A Collaboration-Mediated Exploration of Nonnative L2 Teachers' Cognition of Language Teaching Methodology

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Abstract: The present study sought to investigate nonnative L2 teachers' cognition of teaching methodology based on their collaborative talks. Participants were 12 nonnative EFL teachers categorized into three collaborative discussion groups by their teaching experience. Collaborative discussions were aimed at exploring the participants' cognition of language teaching methodology, including the criteria for the evaluation of teaching methodology, classroom activities, teaching language skills and sub-skills, teachers' roles, and learners' roles in general and communicative language teaching (CLT) in particular. Analysis of the data indicated that the teachers participating in each discussion group held largely similar cognition about most of the issues in teaching methodology and CLT. In addition, there were similarities between the High-experience and Mid-experience groups regarding their cognition of the advantages of CLT, teachers' roles, and learners' roles. The results of this study can help teacher educators design more effective teacher education courses and in-service programs to enhance EFL teachers' cognition of teaching methodology.

Introduction

Teacher cognition is one of the central themes in language teacher education and has become an established area of research in the last two decades (Bailey, 1996; Borg, 2010; Freeman, 1992). As Richards and Burns (2012) state, "teacher cognition encompasses the mental lives of teachers, how these are formed, what they consist of, and how teachers' beliefs, thoughts, and thinking processes shape their understanding of teaching and their classroom practices" (p. 4). Similarly, Borg (2005) believes that teacher cognition refers to such unobservable dimensions as what teachers know, believe, and think about teaching.

Teachers are considered as the most important agent in any language teaching procedure (McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013). Therefore, it is important to see teachers as active professionals who can make generalizations based on their own practice. Due to the crucial role of teachers, sufficient attention should be paid to teacher education. As teacher cognition is an important element of second language teacher education (Richards, 2011) and one of the themes that characterize language teacher education (Borg, 2011a), "teacher education initiatives will be more effective when they take account of teachers' cognitions" (Borg, 2010, p. 85). Moreover, as Richards and Schmidt (2010) note, teacher cognition has a significant role in teachers' professional development, and as a result, those who are concerned with planning programs for teachers' professional development are interested in teacher cognition studies.

Understanding teacher cognition instruction allows us to capture teaching processes (Lim, 2016). As noted by Borg (2009), studies of teacher cognition provide insights into the mental lives of teachers. Teachers' cognition can affect teachers' teaching performance, which, in turn, can influence students' learning. Naturally, teachers' beliefs about the best teaching process shape their teaching performance in the classroom. In addition, students' learning in the classroom is affected by the teachers' teaching performance. Therefore, identifying the aspects of teacher cognition will provide a better picture of the pedagogical reasoning behind their teaching practice. In view of this, research on teacher cognition can help understand what teachers know and believe, how they learn teaching, and how they teach in different contexts (Johnson, 2009). Due to the importance of teachers' cognition and the paucity of studies focused on EFL teachers' cognition of teaching methodology, the present study sought to explore nonnative English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' cognition of language teaching methodology in general and communicative language teaching in particular.

Literature Review
Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition, as Tsui (2011) states, has been defined in several different ways, and different researchers have applied various terms to describe the construct of teacher cognition. According to Tsui, while some of the researchers define teacher cognition as the teacher's thinking and beliefs and claim that it is distinct from teacher knowledge, there are others who argue that teacher's thinking, beliefs, and knowledge are considered as interwoven and hence cannot be easily separated from each other in teacher cognition studies. Tsui also adds that teacher cognition can be defined "as a network, as a continuum, or as clusters of beliefs" (p. 26).

A distinction can be made between three types of teacher cognition: knowledge, assumptions, and beliefs (Ellis, 2012). Nonetheless, Ellis, by referring to Woods (1996), explains that this boundary is not clear. Moreover, Williams and Burden (1997) believe that teachers' beliefs have more influence than teachers' knowledge on their teaching practice. Williams and Burden also note that teaching is a realization of values and beliefs, not just knowledge.

The particular challenge that we face in defining teacher cognition is the broad range of terms that are used in this regard (Borg, 2006). The instances that Borg mentions include "knowledge (and its subtypes), beliefs, attitudes, conceptions, theories, assumptions, principles, thinking and decision-making" (p. 272). Borg holds that teacher cognition can be defined as "an often tacit, personally-held, practical system of mental constructs held by teachers and which are dynamic" (p. 35). However, Borg reminds us that although these mental constructs have been given various labels such as beliefs and knowledge at the theoretical level, it is not easy to make distinctions between these constructs at the level of practice and research. Borg also posits that he uses language teacher cognition as an inclusive term that refers to networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs that are complex, practically-oriented, personalized, and context-sensitive and are used by language teachers in their work. In fact, language teaching can be defined by the interaction that exists between teacher cognition, teacher's experience, and teaching context.

