

A SWOT Analysis of Farhangian University TEFL Program

Mina Tavazoei¹, Seyyed Ayatollah Razmjoo²

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Foreign Language and Linguistics, College of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran, Email: mina.tvz1995@gmail.com

² *Corresponding author*, Professor, Department of Foreign Language and Linguistics, College of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran, Email: arazmjoo@rose.shirazu.ac.ir

Abstract

As Farhangian Universities play a crucial role in educating soon-to-be teachers, the program being developed for students of this university needs to be meticulously developed in order to fulfill the crucial role of teacher training centers. Researchers of this phenomenological study tried to evaluate curriculum specified for TEFL students in Farhangian Universities by the implementation of SWOT analysis. Seven professors of Farhangian University in Mazandaran participated in this study to speak for their perspectives regarding the curriculum's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. They took part in interview conducted by researchers and their comments were transcribed to be segmented and codified in later sections. The findings of this study clearly demonstrated that this program suffers more from weaknesses and there are opportunities which might act as compensation for weaknesses and threats. The significant weakness of this curriculum that was elaborated by participants was misplacement of courses without any observation of necessary content knowledge and pre-requisites. Specification of courses exclusively for teaching was mentioned as one of the important strengths of this university. Participants believed that the first opportunity to be made use of, is to maintain connection with other teacher training centers in Iran and around the world.

Keywords: Farhangian University, TEFL, curriculum, SWOT analysis, phenomenological study

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1. Introduction

Farhangian Teacher Education Universities (FTEU) play a substantial role in enhancing the level of teacher education in Iran. Regarding the fact that they are the only type of the university in which their graduate students will be employed in the ministry of education directly, the procedures employed by decision-makers in order to train individuals with this regard should be conducted meticulously. One factor that should be taken into consideration is the program being developed in these universities. As a TEFL student of one of these teacher training centers, and due to 4 years of experience teaching at schools the researcher is eager to evaluate the program being designed for TEFL students in Farhangian University.

According to Razmjoo and Nouhi (2014) by centering attention on testing and evaluating language students the issue of measuring the effectiveness of the program being developed has been neglected. Ahmadian Jelodari et al. (2018) in their study regarding the strategic plan of the administration of physical education in Farhangian University clearly concluded that strategic planning will cause strategic decision and consequently, strategic decision will bring success within a program. Los Santos et al. (2018) also, confirmed the role of decision making of a proposed enterprise by strategic planning. Masoumpanah et al. (2017) claimed that as the students enter Farhangian universities are paid by the Ministry of Education so, their educational achievement is important that is related to the importance of the program itself which is the source of students' preparation, and output qualification in future. Also, Alaei and Ershadi (2016) following previous claims believed that a way to make growth and development in a program is by evaluating the program itself. Msila and Setlhako (2013) who tried to gain a deeper understanding of Carol Weiss's theory of change concluded that if the process of evaluating a program is done effectively, it will improve the program itself; and if this improvement is ensured decision making will be influenced as well. Leiber (2017) by emphasizing SWOT as a means of analysis stated that:

.... a SWOT analysis can help develop the assessed entities for further rounds of improved goal achievement, and it usually has an exploratory dimension bringing to the fore aspects which have not been noticed by other means of analysis. This exploratory force originates from the requirement to identify and distinguish explicitly the four different categorization dimensions of processes or structures (p.290).

This study aimed at employing a SWOT analysis of the Farhangian University TEFL program because the significance of educating students to be teachers in schools in near future is apparent; there was a need in order to evaluate programs being developed to gain more insight regarding procedures employed in teacher education.

2. Literature Review

Farhangian University as one of the significant teacher training centers in Iran was established in 2012; with more than 68 branches and 58000 enrolled teacher students. It should be mentioned that teacher education program has a long history in Iran, but the emergence of these universities took place recently.

