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An Investigation into the EFL Milieu and Availability of Language Learning Opportunities to Iranian English Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

It is believed that ESL contexts are different from EFL contexts with regard to the language learning and teaching practices. Due to various types of language learning opportunities and resources in these two milieus, language learning practices take place differently in these two situations. ESL context provides learners with ample amount of language learning opportunities, while EFL context does not readily make these opportunities and resources available to language learners. Keeping that in mind, the researchers made an attempt to shed light on the resources and opportunities which may exist for English language learners in an EFL context such as Iran. To this end, a group of advanced language learners in Iran was selected, and the required data was gathered through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Results obtained from both descriptive and inferential statistics indicated that the range of resources and opportunities used by language learners is very limited in this milieu. Moreover, it was revealed that in this EFL context, there are some new and widespread language learning resources and opportunities which can assist language learners in all four skills.

Keywords: *ESL Context, EFL Milieu, Language Learning Opportunities, Iranian Language Learners*

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1. Introduction

Stevens (1992) stated that over one and half billion people use English as a first, second, or foreign language all over the world and emphasized that one quarter of these speakers have English as their native language, while the rest use it as a second or foreign language to establish communication. More interestingly, over two third of these non-native English speakers have learned this language in the past 20 years (Brown, 2001). Thanks to advances in technology, which among other things, brought about wider intercommunication among people all over the world, this number is already on the rise (Brown, 2001; Al Khaiyali & Akasha 2018). However, it should be taken into account that learning a language other than the first one differs greatly with regard to the contexts in which learning the second language takes place (Brown, 2001; Banaruee & Askari, 2016; Marckwardt,

1963; Stern, 1983; Khoshsima & Banaruee, 2017).

Generally, language learning and teaching in a second language context is much easier than that in a foreign language context. Regarding this issue, Stern (1983) mentioned that a non-native language which is learned and practiced “within” one country is accounted as a second language, while a non-native language learned and practiced with reference to a country “outside” territorial boundaries is accounted as foreign language. He also states that the purpose of second language learning is often different from foreign language learning. Since the second language is frequently the official language in a society, learning it is needed “for full participation in the political and economic life of the nation” (Paulston, 1974, pp. 12-13), or it may be the language for education (Marckwardt, 1963).

In line with Stern (1983), Brown (2001) also made some distinctions between foreign and second language learning



contexts. To make an operational differentiation between a second and foreign context, Brown (2001) emphasized the role of the environment outside the language classroom and stated that there are two different language learning environment in which a learner can learn another language. He believed that in a second language situation, the language learner is exposed to the target language outside the classroom in a variety of settings, while in a foreign language environment, the learner will rarely, if ever, have opportunity for exposure to the target language outside the educational setting or language classroom. Teaching English in Japan, Morocco or Thailand, for example, is almost always a context of English as a foreign language (EFL) which lacks the aforementioned privileges.

Social context has been considered as a very important factor with regard to the language teaching and learning process. For language teaching to be effective, it is highly significant to make a relationship between language and the society or the context where the language is used and put into practice (Stern, 1983; Askari et al., 2017). The effect of social context on the process of language learning becomes more prominent when the differences in the social factors involved in ESL and EFL situations are taken into consideration.

2. Literature Review

Second language acquisition (SLA) is a very critical subject and has important and far-reaching consequences. Howatt (1984, p.22) stated that “people have been learning languages other than their first language throughout the long history of mankind, either informally or with the help of one methodological support or another”. Since 1960s, Tudor (2003) believed that we have witnessed an unprecedented expansion in the history of language teaching. This results from the dramatic increase in international exchanges and the consequent need for the learning of languages for the purposes of study, commerce, travel, and so on. In the ups and downs of learning another language, there have always been some facilitating and inhibiting factors which led to many painstaking studies during the past decades like Bloomfield (1933) and Ausubel (1968), to name just a few.

It is believed that learning an additional language is a difficult and complex task (Zare-Behtash, Bakhshizadeh Gashti, Khatin-Zadeh & Banaruee, 2017).

