

## Research Article

# Challenges of Employing the Underlying Tenets of English as an International Language in Iran

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Concerning the complexities that are closely related to the rapid spread of English around the world over the past few decades, English as an international language (EIL) was proposed to represent a revisiting of the established notions within the field of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) by holding a positive attitude toward non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and their cultures. Given that English is not their first language, non-native English language learners, such as Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, may feel frustrated by the current status of EIL discussion. Consequently, searching for the challenges that they may struggle against seems to be an unexplored issue, which is the purpose of this qualitative study. Six Iranian Ph.D. students of TEFL who attended their EIL course were selected. The collection of student journals was combined with semistructured interviews with each participant. After analyzing the data using MAXQDA software and grounded theory, the challenges of EIL in Iran were categorized into five categories: (a) disownership of English, (b) Iranian cultural dominance in high school English textbooks, (c) prevalence of discrimination against NNESTs, (d) acceptance of only American and British varieties, and (e) lack of intercultural competence. The findings bear some implications for TEFL professionals to explore the effects of challenges associated with employing the EIL tenets in EFL settings and to suggest potential solutions.

## 1. Introduction

English is a worldwide language that plays a significant role in everyone's life and acts as a bridge to the rest of the world. It is also widely recognized as an international language both in and out of the fields of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and applied linguistics. A growing number of people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds are learning and using English as a means of communication on a global scale [1]. In this way, they can easily communicate with people who speak other languages but also use English as a shared language [2]. In order to conceptualize the current state of English's global standing, numerous applied linguists have disputed traditional models of English [3, 4] and proposed substitute models [5].

Kachru's concentric circle model of the spread of English (1985) offers an informative way to become familiar with various functions that English performs in different areas all around the world. Generally, Kachru's model of the spread

of English, using a tripartite distinction, divides countries into three main circles: inner-circle countries, outer-circle countries, and expanding-circle countries. In inner-circle countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, English is the dominant language of society, and the majority of people who are born in these countries learn English as their first language. They might speak a different language at home; however, English is likely to become their dominant language because of the increased exposure to the English language outside the home and also the various functions that it performs in that context. In other words, although English is not the official language, it is the language that one needs to know in order to function in that society.

India, Philippines, Singapore, and Nigeria are examples of nations that are considered to be in the outer circle. In these countries, the majority of people study English as a second language either concurrently with or after they have acquired their mother tongue. In these countries, English is recognized as the official language, and in contrast to the inner-circle

countries, where the majority of communication is carried out solely through the use of English, the English language in the outer-circle countries coexists alongside other languages, which are typically indigenized languages that carry important functions.

In expanding-circle countries, such as Brazil, Germany, China, and Japan, English is often taught as the most popular foreign language [6]. However, these concentric circles are no longer applicable in today's postmodern globalized era due to mass migration, which has made it possible for speakers of different English varieties to travel across the circles and reside in them [7]. Interestingly, some expanding-circle countries have changed the status of the English language, and according to Jenkins [8], they are progressively becoming similar to outer-circle countries. Due to this issue and the rapid spread of English in recent years, the concept of English as an international language (EIL) was proposed as a paradigm shift in the field of TEFL. Individuals would need to engage in critical thinking regarding the existing concepts, techniques, strategies, and procedures in the field [9].

EIL is referred to as "a language that belongs to all those who speak it and not to the few who acquire and use it from childhood" ([10], p. 43). In light of EIL, English is not owned by American and British speakers of English only, and it is no longer limited to one country with a single norm [11]. A kind of renationalization of English has occurred about the use of English by non-native speakers (NNSs) for international communicative purposes. As a paradigm, EIL recognizes the various English varieties and how they are employed for cross-cultural and international communication [12]. Based on the World Englishes' viewpoint, more recent English varieties, such as Chinese English and Indian English, are also considered legitimate forms of English [13]. Thus, it seems that NNSs have also become legitimate users of the English language.

The transformation of English from a standard language to EIL has had a profound impact on language teaching and learning throughout the world. As a result, a disputed line of inquiry has evolved regarding the employment of native speakers (NSs) as role models in language instruction (e.g., [14, 15]). English is in transition, with more NNSs than NSs now using it for international communication [1]. The growing popularity of EIL has shifted learners' language objectives and demands, implying that communicating with NSs and developing a native-like accent are no longer the primary goals of language learners.

