

ENGLISH TEACHERS' VIEWS OF EFL EDUCATION IN PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN TUNISIA: A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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Wijdene Ayed

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

wjdnayd@gmail.com

Abstract: This research study focuses on the status of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia, an area that has received limited attention. Qualitative investigation, utilizing one-to-one interviews with English language teachers in private schools and universities, was conducted to understand the conditions of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in the private sector. Interviews were conducted online and transcribed for analysis. Findings indicate that the quality of English language teaching in private institutions surpasses that of state schools, with students benefiting from early exposure and ample practice opportunities. Teachers in private institutions have access to better resources due to stable financial situations, but they tend to be less experienced compared to their counterparts in public schools. Despite the study's limited scope, it provides valuable insights into Tunisian English teachers' perceptions of working conditions and highlights their need for professional development and improvements in TEFL. The instrument used in the study has been validated and could serve as a basis for future research. This research, part of a larger PhD dissertation, contributes to understanding the differences between state and private language education and has pedagogical relevance for EFL education in similar contexts.

Key words: TEFL, EFL, private educational institutions, teachers' views, Tunisia

1 Introduction

Tunisia's position in the extreme north of Africa and on the southern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, opposite such European countries as France and Italy, has made it a meeting point of features of European cultures, on the one hand, and of Arab-Muslim features, on the other. Although a relatively small country, as it covers roughly 164,000 km², it is often considered to be a crossroads of many civilizations throughout history (Aouina, 2013). Lawson and Sachdev (2000) explain that "Tunisia's strategic situation at the crossroads between Africa, the Arab world, the Mediterranean and Europe, and its long history of invasion and re-invasion, have meant that modern Tunisia has inherited a rich ethnolinguistic heritage" (p.3).

In describing this ethnolinguistic and multilingual profile in the Tunisian context, Aouina (2013) affirms that from a historical and political point of view, Tunisia is an ex-French colony, which means that it is a francophone country. As soon as it became independent in 1956, a process of bilingual education was launched. It was based on early literacy in Arabic followed by early introduction of French. At later stages, education has always been trilingual with English as the most common foreign language added to the two languages already taught, Arabic and French.

This multilingual profile shows an early political tendency from the very first Tunisian government led by the late Habib Bourguiba to open up to the rest of the world. After the 1987 political transformation led by the ex-president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, this multilingual language policy was carried on and even reinforced. So, after all the changes and reforms that have been implemented continuously in the field of education and language teaching, Tunisia still preserves a multilingual profile that has made its communication with the world easier and more effective (Aouina, 2013, p.26).

Since 1956, the Tunisian Government has allocated considerable resources (human and financial) to education (Daoud, 2001). The main objectives of the Tunisian government in lifting the educational system are to relate educational practice more effectively to the needs of the economy, to provide places for all children of school age, to “Tunisify” the education of the individual pupil, to improve and expand teacher training at all levels, as well as to modernize teaching methods. These policies have led to the frequent re-organisation of schools leading to substantial changes in the syllabuses (Badwan, 2019).

Focusing on the current situation of languages in the Tunisian context, the language of everyday communication is Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is taught as a subject and it is also the medium of instruction in elementary education (six years) and early secondary education (three years), and at secondary schools (four years) it is only taught as a subject. French is introduced from the third year of primary school as a subject of study and is the medium of instruction at the secondary level. All fields at the university level are taught in French, except for foreign language specializations such as French, English, Spanish, and Arabic studies. In the last two years of high school, students are obliged to select a third foreign language (either Spanish, Italian, German, Turkish, Russian, or Chinese) to study for two years. Although French was dominant in the aftermath of French colonization, it is losing ground in the context of intense Arabization and Islamization at the policy level (Canagarajah & Ben Said, 2009).

More recently, the importance of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Tunisia has been rising steadily, challenging the dominance of French as a second language in education (Canagarajah & Ben Said, 2009). The English language, a second foreign language in the country, is introduced in the fifth year of primary school and taught as a subject until the end of secondary education, leading to nine years of English language education. On the one hand, “the use of English as a medium of instruction is insignificant” (Badwan, 2019, p.2). On the other hand, “as a subject of study, English is well established and the demand for instruction in it appears to be growing steadily” (Badwan, 2019, p.2). Though several reports about EFL education in Tunisia were finalized by the British Council in 1975, the dispositions toward using English as a medium of instruction have not considerably changed over the last 40 years (Badwan, 2019). Tunisian university teachers and students value their multilingual repertoires which is in line with official governmental backing for citizens to speak Arabic (the official and national language) and to master two foreign languages, and although they could see reasons for using English as a medium of instruction at university level instead of French, they are much more concerned with the challenges that this transition could bring (Badwan, 2019).

2 Review of the literature

Canagarajah and Ben Said (2009) explain that the status of English as a foreign language is changing. They believe that English in Tunisia constitutes a language of symbolic power and economic opportunities which is essential for the internal development of the country. They also see that the prestige which used to be associated with French is now related to the English language, especially in an age of globalization where English is an index of economic growth and a means for prosperity and accessibility to a wider international market. In this context, while the government is starting to implement new policies, for example, for the teaching of English to be introduced earlier on in the curriculum, teachers and educators express their concern that more resources for sustained linguistic training in English and professional development should be devoted at all levels of education (Canagarajah & Ben Said, 2009).

English appears to be used extensively by university students and teachers, research workers, and professional people in many fields – education, medicine, business management, economics, sociology, public administration, and diplomacy (Canagarajah & Ben Said, 2009). As a matter of fact, “the case of Tunisia is symptomatic of former North African protectorates and colonies, which are now slowly distancing themselves from dependence on the French language and turning to English as a tool for development” (Canagarajah & Ben Said, 2009, p.168).

