

Navigating the Path of Service: Understanding the Motivations, Benefits, and Challenges of EFL Graduate Teaching Assistants

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivations, benefits, and challenges of English as a foreign language (EFL) graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) at Islamic Azad University (IAU), where the GTA program is nascent. Employing a cross-sectional qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 13 GTAs from Zahedan and Kerman campuses and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicate that many GTAs are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, such as a passion for teaching, alongside extrinsic factors like career advancement. Reported benefits include enhanced teaching skills, increased confidence, and valuable social connections. However, challenges included lesson preparation, classroom management, and student engagement. The insights highlight the need for comprehensive training programs addressing pedagogical skills and classroom dynamics. Additionally, mentorship systems and improved institutional policies are essential to support GTAs. These measures are critical for enhancing GTA effectiveness and improving education quality at IAU and similar institutions. This study contributes to understanding the multifaceted roles of GTAs within Iran's academic landscape.

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Introduction

Hiring graduate students as teaching assistants is a widespread practice in higher education, especially for undergraduate instruction (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021). Graduate students significantly enhance instructional quality and student engagement (Clark et al., 2021; Nichols & Lupascu, 2020). Despite variations in their titles and roles across countries and institutions (Justice et al., 2017), graduate students often occupy a liminal space (Riforgiate et al., 2022), allowing them to mediate between faculty and students and offer unique pedagogical insights (Clark et al., 2021).

In the literature, graduate students serving in teaching roles are referred to variously as graduate teaching fellows (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021), graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) (Justice et al., 2017), graduate tutors (Barrington, 2001), and moniteurs (Legrand, 2001). They represent a type of sessional or contingent academic staff employed temporarily without long-term contracts (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020). In this study, the term EFL graduate teaching assistants (EFL GTAs) is used to describe doctoral students at Islamic Azad University (IAU) who, upon enrollment in specialized academic programs, complete coursework and internships while receiving tuition waivers in exchange for their teaching contributions. As Iran's second-largest university, IAU recently launched a formal "Graduate Teaching Assistant" program as part of broader efforts to transform its educational system.

While the use of GTAs is growing globally (Pashaeypoor et al., 2024), their experiences remain understudied (Acheme & Biwa, 2023), and their voices are seldom documented (Clark et al., 2021), particularly in Iran. No systematic account exists of EFL GTAs' roles, challenges, or contributions within Iranian institutions. The few studies that do address GTAs in Iran have primarily focused on other disciplines. For instance, Pashaeypoor et al. (2024) investigated GTAs in nursing, identifying key barriers such as limited authority, inadequate supervision, and interference with academic progress, while highlighting intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and professor support as facilitators. Memarian et al. (2015) studied GTAs in science and engineering, emphasizing the need for formal pedagogical training, which led to the development of instructional workshops. Sedigh Maroufi et al. (2024) examined undergraduate satisfaction with GTAs in clinical anesthesia training, finding overall positive feedback, with no significant differences based on gender or semester.

Despite these contributions, research specifically focusing on EFL GTAs in Iran—particularly within IAU's emerging program—is nonexistent. This study therefore aims to explore the motivations, benefits, and challenges experienced by EFL doctoral students serving as GTAs at IAU. The following research questions guide the inquiry:

- 1) Are EFL doctoral students at Islamic Azad University motivated intrinsically or extrinsically to become GTAs?
- 2) What benefits do EFL doctoral students at Islamic Azad University obtain from being GTAs?
- 3) What challenges do EFL doctoral students at Islamic Azad University face while serving as GTAs?

Due to the lack of literature specifically addressing EFL GTAs, this study draws on broader GTA research across disciplines. The remainder of this introduction reviews prior findings on GTA motivations, benefits, and challenges to contextualize the investigation.

A brief note of previous works

Motivations for Becoming a GTA

Motivation, defined as the internal or external drive to pursue goals (Bandhu et al., 2024, Rezaei et al., 2025), plays a crucial role in understanding why graduate students assume teaching roles. GTAs' motivations are typically categorized as intrinsic—driven by personal interest and enjoyment—or extrinsic—driven by external rewards such as income or career advancement (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

GTAs motivated intrinsically often express a deep interest in teaching and a desire to support student learning. These individuals may view their role as an opportunity to develop professionally, refine pedagogical skills, and test the waters for an academic career (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021; Goodwin et al., 2023; Glorieux et al., 2024). Their concerns tend to revolve around improving instructional effectiveness and student outcomes (Razavi & Salehi, 2025).

Conversely, GTAs with extrinsic motivation may be more focused on financial security, tuition waivers, or curriculum vitae enhancement (Schunk, 2012; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020). For many, especially unfunded doctoral candidates, the GTA position is a financial necessity and a means of academic survival (Clark et al., 2021).

