

## Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude towards silent students

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### *Abstract*

Given the point that attitude has the three dimensions of cognition, affection and behavior and that teachers' attitude towards the students strongly affects their teaching and students' learning, this study was an attempt to determine EFL faculty members' attitude towards silent students in Iran. To this end, 97 EFL faculty members were selected through stratified random sampling from Isfahan, Shiekhbahae, Khorasgan, Sobhesadegh, Najafabad and Amin universities located in the province of Isfahan. In this descriptive survey study, the data were gathered by a 5 point Likert-scale researcher-made questionnaire (with 60 items; 23 items are related to the cognitive dimension of attitude, 23 to the affective dimension and 14 to the behavioral dimension) whose validity was confirmed by four experts in the field of psychology and teaching English. Moreover, its reliability, based on the Cronbach's alpha, was calculated to be 0.892 showing that it is of high acceptable reliability. The obtained data were analyzed by one-sample t-test. The results showed that the EFL faculty members' attitude in terms of cognitive and behavioral dimensions was positive and above average, while their attitude in terms of emotional dimension was average. And finally, their total attitude was positive and above average.

**Keywords:** silent student; attitude; cognitive dimension; affective dimension; behavioral dimension; EFL faculty member

## Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude towards silent students

### 1. Introduction

Traditionally, EFL educational classrooms including the academic ones were completely teacher-centered in which the focus was only on the instructors, language forms and mechanical drills or in other words on what the instructor knows about the language (Kraft, 2012). The teachers' endless talking led to the passivity of the students which is opposed to the modern idea that students should become active participants in the learning process. Therefore, all EFL teachers' efforts were in line with making or forcing all the students to actively and deeply have interaction in the class and activities such as "large group discussion", "small group discussion" and think- pair-share" have become commonplace in the classroom (Hamelock & Friesen, 2012; Richards & Burns, 2012).

With the advent of the communicative approach, the idea that language teachers should know their students well and be responsive to their needs and preferences in language learning is now part of every teacher's basic training. At the core of this idea is learner centeredness, which is broadly understood as the focus on learners and classroom interaction (Benson, 2003; Jones, 2007). With the idea of focusing on the learners, teachers and professors tend to make their classrooms student-centered. Although they often think their classrooms are learner-centered because their students are engaged in the discussions, many students do not participate and prefer to remain silent during all kinds of discussions. The studies have shown that nearly thirty percent of all students do not participate in whole-class interactions and are considered to be silent (Jones & Grieg, 1994). According to Hamelock and Friesen (2012) in any kind of classroom even in learner centered classroom in which the focus is only on the learners' needs and learners are decision makers, there will be students who spend much of their classroom time in silence. In most of these cases language teachers find it difficult to facilitate active learning and explore ways of breaking the great wall of silence (Harumi, 2011).

Accordingly, Brophy and Evertson (1981) termed silent students "invisible" and defined them as those who "had low rates of behavioral contacts and response opportunities with teachers." (p.43). According to their expressions, invisible students are not only passive in the whole class discussions but also in small group activities. They suggested that these students are generally inactive, passive and detached (Jones & Grieg, 1994). Moreover, Liu and Jackson (2009) investigated that the reasons behind the wall of student's silence are: "*fear of losing face; low proficiency in the target language; previous negative experiences with speaking in class; cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts; incomprehensible input; and lack of confidence and personality (e.g., introversion)*" (p. 66).

On the other side, there are some language teachers and professors (e.g. Reda, 2009, Schultz, 2009) who suggest student's silence should be rethought and that students' silence and not having interaction in the classroom should not be considered as their' weakness, lack of knowledge or power and passivity. In fact, they consider silence as a form of classroom participation. Reda (2009) said that from instructional perspective "*the student who learns is the active student; active has become synonymous with highly vocal... and this is not true*" (p. 5). As can be seen, teachers and professors have taken different positions toward silent students. However, their attitude toward this category of the students has not been empirically measured. To this end, this study was designed to seek teachers' attitude toward silent students in an EFL academic context.

