Exploring the Reasons Behind Iranian TEFL Graduate Students' Academic Failure

Explorando las razones detrás del fracaso académico de los estudiantes iraníes de posgrado en enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera

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This cross-sectional study explored the reasons behind academic failure among Iranian students of teaching of English as a foreign language. Interviews were used to collect data from 56 graduate students (19 men and 37 women) and three officials of the university. Results indicated that four main factors led to the academic failure of the students, namely, (1) the student, (2) the professor, (3) the university, and (4) the source materials. Moreover, the results of chi-square tests indicated that no significant relationship existed between the gender and age of the students and their academic failure. Finally, a number of guidelines to prevent academic failure in this context are presented.

Keywords: academic failure, graduate students, Iran, reasons, teaching of English as a foreign language

Este estudio interdisciplinar exploró las razones detrás del fracaso académico entre los estudiantes iraníes de enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera. El principal instrumento utilizado para la recolección de información fue la entrevista y los datos se obtuvieron de 56 estudiantes graduados (19 hombres y 37 mujeres) y tres miembros oficiales de la universidad. Los resultados indicaron que cuatro factores principales condujeron al fracaso académico de los estudiantes; (1) el estudiante, (2) el profesor, (3) la universidad y (4) los materiales utilizados. Además, los resultados de pruebas chi cuadrado indicaron que no existía una relación significativa entre el género y la edad de los estudiantes y su fracaso académico. Finalmente, se presentan una serie de pautas para prevenir el fracaso académico.

Palabras clave: enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera, estudiantes de posgrado, fracaso académico, Irán, razones

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Introduction

Higher education in graduate levels has always been accompanied with different vicissitudes and the students in these levels confront different challenges before being able to accomplish their degree. Interestingly, there is a general implicit assumption that those entering higher education will also be able to successfully finish the course, as they were permitted to enter it (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Fraser & Killen, 2003). The concept of academic failure is of significant importance since it should not be regarded as a personal problem, but a social one which will lead to a great loss in educational expenses, the general progress, as well as the motivation of the students (Hazavehei et al., 2006). To stress the significance, Ajjawi et al. (2019) call it a "world-wide problem." In fact, academia plays a very important role in the success or failure of the students (Nkhoma et al., 2019). Accordingly, identification of academic failure in the early stages of education has been brought into the limelight (Sarra et al., 2019).

The point is that, in some cases, there is a lack of correlation between the real capacities and talents of the students and their academic achievement level, in which it is necessary to provide the students with some guidance and help to overcome their challenges, as failure may mostly be due to improper instructional procedures or teaching methods (Kochhar, 2000). Whatever the reason, because of the great impact of pupils' achievements on the whole society in general (Ulriksen et al., 2010), more careful attention needs to be paid to this concept, its reasons, and also some solutions to eradicate the dilemma. Against this backdrop, the present study focused on Iranian teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) graduate students who are experiencing more difficulty in their studies (due to studying in a non-English context) and have an important responsibility in educating EFL students. The issue gets more prominence noting that nearly 10% of TEFL students experience academic failure every semester and, unfortunately, most of them quit education. These facts motivated us to conduct this study and explore the reasons behind academic failure among the Iranian graduate students of TEFL. In the next stage of the study, we also conducted interviews with some university officials to investigate a set of practical procedures to solve the problem.

Literature Review

The concept of academic failure is complex and multidimensional and it may hinge upon numerous factors and reasons. Generally, academic failure is defined as a lack of success in the educational process which may lead to numerous personal as well as social losses. Lots of different factors have been cited as having an impact on the academic success or failure of university students, namely gender (Pirmohamed et al., 2017), economic and financial issues (Roman, 2014), different class times (Beşoluk et al., 2011; Enright & Refinetti, 2017), lack of adaptability (Collie et al., 2017), the students' communication skills (Abdullah, 2005), as well as limited technology and internet use (Torres-Díaz et al., 2016).