Context matters in determining motivational priorities. In the UK, financial need is often the primary driver (Park, 2004; Smallwood et al., 2022), while in the US, teaching is more frequently seen as preparation for an academic career. Institutions should therefore design GTA programs that foster intrinsic motivation by promoting autonomy, reflection, and meaningful teaching experiences (Hoessler & Godden, 2015). Intrinsically motivated GTAs tend to invest more in their roles, develop stronger teaching skills, and derive greater satisfaction (Muzaka, 2009). In contrast, extrinsically motivated GTAs may be less engaged in professional development (Park & Ramos, 2002).

Benefits of Being a GTA

Although limited, existing research indicates that GTAs derive various benefits from their roles. These include enhanced subject knowledge, improved pedagogical and interpersonal skills, and greater academic confidence (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020). Teaching experience helps GTAs think critically about their discipline, refine academic writing, and develop time management and communication skills.

According to Jordan and Howe (2018), GTAs value the opportunity to explain concepts, gain insights from students, and develop transferable skills that benefit both research and future employment. Teaching also provides a welcome balance to the isolation of doctoral research, renewing enthusiasm and commitment to academic work.

Similarly, Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2020) found that GTAs reported growth in teaching competencies and subject mastery due to lesson preparation and delivery. They also cited professional development, self-confidence, and institutional belonging as moderate yet meaningful outcomes.

Beyond financial compensation, the GTA role offers opportunities for leadership, mentorship, public speaking, and collaboration—all vital for academic and non-academic careers (Pashaeypoor et al., 2024; Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021). GTAs who engage deeply with their teaching responsibilities gain valuable pedagogical and interpersonal experience that extends beyond the classroom.

Challenges of Being a GTA

Despite the benefits, GTAs face significant personal, professional, and institutional challenges (Acheme & Biwa, 2023). These include balancing dual roles as student and instructor, limited authority, unclear responsibilities, and lack of pedagogical training (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021).

Common challenges across contexts include time pressures due to the demands of teaching and research (Javed & O'Brien, 2024), inadequate compensation, and ambiguous job expectations. GTAs often feel undervalued and unprepared, especially when teaching courses outside their specialization or with limited guidance.

Communication and cultural barriers particularly affect international GTAs, who may struggle with language proficiency, classroom norms, or cultural expectations (Winter et al., 2015). The sudden shift to online instruction during COVID-19 introduced further complications, including technical issues, student disengagement, and content adaptation (Acheme & Biwa, 2023; Riese et al., 2021).

Institutional contexts also shape GTA experiences. At some universities, teaching is prioritized over training or support, leaving GTAs to “sink or swim.” GTAs may be expected to fulfill teaching roles traditionally held by experienced faculty, often without adequate mentoring or clear boundaries (Jordan & Howe, 2018; Park, 2004).

These challenges highlight the need for universities to offer structured support, including orientation, mentorship, and pedagogical training. Equipping GTAs with the skills and confidence to navigate their dual roles can improve teaching quality and reduce burnout.

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a cross-sectional design. A cross-sectional design in qualitative research refers to a study approach where data are collected at a single point in time or within a short time frame, providing a snapshot of a phenomenon (Zheng, 2015). This design is used to explore and understand participants'

perspectives, experiences, or behaviors as they exist in a specific moment. It is particularly useful for identifying patterns, relationships, or themes within a defined context without tracking changes over time.

Participants

Thirteen EFL GTAs from the Faculty of Humanities at Islamic Azad University of Zahedan and Kerman were recruited using convenience sampling, selecting readily available volunteers (Creswell, 2012). The researchers applied the redundancy criterion to determine the sample size, concluding data collection once responses became repetitive and no new insights emerged (Morrow, 2005; Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009). To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms GTA1 to GTA13 were assigned.

As shown in Table 1, 8 participants were female (61.5%) and 5 were male (38.5%), with ages ranging from 26 to 52 (mean age $\approx$ 36). Participants represented Applied Linguistics ($n = 5$), English Language and Literature ($n = 3$), and Linguistics ($n = 5$). Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 3 academic terms: 8 had 3 terms, 4 had 1 term, and 1 had 2 terms. This diverse sample allowed for a well-rounded exploration of EFL GTAs' motivations, benefits, and challenges.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Profiles

ID	Gender	Age	Field of study	Teaching experience as GTA
GTA1	F	38	Applied Linguistics	3 terms
GTA2	F	38	Applied Linguistics	3 terms
GTA3	M	36	English Language and Literature	1 term
GTA4	F	26	English Language and Literature	1 term
GTA5	M	52	Linguistics	3 terms
GTA6	F	34	Linguistics	2 terms
GTA7	F	33	Applied Linguistics	1 term
GTA8	F	37	Linguistics	3 terms
GTA9	M	34	English Language and Literature	3 terms
GTA10	M	38	Applied Linguistics	3 terms
GTA11	F	48	Linguistics	1 term
GTA12	F	34	Linguistics	3 terms
GTA13	M	33	Applied Linguistics	3 terms

Interview Guide

A semi-structured interview guide was developed to elicit open-ended, in-depth responses, supported by prompts and probes to enrich data quality (Hatch, 2002). The guide had two parts: the first explained the study's purpose, gathered demographic data, and obtained informed consent, ensuring participants felt comfortable and aware of their rights. The second part included targeted questions exploring three themes: (1) motivations for becoming EFL GTAs, (2) benefits gained from the role, and (3) challenges faced while teaching. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate while maintaining consistency across interviews. The guide was created by the researchers and reviewed by two assistant professors of qualitative research from Islamic Azad University of Zahedan and Kerman to ensure clarity and relevance. A pilot study with two EFL GTAs was conducted prior to data collection, leading to minor revisions that improved question clarity and the overall flow of the interview process.