These teacher training centers by highlighting the role of the education system in the future history of a country try to provide opportunities in order to train students to be qualified as a teacher after 4 years of study. As provided by Raoof (2000) the significance of teacher training has led many countries to revise their program consequently.

Ulubey et al. (2019) developed a study based on updates with regard to teacher training programs in order to evaluate teacher training programs developed in 2018 in Turkey to see whether the program met the need of training qualified teachers or not. Balbay et al. (2018) also tried to provide suggestions centering around deficiencies in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs. Teacher training in Iran has come through its revisions and changes over time. Estiri (1995) believed that the students graduated from teacher training centers in Iran, claimed that what they learnt was not helpful for later career development; the study which is in line with Kashef (1999) that the applicants studying Physical Education believed that the two of the most important problems in teacher education were lack of practical courses and educational hours. Several studies have emphasized the importance of teacher education and student achievement affecting each other in a positive way (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Felter, 1999; Laczko & Berliner, 2002; Malmir & Bagheri, 2019; Salehizadeh et al., 2020; Ulbey & Basaran, 2019).

Regarding the role of English in our globalized world the evaluation of the TEFL program, especially the one designed in the teacher education system, has its substantial influence on teacher education and students' achievements as well. As stated by Peacock (2009) professionalization of the field of ELT is the result of evaluating these programs. Rea-Dickins and Germaine in 1998 provided a framework for curriculum evaluation by proposing a checklist consisting of 11 questions each one leading to a principle of evaluation. Masoumpanaha et al. (2017) attempted to evaluate the TEFL program in Farhangian University through a mixed-method design. They finally made the point that this program neglected some educational and administrative needs of the learners. In another study investigating the evaluation of EAP programs in Iran, Iranmehr et al. (2018) by employing different methods of data collection like document analysis, expert interview, concluded that EAP programs are in "dire need of reconceptualizing policy-making and practice" (p.171.)

One way of evaluating programs can be done through strategic planning and SWOT analysis. Several researchers put an emphasis on the effectiveness of SWOT in strategic planning (Dickson, 2002; Glaister & Falshaw, 1999; Panagiotou, 2003; Valentin, 2001). Strategic planning is defined by Allison and Kaye (2005) as "a systematic process through which an organization agrees on –and builds commitment among key stakeholders to –priorities that are essential to its mission" (p. 1). Generally, the definition of strategic planning by different scholars implies its improvement role in organizational setting considering key stakeholders (Immordino et al., 2016). A SWOT analysis is one device to accomplish strategic planning. (Orr, 2016).

SWOT consists of Strength, Weakness, Opportunities, Threat; and a SWOT analysis helps in initiating changes in programs and using them for program improvement. Strengths deal with an organization positive point while Weakness implies an organization's area of improvement. Opportunities

and threats are external factors the former means external factors having positive effects that the organization could benefit from. The latter means detrimental factors influencing the organization. Dyson (2004) evaluated SWOT as a model that can be utilized while accompanying newer approaches and techniques.

In order to investigate quality improvement in higher education in developing countries Mensah (2020) employed strategic planning as a framework. He concluded that the effectiveness of planning depends on qualified planners, implementers, monitors, evaluators and other relevant stakeholders. By the emergence of COVID-19 resulting in universities and school closure and a desire for online learning all around the world Halla et al. (2020) developed research regarding this radical change in the educational system of Lebanon, from face-to-face to online learning, and broke down the analysis of online learning and instructor's feedback in Lebanese International University (LIU) into SWOT. In another study focusing on administrators' perspectives of school teachers in different generations (Babyboomers, Generation X, Generation Y) Culp-Roche et al. (2019) made use of a SWOT analysis aiming at determining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of each generation. The results showed that Babybommers were more disciplined, Generation X more determinant and Generation Y more technology adopted. With regard to studies employing SWOT analysis in Iran, Hashemi et al. (2017) conducted a SWOT analysis for Iranian language institution's development. They came to the conclusion that social events organized by the institute were the most important strength and the books taught was the most important weaknesses of institutes. Razmjoo and Nouhi (2014) by employing SWOT analysis tried to evaluate junior high school program in Iran. Making use of interviewing and Grounded Theory they reached to the point that the program's weaknesses and threats were more noticeable than opportunities and strength. Hassankhah (2016) by case study of e-TEFL programs in one of Gilan's state university by employing SWOT analysis, concluded that e-TEFL had some achievements in this university but there still remains some areas in needs of improvement.

