Students' willingness to attend EFL classes with respect to teachers' credibility, stroke, and success: A cross-cultural study of Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions

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Abstract

We investigated the home culture effect with respect to students' perceptions about themselves and their instructors. This study was concerned with the cross-cultural analysis of Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions of teacher success, credibility, and stroke variables. Willingness to Attend Classes (WTAC) was evaluated. Two-hundred-seventy-six Iranian and 150 Iraqi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students participated in the study. Results of the multi-group modeling showed measurement invariance, both metric and scalar, across the groups. Afterwards, descriptive statistics indicated that both groups held high perceptions of their own WTAC and their teachers' stroke, effectiveness, and credibility. Next, correlational results indicated that the sub-components of perceived teacher credibility, stroke, and success variables were significantly and positively associated with Iranian and Iraqi students' WTAC. These outputs were approved in the SEM results, and the hypothesized relations between the variables were approved; perceived teacher stroke, success, and credibility factors were positive significant predictors of Iranian and Iraqi students' WTAC. On the whole, these findings provided empirical backing for the theoretically-rich claim that students' home culture background significantly predicts the way their belief systems are shaped and reshaped. Hence, teacher educators should be concerned with training teachers who not only effectively teach language to the students but also fulfill students' expectations of a successful teacher who is able to provide culturally-appropriate quality communication in the classroom and build a relationship of trust between him/herself and the students with the ultimate aim of enhancing student-related academic outcomes.

Keywords Cross-cultural analysis · Teacher credibility · Teacher success · Teacher stroke · Students' willingness to attend classes · English as a foreign language

Introduction

As one of the key stakeholders in the educational system, teachers have been found to make a difference in the effectiveness of educational systems and the academic achievement of students. The crucial role of teachers in determining various student-related academic decisions has led to this conclusion that teachers' behavioral, psychological, and instructional characteristics are worthy of due attention and research (Burroughs et al., 2019; Derakhshan, Coombe, Zhaleh, & Tabatabaeian, 2020). One of the critical student behavioral outcomes in the academic context is students' degree of Willingness to Attend Classes (WTAC). The significance of students' class attendance decisions for their educational success is well manifested in Moore et al.'s (2003) words that "students who attend class regularly have a much greater chance of making high grades than do students who skip lots of classes" (p. 325). This is so because, through their class attendance, students have more direct engagement with the teacher and instructional materials, in turn paving the way for enhanced understanding and learning on their part (Kassarnig et al., 2017). In contrast, nonattendance can be accompanied by many unfavorable consequences such as

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students' violence, academic failure, and mental disorders (Gonzálvez et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, educational research has evinced that students' class presence or truancy can be potentially influenced by teachers' communication behaviors (Alhassan & Odame, 2014) and teaching effectiveness (Gershenson, 2016). In this regard, three important teacher characteristics, found previously to be affecting students' WTAC, are teacher stroke, teacher credibility, and teacher success (Pishghadam et al., 2019). To start with, teacher success is a remarkable teacher variable devoting much theoretical and empirical research to itself. However, it should be noted that despite the array of theoretical conceptualizations of this notion (e.g., Coombe, 2014, 2020; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Hiebert, Morris, Berk, & Jansen, 2007; Moafian & Pishghadam, 2009; Porter & Brophy, 1988; Richards, 2010; Tamblyn, 2000), no universal, agreed-upon definition has been proposed for it. Tsui (2009) propounded that the slippery nature of the teacher success concept is due to the reason that teacher quality instruction can be defined and realized differently in various cultures. Besides, two essential instances of teacher communication behaviors being remarkably associated with teacher success are teacher credibility and teacher stroke factors (Pishghadam & Karami, 2017), defined respectively as teachers' degree of trustworthiness as perceived by their students (McCroskey, 1998), and students' perceptions of actions taken by their teachers to appreciate students' worth and presence (Pishghadam & Khajavy, 2014).

Although it is argued that teacher variables play indispensable parts in student-related educational consequences, they may be dissimilarities regarding how they are understood and actualized in different cultures. To investigate this claim, previous cross-cultural studies have attended to teacher variables such as teacher-student relationships (Chen et al., 2019), teacher gaze, interpersonal behavior (McIntyre et al., 2020), self-efficacy (Dilekli & Tezci, 2020), effectiveness (Grant et al., 2013), beliefs (Can et al., 2011), immediacy, credibility (Santilli et al., 2011), classroom behavior management (Shin & Koh, 2007), teacher stroke (Irajzad et al., 2017), and teacher roles (Zhu et al., 2010).

To pursue this line of research with the goal of buttressing previous research findings and providing a better understanding of how teacher variables function across various cultures, the present study endeavored to examine the extent to which Iranian and Iraqi university students' perceived WTAC can be predicted by their perceptions of their teachers' credibility, success, and stroking behaviors, and how much similar/dissimilar the students from these two cultures are regarding their perceptions of these four variables. Based on the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the study, four hypotheses are put forward in the present study; first, it is hypothesized that students' perceived WTAC will be predicted by their perceptions of their teachers' credibility, success, and stroking behaviors. Second, it is hypothesized that students' perceptions of teacher success will be predicted by their perceptions

of teacher credibility and success variables. Third, it is hypothesized that students' perceptions of teacher credibility will predict their perceptions of teacher stroke. Finally, it is hypothesized that home culture background of Iranian and Iraqi students may make a significant difference in the perceptions that they hold toward their own WTAC and their teachers' credibility, success, and stroking behaviors.

Since this study is a cross-cultural one, measurement invariance should be verified prior to examining group comparisons. According to Byrne and Watkins (2003), measurement invariance pertains to the degree to which items in an instrument are perceived and interpreted in the same way across various samples. Invariance testing is an investigation of the degree to which score properties and interpretations could be generalized or transferred across heterogeneous groups, settings, and tasks (Messick, 1995). If measurement invariance is not confirmed, the findings of between-group differences cannot be clearly interpreted. Measurement invariance is usually tested at a series of levels. Widaman and Resie (1997) have delineated procedures for testing a set of hierarchical models to test measurement invariance.

