



Affective-Strategy-Oriented Training and Language Teacher Immunity: The Case of In-Service Novice EFL vs. Non-EFL Major Teachers

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Abstract

In the SLA context, Immunity is considered a defense mechanism against stressful situations. Some researchers have claimed that the maladaptive immunity of teachers can be transformed into productive immunity through pre-and in-service training of teachers. This study aimed to examine the effect of in-service training on teachers' immunity levels and to determine whether the pre-service training has any effect on the immunity development among teachers. Participants of this study (N=46) were selected by convenience sampling from private institutes in Zanjan, Tabriz, and Urmia, Iran. They were divided into two groups, non-EFL teachers (10 Male, 10 Female) and EFL teachers (13 Male, 13 Female), receiving 5 training sessions on affective strategies, preceded and followed by the Language Teacher Immunity Questionnaire developed by Hiver (2017). The results showed a significant development of the immunity level among both groups of participants. Moreover, it was stated that pre-service training had no impact on the in-service training that EFL teachers received. As a result, in-service training programs have to pay more attention to teacher immunity and strategies to deal with stressful situations that teachers normally face, regardless of teachers' background knowledge about the field.

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Introduction

Teachers constantly face stressors due to heavy workload, low recognition, and emotional demands (Hiver, 2016). These factors make teaching a very stressful career. It is essential to consider that these conditions are not limited to a specific context or a single teacher; every teacher entering the field of education will face these natural tensions. What differentiates those who survive from those who quit is that thriving teachers have developed a kind of defense mechanism against the excruciating demands and stressful conditions. Hiver calls this defense mechanism “language teacher immunity” (Hiver, 2016).

Hiver (2016) claimed that improving teacher immunity will lead to a decrease in the drop-out rate of teachers, improved student’ learning, and significant savings in time and money for institutes and universities. A paramount consideration is that if teachers thrive, the students will thrive; this is the fundamental demand of all teaching and educational practices.

Reports show that 25 to 45 percent of teachers quit their teaching career before five years of experience (Farrell, 2016). However, there are branches of English teacher education taught to enthusiastic teachers who pursue academic education. Many other English teachers spend a lot of time preparing themselves independently to teach in a classroom. A lot of institutes spend most of their revenue on assessing and training in-service teachers. This dichotomy requires a well-thought-out response that results in teachers’ job persistence development; that is, teacher immunity.

Hiver believes that to improve immunity, we have to support teachers’ well-being and growth by raising their awareness and providing guidelines not only before they start the profession, but also during the profession, which is more effective and important. It must also be considered that immunity, based on complexity theory, is the result of self-organization. Therefore, it cannot be paused or shut down, and as a result, the most effective intervention occurs during the formation of immunity (Hiver, 2016). Hiver believes providing in-service and pre-service training for teachers will result in their immunity development and eventually in educational growth.

However, Songhori et al. (2020) claim that Hiver’s suggestion about training, which will move teachers toward a higher immunity level, was just a theory and didn’t have any effect on improving productive immunity. This debate is not restricted to Songhori et al.’s study, and the effects of such trainings are still unclear. Based on this, it is important to analyze whether pre- and in-service training ‘really’ improve the immunity level of teachers or not.

In this study, affective-strategy-oriented training is considered as in-service training and provides the necessary strategies teachers need to manage difficulties and stressors that arise during their classes or life as a teacher. This training serves as a guideline, suggesting that there is a way around the stressors.

Moreover, while in-service training has been recognized as the route to building immunity, pre-service training has also been acknowledged as in-service training’s companion. By involving teachers who have studied EFL and those who have not, we can evaluate whether pre-service training truly assists in-service training and impacts the immunity level of novice teachers.

This research can theoretically help to prove if pre-and in-service training will result in teachers' immunity level development and be beneficial for every party involved, as there will be an optimal performance on the side of teachers. If such trainings are proven to be ineffective, then the idea is "just an illusion" (Songhori et al., 2020).

The results of this research can be practically beneficial for teacher trainers, making them aware of the importance of their job in affecting teacher immunity. The results are also beneficial for institutes and those responsible for providing in-service courses, taking in-service training and colleague meetings seriously, and trying to provide as much support as possible to help the development process. Students will also indirectly benefit from this research. When students have a teacher who is productively immunized, constantly trying to improve, aware of stressful situations, and able to handle those situations, students' chances of learning and being motivated will be higher. This can also benefit material designers as they can provide teachers with improved teaching guidelines besides materials, or include parts that support them in their daily activities and provide them with coping strategies.

