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## Current challenges in teaching/learning English for EFL learners: The case of junior high school and high school

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### Abstract

In the 20th and 21st centuries, English has become an indispensable part of educational curriculum in Iranian schools. Despite all the efforts and investments devoted to cultivate and popularize English among Iranian language learners, the resultant outcome could not live up to the authorities' expectations.

Generally speaking, the process of teaching and learning English as a foreign language in Iran is not satisfactory. A great body of research has proved that different factors are involved in this process. The researcher made an attempt to examine all the possibly existing researches which investigated/focused on the problems of teaching/learning English in Iran to elicit these factors and to scrutinize the existing problems. It is also an attempt to highlight what can be done to improve the situation significantly. A classification of these factors was suggested and it was indicated that these factors are highly interrelated.

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### 1. Introduction: The State of the Art

Currently, English has dominated the context of foreign language learning and teaching in Iran. English language is considered by many as the international language. Its acquisition can guarantee the availability of opportunities to employment, traveling, higher education, and even better life (Crystal, 1997).

Teaching English as a foreign language is a challenging task in developing countries in general and in our country in particular. English has been included in the curriculum of Iranian schools and universities and considerable attention has been paid to this language in our society for the following reasons: first of all, access to

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and use of the latest technological and scientific resources mainly written in English calls for an efficient amount of English language proficiency. Secondly, coping with the demands of the era of information explosion and the efficient use of the Internet makes learning English as a necessity. Thirdly, mastery of English facilitates cultural exchange among nations including the proposal of the dialog among civilizations. In spite of all these, some studies show that teaching and learning English in Iranian schools has not been able to satisfy the specified goals (see, for example, Bagheri, 1994; Moradi, 1996a; Rahimi, 1996b; Rashidi, 1995; Saadat, 1995; Zanganeh, 1995). Thus, due to the shortcomings of the formal EFL program at schools to fulfill the practical needs of the learners on the one hand, and the need for learning English to satisfy these communicative needs on the other hand, an increasing number of EFL institutes have been developed throughout the country.

Generally speaking, primary school, junior, and senior high school are three levels of schooling in Iran. English as a compulsory course is being taught at junior and senior high school levels. Of course, the private sector has already started introducing English at lower levels such as primary school and kindergarten (Aliakbari, 2005). Teaching English starts at the age of 11, first grade in junior high schools and it continues up to university levels. In spite of studying English for a long period of time in schools (almost 7 years), students are not able to communicate in English in the real contexts. As a result, the authorities and researchers have tried to investigate the reasons why, despite all the money and time spent and efforts taken, Iranian students are not as successful in learning English as they are expected.

Behroozi and Amoozegar (2014)'s paper displays the need to reassess the approaches used to teach English language in Iran. The collected data displayed that Iranian students after nearly seven years of education neither are enabled to speak fluently in English language nor interact with other people because of emphasis on grammatical structure.

Even though various efforts have been taken by the Iranian educationalists for improving the situation of English language teaching for the past few decades in Iran, a disappointing situation still exists in the achievements of English learning among the Iranian students. So, it is really necessary to explore real reasons behind the poor achievements of the students in English. To do so, this study aimed at eliciting and classifying the related factors in this regard. This is achieved by scrutinizing the available studies dealing with the problems of language learning/teaching in Iran. It is also an attempt to highlight what can be done to improve the situation significantly.

### *1.1. Problems on the part of the students*

It is important to identify the problems the Iranian students encounter in the process of learning English. The main obstacle for learning English is that there is no environment that makes them familiar with the original language. In other words, there is no active role for English outside the classroom. So, they do not feel the immediate need to learn English. And the educational system should bring about such need.

The significant role of the English language as the lingua franca of today's world in establishing foreign relations is simply neglected in Iran. Very few learners and /or teachers travel to English speaking countries or have contact with English speakers. A few native English speakers are permitted to teach within Iran. We can see only a 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.

In addition, Iranian people are not allowed to watch or have access to satellite TV, as one of the sources of authentic materials, since the policy makers as well as clergymen in Iran consider their programmes inappropriate and against morality. So, this would be another issue which makes Iran unique in the region or maybe in the world.

This can be explained in a study carried out by Mirzaei Rizi et al. (2014), in which the existing problems of teaching and learning English as a foreign/second language in the secondary schools of Iran and India were identified. The results indicated that Indian students had better access to English audio-visual aids (e.g., listening or watching English TV news or programs), they read English newspapers and magazines more than five times as compared to the Iranians and majority of them find the contents of their English textbooks interesting. It should be noted that publication and circulation of English magazines/journals in India is much higher than in Iran. The extent of speaking English in their English classes was higher than the Iranians. Moreover, poor English knowledge of the Iranian students may further discourage them to read English magazines/journals.

