



**Discovering Iranian EFL Teachers' Metalinguistic Knowledge:  
The Role of Academic Degree and Teaching Experience in Focus**

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**Abstract**

The relevance of metalinguistic knowledge in effective teaching of the four language skills is evident. As such, the present study sought to determine the degree of Iranian EFL teachers' metalinguistic knowledge by focusing on the role of academic degree in English Language Teaching (ELT) and teaching experience. The study drew on a mixed-methods research design, and the data were collected through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, exploring teachers' perceptions and evaluations of metalinguistic knowledge. Additionally, in order to evaluate the declarative knowledge of teachers regarding their grammatical awareness, a test of English Grammar Knowledge was administered among 94 novice and experienced EFL teachers with and without an academic degree in ELT teaching in private language institutes. The results of the questionnaire and interview indicated that while the importance of having grammatical knowledge was evident for participants, experienced teachers displayed more positive views toward grammar awareness. Furthermore, the teachers' performance on the grammar test showed that while formal education helps teachers improve their knowledge, it is not the only determining factor for high levels of declarative knowledge of language. On the contrary, teachers' background knowledge was found to result in high levels of metalinguistic knowledge. Additionally, the results revealed that years of teaching experience does not determine the levels of teachers' metalinguistic knowledge. The study provides implications for EFL teachers and teacher trainers.

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## **1. Introduction**

Nowadays, by determining the vital role of grammar in language learning (Moini, 2008) and the great contribution of grammar to communicative competence (Zhang, 2009), teaching grammar has become an indispensable part of language pedagogy (Hos & Kekec, 2014). The importance of grammatical structures and their awareness direct attention to the critical role of teachers in providing learners with grammatical knowledge. As an important concept dealing with grammar teaching and explicit knowledge about language (Andrews, 2008; Wach, 2014), Language Awareness (LA) is considered as a professional standard expected from L2 teachers (Aghaei & Jadidi, 2013). While the concept 'LA' encompasses many areas of language including grammar, lexis, discourse, pragmatics, and culture (Bolitho et al., 2003; Andrews, 2007), in his study, we follow Andrews' (1997) 'Teacher Metalinguistic Awareness' (TMA) to focus predominately on grammar. According to Andrews (1997), TMA deals with two dimensions: declarative dimension (explicit knowledge about language) and pedagogical practice (the use of such knowledge). However, bearing in mind the objectives of the present study, the term Metalinguistic Knowledge (MLK) is used to refer to declarative metalinguistic awareness.

While explicit knowledge about language is an important part of teachers' MLK (Andrews, 1999, 2005; Petraki & Hill, 2011), according to Nazari and Allahyar (2012), lack of grammatical knowledge makes teachers avoid focusing on grammar instruction and overlook learners' grammatical mistakes. More importantly, it should be noted that teaching experience does not guarantee teachers' expertise in grammatical knowledge (Andrews, 2006). In line with the above-mentioned concerns, there is a growing need to study teachers' grammatical knowledge. The studies conducted so far have examined different groups of teachers, such as student teachers and experienced teachers with academic degree in English, or pre-service teachers who are passing preparation programs with the support of university faculty (Almarshedi, 2017; Andrews, 1997, 2015; Njika, 2015; Shuib, 2009). However, another group of teachers who merit further research regarding their metalinguistic knowledge is the Iranian EFL teachers teaching in private institutes. In an EFL context such as Iran, due to the mushrooming growth of private language institutes (Haghighi & Norton, 2016), the number of EFL teachers is also increasing; teachers who are mostly evaluated based on their communicative ability and it does not matter whether they are academic degree holders in English or other majors. Accordingly, it seems crucial to examine the MLK of Iranian EFL teachers while we have an eye on the role of an academic degree in ELT and teaching experience.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Metalinguistic Knowledge for Teachers**

Since the early 1980s, Language Awareness (LA) has become one of the major concerns in the field of language education. According to Association of Language Awareness (ALA), LA is explicit knowledge about language, and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching, and language use (ALA website). The LA movement initially began by focusing on the language awareness of learners. The idea behind the movement was that learners' ability to analyze and describe language accurately enables them to use language

more effectively (Andrews, 2008). Parallel to the importance of learners' language awareness, the language awareness of teachers has also been considered. In this regard, it was assumed that teachers' ability to analyze language will lead to effective teaching (Andrews, 2008).

