Mapping Past, Current and Future TEFL Research Trends in Iran: A Synthetic Review of Topics and Paradigms in Three Decades

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Abstract

We have recently witnessed a growing awareness of methodological research issues in the field of applied linguistics, which led to what Plonsky (2017) has referred to as "methodological awareness" (p. 517). To make a positive contribution to this nascent movement, this study, drawing on synthetic techniques, sought to describe the cumulative and developmental status of research paradigms and substantive/topical issues in an EFL context. As such, we analyzed a sample of 663 unpublished applied linguistics MA theses which were distributed over a 30-year period. The cumulative results revealed the distribution of the studies in a good range of substantive issues with "*researching language classroom issues*" as the most frequent topic in the data set and "*research methods or researching research methodology", "psycholinguistics", and "sociolinguistics*" as the least frequent issues across a wide range of age groups, proficiency levels, and time span. As for the cumulative analysis of research approaches, the results revealed that about 72% of the included MA theses were quantitative; around 18% of the studies employed mixed methods research; and a smaller percentage of the studies (11%, n=72) used a qualitative research approach. Chronologically, a clear increasing pattern of research paradigms was notable across time. Implications for the research consumers (e.g., supervisors, journal reviewers, postgraduate students, and material developer) are discussed.

Keywords: EFL Setting, Fugitive Literature, Research Paradigms, Research Synthesis, Substantive Issues

1. Introduction

In response to profound weaknesses of traditional narrative reviews, which had been firmly established for a long time as the most prevalent approach to reviewing, the research synthesis presented itself in the early 1970s, particularly in the United States, to restore the status quo of knowledge by examining the prior literature systematically rather than intuitively (Cooper, 2016; Ortega, 2015). Proponents of research synthetic approach to reviewing have widely criticized traditional narrative reviews for being too unsystematic, idiosyncratic, and impressionistic (Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009; Plonsky, 2015).

More specifically, the traditional narrative reviews, being qualitative and interpretive in nature, suffer from inherent subjectivity, lack of transparency, lack of explicit standards of proof, impreciseness in both process and outcome, unsystematic procedures for locating and embracing eligible studies, inaccuracy in reporting data collection, and unwarranted claims about the status quo of knowledge (Cooper, 2016; Ortega, 2015; Plonsky, 2015, 2017; Plonsky & Oswald, 2015). In the same vein, Norris and Ortega (2006) assert that traditional narrative reviews "tend to distill generalizations and to argue their positions, on the basis of theoretical predilections rather than inspection of the actual evidence that may be compiled systematically across studies" (p. 6).

In response to the concerns raised over the narrative traditional reviews, and given that enhancing research synthetic skills is an ambitious educational goal which need precise, rigorous, and transparent alternatives, researchers with various disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., education, psychology, criminology, business, ecology, and medicine) have been motivated to move away from the classical narrative reviews toward research synthetic approach to reviewing. This shift is undoubtedly welcomed because research synthesists can deal with reviewing as "an empirical task in its own right" (Cooper & Hedges, 1994b, p. 6). Norris and Ortega (2006) maintain that research synthesis "constitutes an empirical genre of their own in that they generate new findings that transcend the findings and interpretations proposed within any one individual study" (p. 7).

Recently, the academic research has witnessed the high level of participation of non-Anglophone and the periphery in shaping knowledge by disseminating research outputs (Hyland, 2015; Zhao, Beckett, & Wang 2017). Particularly, in the field of Applied Linguistics, although the USA's publishing percentage "had decreased from 38.53 percent in 2005–8 to 31.49 percent in 2009–12 and 29.49 percent in 2013–16", the developing countries such as Iran and Turkey experienced a substantial growth in producing outlets (Lei & Liu, 2018, p. 16). Despite the fact that neither country ranked

top during 2005 to 2008, and given that Iran was completely absent in the 20-top list during 2009-2012, research article productions from Turkey (n = 49, 1.14%) and Iran (n = 45, 1.04%) have experienced substantial growth in recent years.

Accordingly, this contemporary shift in focus can provide golden opportunities for the researchers to attend to synthetic practices. That is, they can make transparent connections between primary-level studies, focus on the actual variables precisely, provide warranted explanations for locating, selecting, and searching for the primary studies, seek generalizations, and understand the status quo of knowledge objectively (Copper, 2016; Ortega, 2015). Considering the growing prominence of research synthetic methodology in various disciplines (e.g., education, medicine, health studies, etc.) especially after the 1970s, the voice of this newcomer has been heard in applied linguistics, too (Plonsky & Oswald, 2015). Research synthesis, a methodology that encourages the aggregative use of the vast body of primary-level studies with precision and systematicity, has gained unstoppable momentum in applied linguistics since the mid-1990s (Ortega, 2015).

ERIC (the Educational Information Resource Center), *ProQuest* databases — as the two most rampant databases in applied linguistics (In'nami & Koizumi, 2012; Plonsky & Oswald, 2015) —, and *Google Scholar* were manually searched for locating research synthesis and/or meta-analyses in the field. Further, the searching terms (i.e., keywords) or combinations of them such as *applied linguistics*, *meta-analysis*, *meta-analytic techniques*, *second language, methodological syntheses,* and *research synthesis* were used. Then, the search results showed almost 200 research synthetic studies in applied linguistics, disseminating in various forms such as articles, book chapters, dissertations, conference proceedings, and unpublished reports.

