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English language teachers' self-assessment of competencies and preparation level in English as a foreign language teaching contexts

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ABSTRACT

The current study aimed to investigate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' competence levels in different competency areas and the level of preparation of such competencies by their initial preparation programs. EFL teachers from all school levels (cycle one, cycle two and post-basic) participated in this pilot study as part of a PhD project in the academic school year 2022/2023. The participants were in-service teachers (n= 59) who graduated from local and non-local teacher preparation programs and were assigned to different schools in the Muscat Governorate. The pilot study implemented a descriptive research method in which a quantitative research approach was used to investigate the level of EFL teachers' competencies and preparation. The study employed a questionnaire divided into two parts. The first part explored EFL teachers' perceptions of their current level of competencies and the second part investigated teachers' perceptions of the extent to which their initial preparation programs have prepared them for these competencies. The study's findings revealed that teachers perceived themselves as possessing a high competency level in helping learners understand learning objectives and using teaching aids to motivate and engage learners. Teachers perceived their lowest competency to be reading the latest research in ELT. The study makes some significant recommendations including the demand to further update teachers' professional competencies with the assistance of the Ministry of Education's (MoE) in-service training sector and revise the outcomes and content of Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs) for a stronger enhancement of teachers' required competencies.

Contribution/Originality: This research highlights key teacher competencies revealing that helping learners understand learning objectives and using teaching aids are paramount while reading the latest research in English Language Teaching (ELT) is less emphasized. It contributes to the role of teacher preparation programs showing teachers feel well- prepared in teaching grammar.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' competencies are linked to teachers' identity and quality of teaching. Teachers display their abilities when they take well-informed steps to address problems in the classroom. Rossner (2017) asserted that teachers'

competence is a critical factor in the teacher development process in the process of managing language education. There are factors affecting teachers' competence such as personal qualities of teachers, values and dispositions, teachers' experience, skills, knowledge, understanding, and teachers' abilities. In the context of EFL teaching situations, EFL refers to English as a foreign language. According to Thornbury (2006) EFL contexts are communities where English is not the usual language of communication and learners may learn the language for travel, business or other academic purposes. EFL teachers' competence level influences teachers' overall job performance. If teachers are well-prepared for their job, they are more likely to become confident and highly satisfied. According to Pollock, Jefferson, and Wick (2015) employees become more satisfied when they are aware of what is expected of them in their workplace.

Conversely, a lack of clear expectations causes poor performance and increases dissatisfaction. Therefore, universities, colleges and institutions that prepare teachers for their teaching directly affect the contexts where teachers work. The efficacy of teachers is influenced by the teacher training program they completed (Goldhaber, Liddle, & Theobald, 2013). A key factor contributing to dissatisfaction with teacher preparation programs is the teachers' desire for further effective communication between university teachers and Ministry of Education policymakers (Al-Shabibi, 2023). Thus, it is necessary to bridge the gap between what teachers perceive about themselves in authentic contexts and what preparations they have had in their teacher preparation programs (ibid). The Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman has emphasized the critical need to enhance and upgrade teachers' competence levels through active participation in training programs. Teachers of all subjects, including English language teachers participate in the Specialized Institute for Professional Training of Teachers (SIPTT) in novice teachers' programs, senior teachers' programs, and English expert programs. The essences of the programs assume that teachers gain professional knowledge, professional teaching skills, and professional values and qualities for effective teaching by the end of the training. However, it is the responsibility of pre-service teacher preparation programs to ensure that teachers are both competent and prepared to teach (Cummins & Asempapa, 2013).

This pilot study aims to define English teachers' competencies in the Omani school context since specific competencies for language teachers in the Sultanate of Oman have not yet been established. Given that teaching competence is hard to assess and evaluate (Rossner, 2017) this study explores EFL teachers' perceived level of competence and preparation as acquired during their initial university programs through self-assessment.

1.1. Study Significance

The study is significant since it enhances professional training and teacher preparation programs by providing insights into teachers' competency levels which can inform the development and refinement of curricula and teaching methodologies thus, enabling MoE's in-service programs and TPPs to update and improve their programs and courses effectively.