To accomplish this, not only should a language learner master the grammatical system of that language, but also he or she should be able to make use of this system appropriately for communication in real-life situations. According to Barkhuizen (2004), there is obviously a process taking place in the head of language learners, which is unobservable; however, this process becomes more complicated when the outcomes of that learning, which are now observable, are examined within a social context.

There are myriads of research in the annals of second language learning regarding the cognitive procedures underlying language learning such as those done by Chomsky (1965), Pica and Doughty (1988), Oxford (1990), Dickinson (1992) and Banaruee, Khoshsiman and Khatin-Zadeh (2017), to name just a few; however, less focus has been placed on the social environment affecting the process of language learning.

2.1 Social Context and Language Learning

In order to find the relevance of social context to second language acquisition, Ellis (1994) distinguished between social factors and social context. According to him, the latter refers to “the different settings in which L2 learning can take place” (p.197). His samples of the social factors included age, sex, social class, and ethnic identity and the context could be considered as either a natural setting, where informal learning takes place, or an educational setting, where formal learning occurs. Attaching significance to the social context, Harmer (2003) held that “the social context in which learning takes place is of vital importance to the success of the educational endeavor” (p. 338). Barkhuizen (2004), on the other hand, proposed a basic model of language learning which takes into account at least five elements. According to him, in order to start the procedure of language learning, there has to be a *learner*; no language learning can take place if the learner is not exposed to *input*. In the process of language learning, a systematic representation of that knowledge, *interlanguage*, develops inside the learners’ head, and learning is evident in the *output*, a display of the learner’s ability in the language. The last element and perhaps the most important one is the *social context* within which the other four elements can play their roles as appropriately as possible (p.555).

Vygotsky (1962), the Russian psychologist, whose ideas have influenced the field of educational psychology in general and the field of education in particular described learning as a social process. The major theme of his theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition (Turuk, 2008). That is to say, he considered social context and socio-cultural settings as highly significant factors in the development of higher forms of human learning. Introducing the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky (1962) defined it as “the distance between a child’s actual developmental level, as determined by independent problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Wertsch, 1985, p. 60).

Recently, researchers, such as Ryan (1997), Norton (2000), Banaruee, Khoshsima and Askari (2017) and Skilton-Silvester (2002) have begun to investigate how individual language learners learn a language in a range of formal and informal contexts among which the classroom setting plays a lesser role than the social contexts beyond it. Lave and Wenger (1991) also believed that although classroom setting plays a role in the process of language learning, a wider ecology of language learning exists in the context outside the classroom which is made up of situations and environments which provide settings in which language learners can participate by learning and using the language.

Robert and Kleiner (1999) stated that learning a language cannot be seen as a process taking place simply in an individual's head, but the process of learning also occurs through the interconnected parts of a class, a family, or other social groupings.

Moreover, based on the ideas of Beebe and Zuengler (1983), in the early years of SLA research and theorizing, studies seemed to indicate that social context influences learning. In other words, they are two separate entities with the former having an effect on the latter. An important point which is worth mentioning regarding the above-mentioned studies is that in these studies what has received greater attention was actually language *use* rather than language or interlanguage *development* (Barkhuizen, 2004, p.554. emphasis in original).

However, Tarone and Liu (1995) held that “interaction in different social contexts can influence both interlanguage use *and* overall interlanguage development” (p.108). In addition, another study in the same vein carried out by Toohey (2000) has emphasized the *sociality* of language development, whereby learners and learning are socially, historically and politically constructed. Therefore, as Barkhuizen (2004) put it, instead of describing language learning as a process which happens to learners as they interact in a social context, it should be noted that learners themselves are partly constitutive of those contexts, which at the same time organize language learners’ identity and their language learning process.