As academic failure is a common phenomenon happening to different students in academia, different scholars have investigated the issue from diverse perspectives and in a variety of educational contexts. In the following section, we present a brief chronological review of some previous studies on the notion of academic failure in the university context.

Wimshurst and Allard (2008) examined academic failure among 12,093 students in the Faculty of Arts of an Australian university during the educational years of 1998 to 2000. To be more specific, they made a distinction between failure in reaching an acceptable grade and failure in the submission of projects. The results of their study indicated that male students, younger ones, and also those with lower scores on the entrance exam were among the majority of the failed ones. They also asserted that more than anything else,

personal and organizational factors were the most leading factors influencing academic failure.

Moreover, Najimi et al. (2013) explored, through a questionnaire, the reasons behind academic failure among 280 Medical Sciences students from Isfahan University in Iran during the educational year 2009. The results of their study indicated that more than anything else the students believed that failure was rooted in inadequacies in the curriculum regarding the students' needs and educational conditions. Other influential factors were the educator, the learning environment, family, and socioeconomic conditions. They also reported a significant relationship between the gender of the students and some factors. However, no relationship was observed insofar as their ages, careers, or marital statuses and their attitudes. In the same vein, Lancia et al. (2013) conducted a retrospective observational study on 1,006 Italian nursing students starting their education at university in five different educational years. The aim was to explore the predicting factors in the success or failure of these students. More specifically, the impact of their grades in the upper-secondary levels and their entrance exam scores were observed. The results indicated that the students who failed had the lowest upper-secondary diploma grades. The results also showed that most of the failed students were men.

Moreover, Sibanda et al. (2015) stressed the significance of observing both success and failure reasons and concepts through a validated questionnaire distributed among 94 entrepreneurship second year undergraduate students in South Africa. The questionnaire included 38 items on factors related to academic success and 41 items on academic failure. The results indicated that regular study and class attendance were the main reasons for success and a noisy lecture environment was the top reason for failure. Mansur et al., (2017) utilized social network analysis in order to discover the interrelationships between different aspects influencing the academic success or failure of 20 sample students.

The results indicated that there were strong interactions among the students and, more than anything else, study time and the absence from classes had the strongest effect on the students' failure.

In another study, Nkhoma et al. (2019) identified the reasons behind underperformance of the students in a university in Southeast Asia. The data were collected from 968 letters written by students who were at risk of failure. The results of their study revealed five main reasons for the academic failure of the students. The causes included the students' learning skills, issues with the assessment, problems in time management, the university courses and, finally, the students' family.

Finally, in one recent study, D'Uggento et al., (2020) focused on the influence of economic status and financial problems of 7,485 university students in Italy. The main aim was to explore the impact of tuition fees on the academic achievement of the students. Two groups were involved: Those who had economic problems and did not have to pay tuition fees and those who had to pay the fees. The results indicated a significant difference between the two groups and the group exempt from tuition fees outperformed the other one.

As the review of the related studies shows, academic failure is an important issue which has recently been greatly noticed by academics, as it will lead to personal and social drawbacks. Academia agree that some fundamental steps need to be taken in order to root out this issue to prevent greater societal losses in the future. Thus, the issue of academic failure and achievement at university level needs more investigation. Due to the multidimensional nature of academic failure (Fullana-Noell, 1992), this need further extends to specific educational and cultural contexts and among different fields of study. To the best of our knowledge no other study has investigated the issue of academic failure at university level among Iranian graduate students of TEFL. Accordingly, and due to the importance of this issue, the present study was set to probe the Iranian graduate TEFL students' possible reasons behind academic failure

and the possible solutions to eradicate the problem. Consequently, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What are the possible factors which influence Iranian TEFL graduate university students' academic failure?