Although some research are conducted in the area of teacher education and program evaluation the review of literature depicted a gap in studies related to TEFL program evaluation in Farhangian University by the use of SWOT analysis. Consequently, the researchers tried to fill the gap by conducting this study.

3. Objectives of the Study

Using strategic planning, this study attempted to evaluate the TEFL program in Farhangian universities of Iran considering strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats by investigating perspectives of Farhangian university's professors. Based on the importance of these universities in playing roles in the educational system of the country, as well as the significance of the program being developed, the researcher tried to represent a clear picture of the program, and also the potential opportunities and threats.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the strengths of the TEFL program in Farhangian universities in Iran?
2. What are the weaknesses of the TEFL program in Farhangian universities in Iran?
3. What are the opportunities of the TEFL program in Farhangian universities in Iran?
4. What are the threats of the TEFL program in Farhangian universities in Iran?
5. What solutions will be achieved at the end of the study to enhance the quality of the TEFL program in Farhangian Universities in Iran?

5. Significance of the Study

The results of this study are expected to assist TEFL program developers and other decision-makers and stakeholders in Farhangian Universities in order to strengthen the positive aspects and lessen the detrimental effects of weaknesses, making use of opportunities and being aware of the threatening external factors as well; which will result in better-educating teacher students who are going to fulfil one of the purposes of education that is being taught effectively and successfully.

6. Methodology

This part includes subsections with regard to, participants, instrument, data collection and data analysis procedures.

6.1. Participants

The participants were seven professors of the Farhangian University of Mazandaran; with sufficient knowledge of Farhangian Universities' policies and curriculum for TEFL students. Regarding the fact that researchers of this study held interview sessions, they felt data saturation by interviewing 7 professors of this university in a way that no more novel points of view were diagnosed by them; and they concluded that the number of participants suffices to fulfill the aims of the study. Their age ranged from 35 to 50, and their teaching experience ranged from 10 to 20 years. The participants of this study witnessed curriculum modifications two times within these years of experience. They were selected based on purposive sampling, and their demographic descriptions are provided in Table 1. As is stated by Ary et al. (2019) purposive sampling can also be called 'judgement sampling' (p.177). Purposive sampling is a type of non-probability sampling in which the belief behind its implementation is that the participants are judged to be a representative sample of the whole population (Ary et al., 2019).

Table 1

Demographic Description of Participants

Participant	Field of education	Degree	Experience	Age	Gender
Mahmood	English translation	Ph.D.	20	50	Male
Reza	English teaching	Ph.D.	15	43	Male
Mohammad	English teaching	Ph.D.	15	44	Male
Morteza	English teaching	Ph.D.	17	46	Male
Hanie	English teaching	Ph.D.	10	35	Female
Fatemeh	English teaching	Ph.D.	15	42	Female
Zahra	English teaching	Ph.D.	17	45	Female

6.2. Instrument

The interview was developed as an instrument in order to conduct the study. This is a constructive way of gathering qualitative data which is widely used by researchers (Ary et al., 2019). Due to the difficulty of the face-to-face interview, the researchers decided to conduct some of the interviews virtually using the Adobe Connect program to have the opportunity of being involved in an online interview with participants who had agreed upon it. According to Ary et al. (2019) the structure of an interview can be categorized into three types a) Unstructured b) Partially/semi-structured c) structured. In this study semi-structured interview was employed; in a way that the questions were designed in advance, however, in some cases, the interviewer modified the questions expediently. The participants were interviewed, and their comments regarding the curriculum for TEFL students in Farhangian Universities were gathered by the researchers.