Data Collection

The first researcher conducted all interviews in quiet, private locations at Islamic Azad University campuses in Zahedan and Kerman. Before each session, participants were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses. They signed the interview guide, confirming consent and ethical agreement. Interviews lasted 8–15 minutes and were audio-recorded using Easy Voice Recorder (v2.9.0). Recordings were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. These detailed transcriptions formed the foundation for data analysis, allowing for a thorough and faithful representation of the participants' experiences and perspectives as EFL graduate teaching assistants.

Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014) to analyze and interpret the qualitative data. Recognized as a flexible and adaptable method (Fugard & Potts, 2020), thematic analysis allows researchers to identify and report patterns across qualitative datasets. A combination of deductive and inductive strategies was used (Patton, 2015). Deductive analysis, informed by existing theories, guided the examination of motivations for becoming EFL GTAs. Inductive analysis allowed new themes to emerge from the data concerning the benefits and challenges experienced by EFL GTAs.

The five-step model of Gao and Zhang (2020) structured the analysis. First, data were cleaned to remove irrelevant or unclear information. Then, codes were applied to identify recurring ideas, which were grouped into themes reflecting the parent categories: motivations, benefits, and challenges. These themes were organized and synthesized to align with the study's objectives.

MAXQDA 24 software was used to support the analysis (Rädker & Kuckartz, 2020). Its tools for coding, categorizing, and visualizing qualitative data enhanced the systematicity, credibility, and transparency of the process (Marjaei et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024). The use of MAXQDA facilitated the identification of consistent patterns and improved the reliability of findings. This rigorous approach ensured the study's alignment with best practices in qualitative research.

Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis is essential for research rigor. This study employed multiple strategies to enhance credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell, 2012; Fraenkel et al., 2009).

To establish credibility, the researchers used member checking and inter-coder agreement. Member checking involved returning themes to a subset of participants for feedback, ensuring accurate representation of their perspectives (Birt et al., 2016). For inter-coder agreement, an assistant professor in applied linguistics independently coded 20% of the data, yielding an 88% agreement rate using MAXQDA 24. This level of agreement is considered robust in qualitative research (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020).

Dependability and confirmability were addressed through an external audit by experts in qualitative research and a systematic review of all analysis stages by a second researcher, enhancing consistency and objectivity.

To ensure transferability, the study included thick descriptions of the participants, data, and research context. This detail enables readers to assess how findings may apply to other contexts or populations, supporting meaningful comparisons and broader relevance.

Results

This study explored the motivations, benefits, and challenges faced by doctoral students serving as EFL GTAs at Islamic Azad University, where the GTA program is still in its nascent stage. To address the objectives of the study, three research questions were posed. The findings related to each research question are presented below.

Motivations

The first research question explored the motivations of doctoral students for becoming EFL GTAs, revealing a dynamic interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic factors (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020). As shown in Fig. 1 (the Code Trends analysis output from MAXQDA 24), the graph illustrates the fluctuations in motivation types, indicated by the red line for extrinsic motivation and the blue line for intrinsic motivation. Some EFL GTAs demonstrate a balance between intrinsic enjoyment and practical goals, as reflected in the varying frequencies of each motivation type across different EFL GTAs. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of EFL GTA motivations, shaped by both personal aspirations and professional ambitions.