1.2. Research Objectives

The current study aimed to explore teachers' perspectives on both their level of competence across different competency areas as well as the extent to which their initial preparation programs equipped them for these competencies.

1.3. Research Questions

This study's primary research questions are as follows:

1. What do EFL teachers perceive as their highest and lowest levels of competence across various competency areas?
2. How do EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of their initial preparation programs in preparing them for these competencies, particularly the highest and lowest levels?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Quality Teaching and Teacher Competencies

The Philosophy of Education in Oman emphasizes "high-quality education for all" as a key principle aiming to enhance teacher effectiveness and elevate the standards of their preparation and training (Al-Balushi, Al-Harthi, & Shahat, 2022). The call for quality teacher education stemmed from the premise that good teachers are prepared in well-structured teacher preparation programs. For instance, Hollins (2011) claimed that the move to a practice-based approach is the solution for quality teaching including preparing candidates for the essential knowledge, skills and mind habits and then designing opportunities for learning to teach.

Other researchers have stated that curriculum development for the 21st century is necessary to provide high-quality teacher education (Christopher, 1997). In contrast, Goodwin and Kosnik (2013) asserted that having quality teachers equals teachers who are prepared for the process of preparing candidate teachers for their new roles. This means that good teachers ought to have personal, contextual, pedagogical, sociological and social knowledge to lead the change and prepare new teachers for their roles. In terms of practical quality teacher education, Bahr and Mellor (2016) commended clinical experience as the parameter for effective teacher education. Thus, teacher preparation programs and any educational institution's role are to ensure the quality of its graduates and employees through effective preparation. Moreover, ISO 21001 established global quality standards for educational organizations highlighting the crucial role of assessing and ensuring the necessary competencies of employees (including teachers) that affect the organizational performance. The procedures include evaluating personnel competencies, adopting strategies to assess their performance and fostering continuous professional development. Additionally, institutions are required to maintain documented proof of staff competencies so they conform to the standards (ISO, 2018). Thus, ISO (2018) defined competence as the ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve proposed outcomes and learners shall demonstrate appropriate attitudes in different conditions with responsibility.

One major theoretical and practical issue that has dominated the field of teacher competencies for many years is the issue of defining and using the term competence and competency. Although several authors have attempted to define competency, there is still no unified definition of the word *competence* or *competency*. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary *of Current English* defined *competence* as a noun "the ability to do something well". However, *competency* was defined as a technical term and a less frequently used word or skill that you need in a particular job or for a particular task (Turnbull et al., 2010). Both definitions were found under the same headword, i.e., *competence*. Additionally, scholars defined competence and competency from linguistic, methodological, management and administrative perspectives (Stasky, 1995; Thornbury, 2006) because they can be tested and evaluated. Competency is claimed to be rated into levels of competence such as a high level of competence or a low level of competence (Stasky, 1995). According to Cubukcu (2010) teacher competence includes the knowledge and skills required for effective teaching. It encompasses the ability to organize and deliver lessons using appropriate methods. Furthermore, a competent teacher can promote student growth and successful learning.

2.2. Empowering Educators: Effectiveness of Teacher Preparation Programs

Aspects related to teacher and teaching competencies have become a central issue and have often been expressed in desired outcomes throughout the history of English teacher preparation programs (Cowan, 1971; Viall, 1967). Teacher competencies formed fundamental elements in developing frameworks for each context such as Europe, the USA, UAE, KSA, Turkey, and Taiwan (Alraway, 1988; Cho, 2007; Europe, 2001; Kartal & Basol, 2019; Sheshsha, 1982). Additionally, recent studies regarding EFL teacher competencies emphasized the importance of needs analysis of teachers' related competencies to provide the right training programs for 21st-century skills. Remarkably, Tealib and Sheir (2021) revealed significant impacts on developing EFL teachers' competencies through training programs. Another finding indicated a lack of EFL teachers' competencies and training programs were neither aligned with teachers' training needs nor in line with 21st-century skills. Thus, the noticeable gap in