6.3. Procedures

The phenomenology design, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in this study. A phenomenological study describes how an experience is perceived by people (Ary et al., 2019). The researcher seeks ways to comprehend how a particular phenomenon is perceived by specific participants. Based on Yıldırım and Şimşek (2013) in this design individuals have a complete awareness of the issue; however, shortage of facilitative information imposes the need for more investigations and illuminations. In this study SWOT analysis is implemented in order to “identify and improve the effects of external and internal factors “(Hill & Westbrook, 1997, p.47); which “S” Stands for strengths, “W” for weaknesses, “O” to represent opportunities and “T” deals with threats.

The interview was utilized in order to gain a better comprehension of Farhangian Universities curriculum for students majoring in English teaching through acquainting the participants with the nature of SWOT analysis. Seven questions based on general themes of the study namely, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were designed and they were sent to the participants in advance in order to be ready while taking part in interview discussion and gaining more insights by scrutinizing the answers as well.

Their viewpoints were recorded for further analysis. The interview took long between 30 to 40 minutes until no more information was noticed by the researchers or uttered by participants.

6.4. Securing Reliability and Validity

According to Ary et al. (2019), several strategies could be employed in securing credibility and dependability in qual studies. One of them is member check; after data transcription, they were given back to participants to check for revision or correction in case of misunderstanding. It is called referential adequacy of the research; meaning that: "degree to which participants' viewpoints, thoughts, feelings, and experiences are accurately understood" (ibid, 443). The other strategy that can be employed is using many low-inference descriptors, or in another way direct quotations from participants in order to familiarize the readers better with participants' point of view (ibid). One way of securing the dependability, the consistency of results, is by the use of profound documentation of procedure of the study or better to say using an audit trail in order to allow another researcher to conduct the process of examination of the study another time (ibid).

6.4. Data Analysis

The researchers utilized three types of coding procedures, namely, open, axial and selective (Glasser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). At first, data was codified as open coding to perceive the shared concepts. In this stage, the researcher seeks units of meaning which might be modified in later stages (Ary, 2019). In the second stage, tentative categories should be developed. Finally, in the selective stage categories were related and grouped to themes being developed.

7. Results

The data analysis section of a qualitative study is through an iterative process of going back and forth between data collection and analysis procedure in order to gain a deeper insight into the issue under investigation (Dorney, 2007). By this process of iteration, the researchers tried to develop a SWOT matrix based on participants' views. That is depicted in Table 2.

Table 2
SWOT Matrix of the Views of Participants Based on TEFL Curriculum in Farhangian University

Strengths	weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Courses are suitable for teaching (n=4)• Students are creative and smart (n=2)• Students are good at English (n=2)• Courses are unique in nature(n=1)• Courses are up-dated (n=1)• Practicum courses are well-designed (n=1)• A practice for qual research (n=1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Misplacement of courses (n=7)• Pre-requisites are not observed (n=6)• Professors are not knowledgeable (n=6)• Lack of faculty members (n=6)• Various types of education courses (n=4)• Practicum courses are not well-practiced (n=4)• Professors are not assessed and observed(n=3)• Lack of cooperation between schools and FUTEU (n=3)• Courses needs lots of energy to be instructed (n=1)• Skill separation is not acceptable (n=1)
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Maintain relationship with other countries, experts, Teacher training centers(n=7)• Establishing schools specified for FUTE (n=4)• Inclusion of some courses and exclusion of some others (n=4)• Specifying syllabus (n=1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Debilitative procedure of students' selection (n=4)• Formality of practicum courses (n=2)

As it is depicted in Table 2, the views of the professors participating in this study focusing on the evaluation of the TEFL program in Farhangian University are listed as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. As a result of the analysis, it was seen that professors considered 7 aspects of the curriculum's strengths, 10 different views of weaknesses, 4 measures acting as opportunities and finally, 2 views about threats. However, the statements in which the professors expressed the most views on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the theoretical courses respectively; "suitable courses for teaching exclusively (n=4)", "course misplacement (n=7)", "Maintain relationship with other teaching centres, experts, universities (n=7)" and "debilitative procedures of students' selection (n=4)".