Additionally, the conversion of English from being the language of a few influential countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, to becoming the international language has led to many transformations in the English language teaching (ELT) profession because the highly diverse learning contexts pose a challenge for language education. As the English language is not the first language in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts like Iran, the current state of the discussion of teaching EIL poses a great challenge and frustration for teachers and learners.

Up until now, many research studies have addressed EIL (e.g., [16, 17, 18, 19]); however, the majority of these studies have been conducted from a descriptive perspective or

quantitative perspective, primarily approaching EIL to develop and validate questionnaires for exploring the awareness of and attitudes toward EIL (e.g., [16]). Unfortunately, not enough attention has been given to the systematic exploration of the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in Iran, which, in effect, can provide second or foreign language (L2) learners, teachers, and stakeholders with valuable insights into the ELT profession and the status of English language in Iran. The scant research done on the problems and challenges of EIL (e.g., [7]) has been descriptive in nature and is not theory-based. As a result, L2 researchers are still unable to fully understand and investigate the EIL challenges from a systematic perspective.

This study explores the EIL tenets, which encompass various interconnected issues like native-speakerism, ownership of English, pragmatics, and intercultural/metacultural competence. This is achieved by examining the difficulties associated with applying these tenets from the perspective of Iranian Ph.D. students in TEFL, who have frequently encountered these challenges as students, teachers, and even teacher trainers. The importance of the study setting lies in the fact that, unlike most other universities in Iran, EIL was thoroughly approached and explored as an academic course in the Ph.D. program. This demonstrated the significance of EIL in EFL contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

*2.1. EIL.* EIL has been numerously defined in recent years as a recent area of study in the field of TEFL. Smith [20] and Pennycook [21] were perhaps the first two scholars to define the term EIL as a worldly language used by people in various nations for communicative purposes. McKay [10] (p. 43) referred to EIL as "a language that belongs to all those who speak it and not to the few who acquire and use it from childhood." However, EIL is more than just a language because it has been considered a new paradigm for thinking as well as practice, a paradigm that accepts all English varieties at national, regional, and social levels within all the circles of the spread of English as equal [9, 22].

Moreover, the conversion of English from being the language of a few powerful Western countries to becoming the current international language has led to various reformations in recent years [23]. English has been seen as a worldwide language that has a vital function in many countries in the age of globalization [24]. For years, achieving native-like proficiency was considered the ultimate goal in English teaching and learning. However, the spread of English caused language changes, suggesting that one of the goals of EIL is to ensure intelligibility among the users of English [25]. As a result, native-like proficiency should not be considered the eventual goal for teaching and learning English [10]. Hopefully, native-speakerism—the belief that NSs are the only models of ideal language teachers—is rejected in light of EIL, and NSs are no longer seen as the exclusive owners of English [26, 27, 28].

Similarly, many scholars in the field (e.g., [4, 29]) have addressed the effects of both NSs and NNSs on English.

Modiano [4] argues that proficiency in English is no longer determined solely by NSs but also by NNSs who can use the language properly. Dependence on the native-speakerism model for the development of effective communication skills should be deemphasized because NSs of the English language, as Llurda [23] states, are merely a portion of a much wider population of speakers. Sharifian [9] and McKay [10] also address the native-speakerism framework and maintain that native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) who have exclusively been to monocultural contexts might not become effective teachers in EFL settings.

As a result of the increasing global interest in EIL, many scholars have been encouraged to reconsider the concept of proficiency/competence [30]. Sharifian [9], for example, defines proficiency in English about cultural conceptualizations and states, "More proficient speakers are those who have been exposed to, and show familiarity with, various systems of cultural conceptualizations, participating with flexibility in EIL communication and effectively articulating their cultural conceptualizations when their interlocutors need this to be done" (p. 248). As Sharifian [31] argues, the major goal of ELT should be preparing EFL learners for effective communication with speakers from a broad variety of cultural backgrounds and intercultural settings.

As for the EIL tenets, McKay [32] considered the following concepts: (1) promoting multilingualism and multiculturalism, (2) creating localized L2 policies, (3) developing an awareness of language variation, (4) holding a critical attitude toward the discourse related to the acquisition as well as the use of the English language, (5) providing equal access and exposure to English for all the people, and (6) re-examining the concept of eligible English teachers.