Furthermore, there are a lot of people who look for ways of improving their English, but they do not know how and where to start. In most of the English classes, little attention is paid to the conscious efforts learners make in mastering a foreign language. Many of students do not know, neglect or pay not enough attention to how to deal with the task of learning a foreign language even after years of study; only a few students who have used a set of strategies, have been able to succeed and hence, learn the language. It is a neglected area in our language classes. Teachers should be concerned with helping students to learn how to learn the ways of effective learning of English as a foreign language and to achieve autonomy in their education (Akbari, 2014; Akbari and Tahririan, 2009; Jafari and Kafipour, 2013; Tabatabaei and Hosseini, 2014).

It has been argued that learning how to learn (self-directed learning) would be of utmost importance for language learners for at least three reasons. First, because of the complexity of the task which learning presents, there is never enough time within a formal scheme of instruction to ensure mastery on the part of students, and if the learner has not been prepared within the classroom to take responsibility to learn autonomously outside, it is unlikely that any learning will take place (Carver & Dickinson, 1982; Dickinson & Carver, 1980). The second reason is the belief that engaging students in the process of learning and assessment would encourage their learning efficiency. Studies of the characteristics of good language learners (Naiman, et al. 1978; Stern, 1983) suggest that efficient learners consciously monitor their performances, analyze them, and develop a repertoire of efficient learning strategies. Thirdly, in a self-directed scheme, through reducing the distance between the learner and the teacher, feelings of anxiety, frustration, and alienation decrease, and consequently the learner becomes more receptive to the learning process (Brown, 1973; Schumann, 1975).

Another challenging factor is students' beliefs about the nature of learning English as a subject consisting of a list of words and a set of grammatical rules which are to be memorized and separable skills to be acquired rather than a set of integrated skills and subskills (Oxford, 2001).

Furthermore, the students in English classes do not have common background knowledge because some of them are trained in rural areas in which un-qualified English teachers teach them while other students are taught in urban areas having access to a lot of classroom facilities to gain advantage of. While some of the students take advantage of using satellite programs, VCD and video tapes, and go to private language schools, most of the students just have their textbooks as the only source of learning English. Under such circumstances, there is no placement test to put students into different groups homogeneously based on their language proficiency levels. This makes the situation even much worse for the weak students and they resort to guide books.

As classes are crowded, most of the students do not have enough practice in English and do not overcome language learning problems and are not proficient enough to communicate in the foreign language. 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.

There is no place for group work discussion. To acquire the target language effectively, learners need to engage actively in processing the meanings of whatever they hear and read. Group work in the educational context generally involves a small number of students working together to achieve a task (Amatobi & Amatobi, 2013; Dooly, 2008).

Not all students have the same motivation or purpose for learning English. Some of them look at English just as a course that should be passed and do not understand its importance as a means of communication with which they can adapt themselves to new improvements in technology and other sciences. For most learners, learning English is a duty — something that they have to, but don't want to do. They don't see pleasure in learning English. These students have low motivation to participate in class, and they simply try to get a passing mark to get rid of the course.

Other students attend the classes to learn some special points to be successful in the University Entrance Examination so they pay attention to special parts of the book. To be successful in this kind of examination, only a good grasp of vocabulary, some grammatical points, and reading comprehension are sufficient, so the students pay little attention to speaking, listening and writing skills.

Another demotivating factor is that English is considered as a general subject compared to special subjects such as physics, chemistry, mathematics and biology. In the university entrance exam, the scores for special subjects outweigh those for general ones. So, students spend more time on studying their special subjects than general ones such as Persian, Arabic and English.

### *1.2. Problems on the part of teachers*

The mistake is in educational system itself as the teacher's target is to "prepare" his students for the examination and not to make them skilled in the use of the language they are learning (Subramanian, 1985). Therefore, students try to get the required grade and they have no internal motivation to learn English for other purposes and they move to higher grades with different grades and levels of English knowledge and even inadequate knowledge.

According to Khaniya (1990 as cited in Ghorbani, 2009), "A large number of teachers help students cope with examinations in order to preserve their reputation as good teachers" (p. 51). Teachers' fear and the associated guilt, shame or embarrassment of poor results as a consequence of their students' performance in public examinations might lead teachers to teach English for testing purposes only (Alderson & Wall, 1993). According to Jahangard (2007), teachers in Iran are pressured into shaping their teaching practices based on the demands of nationwide exams (also Hosseini, 2007).

Students, particularly those who have high expectations of themselves, expect their teachers to cover all examinable topics. In Iran, most of the students demand that their English teachers focus on textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education. They may not like the textbook but they know that final exams are based on them. Their learning attitudes, thus, influence the teachers' curricular and instructional knowledge (Ghorbani, 2009; Beattie, 1995).