Since the mid-1990s, research synthetic methodology and its variations (e.g., meta-analysis, methodological synthesis, and second-order synthesis) have inspired a series of studies which converges under three strands. The first set of studies exclusively pertains to the substantive use of meta-analysis and its advancements (e.g., Ellis, 2015; Han, 2015; Li, 2010; Plonsky, 2011). The second strand addresses the methodological synthesis of primary-level studies (e.g., Amini Farsani, 2017; Liu & Brown, 2015; Plonsky, 2014). Finally, unlike the previous foci, the third strand is assigned to the second-order research synthesis in which the review itself is the unit of analysis rather than the primary study (e.g., In'nami & Koizumi, 2010).

Adhering to the second brand, we adopt research synthetic techniques—i.e., defining the domain, locating the primary-level studies,

developing a coding sheet, searching the literature, and collecting information from studies (see Cooper, 2016; Plonsky, 2013)—in accounting for "methodological phenomena", often "in conjunction with substantive or topical issues" (Plonsky & Gonulal, 2015, p. 10). This study used thesis and/or dissertation as the most represented type of fugitive literature (see Cooper, 2016). Fugitive literature or grey literature is "that which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business, and industry in electronic and print formats not controlled by commercial publishers" (Auger, 1998, p. 3). Accordingly, the major point of this definition is "publishing is not the primary activity" (Cooper et al., 2009, p. 104).

Research synthesis, as Plonsky and Oswald (2015) maintain, is "the microscope through which past L2 research is interpreted as well as the telescope through which future L2 research efforts will be directed" (p. 121). As such, within a triple methodological wave (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research approaches), this all-inclusive study is possibly unique at providing precise and empirically grounded evidence to support future research in EFL and other comparable contexts (see Plonsky, 2017). In support, Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) maintain that

> We currently are in a three methodological or research paradigm world, with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research all thriving and coexisting and a triple methodological world "might be healthy because each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and times and places of need" (p. 117).

Consequently, this study, adopting a retrospective–and–prospective orientation to attend to both past research and future research endeavors in an EFL context, attempts to boost and maintain 'synthetic thinking' or 'synthetic culture' in an EFL setting (Norris & Ortega, 2006). This is referred to as "synthetic research ethics". This synthetic thinking style "would enable resolution of weaknesses that characterize contemporary practices in the field" (Norris & Ortega, 2006, p. 4) and one that is likely somewhat absent in an EFL context (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009). The current study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the topical issues represented in MA theses?
2. To what extent have research approaches (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) been represented in the unpublished MA theses?
3. To what extent have research approaches, as represented in the unpublished MA theses, changed across time?

2. Literature Review

In the field of applied linguistics, the following studies, adopting descriptive-led or interpretive-led perspective, are mainly concerned with the description and interpretation (rather than evaluation and aggregation) of research practices phenomena in quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies.

To begin with, Henning (1986) examined research articles in the two applied linguistics journals, i.e., *TESOL Quarterly* and *Language Learning,* and described the trends in research methods from 1970 to 1985. The findings depicted a progressive pattern in utilizing quantitative research in the sample. Likewise, in a descriptive study, Nunan (1991) surveyed 50 empirical articles concerning data collection instruments, the data collection context, and data-analytic procedures. He found that the experimental designs appeared more frequently than observational and qualitative research studies. Further, research instruments such as questionnaires, diaries, and interviews were scarcely used.

Lazaraton (2000) described the methodological research trends in applied linguistics. Her findings revealed that a large percentage of studies were quantitative (88%), whereas just 12 percent were qualitative and/or partially qualitative. Lazaraton asserted that "parametric statistical procedures still reign supreme" (p. 180). Gao, Li, and Lu (2001) described and compared research trends in applied linguistics in China and other countries. The findings revealed that quantitatively-based studies were noted as the most pervasive ones in China and the other countries. However, a shift in orientation away from quantitative studies toward the qualitative ones was conspicuous. Similarly, Lazaraton (2005), expanding her earlier article, reported that out of 524 empirical articles, 86 percent of the studies was quantitative, 13 percent qualitative, and 1 percent mixed methods research.

In his Ph.D. dissertation, Martynychev (2009) surveyed empirical articles in applied linguistics journals. The findings revealed that 64 percent of data set was quantitatively-oriented, almost 28 percent qualitatively-oriented, and a small portion of the studies, only 8 present, were reported as mixed methods research. As for statistical techniques, *Analysis of Variance (ANOVAs)*, *t-tests*, and *correlation coefficients* were reported as the most pervasive statistical techniques, respectively. The uses of case studies, as the most common qualitative research design, and interviews, as the most frequent tools for data collection, were notable in this study, too.

Simultaneously, in a study of 2200 published empirical articles in ten applied linguistics journals from 1997 to 2006, Benson, Chik, Gao, Huang, and Wang (2009), found that 22 percent of the data set were qualitative. They asserted that this portion of qualitative studies "might therefore be a sign not

only of greater methodological openness but also of increased awareness of the potential contribution of other disciplines within and beyond applied linguistics" (p. 89). Cohen and Macaro (2010), surveying 419 primary-level studies in five top-tier applied linguistics journals, found that 44 percent of the dataset embraced correlational studies, 28 percent was experimental studies, and just 18 percent was survey or descriptive studies.

In Iran, three related studies have been documented. First, in a very narrow scope, Marefat (1999) surveyed 101 MA theses published in the English department of Tehran University (a leading university). Having reviewed the abstracts of the theses, she described (rather than evaluated) a picture of research status in the department. First, it was found that quantitatively-oriented studies are dominant in the data set, whereas qualitative studies were not used at all. However, the author, subscribing to 'grey-literature' culture (see Cooper, 2016), anecdotally provided a narrow and skewed picture of research phenomena in an Iranian EFL context. The strengths and deficiencies of research issues have not been highlighted in her study.