A brief look at previous research in the modern field of teacher immunity reveals many similarities in the results and further study sections of those studies. An acknowledgment of such research will support the background of this study.

Review of Relevant Scholarship

Recently, more attention has been paid to teachers' psychological well-being, and teacher immunity can play a significant role in this field. Because immunity affects all aspects of teachers' careers, teachers need to be trained and be psychologically ready to handle stressful situations (Li, 2021). It will also maximize students' awareness, increase their motivation, engagement, and interest. Immunity has a very broad positive effect if it is developed positively.

The term immunity comes from the Latin word 'immunis' and refers to resistance or exemption from something. Teacher immunity also acts as a line of defense against the excruciating demands and stressful situations teachers face (Hiver, 2014). While 25 to 45 percent of teachers leave their occupation before five years of experience (Farrell, 2016), the most important thing that immunity results in is teachers' avoidance of burnout and emotional exhaustion. Hiver (2016) claimed that immunity consists of seven subcomponents: burnout, as it refers to psychological exhaustion, affectivity, as teachers' emotions while teaching, attitude toward teaching, as teachers' perspective on their pedagogical practices, coping, as teachers' ability to manage their psychological tension, self-efficacy, as teachers' perspective on the effectiveness to competently perform their job, resilience, as capacity to maintain productive functioning despite threats, and openness to change, as teachers' acceptance of change and novelty in their practices. As can be seen, immunity is a unitary concept that combines all these traits and helps teachers in all aspects of their careers. Moreover, in 2016, Hiver mentioned that immunity has a dual form: maladaptive and productive. Hiver mentioned that the group of teachers with productive immunity will thrive in their careers and function perfectly despite all unsatisfactory conditions. Teachers with maladaptive immunity, on the other hand, display inertia and see advice or feedback as a threat. Hiver suggested that because teachers are like a dynamic system and go through self-organization stages, it is possible to change maladaptive

immunity to productive immunity. Hiver's solution was to provide pre-service training (workshops, for example) and in-service training (seminars, for example) for language teachers to help them improve their immunity levels (Hiver, 2016).

Generally, a lot of research has been carried out so far about immunity (Dehqan, 2017; Maghsoudi, 2021; Noughabi et al., 2020; Pourbahram & Sadeghi, 2020). These researches range from the relationship of immunity with other teacher factors (Khazaeenezhad & Davoudinasab, 2022; Namaziandost & Heydarnejad, 2023) to comparative studies of various teachers (Canbay and Sönmez, 2023; Dobakhti & Khalili, 2024). For instance, it was proved that immunity is affected by job security and reflective teaching (Rahimpour et al., 2020); that immunity and gender are related with female teachers being more positively immunized (Ahmadi et al., 2020); that emotional intelligence has a high positive relationship with teacher immunity (Dobakhti et al., 2022); and that the most dominant type of immunity among Iranian teachers is maladaptive immunity (Songhori & Ghonsooly, 2018). The uniting point in these studies is that they all suggest that providing in-service and pre-service training will help teachers achieve a higher immunity level. The possibility of improvement and transition from maladaptive immunity to productive immunity has been the focus of a lot of studies from the beginning.

Hiver and Dörnyei's (2017) article were the pioneering paper in proposing the possibility of transition. They claimed that rebooting the system requires three components: awareness raising, transformative coping strategies, and re-narrating immunity. Being aware of the current situation and exploring options for a more productive position are key to productive immunity. Hiver and Dörnyei mentioned that these components can be achieved through in-service and pre-service training of teachers.

In another study, it was shown that maladaptive immunity can be temporary only if reflection continues on the part of the teacher. Choosing maladaptive immunity should not stop the critical thinking of teachers, which can be addressed by providing in-service training (Ordem, 2017). Moreover, informing teachers about how to cope with unavoidable difficulties in the teaching environment through training would help them develop productive immunity (Rahmati et al., 2017).