Daoud (2001) explains the rise of English in the country with the fact that English language teaching has steadily improved since independence in 1956. He believes that local English language departments and teacher-training institutions contributed substantially to staffing undergraduate classes and have produced enough teachers for English Language Teaching (ELT) positions in secondary schools and up to 80% of the vocational and academic English for Specific Purposes (ESP) positions.

However, Daoud (2001) confirms that Tunisia still suffers from a lack of functional users of English in the different sectors and fields. Nonetheless, the ever-growing demand for English in the past led to major developments in language planning and more efforts in language-in-education policy and planning, which raises questions about the wisdom and the clarity of the national educational English curriculum, how it is implemented, and how it affects the ELT profession in Tunisia (Daoud, 2001).

Answering the raised questions is challenging as in the Tunisian context, few studies have been conducted about EFL education. Mokhtari (2017) investigated the perceptions of Tunisian educators of the effects of the Arab Spring on Tunisia’s educational policies and reforms related to corruption, job preparation, and the English language. Harrabi (2010) looked at Tunisian science and technology students’ perceptions of ESP courses. Boukadi (2013) worked on teachers’ perceptions of the future of English language teaching and learning in Tunisia after the 2011 revolution. Boukadi and Troudi (2017) worked on English education policy in Tunisia and its issues of language policy in post-revolution Tunisia.

Based on the above review of the existing and scarce literature in the Tunisian context, my current study is an attempt to further investigate EFL education in the country and to contribute to the literature in the field. This research aims to address the lack of empirical literature regarding

the status of English in Tunisian society and its teaching in Tunisian private schools. It also aims to demonstrate the feasibility of conducting empirical qualitative studies in Tunisian educational institutions as most of the available literature is theory and/or history based. It is important to look at the strengths of the Tunisian educational system as well as its flaws. Today, languages in the country are an essential part of Tunisian people's lives, and as a third language (a second foreign language) English adds to the complexity of the linguistic situation in the Tunisian context (Melliti, 2012). Learning languages is compulsory from primary to tertiary level in all specializations and thanks to easier access to modern technology, there is a growing demand for several foreign languages to be taught in different institutions, including English (Daoud, 1996). The instruction of these languages can no longer be overlooked.

Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the current situation of foreign language education in Tunisia, particularly English. Based on Spolsky's (2004) framework of language practices, language beliefs and ideology, and language planning or management, it is important to look at the different stakeholders' dispositions and views of EFL education in the Tunisian context. The first step to contribute to the betterment of education is to look at the policies governing the educational system and the perceptions of major educational stakeholders involved (Peláez & Usma, 2017). In the Tunisian context, "Tunisian educational policy makers are aware of the necessity to cope with the demands of today's world" and of the fact that Tunisian schools should play an important "role in coping with these changes [...] through the promotion of learning foreign languages" (Abid, 2013, p.26). "English is exclusively taught in the classroom" as a foreign language, and therefore "it has been given importance by educational policy makers" (Abid, 2013, p. 27). Taking into consideration the status of the language in the country and its governing policies, teaching English as a foreign language in the Republic of Tunisia seems an extremely challenging task.

3 Research rationale

Due to the lack of empirical research about EFL education, this exploratory study aims to evaluate holistically the current situation of English education in private educational institutions in Tunisia from the perspective of teachers of English. Therefore, the research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What are Tunisian English language teachers' views of the current trends, strategies, and policies of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia?
2. What is the future of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia?

When setting the main objectives of this research, which is part of a larger ongoing PhD research study, I intend to discuss Tunisian English teachers' perceptions and views concerning the conditions in schools, the state of the curriculum, and the approaches employed, as well as their dispositions toward the present language policies and their aspirations for the future of TEFL in private schools specifically and in the country as a whole. While teachers are not the only stakeholders in the educational system, investigating the topic with these teachers is expected to

provide a credible and realistic overview of the situation as they are in the frontline of the educational process. Their familiarity with the educational system and their constructive criticism could lead toward change “for the pursuit of excellence in English language teaching and learning practices” (Liton, 2013, p. 20) as “language policy and planning in Tunisia have been both instrumental in shaping such experiences and attitudes and subject to their influence” (Daoud, 2001, p. 1).

The article holds substantial relevance for individuals within a similar context, particularly educators, policymakers, and researchers in Tunisia or those interested in understanding the differences between state and private language education. Tunisia, like many other countries, has a diverse landscape of language education, with both state-run and private educational institutions offering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs. This qualitative investigation provides valuable insights into the perceptions and experiences of English teachers working in private educational institutions, shedding light on their teaching methods, challenges, and the unique dynamics of the private sector. By delving into this subject, the article can help stakeholders in Tunisia's education sector make informed decisions, enhance the quality of EFL instruction, and bridge the gap between state and private language education, ultimately improving English language proficiency in the country. Furthermore, the findings and methodologies explored in this study may offer valuable lessons and perspectives for educators and researchers facing similar challenges in other regions with a parallel educational landscape.

4 Research design and method

This section intends to justify the selection of the research design and presents the methods to be employed throughout the research in detail, including the participants, the sampling process, the instruments, as well as the data collection and data analysis procedures. Lastly, a summary table of the research design and methods is added.

