



On (the lack of) responsibility in EFL education: A tale of the private sector

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is a crucial aspect of language learning, especially in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education. Such skills are essential for students to develop the ability to express themselves fluently and accurately in real-life communication. The present study aimed to explore EFL teachers' sense of responsibility in the private sector of Iran in teaching communicative skills and to demonstrate strategies to improve responsibility in this area among teachers. Data were collected through narrative frames and individual interviews with a sample of EFL teachers in private institutes. The findings suggested that several factors may contribute to teachers' lack of responsibility in teaching communicative skills, including low payments, a lack of emphasis on communicative skills in curricula and course books, and learners' demotivation. These factors result in a cycle of underperformance and demotivation, which negatively impact teachers' motivation to effectively teach communicative skills. The study highlights the importance of addressing these issues and empowering EFL teachers to take ownership of their students' language learning journeys and opens the door to new possibilities. Implications are discussed in light of the research findings.

Keywords: communicative competence, education responsibility, private sector, teacher responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected global landscape, foreign language education, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL), plays a crucial role, serving not only as a tool for intercultural communication but also as a vehicle for cognitive development, multicultural awareness, and social empathy (Paige et al., 2003; Lange, 2003). At the heart of language education lies communicative competence: the ability to utilize language fluently, accurately, and within appropriate social contexts to engage in meaningful interaction (Celce-Murcia, 2007). Various theoretical frameworks, ranging from Hymes' (1972) six-component model and Canale and Swain's (1980) four pillars to Bachman's (1990) three-dimensional model, converge on the view that communicative competence is a complex construct encompassing grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic, actional, and cultural dimensions. Mastering this competence is the ultimate goal of the language learning process.

However, various empirical reports reveal a concerning paradox. In many EFL contexts, including Iran, there is widespread dissatisfaction among both students and teachers regarding the instruction and attainment of communicative skills, specifically listening and speaking (Nazari, 2007; Czura, 2016). Language classrooms are often still dominated by the isolated teaching of grammar and vocabulary, with assessments focusing on receptive and discrete aspects. This reality highlights a fundamental gap between the ideal of holistic communicative competence development and actual classroom practices.

EFL teachers act as key agents in addressing this gap. The concept of responsibility in education emphasizes the reciprocal obligations between teachers and learners to foster a supportive learning environment and ensure optimal learning outcomes (Peters, 2015). Teachers are responsible for designing effective instructional strategies, providing feedback, and cultivating an inclusive learning climate (Cook-Sather, 2010). Although several studies have explored teacher responsibility in general, identifying its dimensions (Lauermann & Karabenick, 2013), the internal and external factors influencing it (Lauermann, 2014; Semradova & Hubackova, 2016), and even the concept of professional pedagogical responsibility for social justice (Barahona & Ibaceta-Quijanes, 2022), a notable research gap remains.

Previous studies have yet to specifically and profoundly investigate how EFL teachers perceive, accept, or reject their responsibility in teaching communicative competence, which constitutes the core of language education. Furthermore, no research has systematically analyzed this phenomenon through the lens of Activity Theory, which can uncover the complex interactions between teachers, tools (curriculum, textbooks), rules (policies, evaluation systems), community (institutions, students), and the division of labor within the educational ecosystem (Engeström, 2001). Research within the private sector, with its unique dynamics and challenges (such as market pressures and contractual systems), also remains limited.

Consequently, this qualitative study aims to address this gap by investigating the perceptions of EFL teachers in the Iranian private sector regarding their responsibility in teaching communicative skills. Grounded in the perspective of Activity Theory, this research is designed to answer the following two questions. 1) What factors contribute to EFL teachers' (lack of) responsibility in teaching communicative skills in the private sector? 2) How can these factors be promoted to ensure a heightened sense of responsibility among EFL teachers in teaching communicative skills?

