Non-academic L2 Users: A Neglected Research Pool
in ELT in Iran*

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Abstract

English Language Teaching (ELT) articles are published and their results are relied on without delving into their methodological credibility. A research study cannot be considered valid unless its population is precisely determined and defined. This article shows the considerable size of non-academic English learners in Iran and argues that the population in ELT research should not be limited only to university and school students who are easily accessible but it should also include the sizeable non-academic sector. To do this, 170 PhD dissertations and MA theses in TEFL were randomly selected. The result showed that only less than 9% of the participants belonged to non-academic sector. The article also argues that there is wrong overgeneralization of even the existing ELT academic researches to non-academic situation. Finally it compares academic and non-academic English learners to show how the latter are highly motivated to learn.

1   Introduction

ELT researchers all around the world are concerned with studying how learners acquire English. They try to find ways to make teaching more effective. In Iran, ELT is a hotly debated issue too. As scholars study English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran and across the world, they focus on learners as an immediate source of data. The English learner is observed, tested, and given questionnaires to fill in. The learner's reactions are analyzed and the findings are interpreted and generalized. One main factor which plays an important role in the quality of research, therefore, is participants or research subjects.

This article is an attempt to show that while researchers collect data from academic institutions such as universities and schools, they may ignore a highly motivated group of subjects in the non-academic sector. To do so, the paper starts with a definition of non-academic users following a summary of ELT in Iran including statistical presentation of non-academic centers. Next, it introduces ELT research and why it has recently received attention. The second part of the paper discusses why learners play a significant role in ELT research

and shows the insignificant role of non-academic participants in the research. The comparison of academic and non-academic students' share in ELT research is also provided. What comes then is the discussion of how the existing research with academic subjects is wrongly generalized to every English learner. Finally to show how non-academic learners are advantageous, a comparison of the profile of academic and non-academic learners is provided.

2 Non-academic English Users

By non-academic English users we mean those learners who are not students at university or school and learn English to satisfy their immediate communication requirements. They are the ***L2 users*** (To know the definition of the term English users and its difference with English learner, see Cook 2002). However, the term *English learners and users* are used interchangeably in this article. These L2 users, who have never been focused upon systematically in ELT research in Iran to date, like to learn because of their immediate needs such as immigrating, studying abroad, doing their own business correspondence overseas, and attending international conferences or business meetings. Of course drawing a clear line between academic and non-academic English learners is not an easy job because there exist many university students who study English at other non-academic centers (see non-academic centers below) just because they feel they cannot get the satisfactory result form their limited English courses at university. It is important to note here that the distinction is drawn in this article to show that there are other places rather than schools and universities where learners enroll in large numbers because they think they can only learn the communicative skills of English language over there. This can be compared in terms of motivation too. In the case of learners attending non-academic centers, say private institutes, they are personally motivated to learn the language so they spend time and money to have the classes. However, in terms of the learners at universities and schools, they mainly attend the classes because it's a part of the general curricular program and graduation requires their passing marks from their English classes (for insufficiency of English course at schools and universities see Sadeghi (2003); Mazandarani (1998); Seif (1998); Ghasemi (1996).

3 ELT in Iran

ELT in Iran has gained a special status in the past 25 years. Post-revolutionary reactions to ELT, in certain ways, went to extremes (Aliakbari, 2002). A movement, generally referred to as "book purging", aimed at de-culturalization of school and university English-teaching textbooks started then. In general, English did not receive due attention and its use was limited.

At present, the dominant trend in Iran is toward more English language teaching. As a required course in junior high school, English is taught three to four hours in a week. Deficiency of public schools and universities in satisfying students' ever-increasing desire to learn English communicatively resulted in an extensive and still growing private sector of

English teaching in the country a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. English is so crucial a factor in determining the choice of the parents that the quality of the English program and the qualifications of the teachers working in each school may affect the families' choice of school for their children. Due to limitations in state schools (see "Academic vs. non-academic learners" below), private language institutes have simply attracted an increasing number of interested learners including young children and adults. The multiple variations observed in the programs delivered signify a great tendency to learn English.

Universities in Iran are also places in which English is taught in a range of independent fields of study such as English Language and Literature, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, and English Translation. The students in these fields can be referred to as English Major Students (EMSs). Every EMS goes through two years of general English instruction first to learn four main language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the next two years, in general, the student focuses on his/her specialized course of study.

In the other majors of universities, Non-EMSs study English in a maximum of 6 credits: 3 credits of general English instruction and 3 credits of ESP in which they focus on their field related English texts and learn the related terminology.