2. Do these possible factors influencing TEFL graduate university students vary according to gender?

3. Do these possible factors influencing TEFL graduate university students vary according to age?

4. What strategies can be implemented to reduce academic failure among Iranian TEFL graduate university students?

Method

Participants

There were two main groups of participants in the current study. First, a total of 56 students (19 men and 37 women, with an average age of 27) were selected based on convenience sampling (a type of non-probability sampling method) and availability. They were in fact TEFL graduate students with academic failure experience from one of the universities of Tehran (Islamic Azad University). As the rules and regulations in the Iranian universities say, any student whose scores fall below the standard (grade point average = 12 out of 20) for three semesters throughout his or her educational period will be sent to the university educational commission in order to be judged about his or her academic status. These students were in fact regarded as those with academic failure in the present study.

Second, three university officials took part in this study. They were interviewed to investigate their points of view regarding the sources of academic failure of students and the different procedures to be implemented in order to root out the problem. The first official was the head of the TEFL department at the aforementioned university. She was in fact an associate professor who had more than 20 years of teaching experience in higher

education in the field of TEFL and was completely aware of the typical reasons of academic failure among the Iranian university students. The other two officials were head of the Education center and the deputy manager who were also in close contact with the majority of the students and, based on their work experience (25 years and 17 years, respectively), had valid information on the reasons behind academic failure.

Data Collection Instruments

This study mainly drew on a semi-structured interview in order to collect more comprehensive and detailed data on the reasons behind academic failure among Iranian graduate TEFL students. Semi-structured interviews were the most appropriate data collection procedure with the accessible graduate students who had experienced academic failure at university (Mackey & Gass, 2005). In fact, we used a preplanned list of questions, and we also asked further questions to elaborate for more information (see Appendix). To facilitate the process of data collection, the confidential educational files of the failed students were carefully studied. Later, the main outline of the interview was decided upon. It needs to be mentioned that the interview questions were also cross-checked by some psychologists and language experts to add to their validity. The interviews were conducted in the students' first language (Persian) and later the answers were translated into English.

At the beginning of the interviews, the participants were kindly asked to introduce themselves and talk briefly about themselves and their educational background. Later they were invited to share their own opinions and attitudes toward their academic failure through some series of short questions and answers between the interviewer and the students. Each interview took between 15 to 20 minutes and was recorded with the interviewees' permission for later analyses. Later the interviews were transcribed and sent for content analysis.

Moreover, it needs to be pointed out that a similar protocol to the one used for the semi-structured inter-

views with the students was applied in conducting the interviews with the three official members. After setting an appropriate time, they were kindly asked to meet in the head of the department's room. The interview was conducted in the form of a focus group and they were asked to share their views on the students' academic failure. The interview lasted for about an hour and half and was led by one of the researchers. It was recorded and later transcribed for more comprehensive analysis. The interview was conducted in Persian and later the transcriptions were translated into English.

Data Analysis

This study followed a qualitative research technique. The content analysis procedure was used in order to analyze the collected data. In this regard, conceptual content analysis (also known as thematic analysis) was manually employed to examine and quantify the presence of the contributing elements related to the concept of academic failure. To put it differently, we read and reviewed the interview transcripts many times; this way, we could create the initial codes which were revised some more by us and two other coders (a professor and an associate professor of TEFL at the university) to ensure their validity and reliability.

Due to the nature of qualitative studies and the fact that codes are emergent, and based on Dörnyei's (2007) suggestion, we did not have any specific taxonomy in mind. This allowed for iterative revisions in the process of data analysis. Different coders independently labelled these segments and the intercoder reliability analysis was conducted using SPSS and Cohen's kappa statistic was calculated. The results showed a kappa statistic of 0.97 ($p < 0.001$), which indicated an almost perfect intercoder agreement (von Eye & Mun, 2005). Also, the frequencies and percentages of the different observed codes were reported. Moreover, in order to inspect any significant relationship between the graduate university students' gender or age and their academic failure, the statistical procedure of chi-square was utilized.

Results

The first research question in this study was: "What are the possible factors which influence Iranian TEFL graduate university students' academic failure?" The results of the interviews indicated that, generally, the Iranian TEFL graduate students considered four main factors affecting the academic failure of the students. As depicted in Table 1, the majority of the participants ($n = 39$, 69.64%) generally thought that the *student factor* (including four subfactors) was the most important one.