The findings of this study are expected to provide a theoretical contribution by enriching the understanding of the teacher responsibility constructed within the specific domain of language teaching, while demonstrating the utility of Activity Theory as an analytical framework. Practically, the implications of this study can serve as valuable input for curriculum developers, textbook designers, teacher trainers, and policymakers in language institutions to design more supportive systems, ranging from remuneration policies and resource provision to professional development, ultimately empowering teachers to take an active role in their students' language learning journeys.

METHOD

The present study employed a qualitative approach. Data were gathered through administering narrative frames followed by individual semi structured interviews. Data were gathered from five female Iranian EFL teachers working in the private sector. A data saturation point was reached wherein no new themes were emerging from analyzing interview data, therefore the researchers decided to stop the data collection process. The researchers controlled for variables such as age, gender, teaching experience and educational degrees to increase the dependability of the results. It is also noteworthy that the participants who attended the interview sessions with informed consent were ensured that the interview data would remain confidential and anonymous and would only be used for research purposes.

The five participants, who ranged in age from 23 to 25, all held English language related degrees (i.e., Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English Language and Literature, English Language Translation). Maryam (pseudonyms are assigned to ensure anonymity) was a 25-year-old teacher, born in Shiraz and worked in the adults' department of a language center in Shiraz, Iran. She was an MA student of English language and literature and had five years of teaching experience. Sarina, who held a BA degree in TEFL, worked in the private sector in Tehran and had about four years of experience. She was a 24-year-old teacher who worked in the adults' department. Paria and Roya, born in Kermanshah, were 25 years old and worked in the adults' department in private language institutes in Kermanshah, Iran. They had five years of teaching experience and held MA degrees in TEFL. The other participant, Bitia, was born in

Kermanshah and worked in the adults' department of a language center in Tehran, Iran. She was 23 and had four years of experience in teaching the English language. She was an MA student of TEFL.

Data, in the present study, were obtained through administering narrative frames and individual semi-structured interviews. Narrative frames provide a "skeleton to scaffold writing" (Warwick & Maloch, 2003) and interviews are valuable sources of information "where reflection can help raise sensitivity to speech acts, as well as other aspects of language used and choices made" (Mann, 2016). The interview questions were open-ended ones which allowed the participants to express themselves to the fullest in a reflective manner. The narrative frames included prompts which the participants were invited to complete by drawing from their personal experience or knowledge on the subject (Barkhuizen, 2008). Semi-structured interviews were also administered to dig deeper into the participants' perceptions and explore more details in cases where the participants had failed to provide enough information in the narrative frames. The participants were given freedom to answer the prompts of the narrative frames or the interview questions in both Persian (the mother tongue of the participants) and English. They were given the liberty to switch between the languages to best express their ideas.

Since the participants were in different cities of the country and the researchers did not have access to them, both instruments were administered online. The narrative frames were sent to the participants as editable Word files via email. The participants were given three days of time to complete them and send them back to the researchers via email again. The participants were free to fill out the narrative frames in either English or Persian to best express their thoughts. The researchers, then, translated all of them into English and went through the obtained data and familiarized themselves with the contents. Later, they noted down questions for the follow-up interviews in cases where further information was required. After two to three days, the participants were invited to take part in a virtual interview which took place on Adobe Connect where the participants and the researchers were able to communicate through text and talk. The interviews lasted for a total of 25 minutes. The interviews were also conducted in both Persian and English. All interview sessions were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

In order to analyze the data, the researchers transcribed the recordings verbatim and went through them to familiarize themselves with the contents. The transcriptions of the narrative frames along with the interview data were imported into NVIVO 12 which is a software used to analyze qualitative data. Thematic analysis was employed to reveal the most frequent recurrent themes in the data. The data were segmented into meaningful units meaning that the answers to each prompt on the narrative frames were grouped together to facilitate analysis. Next, those themes which were of relevance to the research questions were coded and in cases where off-topic themes were discussed, they were dismissed. Member checking was employed to avoid any discrepancies that might have occurred between the researchers and the participants' interpretations of the data; therefore, all extracted themes were discussed with the participants in a separate session and those themes which were agreed upon by all of the participants were reported.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section includes the most frequently reported themes in the data that best summarize the reasons why EFL teachers do not take the responsibility to enhance EFL learners' communicative skills in language classes. The main four themes are presented and explained below.