Attitude is an important aspect of individuals' emotion and sensation which represents a sort of orientation towards phenomena, events, issues, matters and things. It is evaluated through the terms such as like, dislike and agree, disagree and positive, negative and favorable, unfavorable (Tesser & et al., 1990). All social psychologists believe that attitude is composed of three dimensions of ABC, namely affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions. Cognitive dimension includes one' beliefs, knowledge and awareness towards an event, matter,

phenomena or a thing; affective dimension includes one's likes, dislikes, feelings, emotions while behavioral dimension includes one's tendency and reaction towards an event. Given the point that attitude has three dimensions of cognition, affection and behavior and by considering the fact that nearly one-third of all students do not participate in whole-class interactions (Jones & Grieg, 1994), the purpose of this study is to investigate what EFL teachers think about these students and to identify their attitudes toward them based on affective, behavioral and cognitive dimensions of attitude.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Silence defined

Being a nonverbal invisible phenomenon, silence is an ambiguous term to be defined (Acheson, 2008a). However, it does not mean that it is intangible. Rather, we can notice it in the same way that we understand other concretes in our surroundings. In the one hand, some theorists (e.g. Clair, 1998; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985) agreed that "*silence was and generally is perceived as a passive background to the noisy activity of communication*" (p. 8). It was defined as an absence of speech or as "periods of non-speech or non-vocalization" (Zuo, 2002, p. 4). It was believed that silence stands against talk and it is generally non-communicative (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985).

While, on the other hand, there are some other scholars arguing that the nonverbal nature of silence should not be necessarily interpreted as lack of communication and it is in its nature communicative (Acheson, 2008a, 2008b; Belanoff, 2001; Tatar, 2005). Samarin (1965, p. 115) makes the point clear by comparing silence with zero in math. He points silence has meaning just as zero has meaning in mathematics; it is an absence with a function. Accordingly, Picard (1952, as cited in Meyer, 2009) believed, silence has meaning as such and it is the speech which is the resonance of the silence. In a similar vein, Jaworski (1993) argued that "*the absence of speech does not imply the absence of communication*" (p. 46). The implication, therefore, is that silence is a way of communicating indirectly and that silence before speech should not be treated as a negative phenomenon; rather, we should put silence and speech on a communicative continuum with speech on one end of a continuum, and silence on the other. "*Such, silence and speech are considered as overlapping forms rather than two distinct, dichotomous, clear-cut opposite categories*" (Jaworski, 1993, as cited in Lemak, 2012; p. 9). Tannen (1985) refers to silence as 'the extreme manifestation of indirectness' (p. 97). As she states, '*If indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something*' (p. 97). The implicature is that silence has power. For example, a student who rarely speaks, as she speaks others will pay more attention to his words; in this way, these silent students have more power to control the class (Reda, 2009).

Armstrong (2007a) also argues that "invariably, silence connotes meanings which are interpreted not as empty, but *full* of meaning" (p. 19). Likewise, Liu (2010) believes that we cannot say that a person who is silent says nothing. In sum, silence means and communicates and it should not be considered as the absence of the language. Liu (2010) also adds that "*a word or a phrase offers some clues to meaning, but the meaning of silence depends on the interpreter's sensitivity to understand*" (Liu, 2010, pp. 38-39). And since silence can be interpreted differently and carries out different meanings, therefore, it is considered as one of the greatest sources of misunderstanding. Considering the meanings of silence and its ambiguity, Baurine (2011) suggests a more cautious definition. He says that any efforts to classify or determine the borders among silences only show that the border lines are layered and flexible. Silence might be simultaneously generative and disappointing, speaking and silent, beneficial or detrimental.

### 2.2 Who is a silent student?

The idea of who a silent student is, like the very notion of silence, largely a myth. Many researchers have negative attributions towards students' silent behavior and view the student silence as a sign of reticence,

classroom conflict, and a barrier to language learning (Harumi, 2011). Among them are Tsui (1996), Flowerdew et al. (2000), Jackson (2001, 2003), and Liu and Littlewood, (1997), who define silent student as those passive ones whose reticence in the classroom is due to their low English proficiency; therefore, they choose not to use the target language, especially when responding to teachers; they are unwilling to participate in classroom discussions; they do not give responses voluntarily or ask questions and highly depend on their teacher (Liu & Jackson, 2010).