Several factors may shape and/or affect teachers' cognition. Barnard and Burns (2012) believe that language learning experience, language teaching experience, pre-service training courses, in-service professional development programs, reading books, reading articles,

attending conferences, attending seminars, interaction with learners, and interaction with other teachers are among the factors that can influence teachers' cognition.

In conclusion, teacher cognition refers to teachers' mental lives and the way these mental lives are shaped (Richards & Burns, 2012); thus, research on teacher cognition can help understand what teachers know, what teachers believe, who they are, and how they do their work as teachers (Johnson, 2009). It follows that teacher cognition concentrates on teachers' thinking processes and teachers' beliefs (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

Language Teaching Methodology and Teacher Cognition

Method is "central to any language teaching enterprise" (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 83). Brown (2007) defines language teaching methodology as "a coherent, prescribed group of activities and techniques for language teaching, unified by a homogeneous set of principles or foundations" (p. 386). Likewise, Larsen-Freeman (2000) believes that teaching methodology refers to the coherent set of links between principles (thoughts) and techniques (actions). Richards' (2013) definition of methodology seems to be the most comprehensive:

> *Methodology encompasses the types of learning activities, procedures, and techniques that are employed by teachers when they teach and the principles that underlie the design of the activities and exercises in their textbooks and teaching resources. These procedures and principles relate to beliefs and theories concerning the nature of language and of second language learning and the roles of teachers, learners and instructional materials, and as ideas about language and language learning have changed, so too have the instructional practices associated with them (p. 6).*

Since the teaching methodology used in the setting of this study was based on the communicative approach to language teaching, it was chosen as the main focus of the study and its features are characterized here. CLT applies the theoretical perspectives of the communicative approach to language teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Communicative approaches concentrate on meaning-based learning (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013). According to Brown (2007), CLT focuses on the importance of authenticity, meaningful interaction, learner-centered instruction, and task-based activities.

In CLT, using language for communication is considered to be more important than just having a theoretical knowledge about the language (Scrivener, 2011). Sato (2002) posits that CLT is widely promoted through university courses, teacher training courses (both in pre-service and in-service programs), and workshops; however, little is known about teachers' understanding of CLT and teachers' cognition of it. Therefore, the present study can shed light on the EFL teachers' cognition of CLT.

The interest in research on second language teacher cognition emerged out of the field of general education (Burns & Richards, 2009). Teacher cognition research started in the 1970s when educational researchers shifted their view from seeing teaching as practice-based behaviors to viewing it as thoughtful behaviors; however, it was not until the mid-1990s that researchers started to investigate second/foreign language teachers' cognition (Ellis, 2012).

Borg (2009a) states that research on teachers' cognition has enjoyed a rapid growth since the mid-1990s. Borg (2009b) notes that this has occurred mainly because researchers found out that a proper understanding of teachers and teaching does not happen without understanding the beliefs and thoughts that affect what teachers do. Likewise, Borg (2006) argues that teacher cognition studies have increased in number because researchers have recognized that teachers are active beings, make decisions, and play an important role in

forming what happens in the classrooms. Borg (2003) maintains that researching language teacher cognition has become a well-established area of study.

Teachers have cognition "about all aspects of their work" (Borg, 2005, p. 191) and their teaching methodology. Although teacher cognition of grammar instruction has been a good candidate for teacher cognition research (Borg, 2012, in an interview with Birello), researchers have also been interested in exploring teacher cognition of other aspects and elements of teaching methodology, including teacher cognition regarding the instruction of different skills and subskilles. Nevertheless, few studies have focused on studying teacher cognition of language teaching methodology in general and CLT in particular. It should be noted that in these few studies, as reported below, teacher cognition might have been labeled in different ways, e.g. teachers' beliefs and teachers' attitudes.

Ho-yan Mak (2011) investigated the tensions between a pre-service EFL teacher's beliefs about CLT and her teaching practice in a one-year postgraduate teacher education program in Hong Kong. The participant's mother tongue was Chinese and she spoke English as a foreign language. The instruments used for data collection included interviews, questionnaires, lesson plans, classroom observations, and field notes. Findings of the study indicated that factors such as the participant's learning experiences and her culturally influenced beliefs affected the tension between her beliefs and practice.

Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, and Son (2005) studied teachers' conceptions of CLT. The instruments of their study included observation, questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and video-stimulated recall interviews. The purpose of the study was to investigate Australian teachers' understanding of CLT. It was a small-scale research on six language teachers (five female and one male). The researchers found that the participants had integrated their general understanding of teaching into their understanding of CLT. Moreover, they stated that the participants had integrated many features of CLT into their understanding of this concept. This indicated that they had a good understanding of CLT features. The researchers also argued that the participants might have some difficulty in articulating their conceptions. In addition, results of this study suggested that teachers had two conceptions of CLT: a theoretical/academic conceptualization and a practical conceptualization.