*2.2. Research on EIL in Non-Native Contexts.* Research on EIL in non-native contexts has gained more prominence in recent years, considering the fact that the majority of English users are NNs [33]. Among the research studies concentrating on EIL, Masoumpanah and Zarei [18] scrutinized how the notions of EIL interacted with Iranian EFL teachers' identity and perception of professional competence. Making use of questionnaires and interviews, they found two factors affecting the EFL teachers' identity and perception of competence: the EFL teachers' former experience and the EFL learners' preference for learning English. The Iranian EFL teachers' strong commitment to standard English was discussed as well.

A great majority of other studies (e.g., [16, 19, 34, 35]) have considered the teachers' attitudes toward or awareness of EIL. Among these studies, Tajeddin et al. [19] explored the attitude of Iranian non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) toward the native-speakerism framework in an EIL context through the usage of questionnaires and interviews. The results demonstrated that despite the basic tenets of EIL, the NNESTs in their study showed a preference toward American and British accents and adhered to the norm of the native varieties of English. The authors also provided the ELT profession with some implications for the employment of EIL teaching materials and methodology.

In an empirical study in 2018, Nakamura et al. [34] created a perception scale that EIL researchers and practitioners

can use conveniently. The developed scale makes it easier for EIL researchers and practitioners to use a tool for easily understandable EIL perception measurement, which eventually enables generalization across situations. In a recent study, Raja et al. [35] took the teachers' perceptions of EIL into account and attempted to clarify how EFL preservice instructors in higher education institutions in Indonesia viewed different aspects of EIL using 14 closed-ended statements on a 5-point Likert scale. Using descriptive statistics, the questionnaire's data were examined. The results indicated that participants had a favorable opinion of EIL as a tool for international communication that may be used for several objectives. Their ability to accept various pronunciation patterns and adapt their behavior and conversational styles when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds showed that they had a strong multilingual/multicultural understanding. They welcomed and accepted different varieties of English, and they felt quite strongly that their English varieties belonged to them.

In another study in 2022, Christou et al. [33] looked into preservice English teachers' perceptions of EIL by making use of the EIL perception questionnaire and follow-up semistructured interviews to better understand how teacher education has influenced preservice English teachers' perceptions of EIL. The results showed that although the participants generally had positive attitudes about EIL and that the MA program had significantly influenced these beliefs favorably, these beliefs were not consistent with how the participants envisaged implementing EIL in their future teaching practices.

Most recently, Dewi et al. [36] highlighted that EIL includes local culture familiarization, and they identified how inexperienced teachers incorporate elements of local culture into their lesson plans by reflecting on their own experiences and understandings of how to teach historical recount texts using a variety of English varieties and local cultural elements. The research used a case study approach with preinterviews, document analyses, and postinterviews of three inexperienced teachers. The results demonstrated that participants had incorporated elements of local culture into their modified teaching materials and supported the use of such resources to increase the student's engagement and help them comprehend learning objectives.

*2.3. Research Gap.* Despite the outstanding status of EIL and its recognition by researchers, it seems that the systematic investigation of the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in EFL settings has remained under-researched. Becoming aware of such challenges would be very effective in improving EFL teachers' education. Making use of the grounded theory, attempts were made to explore and identify the challenges of EIL by analyzing Iranian EFL learners' perceptions of EIL with the hope that the achieved findings could provide beneficial guidelines for conceiving a much more developed and effective EIL curriculum in the field of TEFL in Iran. Having the above as background, the following research question guided this study:

How do Iranian EFL learners perceive EIL?

What are the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in Iran?

TABLE 1: Participants' information.

