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Entrepreneurship Traits of TEFL Students at Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province: A Mixed Methods Survey

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Abstract

Research on the entrepreneurial traits of students is a relatively recent area of study in the field of language teacher training in Iran, in spite of its over-two-decade background in the Iranian educational context. However, there has been a lack of research on entrepreneurship specifically among students of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in Iran. This study sought to assess the entrepreneurship traits of English BA and MA students of TEFL at Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province, as well as identify any barriers to the development of these traits. A total of 128 TEFL students (47 MA students and 81 BA students) from four branches selected through convenience sampling participated in the study and completed a questionnaire measuring traits such as risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, pragmatism, seeking challenges, intellectual health, and tolerance of ambiguity. Thirty-one students (12 MA students and 19 BA students) also participated in semi-structured interviews to provide further insight. Descriptive statistical analysis and independent samples t-test revealed that the students' entrepreneurship traits were at an average level, with no significant differences among the BA and MA students. The qualitative analysis of the interview data identified personal, financial, legal, and educational challenges as obstacles to entrepreneurial development. Based on these findings, recommendations were made to enhance the entrepreneurship traits of TEFL students.

Keywords: Barriers, Entrepreneurship, Entrepreneurial traits, Obstacles, University students, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)

I | INTRODUCTION



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Over the past few decades, entrepreneurship has gained increasing prominence as a desirable social behavior, prompting many countries, both developed and developing, to embrace it as a catalyst for social change (Spinelli et al., 2014). Universities have emerged as key institutions for nurturing entrepreneurial students, offering entrepreneurship courses and conducting research in this domain to support students in achieving their career aspirations (Kuratko, 2004; Nouri et al., 2022).

Among the various avenues of entrepreneurship research, one recurring focus has been the exploration of students' entrepreneurial inclinations across different universities, considering students as a pivotal potential source of entrepreneurship. Such research is predicated on the notion that entrepreneurship fundamentally comprises a set of personality traits that can be developed (Soofi & Daylami, 2022). The belief that training can enhance each of these entrepreneurial traits has long been



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ingrained in the field, with experts suggesting that short-term programs can bolster characteristics like locus of control and inclination toward success (Nouri et al., 2022).

These studies primarily adopt a behavioral approach to examine the personality traits influencing entrepreneurial behavior. Within this theoretical framework, entrepreneurship is viewed as a behavior that can be acquired and nurtured, challenging the notion of inherent entrepreneurial abilities (Drucker & Maciariello, 2014). This approach to entrepreneurship research is also evident in Iran, where numerous studies, both large and small-scale, have been conducted in various universities over the past decade (e.g., Hosseininia et al., 2017; Khalili Khezzrabadi et al., 2023). The aim of such research endeavors is to deepen our understanding of students' entrepreneurial inclinations across different academic disciplines.

Understanding students' aspirations and capabilities regarding entrepreneurship post-graduation provides higher education institutions with valuable insights to tailor sustainable educational programs that foster and teach entrepreneurship. Assuming that a significant portion of students opt for teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) program with the aim of securing a job after they graduate, it becomes imperative for them to acquire the requisite knowledge and behavioral competencies with the aim of initiating and developing businesses within this domain, particularly at the undergraduate level. Failing to do so may result in a considerable number of graduates facing unfavorable employment prospects, prompting concerns among prospective students about the stability of career paths within the field of TEFL. Stakeholders responsible for curriculum development and administration in TEFL programs must critically reassess the motivations behind students' enrollment or continuation in these programs. Simply put, equipping TEFL students with entrepreneurial awareness and skills is essential for sustaining the relevance of studying TEFL in Iranian universities and in the guidance provided to prospective students through national entrance exam materials.

Given the lack of substantial research in this area and the limited examination of personality traits or entrepreneurial tendencies among TEFL students, this study seeks to fill this gap. Employing a mixed-methods approach, it has comprehensively explored the entrepreneurial traits of students of TEFL at four branches of Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province, while also delving into the factors that either inhibit or foster entrepreneurial behavior among undergraduate and MA students of TEFL. To achieve this goal, a careful attempt is made to base the inquiry on a sound theoretical foundation for researching the entrepreneurial traits of students in an Iranian context, the one presented by Kurdnaji et al. (2006). Specifically, the study aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent do the TEFL students of Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province possess the entrepreneurial traits, namely, risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, pragmatism, seeking challenges, intellectual health, and tolerance of ambiguity?
2. Is there any significant difference between BA and MA TEFL students at the Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province in terms of their entrepreneurial traits, namely, risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, pragmatism, seeking challenges, intellectual health, and tolerance of ambiguity?
3. What are the barriers to the TEFL students' entrepreneurial desires and intentions?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Entrepreneurship embodies a complex psychological process characterized by the willingness to undertake risks and innovate, navigate uncertainty, and assess inherent risks in business and innovative endeavors (Rodríguez-López & Souto, 2020). Entrepreneurs are required to adeptly make business plans to achieve multifaceted objectives spanning finance, sales, production, marketing, and human resources. They must possess strong communication, interpersonal, leadership, and marketing acumen, fostering