Literature Review

Class attendance is regarded as one of the most pivotal decisions students make during their educational journey. The essentiality of students' class attendance is so remarkable that all other factors within the instructional context seem secondary in comparison to it. Regular presence in class can positively affect students' class performance (Ayodele, 2017), exam performance (Chen & Lin, 2008), and achievement (Credé et al., 2010). It can also bring about students' persistence in the educational program and their production of higher academic outcomes (Bijsmans & Schakel, 2018). The urgency of class attendance is even highlighted in the foreign language learning context, where the classroom is typically the sole place of students' exposure to the target language (Pishghadam et al., 2019). This claim was also confirmed by previous research evidence showing that class absenteeism negatively influences students' language learning (Fay et al., 2013). Among the many factors impacting students' WTAC, teacher quality has been found to play an indispensable role in students' decision to attend classes or not (Gershenson, 2016). This is because teachers are usually the main source of educational input in the school (Harris & Sass, 2011), are managers of the classroom (Lingefjärd & Meier, 2010), create conditions for teacher-student and student-student interactions in the instructional context (Ballester, 2015), are responsible for creating positive environments in classes (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), and bring about long-term effects on students' educational outcomes (Burroughs et al., 2019), among fulfilling many other roles.

That said, the quality of teachers' instructional practice and communication behavior determines to a large degree their professional success (Loy, 2006) and, consequently, students' (dis)inclination to attend classes (Pishghadam et al., 2019). Years of research in the area of instructional communication have provided strong backing for the claim that teachers' effective communication behaviors can galvanize favorable student-related academic outcomes (Frymier & Houser, 2000). To provide further support for this theoretically-rich argument, the present study, in addition to teacher success, also attended to two instances of teacher communication behaviors; namely, teacher credibility and teacher stroke, and their potential effects on students' WTAC.

To elaborate on these teacher factors one by one, first, it should be noted that the origin of the concept of credibility goes back to Aristotle, who identified logos, ethos, and pathos as the three essential means of persuasion. More specifically pertaining to the concern of the present study, ethos regards the source's credibility, referring to the extent to which the person involved in the persuasion work is perceived by others to be trustworthy (McCroskey, 1998). This source's credibility or ethos was also further categorized into the three sub-components of character, intelligence, and goodwill by Aristotle (McCroskey & Teven, 1999). Applying this concept into the educational context, teacher credibility refers to the degree to which an instructor is perceived to be trustworthy, reliable, or credible by his/her students (McCroskey, 1998). In this respect, some modifications were made regarding the sub-components of the source's credibility in this context, as teacher credibility was finalized to encompass the three dimensions of goodwill, competence, and trustworthiness (McCroskey & Teven, 1999), respectively referring to students' perceptions regarding their teachers' care for students' best interests, knowledge of the subject matter, and honesty (McCroskey, 1998; McCroskey & Teven, 1999). In relation to that, McCroskey and Young (1981) stated that "research generally has supported the proposition that source credibility is a very important element in the communication process, whether the goal of the communication effort be persuasion or the generation of understanding" (p. 24). Its significance in education is confirmed by Beatty and Behnke (1980), who confirmed that "students simply do not accept information from sources lacking credibility" (p. 56). Besides, previous educational research showed that teacher credibility behavior can affect various student-related outcomes such as students' language learning (Pishghadam et al., 2017), respect and care for the instructor (Martinez-Egger & Powers, 2007), use of technology (Finn & Ledbetter, 2013), willingness to communicate (Myers, 2004), affective learning, motivation (Zhang, 2009), and WTAC (Pishghadam et al., 2019).

The second teacher instructional communication behavior examined in the present study is teacher stroke, which is a key concept within the theory of Transactional Analysis (TA),

being used to explain interpersonal relationships between students and the teacher in the educational context (Berne, 1988). In this regard, TA can be defined as "a theory of personality and systematic psychotherapy for personal growth and personal change" (Stewart & Joines, 1987, p. 3). When extended to education, TA can bring about more effective communication between the teacher and students (Stewart & Joines, 1987). Within the theory, stroke, as a unit of recognition, represents any action taken by an individual to show his/her recognition of those people around him/her (Shirai, 2006). In a nutshell, giving and receiving stroking behaviors can quench individual's ever-present emotional thirst for acknowledgment and recognition by other people (Berne, 1988). It is argued that "any kind of stroke is better than no stroke at all" (Stewart & Joines, 1987, p. 73), as individuals even seek negative strokes when positive strokes are not present (Barrow, 2007). When two or more people are involved in the exchange of strokes, the individual providing strokes is called the stroker, and the person receiving those strokes is regarded as the strokee. In educational programs, obviously, the teacher is the provider, while students are the receivers.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that these roles can alternate between the interlocutors in interpersonal interaction situations (Pishghadam & Farkhondehfal, 2017). Regarding its dimensions, stroke can be verbal/nonverbal, positive/negative, or conditional/unconditional. Verbal stroking behaviors are verbally-produced utterances that can range in their length, being as concise as a simple "hello" or as lengthy as a conversation. Additionally, while conditional strokes ask about what individuals do, unconditional stroke has to do with what individuals are. Furthermore, in contrast to positive strokes, which are regarded to be appealing and satisfying, negative strokes are considered to be unpleasant and unwelcome by the receivers (Stewart & Joines, 1987). Teacher strokes can be produced through stroking behaviors such as teachers' calling out names, praising, shaking hands, communicating with students inside and outside the class, nodding, keeping eye contact, promoting classroom discussions, and smiling (Irajzad et al., 2017).

The significance of teacher stroke is highlighted when understating that positive student-teacher interpersonal relationships and rapport can bring about the promotion of students' learning, motivation, communication self-confidence, the fulfillment of their hunger for emotional support, and their desire for pleasant conditions for learning, among other benefits (Fallah, 2014; Schutz & Pekrun, 2007). This thinking was also reflected in Oga-Baldwin and Nakata's (2020) statement that "students are most responsive in classrooms involving teacher warmth and strictness" (p. 101). In addition, successful teacher-student communication can enhance students' motivation, attainment of essential interpersonal skills, and academic engagement, as well as reducing their anxiety level (Peng & Woodrow, 2010). In the same vein, Freedman (1993)

also articulated that teacher stroke can enhance students' educational effectiveness rate since students are inclined to function more successfully in stroke-rich situations. As particularly pertained to the concern of the present study, previous research has provided empirical support for the association of teacher stroke with both teacher credibility and teacher success variables (Noorbakhsh et al., 2018; Pishghadam et al., 2019; Pishghadam & Karami, 2017). More importantly, teacher stroke was also found to play a significant role in EFL students' WTAC (Namaghi, 2016; Pishghadam et al., 2019; Rajabnejad et al., 2017).

The last teacher variable considered in this study with a potential contribution to students' WTAC is teacher success. In fact, teacher success is considered to be crucial for the effective functioning of educational systems, at large and students, in particular (Borg, 2018). Due to the essential nature of the teacher success concept, many researchers have sought to uncover qualities leading to teachers' successful practice. Such a research quest resulted in the emergence of various models, frameworks, and conceptualization of this notion. To name but a few of the theoretical studies of teacher success, we can refer to those of Porter and Brophy (1988), Tamblyn (2000), Johnson and Birkeland (2003), Hiebert et al. (2007), Moafian and Pishghadam (2009), Richards (2010), and Coombe (2014, 2020). What this surge of research evinces is that there is no unanimous consensus on the nature and number of features giving rise to the professional effectiveness of teachers (Palardy & Rumberger, 2008).