teachers' performance highlights the critical need for effective training programs that ensure teachers are equipped with the necessary competencies. For pre-service and in-service competencies, EFL scholars contributed to establishing unified EFL teacher frameworks, including generic and specific teacher competencies (English, 2018; Kartal & Basol, 2019; Sulistiyo, 2016). However, each context requires competencies that meet its contextual needs. EFL teachers' competencies in different contexts entailed different competency areas. In Saudi Arabia, Alrwele (2018) has grouped EFL teachers' competency areas into five main categories: language proficiency, language pedagogy, curriculum construction, and theoretical knowledge. A questionnaire of the competencies was developed where female student teachers rated the level of their competencies from highly competent to incompetent. The results of the study showed that female teachers of English had a high level of theoretical knowledge and linguistic. However, low scores raised concern about the adequacy of teachers' preparation in curriculum design and language pedagogy. Further results revealed that teachers were incompetent in their abilities to select appropriate assessment procedures that measure the achievement of students' learning objectives. In other EFL contexts, Drakulić (2013) has classified EFL teachers' competency areas into various categories: communicative language competence, intercultural competence, classroom teaching, and communication competencies such as interpersonal and intrapersonal competencies. The study examined the competencies required for language teachers using a questionnaire that was used in another context i.e., Sakurai's questionnaire (Sakurai, 2012). The absence of a reliable assessment tool revealed that Sakurai's questionnaire fell short of being applicable and was not suitable for the Croatian context because it was adapted from another context. The researcher suggested a need for further refinements of the tools for evaluating teacher competencies. However, results revealed the importance of communicative competence, teaching-related competencies, and intercultural skills as qualities necessary for effective language instruction. The studies by Alrwele (2018) and Drakulić (2013) stressed the critical importance of various competencies for effective instruction. Although they differed in their focus areas, both emphasized the context-specific assessment of teachers' competencies. Several scholars and researchers highlighted the link between teacher preparation programs and the competencies of EFL teachers in specific areas. AlHarbi (2021) and Turtulla (2019) emphasized the prevalent preference of TPPs for grammar-centered teaching methods. This was also reinforced by Wijayanti (2020) who indicated that preservice teachers view grammar as essential for enhancing students' proficiency. Collectively, several studies advocate for a holistic approach to teaching preparation that balances grammar instruction with effective communication strategies and active engagement methodologies (Dy & Sumayao, 2023; Indah, Budhiningrum, & Afifi, 2022; Satar & Akcan, 2018).

2.3. Teacher Education in the Sultanate of Oman

In the 1970s and 1980s, Oman experienced rapid growth in education necessitating the need for teachers to join the education sector. This led to the recruitment of many underqualified teachers mainly from abroad and some Omani nationals who had completed secondary education or preparatory education. The significant evolution of pre-service teacher education started first with the Ministry of Education and then shifted to higher education institutions where teacher education became overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation distinct from the Ministry of Education (Al-Bulushi, Al-Said, & Lietzén, 2018). About 83% of Omani teachers obtained a bachelor's degree by 2008 and 2009 (Mullis, Martin, Goh, & Cotter, 2016). Over the past decades, Oman's teacher education has adapted to national needs and global standards where institutions implement programs aligned with regional and international practices (Al-Balushi et al., 2022). They prepare pre-service teachers for field training, courses, seminars, and activities to enhance their learning skills, teaching skills, and knowledge, and develop positive attitudes towards teaching.

Nonetheless, the Ministry of Education (MoE) continued its involvement by implementing an in-service training program i.e., SIPTT (Al-Bulushi et al., 2018; Al-Shabibi, 2023). SIPTT refers to the Specialized Institute for Professional Training of Teachers. It is a professional development program aimed at training all schools' staff

including supervisors, administrators, novice and experienced teachers. The programs offer subject-specific programs and practice-based sessions while fostering 21st-century competencies. In addition, the programs' core principles such as knowledge, values and professional skills are embedded in the contents of the programs through face-to-face sessions, online, and workplace tasks (Al Shabibi & Silvennoinen, 2018). It is still facing challenges in establishing structured professional tasks tailored to the specific needs of individual EFL teachers although teacher education in Oman has made commendable steps in enhancing the quality of teaching. This exists due to the absence of a centralized database capable of evaluating and determining EFL teachers' real needs in relation to their existing competencies and skills. No comprehensive study has been conducted to investigate EFL teacher competencies in the Sultanate of Oman.