On the other hand, Mehrani and Khodi (2014), subscribing to a 'journal culture' perspective (see Plonsky, 2015), cumulatively *described* the status of the ELT research phenomena by surveying 370 published articles in Iranian scientific-research journals between 2003 and 2012. Following Lazaraton's study (2005), they found that a vast body of the data set was quantitative (80%). However, a small portion of the studies was qualitatively-oriented (8%), and a lower percentage of the studies were mixed methods (5%). Recently, Sahragard and Meihami (2016) described the research issues in the *Journal of Teaching Persian to Non-Persian Speakers* disseminated at Imam Khomeini International University. Having surveyed 58 published articles from 2012 to 2015, they found that 51 percent of the studies were quantitative and 49 percent were qualitative, whereas mixed methods studies were not used at all.

In response to the above descriptive-led studies on research phenomena, the followings systematically took *evaluative* perspective in examining research practices. To begin with, in a critical review of classroom-based research, Chaudron (2001) synthesized a comprehensive data set to evaluate methodological deficiencies in *The Modern Language Journal* in nine decades. The findings revealed that the dataset suffered from low reliability, poor designs, and the dominance of an intact group as a norm. Despite the fact that this critical review provided accumulated findings on the notion of classroom-based research, the interpretive patterns were subjective. Further, as Grant and Booth (2009) maintain, this kind of review does not typically depict the systematicity and transparency in collecting data.

In the same way, two state-of-the-art articles evaluated the trends in qualitative and mixed methods research. First, Richards (2009) assessed the status quo of qualitative practices in applied linguistics. More specifically, having reviewed major qualitative publications in the field, he highlighted procedural constraints and depicted a comprehensive picture of its advancement in the 2000s. In a similar line, Riazi and Candlin (2014) critically reviewed mixed methods studies in language teaching and learning. They addressed mixed methods research methodology regarding issues, challenges, and prospects.

Although these two articles critically evaluate qualitative and mixed methods research trends in the field and offer new insights in the research methodology, they typically recruited traditional narrative reviews (i.e., state-of-the-art-review article) for highlighting the issues and challenges. Further, as the state-of-the-art articles are commissioned by the editors of a given journal, the author(s) may exclusively offer "their own idiosyncratic and personal perspective on current and future priorities" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 102), which may in turn obscure the real image of the methodological phenomena (Cooper, 2016).

In a narrow scope, Hashemi and Babaii (2012) critically reviewed the status of mixed research studies in ESP, attending to an interpretive description of 31 research articles published in a leading ESP journal (i.e., *English for Specific Purposes*). They found that a concurrent design (61%) was reported more frequently than a sequential design (39%). All the dataset within concurrent designs utilized triangulation (61%), even though no study used a concurrent embedded design. With regard to the use of sequential designs (39%), the explanatory sequential design was spotted in almost 32 percent of the data set. Another main mixed methods feature, sampling designs, was also content analyzed. The findings uncovered that a concurrent sampling design was reported in 61 percent of the studies. However, almost 40 percent of the studies utilized a sequential design. More specifically, it was found that a small percentage of the studies used a sequential multi-level sampling (10%). A smaller percentage of the studies embraced sequential parallel designs (3%). As for meta-discussion, the results revealed that ESP researchers did not adequately integrate the quantitative and qualitative strands in a given study.

In a similar yet broader study, Hashemi and Babaii (2013) systematically evaluated the status of mixed methods research in applied linguistics by surveying 205 empirical articles published in leading journals within 1995-2008. The results revealed that concurrent designs (72%) were by far the most pervasive mixed methods designs. The second frequent one was sequential designs (25%). Within the concurrent designs, a large percentage of the data set utilized triangulation (66%); a very small portion of

the studies used the embedded designs (5%). Furthermore, the sequential explanatory design (16%) was spotted more frequently than exploratory counterpart (7%).

These two studies systematically evaluated the status of mixed methods research and offered a 'launching pad' for conceptualizing new methodology in applied linguistics. However, in expanding mixed methods research methodology, they have well adhered to interpretive (not aggregative) components which are "necessarily subjective and the resulting product is the starting point for further evaluation, not an endpoint in itself" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 97). To conclude, beyond the deficiencies in descriptive, anecdotal, state-of-the-art, and critical-review studies, the above literature underscores the need to synthesize the conceptual and methodological issues across dominant paradigms in a systematic, objective, and transparent mode.

3. Method

In this study, drawing on the research synthesis best practices movement, we adhered to Plonsky and Oswald (2015)'s benchmark which provided a detailed context-specific set of steps to research synthesis in applied linguistics:

✓Defining the research domain in terms of location, time, and content

✓Conducting the literature search through different strategies

✓Designing a coding sheet as the primary data collection tool

✓Delineating the coding process: piloting, reliability, the validity of the data collection instrument

✓Analyzing the results both cumulatively and across time

✓Interpreting the results

All in all, our final search led to 663 MA theses. Despite the fact that some MA theses were excluded due to the above-unexpected reasons, we assumed a large number of studies in this study (n= 663) well represents the status of research phenomena in an EFL setting.