Nevertheless, despite this elusive nature of the teacher success phenomenon, it is widely held that a successful teacher is the one whose instructional practices ultimately lead to learners' academic success (Grant et al., 2013). However, the first stride that students must make toward performing effectively in the academic context is their persistent attendance of classes. But it is undeniable that teachers and their instructional quality can affect students' class presence or absence tendencies. On this subject, Gershenson (2016) maintained that instructors could have a noteworthy impact on students' truancy rate. Similarly, Liu and Loeb (2021) propounded that teachers who tend to consider high values for class attendance can educate students who are more enthusiastic about finishing the high school program, compared to teachers who regard students' ultimate achievement as their sole priority.

Now that the literature on the teacher variables and the WTAC concept has been elaborated upon, it is time to point out that culture is one of the central variables incessantly shaping and reshaping the way teachers behave, think, and teach and also the way teachers' psychological or performance characteristics are perceived by their students (Richards, 2014). This is because the culture in which people live directly affects the formation of their belief system (Klassen, 2004). Hofstede (1980) divided culture across five dimensions of

masculinity/feminity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, collectivism/individualism, and long-term/short-term focus. One can, thus, imagine how countries/cultures converge or diverge with regard to these cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2007). To relate the concept of culture to the variables of the present study, it should be noted that different cultures may hold different criteria for their teachers' successful practice (Tsui, 2009). Based on the data obtained from people of different cultures, it was found that most Asian countries tend to hold collectivist beliefs. It is argued that in such cultures, teachers may regard students' engagement, learning, and future accomplishment to be more important than their own personal priorities and goals because collectivist cultures accentuate the attainment of group goals (McIntyre et al., 2020). When teachers do their best for students' enthusiasm toward class attendance and achievement, they may be perceived as more successful by their students.

Likewise, how intimate teachers and students can be in their personal relationships or how much care and attention teachers can give to their students may be established dissimilarly across cultures. Hofstede's data (Hofstede, 2007) also revealed that Asian countries mainly have large power distance. When applied to the Asian educational context, it may reveal more distant relationships between teachers and their students. However, the situation may be different in the second/foreign language learning context, where the nature of language learning demands the building of a good rapport and a close relationship between the teacher and students (Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Pishghadam et al., 2019).

In addition, trust may be more easily built in teacher-student relationships that are shaped based on the banking concept of education (Freire, 1968) where teachers are regarded as the sole authority in the classroom and students, lacking agency, are regarded as empty vessels to be filled by the teacher. The learning style associated with this view of education, noticed in Asia, is called the spoon-feeding style of learning (Wong, 2004). In such contexts, students tend to ascribe high levels of credibility to their teachers. Such a view toward education can be witnessed in some parts of Asia, as Chan (1999) maintained that Chinese students are normally passive learners who largely rely on the instructor for information and very rarely ask questions in the classroom. It is proposed that when students rely more on their teachers and accept their controlling authority, they may resist less toward the teacher in their interpersonal relationships. This claim was confirmed in Chen et al.'s (2019) study showing that compared to Dutch students, Chinese students perceived less conflict and more closeness with their instructors.

Some cultures may be more lenient toward students' class absenteeism, while other cultures may be stricter about class attendance. Students' themselves may also dedicate less or more significance to class attendance, depending on their cultural background. For instance, research indicates that Asian

students tend to rely mainly on their teachers for the provision of content materials, while some other cultures promote students' independent learning, meaning that they should follow their own interest in the selection of learning content and activities (Loh & Teo, 2017). It is argued that for Asian students, who mainly believe in the centrality of teachers' input for their learning, class attendance can be considered a very crucial element for their academic success, and therefore, they may tend to be more willing to be present in classes.

Based on what was mentioned, the present study sought to shed more light on cross-cultural similarities and dissimilarities of stakeholders in the educational context of different countries by seeking to examine Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions of their teacher stroke, credibility, and success variables in relation to their own WTAC. Accordingly, the following research questions were put forward:

1. Are the identical constructs of the four scales employed in this study verified in both the Iranian and the Iraqi data?
2. Do Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions of their EFL teachers' credibility, success, and stroke significantly predict their own WTAC?
3. Are there any significant differences between Iranian and Iraqi EFL students with regard to their perceptions of teacher stroke, credibility, and success variables and their own WTAC?

Methodology

Participants

Based on convenience sampling, two groups of participants were targeted for taking part in this cross-cultural study. The first group involved 276 Iranian BA students, majoring in English Language and Literature or Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in some Iranian universities. This sample included 174 (63%) females and 102 (37%) males, ranging in their age from 18 to 34 years old ($M = 20.73$, $SD = 1.80$). The second group of participants comprised 150 Iraqi students studying English-related majors at a university in Iraq. Participants of this group differed with regard to their level of education, as 132 of them were at the BA level, 11 students were at the MA level, five of them were studying at the PhD level, and the remaining two participants reported to be at other educational levels. Regarding their gender, 87 (58%) Iraqi participants were female, and the other 63 (42%) of them were male, and they also ranged in their age from 18 to 49 years old ($M = 23.09$, $SD = 2.97$). Both groups' participants were supposed to rate one of their English language teachers in terms of their stroke, effectiveness, and credibility behaviors. Then, the students were asked to determine their

own level of willingness to attend their intended teachers' English classes.

Instruments

Characteristics of Successful EFL Teachers Questionnaire This questionnaire was designed and validated by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009), measuring students' perceptions of their EFL teachers' success. It comprised 47 close-ended items, and the respondents' answers on them could range on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 *"strongly disagree"* to 5 *"strongly agree"*. This inventory included 12 subcomponents: commitment, creating a sense of competence, empathy, dynamism, learning boosters, interpersonal relationships, teaching accountability, physical and emotional acceptance, attention to all, class attendance, teaching boosters, and examination. Sample items from this scale include: *A successful English language teacher…. makes an intimate relationship with the students* (item 3), *understands students well* (item 5), *is aware of new teaching techniques* (item 10), *comes to class prepared* (item 21), *attend classes on time* (item 31), *is fair and equitable in evaluation and grading* (item 36), *avoids belittling students for any reason* (item 44), and *improves students' confidence* (item 46). A high reliability coefficient of .94, estimated through the Cronbach's alpha reliability procedure, was reported for the scale by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009). Furthermore, in the present study, reliability coefficients of .96 and .94 were reported for the scale on the Iranian and Iraqi datasets, respectively.

