



EFL Teachers' Evaluations and Expectations about English Language Courses in Iranian Universities

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is to explore EFL teachers' evaluations and expectations about English language courses as EFL in Iran. In other words, this article aims at creating a new avenue for effective EFL teaching curriculum and syllabus in the Iranian context. Iranian universities offer basic, general, and specific English courses as a part of their program, which are not being very effective. These courses do not promote the students in dealing with their disciplines or programs oriented courses. Even after completion of these courses in three or more semesters, students fail to grasp comprehensive control over the reading materials of their field. This is a common scenario in almost all the universities in Iran. The authors of this paper ventured to study the predicament of EFL courses in some universities. The data were collected through questionnaires from a total of 40 EFL teachers at 8 universities. The research results revealed that the existing English Course syllabus is not tailored appropriately to the needs of the students. It, therefore, suggests that university English courses should be redesigned in assimilating the learners' need, and course contents should cover the socio-cultural factors of the learners.

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Introduction

English is not a second language in Iran. Iran is an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) country. Here language is treated as a subject for study rather than as a living language to be spoken in daily conversations. Therefore, the EFL learning context is very different from a natural ESL learning environment. On this backdrop, this study investigates the reasons for tardy English learning progress and outlines to modify the contents of English syllabus, classroom techniques and teaching methodology.

TEFL in the Iranian Context

Deciding on a language to be taught as a foreign language in a country is not a matter of pure academic choice but a matter of government policy often motivated by political, social, economic, and educational factors. (MahboubiArdekani, 1975). After World War II, English began to spread around the world and was taught in most countries as either the sole foreign language or as one of the foreign languages. During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), close political, social, economic, and military relationship between Iran and the US speeded up the westernization in the country that had started some years back with the Qajar Dynasty (Riazi, 1995). Teaching English became a social need and private language schools mushroomed in the capital and many large cities. It should be mentioned that, despite the fact that in some countries such as Japan, English was promoted to a high status of the vehicle of internationalization (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2008), it was kept as a vehicle to educational advancement in Iran. Knowledge of English became an essential requirement for many job opportunities for the younger generation.

Furthermore, while most countries around the world have already responded to the issues of globalization, internationalization, and competition among multinationals by endorsing bilingual and multilingual educational systems, Iran has not been willing to move in this direction in order to keep

national unity and identity among the young school generation. (Khubchandani, 2008).

Teaching English at Universities

Usually, there are basic and general English courses (2-unit & 3-unit respectively) for all university students regardless of their major. Beyond this general requirement, depending on the needs of the students, students might take up to 4/6 units of ESP courses.

The way English is taught at the universities is often translation oriented because the main objective is to enable students in different majors to read and understand materials written in English in their own majors (Farhady, et al 2010).

The instructional materials for English courses at the universities are prepared by an organization called "Center for research and development of textbooks for university students" was established in 1981. One section of this organization is assigned to develop English textbooks for non-English majors. The content of these books is progressively closer to the original materials that students will face in studying the original materials in their major fields of study. After three decades of efforts in designing and redesigning the EFL policy in the country, some problems with the teaching of English at universities still persist (Farhady et al. 2010).

Review of literature

Globally, in the area of EFL teaching-learning development, researchers have attempted to provide available insight into the matter.

In Iranian context, Farhady (2010), in his article, reflects upon foreign language education in Iran. According to him, all variable involved in language education should be taken into account within the context of particular educational community. He mentions Iran has not been well presented regarding its educational system in general and its foreign language education in particular and the strength and weaknesses of the Iranian educational system requires an in-depth analysis.

Dashtestani(2014), conducted a research to explore Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' perceptions on the implementation of online EFL instruction. A mixed-methods design, including semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, was employed. Results suggest that although the Iranian EFL teachers adopted moderately positive attitudes towards the implementation of online instruction, the majority of them preferred blended instruction to online instruction. The findings would provide valuable insights for educational authorities and course designers to integrate online instruction into the EFL curriculum.

Chen 2010; Zhang & Li 2010; Liu 2004; Dong &Gui 2002;In Chinese context, believe that educational system in china is test-oriented system, therefore the goals of English teaching is not for improving students' English language proficiency, but mainly for helping students passing various English examinations.

Lin (2013) conducted an exploratory study to explore relationships between teachers' attitudes and beliefs and their professional knowledge as well as their connections to views on a TEFL professional development program. The study showed that EFL teachers demonstrate an eminent form-focused inclination in their beliefs and professional knowledge, which was translated into a strong desire for new teaching methods to be introduced in a professional development program.

Christina Ng and Eunice Tang (2011), in their article 'Teachers' Needs in the Process of EFL reform in China'made a report that teachers need to be exposed to a wide range of methodologies to enable them to maintain a certain degree of flexibility in teaching. They should be aware of the individual differences among students in the learning process (Ng & Tang: A Report from Shanghai).

Sripathum Noon-ura (2008), suggested that "In an EFL situation, time allocation for English learning may need reconsidering if students are expected to reach a high level of proficiency.