Regarding the significance of community and social context in language learning, Bransford et al. (2000) estimated that 79% of school pupils’ waking time is spent interacting in the home and community, and only 21% at school. Putting emphasis on the significance of the environment beyond the school, these researchers call for educators and stakeholders to take into account the educational potential of the community (Palfreyman, 2006; Zare-Behtash & Banaruee, 2017). Putnam (2000) used the term ‘social capital’ to refer to “connections among individuals –social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). However, Palfreyman (2006) used the term “resources” to focus on positive features of learning and context which can help educators and stakeholders to facilitate learning outside the classroom. In a study conducted in the UAE context, Palfrayman (2006) pointed out that language learners drew upon a rich repertoire of material and social resources in order to practice English in such an EFL milieu. In other words, English language learners in that context had access to a broad range of resources and opportunities for English language learning. In addition, Harmer (2007) mentions the importance of computers and internet-based activities and adds that teachers should encourage the students to find suitable activities and games in order to be successful in language learning. Moreover, Young (2013) indicates that students raise their language awareness by using on-site games and discussion in different social and cultural contexts. Regarding the use of modern technology and its implications on language learning and teaching, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) claim that technology provides



teaching resources and brings learning experience to the children's world. That is to say, children will encounter various opportunities to practice English in the world of technology.

However, despite the importance of social context and its significant effects on language learning and teaching, to the researchers' best knowledge, a few, if any, studies have been carried out in Iran on the impact of social environment on Iranian foreign language learners and the availability of language learning opportunities in that context. Since Iranian foreign language learners are living in a context in which they have inadequate or low-level exposure to English language, this study is concerned with the issues of L2 learners' access to language learning resources and opportunities within such an EFL context.

Therefore, the present study aims at providing answer to the following research questions:

1. What kinds of language learning resources are employed by Iranian English language learners in the Iranian EFL milieu?
2. What kinds of social opportunities and resources are available out there of which language learners are not completely aware?

3. Methodology

This was a mixed design study which combined both qualitative and quantitative approaches during the data collection and data analysis phases. The choice of the design of the study was dictated by the nature of the objectives of the study. According to Creswell (1999), a mixed design allows the researcher to gather the data in order to take into account the results of both qualitative and quantitative methods. Results obtained from the quantitative phase of the study were enriched and evaluated by using qualitative semi-structured interviews, so that a deeper insight would be provided into the resources which can be made available to language learners in EFL contexts like Iran.

3.1 The Context and the Participants of the Study

Since this study was conducted in Bahar Language Institute (BLI) in Shiraz and focused on the language resources and opportunities available to language learners in this part of the country, it is necessary to elaborate briefly on the social context of the country in general and the social milieu of the city in particular. As mentioned earlier,

Stern (1983) categorizes two kinds of contexts in which learning a language rather than the first language takes place: 'second language context' versus 'foreign language context'. The former provides second language learners with a plethora of resources and opportunities to practice and therefore enhance their second language learning. However, contexts in which second language learners do not have ready-made resources and opportunities to practice their L2 are considered as foreign language contexts (Stern, 1983).

Therefore, since English was not the medium of communication in this environment, and it was not the medium of instruction at schools and universities in this context, second language learners' contact with English outside the classroom was rather limited and the range of authentic situations, if any, in which they could use English to communicate with native speakers was considerably restricted. That is why, the context in which this study was carried out is considered as a foreign language learning context.

Participants for the current study were selected from the central branch of Bahar Language Institute in Shiraz. Using cluster random sampling, the researchers selected 250 participants, 150 male and 100 female, studying English in high and advanced levels. Majority of them were university students studying in different majors, and the rest were taking pre-university courses. Moreover, all of the participants had Persian as their first language and aged from 19 to 35. These participants had various types of social and professional backgrounds and differed with regard to the reasons for attending the English language classes.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

In order to conduct the present study, the researchers made use of two kinds of instruments. The main data collection instrument was a validated questionnaire including 33 questions focusing on the social environment participants were living in, language learning resources available inside and outside home and classroom, as well as language learning activities in which participants were involved. The internal consistency of the instrument was estimated through running Cronbach's alpha, and it turned out to be 0.81 for the total instrument which was acceptable.

In addition, in order to provide more in-depth individual data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a

representative sample of the participants randomly selected from among those who had filled out the questionnaire. The questions posed in interview section were related to and based on the questionnaire's items, so that the participants could shed light on some other points and opportunities for language learning in the social milieu in which they were living.

3.3 Procedures

The data were gathered during the summer term of the academic year at Bahar Language Institute in Shiraz, Iran. During the ninth week of that term, a list of all the classrooms, including high and advanced learners, were firstly obtained from the director of the institute, and based on cluster sampling, 17 out of 25 English classes with high and advanced level students were randomly selected. Then, the students were informed about the research project and were assured of the confidentiality of the collected personal information. Finally, the questionnaires were distributed among the students during the regular class hour. Then, at the end of the term, 40 students of the 250 total participants were randomly selected to take part in the interview section.

