



# Representation of Critical Thinking Features in General English Course Books Designed by Native and Non-native

Maryam Azizi and Reza Biria

Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, Isfahan, Iran.

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 1 June 2014;

Received in revised form:

25 July 2014;

Accepted: 6 August 2014;

#### Keywords

Comparison,  
General English Course Book,  
Critical Thinking.

### ABSTRACT

The present study aimed at providing a comparison of General English Course Books used at universities in Iran which are designed by different authors (Iranian and foreigner) from critical thinking perspective. To this end, a retrospective evaluation was designed to examine the reading comprehension questions of 2 selected General English Course Books in terms of the degree to which they foster critical thinking. To accomplish the objectives of the study, firstly one of the top universities of Iran (Isfahan University) was selected; next 2 of the most frequent General English Course Books which were taught in the university were chosen, one of the books with foreign author and designer and another one with Iranian author and designer. Then, reading comprehension questions of all units of the CBs were analyzed based on Facione's (2011) critical thinking model (consisting of 6 features); then, the data were analyzed and occurrence percentage of each feature was calculated in each CB. The results revealed the representation of critical thinking features of Facion's (2011) model and the extent to which the Course Books matched the criteria in fostering critical thinking. The findings of the study seem to suggest that Iranian university students could not be expected to become critical thinkers through the study of such course books. And also the results show the difference between CBs with foreign and Iranian designers in the representation of critical thinking.

© 2014 Elixir All rights reserved

### Introduction

Since the end of 1970s, there has been a change of focus from teachers to the learners. In line with this importance, a great need was felt to design all instructional materials in a way to elevate the students' thoughts. As Sheldon (1988, p.245) mentioned, —learners are not taught in a vacuum, but come from somewhere and are proceeding towards specific educational goals and future training|. In order to achieve such goals, educational materials, particularly course books, should be evaluated because course books (CB) are the fundamental materials in the learning process. According to Hutchinson and Torres (1994), the course book has a vital and positive role to play in teaching and the learning process. Litz (2005) holds that whether one believes course books are too inflexible and biased to be used directly as instructional materials, there can be no denial that they are still the most valuable element in educational systems. In addition course book evaluation is of great importance to clarify the nature of teaching sources. Evaluation is significant because it (a) reveals the strengths and weaknesses of the CB, (b) determines how well the CB meets the standards of a good course book, and (c) provides guidance and feedback for CB revisions.

Sheldon (1988) believed course books are the visible heart of any ELT program for both teachers and students; however, as a matter of fact course books suffer from some shortcomings. Litz (2005) stated that one of the reasons for having undesired and unsatisfied ELT course books is the fact that they are often regarded as the —tainted and product of an author's or a publisher's design for quick profit (Sheldon, 1988, p.239), so such books present disjointed materials.

Moreover, to Nation and Macalisten (2010), a course book evaluation searches for strengths and weaknesses but actually

the weaknesses cause problem. Consequently, we should apply appropriate criteria to evaluate course books to identify their strengths and weaknesses and promote the merits and eliminate demerits.

According to McGrath (2002), there are three different types of evaluation: *pre-use*, *in-use*, and *post-use* evaluation. Depending on the target settings and the purpose, each of these types might be carried out by researchers. Post-use (retrospective) evaluation is the crucial type in the successful course book evaluation process. This kind of evaluation is carried out when a course book is used in a program and therefore it can be called end-of-program evaluation. This evaluation aims at determining the effectiveness of a textbook in order to establish if it needs to be substituted, supplemented and adapted, or retained without any specific change (McGrath, 2002).

The essential issues for instructional material are the level of quality and appropriateness of the content of the course books. Allwright (1990) argued that materials should teach students to learn. Besides, he emphasized that materials control learning and teaching. In Iranian educational system, students rely heavily on course books and learn materials in a way that the CBs present them; therefore, the content of CBs is an outbalance of anything else. Also in the most university programs in Iran CBs are viewed as a reliable resource for teaching & learning. Therefore such vital materials must train critical thinker students. Those who make good decisions and improve their own future are successful in education and are not dependent on the textbook. Therefore, the course book must help to sharpen the students' critical thinking skills. Critical thinking seems to be one of the noticeable issues in education and its skills figure prominently among the goals for education.