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Major
Ali	43	Male	TEFL
Reza	34	Male	TEFL
Amir	38	Male	TEFL
Shiva	25	Female	TEFL
Mina	29	Female	TEFL
Zahra	30	Female	TEFL

### 3. Materials and Methods

*3.1. Participants.* The methodology adopted in this study is qualitative and is consistent with past research that has applied interpretive approaches to investigate EFL learners' perspectives on EIL (e.g., [37, 38]). The research was carried out at Shahrekord University, Iran, from April to May 2021. In order to make the researchers able to concentrate on the cases of the study, six Iranian Ph.D. students of TEFL (three male and three female) participated in the current study. The six participants were all EFL instructors with 6–28 years of experience working at Iranian universities, high schools, universities, and language institutes. In particular, three of the participants were university instructors; two taught at the high school level, and one worked at private language institutes. One of the participants had prior experience leading professional development workshops for EFL instructors as a teacher trainer. Despite being Ph.D. candidates, they were regarded as experts in TEFL due to their substantial teaching experience and involvement in this field. In Iran, a master's degree is normally the minimal requirement for teaching in a university, with a Ph.D. being preferred. As a result, their pursuit of doctoral studies in TEFL strengthened their subject area knowledge. Furthermore, their varied professional backgrounds and living experiences as NNSs provided insightful emic insights on the difficulties Iranian EFL learners can encounter when utilizing EIL. Sampling was purposeful, given that the participants of this study were attending the EIL course at Shahrekord University and had the characteristics that addressed the topic to meet the principles of saturation in a qualitative research [39]. The participants were assigned pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality, and they were solely recognizable by their assigned pseudonyms. Table 1 summarizes the main information about the participants.

*3.2. Instruments and Data Collection.* The present study comprises journal writings and semistructured interviews with the six participants mentioned earlier. The researchers postponed the data collection to the middle of the semester when practical and critical issues of EIL were supposed to be discussed in order to make sure that the participants were sufficiently familiar with the theoretical foundations of EIL, which were addressed in the first eight sessions of the semester. Seven further sessions were held for data collection (see Appendix A for the EIL issues discussed in the observed sessions). The researchers collected the participants' journals at the end of each session, and to triangulate the data,

semistructured interviews with each participant were conducted the next day following each session. The participants were asked some basic questions regarding their attitude toward the EIL tenets and the challenges they tackled during their education and in their careers (see Appendix B). Each interview, which lasted approximately 20 min, was recorded and transcribed. All the transcriptions were validated by the interviewees themselves and coded through the application of MAXQDA software [40]. Semistructured interviews were used because of their flexibility and potentiality in yielding an in-depth, rich understanding of the participant's attitudes toward the basic tenets of EIL and the challenges they faced during their studies or career and allowing for more explanation on the subjects emerging in the answers to the interviewer [41]. Moreover, qualitative methods like interviews give researchers a better insight into social phenomena in comparison to what is obtained from quantitative methods [42].

*3.3. Data Analysis.* The data were analyzed using the grounded theory approach [43, 44], which involves constructing theoretical components based on the collected data. In a grounded theory study, the focus extends beyond merely describing an experience. Instead, it encompasses all available data to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied. The data were analyzed through MAXQDA using a bottom-up approach, first with an open coding system followed by axial and selective coding systems. The first step in coding (i.e., open coding) involved dividing the imported journal writings and transcribed data into meaningful units in MAXQDA. These units were subsequently highlighted and labeled with words and phrases that represented the attitudes of the participants. Axial coding was then used to develop the core categories and create the associations among the different (sub) categories in an attempt to further understand the attitudes of the participants. Finally, some of the categories were unified during the selective coding to create a comprehensive model for the challenges of EIL in Iran. The iterative process of data collection and analysis and the constant comparison of the emerged themes with the participants' attitudes continued until a point of theoretical saturation was achieved. Member-checking and peer debriefing were utilized to verify the credibility of the data that was gathered. For member-checking, the participants were asked to explore the emerging themes from the research to evaluate the accuracy of the interpretations. The peer debriefing included an external check of the research by a graduate colleague who was provided with the raw data and the associated interpretations in an attempt to ensure the interpretations from the data were reliable and accurate.

### 4. Results and Discussion

Written data from interview transcripts and journal writings were conceptualized line by line, and the pieces of data related to the same topic were brought together. On the whole, five categories were formed: (1) disownership of English, (2) Iranian cultural dominance in high school English textbooks, (3) prevalence of discrimination against NNESTs, (4) acceptance of only American and British

TABLE 2: Summary of the codification results.

