratives, seeks to bridge this gap by highlighting students' experiential knowledge. As Moafian and Pishghadam (2009) and GhorbanDordinejad and ImamJomeh (2011) assert, affective variables such as motivation, discipline, and classroom rapport significantly influence learner outcomes and should be central to any measure of teacher effectiveness (26, 27). By shifting the analytical lens toward student perceptions, this research aligns with global educational discourses that advocate learner-centered evaluation, formative assessment, and context-specific definitions of teaching excellence.

In sum, while much has been written on what constitutes effective teaching, the voices of Iranian elementary-level EFL learners have been largely silent in this conversation. Their experiences offer a window into the practical realities of EFL instruction and the qualities that truly resonate with them. Addressing this lacuna is not only a matter of research completeness but also of educational justice. If we aim to develop truly responsive and equitable language education systems, then understanding how learners define, experience, and evaluate teacher effectiveness must be part of the scholarly and policy-

making agenda. Therefore, this study endeavors to elicit learner-informed indicators of teacher effectiveness that can inform professional development, curriculum design, and pedagogical strategies in Iran's EFL landscape.

Methods and Materials

In line with the objective of the study, a grounded theory design was selected for it. Indeed, tackling individuals' perceptions could be best revealed via such a type of design.

The participants of the study consisted of 50 male and female Iranian elementary-level EFL learners who were selected through available sampling from among those who are studying English at different language institutes in Tehran. Their age range was 12-25. The mother tongue of all of them was Persian.

Data saturation was achieved after interviewing the 50th learner. The participants were briefed about the purpose of the study and were assured that their personal information would remain confidential.

To collect the data, a one-on-one semi-structured interview was developed congruent with previous literature and the views of 5 experts at English Language Teaching (ELT). Then, 50 elementary-level EFL learners were voluntarily interviewed. The interview was made of four open questions on the properties of effective teachers in teaching English at the elementary level. The interview was implemented in Persian for the learners. Besides, it followed no time framework. The interviews were done on WhatsApp and Telegram for the comfort of the interviewees. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Finally, the transcribed interviews were analyzed qualitatively. With regard to reliability and validity considerations, the researchers took advantage of low-inference descriptors and member checks (Ary et al., 2010).

Data collection involved implementation of the interviews. During the interviews, the researchers tried not to intervene in the interviewees' sayings so that the data is not manipulated and biased. Moreover, the interviewees were asked to express their opinions freely and with no anxiety.

Qualitative thematic analysis in four stages was followed to analyze the interviews. In the first stage, the researchers became familiar with the transcribed interview data via reading through them. Then, for coding purposes, some phrases, words, or sentences in the transcribed interview data were made highlighted to recognize some codes as representatives of the highlighted sections. Next, the codes were re-analyzed to identify the recycled themes in them. Ultimately, the common themes were reviewed to be checked in terms of accuracy.

Findings and Results

Regarding the research question 'What are Iranian elementary-level EFL learners' perceptions of teacher effectiveness at the elementary level?', the qualitative thematic analysis resulted in the identification of the following themes in the transcribed data:

Creating a Meaningful Educational Setting. As revealed by this theme, creating a setting which is sensitive to needs of elementary-level students is a quality of effective teachers. The following quotations act as evidence to this:

Teachers who are effective respect elementary-level students' different backgrounds, learning styles, and talents. They try to establish a learning educational setting which is meaningful and their specific needs are met. (Participant 28)

Teacher effectiveness at the elementary level requires making learning context meaningful and purposeful. This makes learners more willing and engaged. (Participant 40)

Integrating Technology into Teaching. This theme states that effective elementary-level teaching involves using technology in teaching. The following quotations show this:

Teachers should incorporate online programs and technology integrated components of teaching resources for the purpose of enhancing the language command of elementary-level students. Actively involving students in online components and programs based on their level of proficiency is known to boost English proficiency and enthusiasm for the language. (Participant 17)

Integration of technology is a good strategy for effective teaching of elementary-level teachers. E-learning has practically proved to be effective for better learning. (Participant 33)

Parent Involvement. Reliance on parents, as understood from this theme, is a feature of effective teachers teaching at the elementary level. To support this, the following quotations are referred to:

The participation of parental figures in students' lives plays a significant role in their academic success. Parents' involvement in addition to the time spent in instruction impacts students' learning, as students first learn the value of learning in their home setting. Thus, it is a must for elementary-level teachers to actively engage parents in the teaching process. (Participant 49)

Designing opportunities for parents and students to participate in educational practices together is an efficient approach to teaching at the elementary level. Family involvement is considered effective in the creation of useful activities. (Participant 13)

Creating Motivation Through Engagement. This theme means that teacher effectiveness at the elementary level involves motivating students through engaging them in learning. It can be understood from the following quotations:

Motivation creating through engagement is a characteristic of effective elementary-level teachers. These teachers should motivate students through making them engaged in class activities. Otherwise, they cannot teach effectively. (Participant 19)

