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## Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of teacher self-disclosure

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### ABSTRACT

Teacher self-disclosure (TSD) as a communication behavior can influence students' learning by increasing their engagement and class participation as well as helping them establish effective interpersonal relationships. Owing to its context-sensitive and culture-dependent nature, however, TSD topics, purposes, and considerations may vary cross-culturally. This study was an attempt to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD as well as to investigate whether there was a significant difference between male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD. To this end, the Appropriateness of Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale was distributed among 68 Iranian EFL teachers (34 females and 34 males) from six language institutes. The results of the study indicated the extent to which the Iranian EFL teachers perceived TSD topics, purposes, and considerations to be appropriate or inappropriate. Furthermore, the study found convergence and divergence between male and female teachers' perceptions in terms of the topics used in TSD, the purposes TSD serves in classroom, and considerations the teachers take into account when practicing TSD. The results of the study suggest that Iranian EFL teachers can practice TSD as a pedagogical tool to enhance learning although they should be wary of its consequences in some aspects as TSD is contingent upon context and culture.

**Keywords:** appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure; EFL, self-disclosure purposes; self-disclosure topics; teacher self-disclosure

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## Introduction

The act of teaching is a form of communication (Wubbels & Brekelmans, 2005). The way teachers communicate with students, how they monitor such communication, to what extent such communication can influence students' motivation and learning outcomes, and what perceptions teachers and students hold have been areas addressed so far by the researchers (e.g., Andersen, Norton, & Nussbaum, 1981; Hosek, 2011; Mazer, 2013; She & Fisher, 2002). According to Anderson et al. (1981, p. 390), "perceptions of teacher communication behaviors make a difference in student perceptions of effective teaching". In their meta-analysis of the findings of 81 studies on the relationship between teachers' verbal or nonverbal immediacy and students' learning outcomes, Witt, Wheelless and Allen (2004) argued that teachers' verbal immediacy was found to correlate with students' perceived learning and affective learning. In addition to having a considerable impact on cognitive aspects of learning, teacher communication behaviors can enhance students' engagement or on the contrary bring about their alienation from the learning process. Poor teacher communication behaviors, as pointed out by Alexander (1997), bring about negative emotions on the part of the learners. In this regard, researchers (e.g., Chory, Horan, Carton & Houser, 2014) found that some of the students' feelings of injustice and negative emotional responses can be attributed to their teacher's less effective communication behavior. Mazer, McKenna-Buchanan, Quinlan and Titsworth (2014) maintained that when teachers lack immediacy and display poor communication competence, students have negative emotional reactions. Arguing along the same lines, Titsworth, Quinlan and Mazer (2010) found that teachers' effective communication behaviors are related to students' positive perceptions of the classroom environment. The authors concluded that the communication behaviors preferred on the part of the teachers have a close bearing on the students' higher or lower level of emotional engagement. Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014a) held that the degree of feelings of closeness and support the learners receive from the learning environment help them to develop coping skills manifested as resilience in confrontation with unwelcoming stressful learning conditions.

Underscoring that teachers need training in specific communication skills, Gillies (2004) found that teachers with communication skills could engage in mediated-learning interactions, ask more questions, and make fewer disciplinary comments. Other researchers (e.g., Frymier & Houser, 2000; Gorham, 1988) found that using personal examples, using humor, and calling students by their first names are communication behaviors that help create a more immediate classroom environment.

In addition to talking to cover the course content, teachers sometimes share personal stories, beliefs, and experiences in interaction with their students (Nussbaum, Holladay, & Comadena, 1987). Such communication is called teacher self-disclosure. TSD as an effective communication behavior (Chesebro, 2002) takes place mainly in the classroom. Sorensen (1989, p. 260) defined teacher self-disclosure as "teacher statements in the classroom about the self that may or may not be related to the subject content, but reveal information about the teacher that students are unlikely to learn from other sources". Analyzing teacher self-disclosure of fifty-seven college teachers, Downs, Javidi and Nussbaum (1988) found that the teacher self-disclosure is relevant to course content and the teachers use it to clarify course material. In a recent study, Webb (2014) found that

TSD is used for such different purposes as establishing interpersonal relationships, increasing credibility, explaining course content, and keeping students' attention.

