

Language Teacher Noticing Skills in an EFL Context: A Basic Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This basic qualitative study aimed to explore the underlying structure of Iranian EFL teachers' noticing skills in private language institute settings and to develop a preliminary typology of teacher noticing by examining how educators attend to, interpret, and respond to classroom events.

Methods: Data were collected from 28 participants through semi-structured individual interviews and a focus-group interview, with participants selected to represent a range of ages, teaching experiences, genders, educational levels, and mother tongues. Thematic analysis was conducted using Hashemi's (2020) typological analysis framework.

Results: Four core categories emerged, corresponding to Jackson's (2021) four-component model: skills related to attention, skills related to interpretation, skills related to decision-making, and willingness to engage. These findings indicate that teacher noticing is a multifaceted construct encompassing both cognitive and motivational dimensions.

Conclusions: By offering a context-sensitive typology of teacher noticing, this study contributes to the literature and may inform teacher education and professional development programs.

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Introduction

While ‘teacher noticing’ has gained SLA researchers’ attention (Arefian & Meihami, 2023; Kırmızı et al., 2025; Jackson, 2021), the concept has yet to be clearly defined and systematically examined in the localized, non-Western contexts. One unresolved issue is the extent to which cultural and pedagogical norms in Iranian private institutes shape what teachers notice and how they interpret classroom events. Unlike public school settings, private institutes often operate under commercial pressures and performance-based evaluations, which may influence teachers’ attentional focus and decision-making. In this context, teachers often face a pedagogical dilemma between adhering to communicative language teaching principles and meeting the demands of exam-oriented instruction, which may lead to selective noticing—prioritizing errors or test-related content over authentic communication (Muth, et al., 2025). Additionally, the influence of Persian as a dominant L1 and its interaction with English in classroom discourse could affect what teachers attend to linguistically (Elahi Shirvan et al., 2015). Thus, future research should aim to construct a localized framework of noticing that accounts for these contextual variables, going beyond foreign teaching models to better match what Iranian EFL teachers actually experience.

Jackson (2021) expounded on the notion of teacher sensitivity within the field of SLA. As he noted, language teacher noticing is regarded to be a cognitive construct which refers to the teachers’ cognizance of various elements of the classroom engagement that have the capacity to affect the process of learning. According to his framework, this construct depends on a set of skills including: a) attentional; b) interpretational; and c) decision-making skills. Moreover, as he stated, teacher noticing is profoundly influenced by the language teachers’ willingness to engage in the process of instruction. To be more specific, attentional skills refer to a teacher’s ability to focus on relevant classroom events, while interpretational skills involve making sense of those events in relation to student learning. Decision-making skills enable teachers to act on what they notice in ways that support instruction, and all three are shaped by the teacher’s active engagement and commitment to the teaching process .

Although the literature abounds with many studies conducted on teacher noticing, there are very few studies on teacher noticing in the field of language education (Zargarán et al., 2021; Jackson & Shirakawa, 2020). For instance, Jackson and Cho (2018) carried out a research study to expound on the interactional contexts of second language teachers’ noticing. Jackson and Shirakawa (2020)

examined the foreign language teachers' ability to notice their emotions when they were asked to teach challenging tasks to their peers during their education courses. Zargaran et al. (2021) explored how English language teachers conceptualize the notion of "noticing" in teaching language form—an area often overlooked despite its importance in language pedagogy. Using a Noticing Concept Inventory (NCI), the researchers surveyed 689 teachers and conducted a detailed analysis with a subset of 60 participants. The findings identified seven key constructs influencing noticing: pedagogical effect, learners' characteristics, type of input, skill type, task type, time, and measurement. Arefian and Meihami's (2023) instrumental case study, investigated how reflective practice activates Iranian novice EFL teachers' noticing, using data from portfolios and semi-structured interviews. Their findings indicated that noticing can be activated and sharpened through three interrelated developmental domains—personal, cognitive, and professional—addressed by reflective practice, which in turn influence the components of teacher noticing: framing, perceptual activities and exploration, and interaction. Recently, Kirmizi, et al. (2025) investigated how pre-service EFL teachers (PSTs) engaged in classroom observation and reflection during practicum, using weekly joint reflection sessions to discuss what they noticed. Findings revealed that PSTs primarily focused on aspects of communication, classroom environment, and management, with a tendency to notice procedural elements of teaching more than deeper content-related insights—suggesting a surface-level engagement with pedagogical substance during their practicum.

Furthermore, the existing body of research on EFL teachers' noticing skills—particularly within private language institute settings—remains underdeveloped. While some studies have explored broader themes such as classroom management (Shaheen, 2022), instructional challenges (Bukhari, 2021), and teacher-student interaction (Afzali & Kianpoor, 2020) in private institutes, few have directly addressed the nuanced cognitive process of 'noticing' as a distinct construct. Because there has not been enough focused research, noticing is often confused with general classroom awareness or reactive decision-making (Kirmizi, et al., 2025), instead of being seen as a component of teacher cognition (Jackson, 2021). Although the significance of past studies' findings is acknowledged, they have disregarded the necessity of a context-specific model of teacher noticing skills. Neglecting to address this construct risks undermining both teacher

effectiveness and learner outcomes. It also makes it harder to create teaching approaches that match the real needs and conditions of these specific learning settings.