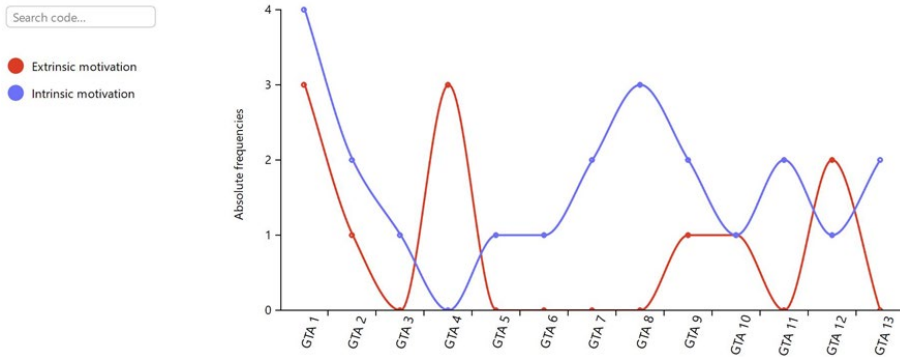


Figure 1. EFL GTAs Motivation Types

Intrinsic Motivation

The analysis of the data indicated that intrinsic motivation was as a significant driver for many EFL GTAs, characterized by their passion for teaching and their desire to make meaningful contributions to academia. GTA 1, for example, stated, *“During my PhD studies, I was eager to test my abilities in a larger academic setting, specifically a university environment. I truly wanted the opportunity to see if I could effectively teach in such a dynamic environment.”* Similarly, GTA 7 shared, *“My primary goal and motivation for becoming a GTA was my passion for teaching. So, I can say that my sole inspiration comes from my deep love and interest in the field of education.”* This intrinsic passion was echoed by GTA 9, who noted, *“Recognizing that higher education institutions are vital centers for growth and development in society, I was eager to contribute to this progress.”*

Other EFL GTAs emphasized their intrinsic enjoyment of teaching. GTA 12 explained, *“My interest in teaching has driven my studies over the years, as I want to see the impact of my efforts in the classroom. One of my primary goals in entering the doctoral program was to focus on teaching too.”* Additionally, GTA 5 described his enjoyment of teaching, stating, *“My goal in becoming a GTA is to apply my knowledge in a practical setting. I truly enjoy the university environment, as it allows me to engage with a group of dynamic and enthusiastic young people.”* These accounts underscore the intrinsic value many EFL GTAs associate with teaching and their dedication to fostering academic growth.

Extrinsic Motivation

Surprisingly, as the analysis of the interviews showed, the one extrinsic factor which shaped the motivation of some EFL GTAs related to career advancement and the practical benefits of the teaching assistantship. For instance, GTA 2 revealed, *“Most people pursuing a PhD aspire to secure a position at a university and view teaching in that environment as a viable career path. I was no exception. I realized that one of my motivations for becoming a teaching assistant was to establish a foothold for my future career.”* Similarly, GTA 6 highlighted the career benefits of the role, stating, *“One of the primary motivations for becoming a GTA was career advancement, as this experience is*

an important addition to our resumes. Now that I have this opportunity, I hope it will pave the way for me to join the university faculty and ultimately become a full-time professor.”

GTA 13 echoed this sentiment, emphasizing, *“Well, my goal is to secure a teaching position in my field of study while also building my resume at the university.”* Likewise, GTA 8 explained, *“After becoming a doctoral student, I found out that graduate students could also serve as GTAs. This opportunity motivated me to pursue this path. My ultimate goal is to become a professor and teach at this university.”* These responses illustrate how extrinsic motivations related to career progression and practical benefits often complement intrinsic aspirations.

Balancing Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Some EFL GTAs demonstrated a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, integrating their passion for teaching with practical career goals. GTA 3, for example, explained, *“My primary goal in becoming a teaching assistant was to gain valuable teaching experience at the university level.”* While this reflects an intrinsic motivation, the role’s practical benefits likely reinforced his commitment. Similarly, GTA 13 shared a dual perspective, noting, *“Since I’m a school teacher, I believe I can contribute meaningfully to the academic community,”* an intrinsic motivator, while also acknowledging the extrinsic benefit of building his resume, *“In addition to that, teaching in the academic setting gives me a chance to build my resume.”*

These examples highlight how intrinsic passion for teaching and extrinsic aspirations for career advancement can coexist, demonstrating the multifaceted nature of EFL GTA motivations. Together, these intrinsic and extrinsic factors reflect the complex interplay of personal and professional goals that influence doctoral students’ decisions to become EFL GTAs.

Benefits

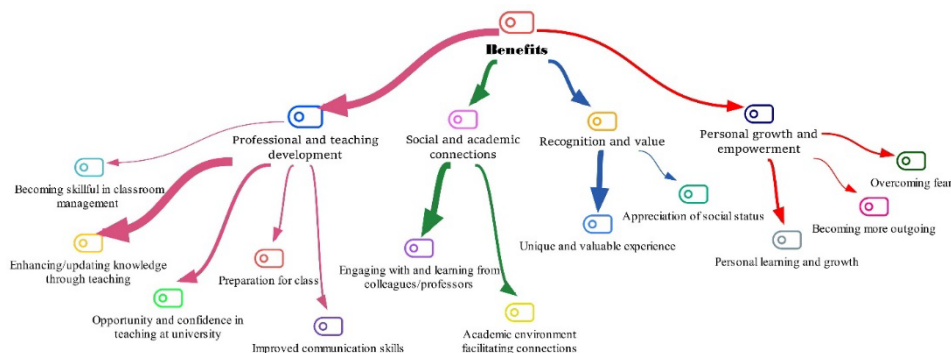
The second research question of the study examined the benefits that doctoral students at IAU gained from their roles as EFL GTAs. As the hierarchical code-subcode model in Fig. 2 shows, the EFL GTAs in this study perceived a variety of benefits from their teaching experiences. The most frequently cited benefit, represented by the thickest lines, is *professional and teaching development*, including enhancing and updating knowledge through teaching, gaining confidence and opportunity in university teaching, becoming skillful in classroom management, and preparing for classes. *Personal growth and empowerment* also featured prominently, with EFL GTAs highlighting personal learning and growth, overcoming fear, and becoming more outgoing as significant outcomes. *Social and academic connections* emerged as another key theme, emphasizing the value of engaging with and learning from colleagues and professors, alongside the supportive academic environment facilitating connections. Lastly, *recognition and value* was an important benefit, where EFL GTAs

appreciated the unique and valuable experiences, social status, and validation their role provided.