According to Canary and MacGregor (2008) teachers often describe them as those who act shyly and put them against the ideal students whom are defined to be those who are more likely to participate orally in class, make contributions, and take part in discussions. Therefore, the student's silence may make teachers discomfort and may cause them to give negative meanings to their silence because the teachers consider students' silence as the sign of their lack of interest in their teaching (Canary & MacGregor, 2008) or lack of communicative competence, comparing with their more competent classmates, which disable them to express themselves in English (Liu, 2010).

Additionally, Ellwood and Nakane (2009) label them as apathetic (p. 225). Brophy and Evertson (1981) also term silent students "invisible" and define them as those who "had low rates of behavioral contacts and response opportunities with teachers." (p. 43). According to their expressions, invisible students are not only passive in the whole class but also in small group activities. They suggested that these students do not typically contact teachers except when it is needed and they are generally inactive, passive and detached. They remain silent to control class and avoid taking risks (Jones & Grerig, 1994). Accordingly, Petress (2001) indicates that students who don't have cooperation with class through oral participation "are acting unethically" (p. 105). He claims that student lack of participation not only influences his own learning negatively, but also puts off classroom learning because they do not allow their classmates to enjoy their experiences, insights, ideas and knowledge.

However, there are so many other researchers (e.g. Li Li, 2005; Meyer, 2009; Reda, 2009), while accepting that student silence could make the instructors discomfort and unsatisfying, provide another explanation for the student silence and believe that silence and talk should not be taken as two opposite words or as an enemy for each other but rather they should be taken complementarily. Viewing silent student as less intelligent, absent, unprepared, resistant, hostile or passive must be rejected (Reda, 2010a, 2010b). Reda (2009) argues that teachers should no longer consider silent students as passive, unprepared or uncritical and non-engaged. These students are seen by what they do not do rather than what they choose to do. She believes for many students silent is a kind of learning style. In fact, these students can be highly active in class just by listening to others. Their silence can be a generative one meaning that they have a "*capacity to speak and listen at the same time and to do so both within and without language*" (Baurain, 2011, p. 91). We should not take their silence as a sign of weakness or absence or a deficit or emptiness that needs to be filled. In sum, silent students are also speaking (Baurain, 2011).

Likewise, Li Li (2005) and Balas (2000) suggest teachers should rethink about their ideas on silence because it can be a form of participation. Students are engaged differently. Some are vocally engaged in the classroom discussion while others prefer to be silent and show their engagement by actively listening to the material presented in class (Meyer, 2007, 2008, 2009; Meyer & Hunt, 2004). Li Li (2005) explained that "in classroom settings teachers often enlist participation as an evaluation criterion. But, they do not recognize silent active listening as a legitimate form of learning" (Li Li, 2005, as cited in Meyer, 2009, p. 25). The silent student is paying attention by his/her own way. Thus, there is no difference in their achievement or learning comparing with other vocally active students, though not always. Accordingly, Jaworski (1993) argued, "when the foreign language classroom is a silent one and the student spends most time listening to the teacher and to the other students, it does not mean that no learning is taking place" (pp. 52-53). The implication is that learning can occur even in silence. Similarly, Armstrong (2007a) rejects the idea that "active participation through talk definitely leads to effective learning" and refers to this idea as a largely "unquestioned axiom" (p. 19).

All in all, there is a dualistic approach with regard to the relationship between learning including language learning and talk. Some believe that talk will result in a better outcome, while others claim that silence will negatively influence the student leaning and achievement. Due to the paucity of a practical research in which teachers' real attitude was to be measured, this study aimed to seek answers for the following issues and shed light on them.