Rahimi and Naderi (2014) studied public school English language teachers' attitudes toward CLT. Participants of the study were 203 EFL teachers. Their age ranged from 24 to 64, and their teaching experience ranged from one to 35 years. The questionnaires administered to the participants were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results of the study indicated that the participants had positive attitudes toward CLT and specifically toward group/pair-work as one of the features of CLT classes. The researchers concluded that, in general, the participants had a good understanding of the merits and the demerits of CLT, specifically in the local EFL context.

As the above review shows, understanding teacher cognition is "a central part of understanding what it means to be, become and develop as a teacher" (Borg, 2011a, p. 218). Following what Borg and other researchers have stated regarding the importance of teacher cognition studies and their implications for teacher education, the present study aimed to investigate EFL teachers' cognition of the criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology. To this end, the following question was posed: What is EFL teachers' cognition of the criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology and its components?

Method
Participants

Participants of this study were 12 Iranian EFL teachers, including seven females and five males. Their mother tongue was Persian, which was the same as their students' L1. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 15 years (Mean = 5.41) and their age ranged from 20 to 33 (Mean = 25.34). They were selected through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009; Dörnyei, 2007). According to Dörnyei (2007), in qualitative inquiry, the aim of sampling is to find participants "who can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation so as to maximize what we can learn" (p. 126). Dörnyei believes that this aim is best achieved by applying purposeful/purposive sampling. Therefore, the participants of this study were selected through purposeful/purposive sampling based on two main criteria. First, they all had the experience of teaching English as a foreign language to adult learners in the setting of a language institute offering general English courses. Second, they all had passed a Teacher Training Course (TTC) in the setting of the study before starting to teach and consequently had received pre-service training in the same context.

The participants were categorized into three focus groups, with four EFL teachers in each group. The criterion for grouping the participants was their teaching experience (low, medium, and high), which was based on their teaching level in the teaching setting (elementary, intermediate, and advance, accordingly). The participants' informed consent was obtained before starting data collection. The three focus groups will henceforth be called High, Mid, and Low based on their teaching experience.

Instrumentation

Panel discussions were chosen as the main instrument of the study to investigate the teachers' cognition of teaching methodology. Seven panel discussion sessions were held. These panel discussions included the exchange of ideas between the participants of each focus group. In order to discuss the issues in an organized fashion, a panel discussion framework was designed and developed based on the points that had been mentioned in the literature regarding the main features of CLT. Since the literature assigns specific features to teaching methodology in general and CLT in particular, the framework encompasses questions about these features.

The framework was piloted in two panel discussion sessions, each taking around 50 minutes. The participants of the pilot sessions were two female EFL teachers. One of the researchers coordinated and led the pilot sessions by asking the questions and guiding the discussions. Based on her observation of the pilot sessions and the participants' discussions in those sessions, potential problems were identified and the questions were modified and revised. The final framework that was applied for data collection included eight questions categorized into five topics:

(1) Teaching methodology
- What are your criteria for evaluating a language teaching methodology? What type of language teaching methodology do you prefer? What are the features of a good language teaching methodology?
- What are the advantages of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?
- What are the disadvantages of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)?

(2) Classroom activities
- Which of them do you think is more useful: whole-class-work, group-work, pair-work, or individual work?

(3) Skills and sub-skills
- Which of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) do you think is/are more important?
- Which of the sub-skills (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) do you think is/are more important?

(4) Teacher
- What are the teacher's roles in the class?

(5) Learners
- What are learners' roles in the class?

However, during the data collection process, in the panel discussion sessions, the framework was just a basis for discussions about the most important and controversial issues. When necessary, in line with the flow of the discussions and the participants' answers, the researcher led the discussions further by asking extra questions to clarify an issue or to engage all the participants in the discussion. The language that was spoken in panel discussions was English. A teacher background questionnaire was administered to the participants to gather their demographic information, such as age, gender, educational background (university degree, major, and English language teaching certificates), and teaching background (teaching experience and teaching level).

The Procedure

After selecting the participants and categorizing them into three focus groups and before holding the panel discussion sessions, a briefing session was held for each group in order to give the participants some information about the nature of the guided discussions in the panels and to answer all their possible questions about the research project. Likewise, a short briefing was given at the beginning of every discussion session to generally introduce the topics and subtopics that were going to be covered in that session. Every focus group attended a panel discussion session once a week. One of the researchers acted as a coordinator during the data collection procedure. She organized the focus groups' meetings and led the focus groups' panel discussions by introducing the topics and subtopics, asking the questions, and guiding the discussions. Seven panel discussion sessions were held, including three sessions for the High group, two sessions for the Mid group, and two sessions for the Low group. Since the discussions among the participants of the High group took more time, one more session was held for this focus group. The participants' cognition regarding the criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology in general and Communicative Language Teaching in particular was explored in panel discussions. As noted above, every panel discussion had a pre-determined agenda. However, the direction and flow of discussions and consequently the time spent was not the same for all the focus groups.

