

The Main Reasons for Failure in Language Learning among Iranian High School Students

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Abstract

Mastery of English is a priority for many learners of English in Iran. Opportunities to improve English in high schools in Iran are very limited, hence many students enroll in courses in private institutes. The purpose of this paper is to study the strategies to improve English in high schools in Iran. Ten teachers and thirty students completed the questionnaires on the strategies to improve English in high schools. We have determined some weaknesses in learning English in Iran and offered some strategies. The teachers and students both agreed on these strategies, and we ranked them as speaking English in classes and learner-centered classes are the best solution for improving learning English. The teachers believe that the efficiency of the content and materials is more important than allocating more hours and sessions, however, the students think that it is vice versa. Results suggest that the teachers and students agree on speaking English in classes, learner-centered classes, the efficiency of the content and materials, and allocating more hours and sessions. These strategies are considered as the best solutions in order to improve English in high schools.

Keywords: language learning, Iranian high school students, education system

INTRODUCTION

In Education system of Iran, primary school, junior, and senior high school are three levels of schooling. 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 part of the educational program, English is taught at all grades of high schools, and is offered as a compulsory course to all high school students across the country (Mehrani & Khodi, 2014). 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.

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 & Tahririan, 2009; Jafari & Kafipour, 2013; Tabatabaei & Hosseini, 2014).

In analysis of high school classes, we have found that there are three major problems in learning English. First, the language is spoken in English classes is Persian, while, they should speak English. Second, the content and materials are inefficient and demotivating. Third, the classes are teacher-centered and the role of learner is not so emphasized. Fourth, there is lack of time for learning English, as it can be seen that the maximum time for learning English is 2 hours in a week.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For the sake of language teaching several methods have been devised. For example, GTM was the most popular method for years. After that different methods such as direct method, ALM, silent way... were developed based upon different views of language learning and linguistics. In Iran GTM is still one of the methods which most of the teachers enjoy it. Therefore, some studies have tried to investigate about this method (Saadat 1995 & Ghorbani 2009).

Saadat (1995) believes that various methods were employed from time to time. Iranian teachers are not exceptional and they have employed different methods and instructions to teach language in different periods. Saadat stated that GTM was used in English classes in Iran in one time and in another time ALM was used.

In Iran, there were few studies which centered on national curriculum. Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) studied the national curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran in field of teaching foreign languages (especially English). According to their critical analysis, "national curriculum of Iran holds some considerable advantages, the successful application of its elements in area of teaching foreign languages requires preparation of some prerequisites." (p. 27)

Some of scholars in Iran focused their studies on importance of major revision to national curriculum. Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) analyzed Iran national curriculum based on major documents such as *Iran's 20-year vision plan* and its comparison with world's knowledge in teaching English as a foreign language. Kiany, Navidinia, and Momenian (2011) searched for unity of Iran's national curriculum and compared it with *Iran's 20-year vision plan*. They believed that national curriculum was not in the line of *Iran's 20-year vision plan*.

As the place and nature of language planning in education is one of the main dimensions of the relationship between language and social life, governments make deliberate choices (Liddicoat, 2004), it is important to analyze Iranian national curriculum, English language part, and compare it with major plans and documents. It was claimed that major documents were cornerstone of adapted national curriculum.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is observably proved that in the non-Native English countries students in every level have difficulties adapting to an extensive and wide range of generally and academic situations within the three levels of studying in schools, institutes and university community. There are many researchers have shown that non-native English speaking (NNES) students face many problems and difficulties in their changing and adjustment to higher education in English speaking (Dolati & Mikaili, 2011).