Researchers investigating the concept of TSD advocated the contributing role TSD can play within different aspects of teaching and learning. Goldstein and Benassi (1994) found that there is a positive relation between TSD and class participation. Zhang, Shi, Luo and Ma (2008) argued that TSD positively influences teacher-student relationship and classroom communication, and enables students to have more active classroom participation. Tobin (2010) stated that in order for teachers to employ affective teaching practices and maintain an effective teaching persona, they could make use of self-disclosure strategically when it is considered a better rhetorical choice. In the same vein, Sanders (2014) found that TSD is crucial in establishing functional student-teacher relationship and students perceive TSD to be an important communication strategy that can be brought into the learning experience.

The researchers maintained that technology due to its crucial role in communication and relationship building can considerably affect the process and our understanding of self-disclosure. Exploring TSD in technology-embedded learning environments, Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007, 2009) found teachers who use Facebook as a tool for TSD report higher levels of teacher competence, trustworthiness, and caring. They argued that students who have access to TSD on Facebook display higher levels of motivation. Researchers (e.g., DiVerniero & Hosek, 2011; Gibbs, Ellison, & Lai, 2011; Imlawi & Gregg, 2014) have argued that when teachers share private information related to the course and humorous posts in the social networks, students' engagement and teacher credibility significantly increase.

Other studies found that the use of TSD can be influenced by such factors as the field of study, and the range of different topics. Zhang et al. (2008) argued that teachers of science majors, in comparison with teachers of social science majors, report significantly higher degrees of acceptance of the impact of TSD on classroom participation. In another study, exploring teachers' attitudes toward the use of TSD, Zhang (2010) found that for three reasons the teachers refrain from disclosing in such topics as beliefs, and religious and political affiliation. The reasons are fear of (1) disagreeing with their students, (2) the possibility of students' having limited understanding or misunderstanding, and (3) the risk of inciting conflicts with parents and the school administration.

Taken together, reviewing the studies dealing with the concept of TSD can shed light on the fact that teacher self-disclosure as a multidimensional communication behavior is likely to increase learners' participation, boost effective learning, and improve social relationships. However, due to the fact that TSD is a cross-culturally dependent and sensitive concept, it should be used judiciously and reflectively with thoughtful restraint and genuine openness (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008; Zhang, Shi, & Hao, 2009). The present study was motivated by the dearth of research on TSD in an Iranian context. The objective of the study was to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure. In fact, teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of three aspects of TSD including TSD topics, purposes, and considerations were explored. Also, an attempt was made to find out if there was a significant difference between male and female teachers'

perceptions of appropriateness of the above-mentioned aspects of TSD. In effect, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure?
2. Is there any significant difference between male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure?

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The study used convenience sampling to choose a total of 68 Iranian EFL teachers (34 females and 34 males) from six language institutes. At the time of the study, the participants, ranging in ages from 26 to 33, had more than 5 years of teaching single-sex English classes at private language institutes in Yasouj, Iran. Of the participants, 44 teachers had MA in TEFL and English translation and 16 teachers had BA in three majors of English, that is, TEFL, English literature, and English translation. The remaining 8 teachers were six PhD candidates and two PhD holders in TEFL. They were teaching English to students in different levels of proficiency ranging from pre-intermediate to advanced levels.

### *Instrumentation*

The data were collected through the Appropriateness of Teacher Self-Disclosure Scale adopted from Zhang, Shi, Tonelson and Robinson (2009). The 20-item, 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very inappropriate) to 5 (very appropriate) is comprised of three dimensions that cover the topics of teacher self-disclosure, purposes for which teacher self-disclosure is used and considerations taken into account by teachers when they use self-disclosure. To establish validity, all items included in the questionnaire were reviewed by three PhD holders in TEFL. After the approval of validity of the instrument, it was pilot tested with 79 English language teachers with characteristics fairly similar to those who participated in the main study. Upon running Cronbach's Alpha model, the adequate Alpha index of 0.78 was obtained for the questionnaire, indicating that the reliability of the questionnaire was acceptable. Further, the results of factor analysis yielded the same factorial structure and item loading for the questionnaire as reported in Zhang et al. (2009).