Lack of financial support

EFL teachers' low income significantly contributes to their teaching demotivation resulting in a lack of responsibility for instructing communicative skills through a complex relationship. Teachers argue that they suffer from a lack of appreciation, insufficient compensation for time and effort, and limited access to professional development opportunities. These factors lead to

demotivation on the part of the teacher, decreased willingness to invest extra time in instructing communicative skills and low-quality student outcomes. The following sentences by Paria best demonstrate these themes:

“In language institutes, we receive lower income than other employees. The institute pays everyone more than us. Honestly, this makes me feel so demotivated that I only want to cover the assigned materials and I don’t put any extra time into doing extra activities. And the management or supervisors only want us to cover each session’s material. They do not care if we are creative or not.”

This can create a cycle of underperformance and demotivation, which can inhibit teachers' ability to effectively teach communicative skills. Alleviating EFL teachers' concerns requires a comprehensive approach including fair compensation, adequate support and resources, and professional development opportunities that empower teachers to improve their skills and engage their students in meaningful communicative language learning experiences.

Lack of emphasis on communicative skills in curricula

The lack of emphasis on communicative skills in general English curricula can contribute to EFL teachers' lack of responsibility to teach these skills in various ways. Firstly, if the curricula do not prioritize communicative skills, teachers may not feel obligated to put time and effort into teaching these demanding aspects of language Sarina elaborated this:

“Our lesson plans are designed in ways that emphasize grammar, vocabulary and reading only. We have many kinds of controlled activities like fill-in-the-blanks. But even if we have production activities, we will not have adequate time to cover them, because our lesson plans dedicate almost all the time to other controlled activities.”

Secondly, teachers may not have the necessary training, resources or skills to effectively teach communicative skills; therefore, they will need further guidance from the curricula on how to incorporate these skills into the classroom. Thirdly, if students are not meant to be assessed on communicative skills, teachers may not feel responsible for teaching them (the washback effect). According to Roya:

“Well, I do not put time in teaching unnecessary skills. Why should I teach speaking or writing? They are useless for the final exams. In final exams, my learners have to answer multiple choice questions and listening comprehension questions. So, it is better to practice these skills in class. We should not waste class time teaching writing and speaking.”

Lastly, if supervisors or observers do not evaluate the teachers on their students' communicative abilities, the teachers may not see the point in dedicating additional time or effort to teaching these skills. Ultimately, the lack of emphasis on communicative skills in general English curricula can create a disconnect or paradox between what is expected of teachers and what is prioritized in the curriculum.

Lack of emphasis on communicative skills in coursebooks

The lack of emphasis on communicative skills in EFL coursebooks results in EFL teachers' lack of motivation to teach these skills in several ways. Firstly, it can lead to a lack of confidence in teachers who may feel unprepared to teach communicative skills without guidance from the course books. A clear, well-structured book can serve as a strong source of confidence for teachers. As Maryam said:

“I do not have enough skills to design and prepare materials by myself. I do not think I can design tasks that can keep up with the course book. I just don’t feel confident enough. What if the students don’t like the tasks? What if they find the tasks useless? What if the tasks I design do not bring about the results I wanted?”

Secondly, it can create a sense of disconnect between what is expected of teachers and what is prioritized in the course books, which can decrease teachers' motivation and sense of responsibility to teach communicative skills. Thirdly, if the course books do not provide relevant and engaging materials or activities for teaching communicative skills, teachers may become demotivated and uninspired to teach these skills which can, ultimately, create a variety of

challenges for teachers. This drastically decreases EFL teachers’ sense of responsibility to teach these important skills.