Tele:

E-mail addresses: [Azizi.maryam64@gmail.com](mailto:Azizi.maryam64@gmail.com)

Recent trends in the educational domain emphasize that the critical thinking skills are necessary for academic success and for life. Learners are expected to question the validity of ideas in texts or judge the ideas of other people. Also, they are supposed to find logical flaws instead of accepting them as they are. Learning demands critical thinking. Students who are both willing and able to correctly interpret information, analyze problems, see the consequences of the things they are learning, critique new ideas and evaluate assumptions are strong learners.

This study provides a retrospective evaluation of two General English Course Books (GECBs) written and designed by different designers (Iranian and foreigner) which are used in Iranian universities. GECBs like any other course books play a variety of roles in particular program. The aims of teaching General English (GE) as a whole is to develop students' ability to use English accurately, appropriately, effectively and fluently for communication in various situations and to develop students' ability to read and understand texts in English on different subjects and topics with minimal help from teachers, but as it is clear, in Iranian universities this course is prerequisite for technical courses. Actually the purpose behind such courses is just preparing students for their technical courses, so according to this aim, the emphasis of this course and its books is on the reading skills. Different texts followed by some reading comprehension questions and exercises to examine to what extent students comprehend the text, therefore such questions have a fundamental role in stimulating students' thought.

Thinking is not driven by answers but by questions. Furthermore, every field stays alive only to the extent that fresh questions are generated and taken seriously as the driving force in a process of thinking. To think through or rethink anything, one must ask questions that stimulate our thought. Answers often signal a stop in thought especially those which can be found easily in a text, if an answer generates a further question or needs to some extent evaluation, interpretation and so on, it activates thought; it leads to thinking and learning.

This study intended to investigate the extent to which certain designed questions have been prepared based on critical thinking model and to evaluate whether the textbook foster critical thinking or not. For this purpose, the content of a general English coursebook used at Iranian universities will be analyzed based on Facione's (2011) critical thinking model. Based on the results, the defects of coursebook will be discussed and some suggestions will be offered to improve these materials. Besides, due to the earlier mentioned caveats in disregarding a crucial position for critical thinking in the existing checklists, it seems that the present study would be helpful in opening a new horizon in the area of material evaluation. Hence, in the assessment process of comprehension questions in university English coursebooks, answers to the following research questions have been sought:

- 1) To what extent are features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model represented in the general English course books designed by Iranian author?
- 2) To what extent are features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model represented in the general English course books designed by foreign author?

#### **Review Of Literature**

As a cognitive skill, most teachers believe in the importance of critical thinking for the students. The cognitive skills of synthesis, evaluation, inference and monitoring employed in the complex process of reading (Grabe, 1991, as cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001) are those cognitive skills that Facione (2011) considers as being at the very core of critical thinking. It means

that both critical thinking and reading have some cognitive abilities in common. In Iranian educational system, most of the students have not developed critical thinking skills while such skills will not develop by themselves and demand teaching. Yet, teaching critical thinking skills is a difficult and time consuming task. Students must learn to think critically and become self-confident as well as open-minded to achieve greater success in their work and get better positions in their education.

In relation to this field, a large number of studies have been done around the world, evaluating textbooks from various perspectives and some studies concerning critical thinking in reading in EFL contexts. These researches are divided into two categories of theoretical and practical. This section deals with some of these researches carried out in the context of Iran and in other countries all over the world.

Concerning the Iranian attempts, Yarmohammadi (2002) evaluated the senior high school textbooks in terms of Tucker's revised model. He concluded his study by mentioning some shortcomings such as, lack of authenticity, using English and Persian names interchangeably and ignorance of oral skills.

Rahimy (2007) evaluated a reading comprehension textbook for the university students entitling *Reading Comprehension for the University Students*, in Iran. Several schemes and checklists (e.g. Ansary and Babaii, 2002; Garinger, 2002; Harmer, 1998) were used which included features of content, layout, additional materials, unit grading, reading comprehension skills, etc.

Mirzaie (2008) studied the relationship between critical thinking and lexical inferencing of Iranian EFL learners. The scores showed that those who gained higher in critical thinking outperformed those with lower scores.