Prof. Reima Al-Jarf conducted a study particularly related to TEFL in Saudi context in developing EFL freshmen students' spelling problems. The study diagnosed that 63% of the spelling errors were phonological, and 37% were orthographic. It also suggested that spelling instruction should include phonemic segmentation practice; patterns of sound-to-letter correspondences and words can bevisualized in terms of syllables and non-phonetically spelled words.

AL-Nofaile examined the attitudes of Saudi teachers and students towards employing Arabic as a facilitating tool in English classes, a topic which gained positive response (Al-Nofaile, 2010, pp. 64-95).

Al-Mekhlafi and Nagaratnam in their article have pointed out that "EFL Curriculum and material developers should show an understanding oflearners' and teachers' difficulties, and provide sufficient guidance and help in the curriculum document. Educators should consider students' attitudes and perceptions when making decisions about how to teach grammar" (Al-Mekhlafi&Nagaratnam, 2011, pp. 69-92).

Omar Atari in his article 'EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Writing Quality and Holistic Evaluations' found that "There is a discrepancy between the teachers' perceptions of the mechanics and their actual evaluation...These teachers do not pay attention to coherence in their actual holistic evaluation nor do they think of coherence as significant...Some cohesion categories are perceived as significant, namely sentence structure. It is recommended, therefore, that workshops on cohesion and

coherence be conducted for EFL teachers" (Atari, A.H. 1418/1998, pp. 49-59).

According to Malla, 1997;Davies t al. 1971;Shrestha, 2008; Bista, 2011; the problem of ELT in English syllabi, textbooks, policy matters, classroom environment are major components to change in Nepal.

Researchers (Anderson&Lindkvis, 2000) have found that country needed well-trained teachers, improved textbooks, enough supplementary materials, and better evaluation system. Bacon and Finneman add that "the texts should be culturally relevant to the experience of the students" in EFL context (Bacon, S. &Finneman, M., 1990, pp. 459-473).

In this vein, Lee states that "a careful and wise selection of materials focused on learners is a must if we want a positive response from them" (Lee, 1995, pp. 323-328)

Ostensibly, this aspect of the related literature review reinforces the importance and value of the present study.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study are university level EFL teachers who have high profile language teaching experience ranging from 2 to 15 years. The participants were chosen on random basis. A total of 40 teachers took part in this study. We performed this research in 8 universities of Iran. It is expected that the finding of this research will help identify problems and the pathways of designing proper contents for English language course syllabi.

Instruments

The device of data collection for this study encompasses a two-page written research questionnaire. There were multiple choice questions as well as questions asking for short suggestions. The questionnaire quests for teachers' perceptions, evaluations, beliefs, attitudes, and suggestions about English language courses as EFL in Iran. Moreover, the questions are set to receive information about EFL teachers' teaching level and experience to diagnose the setbacks of language courses, and to gain their self-reported opinions, feelings, experiences, and expectations.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively in order, "to stress the unique strengths of the genre for research that is exploratory or descriptive" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 60). The collected data of questionnaire were sorted out, and the percentage of teachers offeringthe same answer was computed. Throughout the data analysis process, as Creswell mentions, patterns were described and explained from the perspective of participants (Creswell, 2003).

The first two questions of the questionnaire tries to receive information about EFL teachers' teaching level and experience to diagnose the problems of language courses, and to gain their self-reported opinions, feelings, experiences, and expectations. Tables are drawn below to sum up the frequency of responses to the rest questions.

Table 1, question 3: Do you think Iranian EFL class should be task-based language teaching (TBLT)practice?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
yes	34	85%
No	6	15%
I don't know	0	0

In third question, 85% of the respondents answered yes, while 15% of them answered no. Many teachers have a desire in sing TBLT as a teaching technique, in their classes, chiefly because they believe task-based learning has specific benefits for increasing learner's communication skills and interaction.

Table 2, question 4: If they are not, please tell the reason(s).

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Materials in the book are not appropriate for using TBLT	17	42%
Difficulty in assessing learners' task-based performance in the classroom	4	10%
Large class size is a bar for this practice	19	47%
Other (Specify)	0	0

In question 4, for clarifying the Iranian classroom context, most teachers selected the third choice. In fact, according to them, there may be existed TBLT based materials in the book but it is not possible to materialize because of large class size. Many of the other teachers believed that the materials in the books are not design appropriately for TBLT.

Table 3, question 5: What type of English courses is offered in your university?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Structured	3	7%
Focusing on the reading and writing skills	9	22%
Focusing on the speaking and listening skills	0	0
Both a & b	28	70%

In answer to this question, 70% of the respondents chose the fourth choice and no one chose the third choice which focuses on speaking and listening skills. It shows that, for teaching English, reading and writing have been considered more important than speaking and listening by the policy in Iran. Therefore most of the materials focus on these two skills more.

Table 4, question 6: Do you feel that the English courses offered are properly designed in keeping with the needs of the students?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
yes	9	22%
No	31	77%

In responses to this question, only 9 teachers believed in appropriateness of courses offered. The responses of the most of the teachers reflect inappropriateness of the English courses offered in universities. In answering the question 13, they suggest redesigning the English courses in order to meet the students' needs and standards.