Step 1: open coding

Due to the huge amount of data, codification is used to better organize the information. This stage deals with iterative processing of reading transcribed data to gain a profound comprehension of viewpoints common among participants. These codes were named based on the exact words of the participants. For example, one of the participants mentioned that: "It is good to add some courses and exclude the ones with overlaps"; his viewpoint was labelled under the title of 'course inclusion and exclusion'. Some examples are provided in Table 3.

Table 3
Open Coding of Transcription of Participants Viewpoints on TEFL Curriculum in Farhiangian University

Extracted paragraphs	Open coding
"We need to conduct comparative studies with other countries"	Connection with other countries
"An aptitude test must be considered for students' entrance"	Selection based on aptitude test
"Students of this university are really creative and smart, not any professors could enrich them"	Students' talent and creativity
"I criticize the horrible procedure of instructor employment in Farhangian University"	Professors' unemployment
"Some courses are unique in Iran or even the world"	Appropriacy of courses

Step 2: Axial Coding

This stage deals with the development of categories, and making connections among categories being developed (Ary et al., 2019). In this study several categories have appeared; which is depicted in Figure 1. Some examples of open coding being cumulated to represent categories are also provided in table 4. Regarding strengths two categories were extracted based on participants' comments: a) students b) courses. One of the participants mentioned that:

“Konkoor gives us good products”.

Or the other one, who conducts courses regarding the usage of technology in English classes in Farhangian University of Mazandaran, claimed that: “We have unique courses in Farhangian, you will not find any university that runs three courses based on the use of technology in English classes even around the world”.

Participants of this study repeatedly mentioned that generally they believe that the problem is how the curriculum is put into action, not the curriculum itself. Their comments based on weaknesses were categorized under 3 major sections: a) professors b) course design c) practicum courses. One of the professors stated that: “no matter how well curriculum is designed, it will not be effective and useful until being conducted by proficient, knowledgeable professors”.

Focusing on course design participants frequently mentioned ‘course misplacement’ as one of the most detrimental aspects of the curriculum. “Freshmen students should take part in a course of material development, which needs some pre-requisites and background knowledge that a newly comer student would not grasp the essence of this course completely”.

Also, practicum courses were among the focus of participants as one factor causing curriculum flaws. One of the professors remarked that: “Our practicum is well designed, but not well practised”. Or the other one radically blaming practicum courses as: “a place for motivation slaughter”.

Participants of this study also reflected upon two categories under the general theme of threats. One of them is students’ selection, and the other one is the way practicum courses are done fundamentally. One of the professors deliberately mentioned that: “posing a positive personality with decent family members and history exclusively, is not enough to decide that an applicant is well-suited for teaching”, and the other one focusing on practicum courses stated that: “The matter of practicum courses that are being conducted as a formality, will definitely be a major threat for future”.

Professors who took part in this study mentioned several procedures as opportunities to make use of them in order to enhance the quality of the curriculum plan. For example, one of them mentioned that: “we need to maintain our connection with the world; it is surely inevitable”. Or another one believed that: “It is good to have schools under the observation of Farhangian Universities being established near these universities to employ teachers who graduates from these universities and students have access to them to accomplish their practicum courses as well”.