During the past 25 years, there has been a growing interest to the understanding of the nature of teachers' language awareness and the impact of such knowledge on teaching and learning (see for example, Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Freeman, 2004). Thornbury (1997) defines teacher's language awareness as "... the knowledge that teachers have of the underlying systems of the language that enables them to teach effectively" (p. x). Reviewing the literature, teachers' knowledge of the language system or what called subject-matter knowledge is the most important part of language awareness (James, 1999; Shulman, 1999; Thornbury, 1997; Wright & Bolitho, 1993). According to Andrews (2001), subject-matter knowledge is the core of declarative dimension dealing with explicit knowledge of grammar and grammatical terminology required by language teachers. In other words, teachers' access to rich and substantive knowledge of grammar has two advantages: first, enables them to teach effectively and second, to react to learners' developmental errors appropriately (Myhill et al., 2013; Njika, 2015).

Andrews (1997, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2007) has been the major researcher in the field of language awareness of teachers and began his studies under the title "Teacher Metalinguistic Awareness (TMA)" focused mostly on grammatical knowledge of teachers (Andrews, 1997). Along with other researchers, Andrews (1997) considered TLA as a general term and believed that the scope of such awareness encompasses all the areas of language (Carter, 1995; Andrews, 1997 and Bolitho et al., 2003). In this regard, Andrews stating that the use of the term TMA is intended to:

...underline the importance of the teacher's reflections upon her explicit knowledge about language- the metacognitive dimension of language awareness and also to emphasize the significance of the interrelationship between the declarative and procedural dimensions of teacher language awareness, i.e. between the knowledge-based itself and how that knowledge is drawn upon and applied in the course of professional activity. (Andrews, 1999c, p.144)

In this view, TMA consisted of two dimensions: the knowledge about language, namely, declarative dimension which refers to metalinguistic knowledge that teachers need to possess, and procedural dimension of language awareness which deals with the ability to use such knowledge in practice. According to Andrews (2003, 2005), professional teachers demand the possession of both dimensions.

By focusing on the extra dimension of cognitions and reflections about language competence emphasized by the title TMA, Andrews commenced his study in 1996-97. During the study, Andrews (1997) attempted to evaluate the TMA of 17 Hong Kong secondary school teachers of English. In accordance with the consideration of the study, all of them were Hong Kong Chinese and were accepted for admission to the Post-graduate Certificate in Education (PCEd). At the end of the study after analyzing the collected data, the researcher reported a mismatch between teachers' subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical practice.

After that in 2003, Andrews claimed that the emphasis on metacognitive dimension of teachers' language awareness in the phrase 'Teacher Metalinguistic Awareness (TMA)' is a cause for ambiguity. Therefore, in order to remove any potential ambiguity he employed the more familiar term 'Teacher Language Awareness (TLA)' in his further studies and stated that "TLA is indeed metacognitive but these metacognitions are reflections on knowledge of and about language" (p.86). In this regard, by focusing on the relationship between cognition and language awareness, in 2004, Andrews sent invitation to the subjects in the previous study to participate in the follow up inquiry. This time, three teachers accepted to take part in the study to evaluate the possible changes in their subject-matter cognition of the English grammar. After analyzing the data obtained from metalanguage test and observation and summarizing the findings from 1996-19997 and 2004, it was revealed that teachers' TLA and grammar-related cognitions had not changed very much. The results of the LA test also suggested that their knowledge of grammar and underlying beliefs about grammar pedagogy and the role of explicit grammar teaching did not expand.

One more time, experienced teachers have been targeted regarding their language awareness. This time, Andrews and McNeill (2005) conducted a study to investigate the language awareness of experienced and exceptional teachers relating to grammar and vocabulary. Three highly experienced graduate non-native speaker teachers of ESOL were participated in the study. The study involved tests of both grammar and vocabulary, lesson observation, interview, and stimulated recall. The results of the tests indicated that, in general, all the three teachers had gaps in their subject-matter knowledge and this gap affected the procedural dimension of their TLA (pedagogical practice) to a varying extent. It was also revealed that teachers were aware of their limitations in knowledge of language and had wishes to improve their knowledge.