Table1

Applying Recommended Steps to the Current Study

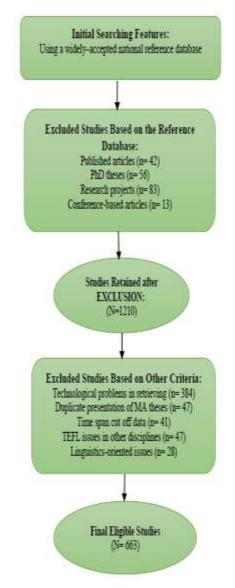| Recommended steps	How the steps fit well with the RS best practices in this study
Research domain definition	In this study, the research domain is defined based on a triple component: (a) location or sources of studies (*in this study, we used Unpublished MA theses*), (b) temporal or dates to be included (*those studies within 1987-2015 were included in the current study*), (c) substance or content (*the scope of this study is inclusive and broad as it focused on three main approaches of research*)
Conducting the literature search	In this study, the national reference database, IRANDOC, was selected to provide the required information.
Designing a coding sheet	In this study, a coding sheet was designed based on the best-practices recommendations (APA, AERA). Eight categories of the studies were garnered: Author's affiliation, province, gender, year, topics, age of participants, educational institutes, and research approaches.
Delineating the coding process	Initial piloting of the coding sheet, consulting experts, field-testing the coding sheets, finalizing coding sheets, preparing guidance or decision role protocols, selecting and training coders, forming team coders, estimating reliability indexes, and translating obtained results into data file were among the major points of this phase.
Analyzing the results	How to analyze the results cumulatively, and how to analyze them across three decades were illustrated in this study? Following Johnson and Christensen (2014, p. 589) who assert that "an image might be worth a thousand words," we visualized the data in figures in order to depict the aggregative and developmental findings. Percentages and frequencies with regard to each research questions were included. Also, for some sections, quantizing data was performed. Some instances of data along with their related percentages in each section were included. Whenever possible, we made some reflections on the qualitative findings, as well.
Interpreting the results	For methodological syntheses of each research approach, we adhered to a retrospective-and-prospective approach in discussion and conclusion sections.

Figure 1. Flow Diagram for the Screening of MA Theses

3.1. Procedures

As Cooper (2016) maintains "the coding of studies for a research synthesis is not a one-person job" (p. 133). Accordingly, in line with the best-practices movement, the following procedures were taken in order to boost the reliability of codes: (a) a team was created including three Ph.D. students who had the research backgrounds and two experienced mentors who had been involved in teaching EFL research methodology in MA and Ph.D. levels; (b) three training sessions (each for two hours) were held in order to delineate the purposes of the study, the coding sheet components, and coding

procedures; (c) coding guides or manuals accompanying coding sheets were distributed among the coders; (d) the coders were independently supposed to synthesize10 MA theses based on the items in the coding sheet, retrieving from the IRANDOC research database, with quantitative, qualitative, and MMR orientations. Then, we assessed all the 30 theses; (e) the coders were asked not to look at the identifiers of a given study as it may have an influence on coding; and (f) in case of any questions and ambiguities, the researchers relied on the mentors' views, the related literature, and experts in research synthesis.

Considering the fact that four coders were involved in the synthetic coding process, and they were asked to rate the different samples, the intra-class correlation (ICC), as a measure of inter-rater reliability, was used in this study. The ICC is "particularly useful in cases where more than two raters are involved and/or raters do not all rate the same samples" (Loewen & Plonsky, 2016, p. 92). The overall inter-rater reliability of rated theses was .93. Finally, with regard to the discrepancy in the coding of each approach elements among the coders, data were discussed and negotiated with the mentors and coders until an agreement was reached.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Results

4.1.1. Description of the Included MA Theses

A total sample of 663 unpublished MA theses disseminated between 1987 and 2015[*] was systematically included in the analysis. These MA theses represented a total of 69730 elements or sampling units (i.e., mainly individuals, texts, and textbooks) from a corpus of 663 studies. These studies were affiliated with 33 *state* and *private* universities. Table 2 and Figure 2 depict a comprehensive picture of the studies, corresponding universities, and geographical places. A large portion of the included studies (almost 90%) came from various state universities, with *Tarbiat Modares* and *Allameh Tabataba'i* being the most represented universities in the data set. However, a very small percentage (almost 10%) of the studies came from Payame-Noor and Islamic Azad branches across the country. Further, the corresponding universities are located in different geographical places of Iran (21 provinces), which represent the center, northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast.

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[*] For this study, the cut-off date was set at February, 2015.
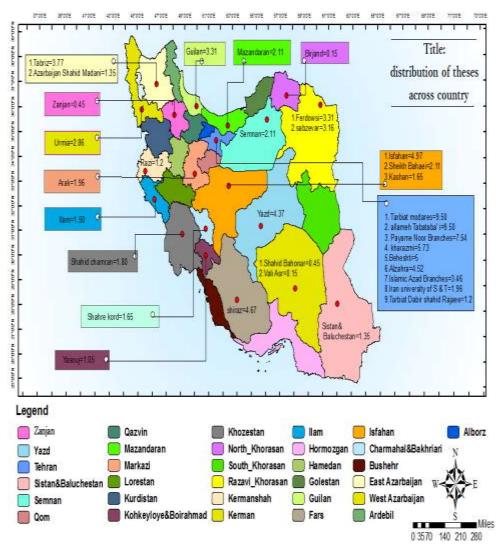
Figure 2. GIS Schematic Representation of The MA Theses across the Country

Timewise, the MA theses were distributed across years and scattered over the three decades (see Figure 3). Also, Figure 3 presents an increasing growth in the frequency of included studies since 2008. As shown in the figure, the included MA theses peaked in 2011. Furthermore, in the first and second decades, (1987-1996 and 1997-2006), the studies scattered disproportionately with one publication in some years; they scattered almost evenly with an exponential rise in the number of theses per year (especially in 2011) in the third decade. This upward trend is further confirmed given the strong correlation between years of publication and number of MA theses: r =0.44.