To gather biographical information of the participants, the researchers added a page to the questionnaire comprised of some questions about gender, teaching experience, and university degree.

*Data collection*

The questionnaire accompanied by instruction about the objective of the study as well as about how to respond to the items was distributed among the participants in six language institutes. To insure that the participants had enough time to fill out the questionnaire, the researchers asked the participants to return the questionnaire within four days.

**Results**

*Teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD topics*

The results, as illustrated in Figure 1, indicated that the teachers viewed talking about their personal experiences/stories, giving information related to their family, relatives and friends, and sharing their personal opinions, interests or hobbies as appropriate TSD topics. In fact, 72% of the teachers perceived relating their personal experiences and stories to be appropriate TSD topics. Furthermore, sharing information related to their family, relatives and friends (63.2%), expressing personal opinions (85.7%), and talking about personal interests and hobbies (75.4%) were reported by the teachers as appropriate TSD topics.

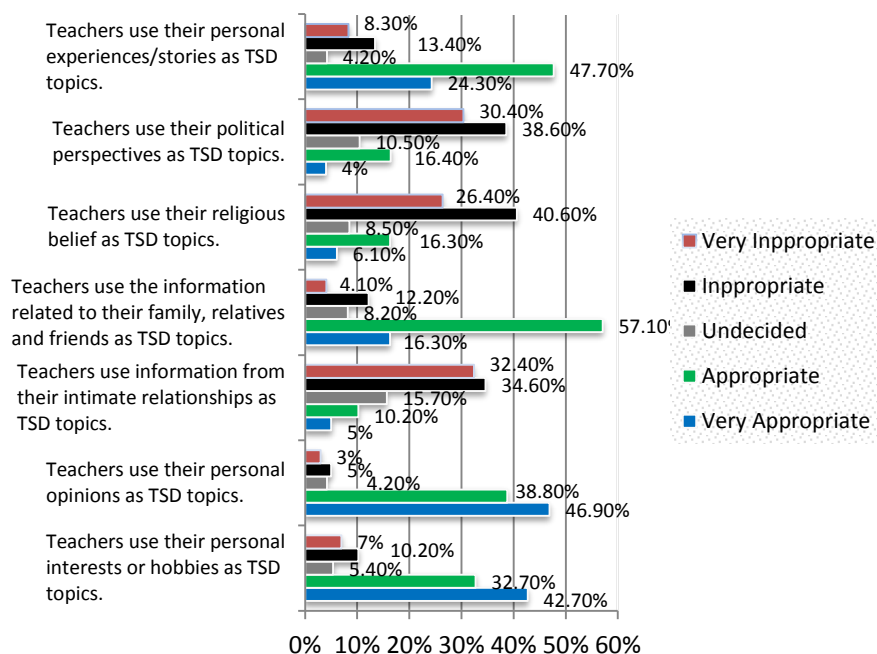


Figure 1. Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD Topics

However, topics including sharing political views (69%) and religious belief (67%) with students, and giving information from their intimate relationships (66%) were perceived to be inappropriate TSD topics.

#### *Teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD purposes*

The results presented in Figure 2 showed that the teachers agreed that such purposes as using TSD to entertain students (74.30%), to offer real-world examples (83.7%), to attract students' attention (79.6%), to set social role model (69.6%), to create a comfortable classroom environment (69.30%), to increase students' learning interests (85.5%), and to clarify teaching content (81.4%) were appropriate. However, while only 22.4% of the teachers used TSD to please themselves, more than half of them (56.7%) perceived this purpose to be inappropriate.