Lack of student motivation

EFL teachers may feel less responsible to teach communicative skills if their students are only interested in passing exams and do not practice English outside the classroom. This lack of interest can make it challenging to create engaging learning opportunities. To address this issue, teachers should provide relevant materials, encourage out-of-class practice, and take ownership of their students' language learning journeys. Maryam said:

“Sometimes I cannot even understand why my learners attend the class. They get so bored and no matter what I do, I cannot motivate them. Sometimes some opportunities arise in class when I realize that I can teach something new to my students, then I realize that they may not even listen to me so I quit. I do not even think about bringing new tasks and activities to class because my students will not be responsive.”

Table 1 illustrates the obtained themes and sub-themes via content analysis with related examples quotes.

Table 1. Themes and subthemes extracted through content analysis

Themes	Subthemes	Examples Quotes
1. Lack of Financial Support	a. Lack of appreciation b. Insufficient compensation c. Limited access to professional development opportunities	“In language institutes, we receive lower income than other employees. The institute pays everyone more than us. Honestly, this makes me feel so demotivated that I only want to cover the assigned materials and I don’t put any extra time into doing extra activities. And the management or supervisors only want us to cover each session’s material. They do not care if we are creative or not.”
2. Lack of Emphasis on Communicative Skills in Curricula	a. Lack of necessary training to teach communicative skills b. The washback effect c. Lack of students’ communicative competence as a criterion to evaluate teachers	“Our lesson plans are designed in ways that emphasize grammar, vocabulary and reading only. We have many kinds of controlled activities like fill-in-the-blanks. But even if we have production activities, we will not have adequate time to cover them, because our lesson plans dedicate almost all the time to other controlled activities.” “Well, I do not put time in teaching unnecessary skills. Why should I teach speaking or writing? They are useless for final exams. In final exams, my learners have to answer multiple choice questions and listen to comprehension questions. So, it is better to practice these skills in class. We should not waste class time teaching writing and speaking.”
3. Lack of Emphasis on Communicative Skills in coursebooks	a. Lack of confidence b. A sense of disconnect between expectations and priorities	“I do not have enough skills to design and prepare materials by myself. I do not think I can design tasks that can keep up with the coursebook. I just don’t feel confident enough. What if the students don’t like the tasks? What if they find the tasks useless? What if the tasks I design do not bring about the results I wanted?”

4. Lack of Student Motivation	“Sometimes I cannot even understand why my learners attend the class. They get so bored and no matter what I do, I cannot motivate them. Sometimes some opportunities arise in class when I realize that I can teach something new to my students, then I realize that they may not even listen to me, so I quit. I do not even think about bringing new tasks and activities to class because my students will not be responsive.”
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According to the findings, EFL teachers’ responsibility status can increase only when the aforementioned challenges are tackled and dealt with appropriately. Therefore, it is suggested that stakeholders revise payment policies, provide access to professional development opportunities (e.g., courses, workshops, conferences, etc.), match curricula and course books with teachers’ expectations by incorporating communication-based tasks and assignments, and familiarize EFL teachers with the significant roles they can play in motivating learners. Table 2 represents a summary of the possible solutions.

Table 2. Suggestions to promote challenges

Challenges	Suggestions
1. Lack of Financial Support	a. Revisions in payment policies b. Tailoring payment policies to expectations c. Providing access to in-service teacher training courses or professional development opportunities
2. Lack of Emphasis on Communicative Skills in Curricula	a. Advocate for curriculum reform b. Designing more communication-based curricula c. Develop collaborative curricula through negotiation between curriculum developers and teachers
3. Lack of Emphasis on Communicative Skills in course books	a. Matching coursebook materials to the needs of EFL classes b. Incorporating more communication-based tasks and assignments into the coursebooks c. Encouraging teachers to adapt existing books with supplementary communicative activities
4. Lack of Student Motivation	a. Familiarizing EFL teachers with their important roles as agents of change

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that the low sense of responsibility among EFL teachers in teaching communicative skills within the Iranian private sector is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a symptom of systemic dysfunction within the language education ecosystem. By utilizing Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) as an analytical lens, the identified factors, low remuneration, misalignment of curriculum and textbooks, and student demotivation, can be mapped as "contradictions" within an activity system oriented toward the "instruction of communicative competence.