All the panel discussions were recorded, and the audio recordings were organized, labeled, and transcribed. All the transcribed data were examined two times to gain a general understanding of the content and then to conduct detailed content analysis to codify the data and find the emergent themes. The content of the panel discussions' transcriptions of each focus group was analyzed to find the main themes in the data for each group of participants.

A framework was set for finding and labeling the themes. In this framework, language teaching methodology was categorized into its components/elements. In view of this framework, the themes were found and labeled based on the nature of these components. Several themes emerged from the data in a bottom-up process through inductive data analysis (Creswell, 2009) and each theme was labeled. Then, all these labels were listed and the whole data were carefully analyzed again to verify if any new themes might emerge.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the results of the study are presented and the findings are discussed. The answer to the research question is divided into subtopics based on the framework's categories.

Teaching Methodology

Table 1 shows a comparative analysis of the participants' cognition of the criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology.

Themes	High Group	Mid Group	Low Group
Attention to communication	*	*	*
Attention to learners' needs	*	*	*
Attention to all four language skills	*	*	*
Attention to all the language sub-skills	*	*	

Table 1: Participants' criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology

As shown in Table 1, the panelists of the three focus groups believed that a good language teaching methodology should consider communication, learners' needs, and language skills. Excerpt #1 partly reflects the teachers' criteria in the High group. It indicates their belief in the significance of communicative orientation of teaching methodology, including the need for authentic tasks.

Excerpt #1: High Group
Researcher: What are your criteria for evaluating a language teaching method? What type of language teaching method do you prefer?
Vahid: A communicative one
Mohammad: Yes, me too.
Majid: Absolutely.
Researcher: And what are the exact criteria? Why do you prefer let's say CLT?
Mohammad: Based on our experience I guess.
Majid: Yes, and language is for communication, at the end people are supposed to be able to communicate.
Researcher: What are the advantages and the disadvantages of CLT?
Vahid: It follows the natural order of learning. It is similar to the way a child learns L1. It is authentic.
Majid: Learners become more fluent and expressive and even more confident. Students get familiar with real-life situations and functions so they can communicate better in real-life.

Moreover, the participants of the High and Mid groups argued that a good language teaching methodology needs to cover language sub-skills; this feature, however, was not among the criteria proposed by the participants of the Low group. There were similarities between the three focus groups, specifically between the High and Mid groups. Excerpt #2 shows the Mid group's argumentation.

Excerpt #2: Mid Group
Researcher: What are your criteria for evaluating a language teaching method? What type of language teaching method do you prefer? What are the characteristics of a good language teaching method? What do you think?
Nastaran: How much learners learn by each method.

Roz: Whenever the students can connect the things they learned to things that they have learned before ….
Rojan: I agree.
Researcher: You mentioned the importance of communication, so now consider CLT (Communicative Language Teaching). What are the advantages and the disadvantages of CLT?
Roz: Some students do not like to communicate, they do not like to speak in the class, so they stop or they get bored.
Rojan: Yes, the negative point is that it's not useful for the shy students, they don't learn that much and they don't enjoy the class.
Roz: The positive point is that the learners become independent in CLT.

Table 2 summarizes the participants' cognition of CLT advantages in six respects.

Themes	High Group	Mid Group	Low Group
Attention to communication and interaction	*	*	
Attention to meaning	*		
Attention to language functions in real-life situations	*	*	
Attention to authenticity	*		
Attention to fluency	*		
Attention to learners and their needs	*	*	

Table 2: Participants' cognition of CLT advantages

As Table 2 shows, participants of the High group believed that CLT has many advantages, including, among others, attention to communication, meaning, and authenticity and recognition of learners' needs. However, they specified one disadvantage for CLT. They contended that when CLT is applied, accuracy is sometimes sacrificed for the sake of fluency.

Participants of the Mid group believed that CLT has three main advantages: attention to communication and interaction, attention to language functions in real-life situations, and attention to learners and their needs. They also referred to one disadvantage for CLT. They pointed out that in their institute, middle-aged and elderly learners couldn't sometimes cope with CLT because they thought a foreign language should be taught through direct presentation of grammatical structures (as formulas) by their teacher; moreover, this group of learners preferred their teacher to translate all the texts and give them the L1 equivalent of all the new words.

Participants of the Low group stated that they had heard about CLT in the Teacher Training Course (TTC) that they had taken in their pre-service education. However, they said that they did not have any information about CLT, its features, its advantages, and its disadvantages. Their only knowledge was that the teaching methodology applied in their teaching context was based on the communicative approach to language teaching.

Classroom Activities

Panelists of the High group maintained that whole-class work, group work, pair work, and individual work are all useful and that a combination of the three should be employed. They said that the decision they made in this regard depended on various factors such as the number of learners in a class, learners' personality, and the nature of the task. They added that pair work and group work are useful since they have the potential to encourage learners to communicate and interact with each other. However, they mentioned that pair work was the dominant mode in their own classes.