On the other hand, the trainings were seen not only as developers of immunity but also as removers of stressors. Esmaeli and Afzali (2020) thought that teachers need to have a range of coping strategies to choose from if they face stressors. These coping strategies, this is teacher immunity, must be taught to teachers as pre- or in-service training. After all, stressors are not the holders of immunity development; they do not need to be removed from the path, but it is educating teachers in dealing with a variety of stressors that matters (Boroujeni et al. 2021).

These studies, while focusing on different matters, all clearly stated that training is the sole way of developing immunity. However, the true effect of such training was never analyzed, which caused doubt when it came to strong suggestions. This is openly mentioned in a study by Dobakhti and Khalili (2024), as they had focused on teachers' affective factors that had significantly predicted teacher immunity. They suggested that examining the effects of pre-and in-service training on the immunity development of teachers is still a mystery and a field that still needs investigation. Before this study, the debate of the effectiveness of training has been

brought to attention by Songhori et al. (2020). Songhori et al. (2020) suggested that the only force with the power to transform maladaptive to productive immunity came from the macro-level interventions (like the Ministry of Education). To change maladaptive immunity, there must be consistent interventions at the macro-level to alter the immunity path of teachers, and pre- or in-service training alone won't result in any immunity transition (Songhori et al., 2020). They also mentioned the possibility of change as 'just a theory', never to be proven.

While most of the studies suggest and support providing pre-and in-service training in different ways, the idea that such training will result in immunity development still remains a mystery. This is because no study has yet focused on implementing in-service training or on considering pre-service training in their research. The present study focuses on filling this gap by providing in-service training in the form of strategy-oriented training to measure its' effect on immunity level development. Moreover, the study compares the immunity level of in-service EFL teachers with that of non-EFL teachers.

The research questions that this study attempts to answer are as follows:

Research question 1: Does affective-strategy-oriented training positively affect the immunity of Iranian in-service novice teachers?

Research question 2: Does affective-strategy-oriented training enhance the immunity level of in-service EFL teachers as compared to non-EFL teachers?

Method

In this study, affective-strategy-oriented training was considered as the predictor variable, and the teachers' immunity was the outcome variable. The study aimed to examine the effect of these variables within two groups of EFL and non-EFL novice teachers, using a quasi-experimental pretest-treatment-posttest design (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). This design allows for measuring the effects of in-service training provided to participant teachers and the effects of pre-service training that they received before entering the profession, on their immunity level.

Participants

Forty-six teachers aged between 18 and 24 volunteered to participate. They were all in-service teachers from Tabriz, Urmia, and Zanjan with a maximum of seven years of experience teaching English as a foreign language in private institutes (Hiver, 2016; Boroujeni, Tahririan & Afzali, 2021; Canbay & Sönmez, 2023). Of these participants, 26 (13 male & 13 female) were members of the EFL group, meaning that they had pre-service training, and at least a BA in one of the EFL branches (TEFL, ELL, and ELT). The other group, the non-EFL group, had 20 members (10 male & 10 female) without any pre-service training (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). These teachers' backgrounds ranged from an MA in any other major to having a high school diploma. Both groups were evenly distributed by gender. Table 1 shows related characteristics of the participants.