4.1 Justification of research design/approach

The research questions of this study aim to investigate Tunisian English language teachers' views of the current trends, strategies, and policies of English language education in Tunisia, and discover how they envisage the future of EFL education in Tunisian private educational institutions. To collect data and find answers to these two questions, I opted for a qualitative method of research. The selection of this method for this study was based on the fact that qualitative studies are not tightly prefigured (Dörnyei, 2007). As a matter of fact, such studies should be kept open and fluid so that emergent details or new themes can be depicted throughout the analyses (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007). Similarly, qualitative research also highlights its nature of flexibility and adaptability to meet the needs of an exploratory study as there is no preconceived hypotheses to test, but rather ideas to investigate (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007).

One-to-one semi-structured single-session interviews are widely used in applied linguistics, and this is what I will be using throughout this study as part of my PhD dissertation (Dörnyei, 2007). I designed three instruments for the purpose of conducting three sub-studies, the

third of which will serve for the purposes of this study. The instrument is based on semi-structured questions, which allowed me to orient and guide the interviews effectively, while giving the interviewees the freedom to elaborate on any of those questions to finally capture rich and complex information. This type of interview and the question format are both suitable for this research as I already had a good overview about the context, and I did not want to use ready-made categories for the interviewees' answers as they could limit their opinions and views. The participants would also feel more comfortable in sharing personal views and opinions as there is only themselves and the researcher (myself) present during the interview, and one session is not considered as unduly exhausting compared to multiple session interviews (Dörnyei, 2007).

4.2 Context, participants, and sampling

The primary aim of this research is to explore EFL education in Tunisia from the perspective of major stakeholders involved in the teaching and learning process. To ensure the representativeness of the sample, the rationale behind selecting this population is to interview active Tunisian EFL teachers. These teachers are employed in private primary, preparatory, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions located in different regions of the country. Based on the purposive criterion sampling technique, the main goal is to find individuals who can provide rich and varied insights into the experience of teaching English as a foreign language in private Tunisian educational institutions and who might have a vision about the future of EFL in the country and in education (Dörnyei, 2007).

I decided to include EFL teachers working in the private education sector. Here, I selected for the piloting phase one teacher who meets the criteria, and as I finished the main phase of data collection, I interviewed five more active Tunisian English language teachers working in private educational institutions in Tunisia. Among the six participants, five were females and one was male; their ages varied between 25 and 50. They are all teaching different levels from primary to high school grades. The teachers have different working experiences. While some of them have been on the job for less than a year, others were in the field for over 20 years. The more experienced teachers worked previously in state-schools and universities before switching to private education. Furthermore, the participants worked in different locations. Three are working in Tunis governorate, one in Ariana governorate and one in Zaghuan governorate, which are all in the north of the country. This can be explained by the rising number of private schools in the more developed regions of the country. The male participant is working in his own private language school in Sfax governorate, which is located in the southeast region of the country. The following table describes the participants' teaching level, place of work, age, and gender, as well as their educational level and years of experience as teachers, preceded by their pseudonyms which will be used throughout the analysis.

Participants pseudonyms	Teaching Level	Governorate	Age	Gender	Educational Attainment	Years of Experience
Donia	Tertiary	Tunis	45	Female	BA	13
Siran	Primary	Tunis	25	Female	MA	Less than 1
Samar	Secondary and tertiary	Tunis	50	Female	MA	20
Mirna	Primary	Ariana	27	Female	BA	3
Hanin	Primary	Zaghouan	27	Female	MA	3
Rida	Secondary and corporate	Sfax	42	Male	MA	16

Table 1. Participants' descriptive and demographic data

4.3 Research instrument

The constructs of this study were adopted from various studies, and they are summarized here. Mokhtari (2017) elaborated in his doctoral dissertation on Tunisian educators' perceptions of educational policies and reforms related to the English language after the outbreak of the Arab spring. Boukadi (2013) in her doctoral dissertation examined Tunisian teachers' perceptions of the compulsory English education and the future of English teaching and learning in post-revolutionary Tunisia. Habeeb (2013) discussed teachers' views of the possibility of implementing English as a foreign language in Kuwaiti kindergartens. Mawed (2016) explored, in her doctoral dissertation, teachers' attitudes towards designing and developing the curriculum of an English language teaching department in a Syrian Higher Education institute of languages. Yook (2010) investigated Korean English teachers' beliefs about English education and the reforms initiated by the ministry-of education. Wang (2008) studied Chinese teachers' perceptions of the language policy implementation in tertiary education.

Based on these studies, I defined the major constructs that I intended to investigate, and I compiled one pilot study interview schedule. I held the first interview with a high school EFL teacher in a private school, in which I combined a set of 11 major questions and 23 sub-questions divided into four major sections, in addition to six biographical questions and three closing questions. After piloting the instrument with a Tunisian female English language teacher working in the capital city Tunis, I modified the wording and the order of certain questions to make them clearer and more coherent for the interviewees. The final instrument (see appendix B) includes 25 questions in total adapted to the Tunisian educational context and divided into five sections, which will be described later. The shared languages between me, as the interviewer, and the interviewees are Arabic, French, and English. However, I prepared an English version of the instrument and conducted the interviews in English instead of Arabic or French because all participants were proficient in English, eliminating the need for translation.

4.4 Data collection procedure

To collect the data for this research and for further accessibility to these different regions, universities, and fields, I opted for the snowball technique to get recommendations from the interviewees about other potential participants (Dörnyei, 2007). The first few teachers I interviewed were teachers that I personally knew and had previous contact with. To ensure accessibility to more participants, at the end of each interview, I asked the interviewees whether they knew teachers and colleagues who might be interested in participating and I verified whether their suggestions would meet the requirements of the sampling of the participating group.