Table 5, question 7: To what extent do you think the contents of existing foundation *English Syllabus* to be appropriate for the higher studies concerned?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Completely	7	17%
To some extent	30	75%
Not at all	3	7%
Did not answer	0	0

The selection of the second choice by the large number of the teachers shows that the contents of English syllabus are not completely appropriate for higher studies of different field. Of course 17% teachers agreed with complete suitability of the course syllabus. It emphasizes on this point that any curriculum needs to be checked carefully and adequately before it can be used as a course text.

Table 6, question 8: What is the learners' reaction regarding the course(s) you are teaching here?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Interested	0	0
Bored	16	40%
Do not like	24	60%

The responses of teachers to this question reflect their evaluations, observations and perceptions about their learners. Unfortunately, no teachers chose the first choice. According to the teachers, most of the students do not like existing English courses and many of them feel bored. However, there may be

some interested students in any class, but it should be kept in mind that the teachers' comments reflect their attitudes and perceptions about the majority of the students not just some of them. Of course, this subject does not justify the high percent of uninterested students. This issue should be examined separately and in another study.

Table 7, question 9: What is your outlook on the use of English as a medium of instruction?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
I support it fully	19	47%
English and Persian should be combined in the classroom	21	52%
Persian should be gradually phased out	0	0

The second choice was chosen by more teachers in comparison with the first one. In fact they support the use of English as a medium of instruction and their awareness of EFL teaching-learning norms. EFL classroom context is very different from a ESL learning environment. In EFL situations, students do not have enough exposure to language. Rather it is exercised in limited form in an academic settings. The lack of surrounding community for acquiring foreign language (English) outside the classroom increases the need of being exposed to the English language by the students.

Table 8, question 10: Do you think students need more English credit courses?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Yes	31	77%
No	9	22%

Selection of the first choice by the large portion of the teachers reflect their agreements regarding offering more English credit courses in order to elevate the students' proficiency level and to help students to run their respective field of study in English medium.

Table 9, question 11: What should be the focus of English Courses?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Grammar	0	0
Reading	3	7%
Writing	0	0
Vocabulary	18	45%
Listening	5	12%
Speaking	14	35%

The selection of the vocabulary by a large portion of the teachers reveals that teachers think vocabulary is central to English language teaching because without sufficient vocabulary students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Wilkins (1972) wrote that ". . . while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary *nothing* can be conveyed"(pp. 111–112). Lewis (1993) went further to argue, "lexis is the core or heart of language" (p. 89). Schmitt (2010) noted "learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books" (p. 4). Teaching vocabulary helps students understand and communicate better.

35% Of teachers chose speaking in fact they emphasis on enabling students to use language. Learners must have capacity to put words together in a meaningful way to reflect thoughts, opinions, and feelings. The four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all interconnected. Proficiency in each skill is necessary to become a well-rounded communicator, but the ability to speak skillfully provides the speaker with several distinct advantages. The recent research has shown the importance of the link between spoken language, learning and cognitive development (Wegerif& Dawes, 1999; Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif&Sams, 2004).

Table 10, question 12. Do you think that students must learn basic language skills in their high schools?

Choices	Answers	Percentage
Yes	40	100%
No	0	0

This question was designed to know whether students must learn basic language skills in their high schools and before coming to the university. All of the teachers answered yes.

13. Do you have any suggestions about English courses?

In question 13, the teachers are asked to give their suggestion about English courses if they have any. All of them offered suggestion and we collected their suggestions and tried to extract any pattern. All suggestions have been categorized in order to be examined better.

1. English syllabus should be redesigned in keeping with the learners' need.
2. More importance should be placed on speaking and listening skills.
3. Courses should be interesting.
4. Course contents should cover socio-cultural factors of the learners.

This paper reveals that many teachers suggest that English syllabus should be redesigned in keeping with the learners' need. And many participant believed that more importance should be placed on speaking and listening skills. The third suggestion can be a solution to the high percentage of uninterested students in English language courses. In addition, the majority of the teachers talked about the need for more integrated courses focusing the socio cultural factors of the learners, which aver the lack of proper course design, and planning.

Conclusion

This paper reveals certain implications and recommendations emerging from the survey results and analyses. Firstly, Foundation English syllabus should be redesigned in keeping with the learners' needs and stressing on vocabulary, speaking and listening skills. Secondly, Course contents should also cover the socio-cultural factors of the learners, i.e., Iranian socio-cultural milieu. Thirdly, as the majority of the teacher answered positively, teacher-centered EFL classes need to be replaced by the task-based language teaching (TBLT) practices as a teaching technique. Fourthly, preuniversity courses should be redesigned and imparting the basic language skills as though the students can keep pace in their subsequent academic stages. Fifthly, more integrated EFL courses should be facilitated focusing the skills (Listening & Speaking) used in the workplaces. Finally, English should be used as a medium of instruction at the university level. Only after all these modifications, we can expect the Foundation English courses to be effective and students to be benefited.

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