Professional and Teaching Development

Professional and teaching development emerged as the most frequently mentioned benefit, emphasizing the transformative nature of teaching as an EFL GTA. This theme reflects the

acquisition of essential teaching skills, enhanced academic preparation, and increased confidence. Many participants acknowledged that this role served as a cornerstone for their professional growth



and laid the foundation for their future careers in academia or related fields.

Figure 2. Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model of Benefits Gained

Note. The thicker lines show the higher frequency.

Enhancing/Updating Knowledge Through Teaching

Teaching as an EFL GTA was often seen as a mechanism for consolidating and updating knowledge. Participants frequently described how the teaching process deepened their understanding of core concepts. For instance, GTA 7 stated, *“Teaching as a GTA helps to consolidate the information in my mind, which is fantastic.”* This was also echoed by GTA 8, who mentioned, *“Teaching serves to update my own knowledge,”* highlighting the dual benefit of teaching both for the students and the instructor. Moreover, revisiting undergraduate-level knowledge was seen as an opportunity to strengthen foundational expertise.

Opportunity and Confidence in Teaching

The role offered EFL GTAs the chance to teach at a university level, often for the first time, which many saw as a crucial step in their professional journey. GTA 3 remarked, *“Teaching as a GTA has given me the opportunity to teach at a university and build confidence.”* Similarly, GTA 1 expressed, *“I now understand that I am capable of this role,”* showcasing how the experience fostered a sense of self-assurance and preparedness for future teaching roles.

Preparation for Class

The demands of teaching encouraged EFL GTAs to be proactive in their preparation. This often translated into habits that benefited both their teaching and personal learning. For instance, GTA 12 highlighted, *“I make it a priority to study before entering the classroom.”* Such preparation ensured they were well-equipped to address student queries and maintain their own academic rigor.

Improved communication skills and classroom management

Although less detailed in the extracts, participants noted improvements in their communication skills and the ability to manage a classroom effectively. These aspects underline the practical, day-to-day teaching competencies that EFL GTAs developed during their tenure.

Social and Academic Connections

Another significant theme revolved around the connections EFL GTAs built within their academic and social environments. These relationships often enriched their experiences and opened doors for professional collaborations and personal growth.

Engaging with and Learning from Colleagues/Professors

The opportunity to interact with colleagues and professors was highly valued. GTA 4 shared, *"The opportunity to engage with colleagues in a university environment is invaluable for me."* These connections not only facilitated knowledge exchange but also fostered a sense of belonging within the academic community.

Academic Environment Facilitating Connections

EFL GTAs appreciated how the academic setting enabled them to establish professional networks. GTA 13 reflected, *"Establishing connections provides access to essential platforms for collaboration with esteemed professors."* This subtheme highlights the role of the EFL GTA experience in fostering mentorship and collaborative opportunities, which are vital for career progression.

Recognition and Value

This theme captured the sense of acknowledgment and appreciation that EFL GTAs derived from their roles. Recognition and the value associated with the position often motivated participants to engage more deeply in their responsibilities.

Unique and valuable experience

Some EFL GTAs described their roles as transformative and unique. For instance, GTA 2 stated, *"I would never have had the chance to explore so many courses and challenge myself."* This comment underscores how the GTA experience often surpassed prior teaching or academic opportunities, providing them with a sense of fulfillment and growth.

Appreciation of Social Status

Being an EFL GTA elevated participants' sense of social standing. As GTA 7 expressed, *"I really appreciate the social dimension and rank that comes with being a GTA."* This reflects the societal and institutional recognition associated with their role, which many found rewarding.

Personal Growth and Empowerment

Beyond professional and social benefits, the EFL GTA experience also contributed significantly to participants' personal development. This theme captured how EFL GTAs overcame challenges, gained confidence, and experienced growth in various dimensions of their lives.

Personal Learning and Growth

The role allowed participants to develop self-confidence and explore their potential. GTA 8 noted,

"Becoming a GTA has significantly enhanced my self-confidence and sparked my creativity." This comment highlights how the experience served as a platform for self-discovery and creative expression.

Overcoming Fear

For a couple of EFL GTAs, initial apprehensions about teaching transformed into confidence over time. GTA 9 stated, *"Previously, I was very anxious about teaching, but now I see that this fear has disappeared."* This shift demonstrates the empowering nature of the EFL GTA role, helping participants confront and overcome their anxieties.