In general, these centers have not managed to bring up students who are able to communicate in English (Sadeghi 2005). Even EMSs complain that either the programs do not prepare them for using English communicatively or they are so busy studying for more difficult subjects of their major that they do not get a chance to use English effectively.

4   Non-academic Centers

Although English is taught as a required subject both at universities and schools in Iran along with other subjects, the real act of English learning takes place not in these educational centers but in non-academic centers (see below). This might be due to inefficiency of public centers or ever-increasing number of English users. Whatever the reasons might be, many English users resort to non-academic places to learn English. To see considerable number of non-academic learners, different centers of private sector which have managed to attract a large number of clients are given as follows:

4.1. English language institutes

One can probably refer to English language institutes as the largest systematic non-academic centers. In general, there are three types of English institutes in Iran according to the issuing authority: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and Ministry of Science, Research and Technology. To show how the private sector is actively involved in the business of teaching English, let us take a look at the number of institutes issued by Ministry of Education—the oldest issuing organization—and Ministry of Culture and Islamic

Guidance. The third ministry is not dealt with here due to its recent involvement in the business.

As figure 1 illustrates, from the total number of 4678 educational institutes in Iran which are licensed by the Ministry of Education, 1971 institutes are language institutes whose first language taught is certainly English. This accounts for 42% of the total number of the institutes. The rest 58% belongs to centers teaching all branches of science, art and technology, from remedial school subjects to sewing and computer sciences at all levels.

Figure 1
Comparison of the Number of Other Institutes with That of
English Institutes Issued by Ministry of Education
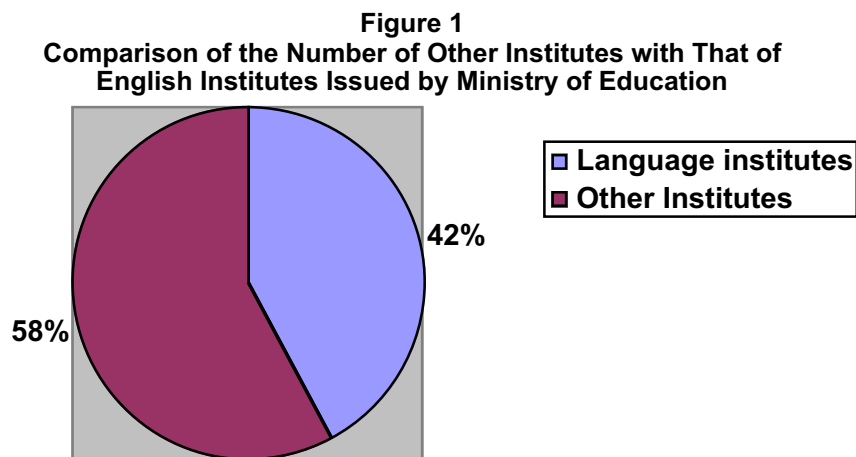
As for the private institutes issued by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, from the total of 186 institutes 127 are English teaching centers which make up 68% of the total (see figure 2), a considerable figure!

Figure 2
Comparison of the Number of Other Institutes with That of
English Institutes Issued by Ministry of Culture and Islamic
Guidance
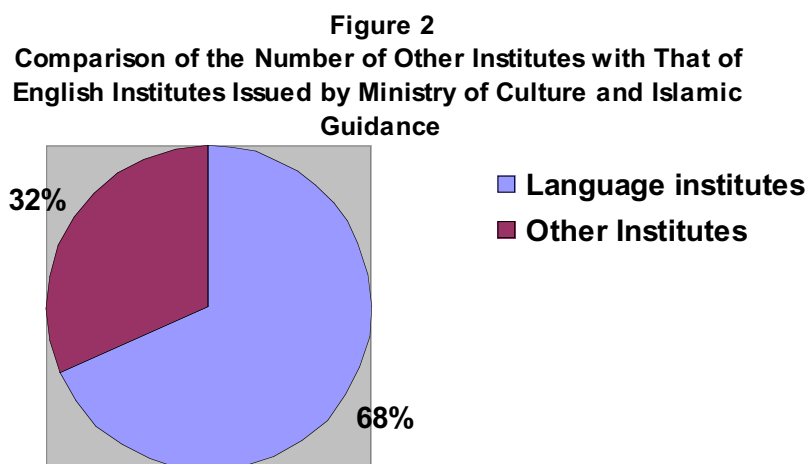
4.2   Tutorial classes.