Moreover, along with such findings, the study revealed a number of characteristics a good language-aware teacher. According to Andrews and McNeill (2005), a language-aware teacher has willingness and ability to engage with language-related issues and to reflect upon them. It was also found that to extend of the subject-matter knowledge, such a teacher possesses self-awareness which is accompanied by their desire for continuing self-improvement of their TLA. Awareness of their own key role in mediating input for learning and potential difficulties that learners dealing with are the more two features of teachers announced in the study.

In 2014, Svalberg focused on the relationship between cognition and grammar awareness and attempted to explore MA Applied Linguistics and TESOL students' perception of Grammar Awareness for language teachers. The aim of the study was to understand how group tasks might help students build grammar awareness. In this regard, the researcher compared the performance of novice and experienced teachers on dealing with authentic texts required different types of linguistic analysis. During the study, the subjects were needed to: a) analyze texts and explain the reason for using certain grammatical forms, b) recognize other grammatical options that may change the meaning, c) correct errors, d) evaluate difficulty level of the text, and e) devise tasks to help students with those areas. Finally, the study displayed that students with no teaching experience had more difficulty with the tasks and texts.

Additionally, it was revealed that along with developing knowledge, teachers' awareness in how to apply that knowledge will also develop.

The aforementioned studies highlight two points: first, the connection between teacher awareness, knowledge, and cognition and second, the importance of teachers' language awareness. These are shown in Andrews's (2006) findings of the important role of cognition in teaching, Andrews and McNeill's (2005) description of how being aware of the limitations in language knowledge can help teachers to improve their knowledge, and the features of a good language-aware teacher mentioned by them, and finally, Svalberg's (2012) description of teachers' ability to improve their grammatical knowledge over time. These findings emphasize the importance of teachers' knowledge of their level of knowledge which directly influence their beliefs and practices.

## 2.2 Teachers in Iran's Private Institutes

The critical role of teachers in education have demonstrated by many researchers and all of them agree upon the significant role of teacher education programs on teacher quality and student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). Musset (2010) emphasized the importance of teacher education programs and claimed that such programs are "the first entry point to the teacher professional career, it plays a fundamental role: the way it is organized determines both the quality and quantity of teachers" (p. 15). Regarding the magnitude of this issue, there is a need for teacher education programs to be constantly reformed and evaluated in order to conform to the demands of a fast-changing world. This necessity is more evident in countries where there is not much on-the-job training for employed teachers and Iran is one of these countries.

As the largest non-academic centers (Faruji, 2012), private language institutes play the main role in teaching English (Haghighi & Norton, 2016). In Iran, private institutes are the only sources to learn language communicatively; accordingly, those learners who take courses in these institutes have right to access to qualified teachers (Mohsenian, Rezai, & Rokni, 2015). Concerning the critical role of teachers in learners higher achievement (Akiba, LeTendre, & Schrimber, 2012), managers of the private institutes need to be sensitive in selecting the more competent teacher for better teaching (Mohsenian, Rezai, & Rokni, 2015). In the study conducted by Akbari and Yazdanmehr (2012), they found basic stages typically followed by private English language institutes to employ teachers. This process of teacher selection which is labeled as "teacher entry" includes application, written test, interview, training lessons, and placement.

Teacher Training Courses (TTCs) are the only training courses that teachers take in private language institutes. Although there is no unified procedure for conducting training courses and every institute run its own course, generally such courses are held with the duration ranging from 10 to 60 hours (Ganji, Ketabi, & Shahnazari, 2018) carried out by an expert or a supervisor. During the course, trainees are presented with the dominant methodology adapted by the institutes, the course materials, class arrangement, management, teaching methods, and other related issues. Teaching course ended with a 'demo section' designed to evaluate how much trainees have mastered the issues introduced during the course. In this case, they are

required to choose part of a lesson of the target textbooks and teach it in the presence of trainers, supervisors, or other trainees (Akbari & Yazdanmehr, 2012).

In attempting to characterize the important factors that managers of private institutes consider in selecting the teachers, Mohsenian, Rezai, and Rokni (2015) considered 100 private institutes in four cities of Mazandaran, North of Iran. Analyzing the data indicated that in the view of the managers 'English skills' including general English skills, fluency, and true pronunciation; 'discipline' including punctuality and syllabus covering; 'interaction' with learners, parents, and colleagues; 'degree' whether academic degree or other authentic certificates such as TOEFL; 'appearance'; and 'teaching' including creativity, teaching experience, and good teaching background were the most important factors, respectively. Conversely, in the study conducted by Akbari and Yazdanmehr (2012), academic degree and teaching experience of the applicants were not considered as the important factors in the eyes of managers of the institutes.