Table 1. *Participants' Demographic Information Related to Study Variables*

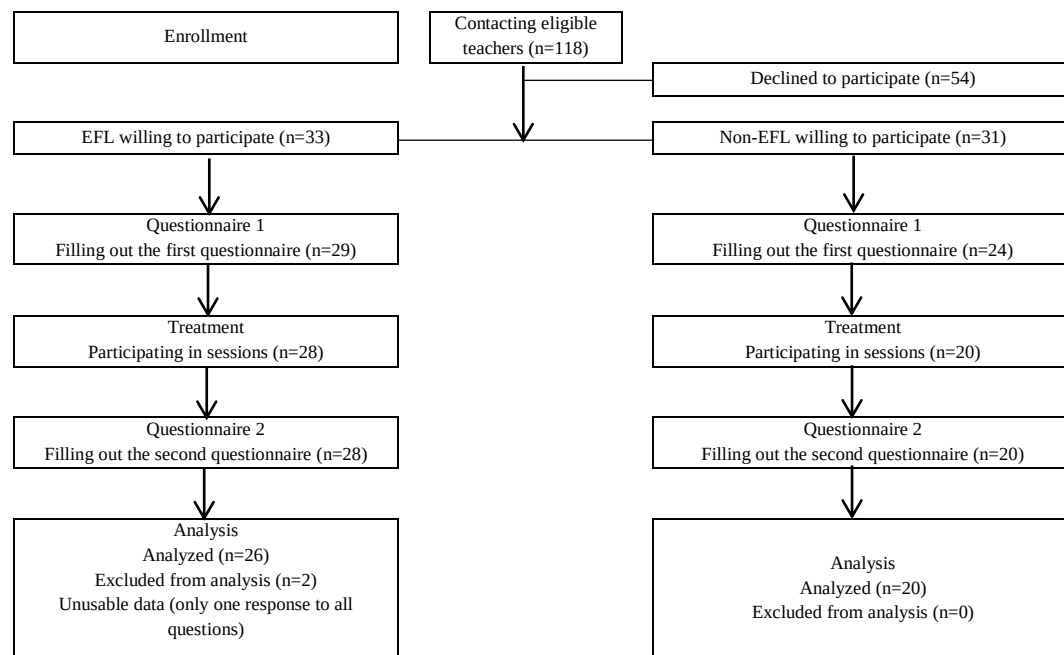
Demographic aspects	Male	Female	EFL		Non-EFL		
Participants' degree	a	B	B.A.	M.A.	Diploma	B.A.	M.A.
Sample	23	23	14	12	4	9	7
Total	46		26		20		

Note. EFL = studies in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, English Language Literature, or English Language Translation. B.A. = Bachelor of Arts. M.A. = Master of Arts. Diploma = high-school graduate.

^{a, b} Male and Female aspect do not include sub-categories in this study.

Participant Flow and Recruitment

Convenience sampling resulted in a total of 46 in-service EFL teachers divided into two groups: 26 with EFL training and 20 without. Each group was evenly split by gender. The flow chart of participants is presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** *Flow chart of Participants*

Instruments

All of the participants were presented with the 'teacher immunity' questionnaire developed by Hiver in 2017. This questionnaire contains 39 items. These items are based on the seven sub-categories of teacher immunity found by Hiver. In this questionnaire, seven items are dedicated to self-efficacy, five to burnout, five to resilience, five to attitudes toward teaching, six to openness to change, six to classroom affectivity, and five to coping. Participants respond to this questionnaire on a Likert scale in which 1 represents the participants' strong disagreement with the statement, and 6 represents their strong agreement with the statement. Although Hiver has reported the reliability and validity of the questionnaire as satisfactory (.89) and all other research reviewed in the literature review section supports this claim, the researchers

themselves calculated the Cronbach Alpha of the questionnaire as well before conducting the analysis, which turned out to be satisfactory (0.85).

Data Collection

The researchers used convenience sampling to approach teachers. From the approached teachers, those who volunteered and agreed with the study terms were included. Data was collected online during a week, from November 26th to November 30th, 2023. Informed consent was obtained from all participants which assured anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. Moreover, participants were unaware of the specific focus of the study to avoid experiment-wise error. They were told in the informed consent that the training will help their teaching practices, but the term “teacher immunity” was not mentioned. However, after the data collection phase they were informed about the exact purpose through the online group, and were allowed to share any concerns with the researchers.

All participants joined a Telegram group formed by researchers. The first step was sharing a link to the questionnaire designed by Hiver in 2016 to measure teachers’ immunity. After all the participants, EFL and non-EFL teachers, filled out the first questionnaire, they attended five asynchronous online sessions throughout a week time. Participants had to attend at least three sessions to make their provided data valuable. These sessions were held on the Big Blue Button website which requires no app installation on the part of participants. In each session, the researchers introduced the materials using PowerPoint files and voice features of the Big Blue Button website. The training sessions were in the presentation format and at the end of each session any questions or additional points regarding the trainings mentioned in that session were brought up by participants and discussed thoroughly. Each session took around 20 minutes, and the overall training was 130 minutes.

These five sessions covered different topics, namely: classroom management, using materials, challenges faced by teachers, learner differences, and lesson planning. The content was taken from ‘How to Teach English’ by Harmer (2007) and ‘Methodology in Language Teaching’ by Richards and Renandya (2010) without modification.