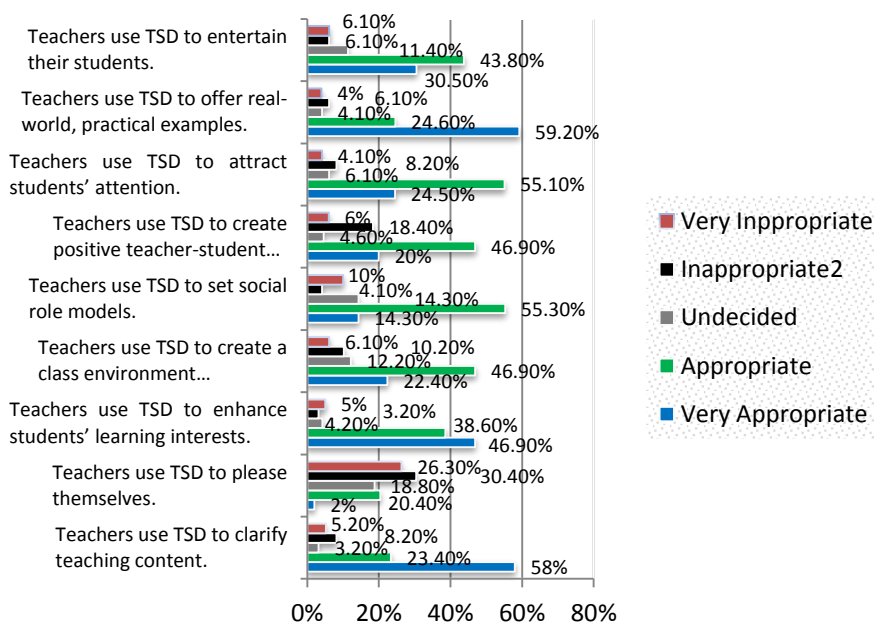


Figure 2. Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD Purposes

#### *Teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD considerations*

The results in Figure 3 illustrated that the teachers took into account various considerations as they intended to use TSD. 87.9% of the teachers believed that students' cultural background needed to be taken into account. Students' feelings and emotions (82.7%) and their grades or levels (79.6%) were also reported as appropriate considerations. As for students' gender, 67.4% of the teachers perceived it as an appropriate consideration, while about 29% believed it was not appropriate to pay attention to students' gender.

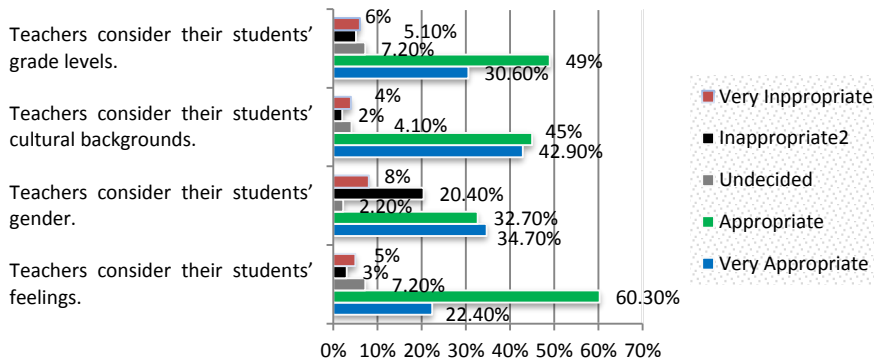


Figure 3. Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD Considerations

Overall, the teachers agreed on most of the topics, purposes and considerations to be appropriate aspects of TSD. Some topics, purposes, and considerations, however, were perceived to be inappropriate. Between 65% to 70% of the teachers did not agree with sharing political and religious views, and information related to their intimate relationships. Using TSD to please themselves (56.7%), and taking into account students' gender (29%) were reported as the inappropriate aspects of TSD.

#### *Difference between male and female teachers' perceptions*

The second research question was to find out if there was a significant difference between male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of teacher self-disclosure. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and the results of the Independent-Samples *t*-tests for the difference between perceptions of the male and female teachers with regard to appropriateness of TSD topics. As indicated, while the male and female teachers did not have significantly different perceptions of appropriateness of the items 1, 2, 3, 6, there was a statistically significant difference between their perceptions of appropriateness of items 4, 5, and 7. That is to say, the male teachers perceived these items to be more appropriate TSD topics.