Student Stroke Scale Pishghadam and Khajavy (2014) designed this questionnaire, including 18 close-ended items assessing four dimensions of verbal stroke, non-verbal stroke, valuing, and class activities. The students were required to evaluate how frequently one of their EFL teachers provides stroke to them by choosing one of the item-response options, ranging from 1 *"never"* to 5 *"always"*. Sample items from this scale include: *My English teacher… smiles at me* (item 1), *knows my name* (item 5), *encourages me* (item 7), *allocates enough time to me outside the class* (item 10), *praises me in front of others* (item 13), and *allows me to ask questions* (item 18). Pishghadam and Khajavy (2014) reported a reliability coefficient of .88 for the scale. In the present study, the scale also showed high reliability on the Iranian ($\alpha = .92$) and Iraqi ($\alpha = .87$) responses.

Teacher Credibility Scale This instrument was developed by McCroskey and Teven (1999), encompassing 18 close-ended items, the responses to which could range on a seven-point bipolar scale. The participants were supposed to show their impression of their EFL teacher by choosing the appropriate number ranging from *1* to *7* between the pairs of adjectives. Sample items from this scale include item (1): *intelligent/*

unintelligent; item (4): *informed/uninformed*; item (7): *cares about me/doesn't care about me*; item (9): *self-centered/not self-centered*; item (13): *honest/dishonest*; item (14): *untrustworthy/trustworthy*; and item (17): *unethical/ethical*. The scale measures credibility on three dimensions of goodwill, trustworthiness, and competence. Previously, Pishghadam et al. (2017) reported high reliability for the Persian version of this scale (α = .86). In the current study, acceptable reliability coefficients were obtained based on the Iranian (α = .94) and Iraqi (α = .71) datasets.

WTAC Scale This instrument was developed by Rajabnejad et al. (2017), assessing through 25 close-ended items the extent to which students are willing to attend EFL classes. The participants indicated their level of willingness on a five-point Likert scale varying from 1 "*strongly disagree*" to 5 "*strongly agree*". This inventory encompasses five dimensions of teacher characteristics: teacher care, teacher knowledge, teacher environment, and teacher methodology. Some sample items from this scale include: item (2): *I attend classes because the teacher has complete mastery of the course materials*, item (5): *I am willing to attend classes because the course content is relevant to my everyday life*, item (9): *I attend classes because the teacher answers my questions well*, item (13): *I am willing to attend classes because the teacher explains the lessons very well*, and item (24): *I am willing to attend classes because class competitiveness makes me progress*. In Rajabnejad et al.'s (2017) study, a reliability coefficient of .83 was reported for the scale. In addition, in the present study, coefficients of .88 and .83 were found for the instrument based on the Iranian and Iraqi datasets, respectively.

Procedure

Before initiating the data collection process, the necessary information regarding the purpose of the study and the nature of participants' cooperation in the study was given to the participants. As ethical considerations are essential to the present study researchers, they demanded the provision of no sensitive information from the participants and also informed them of the voluntary nature of their participation and the confidentiality of the information they provided to the researchers. The participants were also assured that their data would only be used for research purposes. On the whole, it took at most 40 min of each participant's time to respond to the four scales.

Finally, regarding data analysis, it should be noted that as the present study and the one conducted by Pishghadam et al. (2019) are both extracted from a larger project, some of the data reported in the current study were previously reported in Pishghadam et al.'s (2019) research. In this respect, for answering the first research question, Pearson multiple correlation coefficients (SPSS version 22) and full Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) (Amos version 24) were run on

the Iranian data. Similarly, for this same research question, the Iraqi data were analyzed in the present study through Pearson multiple correlation coefficients (SPSS version 24) and full SEM (Amos version 24). For finding the answer to the second research question, the independent samples t-test (SPSS version 24) was run on both Iranian and Iraqi datasets.

It is worth noting that prior to addressing the second and third research questions of the study, the multi-group SEM was carried out to test the measurement invariance of the model across the two groups (Iranian & Iraqi), as a precondition to making meaningful between-group comparisons (Meredith, 1993; Vandenberg & Lance, 2000). In so doing, a hierarchical approach was applied by sequentially constraining the model parameters and juxtaposing modifications in the model fit. The three steps of measurement invariance testing were done by testing the configural, metric, and scalar models. The factor loadings and intercepts were set free across the groups in the configural invariance. The factor loadings were constrained to be equal across the two groups in the metric invariance. And the factor loadings and intercepts were constrained to be equal for the scalar invariance. It is argued that if the multi-group model fit indices demonstrate a good fit (Beaujean et al., 2012) and the change in the values for fit indices (ΔCFI, ΔRMSEA) is small and insignificant (i.e., ΔCFI is smaller than .01, and a change in RMSEA is smaller than .015) (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002), measurement invariance could be confirmed.

Results

As discussed above, the multi-group analyses were first employed to test the measurement invariance of the model across the groups as pertaining to the first research question of the study. According to Table 1, the configural invariance of the model across the two groups was confirmed through the fit indices of the unconstrained multi-group models ($\chi 2$ (295) = 2728.6, CFI = .361, RMSEA = .061), revealing that the factor structure is similar for both Iranian as well as Iraqi EFL students. Consequently, the invariance of all the factor loadings was tested through the metric model. A substantial reduction in the model fit was not observed as a result of constraining all the item loadings to equality, highlighting that the factor loadings could be compared across the groups (ΔCFI = .000, ΔRMSEA = .000). Ultimately, to examine the scalar invariance, all the item intercepts were constrained across the groups. Findings indicated that the scalar invariance across the groups (ΔCFI = .001, ΔRMSEA = .000) could be verified.

In the follow-up analyses, the second research question of the study was concerned with the predictability of Iranian and Iraqi students' WTAC by their teachers' credibility, stroke, and success. Before checking the predictive association

Table 1 Fit Indices for the measurement invariance tests on the model

Model	χ2	Df	CFI	ΔCFI	RMSEA	ΔRMSEA
Iranian	343.473*	161	.971	–	.045	–
Iraqi	373.201*	165	.973	–	.051	–
Configural invariance	612.593*	282	.969	–	.052	–
Metric invariance	635.348*	290	.968	.001	.053	.001
Scalar invariance	686.234*	299	.969	.001	.052	.001

$*p < 0.001$

between the variables, descriptive statistics and Pearson multiple correlation coefficients were run on both Iranian and Iraqi data. Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and correlation results between students' WTAC and teacher success dimensions for both groups.