In the case of this study, the filtered sample of participants is Tunisian teachers of English as a foreign language working in different Tunisian private educational institutions at various levels and sectors. The one-to-one interviews with primary, preparatory, and secondary state school EFL teachers were conducted online via Skype. Conducting the interviews online instead of offline was the best option because all the teachers interviewed are living in Tunisia whereas I am residing in Hungary. Furthermore, using the Skype platform offers a free and unlimited timeframe and easy accessibility from any device. The piloting phase took place in November 2021 and the main interviews were conducted in November 2022.

In order to take into consideration the ethics of empirical research, an interview consent form was sent via email to all the participants prior to conducting the interviews (See appendix A). This consent form was digitally signed and sent back to me via email, and the teachers who did not send it back consented orally at the beginning of the interview. Their participation was completely voluntary, and I ensured their anonymity, and the privacy of the information they shared during the interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, I gave the participants an overview of the topic and the aims behind my PhD dissertation, I indicated the duration of the interview, and I informed them about the university I am a student of. During the interviews, I tried to keep the discussion flowing and make the participants feel at ease and comfortable (Creswell, 2009, Dörnyei, 2007). I also allowed time for them to ask for any clarification at any time during the interview. They were also informed that they could benefit from the research once it was prepared for publication.

I started each interview by asking the participants to share some background information (length of teaching experience, employment location, classes taught, diploma obtained, etc.). The next set of focus points introduced the topic: their general views about EFL education in the country, and in their educational institutions. Later, I asked them about their teaching strategies and approaches as well as the curricula used and EFL education in private educational institutions in the country (in the respondents' respective schools). The next section was related to the participants' preparation to become English language teachers. After I asked them questions about their knowledge regarding language policies and language education policies in the country, and I inquired about their vision for the future of EFL education, followed by some closing questions.

Each interview lasted 60 to 120 minutes. The interviews were simultaneously recorded on my laptop (video and sound) and my smart phone (sound only) in order to have a backup copy in case of any technical issues. All the records were saved with the names of the participants, and I

made sure that no one else had access to this data in order to ensure the confidentiality of the sensitive information. At a later stage and following the standard transcription scheme for conversations (McMullin, 2021), all the interviews were first transcribed online using Otter. Otter is software which is easily accessible from any device and offers a limited number of minutes which can be transcribed per account per month. I selected this software after trying out several other software options and I found this the most convenient one. It also has the option of transcribing other languages besides English, such as French.

During the interview, the participants asked me whether they can use Arabic and French to express certain opinions and ideas, which I agreed with to make them feel at ease when responding to my questions and to gather more data. Next, I listened to the recordings and reviewed manually all the transcripts, to eliminate any inconsistencies and correct any errors found between the recordings and the transcripts. The interviews were fully conducted in English, and the participants showed a high level of proficiency. However, some participants opted to express, unexpectedly, some ideas in French and in Arabic, and therefore, those few instances of their responses were translated into English during the review of the transcription.

4.5 Data analysis procedure

I opted for an inductive data analysis procedure based on an interpretive approach (Creswell, 2009, Dörnyei, 2007). To analyze the obtained data, the set of questions was already divided into constructs, as explained in the research instrument section. These constructs facilitated the coding procedure (Dörnyei, 2007). Further, I started looking for common patterns, chunks of answers, and themes that could be useful for interpretation. Hence, I based my data analysis on the interpretivist paradigm based on the thematically coded responses to enhance the quality of the analysis and to give a comprehensive and an extensive answer to the research question of this study (Dörnyei, 2007). To ensure anonymity, the interviewees' quotations were referred to by pseudonyms with their consent.

4.6 Summary of research design/method

This table (continued on next page) summarizes the research design and methods selected to answer the two research questions of this study.

Aim	To investigate the current situation of English language education in private institutions from the perspective of English language teachers in the Republic of Tunisia.
RQ1	What are Tunisian English language teachers' views of the current trends, strategies, and policies of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia?
RQ2	What is the future of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia?

Research approach	Qualitative investigation
Research participants	Six active Tunisian EFL teachers working in private Tunisian educational institutions
Research instrument	One-to-one single session interviews based on a semi-structured interview schedule (see appendices A and B)
Status	Validated, piloted, and finalized
Data collection	Online interviews via Skype platform
Data analysis	Interpretivist paradigm based on thematically coded responses

Table 2. Summary table of research design/method

5 Findings and discussion

This section will report on the results of the analysis of the data collected based on the six interviews. It will also present simultaneously a discussion of the major findings. The results are divided based on six major themes that were coded in the interviewees' transcripts.

5.1 Overall quality of EFL education

5.1.1 Materials and resources

Asking the interviewees about their views of English language education in private educational institutions in Tunisia enticed them into comparing it with the status quo in public schools. Private schools, including international ones, make use of foreign books and follow either a British or an American curriculum, as far as teaching English as a subject is concerned. This is completely different from the public sector where teachers and learners have to follow the guidelines and the workbooks compiled by the Ministry of Education and Training as well as the National Pedagogy Center. Samar noted that "there is an archaic approach to English language teaching in Tunisia" especially in the public sector. Enrolling pupils and students in private schools is rather attractive for their legal guardians and parents as they believe that learning foreign languages, such as English, should be based on the model of native speakers.