Pishghadam and Motkef (2008) analyzed two texts (taken from New Interchange series and high school English books). Their study was conducted with aim of making a connection between CDA, Critical Discourse Analysis, critical thinking, and ZPD, Zone of Proximal Development. The result of their study focusing on reading texts exhibited that most of the texts are laden with hidden ideologies and power relations and teachers are responsible to make students aware of these hidden ideas.

Azizifar, Koosha & Lotfi (2010) carried out an evaluation of two series of ELT textbooks used for teaching English language in Iranian high schools from 1965 to the present. In this course of study, Tucker's (1975) textbook evaluation model was used. The results suggested that ELT textbooks were one of the fundamental factors in the learners' English language achievement.

Karamouzian (2010) analyzed the content of a reading comprehension series entitled *Reading through Interaction* used at the university level in Iran. A newly developed checklist was applied. Results of the study indicated that the overall quality of the three books was convenient, but there was a lack of materials on grammar and pronunciation.

In another study, Kamili and Fahim (2011, pp. 104-111) investigated the relationships between critical thinking ability, resilience- a measure of successful stress-coping ability- and reading comprehension of texts containing unknown vocabulary items. The results indicated that "EFL learners' critical thinking levels have significant effects on their resilience levels. The study also revealed that "learners' critical thinking levels have significant effects on their reading comprehension ability when faced with unknown vocabulary items."

In addition to the above native studies, a number of similar studies in different contexts were conducted as well.

Tomlinson et al (2001) used a list of 133 course evaluation criteria to evaluate eight current adult courses published in the UK. The textbooks evaluated were *Language in Use* and *True to Life* by Cambridge University Press, *Cutting Edge* and *Wavelength* by Pearson Longman, *Inside Out* and *Reward* by Macmillan Heinemann Press. His checklist had two main parts of overall criteria and coursebook specific criteria.

McGrath (2002) reviewed a number of employed checklists and criteria in evaluating materials. He distinguished three main stages in evaluation as pre-use, in-use, and post-use evaluation. He also suggested some criteria for choosing a suitable method of evaluation.

Litz (2005) carried out a complex evaluation process of a textbook (English Firstrand 2) used in Sung Kyun Kwan University in Suwon, South Korea. The purpose of the study was to determine the overall pedagogical value and suitability of the book towards the specific language program.

Thein (2006) evaluated the effectiveness of the textbooks used for teaching English to religious studies students at Myanmar Institute of Technology. The study investigated the extent to which teachers' and learners' expectations matched the objectives of the program in developing the students' communicative skills and critical thinking.

Yujong (2011) examined an effort to support critical literacy in English as a foreign language (EFL) setting by analyzing one college EFL reading classroom in which students read and responded to articles from "The New Yorker". Results show that when taught to be critical readers of the text, these EFL participants were able to actively use linguistic resources from the article as well as their own cultural and personal experience to support their ideas and raise questions.

To sum up, all the previous studies evaluated textbooks in relation to various factors with different topics. However, there are no studies evaluating Iranian university General English coursebooks from critical thinking perspective.

### Methodology

As a comparative-analytical study, the general English coursebooks used in Iranian universities were sampled for analysis. From among several such coursebooks, the two used at a very populated university in Iran was selected. These GECBs have high frequency of use in different universities of Iran, but we selected them from Isfahan University wherein they were the major GECBs for General English Courses. The CBs consist of different units; the units include reading passages which are followed by several reading comprehension questions. Hence, each question and each unit is evaluated to see which features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model are more emphasized and also to identify the frequency of occurrence of each feature. The specifications of the selected book are as follows:

1. Ketabi, S., & Sheikhi Darani, A., (2009). *General English Focus: A Book for University General English Course*, (1st Ed.). Isfahan: Chaharbagh Publication.

2. Ackert, P., & Lee, L., (2005). *Concepts & comments*, (3rd Ed.). USA: Adult and Academic ESL.

From now on, for the sake of brevity the researcher calls the CBs with numbers; number (1) refers to the CB with Iranian author and number (2) refers to the CB by foreigner author.

The instrument used to do the analysis was Facione's (2011) critical thinking model. This model consists of six cognitive skills: Interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation, and self-regulation.

Facione (2011) has defined the cognitive skills as follows:

- *Interpretation*: means comprehending the meaning of various questions, statements, judgments, and experiences.