However, those at Iranian high schools in Japan and Malaysia have a different perspective on textbook use. In these countries, Iranian students are expatriates who need to communicate with people who speak a different language. They also aim to enter English-medium universities in these countries (partly because free university education in Iran is very competitive) so the pressure to use English as often as possible, and in as wide range of contexts as possible, is very real in order to improve their chances of passing their (English) tests. Thus, their expectations of what teachers should do in the classroom are different: the teachers must use communicative materials and provide communicative spaces in the classroom.

Today, unfortunately most of teachers do not attach equal importance to four language skills and speaking skill is the most neglected aspect of the four skills in foreign language instruction. Iranian syllabus designers and English teachers more focus on reading skill, almost, they use reading text books in their classroom, that is why the Iranian learners learn English language through reading skill and reading is priority skill among the four skills for the Iranian learners in EFL setting (Birjandi et al., 2006).

### *1.3. Problems on the part of textbooks*

Language textbooks seem to play a pivotal role in educational system of every country. In Iranian schools, ELT textbooks are used widely and serve as syllabus and main guideline for teachers. The textbooks taught are designed and prepared by the Ministry of Education. Based on the textbook content, the students are evaluated formatively and summatively. A big problem in language teaching which our students encounter is that the tasks included in their textbooks do not give them enough practice in the skills they will need. In short, the textbooks somehow lack the variety of communication tasks which can motivate and give learners a purpose for doing them. According to Jahangard (2007), students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks.

Many researchers (Chastain, 1988; McGrath, 2002) strongly support the idea of teaching the culture of a foreign language that is taught. However, the textbooks in Iran do not include anything about the culture of English speaking countries. Such a problem, not including the foreign language culture, is much likely to happen in Iran where the native culture is completely different from the target one (Dahmardeh, 2009).

Course books should constitute an effective resource for self-directed learning and for presentation of material, a source of ideas and activities, a reference source for students, a syllabus where they reflect pre-determined learning objectives, and support for less experienced teachers who may be lacking in confidence (Cunningsworth, 1995 as cited in Tsiplakides, 2011).

Ahmadpoor (2004 as cited in Maleki, Mollaei, & Khosravi; 2014) declares the inadequacy of high school English textbooks in his work as follows:

- 1- The use of unattractive, boring, outdated and incoherent texts in the book.
- 2- Incorrect, inappropriate and unattractive pictures of the book.

- 3- The lack of cohesion and proper relevance among the lessons and the texts of subsequent books.
- 4- The lack of coordination between the size of contents and the time dedicated for them.
- 5- Unattractiveness of grammar points and the shortage of variable activities.
- 6- Containing nonstandard questions.
- 7- Lack of logical manner and order of difficulty in presenting grammar points.
- 8- Lack of transparency in the general purpose of the book.

#### *1.4. Problems on the part of teaching methods*

Although grammar translation method is the usual method for teaching in Iran, it should give opportunities to students to drawing themselves forward the language creatively by practicing some substitution drills to dialogue with their partner thus, it will be the basic eager for communication thus, grammar translation method will be interesting method to them and they will attempt to understand the structures and formulas instead of memorization which it is one of their problems in making good sentences to converse (Dolati & Seliman, 2011).

Grammar translation method with strong emphasis on form-focused and translation activities is still pervasively used in Iranian English language teaching and learning context (Eslami, 2010). It is found that Iranian English language learners find extensive use of translation activities as a shortcoming of language education system in Iran (Babai Shishavan & Melbourne, 2010).

It seems that the objectives of the course are improving reading comprehension, listening comprehension, speaking and writing. Reviewing the content of the high school books shows that these skills are given different weights and reading comprehension and writing are more emphasized. Although different tasks are given to help students to achieve the aforementioned goals, they fail to develop the skills interdependently. The major problem arises when most teachers do not use appropriate techniques to guide students use the activities included in their textbooks to achieve the desired goals.

In addition despite its initial claim to be appropriate an approach for EFL situation, communicative language teaching seems to be more suitable for ESL situations. To indicate this fact, Edge (1996:18) points out that it seems necessary that rather than relying on expertise, methodology, and materials controlled and dispensed by Western ESL countries, EFL countries should strive to develop language teaching methods that take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural factors and most important of all, the EFL situations in their countries.

#### *1.5. Problems on the part of language assessment or evaluation*

School authorities and parents in Iran believe that good schools are schools that generate high grades on standardized tests. Since teachers are aware that their students' outcome is an indicator of the quality of their work, accountability purposes of assessment might dominate teachers' assessment beliefs.