Category	Sample
Disownership of English	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) People can claim the ownership of the languages that they are born with only.</li> <li>(2) English belongs to those countries where English is spoken as the first or the official language.</li> <li>(3) Teachers of English in Iran are not the owners of English because their culture is different from that of NESTs'.</li> </ol>
Iranian cultural dominance in high school English textbooks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Iranian students can only learn about Iranian culture in high school.</li> <li>(2) The high school English textbooks in Iran lack variety because they do not consider other countries and their associated cultures.</li> <li>(3) Western culture should be included in high school English textbooks because it can enhance the process of learning the English language.</li> </ol>
Prevalence of discrimination against NNESTs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) NESTs have better job opportunities in EFL settings.</li> <li>(2) I have witnessed several discriminatory practices against NNESTs.</li> <li>(3) Iranian teachers of English can truly stop employment discrimination by considering themselves ideal teachers.</li> </ol>
Lack of intercultural competence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Lack of exposure to other cultures has created problems for me.</li> <li>(2) Iranians have little, if any, access to people from other countries and cultures.</li> <li>(3) NNESTs need to be aware of cultural differences/similarities through in-service training programs.</li> </ol>
Acceptance of only American and British varieties	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(1) Proficient speakers of English are only those with native-like accents.</li> <li>(2) American and British varieties of English should be followed by all English teachers around the world.</li> <li>(3) I watch films and listen to music with native accents to improve my speaking.</li> </ol>

varieties, and (5) lack of intercultural competence. Table 2 represents these categories and provides examples for each category.

*4.1. Disownership of English.* The term ownership has been used to describe how speakers use the English language to suit their own needs [45]. Who owns English internationally? Does English belong to NSs of English or to all who speak it, irrespective of their linguistic background? According to Bourdieu [46], those who are learning English might not view themselves as legitimate speakers of that language if they cannot claim ownership of English. Even though the participants in this study were acquainted with the notions of EIL, some of them did not view themselves as legitimate speakers of English.

Disownership of English was found to be one of the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in Iran, as claimed by most of the participants in this study. Addressing this challenge, Mina said, "My language defines my culture, and vice versa. I own only the Persian language because I am living my life according to the Iranian culture. It is Persian that defines who am I" (Interview 5, May 5, 2021). Amir also made a similar claim. In line with Parmegiani [47], who believed that each person can be the owner of only one language that is learned once and for all at birth, Amir maintained, "I only own the Persian language because it is my native language, and I learned it from the day I started speaking. Even though I can speak English fluently, it is impossible to say I own the English language because I am not born with it" (Interview 2, April 13, 2021). Additionally, he noted, "I reject the idea that English belongs to anyone who attempts to speak the language (Entry 3, April 26, 2021). Therefore, innateness was one of the reasons

for rejecting the ownership of English mentioned by Mina and Amir.

Another reason for disclaiming the ownership of English might be identity loss, as mentioned by Zahra, who believed that "the relationship between language and identity is established only once at birth. One's identity might be lost by claiming the ownership of another language which is not learned at the earliest stage of life" (Interview 3, April 20, 2021). The importance of identity in the debates on the ownership of English has been addressed by Selvi [48]. He criticizes the label NNESTs itself because it constructs an identity defined by being non to a standard, thus marginalizing the accents of those speakers whose first language is not English.

*4.2. Iranian Cultural Dominance in High School English Textbooks.* Another problem was found to be the predominance of Iranian cultural representation in high school English textbooks. Based on McKay [49] and Mai [50], L2 learners need to be exposed to a variety of cultures to reflect on their cultural values. L2 learners must be sensitive to intercultural differences. However, it is interesting that other cultures, even the target language culture, which is mostly American and British culture in this context, are, to a large extent, missing. Addressing this problem, Shiva said, "High school English textbooks in Iran are biased in promoting the Iranian culture and values much more than any other culture" (Interview 7, May 18, 2021). She also, like some previous studies (e.g., [51]), argued that "curriculum developers have not paid enough attention to the student's needs and future demand" (Entry 6, May 10, 2021).

Another participant, Reza, focused on the differences between Iranian and foreign cultures and stated that foreign

cultures are quite different from Iran, with the latter being bound up in Islamic and religious conventions. He, then, criticized the under-representation of any other culture in Iranian high school English textbooks and stated:

It is not appropriate to say that other cultures are taboo and should be entirely removed from the content of our EFL textbooks. Students are mostly interested in getting familiar with a variety of cultures. As a result, with an emphasis on respecting all cultures in the world, EFL teachers should link students from what they are familiar with to what they are not familiar with (Interview 6, May 11, 2021).