1. How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the cognitive dimension of attitude?
  2. How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the affective dimension of attitude?
  3. How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the behavioral dimension of attitude?
  4. How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' total attitude toward silent students?
- 
- H1: There is a significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' cognitive attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ).
  - H2: There is a significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' affective attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ).
  - H3: There is a significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' behavioral attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ).
  - H4: There is a significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' total attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ).

### **3. Method**

#### *3.1 Participants*

97 participants both male (54) and female (43) were involved in this study that were selected by a stratified sampling procedure. They were all EFL faculty members teaching either English Translation or English Teaching at the foreign language faculty of the following universities: University of Isfahan, Shiekhbahaee, Khorasgan, Sobhesadegh, Najafabad and Amin universities. In addition, all of the participants were non-native speakers of English- and within the age range of 29 to 60. Moreover, the number of the years the teachers have been teaching and also their academic degree were different among the participants.

#### *3.2 Instrument*

The instrument used was five-point Likert scale researcher made questionnaire which was developed through meticulous reading of literature. The questionnaire consisted of 60 items in which 23 items were related to the cognitive dimension of attitude (namely, one's beliefs and knowledge about the subject), 23 items to the affective dimension (namely one's emotions towards the subject) and 14 items refers to the behavioral dimension (namely one's reaction towards the subject). Moreover, since the attitude is a relative term and can be either positive or negative, half of the items were positive in terms of their meanings and the rest was negative which in the process of analyzing were turned to positive ones. In this questionnaire five ordered response levels were used: 1. Strongly disagree 2. Disagree 3. Neither agree nor disagree 4. Agree 5. Strongly agree. Here, each response was associated with a point value (ranging from 1 to 5) and the score of each respondent was determined by summing the point value of each statement. Therefore, the obtained data were quantitative.

For the questionnaire to be validated, first the items were written based on an extensive literature review. Whence the initial version of the questionnaire was prepared, it was piloted on a small sample of the same population. Finally the modified questionnaire was submitted for review to four experts in the field of psychology and educational science to check the validity and appropriateness of the content of each item in terms of the three dimensions of attitude, namely affection, behavior and cognition. The experts were asked to explain their idea on the validity of each item by marking on the five-point Likert scale ranging from very high to very low. The average of the experts' individual judgment was at least 4.75 and the average of the experts' judgment on each attitude dimension was at least 4.77 and total average of their judgment about the questionnaire was 4.83. The results obtained from the expert judgment showed that the questionnaire was of high content validity. Moreover, According to the Cronbach's alpha formula the reliability of this researcher-made questionnaire was calculated to be 0.892 showing that it was of high acceptable reliability.

### 3.3 Procedure

To handle this study a single-copy of researcher-made questionnaire was handed out to the participants who were EFL faculty members. They were required to first read the cover page carefully and then fill out the two page questionnaire. They were asked to rate each item according to their degree of agreement. The options available for selection were as follows: strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree. In order to complete the questionnaires, there was no time restriction. In order to feel relax during the completion of the questionnaires some explanations was orally given to the participants about the questionnaires.

## 4. Results

**Table 1**

*Indexes of attitude scores and its dimensions*

|                      | Mean | SD    | Minimum | Maximum | Range |
|----------------------|------|-------|---------|---------|-------|
| Cognitive dimension  | 3.16 | 0.454 | 1.96    | 4.43    | 2.48  |
| Affective dimension  | 3.04 | 0.49  | 1.65    | 3.96    | 2.3   |
| Behavioral dimension | 3.79 | 0.36  | 2.86    | 4.44    | 1.58  |
| Total Attitude       | 3.26 | 0.38  | 2.05    | 4.1     | 2.05  |

The mean score of 3 which is called the assumed mean ( $\mu$ ) shows the neutral position. As can be seen in the above table the mean scores for cognitive, behavioral and total attitude are more than 3 meaning that they are above average but the mean of affective dimension is close to 3 meaning that it is average. In order to see whether the difference between these obtained means and the assumed mean is significant or not t-test was applied -shown in the following:

**RC (1):** How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the cognitive dimension of attitude?

**Table 2**

*Indexes related to the scores of cognitive dimension*

|                     | N  | $\bar{X}$ | S    | Df | $\mu_0$ | Tob | P     |
|---------------------|----|-----------|------|----|---------|-----|-------|
| Cognitive Dimension | 97 | 3.16      | 0.45 | 96 | 3       | 3.5 | 0.001 |

Table 2 represents that the observed t for the cognitive dimension is higher than the critical value of the table with 96 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis - which claims that there is no significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' cognitive attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ) - will be rejected.