Teacher noticing constitutes a cognitive factor which is expected to exert a significant influence on the language teachers' process of language instruction in the context of the classroom (Borg, 2015; Yun et al., 2024). In language education, teacher noticing constitutes a major predictor of teachers' pedagogical choices and teaching methods in the context of language instruction (Arefian & Meihami, 2023; Jackson & Shirakawa, 2020). Likewise, this construct is considered to be an influential factor in the interactional patterns between the language teachers and their learners (Ding, et al., 2022). Hence, the findings of the current research could hold importance in language education as this investigation addresses the research void concerning Iranian EFL educators' noticing abilities and is expected to offer valuable insights into the concept of teacher noticing in foreign language settings. The research may also help EFL syllabus designers, program developers, teacher trainers, teachers and researchers gain a better understanding of teacher characteristics in EFL contexts. Therefore, the main research question for the current study was: RQ. How do participating EFL teachers in private language institutes define their noticing skills?

Material and Methods

Participants

The researchers considered English language teachers from private language institutes across various cities in West Azerbaijan and East Azerbaijan as the study's main participants. There were a few reasons for this choice. First, private language institutes in these regions were more accessible for data collection compared to public schools or other settings. Second, selecting teachers from various cities in both West and East Azerbaijan provided a diverse sample, capturing different regional contexts and teaching environments. Finally, private institutes often follow similar curricula and standards, offering a more consistent population for study.

The sampling procedure was based on the purposive sampling method in which typical cases were selected. Besides, theoretical saturation defined the sample size during the research. As a consequence, 28 EFL teachers constituted the sample of the study: 5 participants took part in focus-group interviews, while 23 participated in semi-structured interviews. The study's participants

were selected from various age groups, teaching backgrounds, genders, educational levels, and mother tongues (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Study's Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Teaching Experience (Years)	Educational Level	Mother Tongue
Participant No.1	Female	28	6	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.2	Female	31	5	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.3	Male	26	3.4	Bachelor's	Kurdish
Participant No.4	Female	42	10	PhD	Azeri
Participant No.5	Female	30	4	Master's	Persian
Participant No.6	Female	27	3	Bachelor's	Persian
Participant No.7	Male	31	4	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.8	Female	34	3	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.9	Female	32	3.5	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.10	Male	45	7	PhD	Azeri
Participant No.11	Female	29	4	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.12	Female	39	4.5	PhD	Kurdish
Participant No.13	Male	40	11	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.14	Female	28	2	Bachelor's	Azeri
Participant No.15	Female	37	9	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.16	Female	37	7	Ph.D	Azeri
Participant No.17	Male	31	3.5	Master's	Kurdish
Participant No.18	Female	31	4	Master's	Persian
Participant No.19	Male	40	4.6	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.20	Female	43	11	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.21	Female	40	4	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.22	Female	27	5	Bachelor's	Azeri
Participant No.23	Female	48	15	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.24	Male	37	6.7	PhD	Azeri
Participant No.25	Female	34	4	Master's	Persian
Participant No.26	Female	32	3	Bachelor's	Azeri
Participant No.27	Female	31	3.5	Master's	Azeri
Participant No.28	Female	39	10	Master's	Azeri

Instrument(s)

Considering the objective of the study, the researcher used a researcher-developed semi-structured interview protocol to conduct the online interviews (using Zoom web-conferencing service) (see Appendix A). This interview protocol consisted of 15 questions, and helped the researcher to determine the participants' perspectives on their teacher noticing skills. This interview protocol was developed based on the extracted themes of the preliminary focus-group interview session of the study. To improve the validity of the research instrument, the interview questions were reviewed and evaluated by several experts to ensure their comprehensiveness and consistency with the research objective. The first author also obtained the participants' written consent using WhatsApp application and was the interviewer. Moreover, she recorded the interview sessions and

analyzed the interview data in order to determine the language institute teachers' perspectives on teacher noticing.

Procedure

This study was conducted in 2024-2025 academic year at ten language institutes across West Azerbaijan and East Azerbaijan, Iran. Prior to the onset of the research, the first author selected language institute EFL instructors as the participants of the preliminary focus-group interview of the research. The focus-group interview was performed in order to determine the experts' opinions on the teacher noticing skills and to enable the researcher to develop the questions of the semi-structured interview protocol based on the themes of the expert opinions. She obtained these participants' written consent before conducting the interview session. During the 60-minute online Persian interview session which was conducted with the help of Zoom web-conferencing system, she acted as a moderator and interviewer and prompted the participants to engage in a focused discussion about the diverse aspects of teacher noticing including: the sub-skills of teacher noticing, the variables which might affect teacher noticing in various academic settings, the sources of teacher noticing, the relationship between teacher noticing and other internal teacher factors, the process of the development of teacher noticing, EFL instructors' noticing of the different aspects of the target language, and the characteristics of teacher noticing in various academic settings among others. She recorded this focused-group interview session and transcribed it; accordingly, she developed the semi-structured interview protocol of the present study on the basis of the extracted themes of the focus-group interview session of the study.