positive relationships with stakeholders such as customers, employees, financial institutions, investors, legal advisors, and accountants. Additionally, proficiency in basic management skills is indispensable for effective delegation and organizational visioning to inspire employees. Learning from past failures is also imperative; prospective entrepreneurs are advised to meticulously research potential ventures and learn from the mistakes of predecessors to ensure alignment between their aspirations and the chosen business endeavor (Gedik et al., 2015).

López-Núñez et al. (2020) observed parallels between entrepreneurs and individuals with entrepreneurial inclinations in certain psychological domains. These shared traits encompass entrepreneurial drive, extroversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, problem-solving aptitude, emotional intelligence, self-assurance, and ambiguity tolerance. Embi et al. (2019) found leadership competencies, the drive for progress, ambiguity tolerance, and risk propensity significantly and positively correlated to students' intentions to embark on entrepreneurial endeavors. Moreover, Rodríguez-López & Souto (2020) discerned that businesses founded by individuals with higher education credentials, particularly university degrees, demonstrate a heightened propensity for competitiveness and success. This is attributed to the enhanced problem-solving capabilities typically associated with entrepreneurs possessing academic qualifications, thereby conferring a competitive advantage over the counterparts lacking such educational attainment.

1. Research on Entrepreneurship

The examination of entrepreneurial traits dates back to the early 1950s, where initial studies posited that entrepreneurs possess distinct personality attributes setting them apart from others. Notably, McClelland's seminal work in 1961 unequivocally demonstrated that the motivation for success, or the aspiration to achieve, serves as a pivotal determinant. This assertion suggests that as the number of individuals exhibiting a strong desire for success increases, so does societal economic development. Subsequently, the pursuit of success, defined as enhancing performance and discovering expedient or efficient methods of accomplishing tasks, coupled with an inclination to triumph through individual efforts, emerged as consistent themes across numerous research endeavors (e.g., Gartner, 1988; Hosseinpour et al., 2011; Hosseininia et al., 2017).

Later investigations expanded the roster of entrepreneurial characteristics to include traits such as a propensity for risk-taking, attributing failures to personal efforts rather than external factors (internal locus of control), optimism, and independence (Raadi Afsooran, 2010; Zali et al., 2008). It is worth noting that the traits delineated across different studies may not always align perfectly.

Various studies have addressed different traits associated with entrepreneurial individuals. For instance, based on an analysis of 50 studies, Timmons (1978) categorized entrepreneurial characteristics into six domains including commitment, opportunism, risk tolerance, ambiguity tolerance, creativity, adaptability, and high motivation. However, this classification is not universally adopted across all studies and may vary in different research contexts. Zali et al. (2008) propose that independence, risk-taking, and creativity are among the behavioral features commonly attributed to entrepreneurs and widely accepted by researchers.

As it is evident in the body of the related research reviewed so far, several studies have focused on researching the entrepreneurial traits of students majoring in various academic fields either at a BA or MA level. However, it can be argued that despite extensive research on entrepreneurial traits, no studies have specifically addressed the barriers faced by TEFL students in Iranian universities. The following section elaborates on the significance of researching the entrepreneurial traits of EFL teachers, in general, to shed light on the necessity of researching such traits among Iranian EFL teachers.

2. The Significance of Entrepreneurial Traits for EFL Teachers

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, the role of teachers extends beyond traditional classroom instruction. Particularly in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), educators face the dual



challenge of equipping students with language proficiency while also preparing them for the complexities of a globalized world (Aniroh, 2018). Entrepreneurial traits among EFL teachers are increasingly considered essential for navigating these challenges and fostering innovation and adaptability in language education.

Entrepreneurial traits encompass a range of competencies, including creativity, problem-solving, risk-taking, and resourcefulness. These skills empower teachers to identify opportunities for improvement, develop innovative teaching methods, and adapt to changing educational contexts (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). In the context of EFL instruction, entrepreneurial teachers are better equipped to address the diverse needs and learning styles of their students, foster a dynamic and engaging learning environment, and stay abreast of the emerging trends and technologies in language education (Özdemir, 2015).