Furthermore, the participants affirmed that the curriculum and syllabus provided by the school administration is useful and appropriate for the international schools' context. This is to say that as many private schools welcome students from various backgrounds and different nationalities, it is easier for the schools and teachers to accommodate their needs and to best work and teach in a diverse environment using English-based books. Tunisian workbooks used for teaching and learning are highly contextualized which might be irrelevant and inappropriate for many international learners. Samar mentioned that "we have been teaching the same way for 25 or 30 years" in public schools. Private schools also have related websites with open access for their

students where they can find all the materials they need to prepare for their classes. This demonstrates that private schools have more digitalized tools in use compared to public ones, which still rely on traditional materials and resources.

The interviewees commonly shed light on the importance of EFL education in Tunisia. Private schools invest financially in the materials used and teach with books written by native speakers in English lessons. Siran added that “it is best for teachers and for students themselves that they get accustomed to getting authentic books, listening to audios and not any random person”. The quality of the books and materials differ from private to public schools. Books used in the latter are prepared by a board of Tunisian teachers and inspectors, while books in the former are exported from English-speaking countries.

5.1.2 Early English language education

Another aspect of the private education sector is the organization of the classes and the subjects to be taught at every level. Siran commented that:

Basically 90% of private schools nowadays started teaching English from preschool classes and from first grade, whereas in public schools, they only teach sixth graders who will sit for the national tests and they need to have an English exam.

This is unfair for the learners as while some of them have been acquiring the language for several years, others have been exposed to it only for a short period. Foreign languages, including English and French, are being taught from an early age. It is commonly believed that the earlier learners start to attend the English language lessons, the better they will acquire it and become proficient in it. It also seems to provide them with more opportunities to practice and use the language inside their school environments.

5.1.3 English language assessment

The interviewees highlighted the importance of differentiation and entrance examinations in private institutions. Most private schools will conduct a placement test at the beginning of every academic year in order to differentiate the levels and proficiency of each student, and to organize the class schedule and activities accordingly. Such tests are also conducted in state schools. However, the participants in this research believed that teachers in both public and private schools are not planning their courses based on the outcomes of these tests. This means that teachers in private schools divide their students depending on their abilities and competencies in the foreign language and prepare their lesson plans based on the different levels and the learning difficulties they have within the same classroom, which enhances the quality of EFL education and promises better learning results.

Hanin, another participant, had a different opinion regarding assessments and claimed that examinations and testing are not credible to test the students’ levels nowadays and “there are lots of mistakes in the exams”. Samar supported this by stating that the ongoing and final examinations

are not reflective of the students' abilities and levels. Before, much attention was paid to the preparation and evaluation of tests and exams offered to students, and their results were more credible and reflective of the students' levels of proficiency. Hanin believes that in both private and public schools, "education is becoming so bad. Teachers are not qualified". This is due to the fact that "English teachers did not really graduate as English teachers, some of them have other specializations" and they were assigned to teach English in primary schools due to a shortage of English majors and recruitment opportunities. However, Hanin pointed out that in private schools, the number of students per class is smaller than the usual number in public schools. Having a limited number of students in the classroom is useful and more effective for learning English.

5.1.4 English as the Medium of Instruction

In higher levels of education, private universities use English as the medium of instruction of most of the courses, as opposed to state universities where French is the medium of instruction. This provides further chances for EFL learners to better engage in an anglophone or international context and to fully immerse themselves into English speaking contexts. The participants affirm that most of their students have plans to continue their higher education studies abroad, hence their need to be familiar with the language and to be able to use it properly. Hanin explained that in some private schools, the administration might organize some fun activities, including, for instance, visits to parks and museums, during which their teachers will interact with them in English and encourage them to converse in English as well, so that they can learn vocabulary based on real life.

5.1.5 Old vs New regime

An interesting point that was raised by Donia is the fact that there is a huge gap between the older and the newer educational systems in teaching in the country. Donia referred back to the time when she was a student herself in the 1980s and 1990s and expressed her disappointment with the quality of teaching and learning in the current times. The comparison between the "old regime" and the "new regime," as she mentioned, highlights the contrast in the state of general education and English language education in Tunisia. It suggests that there has been a decline or deterioration in the quality of education under the new regime compared to the previous one. She said that "there is a big difference between the old educational system and the new one; when I was a student, the teachers and even the educational system was better than now". Samar also noted the teaching approaches used in classrooms, mentioning that what is labeled as the "communicative approach" is not actually communicative in her opinion. She believes it is merely a continuation of the grammar translation method, which originated in the 1990s when the country began prioritizing English language education. However, this method has remained unchanged up to the present day.

5.2 Quality control

According to the participants, some of the private educational institutions have to obtain an accreditation from British or American world-known institutions to administer international tests and to maintain the quality of education they are offering to their students. For this, there are various measures that should be taken into consideration. During the classes, teachers may receive visitors from fellow and more experienced teachers, who might act as inspectors, observing and discussing their classes. Based on these observations, the teachers will receive constructive feedback and suggestions or recommendations for improvement. This feedback could be related, but not limited to, class management, disciplinary acts, use of Information Technology (IT) tools, teaching techniques, and adequacy of lesson plans and objectives as well as their implementation. Hanin commented that she “learned a lot from [her] inspector”.

The interviewees mentioned that they have daily, weekly, and semester plans that should be prepared in advance. For example, the weekly plans should be sent to the head teacher, who in his or her role as an inspector and a consultant reviews them in detail. By the end of every week, the teachers and the head teacher sit together to discuss how the lessons went, whether the objectives were met, the difficulties they faced, the success rate of the lesson, and the students’ specific and individual needs. This consultation provides informal training for the teachers to improve their lessons and plans for the courses they are delivering.