She then conducted the teacher noticing interviews using the semi-structured interview protocol of the study. Prior to the beginning of data collection at this stage, participants explicitly expressed their consent to take part in the study through a written consent form on Whatsapp application. The interviews were conducted Zoom web-conferencing system. During the interviews, field notes were taken, and after each session, the researcher recorded her reflections. These reflections included thoughts arising from the interview, forming the basis for the researcher's theoretical memos. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to one hour.

Design

The current study drew on the basic qualitative research design (Ary et al., 2019; Merriam, 2009). As discussed by Ary et al. (2019), the main purpose of this research design is to understand the phenomenon for those involved.

Data Analysis

First, we utilized thematic analysis in order to identify and extract the pertinent meaningful patterns or the themes of the gathered qualitative focus-group interview data. Thematic analysis is one of the common methods used in qualitative research, aimed at identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning within textual data such as interviews or field notes. This method enabled the researchers to gain deeper insight into participants' experiences, beliefs, and perspectives through a systematic process that included: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) initial coding, (c) identifying and reviewing themes, and finally, (d) defining them.

Later, given the semi-structured interview data, the initial cycle of coding involved in-text coding, which included line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts. This stage enabled the preliminary categorization of the data. The second cycle of coding consisted of assigning focused codes and developing categories. Following the initial coding, the second phase was carried out by identifying conceptual or thematic similarities across the data. It is worth mentioning that to extract the categories in the transcribed interview data, we used the typological analysis (Hashemi, 2020). According to Hashemi (2020), typology is the classification of qualitative data in terms of their predetermined attributes. Hence, in this work, Jackson's four-component framework was selected to function as a preliminary typology; the data was analyzed with reference to this framework. After the categories were established, theoretical memos were used to define the characteristics or attributes of each category. Subsequently, several additional analytical steps were conducted through constant comparison with previous stages, which led to greater clarity in the overall analysis.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative process of the research, the researchers examined its credibility, transferability, conformability, and dependability. More specifically, we took advantage of triangulation techniques to ensure the truth-value or the credibility of the findings of the research. Furthermore, we used thick description to determine the extent to which the results

of the research were transferable to other contexts including similar situations, similar populations, and similar phenomena. Moreover, we provided an audit trail to expound on the conformability of the results by furnishing sufficient information at each stage of data evaluation conducted to clarify the reasoning behind the choices made and to confirm that the results of the research effectively represented the responses of the participants. Finally, we utilized the inquiry audit to establish dependability. More specifically, we asked an outside person (i.e. a university professor) to assess and scrutinize the research methodology and data evaluation to verify that the results were coherent and could be replicated.

Results

Guided by Hashemi's (2020) typological analysis framework, thematic analysis of the data resulted in the identification of four categories consistent with Jackson's four-component model (Jackson, 2021), serving as a preliminary typology. These categories included: (i) *Skills Related to Attention (SRA)*, (ii) *Skills Related to Interpretation (SRI)*, (iii) *Skills Related to Decision-Making (SRD)*, and (iv) *Willingness to Engage (WTE)*. Table 2 shows the concepts, eleven sub-categories, and four main categories that emerged during the qualitative analysis.

This section provides a clear explanation of each category. For every main category and its corresponding sub-categories, researchers' interpretations of participants' quotations are presented individually to create a deeper understanding of their experiences.

Table 2. Main Categories of Teacher Noticing Questionnaire

Main Category	Sub-category	Concepts	f
Skills Related to Attention (SRA)	1. Teaching Context	a. Well as a teacher, I think one of the important factors to increase noticing for teachers is some unpredicted behaviours or incident that might happen in the teaching contexts. However, more than that, I can point to financial issues as a job-related noticing for teachers. As a teacher when I do not have a financial support from my job, I do not have enough concentration in my classroom. Because I have to think about how much of my income will support my financial problems.	5
	2. Workload	a. Workload and students' behaviours were significant predictors of noticing. In addition, workload results in stress and depression, which in turn decrease the participants' noticing. b. Actually, I am really an attentive teacher and I think I try to notice at all in my job or job-related issues especially when the students are not learning or not	