2.4. Methodological Overview of Teacher Competencies

Previous works about teachers' competence needed an epistemological and ontological basis to identify teachers' needed competencies. However, recent works on teachers' competencies areas shed light on more specific competencies such as life-long learning competencies, intercultural competencies, global competencies, and online teaching competencies (Alshauibi, 2021; Bordeianu, 2019; Kuhlman & Knezevic, 2013; Şen & Yildiz, 2022).

Most studies investigated teachers' competency levels using self-report or self-assessment instruments. Self-assessment instruments are reliable sources of information and can help participants who use self-assessments to create personal goals and objectives and can affect their self-efficacy beliefs (Ross, 2019). Additionally, Ross (2019) asserted that self-assessments are essential sources of positive efficacy results and improved behaviors.

Previous studies that administered questionnaires encouraged the use of quantitative methods to investigate teachers' competencies for several reasons. One of the central benefits of using questionnaires is that they help researchers get the latest competencies at one point in time. Furthermore, they assist researchers in getting numerical data to extract the trends out of the findings regarding teachers. In addition, researchers argue that questionnaires offer cost-effective advantages over interviews, allowing simultaneous administration across multiple locations. Additionally, questionnaires help maintain respondent privacy (Aydoğdu, 2007; Cho, 2007). Furthermore, proponents of the descriptive method advocate for integrating qualitative and quantitative designs to achieve more comprehensive research outcomes (Alrwele, 2018; Aydoğdu, 2007; Cho, 2007; Walter, 1978).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This pilot study which was part of a broader, large-scale investigation employed a descriptive research design with a quantitative approach. Quantitative methods are common in human science research and they refer to studies that utilize measurement techniques such as statistical inferences to investigate quantitative characteristics (Westerman & Yanchar, 2011). Pilcher and Cortazzi (2024) distinguished between quantitative and qualitative approaches where quantitative analysis is rooted in statistical data and numerical representations while qualitative focuses on textual interpretation and narrative understanding. However, both methods differ significantly revealing inherent strengths and limitations in each approach. When quantitative methods are applied inappropriately in research such as for measuring IQ or involving irrelevant samples, this can lead to misleading conclusions. On the other hand, when used appropriately, it can be superior in some fields producing quantifiable and genuine results (Pilcher & Cortazzi, 2024). Thus, a quantitative approach was used to allow teachers to evaluate their competencies and preparedness using a self-assessment questionnaire.

3.2. Research Population and Participants

The pilot study comprised 59 in-service teachers from Muscat Governorate and the total population of English teachers in Muscat was 1007 teachers according to Ministry of Education statistics in the academic year

2022/2023. The participants involved teachers from different cycles of schools: cycle one grades 1-4 (children aged between 7-10), cycle two grades 5-10 (transitional level adolescents aged between 11-15), and post-basic teachers who teach students in grades 11-12 (adolescents aged between 16-17).

Table 1 presents the number of teachers and school types they come from, gender, and type of Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs) they completed during their initial teacher education whether in local or non-local universities.

Table 1. Distribution of EFL teachers based on school types, gender, and TPP type.

Variables	Categories	N
School types	Cycle one	12
	Cycle two	22
	Post-basic	25
Gender	Male	20
	Female	39
TPPs	Local universities	30
	Non-local universities	23

The study participants were selected based on the schools' accessibility and their proximity to the researchers' convenience.

3.3. Self-Report Competency Questionnaire

Questionnaires offer several advantages, including the ability to reach a wide range of participants and the clarity of the information they require during data collection (Marshall, 2005). The current study's questionnaire included two columns: one column was for teachers to rate their level on a provided list of competencies and another was for their perceptions regarding the level of preparation for those competencies in the initial teacher preparation program. The questionnaire was developed with an initial set of 114 items drawn from various international and national resources. The scale used ranged between very high means (4.21-5), high (3.41-4.20), average (2.61-3.40), low (1.81-2.60), and very low means (1-1.80) for both columns of competence and level of preparation for the competencies. Researchers provided instructions for both columns, and teachers had to read instructions carefully before filling out the questionnaire items to avoid misinterpretation of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was initially sent to two teachers to test the time needed to fill in the questionnaire and these responses were later excluded from the actual pilot study. Based on the teachers' responses, the questionnaire duration was 30 minutes maximum.