To clarify our findings, some examples of the comments by the participants are provided below. Excerpt 1 illustrates Subfactor 4, *family problems*, whereas Excerpt 2 illustrates Subfactor 3, *economic and occupational problems*.

Excerpt 1

You know, I like my major and studies. I always wanted to be successful in teaching English and everyone told me I can do it very well. But, unfortunately, recently I have been facing some personal problems in my family and you know, my mind is so engaged. I can't concentrate. (Female student, 36 years old)[1]

Excerpt 2

My job is another important thing. I work every day for about nine hours, and I just need this money. I HAVE TO work…sometimes I had to skip some classes because of my job. (Male student, 32 years old)

The findings also indicated that the next mostly mentioned factor was the *professor factor* (with seven subfactors) stated by 53.57% ($n = 30$) of the participants. Excerpt 3 illustrates Subfactor 2, *inappropriate teaching method*, whereas Excerpt 4 illustrates Subfactor 3, *unknowledgeable instructors*.

Excerpt 3

Not only me, but also most of my friends, well, we try so much to understand the lesson, but we really can't. I mean, we listen to the lesson, we study hard, but we can't still

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1   All excerpts have been translated from Persian by the authors.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Factors Affecting Academic Failure

Main factors	Subfactors	Frequency	Percentage
Student factor	1. Lack of interest & adequate preparation	15	26.78%
	2. Low linguistic knowledge & irrelevant BA degree	10	17.85%
	3. Economic & occupational problems	8	14.28%
	4. Family problems	6	10.71%
	Total	39	69.64%
Professor factor	1. Lack of proper behavior from instructor	14	25%
	2. Inappropriate teaching method	10	17.85%
	3. Unknowledgeable instructors	2	3.57%
	4. Assigning non relevant term projects	4	7.14%
	Total	30	53.57%
University factors	1. University administrators and their behavior	4	7.14%
	2. Managerial programming	3	5.35%
	3. Classroom facilities and equipment	3	5.35%
	4. Accurate and good classes schedules	4	7.14%
	5. Internet availability	3	5.35%
	6. Tuition fees	6	10.71%
	7. The library and educational resources	2	3.57%
	Total	25	44.64%
Sources factor	1. Relevance of the source materials	4	7.14%
	2. The size and bulk of the reading materials & projects	5	8.92%
	3. New or old teaching materials	2	3.57%
	Total	11	19.64%

figure out the content of the book. I think the professors need to teach better. (Male student, 32 years old)

Excerpt 4

Yes, I agree. Unfortunately, some of our professors, of course just some of them, can't properly answer our questions in the class. (Female student, 29 years old)

Moreover, 44.64% (*n* = 25) of the participants believed that different issues related to *the university* can affect their academic success or failure. To be more specific, the university factor itself included seven subfactors and below some interview excerpts are provided to clarify the point. Excerpt 5 illustrates Subfactor 5, *internet availability*, whereas Excerpt 6

illustrates Subfactor 7, *the library and educational resources*.

Excerpt 5

As far as I know, the other universities have free internet services for the students, but here, I don't know why we always have connection problems. As an MA student I need to search a lot and update my knowledge. (Male student, 30 years old)

Excerpt 6

We have a library, yes, but I can't find every book that I need there. Sometimes I have to go to some other nearby universities or finally just buy them in the market. (Male student, 31 years old)

Furthermore, the least mentioned factor was related to the source materials. By and large, 19.64% ($n = 11$) of the participants mentioned this point. Excerpt 7 illustrates Subfactor 2, *the size and bulk of the reading materials & projects*, whereas Excerpt 8 illustrates Subfactor 3, *new or old teaching materials*.