According to the participants, some of the international schools require the presence of both a teacher and a teaching assistant in every course. For example, English lessons are conducted by a chief English language teacher who is accompanied by an assistant who helps in all the classroom tasks and activities to ensure that all the students are learning at their appropriate pace. This is not available in public schools due to shortage of resources and budgeting, as well as the rigidity of the educational system.

Although this might be the case in most private schools, Donia stated that in her private school there is no quality control. At the beginning of the year, their head of department delivers a summary of the syllabus to the teachers including the chapters and the programs for each class. However, there is no follow-up or inspection from the side of the administration and headmasters on what and how teachers deliver their courses, and whether their students are learning. The teachers have to prepare both the course plans as well as the examinations.

As far as administration is concerned, the staff are rather focused on the children’s behavior, their absenteeism, difficulties, and issues which could hinder their learning. It is important to note that teachers in private schools are not in direct contact with the parents, unlike in public schools. All communication related to educational matters should be going through the administration staff, unless the administration allows for parent-teacher meetings.

The variety of methods and strategies adopted in teaching English as a foreign language is also a criterion for the sustainable quality of education. Teachers seem to be encouraged to use different approaches when preparing their lessons. Mirna claimed that “we really focus on the students. They need to be active in the classroom”. Teachers were trying to adopt more student-oriented approaches and to engage the learners more in the classroom activities.

The availability of diverse resources and materials in private schools, compared to their lack in public schools, is encouraging. The respondents admitted that the more access they have to different materials, such as textbooks, worksheets, smartboards, and school equipment, the better they are prepared for quality lessons. Unlike in public schools, teachers will find laptops, projectors, speakers, and rooms equipped for English classes which will help them in delivering their lessons.

5.3 Challenges in TEFL

The challenges in private educational institutions are also different from those teachers are dealing with on a daily basis in state schools. To illustrate this, legal guardians and parents are “highly demanding”, claimed Mirna. As “it is an international school, they are expecting native teachers and native speakers of English”, she added. Some parents doubt the quality of courses that are delivered by the local instructors, trainers, and teachers working at these international schools and they believe that native speakers are better at teaching their children. Some of them would even “expect their children to be native speakers by the end of the academic year”, Mirna mentioned.

Donia highlighted the main challenge she faces when she is working in a private language school. She mentioned that since “there are no placement tests” for language learners before the start of the courses, she and her colleagues end up having a very heterogenous classroom with students at different levels and ages. She clarified that she “has students from different levels in the same class”. In some of her classes, she had learners between 16 up to 80 years old. While she acknowledged that age may not significantly influence the learning process, drawing from her extensive teaching experience, she believed it does impact students' learning pace and their ability to progress and attain proficiency in the language. She believed that this high level of heterogeneity negatively affects the teachers' ability to deliver effective lessons. The teacher may struggle to manage the diverse needs of the students and find suitable worksheets that cater to all levels within the same classroom.

Samar pointed out the difficulty of nurturing the needs of the students of different ages and abilities in one classroom. Teaching each of these students according to their individual objectives and goals during English language courses presented a challenge, as their needs vary significantly. Samar further explained:

The heterogeneous classes are challenging, you have adults, teenagers, people who work hard, people who do not. Sometimes we have two or three generations in the same class, so it is interesting, it is really interesting, but at the same time it is challenging because we have to explain things related, for example, to technology, and things related to history. So, we will have further explanations and beyond language.

This also impacts the extent to which teachers are able to manage their classrooms. Samar shed light on the fact that because of the classes' heterogeneity, classroom management becomes difficult.

5.4 University education for EFL teachers

Most of the university programs for English majors include classes such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and Teaching English for Young Learners (TEYL). These courses introduce students to the pedagogy of teaching and present a variety of approaches and methods that have been employed over the years to teach English. Nonetheless, these courses are very few in number during the three year long program of undergraduate studies. The remaining English major courses are related to literature and civilization, whose relevance and usefulness for their teaching career the respondents in this research strongly doubt. Donia claimed that “sincerely speaking, no, as I told you it is so different, but I tried to train myself by myself”. This is the case of most of the teachers who were self-training to be prepared for becoming educators.

However, Mirna expressed that she found herself naturally applying theories and techniques, stating, “I forgot about the theories and techniques, but you find yourself naturally applying all these”. She also mentioned, “Because it is changing with the students and the generations, it is becoming harder with every generation as we need to be creative as much as we can, so not all theories will be relevant”. Therefore, finding relevant tasks and practice activities as well as engaging and motivating materials is challenging for the teachers. Rida believed that “any student who majors in English is the one responsible for his own improvements, so not to expect the university teachers to spoon feed the student”. That is why “the majority of students, graduate students, once they finish, they think they are good English teachers and they can teach whatever, but when they start, they can find a lot of difficulties, and so since then, I have been working on improving myself as a teacher and my use-of-technology skills”. English major programs do not prepare the students to become teachers; it requires work beyond the classroom and self-commitment to professionally develop.

Mirna declared that “university has played a good part’ in adding to her pedagogical knowledge, but it was not sufficient in her career as an EFL teacher and “I wish I went to the educational teacher training”. Hanin explained that her university studies lacked the practical aspects of teaching. The lack of training for novice teachers might be quite challenging. Siran supported this as she believed that learning about the theories of teaching cannot prepare students to become future teachers and practitioners. Mirna also mentioned that she had to sign up for extra professional training outside the school, to enhance her teaching approaches and techniques. Such training is offered for current and future EFL teachers, for example, by the British and American cultural center in Tunisia. Donia had been teaching since 2007, and she mentioned that she heavily relied on YouTube to learn about technological tools and their use in her teaching or sought help from her students as she did not have any training about the latest devices used in education.