- *Analysis*: is identifying the actual relationship among different information statements, questions, ideas, and experiences.

- *Evaluation*: is evaluating credibility of various opinions, questions, beliefs, etc.

- *Inference*: refers to the use of elements needed to form hypotheses and make logical conclusion.

- *Explanation*: is to be able to make a coherent result of others reasoning.

- *Self-regulation*: is conscious control and monitoring one's cognitive activities.

Therefore, based on the detailed accounts of the employed model, the data were collected through the analysis of reading comprehension questions of the selected General English course book. Although this study is a qualitative research, some quantitative records were also represented to give some inferential statistics for each feature of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model.

### Results

This section mainly deals with the results of the statistical analysis of the collected data. It provides descriptive statistics of the data, including frequencies and percentage of CT features in each Course Book. In this respect the frequency and percentage of presence of Facione's CT features was displayed in separate tables and then represents the result of each book in a graph. To have a clear view of the existence of CT features in each course book, the reader is referred to appendix I wherein the results are provided in further detail, and the frequency and percentage of CT features in each unit of the course books are shown separately.

To address the first research question, to investigate to what extent are features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model represented in the course books, primarily the frequency of CT features in reading comprehension questions of each course book was presented and their percentage was computed and showed in the tables.

**Table 1. Representation of each features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model in course book 1**

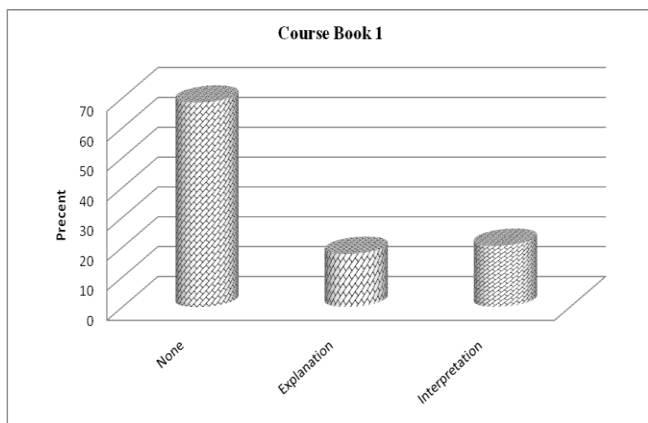
course book 1	Frequency	Percent
Explanation	13	17.8
Interpretation	15	20.5
Sum of Items	28	38.3
None	50	68.5
Number of Question	73	

Table 1 shows that CB 1 with 73 RCQs have been used 28(38.3%) CT factors, just Explanation and Interpretation and 68.5% have none of CT factors.

The following figure provides a clear graphic representation of the actual representation records of critical thinking features across the course book.

**Table 2. Representation of each features of Facione's (2011) critical thinking model in course book 2**

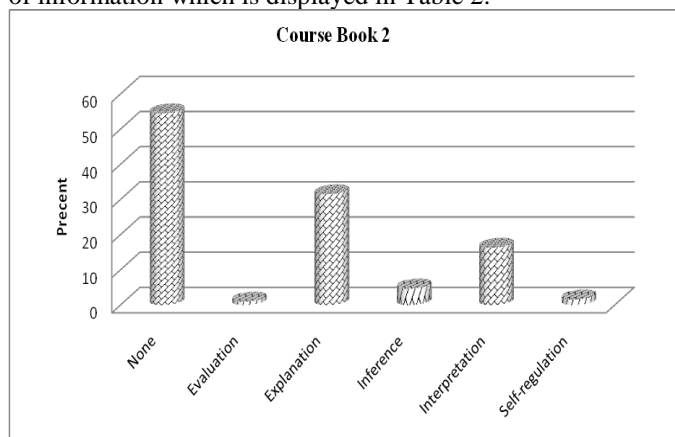
course book 2	Frequency	Percent
Evaluation	2	1
Explanation	58	31.5
Inference	9	4.7
Interpretation	30	16.3
Self-regulation	3	1.6
Sum of Items	112	59.26
None	103	54.5
Number of Question	184	



**Figure 1. Representation of each Feature separately in course book 1**

As data are presented in Table 2, 81 Qs of CB 2 contain 112(59.26%) CT items, 58(31.5%) Explanation, 30(16.3%) Interpretation, 9 (4.7%) Inference, 3(1.6%) Self-regulation and 2 (1%) Evaluation. 103Qs of CB 2 have no CT items. The percentage, of occurrence of CT features was computed based on the numbers of Qs.