Table 2

Distribution of the MA Theses across Universities and Geographical Regions

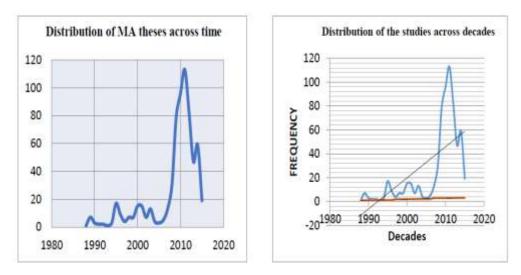| Row	Universities	K	Percent	Province
1	Tarbiat Modares	63	9.50	Tehran
2	llameh Tabataba'i	63	9.50	Tehran
3	ame Noor Branches	50	7.54	Tehran
4	Kharazmi	38	5.73	Tehran
5	Beheshti	33	5	Tehran
6	Isfahan	33	4.97	Isfahan
7	Shiraz	31	4.67	Fars
8	Alzahra	30	4.52	Tehran
9	Yazd	29	4.37	Yazd
10	Tabriz	25	3.77	East Azarbaijan
11	mic Azad Branches	23	3.46	Tehran
12	Ferdowsi	22	3.31	Razavi Khorasan
13	Guilan	22	3.31	Guilan
14	Sabzevar	21	3.16	Razavi Khorasan
15	Urmia	19	2.86	West Azarbaijan
16	Mazandaran	14	2.11	Mazandaran
17	Semnan	14	2.11	Semnan
18	Sheikh Bahaei	14	2.11	Isfahan
19	University of S & T	13	1.96	Tehran
20	Arak	13	1.96	Markazi
21	Shahid Chamran	12	1.80	Khuzestan
22	Shahrekord	11	1.65	Charmahal & Bakhtiari
23	Kashan	11	1.65	Kashan
24	Ilam	10	1.50	Ilam
25	Sistan & Baluchestan	9	1.35	Sistan &Baluchestan
26	Azarbaijan Shahid Madani	9	1.35	East Azarbaijan
27	Tarbiat Dabir Shahid Rajaee	8	1.2	Tehran
28	Razi	8	1.2	Kermanshah
29	Yasouj	7	1.05	Kohkeloye & Boirahmad
30	Zanjan	3	0.45	Zanjan
31	Shahid Bahonar	3	0.45	Kerman
32	Vali Asr	1	0.15	Kerman
33	Birjand	1	0.15	North Khorasan

Figure 3. Publication Years and Decades of the Included MA These

Beyond the geographical and temporal descriptions, the included MA theses were also classified into the major issues. Eighteen general topics were culled for the data set. Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of the studies in a good range of issues within EFL theses between 1987 and 2015. The most frequent category (n=121, 18.25%) is concerned with "*researching language classroom issues*" across a wide range of age groups, proficiency levels, and time span. In this category, the EFL authors paid attention to what occurs in language classrooms where EFL learners, EFL teachers, teaching aspects, and teaching or learning challenges have been researched and examined. The second prevalent theme (n=89, 13.42%), represented in the MA theses, is related to "*researching vocabulary*". More specifically, vocabulary acquisition, receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary, depths and breadths of vocabulary, vocabulary growth, vocabulary strategies, and lexical bundles were examined in the data set (see Figure 3). Then, "*researching reading, writing, and grammar*" had the higher frequency than other topics and generally seemed to have received more moderate coverage in the data set than the other topics such as "*researching listening, language testing, speaking, pragmatics, and discourse.*"

On the contrary, the least prevalent topics were related to "*researching material development*" and "*researching pronunciation,*" respectively (see Table 3). Outstandingly absent from the MA theses was the strands of "research methodology issues" or "researching research issues," "psycholinguistics", and "sociolinguistics". It is to be noted, however, that we cross-checked the issues with those strands in the field of applied linguistics according to the American Association of Applied Linguistics.
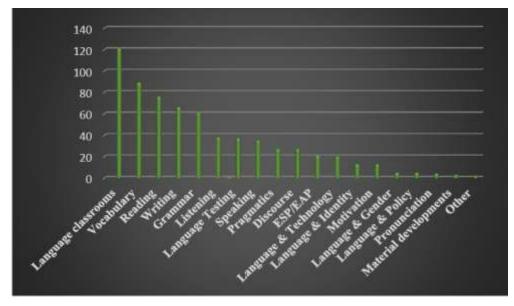
Figure 4. Distribution of General Topics in the MA Theses

Table 3

Distribution of General Topics in the MA Theses

Areas of studies (topics)	K	Percent
Researching language classrooms	121	18.25
Researching vocabulary	89	13.42
Researching reading	76	11.46
Researching writing	66	9.95
Researching grammar	61	9.20
Researching listening	38	5.73
Researching language testing	37	5.58
Researching speaking	35	5.27
Researching pragmatics	27	4.07
Researching discourse	27	4.07
Researching ESP	21	3.16
Researching language & technology	20	3.01
Researching language & identity	13	1.96
Researching motivation	13	1.96
Researching language & gender	5	0.75
Researching language & policy	5	0.75
Researching pronunciation	4	0.60
Researching materials development	3	0.45
Other	2	0.30
Total	663	100