Iranian culture's over-representation in English textbooks has been addressed by some other scholars as well. For instance, according to Nikou and Soleimani [52], Iranian high school English textbooks often fail to prepare students for engagement with English-speaking nations because the representation of English culture is weak in such books. Meanwhile, they advocate integrating the target culture into Iranian EFL textbooks and curricula because they believe that this way, the students will realize their own identity in a better way and develop a better understanding of new cultures. As a result, Western culture should be presented in these textbooks because it is the English language that is considered the target language in such a context. Western culture can be represented through different topics within the context of Iranian high school textbooks. Opportunities should be created for Iranian high school students to practice English and talk about its associated culture through classroom activities.

*4.3. Prevalence of Discrimination against NNESTs.* It has been more than 20 years since the first research was conducted into issues related to NNESTs [53]; however, discriminatory practices continue to exist. Employers do not seem to be informed of the new perspectives offered by EIL and still adhere to the old native-speakerism framework in which only American and British standards are allowed to be followed, and only NSs are regarded as the ideal teachers. As a result, prevalent discrimination is directed toward many NNESTs in EFL settings, creating another challenge for employing the EIL tenets. One of the participants talked about the employment opportunities that were available for her B.A. A Persian-English bilingual classmate who was born and lived in the USA for more than 12 years. In elaborating on this point, Shiva stated, "My friend and I applied for teaching in one of the most well-known institutes in Isfahan. Even though my teaching demonstration was much more professional than my friend, I was rejected, unlike my friend, who was invited to teach for the next semester just because she could speak like NSs and also because the manager understood that she was born in the USA" (Interview 1, April 6, 2021).

Ali had also witnessed such discrimination against Iranian NNESTs at the time he was teaching English in Turkey. Ali was a high school English teacher in Iran who was sent to Turkey by the Iran embassy to work as an English teacher there. Focusing on job opportunities and discriminatory practices in Turkey, he explained, "During those two years in Turkey, I could see how NSs of English were successful at

their career as EFL teachers. They could easily start teaching in different institutions; however, NNESTs, especially Iranian teachers, had a long way to go" (Interview 4, April 27, 2021).

Similarly, Braine [54] (p. 73) addresses his experience of teaching English in Asia and describes his observations as the following:

Although NNS in the United States could be proud of what they have achieved in recent years, the discriminatory attitude toward NNS English teachers—from employers, students, NS colleagues, and parents of students—does not appear to have changed much in the rest of the world. Based on my observations in Asia, where I have lived and taught English for more than 25 years, NNS teachers there face the highest levels of discrimination. This is a result of more and more NS being attracted to English teaching jobs in Asia as a result of the region's rising prosperity.

It is essential to emphasize "non-nativeness in employment discrimination" in order to explore social justice in this globalizing world ([55], p. 481). Till now, many research studies have studied how English language teachers in job advertisements and interviews are discriminated against by candidates with particular backgrounds. Mahboob and Golden [56], for instance, explored 77 advertisements from East Asia and the Middle East and identified some factors that were included as key requirements in those advertisements, including race, nativeness, nationality, etc. The findings suggested that the job-related discriminations that the field of TEFL has been trying to eradicate are still discernible and that more effort needs to be carried out to make the field equitable for all people.

Some scholars have indirectly blamed the language teachers themselves for such discrimination and inequality (e.g., [23, 53]). According to Llorca [23], many NNESTs in EFL settings do not seem to care about the recent perspectives that EIL is providing for them and "are still anchored in the old NS-dominated framework in which British or American norms have to be followed, and NSs are considered the ideal teachers" (p. 319). The issue of power is also critical here because NNESTs usually surrender to power inequalities simply by admitting the established practices without questioning them [57].

According to da Costa and Rose [58], English is more commonly spoken as a second or supplementary language rather than as a first language. Similarly, Mina stated, "NNESTs outnumber the NESTs and have been found to have several advantages over monolingual speakers of English. They have an adequate level of language proficiency and possess the privilege of bilingualism" (Entry 4, April 26, 2021). This can be further supported by Kramsch's [15] claim that NNESTs have the potential to switch backward and forward from their first language to the target language and, hence, enhance the process of L2 learning. Thus, NNESTs should consider themselves powerful teachers and make use of both local and international instructional materials that are relevant to L2 learners' lives and needs [59].