		attending or may have other problems that make them less efficient in class. Or sometimes, based on my observations some teachers are really worried about time. They may not finish them on time. Consequently, these can be reasons for teachers to be inattentive especially for English language teachers.	
Skills Related to Interpretation (SRI)	1. Sharing the experiences	a. I think EFL teachers are better equipped to adapt their instructional strategies. Noticing goes beyond mere observation; it requires an interpretative lens to discern patterns, identify challenges, and recognize opportunities for intervention. For instance, a teacher who notices that certain students consistently struggle with group activities might interpret this as a need for differentiated instruction or additional support in social skills. b. Interpretation is not an isolated skill but one that demands critical thinking and contextual understanding. EFL teachers must consider various factors—such as cultural backgrounds, individual learning styles, and classroom dynamics—when interpreting their observations. Without such interpretative skills, teachers risk misjudging situations or applying one-size-fits-all solutions that fail to address the nuanced needs of their students.	4
	2. Interactive effects and performance-related impacts	a. Equally important is the ability to share these interpretations and experiences with others. Collaboration among educators is essential for professional growth and the development of best practices. When teachers share their insights and experiences, they contribute to a collective knowledge base that benefits not only their peers but also the broader educational community. For example, a teacher who shares how they successfully implemented a new instructional strategy can inspire others to adopt similar approaches, thereby enhancing overall teaching quality.	
	3. Working Environment	a. I assume, working environment is indispensable for teachers' ability to notice and share experiences effectively. These skills not only enable teachers to respond thoughtfully to their students' needs but also foster a culture of collaboration and continuous improvement within the educational community. As such, prioritizing the development of SRI should be a fundamental component of teacher training and professional development initiatives.	
Skills Related to Decision-making (SRD)	1. Sense of accomplishment	a. In my opinion, decision-making is an essential skill in the teaching profession, and its connection to teachers' sense of accomplishment cannot be overstated. The ability to make effective decisions influences not only classroom management but also student outcomes and overall job satisfaction. Teachers who are equipped with strong decision-making skills are better positioned to address the dynamic challenges of their profession, fostering a sense of achievement and fulfillment in their work. b. Decision-making is closely tied to problem-solving, a critical aspect of teaching. Educators often face complex situations that demand creative and ethical solutions, such as addressing equity in the classroom or resolving conflicts among students. The ability to navigate these challenges effectively enhances a teacher's confidence in their professional capabilities. This confidence translates into a stronger sense of accomplishment, as teachers recognize their role in creating a positive and inclusive learning environment.	7
	2. Affirmative feedback	a. the relationship between decision-making skills and affirmative feedback is both profound and multifaceted. By making informed and reflective decisions, teachers can enhance classroom outcomes, solve complex problems, and exercise professional autonomy. b. These factors collectively contribute to a heightened sense of achievement in their roles. Therefore, fostering decision-making skills should be a central focus in teacher training and professional development programs, ensuring that educators are equipped to thrive in an increasingly complex educational landscape.	
	3. Educators' perceptions	a. Educators' perceptions and Skills Related to decision-making are not optional but essential for fostering equitable and effective learning environments. By investing in the development of these skills through targeted training and reflective practices, educational institutions can empower educators to make informed decisions that benefit all stakeholders. Failure to prioritize this aspect risks perpetuating inefficiencies and inequities within the education system. The	

Willingness to Engage (WTE)		argument for enhancing SRD is not only logical but also imperative for the advancement of education as a whole.	6
	1. positive interaction with students	a. The willingness of teachers to engage with their students and foster positive interactions is not merely a desirable trait; it is an essential component of effective education. b. A teacher's active engagement and constructive communication significantly influence students' academic success, emotional well-being, and overall development. This argument rests on the premise that education is not a one-way transmission of knowledge but a dynamic process that thrives on mutual respect, collaboration, and understanding.	
	2. personal engagement	a. I think when teachers demonstrate a genuine willingness to engage, they create an environment that encourages curiosity and active participation. Research consistently shows that students are more likely to excel academically when they feel supported and valued by their educators. b. A teacher's enthusiasm and attentiveness can ignite a student's intrinsic motivation to learn, transforming the classroom into a space of intellectual exploration rather than mere rote instruction.	
	3. students' progress	a. The willingness of teachers to engage with students and cultivate positive interactions is fundamental to the success of any educational system. It not only enhances academic performance but also nurtures a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Policymakers, administrators, and educators must recognize the transformative power of such relationships and prioritize them as a cornerstone of effective teaching practices.	

Skills Related to Attention (SRA)

The first category included the Skills Related to Attention (SRA) with two sub- categories as teaching contexts and workload. As far as positive consequence of the EFL environment on the participants' teaching noticing is concerned, one of the teachers argued that a teaching context influence the amount of teachers' attention and noticing. In a similar vein, another educator supported the notion that participating in an EFL course is defined by a "family-like" environment, which proved advantageous and heightened their focus. She noted that her peers frequently seem engaged, and on certain occasions, it seems that their positivity influences those in the surrounding workplace. Thus, EFL environment plays an instrumental role in shaping teachers' ability to notice and respond to various teaching dynamics. One could argue that the context in which teaching occurs significantly influences the level of attention educators dedicate to their practice. As highlighted by one teacher:

...the teaching context directly impacts their noticing abilities, suggesting that a conducive environment fosters greater attentiveness and reflection. In addition, I think, the "family" atmosphere of some EFL courses appears to enhance this effect. Such an environment not only promotes collaboration but also cultivates a sense of belonging, which can positively affect teachers' focus and enthusiasm. For instance, the cheerfulness and attentiveness of colleagues

were reported to be contagious, creating a supportive and uplifting workplace culture. This dynamic, in turn, reinforces professional growth and attentiveness to teaching practices. (Participant No. 8)