Similarly, panelists of the Mid group believed that whole-class work, group work, pair work, and individual work are all useful (Excerpt #3). They further argued that pair-work is more preferable since it has the potential to increase the amount of STT (Student Talking Time). Excerpt #3 partly manifests their beliefs.

Excerpt #3: Mid Group
Researcher: Which of them do you think is more useful: whole-class work, group work, pair work, or individual work? And why?
Rojan: All of them.
Leili: Pair work is important because they will have more time to talk, especially shy students.
Roz: I like pair-work.
Rojan: We should see what they are doing … Based on the students' needs we decide. But pair work is the best way.
Nastaran: Yes, but sometimes I prefer to do a whole-class activity as a warm-up or as engagement …. .
Researcher: Considering ESA (Engagement, Study, Activation) as the main stages of a lesson, which activities are suitable at each of these stages?
Leili: Group work can be used for engagement.
Rojan: Sometimes at engagement, I use group work and even pair work and then every group or pair can share their ideas with the whole-class.
Nastaran: For study, I prefer individual work.

Likewise, panelists of the Low group contended that whole-class work, group work, pair work, and individual work are all useful. However, they added that they sometimes faced problems in pair work and group work. According to them, one problem with the assignment of pair work was that one learner sometimes talked all the time while the others did not participate in task performance; likewise, when they assigned group work, one learner or two tended to be dominant in the group and the other learners did not talk at all. The second problem they highlighted was the learners' overuse of their L1 in pair work and group work. Their third problem was the impossibility of being able to monitor all the groups or pairs at the same time, especially in large classes. Excerpt #4 shows part of this group's perception.

Excerpt #4: Low Group
Researcher: Which of them do you think is more useful: whole-class-work, group-work, pair-work, or individual work? And why?
Naghmeh: I think pair-work is so useful because students have a chance to speak. Also peer-correction is a good thing that happens in pair work. Group work is good too, because students can share their ideas. I prefer group work and pair work. But there is a problem with pair work, some students don't do anything …. .
Researcher: Considering ESA (Engagement, Study, Activation) as the main stages of a lesson, which activities are suitable at each of these stages?
Naghmeh: I think for engagement we need more than one student, so whole-class work and sometimes pair work. But whole-class work is the best for engagement …. .

Saba: I personally prefer group work for engagement, because whenever I try whole-class work for engagement, it turns into a chaos…. .

Skills and Sub-skills

One of the panelists of the High group believed that all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) are equally important. One of them pointed out that productive skills (speaking and writing) are more important than receptive skills (listening and reading). The other two participants argued that speaking is the most important. However, all the four panelists of the High group agreed that the sub-skills (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation) are equally important. These beliefs are partly reflected in Excerpt #5.

Excerpt #5: High Group
Researcher: Which of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) do you think is/are more important? And why?
Mohammad: Productive skills are more important than the receptive ones, writing and speaking.
Saeed: speaking.
Vahid: When it comes to the student-oriented classes, then we should do needs-analysis. But speaking is more important.
Majid: Yes, it depends on the needs of students. But they are all equally important.
Researcher: Which of the sub-skills, like vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, do you think is/are more important? And why?
Mohammad: All of them are equally important.
Majid: Personal preference: pronunciation. But I agree with him that all are important.
Panelists of the Mid group partly agreed that all the four language skills along with the language sub-skills are important. However, they disagreed about the degree of their importance. Panelists of the Low group gave weight to speaking and listening as the most important language skills. In addition, they disagreed with each other about the most important sub-skill (see Excerpt #6).

Excerpt #6: Low Group
Researcher: Which of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) do you think is/are more important? And why?
Naghmeh: I think writing and speaking are important …. .
Sepehr: They are all equal. They must be integrated. All of them are important.
Sadaf: No, I think listening goes first. When you are a child, you learn by listening.
Naghmeh: But it may be different when you are grown up and our students are not children, they are adults.
Saba: I disagree; I think listening is the most important …. .
Researcher: Which of the sub-skills (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation) do you think is/are more important? And why?
Sepehr: I think grammar, because first of all you have to be able to make correct sentences.
Naghmeh: They are all important. I had students who were good at grammar but they were not good at vocabulary and pronunciation. So they could not speak …. .
Saba: I don't agree. I think vocabulary goes first, then grammar and then pronunciation …. .

Teacher Roles

Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of the participants' cognition regarding an EFL teacher's roles in the classroom. The four themes emerging out of their discussion vary from the consideration of teachers as facilitators to role models.