3.4. Validity and Reliability of the Questionnaire

A copy of the EFL teacher competency questionnaire was sent to 16 jury members from different positions in the Ministry of Education in the Sultanate of Oman, local universities, and non-local universities (UK, Finland). The jury members were requested to check the relevance and clarity of items, and also provide additional feedback. The clarity and relevance of one questionnaire item score, based on jury members' responses reached 68.75% leading to its removal from the list of EFL teachers' competencies. The second edited version of the questionnaire, which included 113 items was administered in the schools. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for both the EFL teachers' competence level column and the EFL teachers' competency preparation level by the TPPs column to measure the reliability of the questionnaire items. The results indicated a high-reliability measure for both columns. Cronbach alpha was 0.878 which is considered a good level of internal consistency to conduct the questionnaire in social science research studies for the EFL teachers' competency level. The second column measuring teachers' level of preparation was 0.906 Cronbach alpha indicating an excellent consistency level. Thus, the results showed that the questionnaire can be used to achieve the research objectives. The final questionnaire version consisted of

113 items distributed under ten main EFL teachers' competency areas as follows: language proficiency, language pedagogy, learning and learner, assessment and feedback, communication, collaboration, digital technology, culture, lifelong learning, and attitudes and values competencies.

3.5. Data Analysis Methods and Ethical Considerations

SPSS statistical package version 25 was used to analyze the results. Means and standard deviations were calculated using SPSS software. The researchers used code numbers to represent teachers' identities and keep their questionnaires anonymous and in a safe place. Since the study was conducted in government schools, the researchers obtained a facilitation letter from the Ministry of Education to implement the study. Approval was granted from the Ethical Committee of the Ministry of Education and Sultan Qaboos University.

In addition, the participants signed a consent form to participate in the pilot study and all demographic data were kept locked to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the study participants.

4. RESULTS

Findings of the two research questions addressing EFL teachers' perceptions of their competency level across various competency areas and their perceptions of the effectiveness of their initial preparation programs in preparing them for these competencies are presented in the following sub-sections:

4.1. EFL Teachers' Competence Level of the Competencies

To answer research question one: "What do EFL teachers perceive as their highest and lowest levels of competence across various competency areas?" means and standard deviations were calculated for overall items in the ten main competency areas.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of overall EFL teachers' competencies level.

EFL teacher competence level	N	Mean	Standard deviation
Ten main competencies	59	4.20	0.47

According to Table 2, EFL teachers rated themselves as possessing a high competence level in overall competency areas (M=4.20, SD= 0.47).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of the highest EFL teachers' competencies level as perceived by teachers.

Items	EFL teacher's competency statements	Means	SD
1	Help learning objectives.	4.53	0.68
2	Use teaching aids.	4.51	0.82
3	Teach grammar using different techniques.	4.49	0.65
4	Decide when to use cooperative work.	4.49	0.65
5	Determine the time needed.	4.47	0.68
6	Understand the content of the English.	4.46	0.65
7	Create a stress-free environment.	4.44	0.68
8	Use to teach writing skills.	4.44	0.6
9	Act in a respectful manner.	4.44	0.68
10	Keep learners on task.	4.42	0.72

Note: Items of the original questionnaire were kept short and partially omitted.

According to Table 3, the highest level of EFL teachers' competence was in the competency area of helping students understand the lesson objectives and the use of teaching aids to motivate students and engage them in the learning process (M= 4.53, M=4.51) (SD=.68, SD=.82). Teachers perceived themselves as possessing a very high competence level in teaching grammar deductively and inductively to support learners (M= 4.49, SD=.65).

Moreover, it is evident that teachers perceived that they possess a very high competence level in making decisions about when to use several styles of collaborative or individual works such as group, individual, and pair work (M= 4.49, SD=.65). Additionally, teachers seem confident in self-assess themselves indicating a very high level of competence in competencies related to time management, understanding syllabus creating a safe environment for learners, acting and behaving in a respectful way based on authority demands in the school, and using different classroom management techniques (see Table 3).