One key aspect of entrepreneurial traits for EFL teachers is the ability to create and seize opportunities for professional development and growth. In an ever-changing educational landscape, teachers must continuously update their knowledge and skills to remain effective and relevant (Özdemir, 2015). Entrepreneurial teachers take initiative in pursuing professional development opportunities, whether through attending conferences, workshops, or online courses, participating in teacher networks, or engaging in action research projects (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). By proactively seeking out opportunities for growth, entrepreneurial teachers enhance their own teaching effectiveness and contribute to the advancement of the field of EFL education.

Moreover, entrepreneurial traits enable EFL teachers to be proactive in addressing the needs and interests of their students. Effective language teaching goes beyond mere transmission of knowledge; it requires a deep understanding of students' backgrounds, motivations, and learning goals. Entrepreneurial teachers are adept at identifying the unique needs and preferences of their students and tailoring their instructional approaches accordingly (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). Whether through integrating technology into lessons, incorporating real-world tasks and projects, or providing personalized feedback and support, entrepreneurial teachers create engaging and relevant learning experiences that inspire and empower students to achieve their language learning objectives.

Furthermore, entrepreneurial traits empower EFL teachers to become agents of change within their educational institutions and communities. In an era of educational reform and innovation, teachers play a critical role in driving positive change and improving learning outcomes (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). Entrepreneurial teachers leverage their creativity, leadership, and collaboration skills to advocate for innovative teaching practices, develop new curricular initiatives, and forge partnerships with other stakeholders (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). By taking initiatives and leading with examples, entrepreneurial teachers contribute to the continuous improvement of EFL education and inspire their colleagues to embrace a spirit of innovation and entrepreneurship. All in all, it can be concluded that entrepreneurial traits are indispensable for EFL teachers in today's dynamic and interconnected world. By cultivating entrepreneurial competencies, teachers enhance their own professional effectiveness, address the diverse needs of their students, and drive positive change within their educational communities. As the field of EFL education continues to evolve, entrepreneurial teachers will play a vital role in shaping the future of language learning and teaching.

Recent research has shed light on the significance of entrepreneurial traits among language teachers, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Entrepreneurial traits are considered essential for navigating the complexities of the modern educational landscape and fostering innovation and adaptability in language instruction (Fejes et al., 2019).

Entrepreneurial traits encompass a set of diverse competencies, including creativity, problem-solving, risk-taking, and resourcefulness (Jones, 2019). These skills enable language teachers to identify opportunities for improvement, develop innovative teaching methods, and adapt to changing educational contexts (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). In the realm of EFL instruction, entrepreneurial teachers



are better equipped to address the diverse needs and learning styles of their students, create engaging learning environments, and stay updated with the emerging trends and technologies in language education (Ferrerias-Garcia et al., 2021).

One key finding is that entrepreneurial traits empower language teachers to proactively pursue professional development opportunities (Phyak & Sharma, 2021). Entrepreneurial teachers take initiative in attending conferences, workshops, and online courses, engaging in teacher networks, and conducting action research projects to enhance their teaching effectiveness and contribute to the advancement of EFL education (Samuel & Rahman, 2018).

Moreover, entrepreneurial traits enable language teachers to tailor instruction to the needs and interests of their students (Sharma et al., 2021). By integrating technology, real-world tasks, and personalized support into their teaching, entrepreneurial teachers create meaningful learning experiences that inspire and empower students to achieve their language learning goals (Wu et al., 2022).

Additionally, entrepreneurial traits empower language teachers to act as agents of change within their educational institutions and communities (Keyhani & Kim, 2021). Entrepreneurial teachers leverage their creativity, leadership, and collaboration skills to advocate for innovative practices, develop new curricular initiatives, and forge partnerships with stakeholders to improve learning outcomes (Sharma et al., 2021).

In conclusion, research findings underscore the indispensable role of entrepreneurial traits for language teachers in today's dynamic educational landscape. By cultivating entrepreneurial competencies, teachers enhance their professional effectiveness, address the diverse needs of their students, and drive positive change within their educational communities. As the field of language education continues to evolve, entrepreneurial teachers can play a pivotal role in shaping the future of language learning and teaching.

3. Theoretical Framework of the Study

In this study, the entrepreneurial traits of students of TEFL from Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province were assessed using the model developed by Kurdnaji et al. (2006) for measuring the personality traits of Iranian entrepreneurs (Figure 1). This model delineates specific traits for measurement, including risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, pragmatism, challenge-seeking, intellectual health, and ambiguity tolerance.