**RC (2):** How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the affective dimension of attitude?

**Table 3**

*Indexes related to the scores of affective dimension*

|                     | N  | $\bar{X}$ | S     | Df | $\mu_0$ | Tob   | P    |
|---------------------|----|-----------|-------|----|---------|-------|------|
| Affective Dimension | 97 | 3.04      | 0.495 | 96 | 3       | 0.793 | 0.43 |

As can be seen from the table 3, for the affective dimension the observed t at the significance level ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.05 and with the assumed mean ( $\mu$ ) of 3 is lower than the critical value of the table at 96 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis based on the idea that there is no significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' affective attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ) - will be rejected.

**RC (3):** How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' attitude toward silent students with regard to the behavioral dimension of attitude?

**Table 4**

*Indexes related to the scores of behavioral dimension*

|                      | N  | $\bar{X}$ | S    | Df | $\mu_0$ | Tob   | P     |
|----------------------|----|-----------|------|----|---------|-------|-------|
| Behavioral Dimension | 97 | 3.79      | 0.35 | 96 | 3       | 21.87 | 0.000 |

Table (4) represents that the observed t for the behavioral dimension is higher than the critical value of the table with 96 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis - which claims that there is no significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' behavioral attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ) - will be rejected.

**RC (4):** How far is Iranian EFL faculty members' total attitude toward silent students?

**Table 5**

*Indexes related to the scores of total attitude*

|                | N  | $\bar{X}$ | S    | Df | $\mu_0$ | Tob  | P     |
|----------------|----|-----------|------|----|---------|------|-------|
| Total Attitude | 97 | 3.26      | 0.38 | 96 | 3       | 6.67 | 0.000 |

As can be seen from the table (5), for the total attitude the observed t at the significance level ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.01 and with the assumed mean ( $\mu$ ) of 3 is higher than the critical value of the table at 96 degree of freedom. Therefore, the null hypothesis based on the idea that there is no significance difference between the mean of EFL faculty members' total attitude and the assumed mean ( $\mu = 3$ ) - will be rejected.

## 5. Discussion

Considering the cognitive and behavioral dimensions of the attitude for which the null hypothesis were rejected, the t- test showed that the cognitive and behavioral means scores of EFL faculty members were positive and above average. In other words, EFL faculty members not only have a good cognition towards the silent but also they adopt a good behavior towards them. They don't assume their silence as a negative factor affecting their learning process. The results of this part is against the presumption that teachers assume that those who have vocally active participation are learning while those who are silent are apathetic and not paying attention (Ellwood & Nakane, 2009). Teachers not only think that student's reticence, or lack of participation does not influence his own learning negatively, but also mentioned that there is no difference between the silent and active students in terms of their learning. The results are exactly in line with what Reda (2010) and some other scholars

(e.g. Jaworski; 1993, Balas, 200; Li Li, 2005; Armstrong, 2007a; Reda, 2009; Meyer, 2009; Liu, 2010; Baurain,2011) believe. They said that the silent student is, indeed, learning in his or her own way. The implication is that learning can occur even in silence. So based on EFL faculty members' cognition the idea that active participation through talk definitely leads to effective learning should be rethought.