*4.4. Acceptance of Only American and British Varieties.* The participants envisioned the English varieties as well. Mina,

for instance, highlighted the superiority of American and British varieties of English and rejected the ownership of English besides her mother tongue by referring to her accent in English. Specifically, she stated, “My accent is not native-like. There is a Persian language influence that makes my speaking unnatural. I have to work on my accent to make it sound like British or American accents” (Interview 7, May 18, 2021). She also reflected on EFL teachers’ and learners’ accents and stated, “they should only follow standard British or American accents” (Entry 2, April 12, 2021).

Amir and Ali who were holding language institutes for more than 10 years, highlighted the significance of American and British accents in language institutes. It was obvious from Ali’s non-native-like accent that he did not favor any specific variety or accent for speaking in English; however, he did favor British and American accents when he was talking about his role as a language institute director. Specifically, he stated, “I prefer to employ teachers with native-like accents due to the fact that they are more successful in attracting EFL learners to my language institute” (Interview 5, May 5, 2021).

As a result, another challenge of EIL is the EFL learners and educators’ preference for only American and British accents, unlike the basic notion in EIL that intelligibility should be the norm and the fact that learners need to have exposure to several varieties to comprehend “the real sense of EIL speech situations” ([60], p. 249). It seems that financial motives or the learners’ unawareness of EIL have negative effects on the employment of EIL tenets in Iran. Some previous studies on the exploration of mindsets toward the English varieties (e.g., [61, 62, 63, 64]) have also found the preference and adherence to the native-speakerism framework.

For example, in a research study on the role of attitudes of NNESTs in employing an international approach to pronunciation in the English language, Jenkins [62] found that the NNESTs in her study considered standard American and British varieties as the best framework to follow. The 47 NNESTs in Coskun’s [61] study showed similar attitudes toward the native varieties by favoring instructional material to be written in such varieties and disregarding non-native varieties as possible alternatives in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Sari and Yusuf [63] investigated the attitudes of NNESTs toward English accents. Most of the teachers disfavored their non-native accents because they believed that British and American varieties are the original and correct English.

**4.5. Lack of Intercultural Competence.** The last challenge was found to be associated with intercultural competence, which is defined as “the ability to adjust to unpredictable multicultural situations” ([65], p. 104). Ali, who was experienced in teaching English in Iran and Turkey, touched on the cultural differences between these two countries and went beyond the culture on the micro level (i.e., the earlier discussion on culture representation in Iranian high school English textbooks) and reflected on the culture on the macro level—the society and communication practices, as seen in his journal entry:

Foreign culture under-representation in Iranian English textbooks is the result of foreign culture avoidance in society.

How can Iranian students develop intercultural communicative competence in a country where Western cultures are taboo? You can rarely have access to people from other nationalities and of various cultural backgrounds. Surprisingly, the students in Turkey could easily develop such competence because they could effortlessly interact with people from different cultures (Entry 7, May 17, 2021).

Reza also discussed intercultural communicative competence and criticized teacher education in Iran. He referred to one of his colleagues in Iran and maintained, “He rejects the efficacy and potentiality of foreign cultures and believes that Western elements are a threat to the local culture of Iranian students and their religion” (Interview 1, April 6, 2021). Intercultural misunderstanding of this kind can result in very unpleasant consequences, which, Zahra argued, is an apparent lack of awareness of and exposure to English varieties and foreign cultures due to the lack of intercultural training in teacher education. Specifically, she commented, “Iranian EFL teachers do not receive any training about intercultural communicative competence and teaching. The in-service workshops primarily focus on the teaching of language skills and nothing more” (Entry 6, May 10, 2021). Sharifian [60] has also touched on the negative effects associated with the unawareness of cultural differences by stating that “unfamiliarity with the systems of conceptualizations on which the international speakers of English are relying may lead to various forms and degrees of discomfort and even miscommunication” (p. 246).