Themes	High Group	Mid Group	Low Group
Facilitator and aid	*	*	
Manager	*	*	*
Assessor	*		
Source of knowledge	*	*	
Role model			*

Table 3: Participants' cognition regarding an EFL teacher's roles in the classroom

As it is indicated in Table 3, the panelists of the three focus groups observed that classroom management is one of the roles of an EFL teacher. Excerpt #7 reflects High-group participants' beliefs about a teacher's role. They maintained that a teacher should function as a facilitator, manage, and assessor of students' learning.

Excerpt #7: High Group
Researcher: What are the teacher's roles in the class?
Mohammad: Mainly a facilitator, a teacher is not supposed to be a teacher all the time… . The teacher is also a manager who manages everything.
Vahid: Yes, the teacher is not the only performer in the class. He has to be more of an orchestrator, he designs a plan and students play roles within that. He is not most of the time only a knowledge transmitter.
Saeed: I agree with Vahid. I believe it depends on the class, the level, the lesson, and different stages in the class… A teacher can play different roles in the class.
Majid: I agree with all of them. I mean a teacher is sometimes a teacher, sometimes a facilitator, sometimes just a manager, sometimes a friend and sometimes an assessor, and sometimes a participant …. .

In addition, the participants of the High and Mid groups believed that being a facilitator is one of the roles of an EFL teacher (Excerpt #8). They regarded a teacher as a source of knowledge as well as a manager. The participants of the Low group, however, did not emphasize all these roles (Excerpt #9). Rather, they emphasized the managerial and role-model functioning of a teacher.

Excerpt #8: Mid Group
Researcher: What are the teacher's roles in the class?
Roz: A source of knowledge I guess. A trustworthy source of knowledge.
Nastaran: A manager.
Rojan: Yes, manager is the most important.
Roz: A good friend who facilitates learning.
Leili: Being a monitor.

Excerpt #9: Low Group
Researcher: What are the teacher's roles in the class?
Sepehr: Managing the time and the class, teacher is a manager. A teacher also is an actor.
Naghmeh: And being a role model.
Saba: I think most of the time a friend.
Sadaf: I agree with my friends.

Overall, there were similarities in the three focus groups' beliefs, specifically between the High and Mid groups.

Learner Roles

Table 4 gives a picture of the participants' cognition regarding EFL learners' roles in the classroom:

Themes	High Group	Mid Group	Low Group
Participating in pair work and group work	*	*	
Helping their peers	*	*	
Correcting their peers (peer-correction)	*		
Evaluating their peers' learning	*		
Evaluating their teacher' performance	*		

Table 4: Participants' cognition regarding EFL learners' roles in the classroom

As Table 4 shows, the panelists of High and Mid groups argued that participation in pair work and group work is one of the roles of an EFL learner. Moreover, the participants of High and Mid groups believed that helping other learners is one of the roles of an EFL learner. Participants of the High group added that peer-correction, peer-assessment, and teacher evaluation are other roles of an EFL learner. Participants of the Low group, however, did not assign any role to learners, arguing that learners do not play any specific roles in an EFL classroom. Excerpts #10-12 manifest the three groups' cognition of learner roles.

As Excerpt #10 shows, participants of the High group attributed many roles to learners such as taking part in group acidities, evaluating teachers, evaluating peers, and helping peers with learning.

Excerpt #10: High Group
Researcher: What are learners' roles in the class?
Vahid: There is interaction between learners and between teacher and learners. The learners communicate with each other and with the teacher. The leaner is not just a receiver. Learners have a say in the classroom and everything is determined based on the analysis of learners' needs and wants. They can provide other learners and the teacher with feedback. They can assess other learners and the teacher. They correct other learners' errors. They perform in the class.
Majid: Yes, and they correct other learners' errors. They take part in pair-work and group-work and they help their peers and group mates.
Mohammad: I agree.
Saeed: Yes, the classes are learner-centered rather than teacher-centered, and yes, I agree.

Unlike the High group, the roles assigned to learners by the Low group were limited to learners' participation in activities and peer help (Excerpt #11). They lost sight of peer evaluation, teacher evaluation, and peer correction

Excerpt #11: Mid Group
Researcher: What are learners' roles in the class?
Roz: They are helpers. They can help their classmates. They can learn from each other. They can cooperate with each other. In pair-work and group-work.
Nastaran: And they must be responsible for their own learning.
Roz: And they are the source of earning money.

Participants of the Low group had no clear perception about the multiple roles of language learners. As the excerpt below manifests, their cognition was limited to the general statement that learners play the main role.

Excerpt #12: Low Group
Researcher: What are learners' roles in the class?
Sepehr: By learners, you mean students?

Researcher: Yes

Sadaf: That's a difficult question.

Naghmeh: They play the main role. Everything is up to them.

Sepehr: They are the reason we have a job.