Next, Table 4 shows the lowest level of competencies as perceived by EFL teachers based on their responses to the questionnaire items, starting with the lowest mean.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the lowest EFL teachers' competencies level as perceived by teachers.

Items	EFL teacher's competency statements	Means	SD
1	Read the latest research studies.	3.68	0.95
2	Write literary texts.	3.69	0.97
3	Establish effective communication.	3.75	0.88
4	Exchange ideas about EFL teaching.	3.78	0.83
5	Development of educational policy.	3.80	0.91
6	Use research methods and carry out research.	3.81	0.92

Note: Items of the original questionnaire were kept short and partially omitted.

Although teachers rated themselves within the range of high competence overall, data in Table 4 shows that they perceived lower competence in specific areas, such as reading the latest English Language Teaching (ELT) research studies (M= 3.68, SD=.95), writing literary essays, communicating with other stakeholders in the field, exchanging their ideas using social media and online applications with other professionals in EFL contexts, taking part in the educational policy, and finally conducting action research in the field.

4.2. EFL Teachers' Level of Preparation for Various Competencies through Their TPPs

The second research question focused on teachers' perceived level of preparation for the competencies during their initial teacher preparation program. Teachers rated their level of preparation for various competencies, indicating whether they felt highly prepared or less prepared for each.

To answer research question two: "How do EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of their initial preparation programs in preparing them for these competencies, particularly the highest and lowest levels?" means and standard deviations were calculated.

Table 5. Means and standard deviations of overall EFL teachers' competencies preparation in teacher preparation programs.

EFL teacher competency preparation by TPPs	N	Mean	SD
Ten main competencies	59	3.69	0.69

Table 5 shows EFL teachers perceived that they had a high preparation level for the competencies in the ten main competency areas (M= 3.69, SD= .69). In general, EFL teachers perceived themselves as being well-prepared by their preparation programs.

The knowledge, skills and abilities that EFL teachers perceived they were highly prepared for during their pre-service teacher programs were mainly in teaching grammar (M= 4.15, SD= .91). In addition, they perceived themselves as highly prepared in linguistic aspects of language teaching, helping students with the comprehension of learning objectives integrating the language skills in teaching, classroom management techniques, acting respectfully and abiding by school authority rules and regulations. Further preparations for the competencies were primarily focused on teaching speaking, planning lesson plans deciding when to use collaborative works or

individual tasks, creating a suitable environment for students' learning and time management (for mean scores, see Table 6).

Table 6. Means and standard deviations of the highest levels of EFL teachers' competency preparation in teacher preparation programs (TPPs).

Item	EFL teacher's competency statements	Means	SD
1	Teach grammar.	4.15	0.91
2	Understand phonology.	4.07	1.03
3	Help students.	3.98	0.97
4	Integrate all four skills.	3.98	0.92
5	Keep learners on task.	3.98	0.96
6	Act in a	3.98	0.9
7	Act in accordance with work.	3.97	0.95
8	Teach speaking tasks.	3.95	0.92
9	Plan a detailed unit.	3.93	0.96
10	Decide when to use collaborative.	3.93	0.94
11	Create a stress-free environment.	3.92	0.93
12	Determine the time.	3.92	0.95

Note: Items of the original questionnaire were kept short and partially omitted.

Table 7. Means and standard deviations of the lowest levels of EFL teachers' competency preparation in Teacher preparation programs (TPPs).

Items	EFL teacher's competency statements	Means	SD
1	Communication with stakeholders in education.	3.32	1.07
2	Use digital to provide assessment.	3.34	0.99
3	Work by an authority evaluation.	3.36	1.13
4	Exchange EFL professionals (Social media etc.).	3.36	1.08
5	Teach online lessons effectively.	3.39	1.20
6	Differentiate between British	3.41	1.18
7	Justify pedagogical practices.	3.41	0.87
8	Development of educational policy.	3.42	1.02
9	Develop a career path.	3.44	0.99
10	Read the latest research studies.	3.44	1.07

Note: Items of the original questionnaire were kept short and partially omitted.