According to Table 2, mean results showed that students of both Iranian ($M = 99.80$, $SD = 13.26$) and Iraqi ($M = 82.23$, $SD = 11.20$) groups had high perceptions of WTAC.

Similarly, students in both Iranian ($M = 209.12$, $SD = 21.89$) and Iraqi ($M = 161.26$, $SD = 24.73$) groups held high perceptions of their teachers' success. Regarding the correlation results, significant positive relationships between students' WTAC and all sub-constructs of teacher success were found within both the Iranian and Iraqi datasets. For the Iranian data, it was found that WTAC had the highest relationships with empathy and learning boosters ($r = .70$, $p < .01$) and the lowest

Table 2 Descriptive statistics and correlations among teacher success dimensions and students' WTAC

		M	SD	TA	IR	AA	Ex	Com	LB	CSC	TB	PE	Emp	CA	Dy	WTAC
TA	Iranian	32.07	3.32	1.00												
	Iraqi	24.22	4.67	1.00												
IR	Iranian	30.54	4.29	.69**.	1.00											
	Iraqi	23.86	4.09	67**	1.00											
AA	Iranian	21.80	3.32	.71**	.62**	1.00										
	Iraqi	17.14	3.30	.69**	.58**	1.00										
Ex	Iranian	13.09	1.99	.65**	.54**	.64**	1.00									
	Iraqi	10.18	2.02	.67**	.61**	.45**	1.00									
Com	Iranian	14.04	1.30	.64**	.36**	.49**	.51**	1.00								
	Iraqi	10.26	1.95	.58**	.50**	.55**	.49**	1.00								
LB	Iranian	26.44	3.31	.80**	.65**	.79**	.66**	.57**	1.00							
	Iraqi	20.52	3.66	.69**	.65**	.66**	.62**	.58**	1.00							
CSC	Iranian	16.48	2.73	.72**	.63**	.71**	.64**	.45**	.80**	1.00						
	Iraqi	13.76	2.91	.69**	.63**	.53**	.65**	.55**	.61**	1.00						
TB	Iranian	18.29	1.83	.67**	.50**	.56**	.61**	.59**	.65**	.57**	1.00					
	Iraqi	13.84	3.13	.64**	.52**	.42**	.54**	.54**	.53**	.69**	1.00					
PEA	Iranian	9.55	.88	.66**	.32**	.53**	.49**	.54**	.60**	.45**	.51**	1.00				
	Iraqi	6.99	1.61	.62**	.54**	.52**	.55**	.37**	.56**	.53**	.42**	1.00				
Emp	Iranian	8.78	1.50	.56**	.62**	.59**	.54**	.40**	.61**	.60**	.46**	.33**	1.00			
	Iraqi	6.80	1.40	.30**	.27**	.35**	.32**	.28**	.40**	.24**	.15*	.25**	1.00			
CA	Iranian	9.09	1.38	.61**	.35**	.51**	.52**	.54**	.57**	.48**	.51**	.64**	.40**	1.00		
	Iraqi	6.91	1.67	.60**	.57**	.61**	.48**	.40**	.46**	.48**	.40**	.48**	.23**	1.00		
Dy	Iranian	9.08	1.15	.68**	.54**	.63**	.51**	.49**	.61**	.58**	.50**	.58**	.42**	.49**	1.00	
	Iraqi	6.74	1.56	.57**	.51**	.62**	.40**	.46**	.56**	.43**	.34**	.35**	.32**	.52**	1.00	
WTAC	Iranian	99.80	13.26	.65**	.58**	.57**	.54**	.46**	.70**	.60**	.49**	.49**	.70**	.39**	.57**	1.00
	Iraqi	82.23	11.20	.65**	.60**	.64**	.50**	.55**	.65**	.51**	.51**	.50**	.31**	.50**	.51**	1.00

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Correlations indicate effect sizes via their absolute values (Cohen, 1992)

M Mean, *SD* Standard Deviation, *TA* Teaching Accountability, *IR* Interpersonal Relationships, *AA* Attention to All, *EX* Examination, *COM* Commitment, *LB* Learning Boosters, *CSC* Creating a Sense of Competence, *TB* Teaching Boosters, *PEA* Physical and Emotional Acceptance, *EMP* Empathy, *CA* Class Attendance, and *DY* Dynamism

relationship with class attendance ($r = .39$, $p < .01$). For the Iraqi data, WTAC had the highest associations with teaching accountability and learning boosters ($r = .65$, $p < .01$) and the lowest association with empathy ($r = .31$, $p < .01$).

Additionally, Table 3 indicates the descriptive statistics and correlation results regarding WTAC and teacher credibility components for both groups.

As shown in Table 3, the mean results showed that students of both Iranian ($M = 80.79$, $SD = 22.42$) and Iraqi ($M = 67.53$, $SD = 11.17$) groups had high perceptions of their teachers' credibility. Concerning the correlation results, WTAC was significantly and positively associated with all teacher credibility dimensions for Iranian and Iraqi groups. More specifically, for the Iranian group, WTAC showed its highest correlation with goodwill ($r = .23$, $p = .01$) and the lowest correlation with competence ($r = .17$, $p = .05$). In contrast, for the Iraqi group, WTAC had the highest relationship with competence ($r = .25$, $p = .01$) and the lowest relationship with goodwill ($r = .17$, $p = .05$).

Finally, Table 4 presents the results of descriptive statistics and correlations for WTAC and teacher stroke dimensions for both groups.

According to Table 4, the mean results showed that students of both Iranian ($M = 54.80$, $SD = 13.74$) and Iraqi ($M = 63.63$, $SD = 8.67$) groups had high perceptions of their teachers' stroke. Concerning the correlation results, WTAC was significantly and positively related to all teacher stroke dimensions for the Iranian group; WTAC had the highest correlation with class activities ($r = .46$, $p = .05$) and the lowest correlation with non-verbal stroke ($r = .33$, $p = .05$). Furthermore, positive significant relationships were found between Iraqi students' WTAC and all teacher stroke dimensions except for valuing ($r = .10$, $p = .22$). Similar to the Iranian group, the Iraqi group's WTAC had its highest relationship with classroom activities ($r = .44$, $p = .01$).

Next, to check the predictability of WTAC in terms of the three teacher variables, full SEM analysis was run on both

Iranian and Iraqi data. Two models were proposed for the predictive relationships of the four variables within both datasets. In order to check whether the models fit the Iranian and Iraqi data, some fit indices were estimated (See Table 5). It is assumed that a model shows a good fit to a set of data when its Chi-square (X2)/df ratio be smaller than 3, its Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Good Fit Index (GFI) be larger than .90, and its Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) be smaller than .08 (Schreiber et al., 2006).