Figure 1
Schematic Representation of Categories of Codifications

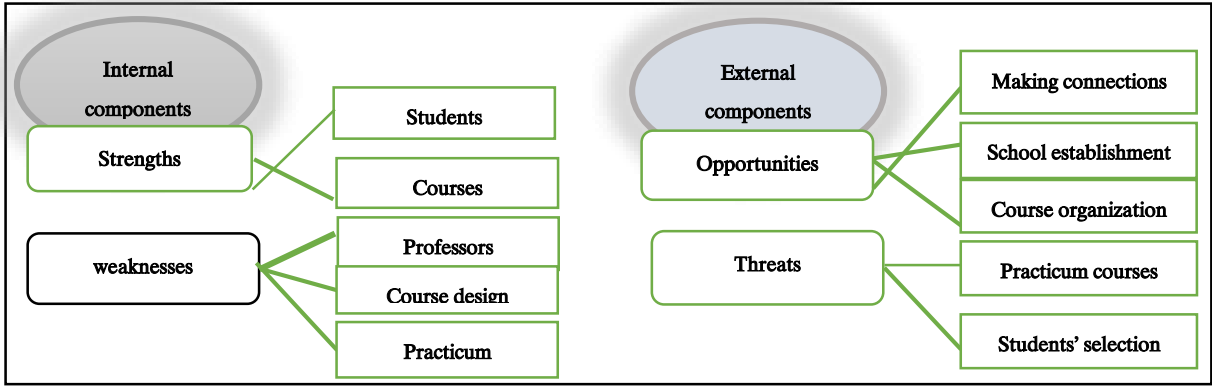


Table 4
Axial Coding and Categories Based on Transcription of Participants Viewpoints on TEFL Curriculum in Farhangian University

Axial coding	categories
Lack of Pre-requisites for some courses	Inappropriate Course design
High number of education courses	
Course misplacement	
Lack of assessment for professors	Inefficiency of professors
Subjectivity of professors	
Lack of faculty members	
Lack of expert professors	
Lack of aptitude tests for students	Student selection
Focusing more on capabilities of students rather than family back ground in their selection	
Up-date courses	Appropriate specification of courses
Courses specialized for teaching	

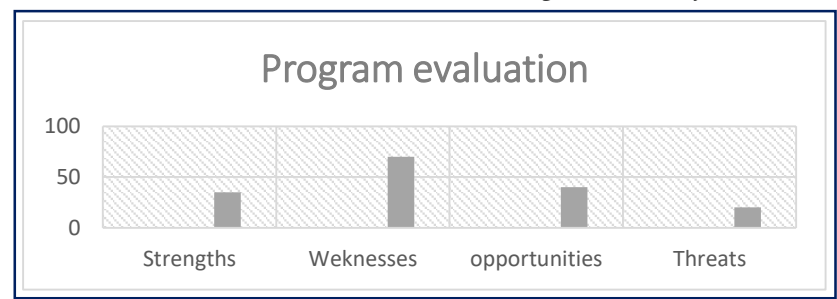
Step 3: Selective Coding

In this stage categories in the previous step are put into “themes”. Meaning that these categories are scattered among 4 major themes of the study including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

All the participants of this study agreed upon the fact the curriculum itself is acceptable, and changes are adequately retained; however, there are several other factors that directly affect the process of actualization the curriculum; meaning that, they did not consider the curriculum a problem, but a package of factors is effective in boosting the efficiency of the curriculum.

As it is shown in figure 2, evaluation of TEFL curriculum of Farhangian Universities suffered from weaknesses more than strengths while the participants believed in several sources to consider them as opportunities to assist in modifications with regard to the program being developed.