The competencies that EFL teachers perceived they were least prepared in were the ability and skills to communicate with other stakeholders in the educational sector (M=3.32, SD= 1.07) followed by using digital applications for assessment practices (M=3.34, SD=.99) working consistently with the formal evaluation system of MoE communicating with other professionals through social media and the ability to teach online lessons. However, the level of preparation for the competencies was average despite receiving lower mean scores. Other areas in which teachers felt they were less prepared by their TPPs were the ability to differentiate between British and American English, justifying pedagogical practices, taking part in educational policy developments, developing a career path in the ELT field, and reading the latest research in English Language Teaching (ELT) (for the mean scores of the items see Table 7).

5. DISCUSSION

This study introduced teachers to various competency items (n=113) to reflect on and self-assess their skills, abilities, and competencies. Looking back at the EFL teachers' perceptions, it was clear that they generally felt a strong sense of self-perceived competence across all items. EFL teachers seem confident enough about the competencies they possess. This might be attributed to the continuous support and professional training they received in the schools as well as the daily practice of these competencies as part of their job performance roles. For instance, one of the very high perceived competencies was their ability to help students comprehend the learning objectives. Teachers begin the lesson by introducing the students to the learning objectives. They are being

assessed by the senior teachers, school principals and supervisors in their ability to explain the learning objectives to the students. However, teachers may overestimate their level of skills and talents. They may need to be in a position to give an objective response to the actual competence level. Hence, external assessment is essential (Al-Mutawa, 1997). Data showed a similar finding in teachers' perceptions of the extent to which they were prepared in this competency by their teacher preparation programs, where they had the chance to be trained to practice ways to explain the learning objectives to students. AlHarbi (2021) found that the level to which language teachers are prepared for their competence depends on the universities from which they graduated.

One of the very high competence levels that teachers possess and for which they are prepared in their initial teacher preparation programs is teaching grammar to support students' learning. This is also supported by Turtulla (2019) who found that 63 percent of EFL teachers preferred using grammatical rules and terminology even if the communicative approach is the primary approach for teaching. This could be attributed to preparation programs where pre-service teachers' beliefs are formed and fossilized. Wijayanti (2020) indicated that pre-service teachers stressed the importance of grammar to aid students learning. Furthermore, Wijayanti (2020) reported that pre-service teachers believe students need explicit grammar knowledge to be more proficient in the classroom. Therefore, it is the teachers' role to clarify the rules and use translation to practice grammar. It is obvious that teachers were prepared in their initial preparation programs to teach grammar to enhance students' learning from the current research findings. They also continued to prefer teaching grammar rules even though the Ministry of Education promotes the communicative approach as the primary teaching approach and encourages teachers to use it. In contrast, the lowest competency level as reported by EFL teachers was related to reading the latest ELT research studies. This indicates that teachers need more research skills to practice reading research articles, new field achievements, and the latest debates on ELT topics. Teachers also reported that reading the latest research was one of the competencies they were less prepared for by their teacher preparation programs, thus lacking the ability to search for or get the latest news in ELT studies. This might be due to the teachers' heavy workload during the school day, where they spend their days preparing for the lessons, designing activities, taking care of all students, doing other required administrative work and taking care of their own homes and family responsibilities. Additionally, after graduating from the teacher preparation programme, many teachers find it challenging to engage with the latest research as there are no established research groups to support their continued scholarly development. Furthermore, supplementary materials are not often provided to teachers to catch up with the latest research in the field. Indah et al. (2022) stated that EFL students in undergraduate programs cannot link research method elements naturally in their daily practices. Furthermore, the lowest-rated competencies reported by EFL teachers were their ability to effectively communicate with educational stakeholders and exchange ideas with other EFL professionals. Similarly, these competencies were among those they felt least prepared for in their Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs) which likely explains their lower proficiency in these areas. This might be due to the emphasis on knowledge, theory, and academic courses gained during pre-service studies rather than encouraging students to communicate with outside stakeholders and EFL professionals. According to a study by Dy and Sumayao (2023) teachers who face challenges with their pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar are not confident in speaking English and, thus, do not express their ideas with others due to limited vocabulary repertoire and speaking fluency problems. Therefore, EFL teachers may not communicate with others outside school due to the challenges they face and the low levels of confidence in their speaking abilities which impedes their process of exchanging ideas. Satar and Akcan (2018) found that EFL pre-service teachers' participation and interactions in online communities depend on the topics and degree of freedom to participate in the discussions. Teacher preparation programs should design professional communities where pre-service teachers begin to learn to actively take part in professional discussions as this may take time to change (Satar & Akcan, 2018).