Thus, a lack of intercultural competence was also identified as a challenge in Iran. Iranian students should be informed of and exposed to different English varieties and their associated cultures. This needs the teachers’ preparation for developing the intercultural communicative competence of their learners. Through rich intercultural-oriented in-service training programs, NNESTs can become cultural facilitators, increase the student’s awareness of various cultures, and help them to know how to communicate with both NSs and NNs all over the world [66]. Finally, because English is becoming a global language across many cultures, NNESTs should appreciate the multicultural contribution that they can provide to language learners [23]. L2 teachers should integrate the three types of cultures proposed by McKay [10]—target, local, and international—into teaching materials to contain the practical needs of language users in intercultural settings. As Kramsch [15] puts it, English classrooms need to establish a “sphere of interculturality” in which students can learn about the culture of other countries as a way of attaining a better understanding of their own culture.

## 5. Conclusion and Implications

In this study, the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in Iran were explored using the perspectives of Iranian EFL learners through the usage of journal writings and semistructured interviews. The data analysis showed that the participants of the study viewed EIL differently, reflecting that many factors affect the EIL learners’ perceptions of EIL. The EFL learners’ different views on EIL led to the identification of five challenges. One of

the challenges was found to be the rejection of the ownership of English by NNS because they did not regard themselves as legitimate speakers of English. The over-representation of Iranian culture in high school English textbooks was identified as a challenge as well. The discriminatory practices against NNEST were also approached. Another identified challenge was the attitude of NNEST toward non-native varieties and its acceptance of only American and British varieties as the best framework to follow in EFL classrooms. Finally, the Iranian EFL teachers' and learners' lack of exposure to foreign cultures led to their lack of intercultural competence, being a major challenge in employing the EIL tenets in Iran.

By implication, instead of adhering to the traditional monolingual framework (i.e., native-speakerism), multilingual orientation to EIL interactions needs to be developed and emphasized in EFL settings. The fallacy whereby multilingual speakers of English are constantly compared with the native-speakerism framework should be set aside. EFL teachers can play pivotal roles in this regard by including different English varieties in EFL courses and curricula and also by encouraging EFL learners to make use of both native and non-native varieties norms in their speaking practices. To this end, NNESTs need to identify themselves as owners of English rather than looking at it as a foreigner's language. Moreover, the discriminatory practices against NNESTs might have negative effects on their motivation and confidence. Awareness courses for EFL learners and NNESTs might be of great help in this respect.

Furthermore, it is essential for the ELT curricula in EFL settings to be culturally sensitive and incorporate courses on cultural conceptualizations associated with different varieties of English. This will empower EFL learners to effectively engage in intercultural communication with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is hoped that the results could provide a need for further research in the realm of EIL and diminish the problems that are associated with employing the EIL tenets in an EFL context such as Iran. Therefore, it is suggested to conduct further studies on the mentioned challenges to explore their impact and possible solutions.

The implication for future research that the researchers opine is researchers can investigate the challenges of employing the underlying tenets of EIL in Iran with larger samples in different parts of the country to ensure that the results can be replicated. In addition, a comparison can be drawn between the perspectives of EFL learners who are not aware of the EIL tenets and those who are fully aware of EIL-related concepts. Comparing the NESTs' and NNESTs' perceptions of EIL is also worth exploring. This would ensure that the results are generalizable as the current study was carried out in a single Iranian city comprising a small number of non-native participants who were totally trained in the field of TEFL.

## Appendix

### A. EIL Issues Discussed in the Observed Sessions

- (i) Topic for session 1: Teaching EIL.
- (ii) Topic for session 2: Native-speakerism and EIL.

- (iii) Topic for session 3: Ownership in EIL.
- (iv) Topic for session 4: Non-native teachers of EIL.
- (v) Topic for session 5: EIL teacher identity.
- (vi) Topic for session 6: Pragmatics and EIL pedagogy.
- (vii) Topic for session 7: Intercultural/metacultural competence in EIL.

### B. Interview Guide

- (i) Would you please explain the topic of your discussion in the previous session?
- (ii) Would you please elaborate on your own idea about the topic?
- (iii) Did the discussion affect your attitude toward EIL?
- (iv) Based on what you have already learnt about EIL and based on the topic of the previous classroom session, what are the challenges of employing the EIL tenets in Iran?

### Data Availability

The data used to support the findings of this study will be available from the corresponding author on request.

### Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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