In fact, the EFL environment, particularly when characterized by mutual support, serves as a catalyst for heightened teacher noticing. This underscores the importance of fostering positive and collaborative teaching contexts to maximize educators' engagement and effectiveness in their roles. As one of them argued:

Well as a teacher, I think one of the important factors to increase noticing for teachers is some unpredicted behaviours or incident that might happen in the teaching contexts. But more than that, I can point to financial issues as a job-related noticing for teachers. As a teacher when I do not have a financial support from my job, I do not have enough concentration in my classroom. Because I have to think about how much of my income will support my financial problems. (Participant No. 26)

As far as the second sub-category i.e., workload is concerned, seven contributors recognized awareness as an indication of operating within EFL settings. For one individual, it involved awareness directed at fellow EFL instructors, while another teacher experienced heightened awareness regarding the students. For instance, one participant revealed that the materials used for learners influenced her significantly beyond the EFL classes. Other contributors observed how the demands of EFL responsibilities impacted their awareness. Most participants mentioned that they appreciated physical activity; however, because of the pressures associated with their workload, they frequently lack the time or energy to engage in regular exercise. One of them maintained:

The relationship between workload, students' behaviors, and the ability to notice critical details is both compelling and concerning. Evidence suggests that increased workload, coupled with challenging student behaviors, significantly impacts an individual's capacity for attentiveness and observation. This correlation is particularly alarming because noticing is a fundamental skill in academic and professional contexts, influencing decision-making and overall performance. (Participant No. 15)

Furthermore, the adverse effects of workload extend beyond diminished noticing; they contribute to heightened stress and depression. These psychological burdens create a vicious cycle, further impairing cognitive functions and reducing individuals' ability to engage effectively with their environment. Such outcomes highlight the urgent need for systemic interventions aimed at workload management and mental health support. According to another participant:

Institutions must prioritize strategies to mitigate these pressures, such as fostering supportive environments, offering mental health resources, and promoting balanced workloads. Ignoring these issues risks not only the well-being of individuals but also the broader efficacy of educational and professional systems. Addressing these challenges is not merely a matter of individual responsibility but a collective imperative to ensure sustainable productivity and mental health. (Participant No. 13)

Skills Related to Interpretation (SRI)

The second category was related to the Skills Related to Interpretation (SRI). To grasp how teachers' abilities related to interpretation influence their awareness in EFL settings, the participants were invited to share their experiences pertaining to these areas. Several themes surfaced from the participants' accounts of teaching awareness, including its interactive effects and performance-related impacts. Participants were also encouraged to discuss the strategies they implement to interpret their teaching awareness during EFL courses and to briefly outline what they consider to be effective awareness strategies.

The feedback from participants confirmed the impact of the work environment on teaching awareness; however, they highlighted particular aspects of the EFL context that could influence teachers' interpretive factors. These aspects encompassed having a stable workspace, moving from a conventional therapeutic environment to a non-conventional one, the necessity of sharing communal areas, and environments lacking established guidelines. For the participants, the demand of spending significant time on administrative responsibilities and dealing with students exhibiting challenging behaviors was the most prominent aspect in understanding their circumstances. To summarize, the teacher participants expressed their perceptions on

interpretation reasons regarding the nature of the EFL environment, educational responsibilities of teachers, and the amount of support. One of them argued:

The work environment plays a pivotal role in shaping teaching awareness, particularly within the EFL context. Participants in the study underscored the multifaceted nature of this influence, pointing to specific environmental factors that affect teachers' interpretive processes. These factors include the availability of a stable workspace, transitions between conventional and non-conventional settings, the necessity of sharing communal areas, and the absence of clearly established guidelines. Such variables create a dynamic and often unpredictable environment that demands adaptability and resilience from educators. (Participant No. 10)

One of the most critical challenges identified by participants was the substantial administrative workload coupled with managing students exhibiting challenging behaviors. These dual pressures detract from the core educational responsibilities of teachers, potentially diminishing their capacity to focus on pedagogical innovation and student engagement. The administrative burden not only consumes valuable time but also shifts the teacher's role from that of an educator to a bureaucratic functionary, which can lead to professional dissatisfaction and burnout. One of the teachers mentioned that:

The lack of structured guidelines in certain EFL environments exacerbates these challenges. Without a clear framework, teachers are left to navigate ambiguous expectations, which can hinder their ability to implement effective teaching strategies. This absence of structure is particularly problematic in communal and non-conventional settings, where shared spaces and resources may create additional logistical complexities. Stability in the work environment is therefore not merely a convenience but a necessity for fostering teaching awareness and efficacy. (Participant No. 23)

The participants' reflections also highlight the importance of institutional support. Teachers in EFL contexts often operate within systems that demand high levels of adaptability but provide limited resources or guidance. This imbalance underscores the need for educational institutions to

prioritize support mechanisms that address both professional development and emotional well-being. For instance, reducing administrative burdens or providing training for managing challenging student behaviors could significantly enhance teachers' interpretive capacities and overall job satisfaction. As highlighted by one participant:

EFL context presents unique challenges that influence teaching awareness and interpretive factors. While the dynamic nature of these environments can foster creativity and adaptability, they also pose significant obstacles that require systemic intervention. By addressing issues such as administrative overload, unclear guidelines, and insufficient institutional support, educational stakeholders can create conditions that empower teachers to thrive both professionally and personally. (Participant No. 9)

Skills Related to Decision-making (SRD)

The third category consisted of the Skills Related to Decision-making (SRD). EFL teachers felt that their sense of accomplishment triggers their decisions as well as their noticing, and that their high interest and persistence at work contribute to their reasons to be attentive in teaching profession and in their institution, and making decisions. The most common rationale cited by educators for their choices was the affirmative feedback obtained from their students and school leaders, such as when a pupil commends the instructor's methods and conduct. This corresponds with the results from Jacob et al. (2017), who also discovered that clear external positive reinforcement influences educators' perceptions of decision-making.

Thus, the role of decision-making in the teaching profession, particularly among EFL instructors, is a critical area of pedagogical research. The category of Skills Related to Decision-making (SRD) sheds light on the intricate interplay between teachers' professional noticing, their sense of accomplishment, and the external reinforcement they receive. This dynamic not only informs their day-to-day choices in the classroom but also contributes to their overall engagement and effectiveness as educators. By examining the factors that influence decision-making, we can better understand how to support teachers in fostering an environment conducive to both student success and professional satisfaction. According to the teacher participants:

One of the most salient aspects of SRD is the role of intrinsic motivation, particularly a teacher's sense of accomplishment. EFL teachers often report that their decisions in the classroom are driven by a deep-seated commitment to their work and a desire to see tangible outcomes, such as student progress or improved engagement. This sense of achievement acts as a catalyst for their noticing—an essential skill that involves observing, interpreting, and responding to classroom dynamics. When teachers feel that their efforts yield meaningful results, they are more likely to invest time and energy into refining their instructional methods and addressing the diverse needs of their students. (Participant No. 11)

Another participant emphasized the persistence and high interest of EFL teachers which result in their noticing:

the persistence and high interest that teachers exhibit in their profession are closely linked to their decision-making processes. Teaching is a demanding vocation, requiring not only subject-matter expertise but also emotional resilience and adaptability. Teachers who demonstrate persistence are better equipped to navigate challenges, such as varying student abilities or institutional constraints, and make informed decisions that enhance learning outcomes. Their sustained interest in their work serves as a foundation for continuous professional growth, enabling them to remain attentive and proactive in their instructional practices. (Participant No. 7)

However, intrinsic motivation alone cannot fully account for the complexity of decision-making in teaching. As one of the teachers responded:

External factors, particularly affirmative feedback from students and school leaders, play a pivotal role in shaping educators' perceptions and choices. Positive reinforcement, such as a student's commendation of a teacher's methods or a principal's acknowledgment of their dedication, serves as a powerful motivator. When teachers receive constructive feedback, they are more likely to feel valued and confident in their abilities, which in turn reinforces their commitment to excellence. (Participant No. 24)

Further, one of the interviewees mentioned that:

Decision-making underscores the multifaceted nature of teaching as a profession. EFL teachers' decisions are influenced by a combination of intrinsic factors, such as their sense of accomplishment and persistence, and external factors, such as affirmative feedback from students and school leaders. Recognizing and addressing these influences can lead to more effective teaching practices and a more fulfilling professional experience for educators. As such, both individual teachers and educational institutions have a shared responsibility to invest in the development of SRD skills, ultimately enhancing the quality of education delivered to students. (Participant No. 18)

Willingness to Engage (WTE)

The final category was the Willingness to Engage (WTE). This element of awareness is connected to the objective of educators' specialized competencies, particularly, self-accountability for achieving this objective. Educators noted that when they perceived their learners making progress due to their instruction and could observe their advancement, they felt a sense of pride in themselves, and had the willingness to engage more in teaching context. In addition, some interviewees explicitly said that they enjoyed teaching when they engage and notice the class activities. The common themes for teachers' WTE include positive interaction with students, personal engagement, and students' progress. The most common explanation educators highlighted for WTE was constructive engagement with learners. This result is consistent with achieving the relational objective. As one of the teachers said:

Teachers' willingness underscores the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators that drive teachers to immerse themselves more fully in the educational process. The relationship between educators' willingness and their perception of students' progress is a critical area of focus, as it highlights the interplay between teacher engagement, student outcomes, and the overall quality of classroom dynamics. Teachers' willing, fueled by constructive engagement with learners, is a pivotal factor in enhancing both teacher satisfaction and educational effectiveness. (Participant No. 28)

Another participant emphasized the relationship between teacher's willingness and accountability by saying that:

Teacher's willingness is deeply intertwined with educators' sense of self-accountability. Teachers who recognize their role as pivotal to student success often report a heightened willingness to invest effort and energy into their teaching practices. This stems from the pride they derive when observing tangible progress in their students—progress that they attribute, at least in part, to their own instructional strategies. Such a sense of accomplishment fosters a positive feedback loop: as educators witness the fruits of their labor, they become more motivated to engage further, thereby enhancing their teaching efficacy. This cycle underscores the importance of fostering environments where teachers can clearly see the impact of their work on student development. (Participant No. 16)