After the data collection phase, the quantitative data were analyzed with SPSS using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Of course, the main statistical formula for the analysis of quantitative data was the Chi-square test to determine whether the responses are significantly different or not. After that, in order to analyze the qualitative data, the researchers made use of specific interview analysis techniques such as content analysis (Kvale, 1996). In other words, the qualitative data of this study will be analyzed through content analysis. Then, benefiting from both quantitative and qualitative information gathered throughout the study, the researchers sought satisfactory answers to the research questions.

4. Data Analysis, Results & Discussion

In data analysis section, two steps were taken: first, the data gathered via questionnaire were considered and analyzed; second, the interview data were elaborated on for finding complementary or additional information about the research questions.

In order to analyze the data gathered through the questionnaire, the questions were classified into five different categories, each focusing on a specific type of information. Category 1 provided information on the students' use of English inside home, whereas Category 2 focused on

the participants' use of English outside home or institute. The third category included some questions which were related to the usefulness rate of the materials used by the students. In addition, Category 4 questions asked about the availability of family members helping students with English at home. Finally, the last category took into account the amount of help students received from or provided for their family members regarding the activities related to English language. After that, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for analyzing the data, using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Then, in order to determine whether there were any differences between responses given to the questions, a chi-square test was run.

The data gathered through the interview phase was of considerable significance for a deeper elaboration on the research questions, so that the new points which were not probably touched upon in the questionnaire could be mentioned and discussed.

4.1 Results

In the present study, 250 high and advanced level students studying English in Bahar Language Institute participated and provided information about the available resources and opportunities for language learning in an EFL context. Regarding the results obtained from the first category, it was revealed that the participants spend a significant portion of their time with their family members, and more than half of them spend time with their friends and classmates 'once a week' or 'a few times a week'. Another important point shown in the table below is that a large number of the students use the Internet messengers 'rarely' or 'once a week' (Table 1). Regarding the interview section of the study, it was indicated that the reasons for not using Internet Messengers was that some participants did not know how to use these resources for the purpose of language learning. And those using these resources mentioned that they use these types of resources, but for the purposes other than language learning (e.g. chatting with a friend in Persian language).

Moreover, with regard to the practice of four language skills at home, participants stated that they have very limited opportunities to engage with English, and that they have to practice mostly the reading and writing skills as their homework assignments, and the other two skills are always left untouched at home.



Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Language Learners' Use of English at Home

	Rarely	once a week	a few times a week	every day	Total
13	105 (41.2%)	38 (16%)	78 (30.8%)	29 (12%)	250
14	67 (27.6%)	42 (16%)	90 (36.4%)	51 (20%)	250
15	33 (13.6%)	40 (15.6%)	114 (45.6%)	63 (25.2%)	250
16	68 (26.5%)	56 (23%)	93 (38%)	33 (12.5%)	250

In addition to the information provided by descriptive statistics, inferential statistics, mainly the chi-square test, also revealed that since $\chi^2 = 64.31$, $DF = 9$, and $Sig = .000$, there is a statistically significant difference between the participants' responses given to the questions in category 1 (Table 2).

Table 2: Inferential Statistics for Language Learners' Use of English Inside Home

	Value	DF	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	64.31	9	.000

Regarding the results of the second category, it was indicated that in very few cases, participants can engage in opportunities to practice the four language skills outside home or the language institute where they study English. Moreover, the descriptive statistics actually reflect the fact that these students do not have enough exposure or access to authentic English language in this specific foreign language context. (Table 3)

Of course, it is worth mentioning that with regard to the differences between various foreign language learning milieus, all foreign language contexts are not necessarily the same in terms of language learning opportunities and resources which can be considered useful for language learning.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Language Learners' Use of English Outside Home or Institute

	Rarely	Once a Week	A Few Times a Week	Every Day	Total
17	147 (60%)	37 (14%)	54 (21%)	12 (5%)	250
18	143 (58%)	47 (18%)	47 (19.2%)	13 (4.8%)	250
19	123 (50%)	46 (18.3%)	61 (25.7%)	20 (6%)	250
20	157 (64%)	37 (14%)	45 (18.4%)	11 (3.6%)	250