Motivation is of significance for elementary-level students. They should be motivated enough to be involved in learning. Teachers should make their best to motivate elementary-level students. (Participant 35)

Using Collaborative Learning. According to this theme, taking advantage of collaborative learning is a technique that can add to elementary-level teacher effectiveness. The following quotations show this:

Collaborating in pairs or small groups is a widely used technique in elementary classrooms. Collaborative learning encourages active engagement and fosters social interaction. Therefore, it can be used by elementary-level teachers to generate active class participation. (Participant 50)

Collaboration is emphasized across various studies focusing on EFL learning at lower levels. Low proficiency students learn through sharing. When teachers use collaboration tasks, they make learning easier for students. (Participant 11)

Use of L1 in the Teaching and Learning Process. This theme indicates the need to use L1 when teaching at the elementary level. This is supported by the following quotations:

The employment of L1 is justified primarily in classes for beginner learners. Given that elementary-level learners are not highly proficient in English, incorporating L1 by teacher in teaching and learning can be very beneficial. It helps students better understand materials. (Participant 9)

At the beginning level, students are dependent upon their mother tongue. It is good for teachers to switch to mother tongue or L1 sometimes during instruction. L1 switching is a strategy frequently used by effective teachers. The impact of L1 use by both students and instructors on the development of L2 proficiency in beginner learners is significant. (Participant 38)

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study set out to explore Iranian elementary-level EFL learners' perceptions of teacher effectiveness using a grounded theory design. The analysis of semi-structured interviews with 50 learners led to the identification of six key themes:

creating a meaningful educational setting, integrating technology into teaching, parent involvement, creating motivation through engagement, using collaborative learning, and employing L1 in the teaching and learning process. These themes reveal a multidimensional construct of teacher effectiveness, as perceived by learners, that aligns with broader research in EFL pedagogy, developmental psychology, and teacher education. The findings underscore the importance of responsive, inclusive, and dynamic instructional practices that not only address language acquisition but also the holistic needs of young learners.

The first prominent theme—*creating a meaningful educational setting*—reflects the learners’ belief that effective teachers establish learning environments that resonate with their backgrounds, interests, and needs. This theme corresponds with findings from Johnson and Smith (2014), who emphasized the importance of personalized and contextually appropriate instruction in enhancing learning engagement and achievement (28). Similarly, Dong et al. (2020) highlighted how home and classroom environments jointly contribute to comprehension development, particularly among young learners who are sensitive to the emotional tone and relevance of their surroundings (7). The learners’ emphasis on purposeful and relevant instruction suggests that teacher effectiveness is rooted not only in content delivery but also in the emotional and cognitive meaningfulness of that content. As Korthagen (2004) notes, effective teachers connect theoretical knowledge with lived classroom experiences, making learning more impactful (18). A meaningful educational setting, therefore, is one that blends pedagogical goals with learners’ developmental needs and socio-cultural contexts.

The second theme—*integration of technology into teaching*—reveals a clear learner preference for instructional approaches that utilize digital tools. Participants valued e-learning, online programs, and interactive resources as facilitators of both engagement and language mastery. This finding aligns with the assertions of Yang et al. (2018), who argued that technology can bridge gaps between theoretical instruction and practical application in language education by making learning more interactive, personalized, and efficient (6). Similarly, De la Fuente and Goldenberg (2022) emphasized the strategic use of digital tools in supporting beginning language learners, particularly in contexts where traditional methods may fall short (4). Yet, despite its pedagogical promise, technology integration in Iranian EFL classrooms remains uneven due to limited infrastructure and insufficient teacher training. Herzallah (2011) and Richards and Farrell (2005) identified the lack of access to digital resources and institutional support as barriers to teacher professional development, which directly impact classroom technology use (15, 23). The learners’ insights point to a need for systemic reform to enable teachers to leverage technology as a core component of effective instruction.

Another key theme—*parent involvement*—underscores the learners’ perception that the educational process is most effective when it includes active collaboration between teachers and families. Participants noted that parents’ engagement fosters academic success, enhances motivation, and strengthens the value of learning. This perception echoes the findings of Dong et al. (2020), who emphasized the significance of the home literacy environment and parental engagement in early language development (7). Similarly, Ntumi (2016) and Munday (2022) found that insufficient parental involvement constitutes a major challenge in elementary education, often limiting the effectiveness of instruction (14, 29). Involving parents in the instructional process enables a more consistent, reinforced learning experience across school and home settings. The importance of this finding lies in its implication that teacher effectiveness extends beyond the classroom and into the broader ecosystem of the learner’s social world. As Ahmed (2003) and Bowman (2013) assert, successful teaching at the elementary level requires a systemic approach that includes families, administrators, and the community (9, 12).