Excerpt 7

This term we had a lesson named as testing, and we had to read about an overall of 500 pages, can you believe it?! It was too much really. [*sic*] (Female student, 28 years old)

Excerpt 8

Another problem that I have is that some older professors introduce us some very old resources, I mean some outdated books, and we don't like to read them, because…well, they are not interesting anymore. [*sic*] (Female student, 27 years old)

The second research question in this study was: "Do these possible factors influencing TEFL graduate university students vary according to gender?" Since most of the graduate students of TEFL (more than 70%) were women, there was no equilibrium between women and men in this study. Thirty-seven women and 19 men participated in the interviews. Thus, the data obtained from 17 male students were compared to data of 17 female students who were selected randomly and analyzed by SPSS. The report with the results and analysis is as follow:

Table 2 shows the frequency of main factors in interviews across gender. As can be seen, the most important factors were the students ($n = 34$, 33.33%), the professor ($n = 28$, 27.5%), university ($n = 22$, 21.6%), and sources ($n = 18$, 17.6%). In addition, it needs to be pointed out that the results of the Chi-square test (x^2 $(3) = 3.50$, $p = .95$) of independence showed that there was no statistically significant relationship between gender and academic failure.

The third research question in this study was: "Do these possible factors influencing TEFL graduate university students vary according to age?" The age range of the participants was between 22 and 50 years. To facilitate the data analysis, it was divided into three groups of 22–30 as the first group, 30–40 as the second group, and more than 40 as the third age group.

Table 3 shows the frequency of the main factors of academic failure mentioned by the participants in the interviews across different age groups (i.e., 20–30, 30–40, and above 40). Regarding *student*, the most frequently mentioned factor ($n = 34$, 33.3%), was found nine (26.5%) times in the 20–30 group, 17 (50%) times in the 30–40 group, and eight (23.5%) times in the above-40

Table 2. Student, Professor, University, and Materials Sources and Gender Crosstabulation

			Gender		Total
			Women	Men	
Main reported factors	Student	Count	17	17	34 (33.3%)
		% within Main	50	50	100
	Professor	Count	16	12	28 (27.5%)
		% within Main	57.1	42.9	100
	University	Count	12	10	22 (21.6%)
		% within Main	54.5	45.5	100
	Sources	Count	10	8	18 (17.6%)
		% within Main	55.6	44.4	100
Total		Count	55	47	102 (100%)
		% within Main	53.9	46.1	100.0

Table 3. Student, Professor, University, and Materials Sources and Age Crosstabulation

			Age			Total
			20–30	**30–40**	**+40**	
Main factors	Students	Count	9	17	8	34 (33.3%)
		% within Main	26.5	50.0	23.5	100
	Professor	Count	6	15	7	28 (27.5%)
		% within Main	21.4	53.6	25.0	100
	University	Count	7	9	6	22 (21.6%)
		% within Main	31.8	40.9	27.3	100
	Sources	Count	3	11	4	18 (17.6%)
		% within Main	16.7	61.1	22.2	100
Total		Count	25	52	25	102 (100%)
		% within Main	24.5	51.0	24.5	100

group. Also, with regard to *sources*, the least frequently mentioned factor ($n = 18$, 17.6%), was found three (16.7%) times in the 20–30 group, 11 (61.1%) times in the 30–40 group and four (22.2%) times in the above-40 group. In addition, it needs to be pointed out that the results of the Chi-square test of independence ($x^2 (6) = 2.05$, $p = .91$) indicated that there was no statistically significant relationship between the age of the participants and their academic failure.

The fourth research question in this study was: "What strategies can be implemented to reduce academic failure among Iranian TEFL graduate university students?" In order to answer the last research question and figure out some fundamental solutions to the problem of academic failure among TEFL graduate students, three official workers were interviewed. The results of the interviews and their mentioned guidelines are summarized here in this section. An excerpt of this focus-group interview is presented below (for the sake of anonymity they are presented as A, B, and C, and it needs to be noted that they are our own translation).