Table 1  
*Male and Female Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD Topics*

	Male		Female		f	df	t	Sig.
	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean				
1. Teachers use their personal experiences/stories as TSD topics.	3.20	1.35	3.12	1.32	.132	46	.215	.830
2. Teachers use their political perspectives as TSD topics.	2.54	1.25	2.41	.92	6.0	46	.018	.696
3. Teachers use their religious belief as TSD topics.	2.54	1.21	2.62	1.17	.006	46	.242	.810
4. Teachers use the information related to their family, relatives and friends as TSD topics.	4.08	.88	3.33	1.04	2.79	46	2.68	.01*
5. Teachers use information from their intimate relationships as TSD topics.	2.66	.63	2.00	1.10	7.37	46	.009	.01*
6. Teachers use their personal opinions as TSD topics.	4.33	.70	4.37	1.10	.023	46	.204	.839
7. Teachers use their personal interests or hobbies as TSD topics.	4.33	.76	3.54	1.06	3.89	46	2.96	.05*

\* $p < .05$

In other words, as compared to the female teachers, the male teachers disclosed more information related to their family, relatives and friends ( $t(46) = 2.68, p = .01$ ), revealed more information from their intimate relationships ( $t(46) = .009, p = .01$ ), and used more personal interests or hobbies as TSD topics ( $t(46) = 2.96, p = .05$ ).

As for the male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD purposes, the results of the Independent-Samples  $t$ -tests, as illustrated in Table 2, indicated that only for the item 7 did the male and female teachers have statistically significant different perceptions ( $t(46) = 6.28, p = .000$ ).

Table 2  
*Male and Female Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD Purposes*

	Male		Female		f	df	t	Sig.
	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.				
1. Teachers use TSD to entertain their students.	3.54	1.17	3.95	1.04	.243	46	1.29	.201
2. Teachers use TSD to offer real-world, practical examples.	4.41	.82	4.45	.88	.001	46	.168	.867
3. Teachers use TSD to attract students' attention.	4.08	.92	3.70	1.08	.598	46	1.28	.204
4. Teachers use TSD to create positive teacher-student relationships.	3.33	.76	3.33	.86	.590	46	.000	1.00
5. Teachers use TSD to set social role models.	3.91	.71	3.91	.65	.168	46	.000	1.00
6. Teachers use TSD to create a class environment comfortable to students.	3.66	.81	3.75	1.39	5.75	46	.253	.801
7. Teachers use TSD to enhance students' learning interests.	4.83	.38	3.54	.93	21.29	46	6.28	.000*
8. Teachers use TSD to please themselves.	2.54	.97	2.87	1.11	.262	46	1.10	.277
9. Teachers use TSD to clarify teaching content.	3.70	1.60	4.08	1.13	8.09	46	.935	.355

\* $p < .005$

To put it another way, using TSD for the purpose of enhancing students' learning interests was perceived more appropriately on the part of the male teachers than the female teachers. However, for the items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, male and female teachers held approximately the convergent perceptions.

Table 3 shows the results for the male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of considerations that need to be taken into account by the teachers when they use TSD. For items 1 and 4, the male and female teachers' perceptions did not differ significantly. This means that both groups of the teachers agreed on considering students' grade levels and feelings when they employed TSD.

Table 3  
*Male and Female Teachers' Perceptions of Appropriateness of TSD*

	Male		Female		f	df	t	Sig.
	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.				
1. Teachers consider their students' grade levels.	4.16	.816	3.95	.858	.278	46	.861	.394
2. Teachers consider their students' cultural backgrounds.	4.58	.503	4.12	.740	.050	46	2.50	.016*
3. Teachers consider their students' gender.	3.50	1.09	4.16	1.10	.519	46	2.10	.041*
4. Teachers consider their students' feelings.	4.20	.508	4.00	.659	.030	46	1.22	.227

\* $p < .005$



However, considering students' cultural backgrounds (item 2) and students' gender (item 3) was perceived significantly different by the male and female teachers. That is to say, the male teachers considered their students' cultural background more than the female teachers did ( $t(46) = 2.50$ ,  $p = .016$ ) when they used TSD. By contrast, the female teachers took their students' gender into account more than the male teachers did ( $t(46) = 2.10$ ,  $p = .041$ ) when they employed TSD.