Based on Table 5, the two proposed models showed acceptable fit on X2/df (Iranian = 2.19, Iraqi = 2.82), GFI (Iranian = .93, Iraqi = .90), CFI (Iranian = .95, Iraqi = .94), and RMSEA (Iranian .07, Iraqi = .06). Results of the schematic relationships between the four variables of the study based on the Iranian and Iraqi data are presented in Figs. 1 and 2, respectively.

As revealed through Fig. 1, Iranian students' WTAC was predicted positively and significantly with all variables of teacher stroke ($\beta = .21$, $p < .05$), success ($\beta = .62$, $p < .05$), and credibility ($\beta = .17$, $p < .05$), confirming the first hypothesis of the present study. Besides, teacher success was found to be positively and significantly predicted by teacher stroke ($\beta = .52$, $p < .05$) and credibility ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$), approving the second hypothesis of the study. Nevertheless, teacher credibility did not predict teacher stroke ($\beta = .13$, $p > .05$), rejecting the third hypothesis of the study.

Figure 2 demonstrates the predictive relationships between the four variables on the Iraqi data.

Based on Fig. 2, it was uncovered that all the three independent variables of teacher success ($\beta = .67$, $p < .05$), credibility ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$), and stroke ($\beta = .20$, $p < .05$) positively and significantly predicted the dependent variable (WTAC) based on the Iraqi data, confirming the first hypothesis of the present study. It was also revealed that teacher stroke ($\beta = .40$, $p < .05$) and credibility ($\beta = .19$, $p < .05$) significantly and positively predicted teacher success, approving the second

Table 3 Descriptive statistics and correlations among WTAC and teacher credibility components

		M	SD	Competence	Goodwill	Trustworthiness	WTAC
Competence	Iranian	23.61	9.50	1.00			
	Iraqi	21.84	4.60	1.00			
Goodwill	Iranian	29.50	7.17	.75**	1.00		
	Iraqi	23.24	4.93	.40**	1.00		
Trustworthiness	Iranian	27.68	7.23	.86**	.84**	1.00	
	Iraqi	22.44	4.35	.45**	.55**	1.00	
WTAC	Iranian	99.80	13.26	.14*	.23**	.15*	1.00
	Iraqi	82.23	11.20	.25**	.17*	.20**	1.00

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Correlations indicate effect sizes via their absolute values (Cohen, 1992)

Table 4 Descriptive statistics and correlations among teacher stroke components and WTAC

		M	SD	Verbal Stroke	Non-verbal Stroke	Valuing	Class Activities	WTAC
Verbal Stroke	Iranian	17.60	5.29	1.00				
	Iraqi	20.79	3.97	1.00				
Non-verbal Stroke	Iranian	11.86	3.08	.74**	1.00			
	Iraqi	13.70	2.59	.55**	1.00			
Valuing	Iranian	11.32	4.32	.77**	.68**	1.00		
	Iraqi	14.86	3.68	.23**	.20**	1.00		
Class Activities	Iranaian	14.26	3.02	.61**	.46**	.18*	1.00	
	Iraqi	13.73	3.69	.64**	.52**	.68**	1.00	
WTAC	Iranian	99.80	13.26	.39**	.33**	.43**	.46**	1.00
	Iraqi	82.23	11.20	.36**	.20**	.10	.40**	1.00

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Correlations indicate effect sizes via their absolute values (Cohen, 1992)

hypothesis of the study. However, teacher credibility did not predict teacher stroke ($\beta = .15$, $p > .05$), rejecting the third hypothesis of the study.

To answer the second research question, examining whether there would be any significant difference between Iranian and Iraqi EFL students' perceptions of teacher stroke, credibility, and success variables and their own WTAC, the independent samples t-test was run (See Table 7). Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics of the two groups.

As presented in Table 6, the mean scores of Iranian students in their perceptions about teacher success (Iranian; $M = 209.54$, Iraqi; $M = 161.26$) and their own WTAC (Iranian; $M = 99.80$, Iraqi; $M = 82.23$) are higher than those of Iraqi students. However, the mean scores of Iraqi students in their teacher stroke (Iranian; $M = 57.92$, Iraqi; $M = 63.63$) and credibility (Iranian; $M = 57.38$, Iraqi; $M = 67.53$) are higher than those of Iranian students. Table 7 indicates the results of the independent samples t-test for these four variables for the Iranian and Iraqi groups.

As demonstrated in Table 7, there were significant differences between Iranian and Iraqi EFL students with regard to their perceptions of teacher stroke ($t = -5.14$, $p < .05$), credibility ($t = -4.51$, $p < .05$), and success variables ($t = 21.04$, $p < .05$) and their own WTAC ($t = 13.76$, $p < .05$), approving the fourth hypothesis of the present study.

Table 5 Goodness of fit indices

|		X2/df	GFI	CFI	RMSEA
Acceptable fit		<3	>.90	>.90	<.08
Model	Iranian	2.19	.93	.94	.06
	Iraqi	2.82	.90	.95	.07

Discussion

As previously noted, the aims of the present study were twofold; first, to examine whether Iranian and Iraqi students' WTAC perceptions can be predicted by their perceptions of their teachers' stroke, credibility, and success variables, and second, to investigate if any significant differences existed between Iranian and Iraqi EFL students with regard to their perceptions of teacher stroke, credibility, and success variables and their own WTAC. However, as a pre-requisite for conducting cross-cultural comparisons, measurement invariance was tested to investigate whether the scales used in this study were measuring the same constructs in both the Iranian and Iraqi groups. More technically speaking, invariance of intercepts (i.e., scalar invariance) and invariance of factor loadings (i.e., metric invariance) were tested in order to check measurement invariance. The results revealed the measurement invariance of the model, meeting the criteria for both the metric and scalar invariance. Evidence of both the metric and scalar invariance indicates that the presence of any difference in the factor score is likely to be the indicator of possible group differences rather than measurement artifact or item bias (Dimitrov, 2010; Meredith & Teresi, 2006).