As for the authors, of the total 663 authors, 359 were females (54.15%), and 304 were males (45.85%). Figure 5 and 6 present the participants' characteristics of the included MA theses in terms of age groups and educational status, respectively. As shown in Figure 5, almost over half of the theses (n=379, 57.16%) recruited adult EFL learners (+18 years), almost 15 % of the studies (n= 97) recruited adolescent EFL learners (14-17 years), and child L2 learners were recruited in a very small percentage of the studies (n=11, 1.65%). Thus, adult EFL participants received greater emphasis than adolescents and child EFL learners.
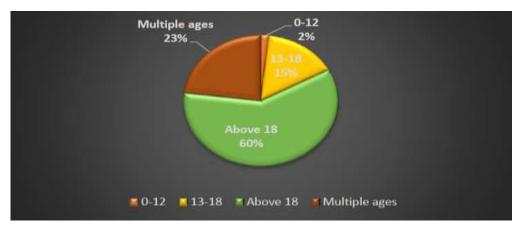

Figure 5. Distribution of L2 Learners' Age in the Included MA Theses

As for educational settings, most MA theses (n=289, 43.58%) were conducted in university contexts. Almost 38 percent of the studies (n=247) were done in private language institutes. Surprisingly, a very small portion of the MA theses were conducted in schools. Thus, researching in language institutes are more favorable than in schools for the EFL authors.
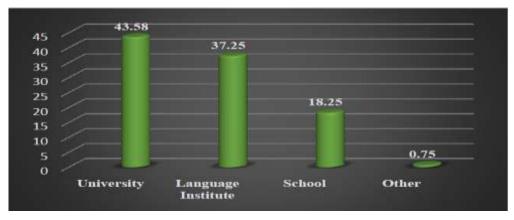

Figure 6. Distribution of Educational Institutes in the Included MA Theses

Results for Research Question 2, *to what extent have research approaches (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods) been represented in the unpublished MA theses?* on the type of research paradigms (see Figure 7), revealed that about 72% (n=472) of the included MA theses were quantitative. Surprisingly, around 18% (n=119) of the studies employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, i.e., mixed methods research, in a study to answer the research question(s). A very small percentage of the studies (11%, n=72) used a qualitative research approach. Cumulatively, the findings revealed that quantitative research was utilized as the most pervasive approach. Further, mixed methods research took precedence over the qualitative research approach.
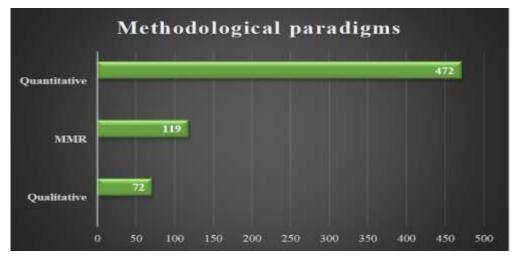

Figure 7. Research Approaches Appeared in The MA Theses

In addition to the cumulative report of research approaches, changes and developments of research approaches were also examined so as to depict a better picture of changes and/or advancements of the culture of EFL research across time in Iran (Research Question 3). As Figure 8 illustrates, a clear increasing pattern of research approaches is notable across time. For example, quantitatively-oriented studies increased steadily across the decades, with an exponential rise of the studies using quantitative research in a recent decade. Mixed methods research studies, as the second most frequent approach to research, increased across three decades. Although mixed methods studies slightly increased from decade one to decade two, a considerable portion of the studies have employed this approach in recent years (i.e., decade 3). The use of qualitative research increased across the decades, especially from decade two to decade three.
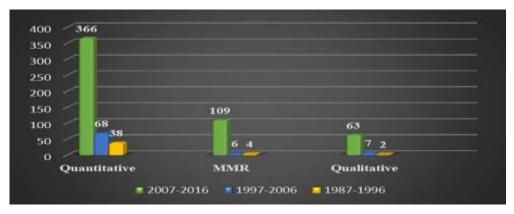
Figure 8. Frequency of the MA Theses with Research Approaches across Three Decades

4.2. Discussion

The results revealed the distribution of the studies in a good range of issues within EFL theses completed between 1987 and 2015. The included MA theses were classified into eighteen general topics which were culled for the data set. The most frequent category was mainly concerned with "*researching language classroom issues*" across a wide range of age groups, proficiency levels, and time span (18.25%, n = 121). The second prevalent theme represented in the MA theses was related to "*researching vocabulary*" (13.42%, n = 89). More specifically, vocabulary acquisition, receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary, depth and breadth of vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary growth, vocabulary strategies, and lexical bundles were examined in theses included in this category of the data set.

Then, "*researching reading, writing, and grammar*" had a higher frequency than other topics and generally seemed to have received more moderate coverage in the data set than the other topics such as "*researching listening, language testing, speaking, pragmatics*, and *discourse*". The least prevalent topics were related to "*researching materials development*" and "*researching pronunciation*," respectively. Outstandingly absent from the MA theses was the strand of "*methodological research issues*" or "*researching research issues.*"

In line with most of the prior research (e.g., Davis & Elder, 2004; Harbon & Shen, 2015; Mackay, 2006; Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015), the EFL authors tended to address and cover a wide range of issues in an EFL setting. Contrary to Marefat's (1999) study in which *researching reading issues* was found to be the most prevalent topical area of MA theses in a leading Iranian university, the majority of the MA theses in this study have examined issues related to language classrooms and skill-based instructions, revealing that the

authors of theses gave serious thought to the matters related to teaching and learning aspects in an Iranian EFL setting.