Taking together, the study found convergence and divergence between the male and female teachers' perceptions in terms of the topics used in TSD, the purposes TSD serves in classroom, and considerations the teachers take into account when practicing TSD.

## Discussion

Central to the professional lives of teachers is to ensure the best teaching and learning environment for learners (Swan, 2013). Such an environment can result in teaching effectiveness, which according to Rahimi and Karkami (2015) is a source of motivation for learning English. Effective classroom communication which reflects to what extent teaching and learning environment is successful can increase learners' interests and accordingly engage them both cognitively and emotionally in the course content. There is a consensus that learners' engagement can be triggered and fostered by effective communication behaviors that teachers display in the classroom. TSD as a communication behavior was found to be an effective instructional tool teachers could use to increase students' engagement and participation (Cayanus, 2004). The present study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD as well as to find out if there was a significant difference between the male and female teachers' perceptions. The study found that the teachers, when deploying TSD, chose different topics ranging from talking about their personal experiences/stories and personal interests or hobbies to sharing their personal opinions and information related to their family, relatives and friends. In contrast, the teachers refrained from presenting their political perspectives, sharing their religious beliefs, and giving information from their intimate relationships. The results suggest that the teachers' self-disclosure behaviors did not occur in a haphazard way, but rather the teachers were selective in adopting and showing a particular TSD behavior. It is speculated that Iranian EFL teachers teaching at language institutes display self-protective self-disclosure behaviors by not revealing their political perspectives and religious beliefs, and not talking about their intimate relationships. One possible reason can be ascribed to the market-driven managerial discourses advocated and disseminated in language institutes in Iran. In this regard, Rahimi and Askari Bigdeli (2014b) found that student retention was one of the crucial issues for language institutes in Iran and accordingly teaching methodologies, teachers' role identities, and their communication behaviors were driven or dictated by the advantage of the institutes rather than by teachers' own wishes. This means that teachers teaching in language institutes are working within a structured framework supported by managerial discourse. Under such conditions in which teachers' work is managed and regulated, it is logical to assume that Iranian EFL teachers eschew talking about issues that damage their relationship with students, parents and the institute. The results are in line with those of Zhang et al. (2009) who found that teachers avoid self-disclosure in cases where they think that disclosure can bring about problematic situations, or credibility damage. In this regard, the findings of the present study, in particular, are in accord with those of Zhang (2010) who found that the teachers refrained from disclosing in such topics as religious beliefs and political perspectives. In addition, the study makes a case for supporting McBride and Wahl (2005) who argued that teachers would not reveal private information that could possibly be used against them, despite the fact that it helped students increase their learning. One possible reason can be ascribed to the environment of teaching and learning in Iranian educational settings where it is uncommon to bring up political issues and

challenge the perpetuated status quo that can possibly lead to students entering into dialogues to question unequal power relationship (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2015).

The study also found that the teachers agreed on the idea that TSD be used more as an instructional tool than as a way to please themselves. In this case, the results of the study supported the findings of the other researchers (Downs, Javidi & Nussbaum, 1988; Sanders, 2014; Webb, 2014) who explored different purposes TSD served in the classroom. Despite the fact that TSD can contain various topics and also serve different purposes in the classroom, there exist a number of considerations teachers need to take into account if TSD is intended to have an effective impact on students' learning. In the present study, the teachers believed that, for the successful and effective practice of TSD, such considerations as students' feelings, their level and grade, and their gender need to be taken into account. This shows teachers are mindful in displaying particular self-disclosure behaviours (McBride & Wahl, 2005) and, as argued by Petronio (2002), they weigh pros and cons of revealing their private information, and consequently this cautious manner continues to be a key factor in teacher self-disclosure.