By this we mean those private English classes that a teacher holds at the learner's or teacher's place of residence or private classroom. As the pay is higher than that in general classes, teachers prefer tutoring to teaching at institutes. Furthermore, there are some people who think they get better results if they hire a teacher to have a private class. As tutorial courses are not systematically constituted, no formal report of their size can be announced. However, abundant classified advertisements for English classes of different types in newspapers can be an indication of how active this sector is.

4.3   Organization English classes.

These include all English courses which are held at industrial, cultural, organizational and business centers. Most organizations, public or private, hold English courses or have their own language centers. It is good to know that almost all these classes are student-initiated, that is, the employees themselves require the authorities and supervisors to start such classes. A vivid example is the requirement of International Standard Organization (ISO) from establishments such as industrial centers to ask employees' interest in training courses they like to sit. The results of most employees' interest questionnaires, along with other things, require people in charge to hold English classes at organizations and factories in Iran. The organization English classes mainly include the followings:

1. Industrial government or private centers such as producing factories and refineries
2. Business companies such as import, export, transport companies
3. Organizational offices such as state related organization, ministries, government offices and hospitals
4. Academic centers such as university and school related language institutes or student societies
5. Cultural centers such as culture houses, children mind developing societies, mosques, and libraries

Almost everywhere, even at hospitals, you may find English classes. For these centers, as they are normally locally established, there is no estimation of the size too.

5   ELT Research in Iran

Research in ELT has shown an exceptional growth in Iran during the recent years. This tremendous increase in the number of studies on English acquisition may be due to the following:

Along with the development of English as the leading international language as well as a means of science and technology transfer (Crystal 2003), there has been an upsurge of interest among the Iranians to pursue learning English as an effective means of communication. Consequently, the hot market of English learning motivated the ELT scholars in Iran to study

the ways in which English can be learned optimally. The recent increasing number of ELT conferences and seminars in Iran shows the proliferation of the related studies.

One of the chief and new priorities of Iranian government is providing the ground to increase the production of knowledge typically called as "Software Movement". Under such state requirements the related ministries and organizations are requested to finance fresh research programs in varied fields. So it is not surprising to see the research priorities being announced and financed by the ministries every year. This has been a welcomed opportunity for the related university professors to explore unexplored aspects of ELT.

With the expansion of master's programs in TEFL—almost doubled within a decade—and establishment of PhD programs in TEFL in many universities in Iran, there started a host of research studies as a partial requirement to complete the related program. The studies are typically on the methods of teaching, learning strategies, as well as the problems students face in learning situations.

No matter what the aims and methods of these research projects are, a good portion of them consider students as their participants. The following sections take this issue into consideration.

6   Learners as Research Participants

College and school students very often serve as subjects because most studies in applied linguistics are conducted by college professors or school teachers, for whom such students form a readily available pool of potential research data source. In fact, many English language departments set up "subject pools", usually consisting of introductory students, to provide participants for ELT studies. They are essentially a captive pool of individuals that can be tapped easily. Bordens and Abbott (2002: 151) hold that sampling from a relatively small subject pool is much easier than drawing a random sample from the general population and greatly reduces the time and financial costs of doing research. They further add that using such non-random sample has a downside. If you choose to use college students in order to save time, effort, and money, you may be sacrificing the generalizabiltiy of your results, and the study will have less external validity.

To explore the type of participants selected for the purpose of ELT studies in TEFL PhD and MA programs, 170 PhD dissertations and MA theses (28 and 142 respectively) were randomly selected from Allame Tabatabaee, Tarbiat Modares, and Isfahan universities. All researches were done between 2000 and 2004. The results of subject study showed that 91% of the participants belonged to academic sector and only 9% of the studies took private institute learners as their subjects (See figure 3). Rostamlu (2003), to justify his choice of participants from a private English language institute rather than university classes, held that in such environments learners especially at intermediate and advanced levels are highly motivated. He further adds: "We thought high motivation and seriousness of such participants could give the project a considerable advantage" (p. 5).

It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of Education has regular yearly programs to finance research projects related to the problems of schools and naturally all the participants of such studies are school students, teachers, or the authorities. However, such research enterprises do not exist to support non-academic sector such as private institutes. One may notice the same problem when one studies the participants of experimental studies published in ELT journals.