Moreover, teachers' WTE is not merely about teachers' internal motivations; it is also shaped by their interactions with students. Positive engagement with learners emerges as a central theme in understanding why educators choose to invest themselves more deeply in their roles. Constructive interactions—whether through meaningful dialogue, active participation in class activities, or collaborative problem-solving—serve to strengthen the relational bonds between teachers and students. These interactions create a supportive and dynamic classroom environment, which not only benefits students but also reinforces teachers' commitment to their profession. Indeed, the relational objective of education is achieved when teachers and students engage in mutually beneficial exchanges that promote learning and growth on both sides. As one noted:

The personal engagement in teaching activities plays a significant role in fostering willingness. Educators who immerse themselves in the classroom experience—observing, participating, and adapting to the needs of their students—report higher levels of job satisfaction and enjoyment. This sense of enjoyment is not trivial; it is a key driver of sustained engagement. When teachers find joy in their work, they are more likely to approach challenges with creativity and resilience, thereby contributing to a more effective and inspiring learning environment. Personal engagement

thus acts as both a catalyst and a consequence of willingness, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits all stakeholders in the educational process. (Participant No. 21)

Discussion

The current basic qualitative study sought to explore the fundamental nature and definition of teacher noticing skills among Iranian EFL teachers within private language institute settings. Through in-depth data collection and analysis, a theoretical framework emerged comprising four primary categories: (a) skills related to attention, (b) skills related to interpretation, (c) skills related to decision-making, and (d) willingness to engage. This theoretical structure directly answers the research question (How do participating EFL teachers in private language institutes define their noticing skills?) by articulating the ways in which Iranian EFL teachers perceive and describe their noticing skills in their instructional contexts. Each category represents a distinct but interconnected dimension of noticing, collectively capturing the multifaceted nature of how teachers attend to, process, and act upon classroom phenomena. Specifically, the teachers' definitions reflect a progression from sensory perception (attention), through cognitive processing (interpretation), to proactive instructional responses (decision-making), underscored by motivational disposition (willingness to engage).

At the outset of the noticing process lies the ability to attend selectively to relevant stimuli in the dynamic and often complex environment of the EFL classroom. Iranian teachers in this study highlighted the importance of tuning their awareness to students' verbal and non-verbal cues, task engagement, language use, and classroom interactions. This is consistent with existing research in teacher cognition and noticing, such as Wirth et al. (2025) and van Es and Sherin (2002), who posit that noticing begins with selective attention to specific classroom occurrences. The focus on attention skills is consistent with the transactional theory of Folkman and Lazarus (1985), which emphasizes the role of appraisal in stress and coping; teachers must first detect relevant environmental information before cognitive appraisal and action planning. In the context of language teaching, this initial stage is critical because effective attention skills enable teachers to manage the abundant sensory information, filtering signals from noise.

The results suggested that EFL teachers' attention varies depending on factors such as classroom size, task complexity, and individual student behaviors. These findings are consistent with

previous studies (e.g., Ding & Domínguez, 2016; Louie, 2018; Wirth et al., 2025; Sherin et al., 2011) that noted teacher attention is not merely passive reception but an active, effortful process influenced by contextual constraints and teacher expertise. Moreover, the EFL teachers in this context appeared to emphasize the attentiveness to students' affective states (e.g., frustration, motivation), which is notable given the social-emotional challenges in language learning. This highlights a culturally specific dimension of attention that might be underrepresented in more general teacher noticing literature—a finding supported by research on culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010).

Following attention, interpretation involves decoding and making sense of the attended classroom data. The participating EFL teachers defined this as the process of understanding student behaviors, language errors, and interaction patterns within the specific cultural and pedagogical framework. This category complements the transactional stress and coping model's concept of cognitive appraisal where teachers interpret events to evaluate their significance and potential impact (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Interpretation here is not a neutral description but an evaluative process that directly influences instructional decisions. The findings illustrate that teachers' interpretations are contingent on their pedagogical knowledge, beliefs about language learning, and sociocultural expectations (Jackson, 2021; Jacobs et al., 2010). For instance, a student's silence might be interpreted as disengagement or reflective thinking depending on these lenses.

Connections to existing literature are abundant; van Es and Sherin (2008) describe how teacher noticing encompasses interpreting student thinking and instructional moves, and this confirms the participating teachers' emphasis on interpretive skills. Furthermore, the role of teacher beliefs in shaping interpretations is well documented (Pajares, 1992; Russ & Luna, 2013; Tam, 2025). Importantly, the study highlighted those Iranian teachers often interpret student errors not just linguistically but socially and motivationally, supporting the view of teacher noticing as holistic and context-embedded (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). The variability in interpretation across contexts explains why this category is distinct and complex. Teachers' ability to interpret effectively affects their capacity to make appropriate, context-sensitive decisions in real-time.