A: Yes, as Dr. x said we have lots of economic problems currently in our country. Everything is getting more and more expensive every day and our students need to work in order to be able to pay the tuition fees and this is not easy for them to work and study at the same time. I heard many times that some students can't attend classes on time because of their job.

C: Yeah, economic problems cannot be denied, of course. Especially in the case of male students who are also married and have a family of their own.

A: Exactly.

B: I agree with you, but don't forget that we are not talking about kids in primary school, we are discussing the issue concerning university students in higher levels, so in my idea our students need to accept the responsibility of their education more fully. . . What I am going to say is that, as far as I can see, most of the students don't have enough motivation to continue their studies. They feel they have no future as there is a lot unemployment in the society. We need to boost their motivation to study and be present in academic contexts.

A: Yeah, sure.

C: You are right. They are not very motivated. But what can we do? I feel it's like something intrinsic.

B: Well, the teacher, the class, the environment, they are very important. Our students mainly need to feel and get that motivation from their professors.

After the interviews were conducted, we decided to present the results in the form of some readily accessible and easily applied guidelines so that the academics would easily be able to implement them. It needs to be noted that the extracted guidelines were later sent to the three official members to be cross-checked. Accordingly, they all agreed on and favored these concluding 13 items. These guidelines are as follows and are presented in the order in which they were raised in the discussion:

1. It would be better to accept and enroll students in the graduate courses with similar degrees in the undergraduate levels.

2. Universities may limit the accepted students to those with only top scores.

3. As most of the students at graduate levels are married or work full-time jobs, considering some classes on weekends (Thursday and Friday in Iran) may seem a good idea, so that all students would be able to attend the classes.

4. The students at any level of education need to be encouraged not to lose motivation. In this regard, it would be better to reward the students with high scores and remind them of the long path they have taken.

5. As many students mentioned that financial problems are a key factor in academic failure, the universities need to facilitate and help the new students with their registration process, especially during the first semester.

6. The universities need to employ experienced, responsible, and pleasant professors who will actively assist the students in finishing their degrees.

7. Training teachers on how to care for the students' needs is of significant value too. Teachers need to be taught the main elements of fruitful tutoring.

8. Professors need to be more cooperative, kind, and treat all students equally.

9. The assignments and term projects are also a very important issue. University professors need to take care to assign appropriate, related, and useful term projects; ones which will lead to students' real engagement and learning.

10. Universities need to provide the students with the required modern pedagogical facilities.

11. Different parts of the university (such as library, café, or labs) need to be equipped according to the main needs of the students so that they would feel comfortable in the educational milieu.

12. The university tuition needs to be decreased and students with financial problems should be identified and supported.

13. With regard to teaching materials, the sources need to be interesting, manageable, up-to-date, and newly published. This will lead to more active participation of the students in class activities.

Discussion

The present study aimed at identifying the main reasons behind academic failure among the Iranian TEFL graduate students who have experienced it. The careful content analysis of the interviews indicated that, generally, four main factors, namely, *the student*, *the professor*, *the university*, and *the sources*, pertain to the issue. It needs to be noted that each of these factors included some subfactors. Moreover, no significant relationship was observed between the gender and age of the participants and their academic failure.

With regard to the observed factors in the failure or success of the students, our results are in line with Wimshurst and Allard (2008), who also reported that the student factor accounted for 15% of failure among Australian students. Their results also indicated that the course or the source factors accounted for 32% of the academic failure rate. Almuammria (2015) also reported that some factors such as the learner, family, and the educational context can affect the academic achievements of the students. By the same token, Sibanda et al., (2015) also pointed out that those factors related to the student himself/herself (e.g., regular studies, hard work, and regular attendance in classes) were

among the highest rated factors in the success of the students. Similarly, Ajjawi et al., (2019) and Brooker et al. (2017) also stated that students' lack of skills in time management to properly complete their term projects and studies on time was a main reason for their academic failure.