Becoming More Outgoing

While less detailed in the extracts, one participant (GTA 6) mentioned becoming more outgoing as a result of her interactions with students and colleagues. This subtheme suggests that the EFL GTA experience encouraged greater social engagement and adaptability in professional settings.

All in all, these insights highlighted that the EFL GTA role not only fosters professional expertise but also contributes to personal empowerment, social networks, and recognition, making it a transformative experience.

Challenges

The third research question of the study addressed the challenges that doctoral students at IAU faced in their roles as EFL GTAs. As the hierarchical code-subcode model in Fig. 3 shows, the EFL GTAs in this study experienced some challenges in their teaching experiences. These challenges can be categorized into two main themes: *Preparation and engagement challenges* and *classroom management challenges*. Preparation and engagement challenges encompass issues such as uncertainty in selecting teaching materials and methods, late student registration, and stress during initial days as an EFL GTA. These factors highlight the difficulties EFL GTAs face in lesson planning and connecting effectively with students. Conversely, classroom management challenges include maintaining discipline, addressing diverse student needs, and managing students' lack of interest. The challenges of handling large or unmotivated groups further complicate the EFL GTA experience.

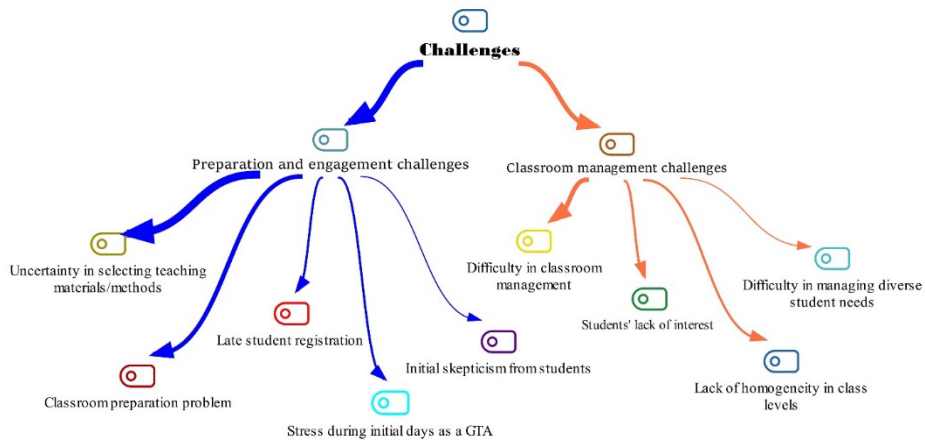


Figure 3. Hierarchical Code-Subcode Model of EFL GTAs Challenges

Note. The thicker lines show the higher frequency.

Preparation and Engagement Challenges

This theme encompasses obstacles related to planning lessons, adapting to teaching expectations, and engaging with students effectively. The challenges include *uncertainty in selecting teaching materials/methods*, *classroom preparation problems*, *stress during the initial days as a GTA*, and *late student registration*.

Uncertainty in selecting teaching materials/methods

EFL GTAs expressed struggles with identifying appropriate teaching materials and methods for their courses. GTA 1 shared, “*I faced the challenge of determining the best teaching methods... What percentage of my teaching should be theoretical versus practical?*” This extract highlights the cognitive load placed on novice teachers who are still building their pedagogical knowledge. For GTA 1, the decision between theory and practice represents not only a teaching dilemma but also a concern about meeting institutional expectations and effectively delivering content to students. Similarly, GTA 2 emphasized the importance of adaptability: “*GTAs like me are increasingly expected to adapt to diverse learning styles and preferences among students.*” This suggests that GTAs are aware of their responsibility to create inclusive learning environments, but the lack of formal training often leaves them ill-equipped to respond to the variety of student needs.

Classroom Preparation Problems

The extract from GTA 5: “*I needed to invest a significant amount of time in preparation... staying up late, searching for information, studying, and reading.*” points to the time-intensive nature of lesson preparation. This reflects the steep learning curve EFL GTAs face when tasked with teaching unfamiliar topics or courses. For GTA 5, preparation is not only about mastering the content but also about building confidence to deliver it effectively in class. This level of dedication often comes at the expense of personal well-being, contributing to stress and fatigue.

Stress during initial days

The transition into teaching can be overwhelming for EFL GTAs. GTA 6 admitted, *“The first days of working as a GTA are undeniably stressful... I often feel that pressure.”* This statement captures the anxiety and uncertainty that many EFL GTAs experience as they navigate their new responsibilities. The stress is likely exacerbated by a lack of structured support and guidance from the university, leaving EFL GTAs to rely on their own resources to overcome early challenges.

Late Student Registration

Late student registration often disrupts the flow of teaching and learning. GTA 10 explained, *“We often see students registering a month or two late... This disrupts the flow of the class.”* This challenge reflects systemic issues within the university’s administrative processes. Late registrations force EFL GTAs to constantly revisit previously taught materials, causing frustration and hindering the progress of the class as a whole.