The following figure provides a clear graphic representation of information which is displayed in Table 2.



**Figure 2. Representation of each Feature separately in course book 2**

Frequency of CT feature in each CB is presented briefly in the following Table.

**Table 3: Frequency of CT features in 2 course books (book and Items cross tabulation)**

Item	Book		Total
	CB 1	CB 2	
Analysis	0	0	0
Evaluation	0	2	2
Explanation	13	58	71
Inference	0	9	9
Interpretation	15	30	45
None	50	103	153
Self-regulation	0	3	3
	78	205	283

As shown in Table 3, totally the most frequent CT feature is Explanation factor and the least frequent CT item is analysis factor. According to this table there are 153 Qs without CT features.

The following table indicates the representation of CT features in each CB; it shows that each CB contains how many factors of those 6 CT factors. It is simply realized that CB 1's

Qs have just 2 CT features out of 6 features of Facion's CT model and CB 2 contains all 5 CT features.

**Table 4: Comparison of CBs according to the presence of each CT item in CBs**

Questions	Interpretation	Analysis	Evaluation	Inference	Explanation	Self-regulation	Sum
course book 1	✓				✓		2
course book 2	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	5

**Discussion**

In the present study, as in tables 1 and 2 indicate the representation of CT features in 2 GECBS is low and the percentage of non-CT-featured Qs is high. In the CBs the percentage of non- CT-featured Qs is more than 50%, CB 1, 68.5% and CB 2 , 59.26%.

The researcher tried to compare the 2 CBs based on the total percentage of each CB. According to the tables, if the CBs will be ranked the first place is for CB 2 (69.9%) and the second place for CB 1 (38.3%). It can be concluded that in comparison CB 2 has better condition based on critical thinking perspective than CB 1.

Regarding the data in table 3, the most frequent CT feature is **Explanation** by the frequency of (71), and the least one is **Analysis** by the frequency of (0), Based on table 3 the focus of most of the Qs in CBs is on Explanation factor. It is clear that the material designer in designing such RCQs is more focused on explanation, description, paraphrasing and copy, etc., not on the deep thinking, creative and critical thinking. It is very important to know what their definition of comprehension is. Such Qs do not even stimulate students to think, let alone critical thinking.

Table 4 presents the CT factors which were included in RCQs in each CB. As shown in the table, 5 CT factors are represented in CB2 whereas just 2 CT items (Interpretation & Explanation) are represented in the Qs of CB1. It is obvious that in this comparison from this point of view CB2 has better quality based on critical thinking perspective than CB1.

Training creative and thoughtful people should be the major goal of education in universities. In fact we face with the deficient methods in fostering CT. Today most of the countries all around the world are looking for the best method for instructing people and arranging the educational system to develop critical thinker people.

It is better that teachers make an opportunity for students to ask questions about whatever they have read and make different responses. Teachers should give them a chance to express their ideas. It is recommended to design Qs after the reading passages which are required interpretation and analysis of characters and elements of the texts by students. Of course every kinds of Qs is not appropriate and useful to foster and enhance CT, to achieve this goal the authors and designers should design Qs which contain CT features such as interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference and etc.

Totally this comparison showed us that the GECBs by foreign author is in a better condition according to critical thinking features than the CBs designed by Iranian authors.

**Conclusion**

This article tried to compare 2 selected GECBs of Iranian universities based on the representation of critical thinking features of Facion's model in these CBs to know which feature of the model was more emphasized. Although the book and its exercises were believed to have been designed to increase the

students" comprehension, the features of the model were presented in very low frequencies. Therefore, this book neither increased the students" comprehension nor fostered their critical thinking.

The researcher concluded that GECBs with foreign designer or author pay more attention to critical thinking and embed critical thinking features within the exercise of their books whereas in Iranian GECBs it is rare.

In the world in which the evolutions are so fast, there is no option except thinking critically, it helps people to find the truth and involve in solving social problems actively. Finally the researcher believes it is better to find a way to change the biased policy of our educational system.