Moreover, the economic and occupational problems brought up in the present study ($n = 8$, 14.28%), were also pointed to in the study done by Sahragard and Ansaripour (2014) on 170 Iranian TEFL students. In addition, nearly 25% ($n = 14$) of our participants argued that family and financial problems may lead to academic failure. This brings to the fore the different responsibilities that both male and female students may experience during higher education besides their personal life. This finding resonates with Ajjawi et al. (2019), who also reported higher rates of failure among students who led complex personal or occupational lives. Our findings are further in tandem with Naylor et al. (2018) and O'Shea (2015), as they have also found that managing a life with complex identities will lead to higher rates of academic failure.

However, the current study's results are not in accordance with Sibanda et al. (2015). In their study, they found that the relationship between the teacher and the students were among the least rated factors. However, in the present study more than half of the participants ($n = 30$, 53.57%) claimed that the instructors can be an important factor in the academic failure or success of the TEFL graduate Iranian students. This may in fact be rooted in the specific socio-cultural backgrounds of the students in different countries. Similarly, Kaivanpanah and Ghasemi (2011) stated that the teacher, teaching materials, and the educational facilities, are the main factors which may cause demotivation and lead to academic failure among the Iranian students at university level. Nevertheless, our results run counter to those of Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) in which the teacher was reported to be the prominent factor of demotivation/academic failure,

while in this study it was placed second as the reasons for academic failure.

Furthermore, in line with our study, the results of the study by Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014) indicated that the university and the class environment were among the leading factors in the academic performance of the students. Some other factors, reported in the present study, such as the student and occupational problems were also reported by Aydin (2012). Additionally, with regard to the other factors, Roman (2014) also reported that economic status and financial issues were significant factors in the academic failure of the students of Bucharest University of Economic Studies. Furthermore, concerning source factors, it was observed that nearly 9% ($n = 5$) of the students thought that many students fail different courses because of the number of projects, too much homework, and, accordingly, the stress arising from them. This finding is in line with Naylor et al. (2018) who also reported the same results regarding the workload put on the students' shoulders among the Australian first-year university students.

As mentioned before, this study also sought to investigate whether these possible factors influencing Iranian TEFL graduate university students vary according to gender. The results, however, indicated that there was no significant relationship between the two variables. The results of the present study are consistent with some previous studies (e.g., Muhonen, 2004; Rastegar et al., 2012) which also reported no significant differences between men and women concerning their academic failure. In fact, what needs to be mentioned is that generally female students outnumber the male ones in graduate levels in Iran and this may be the reason for having more failed female students in the department.

On the contrary, the results of our study run counter to those of Wimshurst and Allard (2008), who reported that the majority of failed students were men, and this was justified by their lack of motivation and engagement

in the course. Similarly, McInnis and Hartley's (2002) study also indicated that younger male students were less engaged with the teaching material during the course. The results of the studies done by McLaughlin et al. (2010) as well as Mulholland et al., (2008) also indicated that, generally, female students are more successful in graduating within the official educational semester. Lancia et al. (2013) also reported that the majority of failed nursing students were male students. In the same vein, Izadi Sabet et al. (2015) also argued that there were more cases of academic failure among men rather than women in the Iranian medical universities. However, our results indicated no statistically significant relation between gender and academic failure. Similarly, Mozahem (2019) also argued that course withdrawal rates among engineering courses and among male students in bachelor level are higher. In the same way, D'Uggento et al. (2020) also reported that Italian female students were more likely to successfully complete their academic courses.

Another section of this study was concerned with whether these possible factors influencing Iranian TEFL graduate university students vary according to age. We wanted to figure out if any relationship exists between age and the academic achievements of the Iranian graduate students in TEFL. The results displayed that there was no significant relationship between the age of the students and their academic success or failure. As all of the participants were from graduate level, it sounded logical that they had reached an acceptable degree of sensibility and intelligence; one which could justify the significance of higher education and academic advancements. The results of our study are in tandem with Dante et al. (2011) and Bulfone et al. (2011), who also reported that there was no significant relationship between the students' ages and their academic failure. This lack of any relationship could be due to the educational level of the students. Nevertheless, the current study's findings contrast with the study by Mulholland et al. (2008), as they reported that there was a significant relationship between the

age of the university nursing students and their level of academic achievement. Similarly, Pryjmachuk et al. (2009) also stated that a strong relationship was found between age and the possibility of academic failure. In this regard, academic failure was more prevalent among younger students, which may of course be justified on the grounds of the increased ability level of older students in comparison to the younger ones.