Based on the results, in the follow-up analyses, it was revealed that both groups held high perceptions of the four above-mentioned variables. To elaborate on these findings, high perceptions of teacher success by both Iranian and Iraqi students in this study can be justified by relating these findings to the data presented on Hofstede (2007), with Asian countries tending to hold collectivist beliefs. In this respect, in the educational context of Asia, teachers may consider students' learning, academic engagement, and future success to be more important than their own personal and professional priorities as collectivist cultures accentuate the attainment of group goals (McIntyre et al., 2020). Therefore, it is no surprise that

Fig. 1 The schematic relationships among teacher success, credibility, stroke, and Iranian students' WTAC
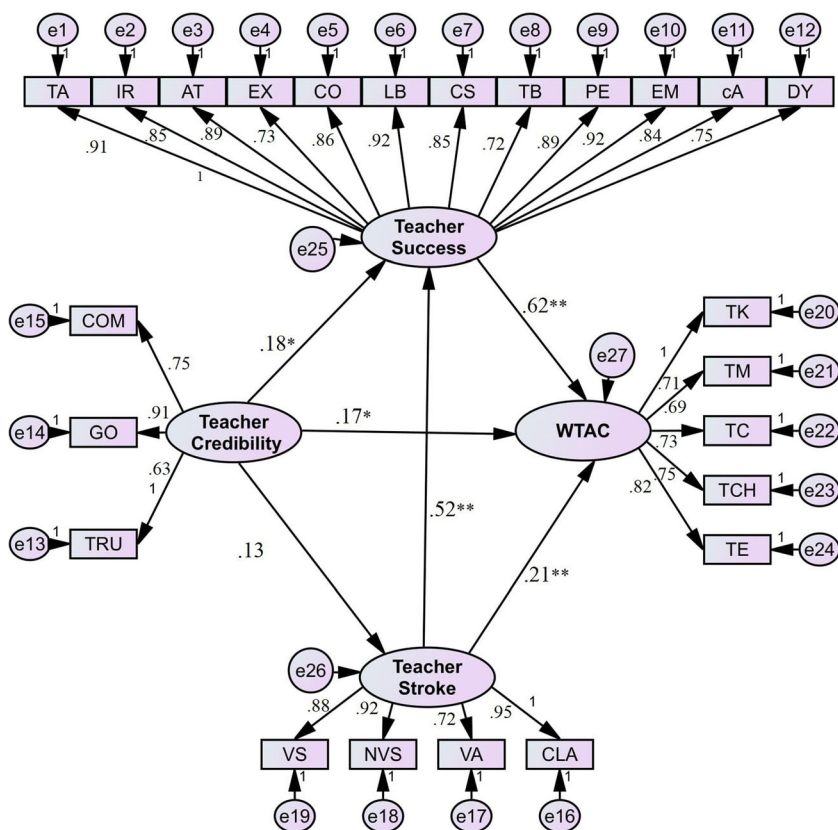
Fig. 2 The schematic relationships among teacher success, credibility, stroke, and Iraqi students' WTAC
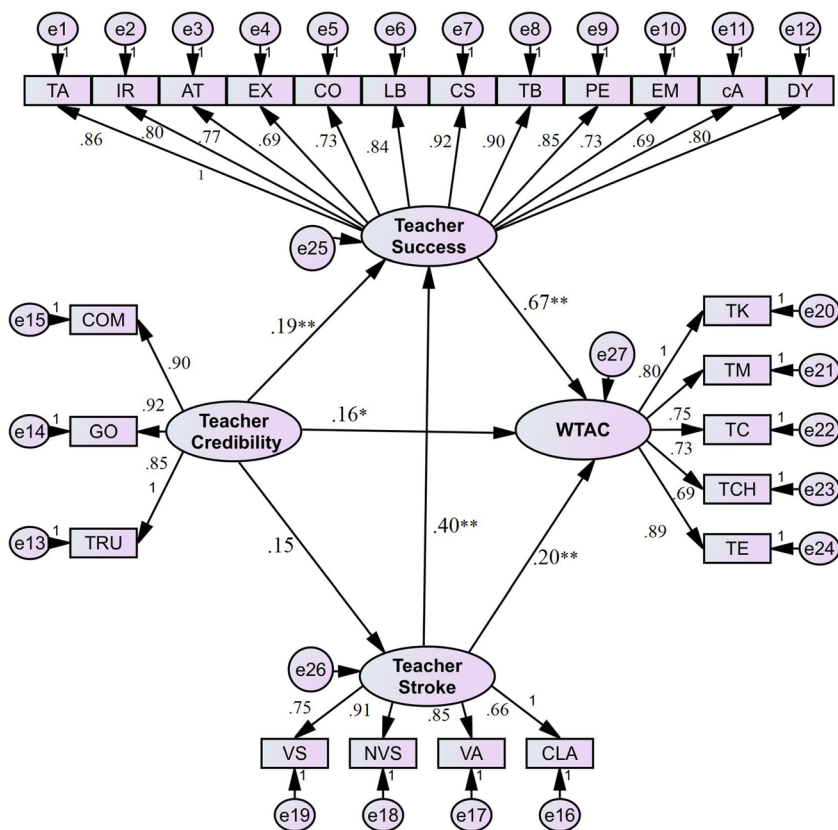
Table 6 Descriptive statistics of the Iraqi and Iranian groups

	Nationality	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Teacher Success	Iranian	276	209.5471	21.38788	1.28740
	Iraqi	150	161.2600	24.73929	2.01995
Students' WTAC	Iranian	276	99.8007	13.26130	.79824
	Iraqi	150	82.2333	11.20787	.91512
Teacher Stroke	Iranian	276	57.9273	11.98578	.72277
	Iraqi	150	63.6333	8.67413	.70824
Teacher Credibility	Iranian	276	57.3869	26.25188	1.58593
	Iraqi	150	67.5333	11.17323	.91229

students attain higher perceptions of their teachers' success when teachers attend to students' various needs and goals.

Regarding both groups' high perceptions of the teacher stroke variable, it is worth mentioning that these results were in line with previous findings, highlighting that quality teacher communication, good rapport between students and teachers, and intimate student-teacher relationships are essential requirements of language learning in second/foreign language learning environments (Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Hence, the findings can be justified in light of the idea that as an instance of teacher communication behavior, teacher stroke can be frequently received by students in the EFL context, resulting in their high perceptions of their teachers' stroking tendencies (Pishghadam et al., 2019).

Findings concerning both Iranian and Iraqi students' high perceptions of their teachers' credibility were in congruence with initial expectations. The banking concept of education (Freire, 1968), prevalently noticed in the Asian educational systems, promulgates the spoon-feeding style of learning among learners where instructors transmit all the required information to students and students, in turn, are just passive recipients of teachers' knowledge (Wong, 2004). In such teacher-centered instructional contexts, teachers are regarded as the sole classroom authority and students lack agency to go for their own learning. As it was found in some parts of Asia (Chan, 1999), trust may be more easily shaped in such teacher-student relationships as students are expected to

believe in the truth of the information provided to them by their teachers. Therefore, it was expected that Asian participants (from both Iranian and Iraqi nationalities) would ascribe high levels of credibility to their teachers.