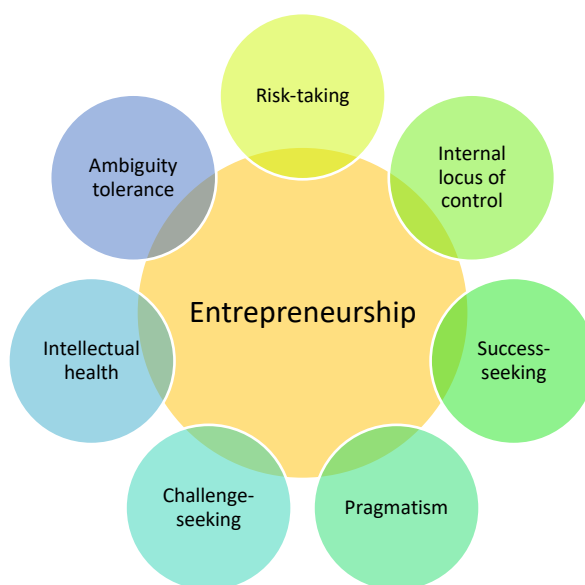


Figure 1. The theoretical framework of this study, adopted from Kurdnaji et al. (2006).



In this framework, as applied in the current study, each component is defined distinctly. Risk tolerance pertains to an individual's capacity to accept or avoid risks when faced with perilous situations (Anwar & Saleem, 2019). Internal locus of control, introduced by Rotter (1982), refers to individuals' perceptions regarding their ability to influence actions or specific events affecting their lives, with entrepreneurs commonly believed to have a heightened sense of control over outcomes (Embi et al., 2019). Success-seeking denotes a fervent desire to excel or achieve success across various endeavors (Greenberg & Baron, 2008; Kusmintarti et al., 2018).

Intellectual health embodies the creative process of entrepreneurial individuals, enabling adept problem-solving and spontaneous action (Kurdnaj et al., 2006). Pragmatism, often deemed as a primary entrepreneurial trait, pertains to the practical approach to tasks and decision-making, with entrepreneurs emphasizing tangible outcomes and adaptability to change (Jena, 2020). Ambiguity tolerance refers to individuals' readiness to navigate uncertain conditions where outcomes are indeterminate, a crucial trait for entrepreneurs frequently confronted with unpredictable challenges and potential success in nascent ventures (Kusmintarti et al., 2018). Challenge-seeking reflects individuals' inclination to tackle ambiguous and intricate tasks, coupled with the ability to devise solutions commensurate with such challenges (Kurdnaj et al., 2006).

4. Students' Entrepreneurship Skills

Over time, the exploration of entrepreneurial traits has expanded from outside academia to within-university settings. This trend can be attributed to the growing cognitive perspective on entrepreneurship, fostering a belief among experts and researchers that entrepreneurial traits are trainable (Soofi & Daylami, 2022). Consequently, there emerged a conviction that identifying and reinforcing the characteristics of entrepreneurial students could facilitate the imparting of entrepreneurial traits, particularly to those who may initially exhibit reluctance for pursuing a career in entrepreneurship.

Similar to earlier research on entrepreneurial individuals, studies in this domain underscored the variability of individual traits among entrepreneurial students across different contexts. For instance, findings revealed that, during the venture initiation phase, the key characteristics among entrepreneurial students included ambition, self-confidence, leadership, risk-taking, independence, and creativity, whereas, during the business development phase, the prioritization of these traits shifted to ambition, risk-taking, leadership, creativity, self-confidence, and independence (Burns, 2022).

Furthermore, it is important to note that the inclination towards entrepreneurship among students does not necessarily correlate with their knowledge of entrepreneurial concepts. For instance, the research by Wang & Wong (2004) demonstrated that, despite a considerable interest in entrepreneurship among participants, a significant portion lacked adequate knowledge on the subject. This suggests that mere interest is not sufficient to cultivate entrepreneurial traits or knowledge among students. Hence, there exists a need to actively teach entrepreneurship skills to bridge this knowledge gap.

In line with this issue, the research by Gürol & Atsan (2006) conducted at Turkish universities indicated that not all recognized entrepreneurial traits account for the disparity between the students interested in entrepreneurship and those who are not. While characteristics such as tolerance of ambiguity and self-confidence were found to be consistent across both groups, distinctions emerged in traits like risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, and innovation, which set apart the interested students from the uninterested ones.

5. Research on Students' Entrepreneurship Skills in Iran

The investigation of student entrepreneurship in Iran has a relatively short history of less than two decades. Unfortunately, within this timeframe, there is a notable absence of research on



entrepreneurship specifically among TEFL students, both domestically and internationally. This section aims to address this gap by reviewing the relevant Iranian studies that have explored the indicators and characteristics of entrepreneurial traits among students across various fields. This review is crucial as it not only enhances the quality of the current research but also aids in the interpretation of its findings by providing insights from prior investigations.