With reference to what has been mentioned, there are two points to consider; first, different institutes have different views about the necessity of teachers' academic degree and teaching experience. The second point is that, while teacher training courses try to prepare applicants for their future career, they contain little or no focus on trainees' cognition and knowledge about language; however, according to Stanley and Murray (2013) a teacher is qualified when he has knowledge about language and knows what he needs to be able to do. In this regard, the present study attempts to put these issues under the investigation in relation to teachers' grammatical knowledge.

### **3. Research Questions**

The present study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do Iranian EFL teachers evaluate their own metalinguistic knowledge (MLK) of English language?
2. Is there a significant difference between Iranian novice EFL teachers with an academic degree in ELT and those without it with regard to their level of MLK?
3. Is there a significant difference between Iranian experienced EFL teachers with an academic degree in ELT and those without it with regard to their level of MLK?
4. Is there any significant difference between Iranian novice and experienced EFL teachers with regard to their level of MLK?

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Participants**

Ninety four English language teachers (both males and females) teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in private English language institutes in Isfahan, Iran, were selected through convenient sampling technique. The participants were all Farsi native speakers and ranged in age from 21 to 50. Among the total number of teacher participants in the study, 49 of them were English majors and 45 non-English majors with different academic qualifications of Master's and Bachelor's degrees. The highest academic qualification among degree holders in English was Master's degree (n=25). Then, Bachelor's degrees in English Literature, English Translation, and ELT constituted the rest of the English major group with 24 participants.

Likewise, in non-English majors group, the highest academic qualification was Master's degree with 10 participants; the other 35 participants held Bachelors' degree in different majors. The participants taught English in three levels, namely, pre-Intermediate, intermediate, and advanced level and their teaching experience varied from 5 months to 26 years. In accordance with the purpose of this study, the participants were placed in two groups; those with 2 to 4 years of teaching experience were labeled as novice teachers (n=43) and teachers with more than 5 years were regarded as experienced teachers (n=51).

#### 4.2 Data Collection Procedure

The present study drew on a mixed-methods design; this being so, the quantitative phase used in this study consisted of administering a questionnaire and a test which allowed the researcher to not only test the participants' explicit grammatical knowledge, but also to investigate the teachers' perception and evaluation of their own metalinguistic awareness. Accordingly, after the participants were assured that all the data would be kept confidentially, in the first step, they were asked to complete the questionnaire. The Attitudes about Grammatical Knowledge questionnaire that was used in the study was a modified version of the questionnaire designed by Almarshedi (2017). The questionnaire consisted of 2 open-ended and 14 closed questions exploring: 1) general information of the participants, 2) their views about English grammar knowledge, 3) the evaluation of their level of knowledge, and 4) their views regarding their limitations. Next, when the completed questionnaires were submitted by the teachers, the researcher administered the test. Again, with some modifications, the study adopted the English Grammar Knowledge test devised by Almarshedi (2017), consisting of 36 items presented in two sections. Each section assessed teachers' knowledge of grammar rules and grammar terms by addressing the participants' productive and receptive knowledge. The approximate time to answer the test items was 30 minutes. The reliability of the questionnaire was also determined through using Cronbach's alpha (reliability index=0.79).

In the second phase of data collection, a semi-structured interview was run to collect qualitative data. This process of data collection was very important because it allowed the researchers to come to more comprehensive results to answer the first research question. In this phase, based on the data collected already from the test, participants were classified into four groups, namely teachers with academic degree and low level of MLK, teachers with academic degree and high level of MLK, teachers without academic degree and low level of MLK, and teachers without academic degree and high level of MLK. Given the total score of the test (i.e. 68), the scores between 0 to 34 were regarded as indicating low levels of MLK and those from 35 to 68 were considered as showing high levels of MLK. Later, two participants in each group were selected and one of the researchers interviewed them. In conducting the interview, seven interview questions designed by Dean (2016) were used. The questions were all open-ended ones discovering teachers' attitudes about the nature and the effectiveness of grammar and the sorts of difficulties they might have encountered in the classroom. The interview session for each participant lasted about 20 minutes and the responses were recorded on an audio recorder.