Classroom Management Challenges

This theme highlights difficulties EFL GTAs face in maintaining an effective and orderly classroom environment. Subthemes include: *difficulty in classroom management, students’ lack of interest, lack of homogeneity in class levels, and difficulty in managing diverse student needs.*

Difficulty In Classroom Management

Classroom management was a recurring challenge for EFL GTAs. GTA 11 stated, *“When a student is disrespectful, I often find myself unsure of how to respond effectively.”* This indicates a lack of training in handling classroom disruptions and enforcing boundaries. For novice teachers, navigating these situations can be particularly challenging, as they often feel unequipped to assert authority while maintaining a positive learning environment. Similarly, GTA 9 identified managing difficult students as the most significant hurdle, pointing to the emotional toll of dealing with behavioral issues: *“The biggest challenge I have faced as a GTA was managing students who were more difficult to deal with. To me, this issue primarily revolves around classroom management.”*

Students’ Lack of Interest

Some EFL GTAs reported struggling to engage students who seemed disinterested in the material. GTA 7 observed, *“Many students come to class simply to pass the time, often expressing fatigue after just half an hour.”* This extract underscores the challenge of motivating students in an era where distractions and competing priorities are prevalent. For EFL GTAs, this lack of engagement can feel disheartening and diminish their sense of accomplishment in teaching.

Lack of Homogeneity in Class Levels

The lack of uniformity in students’ academic levels further complicates the teaching process. GTA 3 explained, *“Since students do not take a university entrance exam, the class level is not homogeneous at all.”* This challenge reflects the difficulties of teaching a mixed-ability group, where some students may struggle to keep up while others find the material too basic. For EFL GTAs, balancing the needs of such a diverse group often feels like an insurmountable task, leading to frustration and decreased teaching efficacy.

Difficulty in managing diverse student needs

The wide range of student abilities and needs also posed a significant challenge to EFL GTAs. GTA 12 emphasized, “*The disparity in student abilities creates difficulties in managing the class.*” This statement highlights the importance of differentiated instruction, a skill that many EFL GTAs may not have had the opportunity to develop. Managing diverse needs requires advanced pedagogical strategies and significant preparation, which can be overwhelming for EFL GTAs who are still acclimating to their teaching roles.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the motivations, benefits, and challenges experienced by EFL GTAs at Islamic Azad University (IAU), offering insights into their experiences within the university’s emerging GTA program. The findings align with and extend the existing literature on GTAs while highlighting the unique contextual factors influencing EFL GTAs at IAU.

The motivations of EFL GTAs at IAU reflect a balance between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Most participants were intrinsically motivated, expressing a genuine passion for teaching and a desire to contribute to academia. This aligns with Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory, which highlights the importance of engaging in activities for their inherent satisfaction. Participants viewed their roles as opportunities to refine their teaching, connect with students, and enhance learning—findings consistent with Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2020).

At the same time, extrinsic motivations, particularly related to career development, were significant. Many GTAs saw the role as a strategic step toward future academic employment, resonating with studies by Smallwood et al. (2022) and Park (2002), which emphasize the professional advantages of teaching assistantships. EFL GTAs highlighted how listing GTA experience on their CVs strengthened their academic profiles, a trend also noted in Bale and Anderson (2024).

Interestingly, unlike findings by Clark et al. (2021), Park (2004), and Schunk (2012), which emphasize financial motivations among GTAs, this study revealed that financial compensation was not a primary driver. Participants unanimously viewed the pay as insufficient and cited career development and pedagogical growth as more influential factors. This suggests a context-specific shift in motivational priorities, with professional identity and future employability taking precedence over monetary rewards.

The study revealed that EFL GTAs derive multiple benefits from their roles, with professional development emerging as the most prominent. Participants noted significant growth in teaching skills, subject mastery, and academic confidence, aligning with findings from Jordan and Howe (2018). Teaching helped them review core concepts, a phenomenon often referred to as the “protégé effect”, where teaching others reinforces one’s own learning (Gates, 2019).

Increased self-confidence and improved classroom management skills were also widely reported. These findings support prior research highlighting GTAs’ development of key academic and

professional skills such as communication, leadership, and mentorship (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2020; Pashaeypoor et al., 2024).

Additionally, social and academic networking emerged as a valued benefit. EFL GTAs emphasized how their roles allowed them to build connections with faculty and peers, findings consistent with Littlepage and Hepworth (2016). These relationships fostered a greater sense of belonging and encouraged academic collaboration, which is critical for graduate student success (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021).

Participants also reported that being recognized as GTAs enhanced their professional identity and motivation, consistent with Sweitzer (2009), who found that social status and recognition within academic settings promote graduate students' job satisfaction and engagement.

Despite the benefits, participants encountered substantial challenges. These fell into two main categories: preparation and engagement issues and classroom management difficulties.