5.5 Knowledge of English language policies

The participants were not aware of any existing language policies in the Tunisian context. To their knowledge, their schools do not receive any regulatory document, or official paper, information, or letters from the Ministry of Education. Mirna suggested that usually “it is between the teacher and the school; we have the contract, we have the trainer, the trainings and the trainees.

Rida declared that the only regulatory documents they are aware of are related to ethical regulations, staff behavior, and discipline within the school.

Regarding the materials and the books, most of these private schools receive their documents from international schools and institutions abroad, and they do not use the locally produced workbooks that the Ministry distributes. Teachers are not aware of the current regulations and reforms because of the position of English in society and its rivalry with the French language. Also, the headmasters might not be willing to share the information they receive from regional delegations of education, and so teachers are not up to date with the changes.

5.6 The future of EFL education

Teaching English as a foreign language in Tunisian schools has been compulsory since the 1990s. Teachers of English at private schools believed that the future might be brighter than the present for EFL education as they could see several improvements within private schools. They believed that there are still several deficiencies and issues that should be dealt with by the different stakeholders, including themselves and the learners. In expressing her dissatisfaction, Donia stated that “I have never heard that the Ministry is trying to change anything”. She also mentioned that “the policies are written on paper and not practiced”. Radi described:

... the education system in Tunisia as mediocre ... it is really like the worst education system and has not changed since or for a long time. I think we need to reconsider the way we teach not only languages, but I think, some education reforms need to be done as soon as possible if we want to keep up with the rest of what is happening around the world.

However, in comparison with state schools, private EFL education seems to be in a better position because of the expertise, the continuous follow-up, and the resources provided for the learners to reach proficiency levels in English. Mirna stated that if EFL in public schools had been “given the same importance and the same value as in private and international schools, it would be perfect”. Rida is an English teacher and the owner of a private language center. He mentioned that he provides appropriate equipment for his colleagues to teach with as well as newer booklets and worksheets. He also tries to keep the number of students per class limited to 10 or 15 as it is more efficient and allows the possibility to do group projects.

In his summary, Rida stated that “the facilities and the classrooms are appropriate and convenient to give good and motivating lessons for the students” which enables quality learning and teaching, and the same should be implemented in public schools. Rida also claimed that it is important for private schools to keep education standards high by including inspectors to work in the school as teachers and recruiting highly qualified teachers who are passionate about their jobs. By the end of every academic year, he launches a survey regarding the training courses to get students’ feedback and to evaluate his teaching staff and the quality of their lessons for the upcoming courses. Such surveys should also be employed in other private educational institutions and language centers.

Nonetheless, since businessmen see their private schools as a source of income and financial security, there is no consideration for the courses being taught at their schools and the administrative and teaching staff working with them. Donia raised the issue of capitalism and the fact that such private institutions are economically thriving at the expense of the quality of education they are offering. In this regard, most of the private schools' directors have been heavily influenced by the French language dominance in the country and they do not give importance to English education in their schools and the government has no control over such lucrative business.

Siran pointed out the importance of exchange programs and cultural training opportunities in international contexts. She claimed that the "older generation got the chance to learning English or teaching English [*sic*] with native speakers. For us, the younger generation, we did not have any contact with native speakers, only if we travel abroad, which is sad". English language teachers in Tunisia used to have several opportunities to travel to English-speaking countries and attend training sessions and professional development programs which would help them in their careers in Tunisia. The lack of such professional development programs in the last decade has influenced the quality of education teachers receive at universities. Siran suggested that it would be beneficial to allocate a specific budget for prospective EFL teachers to send them on exchange programs which could contribute to success in their career, and Donia suggested that it would also be encouraging to allocate pay rise budgets to teachers.

6 Pedagogical implications and limitations

The present study is limited to an exploration of EFL education in the Tunisian context in private schooling institutions from a teachers' perspective. By unveiling the challenges and deficiencies of EFL education in one of the most important sectors for education in the country, the research seeks to call for revising EFL teachers' education, professional development, and learners' curricula and programs as well as the policies and regulations governing EFL education. The study invites all stakeholders of education to be part of the development and enhancement of EFL education in the country by giving voice to the 'frontline' soldiers of education: teachers' suggestions and proposals for improvement.

The research on English language policies in Tunisia eventually leads back to historical and societal facts. However, the scarcity of the existing literature review written on English language education in Tunisia might limit the outcomes of this study. The reason behind the limited research in this area is that academic publishing in Tunisia is still conducted in the French language since it is the medium of instruction, and the majority of academicians have been heavily influenced by francophone research (Abdeljaoued & Labassi, 2021).

The pedagogical implications of this work include but are not limited to the transferability of the instruments to different contexts and to other foreign languages. The research outcomes are reflections on language policy, planning, and management levels as "language learning projects in developing contexts such as Tunisia have to be carefully designed in a way that aligns itself with local needs and aspirations" (Badwan, 2019, p.6).

7 Conclusion

Teaching English as a foreign language in Tunisian private educational institutions raises many debates in Tunisian society. While some experts would advocate a move toward an anglophone society, others would be still fighting for the supremacy of the francophone context. The rise of English in private schools and teaching it at an early age compared to state schools shows that there is tendency toward recognizing the dominance of English and the awareness of what benefits it could bring into society.

Needless to say, the quality of English language education in privately-owned schools is superior to that in public ones, as shown by the participants' interviews. Private schools are far more organized and well-equipped with all the necessary means of teaching and learning. This plays a significant role in the development of ELT and the improvement of learners' levels in foreign languages in general in Tunisia.