One of the earliest studies in this domain in Iran, conducted by [Hosseinpour & Rezaei \(2011\)](#), revealed a significant positive correlation between various entrepreneurship variables among students. These variables included both external and internal motivations, subjective perceptions of the attractiveness of entrepreneurship, self-efficacy, expectations, creativity, and attitude. Additionally, the study highlighted that students commonly cited personal financial constraints and insufficient knowledge about business initiation as the primary obstacles hindering their entrepreneurial endeavors.

Similarly, [Zali et al. \(2008\)](#) reported that approximately 21 percent of the surveyed students exhibited entrepreneurial traits. While this group demonstrated strong determination, other crucial traits such as independence, risk-taking propensity, and creativity fell below the minimum acceptable threshold. Another study within the same timeframe by [Raadi Afsooran \(2010\)](#) indicated that neither gender nor academic discipline significantly influenced the acquisition of entrepreneurial characteristics among students. However, further analysis revealed noteworthy variations in success-seeking behavior and tolerance of ambiguity across different demographic groups.

Subsequent research in the following decade continued to highlight deficiencies in certain aspects of entrepreneurship among Iranian students, suggesting an uneven distribution of behavioral components within this cohort. For instance, [Rezaee & Rahsepar \(2010\)](#) found that, while students generally exhibited high levels of entrepreneurial traits across all components, there was a notable deficiency in risk-taking propensity. Further examination of the data revealed similarities between male and female students in terms of internal locus of control, creativity, and risk-taking, but disparities in success-seeking behavior and independence. Similarly, significant variations were observed among different academic departments in all aspects except creativity.

Several studies conducted in Iran over the past decade have examined the factors influencing students' entrepreneurial aspirations, particularly focusing on the barriers to entrepreneurship. For instance, [Hosseini & Khosravilagh \(2017\)](#) identified leadership self-efficacy, leadership motivation, and financial support as the pivotal determinants leading to entrepreneurial inclination among students in public universities in Tehran. Similarly, [Keshavarz & Mehri Shandi \(2021\)](#) identified seven obstacles faced by students, including familial, personal, educational, technical, financial, socio-cultural, and legal factors. Additionally, [Hosseininia et al. \(2017\)](#) highlighted other hindrances to student entrepreneurship, such as lack of planning and teamwork and unfamiliarity with legal and regulatory issues. Moreover, they found that motivation for progress, success-seeking behavior, marketing skills, and pragmatism can predict students' entrepreneurial aspirations.

Recent research has underscored the significant role of educational factors in shaping students' entrepreneurial intentions in Iranian universities. [Khalili Khezrabadi \(2023\)](#) emphasized the close relationship between the quality of undergraduate curricula and students' entrepreneurial intentions. The findings suggested that, by enhancing the integration between academia and business as well as fostering the development of entrepreneurial traits, universities can better equip students to navigate environmental challenges. Furthermore, the study recommended that nurturing students' emotional factors could further cultivate their desire for entrepreneurship.

Similarly, [Darini et al. \(2022\)](#) analyzed the data from 482 students and found that teaching entrepreneurship skills could enhance students' self-confidence, mindset, and attitudes, consequently boosting their entrepreneurial intentions. Their study indicated that the desire for entrepreneurship is predominantly influenced by behavioral and emotional dimensions, with the cognitive dimension playing a less significant



role. Therefore, they argued for the role of education and universities in providing a platform for the development of entrepreneurial traits, fostering a positive attitude among students towards their abilities and ultimately strengthening their entrepreneurial intentions. This positive environment can create a mindset conducive to entrepreneurship among students.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

The study involved the participants selected from eighth-semester BA students ($n = 81$) and second-year MA students ($n = 47$) majoring in TEFL at the English Departments of Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province. A total of 128 students comprising 39 males and 89 females with an average age of 24.5 were included. Convenience sampling was employed instead of cluster or stratified sampling due to the fact the (post)graduate students were not easily accessible to the researcher upon invitation in all the branches of Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran. Additionally, 19 seniors, seven males, 12 females, and 12 MA students (four males and eight females) participated in interviews following questionnaire completion.

2. Instruments

2.1. Personality Traits of Iranian Entrepreneurs

The quantitative data collection was based on a validated questionnaire assessing entrepreneurial characteristics within the Iranian context. The questionnaire was found to have a reliability coefficient of .82, as determined by Cronbach's alpha. It consisted of 95 items measuring eight primary entrepreneurial personality traits including risk-taking, internal locus of control, success-seeking, pragmatism, challenge-seeking, intellectual robustness, and tolerance of ambiguity. The responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.2. Semi-Structured Interviews

To explore the factors influencing the entrepreneurial characteristics of the TEFL students, semi-structured interviews were conducted using five predetermined questions. The questions were vetted by two assistant professors of TEFL and two entrepreneurship course lecturers. Individual interviews were conducted in Persian with durations ranging from 10 to 20 minutes. Prior to the interviews, the participants were briefed on the study objectives and the utilization of the resulting data.