Moreover, the inferential statistics for this category revealed that, since $\chi^2 = 2.860$, $DF = 42$, and $Sig = .000$, there is a statistically significant difference between the participants' responses given to the questions in category 2 (Table 4)

Table 4: Inferential Statistics for Language Learners' Use of English Outside Home

	Value	DF	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	2.860	42	.000

As far as the third category, usefulness rate of materials used by the students, is concerned, majority of the participants reported that entertaining materials such as watching English films and animations, reading English story books and magazines or newspapers, talking to foreigners in city, and the like can be "useful" or "very useful" ways of practicing and learning English; however, they believed going through the grammar books or looking up words in dictionaries were not considered to be of great help for language learning (Table 5)

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for Usefulness Rate of the Materials Used by Students

	Not Useful	A Bit Useful	Useful	Very Useful	Total
21	21 (8%)	68 (28%)	117 (46%)	44 (18%)	250
22	15 (6%)	36 (15%)	105 (42%)	94 (37%)	250
23	22 (9%)	48 (18.3%)	110 (45%)	70 (27.7%)	250
24	15 (6.5%)	30 (12%)	92 (36.5%)	113 (45%)	250
25	8 (3.5%)	20 (7.5%)	61 (25%)	161 (64%)	250
26	18 (7.2%)	49 (19.2%)	94 (38%)	89 (35.6%)	250

Once again as shown in table 6, by the use of Pearson chi square test as a type of inferential statistics, it was indicated that the responses participants provided to the questions in this category were significantly different.

Table 6: Inferential Statistics for Usefulness Rate of the Materials Used by Students

	Value	DF	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	7.380	110	.000

Regarding the questions classified in the fourth category, 34% of the respondents mentioned their older siblings as providers of considerable assistance for language learning; 22% preferred asking their friends and classmates for language learning assistance and 21% were unwilling to ask

others for help. Moreover, respondents stated that fathers were twice as helpful as mothers with English practice at home.

Table 7: Descriptive Statistics for the Family Members Helping Students with English at Home

	Father	Mother	Older brother (s)	Older sister(s)	Younger brother (s)	Younger sister (s)	Your friend & classmate	Parents	Siblings	Nobody	Total
27	27 (12%)	13 (6%)	45 (18%)	42 (16%)	5	6	53 (21%)	5	3	54 (22%)	250
28	33 (13%)	25 (11%)	15	12	8	5	146 (59%)	5	3	3	250
29	15	45 (18%)	4	2	20	8	5	130 (52%)	20	1	250
31	33 (13%)	23	42 (17%)	48 (20%)	8	5	1	8	5	77 (31%)	250
33	0	2	2	4	14	9	135 (54%)	22	54 (22%)	8	250

Moreover, 59% of participants stated that if their problem with English is not solved, in the next stage, they prefer to call their friends or classmates for assistance, while the rest could seek help from their family members. In addition, due to their parents' lack of English knowledge, more than half of the participants (52%) reported that they did not ask for their parents' help with the problems they encountered in English language learning.

Table 8: Inferential Statistics for the Family Members Helping Students with English at Home

	Value	DF	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1.194	36	.000

The above table (Table 8) shows the inferential statistics related to the fourth category which indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the responses participants gave to this category's questions.

Finally the last category including the questions which focus on the amount of help students give to or receive from their family members and friends with regard to English language problems was taken into consideration. As shown in Table 9, more than half of the participants stated that they provide help for their friends and classmates regarding the English language learning difficulties. Moreover, nearly one fourth of them mentioned that they help their younger siblings with English at home. However, with regard to the amount of help the participants receive from others inside or outside home, findings of the current study revealed that almost 70% of them receive help with their English problems "rarely" or "never". On the other hand, 36% of them claimed that they "often" receive help from

other people around them either at home or the institute (Table 9).