The theme of *creating motivation through engagement* emerged as another central dimension of teacher effectiveness. Learners consistently reported that effective teachers stimulate interest and participation through interactive and enjoyable tasks. This theme aligns with the work of Rahimi and Karkami (2015), who demonstrated that motivational strategies significantly enhance language learning achievement and classroom discipline (11). Additionally, Moafian and Pishghadam

(2009) found that successful EFL teachers employ engaging pedagogical styles that foster student interest and emotional involvement (26). Effective motivation strategies often involve the use of games, storytelling, real-life tasks, and positive reinforcement—all of which are particularly impactful at the elementary level due to the cognitive and affective profiles of young learners. Kagen (1992) emphasized that novice teachers must learn to tailor their instructional methods to sustain learners' intrinsic motivation, a skill often developed through experience and reflective practice (25). The present findings suggest that learner engagement is not just a pedagogical preference but a psychological necessity for elementary EFL instruction.

The fifth theme—*using collaborative learning*—was highlighted as a valuable approach that enhances interaction, peer learning, and classroom dynamics. Learners believed that working in pairs or groups allowed them to better understand language concepts and develop social skills. Owusu and Cobbold (2020) supported this view by identifying collaborative strategies as key facilitators of cognitive and social learning, particularly for low-proficiency students (22). Edge (1992) also emphasized that cooperative learning among peers can lead to professional and academic growth when guided by reflective and supportive facilitation (20). This approach not only aligns with constructivist theories of learning but also fosters emotional safety and mutual respect in the classroom. In Iranian EFL classrooms, however, traditional assessment models and rigid seating arrangements may hinder the implementation of collaborative methods. As Underhill (2004) suggested, reforming classroom cultures to support learning communities is essential for sustainable pedagogical change (21). Thus, collaborative learning is not merely an instructional tactic but a pedagogical philosophy that redefines the role of both teacher and student.

The final theme—*the use of L1 in the teaching and learning process*—was strongly endorsed by learners who felt that their mother tongue provided necessary cognitive scaffolding in early stages of language learning. Participants reported that judicious use of L1 helped them grasp difficult concepts, reduced anxiety, and bridged linguistic gaps. This finding is strongly supported by De la Fuente and Goldenberg (2022), who argued that using a principled L1 approach in beginner classrooms enhances comprehension and learning efficiency (4). Herzallah (2011) also observed that low-proficiency learners benefit from strategic code-switching, especially when navigating abstract or culturally unfamiliar content (15). Furthermore, GhorbanDordinejad and ImamJomeh (2011) and McCormack et al. (2006) emphasized that effective EFL instruction should be emotionally sensitive and linguistically accessible, especially in early stages (17, 27). Rather than viewing L1 use as a pedagogical failure, learners in this study recognized it as a valuable support mechanism that facilitates the transition into L2 proficiency. This insight challenges purist immersion models and calls for a more pragmatic and learner-centered approach in EFL classrooms.

Despite its valuable contributions, the present study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study sample was limited to 50 elementary-level EFL learners from Tehran, which may not represent the broader demographic and linguistic diversity of Iranian learners. The use of convenience sampling may have introduced selection bias, as only those with access to digital platforms and a willingness to participate were included. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the study, while rich in depth, limits the generalizability of the findings. The interpretations rely on participants' self-reported data, which may be influenced by memory recall, social desirability bias, or limited self-awareness among young learners. The study also did not differentiate responses by age, gender, or language proficiency level, which could have yielded more nuanced insights. Finally, the researchers' subjectivity in data interpretation, though mitigated through member checks and low-inference descriptors, remains an inherent limitation of qualitative research.

Future studies should expand the scope of investigation by including larger and more diverse samples from different provinces and educational settings in Iran. Longitudinal research designs would offer insights into how perceptions of teacher effectiveness evolve over time and impact language learning trajectories. Mixed-methods approaches could combine qualitative

interviews with quantitative measures such as achievement tests or classroom observations to triangulate data and validate findings. Comparative studies between public and private educational institutions, or between different age groups, could uncover contextual variables influencing learner perceptions. It would also be valuable to explore how cultural values, gender norms, and socio-economic factors shape expectations of teacher behavior and instructional strategies among elementary learners. Moreover, future research could investigate teachers' perspectives alongside learners' views to capture a holistic understanding of EFL teacher effectiveness at the elementary level.

The results of this study hold significant implications for classroom teachers, school administrators, and teacher education programs. Teachers should strive to create learner-centered, emotionally supportive environments that incorporate technology, collaboration, and relevant content. Integrating digital tools, designing interactive tasks, and building strong home-school connections can enhance learner motivation and performance. Teacher education programs must include training on using L1 judiciously, employing collaborative strategies, and managing diverse learning needs. Administrators should ensure that teachers have access to technological resources, ongoing professional development, and platforms for peer collaboration. Curriculum developers should align instructional materials with the practical realities of teaching and learning at the elementary level, making space for flexibility and learner feedback. Ultimately, placing learner perspectives at the heart of instructional design and teacher evaluation processes can lead to more effective, equitable, and responsive EFL education.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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