The role of tools and rules

In an instructional activity system, the curriculum and textbooks should serve as primary "tools" that mediate the teacher’s efforts to achieve learning objectives. However, findings suggest that these tools actually function as inhibitors. Curricula and textbooks are dominated by structured exercises (such as fill-in-the-blanks) and a narrow focus on grammar and vocabulary disregard the complexities of communicative competence as conceptualized by Hymes (1972) and Canale & Swain (1980).

These models emphasize that communicative competence requires the integration of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. The neglect of

sociolinguistic and strategic aspects in the available "tools" creates an instrumental contradiction: teachers are expected to facilitate communication, yet they are not equipped with adequate guidelines or materials to do so. As noted by the participants, the absence of such guidance erodes their confidence in designing original communicative tasks.

Furthermore, the "rules" within the system, specifically evaluation policies that exclusively test reading and listening, generate a negative washback effect. These rules signal that only receptive and grammatical aspects carry value. Consequently, aligned with Bachman's (1990) model which emphasizes strategic competence for contextual adaptation, teachers strategically choose to "ignore" speaking and writing instruction, perceiving it as "useless for examinations." Thus, the contradiction between the system's objective (communication) and the evaluative rules (discrete structures) becomes a primary driver of low teacher responsibility.

Unsupportive division of labour and community

The issue of low remuneration is not merely a matter of compensation; it is an indicator of an imbalanced division of labour and recognition within the language institute community. In Activity Theory, the subject (the teacher) is motivated when there is an equilibrium between effort and recognition. Low wages that are disproportionate to workload and professional demands reflect this imbalance, causing teachers to position themselves as "technical implementers of the curriculum" rather than "agents of competence development." This aligns with the findings of Barahona and Darwin (2023), who distinguish between affective and concrete responsibility, wherein private sector teachers feel their engagement is largely transactional.

Additionally, the community, comprising institutional management and students, further exacerbates these contradictions. Management that demands "content completion" without valuing instructional creativity, coupled with student demotivation due to a lack of perceived relevance in communicative learning, creates an unsupportive environment. Passive, exam-oriented students (as expressed by Maryam) reduce the "demand" for communicative instruction, fostering a vicious cycle: teachers feel no responsibility because students are unresponsive, and students become increasingly unmotivated because the instruction lacks a communicative dimension.

Implications of theoretical-practical gap

These findings offer a fresh perspective on the discourse of teacher responsibility. While previous studies, such as Lauermann (2014), focused heavily on internal factors (commitment, role perception), this study reveals that in the context of teaching communicative skills in the private sector, external (socio-material) factors dominate. This confirms and deepens the arguments made by Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes (2022) regarding the social determinants of responsibility, demonstrating how the tools, rules, and community structures within an activity system collectively shape (and constrain) teacher agency and their sense of responsibility.

Consequently, proposed solutions must move beyond "motivating teachers" on an individual level. Interventions must be systemic: 1) Revision of tools. Curricula and textbooks must be revised to reflect a holistic communicative competence model, incorporating authentic tasks that train discourse and strategic competencies. 2) Transformation of rules. Evaluation systems must align with communicative goals, such as incorporating performance-based assessments for speaking and writing. 3) Restructuring community and division of labour. Institutions must foster a culture that rewards communicative innovation and provides equitable compensation. Teacher training should also focus on building strategic competence and self-efficacy in designing and facilitating communicative tasks, enabling them to navigate the limitations of existing materials.

Enhancing teacher responsibility in teaching communication is a collective project that necessitates the reconfiguration of all elements within the language education activity system.