Although teachers are encouraged to use formative assessment during the school year, they seldom utilize this assessment type. Also, no documented research has been conducted on the psychometric properties of standardized tests administered (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009 as cited in Saad, Sardare, & Ambarwati; 2013).

Even though, because of the popularity of discrete point tests and summative testing of students' learning, teachers still focus on summative assessment and do not have enough knowledge and skill to implement the new assessment system. That is to say, the focus is still on students' performance on exams rather than their performance in real life situation. Therefore, the washback effect of testing might hinder the adaptation of instruction to support students' learning (Safarnavadeh, 2004 as cited in Saad et al., 2013).

Another major finding was that teachers do not use different testing methods, and this can be regarded as a pitfall in EFL programs.

### *1.6. Problems on the part of the curriculum*

From the age of seven, pupils attend primary school. In the primary school, students study a variety of subjects including Persian Language, elementary science, and elementary social sciences. Excluding some private institutes, English is not taught in Iranian primary schools. After five years, students proceed to junior high school for three years. English is one of the key subjects taught for three hours a week at this level. Dialogs, pattern practice and words are the major components of the textbooks designed for this level.

After junior high school, students proceed to high school for another three years and study English for two hours per week. Reading comprehension is the major part of the textbooks at this level (Birjandi, Soheili, Nowroozi, & Mahmoodi, 2000; Birjandi, Nowroozi, & Mahmoodi, 2002a, 2002b).

After high school, students start the pre-university level for one year, based on a credit-semester system in which English is taught four hours a week. The pre-university English textbook has been developed on the basis of the Reading Method. On the whole, the adoption of such a methodology, though not specifically in line with the recent practices of teaching methods throughout the world, seems to be fairly successful in serving the purpose of foreign language teaching in Iran. English is taught as an obligatory subject in grade one of junior high school and onward (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006).

The teachers are expected to teach a specific curriculum, a body of knowledge and skills which their students would not normally encounter in their out-of-school lives. There is not a series of highly interrelated and progressive step by step process of language learning and teaching which are connected like a chain; starting from elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate moving to advanced levels. These stages are not clearly and exactly defined.

Although the authorities and curriculum developers are attempting to incorporate a communicative syllabus at public schools, what is commonly delivered to students is at best a traditional course where the focus is primarily on reading comprehension (Razmjoo & Riazi 2006) and the sub-skills of grammar and vocabulary (both of which are instrumental for the development of reading skill). Despite failing to foster oral communication skills in learners, such reading-oriented programs may be justifiable in EFL contexts where most learners will use the language they learn for furthering their subject areas at university rather than for face to face interactions with speakers of the same language.

Ghorbani (2009) states that before the 1990s, English education focused on reading skills in order to help students read and translate materials written in English. Consequently, high school English teachers essentially used grammar translation to meet the expectations of the national curriculum.

### *1.7. Political problems*

English language teaching in Iran has passed through ups and downs and has experienced extreme courses. On one hand, English as a school subject is seen as representing and introducing western culture to the Iranian students. On the other hand, there are voices postulating that English as it is presently taught in Iran is nothing but a representation of the Persian or Islamic ideology.

According to Navidinia et al. (2009 as cited in Mojtahedzadeh & Mojtahedzadeh, 2012), Iran has always been a country with one official language called Persian. We are proud that we have never been colonized. Another reason for having been a country with one language is the concept of national stability. English can, therefore, be at most the first foreign language that students must study in schools and universities. Hence, Iran's level of English proficiency is low in comparison with many countries in Asia (e.g. Malaysia, Philippines, and Singapore).

Students do not use English as a medium for daily communication; the educational system is traditional and teachers and learners hold beliefs and attitudes that sometimes hinder new approaches.

## 2. Conclusion

One of the major problems of language learning in Iran is that most of our students do not have the capacity to express themselves in the foreign language fluently after studying English at junior and high school for seven years. In other words, they cannot communicate in English. The researcher tried to examine the reasons behind the failures of the Iranian students to acquire the expected level of proficiency in English in spite of learning English for seven successive years (from the first year of junior to last year of secondary school).

English teaching–learning pathology will detect the pitfalls, the weaknesses, and the unhealthy conditions of teaching and learning English. The problems fall into seven categories which constitute five important components of any education system (students, teachers, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation) and two other subcomponents (curriculum and policy) which are closely interrelated.

Knowing about the students' needs is one critical matter for the teachers to teach and authors to write school books. Most of students in Iran tend to participate in communicative activities type to learn English. Some students tend to have more opportunities to participate in free conversation classes, expressing their wish towards a more communicatively oriented approach. On the other hand, there are those who prefer more emphasis on grammar teaching and learning (Bada and Okan, 2000). Thus, the syllabuses should be observed based on all students' requirements and interests.

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