Another area highlighted in the results that came across in the findings of both research questions 1 and 2 was teachers' ability to use digital sources and materials for assessment practices. Teachers may need to be prepared to

use technology to assess students. Zhang, Yan, and Wang (2021) explained the practical constraints that teachers face when using online assessments, such as class size problems, internet connection issues, appropriate application selection difficulties and technology malfunctions. Other challenges teachers faced in using online assessment are insufficient digital literacy knowledge, teachers' assessment practices, teaching loads, low motivation of learners in online classes, and issues with academic dishonesty in the exam results, as the chance for cheating in online exams is higher (Alkharusi, Aldhafri, Alnabhani, & Alkalbani, 2012; El Hassan & Ahmed, 2023). A similar finding was reported by Alrwele (2018) where students and teachers perceived themselves incompetent in their abilities to select appropriate assessment procedures that measure achievement of students' learning objectives.

The current pilot research faces limitations related to the sample, data collection and findings' generalizability. First, the sample size (n=59) does not represent all EFL teachers in the Sultanate of Oman. It represented 5.85% of one governorate teachers, i.e., Muscat (N= 1007). Second, findings for the competencies and level of preparation can only be generalizable for some EFL teachers. Teachers may be subject to self-report biased information about initial preparation or they may need to remember the exact level of preparation due to long-time graduation from undergraduate universities. Third, the quantitative design should be supported with a qualitative aspect to triangulate the data further. Fourth, the pilot study was part of a larger PhD project; therefore, items of the questionnaire were kept short and partially omitted to save the rights of the researchers in the original competency questionnaire statements.

5.1. Research Implications

It is recommended that the Ministry of Education and teacher preparation programs investigate areas where teachers perceive themselves as having low competence levels and feel less prepared to meet their professional needs. Future training must address the actual needs that the teachers perceive as lacking in their daily practices. Further observations and external evaluations should consider teachers' self-reports about their skills and abilities. It is recommended that stakeholders seek open discussions and conversations with the teachers allowing them to exchange their ideas with EFL professionals. Meanwhile, in government schools, most teachers can only meet or communicate with EFL professionals from outside when formal seminars and conferences are organized; otherwise, they become overwhelmed with schoolwork and passive. Thus, it is recommended that EFL teacher preparation programs, with the assistance of MoE organize conferences for EFL teachers to take part in and have the opportunity to exchange their ideas in ELT through such meetings and forums. Finally, further investigations are necessary to refine and enhance the professional competencies of EFL teachers aiming to establish a comprehensive framework that explains the essential competencies these educators need to adopt. This framework will be a useful guide to inform teachers' professional knowledge and practices, ensuring that EFL teachers have the skills and knowledge required to effectively facilitate language learning in diverse educational contexts. This could be approached through the Ministry of Education (MoE) along with the teacher preparation programs.

6. CONCLUSION

Quality education in language teaching demands well-prepared and competent teachers to teach the EFL curriculum, facilitate students' learning, develop professionally, and continuously participate in the improvement of different aspects of ELT. The present study provided an understanding of EFL teachers' perceptions of their competencies and the level of preparedness for these competencies through their initial preparation programs. Further, the current study provided a nuanced overview of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and teachers' self-assessment of their competencies, highlighting their strengths in lesson objectives, teaching aids, and grammar instruction. However, it also revealed critical gaps in areas such as engagement with contemporary ELT research, stakeholder communication and the adaptation to digital methods. The teachers' high self-ratings in collaborative learning strategies illustrate their confidence yet contrast sharply with their recognition of the need for

improvement especially in maintaining current knowledge of research and educational policies. Overall, the analysis offered a balanced view suggesting that EFL teachers require professional development to enhance teachers' engagement with current teaching practices and stakeholders' interactions.

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