The content for the first session was a summary of some classroom management techniques, including ongoing control of students’ behavior, teachers’ role, managing constraints, etc. The second session focused on ways teachers can use the material, covering options like omitting and adding, as well as choosing effective teaching material. The third addressed challenges teachers face in their careers, such as class sizes, uncooperative students, etc., offering solutions for each challenge. The fourth session discussed learner differences, including reasons for learning, personality differences, and learning strategies. The fifth and last session emphasized the importance of lesson planning and evaluating plans after execution.

At the end of these sessions, the participants were asked to try to implement the techniques they learned in their classes within a week. A week later, the same questionnaire’s link was shared for the second time in the Telegram group.

Initially, participants with more than seven years of experience were excluded, and data of those participants who did not participate in at least three sessions were omitted.

Results

Data Analysis

The analysis included data from 46 participants who completed the questionnaire for the second time. Researchers compared the immunity level of all participant teachers before and after the treatment, as well as between EFL and non-EFL participants. To test the first null hypothesis (i.e., affective-strategy-oriented training does not enhance the immunity of Iranian in-service novice teachers), a paired samples t-test was used. The analyses were normally distributed according to Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests with no outliers, validating the assumptions for paired samples t-tests. Table 2 and Table 3 show the results.

Table 2. *Paired Samples Statistics of Participants Before and After the Treatment Sessions*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair	Post-test	107.43	46	9.382
	Pre-test	97.85	46	8.877

Table 3. *Paired Samples T-test: Paired Differences of Participants' Responses Before and After the Treatment sessions*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper		
Post-test – Pre-test	9.587	5.369	.792	7.993	11.181	12.111	.000

As shown in Table 3, the participant teachers scores were significantly higher after the training ($M = 107.43$, $SD = 9.382$) than before training ($M = 97.85$, $SD = 8.877$), $t(45) = 12.111$, $p = .000$. The p-value of .000, marked as Sig, 2-tailed, is lower than .05, indicating a significant difference between the results of participants before and after the treatment. The results revealed a significant development in teachers' immunity levels due to in-service training.

The second null hypothesis (i.e., affective-strategy-oriented training does not differentially affect the immunity of Iranian in-service EFL teachers compared to non-EFL teachers) was tested using an independent-sample t-test. Table 4 and Table 5 illustrate the analysis.

Table 4. *Groups Statistics for Second Research Question*

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	non-EFL teachers	20	98.35	9.610	2.149
	EFL teachers	26	97.46	8.444	1.656

Table 5. *Independent Samples Test for EFL and non-EFL Teachers*

	Levine's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means			
	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.092	.764	.333	44	.741	.888	2.667	-4.486	6.263
Equal variances not assumed			.328	38.066	.745	.888	2.713	-4.603	6.380

As shown in Table 5, there was a significant difference in the scores for EFL teachers ($M = 97.46$, $SD = 8.444$) and non-EFL teachers ($M = 98.35$, $SD = 9.610$); $t(44) = .333$, $p = .741$. The p-value (.764) of Levine's Test for Equality of Variance is significantly greater than .05. Consequently, there is not a significant difference between these two groups. As a result, it is suggested that affective-strategy-oriented training positively and equally affects both groups; the pre-service training of teachers won't affect the improvement of immunity levels in response to in-service training.

The data analysis was done using SPSS 27 software. No missing value was found, but during the data analysis phase, the data from participants who chose the same response for all questions were excluded.

In summary, the first null hypothesis was rejected, while the second null hypothesis was accepted based on the collected data.

Discussion

The analysis showed that the immunity levels of all participants improved due to the week-long in-service training. However, the second null hypothesis couldn't be rejected, suggesting that affective-strategy-oriented training does not differentially affect the immunity of EFL and non-EFL teachers. Contrary to researchers' expectations, pre-service training did not significantly impact the benefits of in-service training. Although it was initially believed that the immunity level of participants would develop and the background knowledge of teachers would affect such development, the results suggested otherwise. It was also shown that affective-strategy-oriented training does enhance the immunity level of Iranian in-service novice teachers.

The results of this study do not support Songhori et al.'s (2020) claim that the immunity enhancement among teachers could be achieved by systematic changes on the macro-level, for example, by the Ministry of Education. Instead, it shows that participants' immunity benefited considerably from the affective-strategy-oriented training. As a result, immunity should not be considered as an unchangeable concept that can only be affected by people at the macro-level, like the Ministry of Education.