Implications for practice and teaching education

These findings offer a novel perspective within the discourse on teacher responsibility. While previous scholarships, such as Lauermann (2014), have largely concentrated on internal

psychological factors, namely commitment and role perception, the current study reveals that within the context of communicative skill instruction in the private sector, external (socio-material) factors are predominant. This confirms and extends the arguments of Barahona and Ibaceta-Quijanes (2022) regarding the social determinants of responsibility.

However, recognizing systemic constraints must not result in professional passivity. On the contrary, these findings demand a more proactive approach from all stakeholders. For teachers, there is an imperative to experiment with innovative instructional methods and to foster supportive learning environments despite systemic limitations. Crucially, teachers must consciously enhance their own communicative proficiency; confidence in teaching communicative skills is predicated on personal mastery. This self-efficacy serves as vital capital, enabling teachers to take the initiative in designing communicative activities even when textbooks offer insufficient support.

For teacher educators, the implications are manifest. Professional development and teacher education programs must explicitly prioritize the cultivation of pre-service teachers' communicative competence as a core objective. Furthermore, these programs should be engineered to promote teacher autonomy and self-efficacy, equipping educators with the skills to design original materials and evaluate students' communicative abilities. This reduces over-reliance on rigid curricula and textbooks. Effective teacher education must bridge the gap between theoretical communicative competence and applicable pedagogical strategies that can withstand diverse contextual constraints.

CONCLUSION

The present account has identified a number of factors that contribute to the lack of responsibility in EFL education, including low teacher income, curricula and coursebooks that do not prioritize productive skills, a lack of assignments that target these skills, and student demotivation. These findings have significant implications for various stakeholders involved in EFL education. Not only can this study inform policy makers of teacher education on how to design programs that target teachers' inability to overcome these challenges, but the ideas presented by the participants can also serve as potential practical suggestions to heighten a sense of responsibility in instructing communicative skills among EFL teachers.

For teachers, the findings highlight the need for greater emphasis on professional development, experimentation with new teaching methods, and the creation of a supportive and engaging learning environment for students. In other words, teachers are encouraged to take a more proactive approach to teaching. Needless to say, this requires teacher educators to promote teacher autonomy and confidence in their teacher education programs. Teachers should also prioritize developing their own communicative abilities so they can feel more confident when it comes to teaching such skills. This can also be incorporated as one of the goals of teacher education programs.

For policy makers, the findings suggest that increased investment in EFL education is necessary to create an effective learning environment for students. This includes investment in teacher salaries, offering professional development opportunities, and revisions in educational policies to prioritize productive skills, as well as the development of communicative skills in EFL curricula and course books. Additionally, prioritizing the incorporation of communicative skills in teaching practices, even if they are not well-emphasized in coursebooks or curricula, can help create a more effective and engaging learning environment for all learners resulting in enhanced communication inside the classroom as well as in real-life situations.

Overall, the implications of the findings emphasize the importance of all stakeholders in EFL education taking responsibility for creating a more effective and engaging learning environment which can ensure that students receive high-quality instruction which enables them to succeed in the real world. Further research can build upon these findings and explore additional factors that may contribute to the effectiveness of EFL education. Longitudinal and interventionist studies that explore the process of change in EFL teachers' perceptions of their responsibility in communicative competence instruction over the course of time are also recommended.

Comparative accounts of the perceptions of novice and experienced EFL teachers can also shed light on the role of expertise in determining their perceptions.

The implications of this study extend far beyond its limitations, although one is recommended to exercise caution when approaching the findings for a number of reasons. The study included a relatively small sample size, and the participants were recruited from a specific context, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other settings. Moreover, the study failed to take into account the ideas of other stakeholders such as institute authorities, colleagues, students, and parents who may also influence teachers' sense of responsibility. Therefore, future research should consider the perspectives of all parties involved to obtain a more comprehensive and comparative understanding of their perceptions. Lastly, future studies may need to develop suitable interventions to overcome other possible barriers to teacher responsibility.

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