#### 4.3 Data Analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed by calculating the frequencies of the teachers' answers as percentages using SPSS. To achieve this goal, the data were coded

numerically on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4. However, in order to present the analysis of the data more clearly and to facilitate the comparison between the two groups, the 5-point scale was reduced into a 3-point scale. In fact, "strongly agree" and "agree" were merged into "agree", "strongly disagree" and "disagree" into "disagree", "very poor" and "poor" were merged into "poor", and "good" and "excellent" into "good".

In scoring the test, each question was assigned one point. For each item in the section assessed knowledge of grammar term, a maximum of two points for a complete answer and one point for a partially correct answer were considered. In the second section where the participants' knowledge of rules were examined, for the receptive questions each correct answer was given one point and for the productive questions each correct answer was assigned two points. After calculating the scores, the data were entered into SPSS; comparing the mean scores helped determine whether the differences between groups were significant or not.

Additionally, in order to ensure the consistency of the test scores, the inter-rater reliability was assessed. In this regard, half of the test papers were sent to an English language teacher with 6 years of teaching experience. After the papers were scored by the second marker, it was revealed that there was an acceptable level of consistency between the scores calculated by the two raters.

### 5. Results

With regard to the first research question, Table 1 indicates teachers' satisfaction with their level of knowledge of grammar terms and grammar rules. According to the collected data, it was revealed that novice teachers were more satisfied with their level of knowledge of grammar rules (72.1%) than their knowledge of grammar terms (51.2%); whereas, the ratio of satisfaction for both knowledge of terms and knowledge of rules were somehow the same for experienced teachers (76.5%, 76.4%).

**Table 1:** Teachers' Views about Grammar

	Disagree (%)		Neither agree nor Disagree (%)		Agree (%)	
	NT	ET	NT	ET	NT	ET
im satisfied with my level of knowledge of grammar <u>terms</u> .	9.3	7.8	39.5	15.7	51.2	76.5
im satisfied with my level of knowledge of grammar <u>rules</u> .	4.7	5.9	23.3	17.6	72.1	76.4

(NT) novice teachers, (ET) experienced teachers

In seeking teachers' evaluation of their level of knowledge of grammar rules and grammar terms, it was revealed that 76.8% of novice teachers rated their ability in classifying English words as excellent and good and 23.3% as neutral. While in this item, the total number of experienced teachers (100%) rated their ability of word classification as good and excellent. Moreover, in asking teachers' knowledge of grammar rules, all of the novice teachers (100%) evaluated their ability as good and excellent; however, 96.1% of experienced teachers rated their ability as good and excellent and 3.9% as neutral (Table 2).

**Table 2:** Evaluation of Grammar Knowledge

Groups	poor (%)		Neither poor nor good (%)		good (%)	
	NT	ET	NT	ET	NT	ET
3) My ability to classify English words into <i>for example, nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.</i>	-	-	23.3	-	76.8	100
4) Knowing the grammar rules.	-	-	-	3.9	100	96.1

While the aforementioned results indicated that the majority of novice and experienced teachers rated their grammatical knowledge as good and excellent, the teachers' responses to the interview question asking 'how comfortable do they feel about applying their grammar knowledge to the lessons presented in their classroom', it was demonstrated that teaching experience is an important factor which make experienced teachers to be more confident about applying their own knowledge to make the material more understandable.

Experienced teacher:

*Knowing and having studied many teaching books and being able to build a good rapport has made me feel really comfortable about applying my knowledge.*

Novice teacher:

*Generally, I'm not really comfortable when it comes to teaching grammar. It's considered my least favorite part of teaching.*

In eliciting teachers' views about their personal strength and limitations regarding their language knowledge, it was revealed that 62.8% of novice teachers admitted their requirement to improve their understanding of language terms and only 18.6% were satisfied with their level of knowledge. On the other hand, 10.4% of experienced teachers agreed their needed of improvement and 41.2% were disagreed with further development (Table 3).

Furthermore, as shown in Table 3, the last item elicited teachers' ideas about the need to develop their knowledge of grammar rules. More than half of the novice teachers (58.1%) agreed with improvement, 10.3% were neutral and 25.6% disagreed with such need. However, among experienced teachers, 47.1% agreed with the need to develop their knowledge of grammar rules, 17.6% were neutral, and 35.3% believed that they have enough knowledge and there is no need for further development.