3. Design of the Study

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques. With regard to the exploratory nature of this research, as guided by the research questions, quantitatively, the research was a survey type, while, qualitatively, it adopted an explanatory research design. Considering the purpose of the inquiry, a consecutive quantitative-qualitative design was adopted to collect the required data, as described in the following section.

4. Data Collection Procedure

The study commenced with the sampling procedure, and then face-to-face data collection was done in classrooms following an explanation of the research purpose to the students. The interested students were invited to complete the questionnaire, and those who opted not to participate were free to leave



the class. To incentivize participation, the researchers assured the students that they would receive individualized feedback via social media following the data collection. Ultimately, 128 questionnaires devoid of missing data were collected out of the 137 distributed. Subsequently, the students expressing interest in further participation were invited for interviews, resulting in 31 volunteers including 19 BA students and 12 MA students. The recorded interviews underwent comprehensive coding, followed by analysis and interpretation in conjunction with the questionnaire data.

IV. RESULTS

This section comprises two subsections. The initial part presents the findings derived from the quantitative analysis of the questionnaire data, while the subsequent part delves into the results of the content analysis on the interview transcripts. The first and second research inquiries were addressed through examination of the data obtained from the TEFL students across four Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province. Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were conducted on the collected data, with a summary provided in Table 1. Notably, an independent samples t-test was employed to compare the entrepreneurial traits of the BA students and MA students of TEFL at Islamic Azad Universities in the province.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and the results of one-way ANOVA for seven traits of entrepreneurial personality.

Traits	Degree	Descriptive statistics			Level	t-test		
		<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Risk-taking	BA	3.20	81	.71	Average	1.82	2	.16
	MA	3.36	47	.78	Average		2	
Internal locus of control	BA	3.06	81	.56	Average	.98	2	.68
	MA	3.55	47	.81	Average		2	
Success-seeking	BA	3.30	81	.80	Average	1.54	2	.19
	MA	3.86	47	1.11	Average		2	
Pragmatism	BA	3.52	81	1.02	Average	1.53	2	.17
	MA	3.26	47	.66	Average		2	
Challenge-seeking	BA	3.11	81	.61	Average	1.34	2	.31
	MA	3.16	47	.71	Average		2	
Intellectual health	BA	3.25	81	.75	Average	1.06	2	.13
	MA	3.42	47	.48	Average		2	
Ambiguity tolerance	BA	2.73	81	.32	Average	1.16	2	.43
	MA	3.03	47	.79	Average		2	

Each entrepreneurial trait was assessed on a scale from 1 to 5, with a theoretical mean of 3. The analysis revealed that, for the BA students, the mean scores on risk-taking ($M = 3.20$), internal locus of control ($M = 3.06$), success-seeking ($M = 3.30$), pragmatism ($M = 3.52$), challenge-seeking ($M = 3.11$), intellectual health ($M = 3.25$), and tolerance of ambiguity ($M = 2.73$) were proximal to the theoretical average. By comparison, for the MA students, the mean scores on risk-taking ($M = 3.36$), internal locus of control ($M = 3.55$), success-seeking ($M = 3.86$), pragmatism ($M = 3.26$), challenge-seeking ($M = 3.16$), intellectual health ($M = 3.42$), and tolerance of ambiguity ($M = 3.03$) were also close to the theoretical average. Consequently, the general level of entrepreneurial traits among the BA students and MA students of TEFL in Azad Islamic Universities of Mazandaran Province was deemed average in response to the primary research question.

Addressing the second query, the mean scores from the students across the four university branches were compared via independent samples t-test. The results indicated no significant disparity among the branches concerning the measured traits, including risk-taking ($t = 1.82$, $p = .16 > .05$), internal locus of control ($t = .98$, $p = .68 > .05$), success-seeking ($t = 1.54$, $p = .19 > .05$), pragmatism ($t = 1.53$, $p = .17 > .05$),



challenge-seeking ($t = 1.34, p = .31 > .05$), intellectual health ($t = 1.39, p = .13 > .05$), and tolerance of ambiguity ($t = 1.16, p = .43 > .05$). This suggested no significant distinction among the BA and MA students of TEFL from different branches in the province concerning entrepreneurial trait levels.

To address the third research inquiry, an open coding content analysis was conducted on the interview data, resulting in the identification of four primary themes: personal, legal, financial, and educational obstacles. These themes, elaborated upon below, are illustrated in Figure 2.