Moreover, students' high ratings of their own WTAC can be supported by the same line of argument accentuating the influence of the banking concept of education on teachers and learners' educational beliefs and performance. As stated by Loh and Teo (2017), in some educational contexts advocating students' agency for their own academic learning and success, students may, independently of the teacher, pursue their interest in finding content, activities, and other instructional input. It is argued that in such contexts, students may assign less significance to class presence as they can find the relevant information not only in class, but also from other sources such as the library, the internet, or people around them. Nevertheless, in educational contexts such as in Asia, which are mainly based on the teacher-centered view of pedagogy, students tend to rely mainly on their teachers for the provision of educational input. Hence, they may consider class attendance a very pivotal factor for their academic progress and success.

Further results also revealed that, for both the Iranian and Iraqi groups, positive significant relationships were found between WTAC with their teacher success, credibility, and stroke (except for no relation between Iraqi students' WTAC and the valuing subscale) perceptions; these findings were

Table 7 Results of the independent samples T-Test on the Iranian and Iraqi data

	t-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Teacher Success	21.04	424	.000	48.28	2.29	43.77	52.79
Students' WTAC	13.76	424	.000	17.56	1.27	15.05	20.07
Teacher Stroke	−5.14	424	.000	−5.70	1.10	−7.88	−3.52
Teacher Credibility	−4.51	422	.000	−10.14	2.24	−14.56	−5.72

approved by the SEM results showing that Iranian and Iraqi students' perceived WTAC could be predicted by their teacher stroke, success, and credibility perceptions, confirming the first hypothesis of this study. These outcomes were in congruence with previous findings showing that students' class presence/truancy tendencies are influenced by their teachers' stroke and other communication behaviors (Alhassan & Odame, 2014; Namaghi, 2016; Rajabnejad et al., 2017) and teaching effectiveness (Gershenson, 2016). These results also provided further empirical backing for the long-held theoretical claim that teachers' effective communication behaviors can promote favorable student-related academic outcomes (Frymier & Houser, 2000). Besides, for both groups, teacher success was found to be positively and significantly predicted by teacher stroke and credibility perceptions, which is in line with previous findings and confirms the second hypothesis of the study (Noorbakhsh et al., 2018; Pishghadam et al., 2019; Pishghadam & Karami, 2017).

Finally, significant differences were found between the Iranian and Iraqi students' perceptions of their own WTAC and their teachers' credibility, stroke, and success, which substantiated the fourth hypothesis of the present study. It should be noted that, although both instances of Asian cultures, Iranian and Iraqi cultures tend to train students to maintain high perceptions of their teachers' communication behaviors and success as well as their own WTAC, the distinct ways of thinking and acting promulgated in these two cultures may have led to significant differences between the two groups' responses to the questionnaires. This outcome was in line with Min et al.'s (2018) argument that although Asian cultures are usually all considered to be collectivist, each of them has its own distinct way of thinking. This finding also supports the previous theoretically-rich claim that the culture in which people live directly predicts the formation of their belief system (Klassen, 2004). The crucial role of culture was also approved in the educational context where it was uncovered that culture is one of the central factors continuously shaping and reshaping the way teachers behave, think, and teach and also the way teachers' psychological or performative characteristics are perceived by their students (Richards, 2014; Tsui, 2009). This theoretical argument was, in fact, the concern of many cross-cultural studies conducted previously within the instructional context (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Dilekli & Tezci, 2020; Grant et al., 2013; McIntyre et al., 2020; Santilli et al., 2011) and that of the present study. In the following section, some conclusions, pedagogical implications, and suggestions for future research are presented.

Conclusion

By drawing on the outcomes attained in the study, it can be concluded that culture plays a significant role in how Iranian and Iraqi EFL students perceive their own WTAC and their teachers' stroke, effectiveness, and credibility. Accordingly, the results reached in this research can inform the practice of pre- and in-service teachers, materials developers, teacher educators, authorities involved in teacher recruitment programs, and students, among other stakeholders. To start with, teacher training courses and teacher education programs intending to prepare successful English language teachers should, besides providing content and pedagogical knowledge to the trainee teachers, notify them of how such knowledge can be taken in differently by students of different cultures. This is because culture is one of the central elements shaping the way our mindset is constructed and reconstructed (Agar, 1994; Derakhshan, 2018; Pishghadam, 2013; Pishghadam et al., 2020; Risager, 2011).

More importantly, the influence of culture in the instructional context is not limited to students' learning of the target language, but it also embraces the way they perceive their own and their teachers' performance and characteristics. Hence, teacher educators should be concerned with training teachers who not only effectively teach language to the students, but also fulfill students' expectations of a successful teacher who is able to provide culturally-appropriate quality communication in the classroom and build a relationship of trust between him/herself and the students. Furthermore, materials developers must also attend to this notion that language learning does not happen in a vacuum, which signifies the role that individuals' cultural, social, economic, educational, and sociolinguistic backgrounds play in the learning process. Hence, as related to this study concern, as an attempt to cater for such essential factors, materials developers are advised to develop materials highlighting, in addition to the target language culture, students' home culture in various aspects of student's and teacher's textbooks that they design.

Moreover, the results of this study can prove beneficial for authorities in charge of recruiting quality teachers for instructional programs. In this respect, only teachers with sufficient knowledge of diverse aspects of teacher competence, including knowledge of pedagogy, content, language, psychology, sociology, instructional communication, and culture, can pass the gate. Last but not least, the outputs of this research can inform teachers' classroom practices to the benefit of learners as teachers must notify students of how their home culture attachment (Pishghadam et al., 2013) may both negatively and positively predict the way they perceive their own and their teachers' characteristics, priorities, and performance.

In the end, it should be noted that the present study suffered from some limitations. First, as a cross-cultural study, this research could only collect data from the students of Iranian and Iraqi cultures. Hence, future research may help to reach more conclusive results about the potential role of students' cultural background in their perceptions and achievement by collecting data from other cultures in Asia, Asia-Pacific,

Europe, or other parts of the world. Second, this study focused on students' perceptions of only three types of teacher variables, promoting future researchers to cross-culturally examine students' perceptions of other important, but disregarded teacher factors. Finally, as the nature of this study was purely quantitative, the data were collected through close-ended items and subsequently analyzed by running statistical procedures. In the future, researchers may provide more in-depth understandings of the role of culture in this line of inquiry by approaching it more qualitatively or through mixed-methods research designs.

Data Availability The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in the study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all the individual participants included in this study.

Conflicts of Interest/Competing Interests The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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