Preparation-related stressors included uncertainty about selecting materials, lack of guidance, and logistical issues such as late student registrations. These findings mirror those of Acheme and Biwa (2023), who identified similar obstacles as impediments to effective teaching. The cognitive demands of lesson planning, especially for novice educators, added to this burden, echoing findings from Javed and O'Brien (2024).

Classroom management challenges were widespread. EFL GTAs described difficulties in maintaining discipline, engaging students, and addressing varied student proficiency levels. These challenges reflect the lack of formal pedagogical training, as noted by Nasser-Abu Alhija and Fresko (2020). Many GTAs felt unprepared to navigate classroom dynamics effectively, leading to frustration and self-doubt. These findings support calls by Hoessler and Godden (2015) for structured training in classroom strategies and student engagement.

The emotional toll of these challenges was also significant. GTAs described feelings of stress, anxiety, and uncertainty, particularly at the outset of their teaching roles. This aligns with Luo et al. (2000), who emphasized the difficulty of transitioning into teaching without adequate mentorship. The absence of structured support or experienced guidance during this critical phase contributed to a sense of isolation and insecurity, underscoring the need for institutional mechanisms to support GTA onboarding and professional growth (Nasser-Abu Alhija & Fresko, 2021).

The findings of this study have several important implications for improving the GTAs in general and EFL GTAs in specific experience at IAU and similar institutions. These implications extend to training, mentorship, institutional policies, and recognition, all of which are critical to addressing the challenges GTAs face and enhancing their overall effectiveness and well-being.

First, the implementation of comprehensive training programs is essential to address the dual challenges of lesson preparation and classroom management (Park, 2004; Riese et al., 2021). These programs should go beyond generic orientations and instead include targeted workshops on pedagogical techniques, differentiated instruction, and conflict resolution. Training in areas such as

lesson planning, interactive teaching methods, and inclusive practices can help GTAs adapt to the diverse needs of students (Young & Bippus, 2008). Additionally, practical simulations and peer-teaching sessions can provide hands-on experience, boosting EFL GTAs' confidence in managing classrooms effectively.

Second, establishing robust mentorship and support systems is vital to helping EFL GTAs navigate their dual roles as students and educators. Pairing EFL GTAs with experienced faculty mentors can create opportunities for personalized guidance and feedback on teaching practices. Mentorship can also serve as a platform for addressing specific challenges, such as managing workload or resolving conflicts with students. Beyond individual mentoring, institutional initiatives such as peer support networks and regular check-ins with academic advisors can further create a sense of community and shared learning among EFL GTAs, reducing isolation and stress.

Third, addressing systemic issues through improved institutional policies is necessary to remove unnecessary barriers for EFL GTAs. For instance, late student registration often leads to unpredictable class sizes and lesson disruptions, making it difficult for EFL GTAs to plan effectively. Streamlining administrative processes related to course registration and providing EFL GTAs with timely access to teaching materials and resources can mitigate these logistical challenges. Institutions should also ensure that EFL GTAs have access to adequately equipped classrooms and tools that facilitate effective teaching, such as technological resources and teaching aids.

Finally, recognizing and rewarding EFL GTAs' contributions can significantly enhance their motivation and job satisfaction. Formal recognition programs, such as teaching awards or certificates of excellence, can highlight the value of their work. Additionally, offering career development opportunities, such as professional development workshops, conference funding, and teaching certifications, can serve as incentives that benefit both the EFL GTAs and the institution. These measures not only acknowledge EFL GTAs' efforts but also prepare them for future academic and professional roles.

By implementing these strategies, institutions like IAU can create a more supportive environment that empowers EFL GTAs to excel in their roles. Enhancing the EFL GTA experience ultimately benefits the broader teaching and learning ecosystem, contributing to higher quality education and fostering a culture of academic excellence.

Conclusion

This study provides insights into the motivations, benefits, and challenges of EFL GTAs at Islamic Azad University (IAU). However, its findings are limited by a small, context-specific sample from IAU branches in Kerman and Zahedan, restricting generalizability. The qualitative, self-reported data may introduce bias and may not reflect all GTA experiences. The study's timing during a new GTA program limits understanding of evolving experiences. It excludes challenges from other disciplines and cultural factors like gender dynamics. Future research should use broader samples, mixed methods, and longitudinal designs to better capture the EFL GTA experience.

In conclusion, the findings from this study provide a rich understanding of the motivations, benefits, and challenges faced by EFL GTAs at Islamic Azad University. The interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations highlights the complexities of the EFL GTA role, where personal passion for teaching coexists with professional aspirations. The benefits of the EFL GTA experience extend beyond professional development, encompassing personal growth and social recognition within the academic community. However, the challenges related to preparation and classroom management underscore the necessity for improved training and institutional support. Addressing these challenges will not only enhance the effectiveness of EFL GTAs but also contribute to the overall quality of education at IAU and similar institutions.

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