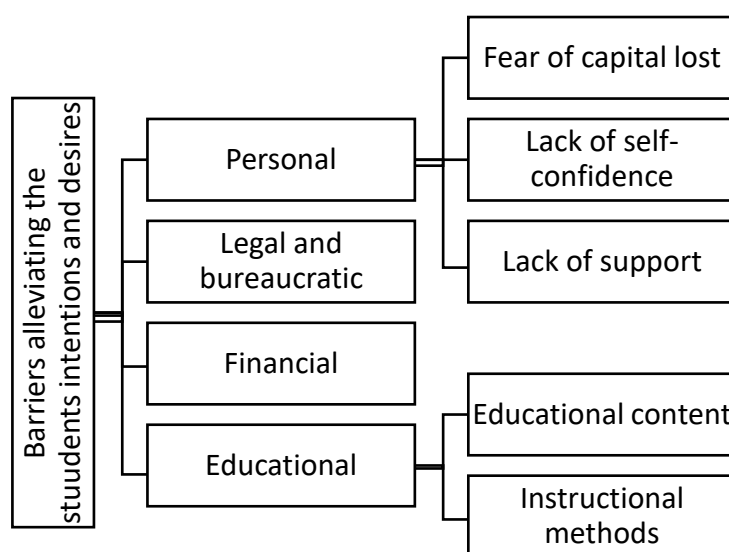


Figure 2. The themes and subthemes emerging from the interview data.

Personal obstacles: According to the collected data, personal obstacles are generally those barriers which originate from personal emotions or are related to the people close to students, such as family members or friends. Thus, they can be felt by the student himself, and, if other obstacles are removed, no change is made in their existence. In this research, three types of personal obstacles were identified.

One of the most important personal obstacles is the loss of capital. As it means, the student feels that, in investing in the idea of entrepreneurship, he will probably lose his own savings or what he has gained from family members or any other source. As a result, he will not have a second chance. For example, student 7 stated:

"How much capital do I possess to use? What if it disappears?"

What is important is that, even if there is no fear of loss of capital, there is not enough self-confidence in some students. This means that the student is not sure if he has the necessary ability to start and run a small business even on his own. For example, student 12 stated:

"My father supports me when it comes to my future, but I don't think I can. I mean, even when we talk about work with friends, I still think I can't."

Finally, the lack of support from family members and friends was another theme extracted from the interview data. Specifically, the concept of lack of support referred to the student's feelings about the assurance of the support of family members and friends in case of job-related problems, loss of capital, or financial crises. For example, student 14 stated:

"I know my wife and her family. Even if the financial support is from my own family, again, if there is a problem, they blame me and say they warned me. I don't know what to do after that?"

Legal and bureaucratic obstacles: The other fundamental barrier that stands in the way of TEFL students to entrepreneurship is legal and bureaucratic restrictions. Specifically, these limitations include



their lack of familiarity with the legal requirements that must be met to start work and continue it. For example, student 7 stated:

"I have friends who, after starting work, faced lots of complexities in offices and even regretted it. I don't want to experience it."

In addition, it should be said that students are faced with confusion in administrative systems. In general, one recurring theme in the data was that students are not familiar with the official issues and the administrative procedures, and this step makes starting a business scary for them. Student 2 stated:

"I feel I need a lawyer or a counsellor or someone who can help me with that. I don't know what to do, who to turn to; I don't have anything to do with this kind of work."

Financial obstacles: Another thing that was evident in the data was financial and monetary issues. In general, the students and their families, as the most important financial supporters, do not have enough capital to start a business. In addition, funding through banks and institutions is not easy for them either. For example, student 3 said:

"I have other siblings who have to be provided by my family as well. I have to take a loan. Will a bank give me a loan? I need a deposit; there are thousands of other excuses."

Educational obstacles: The final theme which was drawn from the interview referred to educational obstacles. More specifically, the students who participated in this research believed that what they learned during their studies in schools and university did not help them develop their entrepreneurial traits. One of the dimensions of this obstacle is related to the educational content, which, according to the students, puts too much emphasis on theoretical aspects and does not outline for the students how knowing these theoretical issues will help them in practice. For instance, student 16 stated:

"We only read books and pamphlets and memorized them. We took an exam and wrote answers to the questions. We wrote and they corrected our papers. No one said anything about business."

In other words, the students believed that what they needed to be able to start a business based on their teaching expertise was not provided for them through the content they received. The same theme is echoed by student 20 as follows:

"I have already mentioned all the obstacles and problems, financial issues and other things. In the whole 4 years, we have not talked about these things in our classes as we did during this meeting."

Another obstacle raised in this regard was the professors' teaching methods and the current curriculum; in general, they were judged not to meet their needs. In addition, there are not even practical courses, nor is there enough internship-like atmosphere. Students do not know, even if they work for others, what limitations, problems, opportunities and threats are they going to face in a work environment.