The results also support Hiver and Dörnyei's (2017) assertion, by demonstrating that just one week of in-service training for teachers can improve their immunity regardless of their

backgrounds. Moreover, this study supports the idea that the transition from maladaptive immunity to productive immunity is possible (Hiver & Dörnyei, 2017). As the in-service training resulted in immunity development, we can have an optimistic view about the possibility of change. Ordem's (2017) idea that teachers' maladaptive immunity is temporary and there is still hope for those teachers who have developed maladaptive immunity is supported as well.

Esmaeli and Afzali (2020), along with Boroujeni et al. (2021), claimed that stressors themselves are not the primary issue when it comes to immunity; instead, the key issue is teachers' lack of enough coping strategies. This claim is somewhat accurate, as the in-service training of teachers showed improvement in immunity development. It is understandable from the results that a simple in-service training can result in productive immunity development, which is what Rahmati et al. (2017) mentioned to be the case. All in all, this study acts in favor of all studies that suggested providing in-service training as a way to improve the immunity level of teachers (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Namaziandost & Heydarnejad, 2023; Noughabi et al., 2020; Rahimpour et al., 2020).

For example, supporting Pourbahram and Sadeghi's (2020) suggestion that teachers, whether they teach in private institutes or public schools, need the support of every involved party. It is supported that teachers benefit from the in-service training they receive (seen as a form of support), and there is more confirmation of the importance of the responsible parties' role.

The present study also goes hand in hand with Dobakhti et al.'s (2022) study. This study supports their claim that immunity is not a static concept that remains unaffected by various types of intervention, in this case in-service training. It can be seen that immunity changes in response to in-service training. The fact that immunity is not a static concept is in favor of many previous studies that claimed the possibility of a change in the immunity level of teachers. This study is also in line with Maghsoudi's (2021), as he mentioned that student teachers who spend more years in university have a higher immunity level; for example, year four students have higher immunity than year one students. He also mentions that those with maladaptive immunity were moving toward productive immunity. This study suggests that the reason behind such a difference might be due to the training that teachers received at the time of the study.

A similar study was carried out recently by Yalcin Arslan and Almacioğlu (2024). In their study, they also focused on the immunity level of pre-service teachers and aimed to examine the effects of a reflective approach on immunity level. They claimed that teaching responsibilities, coping strategies, and contextual factors were the main factors influencing change in teachers' immunity levels. The present study is an empirical example that developing coping strategies through in-service training might affect the immunity level development of teachers.

Additionally, reflecting on the amount of in-service training and support that was provided for the participants in this study, we can say that the present study supports the idea that any type of feedback or assistance, even if it is very small, will contribute to immunity development of teachers.

Moreover, this study aligns with Dobakhti and Khalili's (2024) study as it shows that teachers' background does not affect their immunity development. Therefore, considering participants' backgrounds should not be a cut-off point in immunity-related studies. However, this matter requires further research.

While such a possibility of change is suggested to be true, and as it is obvious from the results that improvement in immunity level is achievable, it can be said that Hiver and Dörnyei's claim about the possibility of change is not an illusion. Moreover, the possible way of improving immunity that they mentioned, in-service training, was shown to be effective.

Conclusion

This study showed that providing training and support for teachers as in-service training will help them improve their immunity level. Their pre-service training was found to be ineffective on the in-service training they received. The participants in this study showed significant immunity development in response to one week of training. If this short-time training can be effective, then the change does not have to come from macro-levels, and Hiver's idea is supported. This shows that the change and development of immunity level is not only a possibility but also an "easy" achievement.

To summarize, English teaching institutes and those who are responsible for providing in-service training should take in-service training seriously and provide support for teachers. This study showed that even one week of in-service training significantly developed the immunity level of teachers, suggesting that longer and more comprehensive in-service training could yield even greater improvements. Moreover, follow-up courses to support teachers in the field are also recommended. Finally, it is suggested that teachers take part in available in-service training programs, which can be found online, in conferences, workshops, etc.

As the cost of neglecting teacher immunity is so great, and even the simplest actions can significantly improve immunity, in-service training and focusing on immunity development is highly recommended.

Limitations

While the results are promising, they should be considered cautiously. Limitations include the potential impact of workplace conditions, the brevity and intensity of the one-week treatment, and reliance solely on questionnaires. This study controlled for gender; future studies should explore the effects of gender on immunity development.

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