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics for the Amount Help Exchanged Between Students and their Family Members and Friends Regarding English Problems

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Total
30	78 (32%)	96 (38%)	53 (22.3%)	23 (7.7%)	250
32	9 (4%)	49 (19%)	104 (41%)	88 (36%)	250

Table 10 indicates that there is a statistically significant difference between the responses participants provided for the last category's questions (Table 10).

Table 10: Inferential Statistics for the Amount of Give and Take of Help between Students and their Family Members and Friends Regarding English Problems

	Value	DF	Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	5	7	.000

In addition to the quantitative results of the study, the researchers took the qualitative data into account as well. This part of the study dealt mostly with shedding light on the potential resources and opportunities which could be made available to Iranian English language learners outside the classroom and of which they may not be necessarily aware. To explore the participants' ideas about the above-mentioned issue, qualitative data, gathered from 40 students during the interview phase, were utilized. Of course, the number of students who participated in the interview section was not decided in advance. That is to say, the interview phase was continued until the saturation point was reached. After the interview with the 40th participant, the data saturation point was reached.

Regarding the qualitative section of the study and the participants' responses, there were some different classifications which could be subsumed under these general categories: social networks, Internet webs, English films and animations, satellite programs, and language learning software. Moreover, it was found out that the most significant resources available to Iranian language learners included various social networks such as Facebook, Whatsapp, Telegram, Instagram, etc., where language learners can join different English channels or groups for practicing and improving their language skills. The following quotations from the participants illustrate the above-mentioned themes. Of course, before quoting the students' sayings, some corrections were made regarding the



structures of the sentences and the language they used.

When I use different web sites on the Internet such as Yahoo, Bing, or Google, I think that I am learning something new from all these websites to enhance my English learning, and even sometimes, I can use them to pass my exams more successfully (Participant No. 3).

I use chatting on the internet and talk to my friends in English. I also chat with some people who are not English native speakers, but they are of great help in some cases regarding the structures and vocabularies they use while chatting with me (participant No. 5).

Another resource which was of considerable importance to these language learners was English films and music. Regarding this resource, one participant commented:

I listen to English songs via my cell phone on my way to school or home that is really helpful to me regarding my listening and speaking skills (Participant No. 19).

To quote another Participant,

I usually watch cartoons animations in English via my smart mobile phone. Since they use simple language, they are more understandable for me (Participant No. 11).

Another important recourse on which Iranian language learners rely is language learning software and channels. Regarding this theme, they said:

I use English language learning software and programs such as Family Album, How Do You Do, Learn to Speak English, and so on, to enhance my proficiency in English, and I think they are really helpful (Participant No. 14).

My teachers at institute and school appreciate my progress in English learning during the last two years. I believe that this would not happen if I did not make use of How Do You Do DVDs at home and language learning channels in Telegram and Instagram (Participant No. 23).

Actually, the participants' responses in interview section shed light on some new resources and opportunities for language learning which were not somehow indicated in the questionnaire items. That is to say, the interview section had a complementary role and provided deeper insight into the resources and opportunities for English language learning in a foreign context.

4.2 Discussion

In the current study, the research questions dealt with the type of resources Iranian English language learners employ in their specific EFL context. Moreover, an attempt was made to elaborate on the

potential opportunities for language learning of which majority of the learners are not aware.

After conducting the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study, the results indicated that almost all of the participants spend majority of their time with their family members who are not fully familiar with English and may not have academic education. Actually, this fact was extracted from participants' responses to the questionnaire items. Therefore, it is inferred that the group of individuals with whom the language learners spend most of their time are not knowledgeable enough in order to be able to assist them with English language problems. Regarding the same issue, Borgatti and Cross (2003) reported that parents and younger siblings, due to the lack of English knowledge, are expected to be a limited source of help with English in an EFL setting.

In a study conducted in UAE social environment, Palfreyman (2006) found out that since English use outside home takes place mainly in public contexts where English is widely prevalent, speaking skill (49% 'every day') and listening skill (42%) are practiced considerably more than reading (31%) and writing skills (22%). However, in the current study carried out in the Iranian context, known as a foreign language learning context, it was indicated that in each day, participants engage in the least amount of practice in speaking (4%), listening (4%), reading (6%), and writing (4%) outside home or the language institute. In addition, more than 68% of the participants claimed that materials and opportunities such as monolingual English dictionaries, reading stories, magazines, and newspapers, chatting on the Internet, using Web Pages are 'useful' or 'very useful' items for language learning practice. Furthermore, nearly 82% of the participants mentioned that for the purpose of language learning skills, watching English films and animations are considered as 'useful' or 'very useful' resources; however, traditional resources such as grammar textbooks were rated as "less useful" among other language learning resources.