The MA authors were found to be particularly prone to examine "what happens in the language classrooms" which is a key line of inquiry in applied linguistics (Harbon & Shen, 2015, p. 434). In these strands, the EFL authors paid momentum attention to what occurs in language classrooms wherein EFL learners, EFL teachers, teaching aspects, learning processes, and teaching or learning challenges have been researched and examined (Harbon & Shen, 2015). The MA students' formal education over two years and academic experience in courses such as "Teaching Methodology", "L2 Language Skills" (i.e., Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Language components), and the "Practicum" might lead them to approximate pedagogical content. This orientation is consistent with Stapleton and Shao's study (2018) that demonstrates "MATESOL programs, in general, are paying heed to pedagogical content" (p. 12). It could also be due to the fact that MA students and/or MA holders were mainly less-experienced teachers in state and private sectors (see Hasrati & Tavakoli, 2014) who are primarily seeking to resolve pedagogical problems and challenges about their current teaching practices (Mackay, 2015).

However, conspicuously absent from the MA topical areas were issues related to "*research methods* or *researching research methodology*". This finding revealed that MA students gave serious thought to the *what of EFL research* (the substantive use or pedagogical use) rather than the *how of EFL research* (Plonsky, 2017). That is, the present finding showed a predisposition among MA authors or students not to examine research methods issues and the ilk, despite the fact that the scholars (e.g., Brown, 2015; Byrnes, 2013; King & Mackay, 2016; Plonsky, 2014, 2015, 2017; Riazi, 2017) necessitate an investigation of issues related to various dimensions of research methods in applied linguistics, which in turn brings about the notions of 'methodological turn' and 'methodological awareness' (Byrnes, 2013; Plonsky, 2017). As Plonsky and Gass (2011) maintain, "progress in any of the social sciences including applied linguistics depends on sound research methods, principled data analysis, and transparent reporting practices" (p. 325). Also, this finding was in sharp contrast to Byrnes's observation (2013) that "research methodologies no longer have ancillary status in our work" (p. 823).

Another reason may be attributed to the impact of schooling on raising the MA students' awareness of the *how-of-research* pattern in the EFL setting. A general look at the well-known national society, i.e., *Teaching English Language and Literature Society of Iran*, founded in 2007 with the purpose of developing and promoting TEFL learners' knowledge base, improving the quality of experts' practice and advancing teaching and

research reveals that issues related to research methods have received minimal attention. A list of major national conferences, major divisions, and the special interest groups (*Sigs*) supports this claim (http://www.tellsi.org). Likewise, in universities and TEFL departments, MA students are supposed to study just a 2-credit course of research methodology in MA years. The primary purpose of this course is to discuss some conceptual issues in doing research and to help the students do real research. The students are expected to get a better understanding of main theoretical and conceptual research issues, show their abilities to evaluate and analyze methodological issues, conduct quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research approaches, and make sound interpretations based on the results.

Accordingly, the findings suggested that there is no regular correspondence between the *what* of research (i.e., pedagogical and substantive issues) and the *how* of research (i.e., research issues) in an accountable EFL setting such as Iran (see Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019). Research is like an electric generator in which sources of mechanical energy including here the pedagogical/substantive input and methodological research input are necessary to work efficiently. However, one of the sources has not been worked effectively in an Iranian EFL setting.

The second research question of the study involved two stages: cumulative analysis of research approaches, and examining the changes and advancements of research approaches across three decades. As for the cumulative analysis of research approaches, the results revealed that about 72% (n=472) of the included MA theses were quantitative. Around 18% (n=119) of the studies employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, i.e., mixed methods research, in a study to answer the research question(s). A smaller percentage of the studies (11%, n=72) used a qualitative research approach. Cumulatively, the findings revealed that quantitative research was noted as the most pervasive approach.

Partially consistent with most of the previous research (e.g., Gao, Li, & Lu, 2001; Henning, 1986; Lazaraton, 2000, 2005; Marefat, 1999; Martynychev, 2009; Mehrani & Khodi, 2014; Nunan, 1991), quantitatively-oriented research approach was the most prevalent research approach in the corpus. This hegemony of quantitative research approach in an EFL setting represents "the dominant positivist research paradigm in the field of applied linguistics that has traditionally sought linear or cause-effect-relationships between the variables (Riazi, 2017, p. 8). This finding hypothesized that the MA students seek to value and undertake research enterprise by adhering to scientific concepts such as experiment/pre- and post-test comparisons or correlations in an EFL setting.

A plausible explanation of such conceptual reliance on scientifically-based research may lie in the prevalence of scientific discourse as "a powerful and influential way of understanding research (Usher, 1996, p. 10), as well as the aspirations of the quantitatively-oriented researchers to discover causal-like relationships among manipulated variables (Hudson & Liosa, 2015). Furthermore, the EFL authors seemed to adhere to "a reality-oriented perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 93) or *etic* approach in which they can play an objective and value-free role in the whole process of research as if the "researchers are able to fully detach themselves from the object of the study" (Riazi, 2017, p. 15).

Partially inconsistent with the prior empirical studies (Benson et al., 2009; Gao, Li, & Lu, 2001; Henning, 1986; Lazaraton, 2000, 2005; Martynychev, 2009; Mehrani & Khodi, 2014), around 18% (n = 119) of the studies employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, i.e., mixed methods research, in a study to answer the research question(s). A smaller percentage of the studies (11%, n = 72) used a qualitative research approach. The findings revealed that mixed methods research took precedence over qualitative research approach. Notably, this finding was in sharp contrast with Martynychev's observation (2009) in which almost 28% of the studies were qualitatively-oriented, and a small portion of the studies, only 8%, were reported as mixed methods research. Likewise, the finding of the current study was not consistent with Mehrani and Khodi's (2014) study in which a small portion of the studies were qualitatively-oriented (8%), and a smaller percentage of the studies were mixed methods (5%).