Figure 3
Participants' Share in 4 Types of English Learning Centers
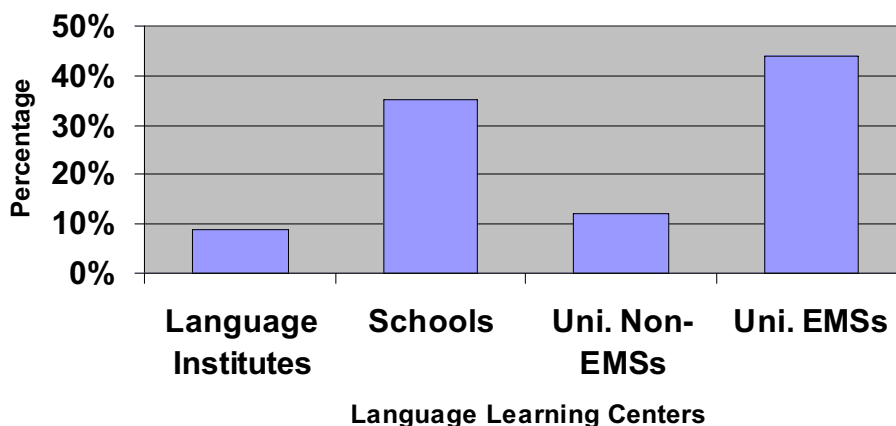
A fundamental goal of research is to be able to generalize—to say something reliably about a wider population on the basis of findings in a particular study. A sample is obtained by collecting information about only some members of the population. Before selecting the sample it is critical that the population is properly defined. The goal of sampling is to obtain a sample that properly mirrors the population it is designed to represent. This involves defining the population, obtaining an unbiased sampling, and selecting a sample using probability sampling methods. This should result in a final sample with similar shape (De Vaus 2003).

While the main shortcoming with the research done by ELT practitioners at university or school is too much concentration on academic subjects, the second problem has something to do with overgeneralization of the results, that is, they wrongly generalize to every Iranian learner while the sample is taken merely from academic learners.

College students differ from non-college population in a number of ways including age, motivation or socioeconomic status, etc. These differences may limit the researcher to apply his/her results to a larger population beyond college. He/she may be limited to generalizing only to other college students. However, in the study of university dissertations and theses, there were many cases of mismatch between the quality of sample participants and that of target population which in turn results in poor generalization. As an example the study was done only on (a limited) number of EMSs but the title and the discussion imply generalization for every Iranian English learner. What we want to emphasize here is that the study on academic learners cannot be securely generalized unless the subjects are well-known

and appropriately selected for the study. To know who the real English learners in Iran are, in the following the differences between academic and non-academic learners are shown.

Table 1 Titles and participants type of 4 university researches done at PhD   level

No	Title	participants	Source
1	Competence differences between native and **Iranian near-native speakers** of EFL	Students of MA in TEFL/English literature	Noroozadeh, 2001
2	Production of the anaphora by **Persian learners** of English in the narrative and descriptive written discourse	90 Iranian BA students in Translation, English language and literature, and TEFL	Raiyati Damavandi, 2000
3	Speech act in 2nd language process of **Persian speakers**	Senior students in English language and literature	Tajvidi, 2000
4	Politeness strategies in English and **Persian** in contrast	142 MA and PhD students	Yarmohammadi, 2003

of university dissertations and theses, there were many cases of mismatch between the quality of sample participants and that of target population which in turn resulted in poor generalization. In table 1, you can see the titles and participant type of 4 university researches done at PhD level, all in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, at the University of Allameh Tabatabaee. As you see, there is no correspondence between the sample types and generalization made by the researchers to the populations. What we want to emphasize here is that the study on academic learners cannot be securely generalized unless the subjects are well-known and appropriately selected for the study.

To know who the real English learners in Iran are, in the following section the differences between academic and non-academic learners are shown.

7   Academic vs. non-academic learners

As the study attempts to show that the real asset of EFL do come from non-academic sector, it is worth comparing their characteristics to clarify the point. Surely the differences between the two are not confined to what follows but these features are the most relevant to our discussion. Although it should be noted that the exact applicability of the parameters is not possible, one can noticeably trace the relevant specification back into each group of learners. The comparison is made in terms of motivation, purpose, setting of learning and contact with foreigners (for one to one comparison see table 2).

Table 2 Comparison of academic and non-academic English learner

Academic English Learner	Non-academic English Learner
- has low motivation.	- has high motivation in terms of job requirements, financial income, and social status.
- studies to get good marks.	- studies to learn the language.
- is normally below 22 years of age.	- is normally older than 22, therefore, more experienced in terms of world knowledge.
- normally doesn't work.	- normally works.
- has almost no contact with foreigners.	- is in contact or will be in contact with foreigners.

Motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researchers as the major factor that influences the rate and success of L2 learners. Motivation provides one of the primary key factors that initiates learning in L2; indeed many other factors involved in L2 learning are based on motivation to some extent (for a recent review of new studies on motivation in ELT refer to Dornyei, 2003). Individuals with the highest degree of abilities, and the best teachers with the most appropriate curricula do not seem to be able to accomplish long-term goals if there is not sufficient motivation. Moreover, high motivation can make up for deficiencies in one's language aptitude and language learning situation.

A non-academic learner normally enjoys a high level of motivation to learn English. The motivation is mainly instrumental and the result of the needs they feel regarding job satisfaction which actually leads into more income and social status that they will gain through learning the language. A business or industrial manager comes to this understanding that his English knowledge would equip him/her with a better result in every aspect of his/her career. An engineer, upon his/her graduation would find that job advertisements on newspapers require him/her to have the English abilities if he/she is looking for a credential job. Even the employees of a company know that the priority of overseas mission is with those who have a good command of the international language, that is, English.

On the other hand, students at universities and schools have lots of homework, and examination in front of them. English is also a subject like others for which they must study to get a passing mark. Still if they pass, no increments or promotion is waiting for them. Consequently they are not highly motivated to learn English at university or school.

Academic and non-academic learners also differ in purpose they have for learning English. It is very difficult to decide what the real purpose of a student is when he/she attends university or school. While the overall purpose of a student is defined to be learning the subjects he/she is studying, we should admit that a good proportion of students study for marks. Therefore,

one of the main purposes of a student as it was noted is to gain an acceptable mark. This condition is more revealing in the subject of English for non-EMSs because in the limited hours of instruction they normally could not have the chance of learning English especially the most favored skills of listening and speaking as the program is not designed to do so. However, when the student graduates, on the one hand, he/she feels the necessity of communicating in English and on the other hand he/she finds that his/her previous schooling did not help him/her to do so. Therefore, he/she resorts to other means of learning to communicate the language such as registering at language institutes or hiring a teacher.

Still another point of difference between academic and non-academic English learners is the setting in which they learn. The setting can be mainly discussed in terms of the programs, class size and hours.

The programs in all learning institutions of university, school as well as private institutes are more or less varied. While teachers are not competent at spoken language skills, the university instructors are, but the problem is that students are not at the level of proficiency to make the professors communicate with them in English. The other pressing limitation is the short hours which do not let both school teachers and university professors work on four skills adequately. In private learning programs the hours are doubled or more and programs are normally designed in a way to teach the spoken skills. The class size in private English teaching centers is not comparable with that at schools or universities. It is not surprising to see 50 or 60 or even 70 students in a class at universities or schools. This large number in the classroom results in instructor's limitation in applying effective communicative methods with almost no student talking time in the class.

The last but not the least index of comparison between academic and non-academic English learners is the contact or/and possibility of prospective contact that the learners have at different sectors. Moyer (2004) takes contact opportunities along with intention to become native-like as two psychological factors to play the greatest role in the attainment of late language learners.

Iran is not a prime target country for tourists especially from English speaking countries so it is quite natural to see only few English speaking foreigners in the country who are tourists or belong to business sector. Moreover, the places you may find the tourists are limited to tourist sites, hotels, or business companies. Besides it is not also usual for Iranian students to travel abroad. Therefore, students' contact with foreigners is almost nothing except for pretty few cases.

However, those at business and industrial companies are required to keep constant contact with overseas to sell their products or services or to buy products, technology or raw materials. Here, it is necessary to send delegations and receive foreign ones. They send and receive many e-mails in English. Technicians are sent to developed countries to learn and bring in professional technology. Here, there is always an opportunity for communication or possibility of it for authorities as well as engineering teams.

8   Conclusion

Investigating ELT is a revealing enterprise, offering important insights to the researchers, the teachers, as well as English learners. However, at first the research should be checked in view of every research requirement among which mention can be made of external validity which guarantees the extent to which the result of research can be trusted and applied to the population. In this article it can be concluded that first, English learning should not be limited to universities and schools. There are many other English language centers such as private institutes, organization-related language centers, and tutorial classes that the learners attend with the hope of learning only English. The real English learners belong to non-academic sector; they are highly motivated with a real purpose of learning the language. They are the group which has the actual contact with foreigners. Second, it was also mentioned that most of the ELT studies focus on academic students as the source of data collection while the non-academic learners who enjoy high motivation to learn are left unexplored. The problem is that the results of research done on the academic English learners who are not as motivated as non-academic ones are wrongly generalized to every Iranian English learner. So it would be more beneficial for the whole ELT literature in Iran and across the world to focus more on those learners who come from non-academic sources as a worthy and active research pool.

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