This research could appeal to individuals within similar educational contexts, as well as those interested in comprehending the distinctions between state and private language education. Tunisia has seen a significant growth in private educational institutions, including language schools, in recent years. This qualitative investigation provides valuable insights into the perspectives and experiences of English teachers working within these private institutions, shedding light on their instructional methods, challenges, and aspirations. By delving into this subject, educators and policymakers can gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play in the realm of EFL education in Tunisia, allowing for more informed decisions regarding curriculum development, resource allocation, and professional development strategies. Additionally, the study offers a unique opportunity to compare the practices and outcomes in private language education with those in the state sector, contributing to a broader dialogue on the effectiveness and equity of language education in Tunisia and similar contexts.

The challenges faced by English language teachers in private schools in Tunisia could be numerous. This study only shed light on a few issues within EFL education in Tunisia. Although teachers might not be aware of the existing English educational policies and language policies in the Tunisian context, they are quite aware of the importance of English as a foreign language and its effects on future generations. While there is a rising trend for enrolling students in private schools to enjoy the benefits of learning several foreign languages at a very young age, teachers are hoping for a better future for TEFL in private schools.

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APPENDIX A

Interview consent form

Interview consent form for the interviews

- University

PhD programme in -

Budapest, Hungary

Title: English language compulsory education in the Republic of Tunisia:

A look at private institutions

Investigator: -

I. Purpose of the Research: The following study aims to bridge the gap between language education policies, curriculum, and their implementation in TEFL environment in the Republic of Tunisia. The researcher attempts to explore English language education in private institutions in the Republic of Tunisia.

II. Procedure: an individual interview will be conducted online via Skype. You will be interviewed once and the interview will take about 90 minutes.

III. Risks: The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life.

IV. Benefits: Taking part in this research may benefit you as an English teacher. You will have the opportunity to reflect on your university education to become an English language teacher, your preparedness for the work in field upon graduation. The results of the research will show the relevance and usefulness of the English studies degree and university curriculum in preparing teachers of English as a foreign language in the country. It will also give us a holistic view of the EFL in private institutions. This will help us find out more about how to improve English education in the Republic of Tunisia.

V. Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal: Participation in this research is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study. If you decide to be in the study and change your mind, you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. Whatever you decide, you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

VI. Confidentiality: I will keep your records private to the extent allowed by law. Dr. Wein Csizér Kata will have access to the information you provide. I will use a pseudonym of your choice rather than your name on study records and it will be destroyed after the research is conducted. Your record will be stored in the researcher's protected computer. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results. The findings will be summarized and reported in such a way that you will not be identified personally.

VII. Contact Persons: Contact -----

VIII. Copy of Consent Form to interviewee: You will receive a digital copy of this form.

APPENDIX B

Interview Instrument

Dear,

Thank you for accepting to participate in my study and contributing to my doctoral dissertation. I invited you as you are teaching at one of the Tunisian private institutions as an English language teacher.

Your participation is voluntary. I would like to inform you have the right to drop out at any time. You may skip questions or stop participating at any time. This interview will be recorded, and I will keep your records private. They will be destroyed after the finalization of the research. I will use a pseudonym or name initials, as your choice, rather than your name. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

With the goal of improving “teacher education, it is important to listen to those who are affected by it” (Ulvik & Smith, 2011, p.520). TEFL in the private sector is respectively a neglected perspective in research. Therefore, the interest of this research is to explore further the under-researched domain of English language teachers’ education in the private institutions in the Tunisian context.

I would like to get to know you more

1. Due to technical reasons, I have to ask your age: What year were you born in?
2. Where and when did you graduate? What did you graduate in?
3. Why did you choose to become an English language teacher?
4. Throughout your career as an English language teacher working in a private school, what age groups have you taught? Which educational level are you teaching English now? Where?

I would like to find out more about English language education in your school

5. What is your opinion about the overall quality of the Tunisian English language education?
 1. What characterized the quality of English teaching in your context/private school?
 2. What quality control steps are included in the private schools in Tunisia to maintain the quality of English language education?
 3. What curriculum and approach are you following to teach English in private schools in Tunisia?
 4. What are the materials that your private school provided you to teach English with?
6. What are the challenges you face as an English language teacher working in a private school?

I would like to know more about your preparation to become an English language teacher

7. Based on your university studies in Tunisia, what do you find useful and relevant in the English studies' curriculum/courses/theories/trainings/practicum you had?
 1. In what aspects of your teaching, you try to employ what you learned about during your university studies?
 2. To what extent do you believe you had adequate preparation to become an English language teacher working in private Tunisian schools?
 3. What are the skills you wish had received more attention during the program, in light of your teaching experience in a private school?
8. If there were any, to what extent are you personally satisfied with the professional learning opportunities you have experienced to date since you started working?

Knowledge about English language education policies and the future of TEFL in Tunisia

9. What do you know about regulatory and/or official documents that you should take into consideration when teaching in private Tunisian schools?
10. What do you know about English language policies in Tunisia?
11. What do you know about the MOE-initiated reforms in English language education?
12. What do you think about the success in TEFL in Tunisia?
13. What would you like to change in the current TEFL environment?
14. What would make an ideal TEFL environment in Tunisia?

Coming to the closure of our interview

15. What should I have asked you that I did not think to ask in light of this topic?
16. Could you please raise any issue that needs to be discussed and studied?
17. Would you like me to use as a pseudonym or your name initials?