Findings from this study revealed EFL teachers' cognition of various aspects of language teaching methodology. In general, the participants of this study had a conceptual awareness of the general nature of language teaching methodology and its main components such as teaching activities and the roles of teachers and learners. Teachers in all the three groups highlighted attention to communication and learners' needs as important criteria for the evaluation of language teaching methodology. As these two criteria lie among the main tenets of CLT, it can be argued that the teachers' general approach to teaching was CLT oriented. Also, their belief in these two criteria might be due to their teacher training courses and their teaching in a language institute with CLT as its dominant approach.

Among the three groups, participants of the High and Mid groups manifested a more informed perception of the main features of CLT, its advantages, and its disadvantages. The rise of interest in CLT since its advent in the 1970s and teacher training courses embodying the principles of CLT has raised language teachers' awareness of this approach to language teaching. The findings about teachers' awareness and positive attitude toward CLT principles reported in this study are in agreement with those found in other contexts (Mangubhai, Marland, Dashwood, & Son, 2005; Miller & Aldred, 2000; Pham, 2004; Phan, 2004). For instance, the student teachers in Miller and Aldred's study maintained that CLT helped students learn English more actively and be more engaged in classroom activities. Similarly, Mangubhai et al. found that teachers had internalized most of the elements of CLT. In another study conducted in the context of Iran, Rahimi and Naderi (2014) found that EFL teachers were greatly familiar with CLT and its pros and cons. However, in the present study, the participants of the Low group had an inaccurate perception of CLT principles. Although they were not cognizant of the theoretical assumptions of CLT, in practice, they applied most of the CLT techniques in their classrooms. The participants of the High and Mid groups knew that CLT was a learner-centered approach, a fact highlighted in the literature as one of the main features of CLT (Brown, 2007; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Savignon, 2002). These participants also knew that CLT was based on communication and interaction between learners, which is another key feature of CLT (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007; Richards, 2006; Savignon, 2002). However, the findings from the current study on teachers' familiarity with CLT in Iran are not in agreement with those reported in other contexts, such as Gahin and Myhill (2003) and Shawer (2010), which found teachers to be unfamiliar with CLT principles. These contradictory findings might show the impact of the teaching context on teachers' cognition of CLT.

Using pair work and group work is one of the characteristics of CLT-based classes (Richards, 2006). Participants of all the three groups reported on the use of pair work and group work in their teaching practices. Although a large body of research on pair work and group work has focused on learners' perceptions, teachers' perceptions have been investigated in only a few studies (Chang, 2011; Pacek, 1996; Zheng & Borg, 2014). Chang's study in Taiwan's EFL setting showed that the teachers were in favor of group/pair work as one of the five principles of CLT. Investigating the beliefs of EFL teachers in China, Zheng and Borg found that the teachers regarded pair and group work as the main types of communicative activities. In the same vein, in an earlier study, Pacek's survey of 43 English teachers in Japan showed that most of them preferred to include pair and group work in their language classes. The teachers' use of pair and group activities are in line with the general conception that the use of these activities, among others, has gained acceptance and is widely included in language-teaching programs (Savignon, 2002).

While Richards (2006) believes that CLT pays equal attention to all four skills, only the participants of the High group assumed the equal importance of all four language skills. By contrast, the Low-group teachers mostly preferred the oral skills of speaking and listening. This divergence was, to some extent, expected. Being more experienced in teaching, the High-group teachers had a better understanding of the need for the four language skills and had the experience of teaching advanced level learners who needed all language skills, including reading and writing, for communication in both general English contexts and academic contexts. On the other hand, the Mid and Low group teachers preferred oral communication skills. Their narrower conception of language skills involved in communication may be rooted in the wrong belief that written skills are not central to CLT. As the findings show, the High group teachers' emphasis on the four language skills is more compatible with CLT's aim to foster both oral and written skills (Duff, 2014). Also, a case study conducted by Shawer (2013) on two experienced teachers with 14 and 17 years of teaching experience showed that they confirmed that CLT entailed the teaching of the four language skills in an integrated way.

Regarding teachers' roles, it was found in this study that the participants of the High group assigned many roles to teachers, including the role of teachers as facilitators, which is the key role emphasized in CLT (Brown, 2001; Richards, 2006). Besides, it was found that the Low group had comparatively a limited understanding of teacher roles by ignoring facilitating and evaluating roles attributed by the other two groups of teachers. As to learners' roles, the Low-group teachers failed to attribute any clear roles. Teacher roles in language teaching, including in CLT, have been described or investigated in other studies. These roles are assumed to be needs analyst, counselor, communication facilitator, and group process manager (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Apparently, unlike the more experienced teachers, the roles assumed by the teachers in the Low group were too limited to encompass all these roles. Since teachers' cognition of teacher roles is broadened with their teaching experience, the variable of teaching experience can be contented as an influence on the teachers' cognition of aspects of teaching methodology, including teacher roles.