The results further revealed that the MA students were cognizant of new paradigms of research such as mixed-methods research, which has gained popularity in recent years (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013; Riazi, 2016, 2017; Riazi & Candlin, 2014). It seems that their predisposition to "incorporate a range of perspectives" (King & Mackey, 2016, p. 214) and take diverse epistemological perspectives in their research endeavors waves the flag of a contingency or needs-based approach to research methods (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Adhering to the "indistinguishability thesis" (Morgan, 2018), it seems that the MA authors tried to argue against the research approaches as a dichotomy, suggesting that quantitative and qualitative research approaches are not subject to "a binary distinction in which sharp lines can be drawn between the two" (Sandelowski, 2014, p. 5). The results also suggested that MA students or authors sought to approximate the intended research problems in an EFL setting by integrating quantitative and qualitative research approaches in a study (see Melzi & Caspe, 2010). Also, adhering to an inclusive research approach, it seems that the MA students made an attempt to recruit both explanatory and exploratory approaches in EFL research.

The somewhat higher employment of quantitative and mixed methods research approaches than the employment of qualitative research approach by the MA students may be attributed to the EFL faculty members' conceptions of research. According to Babaii, Hashemi, and Amini Farsani (2017), the EFL faculty members' conceptions of research showed that inquiry including quantitative research approach (typically experimental designs) and mixed-methods research designs, respectively, were more likely to be conceived of as research by the respondents. This conceptualization of research, as Seliger and Shohamy (1989) asserted, has been related to the state of mind of the researcher: "The state of mind of the researcher reflects, to some extent, the world in which he/she lives. What researchers believe, what they accept as forms of knowledge, is often a reflection of their social and cultural context" (p. 5). Likewise, Holliday (2015) argues that "the outcomes of research will always be influenced by the researcher's beliefs" (p. 60). Therefore, it is highly probable that this conceptualization of research has been transferred to their research practices including supervising and/or advising of the postgraduate students, which in turn might affect MA students' research practices, too.

In addition to the cumulative report of research approaches, changes and developments of research approaches were also examined. According to the results, a clear increasing pattern of research approaches was notable across time. For example, quantitatively-oriented studies have increased steadily across the decades, with an exponential rise of the studies using quantitative research in the recent decade. Mixed methods research studies, as the second most frequent approach to research, increased across three decades. The use of qualitative research has expanded across the decades, especially from decade two to decade three. These growing values of three research approaches lend support to the argument ensued by Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007):

> We currently are in a three methodological or research paradigm world, with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research all thriving and coexisting and a triple methodological world might be healthy because each approach has its strengths and weaknesses and times and places of need (p. 117).

5. Conclusion and Implications

Retrospectively, under the microscope-led perspective, the cumulative and developmental findings identified several patterns of research strengths and weaknesses in three research approaches in an EFL context. Moving forward, under the telescope-led perspective, these obtained patterns can then inform the present status of EFL research and put the EFL researchers on the

right path of reporting future researchers by presenting a set of recommendations to boost strengths and improve weaknesses.

The recent years have witnessed an increasing awareness of methodological issues in the field of applied linguistics, which brought about what Byrnes (2013) and Plonsky (2017) have referred to as "methodological turn" (p. 825) and "methodological awareness" (p. 517), respectively. In line with this awareness, the findings from the current study, based on cumulative and developmental results, revealed the traces of advancement and shift in research orientation. This trend, regarding general research approaches, partially represents a shift in orientation away from either-or approach or "dualistic perspective on qualitative and quantitative research approaches" to "continuum and a matter-of-degree perspective" (Riazi, 2017, p. 12).

Recently, a national movement has emerged in an Iranian context to renew and evolve higher education research issues in postgraduate courses in both natural and social sciences (including Iranian EFL research). Prospectively, in line with the methodological turn and methodological awareness (Byrnes, 2013; Plonsky, 2017) movements, which are lively testimonies "to the fact that methodologies no longer have ancillary status in our work" (Byrnes, 2013, p. 825), we recommend that the officially recognized society like TELLSI should establish a distinct research *Sig,* hold research workshops, attend research deficiencies, organize the societal needs, and offer researchers competitive grants.

This study provides not only important implications for local agencies and consumers such as universities, major national organizations (e.g., *Department of Higher Education*; *Department of Statistics and Information Technology*; *The ministry of Science, Research, and Technology*; *The national reference database, i.e., IRANDOC*), policy makers, supervisors, journal reviewers, postgraduate students, and material developers, with regard to the status of research (both research conceptions and research practice) in an accountable context, but the results of the study can also be extrapolated to other accountable international contexts (i.e., EFL and/or ESL).

Although this synthetic study provides a gestalt view of research paradigms and topical issues in an accountable EFL setting like Iran (see Amini Farsani & Babaii, 2019), we think that IRANDOC might not provide a representative set of MA theses in its databases to illustrate the true landscape of research in an EFL setting, especially for those theses done up to about ten years ago. Moreover, theses from some universities like the University of Tehran and different branches of Islamic Azad Universities were not found in the IRANDOC database. Therefore, future studies should continue this line of research by surveying the absent universities. Also, having adopted

research synthetic techniques, future studies can make a positive contribution to the hotly debated issue of quality in each paradigms of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research in applied linguistics and other related fields. Particularly, we can further extrapolate the use of research synthetic techniques for mapping and evaluating the discipline of "Teaching Persian to Non-Persian Language Learners".

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