Similarly, Kazemi and Izadi (2013) conducted a study focusing on the social context and available resources for English-language learners in Iran. The participants of that study were a group of intermediate and upper-intermediate language learners studying English in a language learning

institute. Results of that research revealed that in majority of the cases, those language learners had very limited access to language learning resources in such an EFL context.

However, in the current study, a group of advanced and high level language learners took part and answered the items of the questionnaire and the results obtained from the questionnaire were to some extent similar to those found in Kazemi and Izadi's study (2013). However, the main point of difference between the two studies lies in the qualitative section of the present research. In this phase of the study, participants stated some new resources which have been growing drastically during the last four years, thanks to advances in technology. Most of the respondents participating in the interview section mentioned that they spend four to six hours a day searching information on the Internet through their smart mobile phones. Since these language learners are using various social networks including Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram, Instagram, etc. whose language is mostly English, these Internet users need to get familiar with English language in order to be able to surf the Internet. On the other hand, they join various English learning channels and groups which provide different and interesting programs for those seeking to learn a new language or improve their skills in English. Similarly, Tomlison (2009) informs that computer-based activities provide language learners rapid information and excellent materials. He also explains that multimedia and all sorts of internet materials encourage learners to learn more, because language learners can find various ways of practicing different skills while surfing the Internet or using high-tech devices.

In a study conducted by Kazemi and Izadi (2013), most of the participants stated that they used English language learning software, animations, some internet websites, and DVD programs as external sources for language learning. However, in the present study, due to the rapid growth of technology and easily available Internet in Iran during the last four years, some other opportunities and resources for language learning have come into vogue and they are added to the previous ones. Therefore, English language learners in this EFL context can have access to these entertaining and educational resources 24 hours a day through their smart mobile phones. In another study conducted by Ilter (2015), it was reported that technology has a positive

effect on children's language awareness when it is used appropriately. Language teachers are aware of this good impact and think that it is the key factor in this unlimited world. It is obvious that technology brings real world in front of the children and language learners. He also concluded that not only does technology teach a new language, but also it assists young learners gaining new cultural items. Therefore, young learners can be more motivated and active via technology and language learning resources which are prevalent in the realm of technology. (Ilter, 2015)

The entertainment and communicative-oriented resources reported as useful in this study mirror Willing's (1988) communicative learning orientation which accounts for the improving and flourishing of the students' communicative and learning abilities. Besides, Palfreyman (2006) also holds the view that his participants in the UAE context rated these entertainment and communicative-oriented resources as the most significant and useful resources and opportunities for learning English in that EFL milieu. Furthermore, the current study's results revealed that only 30% of the students seek help with English learning problems from others at home, while on the other hand, 77% of them provide help to other family members in this regard. Therefore, it can be concluded that a considerable number of the students who participated in the study are more proficient in English than their family members and hence mostly give help to others rather than receive it.

Similarly, in a study conducted by Palfreyman (2006) in UAE context, it was reported that in majority of the cases the participants of the study were providers of the assistance to other family members and friends rather than receivers of the help with English problems. Corresponding to the current study's results, his findings revealed that over 70% of the participants resorted to others at home "sometimes" or "often" for language learning help. On the other hand, more than 20% mentioned that they are mostly help providers than help receivers regarding English language issues. Thus, it can be inferred that as far as learners themselves consider such situations, they are the most prominent figures in their families who know English and assist others in this regard (Kazemi & Izadi 2013; Palfrayman, 2006; Zare-Behtash, Khatin-Zadeh & Banaruee, 2017).