Overall, in this study, the analysis of teacher cognition reflected in panel discussions indicates that different factors might influence the participants' cognition of language teaching methodology and its components. These factors include the panelists' pre-service education, learning experience (experience as learners), teaching experience (experience as teachers), teaching practice, rules of the teaching context, and learners' expectations. Participants of the study sometimes directly referred to what they had been taught in the pre-service teacher training course and its impact on their cognition of teaching methodology. This happened more often in the panel discussions of the Low group in comparison with the other two groups. This substantiates previous findings that teacher education has an effect on teachers' cognition (Barnard & Burns, 2012). Learning experience was another factor in shaping the teachers' methodology cognition. They talked about their own experiences as learners. The importance of this factor has been featured in related studies. For example, Barnard and Burns (2012) and Borg (2009a) argue that learning experience has an influence on teachers' cognition. Therefore, the findings of this study are in line with the existing studies on this issue.

Besides learning experience, participants of the study most often referred to their own teaching experience and its positive and negative effects on their cognition when they were asked to articulate their perception of teaching methodology. In the same vein, it is reported in the literature that teaching experience has an effect on teachers' cognition (Barnard & Burns, 2012; Borg, 2009a). Moreover, participants of the study regarded their teaching practice as a variable in shaping their cognition of teaching methodology. Unlike this study, Baleghizadeh and Yassami (2010) found that it is teacher cognition that has an impact on

teaching practice; however, it seems that teaching practice can also affect teachers' cognition. It seems that there is a mutual relationship between teachers' cognition and their teaching practice as they both can affect each other, as argued by Borg (2009a). Nevertheless, there sometimes seemed to be a conflict between what the participants articulated as their cognition and what they articulated as their practice. Apparently, such a mismatch could happen due to contextual factors and constraints affecting teachers' actual teaching practice.

Conclusion and Implications

Although the number of studies on EFL teachers' cognition has increased in recent years, few studies have explored the EFL teachers' cognition of language teaching methodology, specifically in an EFL context. To address this gap in the literature, the present study investigated EFL teachers' cognition of language teaching methodology in general and CLT in particular. Although the participants were divided into three focus groups based on their teaching experience, the panelists of all three groups often shared a set of core beliefs. Seemingly, regardless of their teaching experience, EFL teachers have several common beliefs about language teaching methodology. Moreover, the participants of each focus group seemed to hold similar cognition about most of the issues they raised about the components of teaching methodology.

While the findings show several similarities between the three teacher groups regarding the cognition of different components of methodology, it can be concluded from the findings that with an increase in the participants' experience, i.e. from Low to Mid and from Mid to High, their cognition becomes more compatible with both the tenets and recent findings of research on teaching methodology and CLT. Furthermore, the teachers in the High group were more competent in articulating their beliefs in comparison with those in the other two groups. Likewise, the teachers in the Mid group were better able to verbalize their understanding of teaching methodology compared with those in the Low group. In general, it seems that more experienced EFL teachers have a more broadened cognition of language teaching methodology and can better verbalize their cognition. Hence, it can be concluded that there is a link between teacher cognition and teaching experience. Despite differences, however, EFL teachers in the context of the study had a detailed understanding of many aspects of language teaching methodology in general and CLT in particular. With regard to teaching practice, there were at times mismatches between what EFL teachers articulated as their cognition and what they reported on their teaching practice. This may be due to teachers' educational background, language learning experience, and teaching experience, which can influence their ability to translate their cognition into their teaching practice.

Although the study was conducted on a small scale and in a single language institute, its findings might have implications for teacher educators and EFL teachers. Pre-service teacher education may not be sufficient for preparing EFL teachers for a lifetime of language teaching; consequently, continued professional development is necessary. Because of the crucial role of teachers, sufficient attention should be paid to in-service teacher education. Therefore, the results of this study can inform teacher educators about more effective in-service programs in order to better expand teachers' cognition about teaching methodology, particularly CLT. EFL Teachers should also be made aware that developing their cognition is one of the ways that can help their professional development. Hence, teacher education programs can directly address a sound cognition regarding teaching methodology and its components like the role of teachers, learners, and classroom activities as a means of professional development for EFL teachers. Furthermore, in both pre-service and in-service programs, teacher educators can introduce different ways of developing such cognition

including participation in conferences and seminars, attending in-service courses and workshops, reflection on their own teaching practice, doing classroom research, and discussing their cognition with other teachers.

This study explored teachers' cognition of language teaching methodology in view of their teaching experience. However, there are many other variables that may contribute to the construction of and variation in teacher cognition. Future research might be focused on the effects of different teacher education programs, both pre-service and in-service, on EFL teachers' cognition of teaching methodology. The effects of teachers' educational background and gender on their cognition might be investigated. Further studies might be conducted on the role of teachers' classroom action research on their cognition of teaching methodology. Finally, the main themes derived from teachers' cognition in this study might be observed in a larger sample of teachers as well, because it is possible that teachers who are investigated in a larger-scale study will hold cognition about language teaching methodology different from the one reported in the present study.

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