#### Reference

- [1] Ackert, P., & Lee, L., (2005). *Concepts & comments*, (3rd Ed.). USA: Adult and Academic ESL.
- [2] Allwright, R. L. (1990). What do we want teaching materials for? In R. Rossner and R. Bolitho, (Eds.), *Currents in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Azizifara, A., Kooshaa, M., Lotfia, A. R. (2010) An analytical evaluation of Iranian high school ELT textbooks from 1970 to the present. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Published by Elsevier Ltd. 3, 336–44
- [4] Carrel P. L. (1984). 'Schema theory and ESL reading: classroom implications and applications.' *Modern Language Journal*, 68/4:332-43.
- [5] Eriksoussy., Zubaidah, M. (1993). Evaluating the English Language Textbook Studied at the First Year Intermediate Schools in Saudi Arabia. Unpublished MA thesis, King Saud University. Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
- [6] Facione, Peter, A. (2011) critical thinking: What it is and why it counts. *Insight Assessment*. Measured Reasons and the California Academic Press, Millbrae, CA.
- [7] Jahangard, A. (2008). Evaluation of the EFL Materials Taught at Iranian High Schools. *Iranian EFL Journal*, 1 (1), 31-49.
- [8] Kamali, Z., & Fahim, M. (2011). The Relationship between Critical Thinking Ability of Iranian EFL Learners and Their Resilience Level Facing Unfamiliar Vocabulary Items In reading. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 2 (1), 104-111.
- [9] Karamouzian, F.M. (2010). A Post-Use Evaluation of Current Reading Comprehension Textbooks Used in TEFL Programs *The Iranian EFL Journal December 2010 Volume 6 Issue 4*.
- [10] Ketabi, S., & Sheikhi Darani, A., (2009). *General English Focus: A Book for University General English Course*, (1st Ed.). Isfahan: Chaharbagh Publication.
- [11] Litz, D. R. A. (2005). Textbook evaluation and ELT management: a South Korean 46 Iranian EFL Journal case study. *Asian EFL Journal*.
- [12] McGrath, I. (2002). *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- [13] Mirzai, Z. (2008). *The Relationship between Critical Thinking and Lexical Inferencing of Iranian EFL Learners*, Unpublished Master Thesis, Tehran, Iran: Islamic Azad University of Science and Research Campus.
- [14] Nation, I.S.P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum Design*. New York and London: Routledge.
- [15] O'Neill, R. (1982). Why use textbooks? *ELT Journal*, 36, 104-111
- [16] Pishghadam, R., & Motakef, R. (2008). *CDA, Critical Thinking, and ZPD: A Comparative Study*. Iran: Language Teaching Conference.
- [17] Rahimy, R. (2007). A coursebook evaluation. *ESP World*, 6(2).
- [18] Sheldon, L. (1988). Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 42(4), 237-246.
- [19] Thein, N. (2006) *Evaluating the suitability and effectiveness of three English coursebooks at Myanmar Institute of Technology*. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Thailand. Thailand.
- [20] Tomlinson, B. et al. (2001). ELT Courses for Adults. *ELT Journal*, 55(1) 80-101.
- [21] Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 37(2), 251-255.
- [22] Yarmohammadi, L. (2002). The evaluation of pre-university textbooks. *The Newsletter of the Iranian Academy of Science*, 18, 70-87.
- [23] Yujung, P. (2011). Using New Articles to Build a Critical Literacy Classroom in an EFL Setting. *TESOL Journal*, 2 (1), 24-51 .

**Maryam Azizi**, was born in Isfahan, Iran in 1985, she received her BA in English Translation, Sheikhabahaye University, Isfahan, Iran in 2007. She then got her MA in TEFL from Shahreza University, Isfahan, Iran in 2012. She is currently a PhD candidate in TEFL in Khorasgan University in Isfahan. She has published several articles in different journals. her research interests include sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and teaching and learning strategies.

**Reza Biria**, born in Isfahan, Iran, obtained his Ph.D. in teaching English as a Foreign Language from the University of Isfahan in 2001. He is an applied linguistics assistant professor working at Khorasgan Azad University, Isfahan, Iran. Dr. Biria has published papers in national and international conferences and journals. His research interests include teaching English as a second and foreign language and ESP.