In other words, unlike Tsui (1996), Flowerdew et al. (2000) and Liu and Littlewood, (1997), Zou (2002), Canary (2008), Ellwood and Nakane (2009) who define silent student as those passive, lazy, unintelligent ones whose reticence in the classroom is due to their low English proficiency, the results indicated that EFL faculty members do not define silent students as passive, unintelligent lazy ones and they do not view the student 's silence as a sign of reticence, classroom conflict, and a barrier to language learning. The results were in line with the view of researchers like Li Li (2005), Balas (2000), Meyer (2009), Reda (2010a, 2010b), Harumi (2011) and Baurain (2011). They argue that viewing silent student as less intelligent, absent, unprepared, resistant, hostile or passive must be rejected. Teachers should no longer take "active synonymous with highly vocal" (Reda, 2009, p. 5) and should no longer consider silent students as passive, unprepared or uncritical and non-engaged. They believe for many students silent is a kind of learning style. In sum, as Meyer (2009) believes, EFL faculty members believe that some students get the point just by listening and paying attention to the class discussions rather than having oral participation. In other words, according to their views, many silent students are actively listening to the discussions and their silent does not mean that they are not preparing to give the correct response if they are called on.

The results also showed that although EFL faculty member's affective attitude towards silent students was positive and average, it is not as positive as their attitude in terms of cognitive or behavioral dimension. This is exactly what Reda (2009) indicated to in her book. Reda (2009) explained that from the instructional perspectives "those silences initiated by students are problematic" (p.5) and "professors have a whole vocabulary for explaining students 'silence" (Reda, 2010, p. 68). She also added that much too often when a teacher in the classroom faces with the students who rarely speak, he may think that there is something wrong in his/her teaching which needs to be fixed. Therefore, it can produce a disturbing or better to say less positive emotion.

Finally, the t-test showed that the mean scores of EFL faculty member's total attitude towards silent students was positive and above average meaning that their total attitudes towards the silent students is generally good and they don't consider their silence as a negative factor affecting their learning process and their achievement. All these are in line with the view of researchers like Li Li (2005), Balas (2000), Meyer (2009), Reda (2010a, 2010b), Harumi (2011), Baurain (2011) who argue that the notion of silent student should be rethought. They believe that they are as good, as active and as ideal as other students, they learn by being silent and in fact they are not silent, they are active listeners- they actively listen (Reda, 2010).

## **6. Conclusion**

In sum, the purpose of this paper was to determine what EFL faculty members think about silent students, what kind of emotion they have towards them, what kinds of behavior they adopt towards them and generally what their attitude is towards the silent students. Overall, this study has shown that EFL faculty members' attitude in terms of cognitive and behavioral dimensions is positive and above average while their attitude in terms of emotional dimension is average and the their total attitude is positive and above average. In other words, they have significantly positive beliefs, awareness, ideas and behavior towards the silent while their emotion or feeling towards them is neutral (neither positive nor negative).

### *6.1 Limitations and future investigations*

Silent students are always challenging in all kinds of classroom especially in English academic ones. EFL teachers have taken different positions towards them. Some interpret their silence as learning signal while others believe that their silence means lack of knowledge. Since teachers attitude affect their teaching style and



students' learning, the latter may lead silent students to think that their teachers do not like them and provoke their silence more. Therefore, this paper tried to shed light on teachers' attitude towards the silent students in an EFL academic context and compare the results of their attitude with the aforementioned ones. However, in contrast to claims made in some studies, this research showed that the idea that teachers may consider silent students as weak ones and that they have a kind of negative attitude towards them should be rejected. On the contrary to the face of the matter, this study showed that teachers have a high positive attitude towards the silent.

In so doing, some limitations were observed in this study. First, this process of measuring attitude was done for the first time in an EFL faculty, so it faced the problems that any innovative work may encounter. Second, it lacks in literature reviews on teachers' attitude. Most research had discussed the reasons for students' silence and the participants of their study were the silent students themselves not their teachers. Third, since the participants of the study were EFL faculty members not teachers, their numbers were limited. And finally, this process of measuring attitude had never been done EFL faculties; hence, it faced all the problems that any innovative works may encounter.

For future investigations, this study was performed only on the accessible universities existing in Isfahan; therefore, it can be done on a larger scope. Moreover, EFL faculty members' attitude towards the vocally active students could also be measured and compared with their attitude on the silent students. In addition, the participants of this study were EFL faculty members. The same study can be administered on EFL teachers teaching at either EFL language institutes or state schools.

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