"It seems that professors are not aware of what a student needs in the job market in the field of teaching. You can see how many of our professors have businesses."

Overall, the current teaching methods and curricula cannot provide students with the right direction and a right role model. The existing curricula and what students experience in the university are far from the realities of the job market.



V. DISCUSSION

The findings derived from both quantitative and qualitative analyses of the data indicate that the status of the TEFL students at Islamic Azad University in Mazandaran Province is not particularly favorable. Through this research, it was found that the current level of entrepreneurial traits among the students is average. Furthermore, these entrepreneurial traits were identified to be influenced by various personal, legal, financial, and educational factors.

The interpretation of the current level of entrepreneurial traits among students should be approached with caution, considering prior research. Previous studies have revealed variations in the possession of entrepreneurial traits by students from different disciplines. For instance, [Narenji Thani et al. \(2020\)](#) demonstrated that students in management or information technology had a higher level of entrepreneurial characteristics compared to students in industrial engineering within the same university. Hence, the outcomes of this study should be cautiously generalized to other universities across different provinces or national universities.

Additionally, juxtaposing the findings of this research with those of [Raadi Afsooran \(2010\)](#) and [Khalili Khezrabadi \(2023\)](#), one finds that the overall university environment may not exert as significant an influence as departmental environments. Consequently, the qualitative data underscored the importance of considering the educational content and curriculum. The qualitative analysis of the interview data reaffirmed the observations made by [Burns \(2022\)](#) regarding students' pre-business initiation traits, particularly weaknesses in personal traits such as self-confidence and self-reliance. Furthermore, the results echoed the conclusions drawn by [Wang & Wong \(2004\)](#) regarding students' deficiencies in knowledge, both in terms of specialization and legal aspects of the job market, hindering the development of their entrepreneurial traits.

It is noteworthy that the findings of this study, conducted in Iran, align with prior research, such as [Zali et al. \(2008\)](#), indicating that the level of entrepreneurial traits among TEFL students is not particularly favorable. [Hosseinpour & Rezaei \(2011\)](#), as well as [Hosseini & Khosravilagh \(2017\)](#), highlighted financial constraints as significant barriers to entrepreneurship. The temporal alignment of these studies with the current research underscores the persistent nature of these challenges within the Iranian context.

Previous research has elucidated that the determinants of students' entrepreneurial traits extend beyond the confines of the university environment. Consequently, addressing the factors influencing student entrepreneurship requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing personal, intra-university, and extra-university elements. This study underscores the tripartite nature of the planning framework aimed at enhancing students' entrepreneurial traits, as delineated by [Keshavarz & Mehri Shandi \(2021\)](#).

In conclusion, while the utilization of the standardized instrument developed by [Kurdnaji et al. \(2006\)](#) facilitates the assessment of entrepreneurial traits of students of TEFL, it is evident from the amalgamated results of quantitative and qualitative analyses that a more comprehensive tool is imperative. Such an instrument would not only gauge the students' entrepreneurial traits but also assess their readiness in terms of educational, legal, financial, and personal factors.

VI. CONCLUSION

Given the pivotal role of university education in shaping students' future career, coupled with the increasing importance of entrepreneurial endeavors in the contemporary and forthcoming job markets, fostering entrepreneurial mindsets and skills among university students is imperative. The potential



disillusionment and frustration faced by TEFL graduates in navigating the competitive job market underscore the urgency of assessing and nurturing entrepreneurial traits within this cohort.

This research was motivated by a notable gap in scholarly inquiry within the Iranian context. Within the confines of administrative constraints and the scope of the study, a mixed-methods approach was adopted to examine final-year students at Islamic Azad Universities in Mazandaran Province. The findings revealed an average level of entrepreneurial traits among these students, with identified barriers stemming from personal, legal, financial, and educational realms.

The implications of the research findings extend to stakeholders involved in TEFL programs, urging concerted efforts to enhance students' entrepreneurial competencies. Collaboration with other university departments and external entities, such as industry liaison offices, is essential. Moreover, pedagogical approaches within TEFL courses necessitate adaptation to align with real-world applications, emphasizing the relevance of course content to professional practice. Initiatives such as guest lectures, industry exhibitions, and seminars offer avenues for students to engage with pertinent labor market information encompassing administrative, legal, financial, and commercial dimensions.

While acknowledging its limitations, this study serves as a pioneering exploration of entrepreneurship within the domain of TEFL. Future research endeavors should scale up to encompass larger cohorts, facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of students' entrepreneurial traits. Phenomenological investigations are warranted to elucidate the nuanced aspects of entrepreneurship specific to the field of TEFL. Furthermore, the development and evaluation of tailored entrepreneurship training programs represent promising avenues to cultivate students' skills and aptitudes across various university settings.

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