Figure 2
The Holistic View of TEFL Curriculum in Farhangian University



8. Discussion

The results of this study are in line with Maasoumpanah et al. (2017). They also, believed that the TEFL program in Farhangian Universities did not suffice to address educational and administrative needs, and there are some theory-practice gaps as well. In another research conducted by Maasoumpanah et al. (2019) based on evaluation of practicum courses at Farhangian University, it was found that the way practicum courses are implemented was not satisfactory; which is in total accordance with the results of this study. Hejazi et al. (2018) also, in their SWOT analysis of the implementation of lesson study as one of the 4 practicums in Farhangian University concluded that not sufficient knowledge and skill to teach their students in this university acts as one of the weaknesses to be considered. With regard to appropriately designed practicums in Farhangian University and obstacles on the way of its implementation; there is another study which is in total agreement with the current study conducted by Safarnavadeh et al. (2019); that the practicum courses as internship program are satisfactory, but there are some impediments to their application. The participants of this study, also believed that based on modifications undergone by the program and the emergence of its improved version since 2014, the changes are constructive; but the existence of some obstacles is inevitable, including lack of expert professors to handle practicum courses, inappropriate schedule for these courses, lack of concordance with school academic year, idealistic philosophies behind practicum courses, and the most significant one which was frequently mentioned by participants, scarcity of schools with the pertinent atmosphere for teacher-students. It should be mentioned that based on students' points of view with regard to professors of Farhangian University in a study carried out by Badele (2020), students viewed professors' level of guidance, learning ethics and components of learning and teaching desirable.

In another study conducted by Keikhannezhad et al. (2017) focusing on the evaluation of elements of these universities' curriculum on the basis of high-level documents, they found that further actions are needed, including employment of elite faculty members, steering teacher-students toward creative thinking, maintaining and establishing affairs with other universities around the world and adherence to qualitative norms specifically in acceptance of teacher-students. As it was mentioned before establishing a relationship with other countries and employment of knowledgeable professors are among the focus of attention in this

study as well. Participants of this study unanimously mentioned the significant role of professors in the better implementation of strategies well-suited for designed courses. They also criticized the isolated atmosphere of this university, and the lack of its cooperation or connection with other teacher training centres even in Iran, and around the world.

10. Conclusion and Implications

Concerning research questions being raised, it was concluded that the most significant weakness of the Farhangian Universities TEFL program are the matter of course misplacement. All the participants of this study unanimously believed that implementing a course like philosophy of teaching or material development for freshman students is an issue which causes professors to provide students with a plenteous amount of pre-requisite theories and content knowledge which leads students into more hesitation and confusion consequently. They, also believed that practicum courses are well designed on paper, however, due to the lack of experts and assessment of professors' course conduction in Farhangian Universities, these practicum courses are not enriched and well-practised. The participants of this study mentioned many obstacles on the way of practicum courses along with professors' lack of knowledge, such as lack of cooperation and collaboration between Ministry of Education and Farhangian Universities, shortage of schools with a suitable and welcoming atmosphere for teacher-students, the mode of practicum reports, as one of the participants claimed that the students are instructed in English, but they have to represent their final results in Persian. These are the reasons why practicum courses, if not appropriately practised, will shift their function as a place for teacher-students demotivation. Participants of this study proposed that choosing specific schools to cooperate with Farhangian Universities is the best solution in order to assist students in better accomplishment of their practicum courses. Another weak point of the program that was frequently mentioned, was its idealistic nature. Participants of this study exemplified some aspects of the curriculum that is too idealistic and difficult to achieve.

Participants of this study believed that generally, the courses are appropriate for teaching and Farhangian Universities tried to make the connection between theory and practice by instructing students who are talented and knowledgeable. On the other hand, they saw threats regarding the procedure of students' selection and their entrance into these universities. They surely claimed that the procedure needs modifications since these universities are losing their chance regarding the refusal of some students' acceptance based on family history and religious issues.

The results of this study could assist program developers and stakeholders in Farhangian Universities to modify conditions for better application of the program; although its last refinement made it more suitable for the educational system of Farhangian Universities, it needs the removal of obstacles and some modifications to result in better employment of the curriculum. As Farhangian Universities play a crucial role in training soon-to-be teachers, the curriculum of this university possesses a significant role in the illumination of training procedures, and enhancement of the educational system to some extent.

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