Decision-making, the third identified dimension, represents the highest point of noticing where teachers translate attention and interpretation into instructional actions. The participating EFL

teachers described making pedagogical decisions such as whether to provide immediate corrective feedback, modify tasks, or re-engage students to enhance learning. This is in line with studies that emphasize the core function of teacher noticing: to inform responsive teaching (Gharani, 2025; Jacobs et al., 2010). It is the practical stage where noticing has meaningful classroom impact. The transactional model of stress and coping again provides a useful lens: after interpreting events, teachers decide on coping strategies to address perceived challenges. Here, decision-making is adaptive and strategic, reflecting teachers' agency. The findings show that the decision-making skills depend on teachers' experience, confidence, and contextual knowledge. In Iranian private institutes, teachers also reported constraints (e.g., curriculum mandates, class size) that moderate their decisions. These results echo findings by Hammerness et al. (2005), Goldsmith and Schifter (1997); and Tanchuk, (2024), who highlight how contextual limitations shape teacher decisions following noticing. Moreover, teachers' decisions reflected a balancing act between promoting learner autonomy and ensuring accurate language use, which is particularly salient in EFL contexts where communicative competence is prioritized but accuracy remains valued.

The final and somewhat unique category identified is teachers' motivational and dispositional willingness to engage with the noticing process. This includes teachers' openness to reflect on their noticing, willingness to act on insights, and persistence despite challenges. This notion integrates affective and volitional dimensions into the cognitive framework of noticing. While much research on noticing focuses on skills and cognition, the motivational aspect is increasingly recognized as crucial (König et al., 2022). Findings revealed that Iranian teachers' willingness is influenced by professional beliefs, perceived efficacy, and institutional support. Some expressed hesitation to engage fully due to burn-out or lack of training, underscoring the importance of teacher agency and emotional resources. The transactional coping model (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985) supports these results by emphasizing that coping is not merely reactive but requires motivation and engagement. This aspect also links noticing with professional development literature, which stresses the role of reflective practice and teacher identity in adopting new noticing habits (Zeichner & Liston, 2013). Hence, willingness to engage is a vital factor enabling or constraining effective noticing, making it a meaningful addition to the theoretical model.

Overall, integrating these categories with existing literature and theory clarifies the complex, interconnected nature of teacher noticing in Iranian EFL contexts. Attention initiates noticing by

filtering stimuli; interpretation gives significance and meaning to these observations; decision-making converts meaning into action; and willingness to engage drives sustained and reflective engagement with the noticing process. Folkman and Lazarus's transactional model underpins this framework, providing a psychological foundation for understanding the dynamic interrelation between cognitive appraisals, emotional responses, and behavioral strategies that characterize teacher noticing. The cultural and contextual factors specific to Iranian private language institutes—such as curricular expectations, classroom dynamics, and cultural values around education—shape each of these categories uniquely, accounting for the patterns observed in participants' definitions. Overall, these findings extend teacher noticing research by operationalizing a culturally situated substantive theory that can inform teacher education and professional development adapted to EFL contexts.

The findings of this study offer valuable insights into the cognitive and affective dimensions of Iranian EFL teachers' noticing skills within private language institutes. By identifying four distinct categories, the research provides a framework that can inform teacher education programs, professional development initiatives, and classroom observation protocols. These categories highlight that teacher noticing is not merely a passive act of perception but a dynamic process involving interpretation, judgment, and intentional engagement. Moreover, the consistency of the findings with Jackson's (2021) four-component model theoretically supports the proposed typology and suggests its potential applicability beyond the Iranian context. Teacher educators can use this framework to design targeted interventions that strengthen specific noticing skills, thereby enhancing instructional efficacy. In practice, fostering teachers' willingness to engage—often overlooked in cognitive models—may be especially crucial in environments where motivation and agency are key to professional growth.

While the study offers a foundational typology, its scope is limited to a specific context: Iranian EFL teachers in private institutes. Future research could expand this typology by exploring noticing skills in public school settings, across different cultural or linguistic backgrounds, or among novice versus experienced teachers. Comparative studies could reveal whether the four-component structure holds across diverse educational systems or whether additional dimensions emerge in other contexts.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of Islamic Azad University. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design, material preparation, data collection, and analysis. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix A
Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. As a teacher, do you try to think of new ways of doing things during teaching?
2. Can you adapt to different situations?
3. Are you curious about new teaching approaches and techniques in language education?
4. Are you open-minded in new contexts?
5. Are you always open to new ways of doing things?
6. Do you find it is easy to create new and effective ideas?
7. Do you like to be challenged intellectually?
8. Do you make novel contributions (e.g., the quality of being new, original or unusual contribution)?
9. Do you “get involved” in almost everything you teach?
10. Do you notice what other people are up to?
11. Do you hold onto the old ways of doing things?
12. Are you alert to new developments in language teaching?
13. Do you think you possess the skills to enhance your attention?
14. How much does sense of accomplishment affect your amount of noticing?
15. In general, how do teachers can increase their noticing? What are the contributing factors?