**Table 3:** Acknowledgment of Gaps and Dissatisfaction

Groups	disagree (%)		Neither agree nor disagree (%)		agree (%)	
	NT	ET	NT	ET	NT	ET
Classifying English words for example into: <i>nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.</i>	18.6	41.2	18.6	29.4	62.8	10.4
15) Knowing the grammar rules.	25.6	35.3	16.3	17.6	58.1	47.1

In addition to the items presented in this part looking for the areas that are required to be improved, in the interview sections, the participants were asked “have you encountered any problem associated with teaching grammar?” the teachers’ responses to this question indicated that all the teachers have been dealt with different problems in teaching grammar which stem from lack of knowledge or the inability to clarify grammar point on the part of the teacher.

Experienced teacher:

*Yes, because of lack of knowledge*

Novice teacher:

*Yes, I have. Because of weak knowledge of grammar and not using proper ways of teaching.*

However, all the teachers were agreed that practice, repetition, and gaining experience helped them to progress in their knowledge.

To answer the other three research questions and to distinguish the performance of the two groups of teachers on the English Grammar Knowledge test in each question, an independent-samples T-test was performed.

In association with the second research question, Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics to examine the mean scores of novice EFL teachers with and without academic degree in English.

**Table 4:** Descriptive Statistics of Novice EFL Teachers with and without Academic Degree in English

teachers		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
grammar test	novice EFL teachers with academic degree in English	22	32.54	10.44	2.22
	novice EFL teachers without academic degree in English	21	41.14	11.68	2.55

Considering Table 5, Levene’s test shows the variances of two groups of novice EFL teachers with and without academic degree in English is equal (Sig.=.13). It also, shows that there is statistically significant difference in the mean scores of two groups. The magnitude of difference in the means is large (Eta squared= .13), which shows that novice teachers without academic degree in English outperformed the other group.

**Table 5:** Independent Samples T-test for Novice Teachers with and without Academic Degree in English

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
grammar test	Equal variances assumed	.10	.75	-2.54	41	.01	-8.59	3.37	-15.41	-1.77

Regarding the third research question, Table 6 indicates the descriptive statistics conducted to examine the mean scores of experienced teachers with and without academic degree in English.

**Table 6:** Descriptive Statistics of Experienced EFL Teachers with and without Academic Degree in English

teachers		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
grammar test	experienced EFL teachers with academic degree in English	27	36.70	8.70	1.67
	experienced EFL teachers without academic degree in English	24	31.50	5.42	1.10

Table 7 presents independent-samples T-test to compare the level of metalinguistic knowledge of the two groups of Iranian experienced EFL teachers. Levene's test shows the variances of experienced teachers with and without academic degree in English are the same (Sig.= .02). Additionally, the column labeled Sig (2-tailed) of .01 shows a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the two groups. The magnitude of differences in the means is large (Eta squared= .12) which shows that the group of experienced teachers with academic degree in English outperformed those without academic degree in English.

**Table 7:** Independent-Samples T-Test for Experienced EFL Teachers with and without Academic Degree in English

		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
gram	Equal variances assumed	5.10	.02	2.52	49	0.015	5.20	2.06	1.05	9.34
mar	Equal variances not assumed			2.59	44.16	.01	5.20	2.00	1.15	9.25
test										

Table 8, which is in connection with the fourth research question, presents the descriptive statistics to examine the mean scores of novice and experienced EFL teachers, irrespective to their academic degree, to distinguish their performance on the English Grammar Knowledge test.

**Table 8:** Descriptive Statistics of Novice and Experienced EFL Teachers

teachers	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
level of grammar Iranian novice EFL teachers	43	36.74	11.76	1.79
knowledge Iranian experienced EFL teachers	51	34.25	7.73	1.08

As shown in Table 9, an independent-samples T-test was conducted to compare the level of metalinguistic knowledge of two groups of novice and experienced EFL teachers to investigate the impact of teaching experience. Levene's test shows the variances of the two groups are not the same (Sig.= .02). The column labeled Sig (2-tailed) of .23 shows there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups.