Lazar (2015) claims that making use of digital resources from early ages can encourage children to encounter a world of information, different people, and different cultures; Since access to computers is sometimes limited, many public libraries and school offer the use of these technology resources where teachers and parents can use digital resources with their children. Digital resources also encourage children to learn about the world around them and to become active digital citizens and tolerant of other cultures. The emergence of these technologies into early education has meant that children now have access to information and learning opportunities at any time and in any place (Lazar, 2015)

Therefore, as far as the results of the present study show, it can be inferred that peer group activities and cooperation can be enumerated as a precious source of assistance for English language learning in the Iranian social milieu. This is because in almost majority of the cases, students are willing to resort to their friends and classmates in order to cope with the English language learning problems they face. Regarding this issue, some eminent figures such as Vygotsky (1962), Wertsch(1985), Ellis (1994), Lantolf (2000) mention that group work and cooperative activities can be of considerable significance in various dimensions of leaning during the life span of all learners in general and language learners in particular.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The major objective of the present study was to elaborate on the language learning resources and opportunities employed by Iranian English learners as a well as the potential resources and opportunities of which learners are not completely aware. According to the findings of this study, it can be concluded that resources and opportunities Iranian EFL learners usually draw upon are not very vast and varied, but some improvements have been observed during the recent years. That is to say, language learners in this context mostly employ the resources including English films and animations, English story books or magazines, and some widespread social networks. In addition, their Family members are considered to provide the least amount of help for language learning at home. However, in some rare cases, older siblings were mentioned as limited sources of assistance with English. Furthermore, it was found that there are some potential

resources and opportunities for language learning including Internet messengers, English language learning software and language learning channels and groups in social networks of which majority of the subjects were not completely aware; moreover, in cases of their awareness of these potential resources, they do not use them for the purpose of language learning (for example, they use the Internet for doing some other activities except language learning. They search, chat, or send emails but they use Persian language, while using a language is considered an important way of learning it). Furthermore, it was found that language learners themselves can be relied upon as a great source of assistance for other language learners at home or in the language institute regarding different kinds of language learning activities or practices. Keeping this study's findings in mind, language teachers and instructors in EFL context can provide some interesting homework for the language learners in order to motivate them to make use of these language learning resources, prevalent on the Internet, and improve their language skills. Of course, employing such issues and resources inside the classroom will make the English classes more vivid and joyful for both learners and instructors. For further studies, it is suggested that some specific and widespread language learning resources be chosen to determine which one has the greatest role and impact in language learning and teaching.

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Appendix: Questionnaire

1. How many years have you been studying at Bahar Language Institute (BLI)?
2. What are you studying now?
3. Who are the people in your family?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
4. In your family, who has studied at primary or high school?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
5. Who has studied at university?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
6. Who has lived in another country?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
7. Who has a job?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
8. Who knows English better than you?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
9. How much of your time do you usually spend with the people in your family?
 A lot of time every day a little time every day Once or twice a week
10. How often do you talk to friends on the phone in English?
 Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
11. How often do you meet friends outside the university?
 Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
12. How often do you use MSN Messenger, ICQ or Yahoo Messenger?
 Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
- *** How often do you use English at home? Choose an answer for each activity:
13. Speaking: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
14. Listening: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
15. Reading: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
16. Writing: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
- *** How often do you use English outside home or university (e.g. in shops, Restaurants, offices . . .)? Choose an answer for each activity
17. Speaking: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
18. Listening: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
19. Reading: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
20. Writing: Every day a few times a week once a week rarely
- *** How useful is each of the following for learning English?
21. The Persian-English dictionary in your computer:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
22. A paper English- English dictionary:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
23. A grammar book:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
24. Reading stories, reading magazines or newspapers:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
25. Watching films:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
26. Chatting on the internet, using web pages on the internet, talking to other People in English:
 Very useful Useful a bit useful not useful
27. If you have a problem or question about English when you are *at home*, who do you ask first (e.g. someone in your family, a friend, someone else. . .)?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) Younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s) your friends
28. Who would you ask second?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) Younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s) your friends
29. Who do you *NOT* ask?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) Younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s) your friends
30. How often do other people help you with English at home?
 Often Sometimes Rarely Never
31. Who helps you most?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) Younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s)
32. How often do you help other people (family or friends) with English?
 Often Sometimes Rarely Never
33. Who do you help?
 Father mother older brother(s) older sister(s) Younger brother(s)
 Younger sister(s) your friends or classmates