The second research question dealt with the difference between the male and female teachers' perceptions of appropriateness of TSD. Overall, mixed results were obtained in the present study. While there were some aspects of TSD (Tables 1, 2, and 3) upon which the male and female teachers did not have significantly different perceptions, both groups' perceptions differed for some other aspects of TSD. In this regard, the findings of the study are in conflict with those of the researchers (Consedine, Sabag-Cohen, & Krivoshekova, 2007; Dindia & Allen, 1992; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) who found that females are willing to disclose more information than males. However, the results make a case for supporting Petronio (2002) who argued that decision as to whether and when to employ TSD are driven by a host of such factors as culture, motivation, individual differences, situations, and gender. In the present study, the female teachers manifested less noticeable tendency to share their innermost compassion and ideas. They turned out to be more reserved and taciturn as compared with the male teachers who were more loquacious. This is reflective of a gender-specific difference of propensity to stay within the limits and circle of one's world of past experiences which may be emblematic of failure, frustration and weakness. In other words, silence or reluctance to express the affective and cognitive features alongside possible outlandish or disappointing memories could be justifiable in certain circumstances like educational atmospheres in Iran. The preponderance of male teachers' disclosure and rarity of female teachers' talks could also be attributable to some psychological traits which are entirely irrelevant to the local context- merely female genetic characteristics. What's more, the norms and values of religious affiliation and some kind of angelic celestial morality required of female teachers can be, to a great extent, guaranteed through adoption of an air of silent dignity and glory. Male teachers, however, are not under such a massive pressure of justification of an acceptable morally recognized picture in their immediate education setting. This can also be indicative of a society ridden by patriarchal rules and regulations, which divests female teachers of their own individuality and prompts them to clam up. Therefore, female teachers withhold personal information and viewpoints as a psychological move to ward off the potential pitfalls and their insecurities. The gender specific appeal to silence thus seems to be an indecent repercussion of asymmetry of male and female access to power and discourse of influence.

## Conclusion

The present study shed light on the fact that the concept of TSD is context-sensitive. The findings of the study suggested that the Iranian EFL teachers embark selectively on self-disclosure behaviors. The findings indicated the topics the teachers considered appropriate for self-disclosure

include personal experiences/stories, giving information related to their family, relatives and friends, and sharing their personal opinions, interests or hobbies. On the other hand, the teachers eschewed showing behaviors (e.g. sharing their political and religious beliefs) that are thought to lead to conflict in the classroom or threaten their job. This shows that instructional purpose of TSD is important to the teachers. In addition, the study revealed that TSD served different purposes in classes: to entertain students, to offer real-world examples, to attract students' attention, to set social role model, to create a comfortable classroom environment, to increase students' learning interests, and to clarify teaching content. Although TSD served different purposes in classrooms, the teachers did not practice them haphazardly and without consideration; rather, students' feelings and emotions, their grades or levels as well as their gender were important factors that were taken into consideration by the teachers. The study also found that teachers' self-disclosure behaviors were partly related and partly unrelated to gender.

The important implication of this study is that Iranian EFL teachers should shift away from the perception that language teaching and learning should be heavily driven by cognitive perspectives toward the perception that language learning is more of a social process. Learning environment and atmosphere created through effective TSD can, to a great extent, influence the cognitive dimension of learning and further lead learners to invest into language learning. As far as the findings of this study are concerned, TSD can be implemented by language teachers for different pedagogical purposes. However, although TSD has some pedagogical merits, it is an issue that needs to be treated and implemented meticulously. It should be noted that TSD is contingent upon culture and context. As a result, teachers should be mindful and take into consideration culture, feelings and emotions, grades or levels, and gender of learners when practicing TSD as a tool to boost learning.

This descriptive study tried to shed light on the status of TSD among the teachers teaching English at language institutes. Future studies can address the issue in the context of university to see to what extent TSD is practiced and implemented by professors. This line of investigation will be of significance since the teaching context and teacher-student relation are different in Universities and language institutes. The present study addressed TSD in single-sex classes while future studies may include mixed-sex classes to find out if there are differences in the way teachers use TSD.

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