**Table 9:** Independent-Samples T-Test of Novice and Experienced EFL Teachers

		F	Sig. t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper	
level of metalinguistic knowledge	Equal variances assumed	5.12	.02	1.22	92	.22	2.48	2.02	-1.53	6.51
	Equal variances not assumed			1.18	70.35	.23	2.48	2.09	-1.69	6.66

## 6. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine the metalinguistic knowledge of Iranian EFL teachers to investigate whether having academic degree in English and teaching experience can be contributed to the teachers' high level of explicit grammatical knowledge and their success in producing appropriate terminology. According to Flavell (1979), self-knowledge is an important component of metacognition which is considered as an effective factor in teacher development. Accordingly, in attempting to get to a clear picture of teachers' opinions about their metalinguistic awareness, the first research question sought to investigate how teachers perceive and evaluate their own grammar knowledge. According to Andrews and McNeill (2005) and Borg (2011), the important consequences for teachers' understanding of their own language knowledge are that they can identify their weaker areas, acknowledge difficulties, and actively pursue continuous self-improvement. The results of the questionnaire and interview indicated that the evaluation of experienced teachers about their knowledge of grammar terms and grammar rules were higher than those of novice teachers, resulting in their high level of confidence and satisfaction with their level of metalinguistic knowledge. This result contrast with the findings reported by Andrews' (1999b) and Sangster et al.'s (2013) studies which, respectively, reported a high level of novice teachers' and low level of experienced teachers' confidence regarding their knowledge.

Although such level of confidence in the knowledge of teachers participated in the present study were substantially higher than their actual performance on the test; however, the obtained result supported Petraki and Hill's (2011) and Wolters and Daugherty's (2007) statements that teaching experience leads to the confidence. According to Almarshedi (2017), this confidence stems from the belief that experienced teachers have already mastered the knowledge required

in their present context. In other words, by gaining experience in the profession, teachers' knowledge about the content they teach will increase (Wolters & Daugherty, 2007) and such increase in knowledge will increase their confidence, accordingly. Additionally, the results of the study displayed disagreement between the ratio of teachers' recognition of gaps and their level of dissatisfaction about their current knowledge. This finding which was in line with Almarshedi's (2017) findings who reported a huge difference between teachers' awareness of the gap in their grammatical knowledge and the surprising level of satisfaction with their content knowledge would interestingly indicate that Iranian teachers are not aware of their weakness as well and it should be a point for concern. It is very important for teachers to use such awareness as a motivational factor, as presented by Almarshedi (2017), for self-improvement.

Considering the second research question, the scores of the English Grammar Knowledge test suggest that novice EFL teachers without academic degree in English outperformed those novice teachers with academic degree in English. The findings of this research question were consistent with the idea that, irrespective of their academic degrees, teachers do not enter the teaching career as 'blank slates' (Grossman, 1991) and their prior experience as language learners is the most influential factor which can be contributed to their content knowledge (Arioğul, 2007; Borg, 2005; Johnston & Goetsch, 2000). In actuality, the undeniable value of grammar courses that teachers with academic degree in English pass in university is clear and as supported by National Research Council (2000), it is the path of formal education which direct students to formal understanding and expertise. However, as the findings indicated, formal courses are not the only determining factor for having high level of metalinguistic knowledge, instead informal grammar classes can also lead to the high level of metalinguistic knowledge. In fact, as stated by Andrews (2006), the improvement in knowledge of subject-matter (which is measured by the TLA test) demands teachers to actively seek to continually develop their professional competence not only through formal study, but also through informal study.

More importantly, the findings of this study supported Tsui's (2003) belief that English learning in general and grammar learning in specific requires teachers to put time and effort to learn that specific area and have a desire to acquire more knowledge. This statement is not only true for novice teachers but also for experienced ones. However, the survival stage of the professional development, which is frequently accompanied by the feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (Marshall, Fittinghoff, & Cheney, 1990), necessitates novice teachers to learn more and more to remove any ambiguity regarding the structures to cope with the stress of facing different questions on part of the learners. This can be considered as the important point for better performance of novice teachers without ELT degree who were studied in the present inquiry. Accordingly, the lack of formal training in English structures can be regarded as the effective factor for those novice teachers without academic degree in English to try to understand the points as clearly as possible. Such need to learn more and more, as stated by Grossman (1988), can be considered as a motivational force "to deepen their understanding of familiar topics" (p.60) which can finally lead to the growth of their subject-matter knowledge.