The final aim of the current study was to figure out some practical guidelines that can easily be applied in the academic context in order to reduce academic failure rates. The results of the interviews with the official workers at university showed some interesting and viable techniques to be implemented. The point is that, just as Azari et al. (2015) argue, the future consequences of academic failure are so great that there is a more than ever need to solve the issue through conducting workshops or educational courses for those students who are at risk of failing, and perhaps also with professors to make them aware of these problems, as they play a significant role. We hope that the results of the current study will remind academia of the significance of raising awareness of the professors and also of the students regarding the negative personal and social consequences of academic failure and the factors and possible solutions.

Conclusion

This cross-sectional study aimed at investigating the reasons behind academic failure among Iranian graduate TEFL students. The results of this study indicated that, overall, four main factors were regarded as important in the academic failure of the students, namely, the student, the professor, the university, and the sources materials. Moreover, it was found that no significant relationship existed between the gender and age of the students and their academic failure. As the results of the current study showed, there is no single reason for the academic failure of the graduate students and numerous factors play a role. This further proves the

complex nature of the phenomenon and the necessity of dealing more meticulously with the issue.

The results of the current study can have important implications for academics not only in the field of TEFL but in any other field of study as academic failure has become very common in that many students are experiencing it, which has an impact on university dropout rates (Ajjawi et al., 2019; Li & Carroll, 2017). We would argue that in any educational context or level, a better understanding of the influential factors on the academic success or failure of the students can lead to a redirection in the instructional procedures, which in itself may later lead to improvements in the students' education and a whole different society. The main goal is in fact the long-term success of the students. It seems that the first step in this regard is raising the awareness of students and professors to the main reasons for low achievements at university level. Hopefully, by knowing the reasons and causes of failure, both groups will be more capable of dealing with the issue and overcoming the challenges of eliminating failure. Moreover, as argued by some scholars (e.g., Hai-tao et al., 2020; Karaci, 2019; Sheng-dong, 2011), an important procedure to be taken in order to root out academic failure is related to its prediction. More and more educational contexts are becoming cognizant of the fact that early predictions of the students' failure would definitely inhibit the issue to some extent and assist both the instructors and the students in taking follow-up actions. In this regard, it is highly recommended that universities devote more attention to the students' academic status, trace their failure and success from the beginning, and accordingly take any necessary follow-up step.

Just like any research study, this study has its own limitations too and caution must be exercised when generalizing its results. The present research was only focused on the academic failure of TEFL MA students in one of the universities in Iran. We also investigated the relationship between academic failure and the variables of gender and age. Moreover, academic failure was investigated based on the reported results from the students and the professors, but not from their actual performance. Future interested researchers may explore the topic in a wider context and with a higher number of participants. In addition, there is a need to investigate the effects of more variables such as ethnicity, financial status, and family background. Also, similar studies may be conducted across different fields of study and among the students of different levels (i.e., BA and PhD) as well as different fields or areas of knowledge. Moreover, another interesting line of research, mostly neglected, would be to explore the students' personal and emotional responses to academic failure and the consequences afterward.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a little about yourself.
2. What is failure in your opinion? How about academic failure?
3. Have you ever failed? Tell us about a time when you failed?
4. How did you deal with your academic failure? How did you handle your failures?
5. Why do you think you failed? What was/were the reason(s)?
6. How do you think you can prevent academic failure?
7. What is/are your suggestion(s) for reducing academic failure?
8. Is it possible to stop academic failure completely?