In search for the differences among experienced EFL teachers with ELT-related degrees and those without it, which was the focus of the third research question, the results of the test scores revealed that experienced EFL teachers with academic degree in English outperformed those experienced teachers without academic degree in English. This finding which stressed the positive role of professional coursework and teaching experience have been considered by different researchers as the two influential factors on teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (Almarshedi, 2017; Arıoğul, 2007; Johnston & Goettsch, 2000; Petraki & Hill, 2011). Actually, it seems that the results of this question were consistent with the Petraki and Hill's (2011) idea that teacher education can be considered as a basis which helps teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding through experience. According to the finding of this study, while EFL teachers, in general, can achieve a level of grammar knowledge by relying on different sources (Petraki & Hill, 2011), the linguistic courses that are presented through formal studies can provide future teachers with a good ground in grammar which will stay with them throughout their professional lives. In other words, as it was discussed earlier, for novice teachers without academic degree in ELT the beginning of teaching career is accompanied by trying hard to become competent in knowledge about language. In this regard, they make great effort to learn the knowledge that they had not the opportunity to learn academically. However, by gaining more experience during the teaching process and obtaining confidence in satisfying the requirement of the language institutes they begin to keep their content knowledge to the need to prepare material for teaching (Grossman, 1988). That is why, in asking an experienced English teacher without academic degree in ELT why she did not answer the questions of grammar terms she said: *"I don't know about grammar terms, because I don't need such knowledge to work in private institutes"*; while it is accepted that a teacher with a well-developed knowledge about language is able to give quality feedback not only on written work but also on oral work (Almarshedi, 2017).

The final research question of the study was focused on the role of teaching experience on the level of metalinguistic knowledge by comparing the performance of novice and experienced teachers on the test. While most of the previous inquiries agreed the positive impact of teaching experience on teachers' metalinguistic knowledge (Almarshedi, 2017; Andrews, 1999c; Johnston & Goettsch, 2000), the results of the test scores displayed roughly similar performance of the two groups of teachers in the test which indicated that years of teaching experience would not directly improve the metalinguistic knowledge of teachers. Generally, the obtained result was in line with those studies conducted by Andrews (2006) and Wach (2014) which reported the neutral impact of teaching experience on teachers' metalinguistic awareness. In fact, although it might be expected that teaching experience would positively develop different knowledge (Almarshedi, 2017), the finding showed that it is not true in all cases.

In fact, although teachers' tendency to save their face can be regarded as a motivational factor for both novice and experienced teachers to the continuing development of declarative metalinguistic awareness and improving their knowledge about language (Almarshedi, 2017), considering the context of private institutes in Iran with the dominancy of CLT and implicit approach to teaching grammar, after some years of teaching, teachers may lead to the conclusion that teaching grammar requires little use of explicit knowledge of the target

language (Wach, 2014). In fact, the gap in the metalinguistic knowledge of Iranian experienced teachers can be related to their attempt to follow the implicit approach and satisfy the curriculum requirement and this may stop them from searching out professional challenges (Tsui, 2003) and improving their knowledge. However, it is obvious that teachers are required to have rich knowledge about language to be prepared enough to respond appropriately and quickly to their learners' grammatical questions.

## 7. Conclusions

The renewal of interest in grammar learning and teaching (Burgess & Etherington, 2002; Swan, 2011) and the emergence of focus-on-form instruction with the embedded grammar into communicative activities (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011) have given rise to the important role of language awareness in learners and teachers (Wach, 2014). According to Carter (1995), being aware of how language works facilitates learning process for learners which consequently leads to positive learning outcomes. However, enhancing such awareness in language learners require teachers to have an accurate knowledge about language system. Regarding the critical role of teachers' metalinguistic awareness, this study attempted to highlight whether academic degree in ELT and teaching experience can make a difference between novice and experienced EFL teachers. On the basis of the scores obtained from the conducted English Grammar Knowledge test, it can be concluded that ELT degree cannot necessarily be considered as the only platform for enriched grammatical knowledge; whereas, informal study can also be an important source for becoming proficient in language system. Furthermore, it should be considered that gaining experience in the field of teaching needs to be accompanied by continuous desire for developing existing knowledge and acquiring new knowledge in order to lead to the high level of MLK. Accordingly, there is no need to consider academic degree in ELT and other related fields as a determining factor in selecting EFL teachers in private institutes when deciding about their grammatical competence. Moreover, although the importance of having subject-matter knowledge is obvious for teachers, as it was revealed during the interview, it may be believed that not all teachers such as those in private institutes will need to have complete knowledge of metalinguistic terms; however, as stated by Edge (1988), teachers are required to be language analysts who are ready for answering any grammatical questions the learners may have in the classroom.

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