The history of Language teaching in Iran can be traced back to 1851 when the government has opened Dar-ol-Fonun as the first institution in Tehran (Tabatabaei & Pourakbari, 2012). The emergence of English books in curriculum of schools came back to 1940. The current “revised” syllabus used in public education aims to move beyond a focus on reading skills and to develop basic English proficiency; however, the course materials at middle school primarily address alphabet recognition, pronunciation and limited vocabulary development, while those used at high school continue to focus on reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary development, with little emphasis on writing beyond de-contextualized sentence practice. Listening is almost absent in the syllabus, and speaking is limited to a few drills (mainly intended to practice grammar) and short dialogues to introduce language functions. Consequently, after six years of English instruction, unless students have taken additional courses in a private institute, they normally have minimal communication skills in English. It is not an exaggeration to claim that an Iranian student who graduates from high school (and who has not attended any courses outside the formal education system) is hardly able to introduce himself or herself in English or to express or understand more than a few simple sentences, despite having studied English at school for at least six years (Ettelaat, Daily, 2011; Dorshomal *et al.*, 2013).

The main problems in learning English in high school

The abstract nature of learning necessitates constant research in the field to find solutions to questions and difficulties language educators and program developers face. Thus, the constant change and development in language teaching methods is meant to accommodate new findings in the field.

In the last fifteen to twenty years, language teaching in Iran has seen a slow and gradual change from traditional methods, in which deductive learning was stressed and learning of a language was done mainly through teaching and studying of grammar and translation, to more modern methods based on communicative approaches. This move towards the latter methods reflects two points. First, the change in language teaching

forum from traditional methods to communicative ones, and second, the recognition of changes in the kind of proficiency Iranian learners of foreign languages, specifically English, expect to gain, such as a more efficient oral and listening proficiency besides reading comprehension.

Despite the turn from traditional approaches of language learning and teaching, some applied linguists point out research results indicating the efficacy of some practices and techniques of these approaches which boost adolescent and adult learning in SL classroom. Students' attitudes to procedures and in general to language learning are also crucial. Research in this field of language learning has shown that learners' negative perceptions can be detrimental to the whole learning program (Green, 1993 & Wenden, 1987).

Teachers' perception toward the efficacy of methods and practices employed in teaching a foreign language is yet another significant factor to consider in developing a program. Willingness or unwillingness to experiment with a new method or to use innovations in language teaching is very decisive. Incongruities among teachers' beliefs based on their actual experience with learners and theoretical framework of their teaching can lead to difficulties in teaching which in turn negatively affect learners. (Salomon 1998). Therefore, this study was an attempt to find the reasons for the problems and then to present probable solutions to eradicate them to the extent possible.

The conception of a teacher is someone with a great number of decisions to make at every moment of classroom instruction. In some cases, research findings can guide those decisions. In others, research can inform professional judgment, but decisions must be based on experience and intuition rather than knowledge. Gharabaghi (1991) tried to evaluate the plan of the Ministry of Education designed to alleviate the problem of the shortage of teachers in Iran. In this plan, the Ministry of Education tried to solve the problem by lowering the recruitment standards. Gharabaghi presented a historical analysis of the educational system of Iran, with specific references to the number of teachers of English and the preparation of such teachers in Iran.

The most important problem is, in fact, the teachers themselves. Because of a lack of training most of them teach not in English, but in Farsi, most of the time. One of the other reasons is the Iranian students themselves, who often prefer to be quiet and passive in class. This problem is basically related to the Iranian culture and social context which are different from the Western in many respects (Jamshidi Avanaki (1998). So far, in all classroom interactions it is the teacher who decides what to do or what kind of activities should be performed in class and in the majority of classes the teacher is the sole speaker most of the time and also has the right to speak. As a result, students have no opportunity to practise, at the very least, what has been taught in class or to participate in speaking activities as is supported by Biria and Tahririan (1994).

Iranian university teachers have two main problems with the English textbooks: firstly, most of them find the content difficult since it is often taken from foreign books; secondly, there is no particular approach suitable for teaching the English language

content. Iranian university textbooks for English courses are prepared in two periods in which different groups of writers unanimously have provided a variety of English textbooks. In the first, authors such as Bates (1978) produced a set of materials called „The Nucleus Series“. The second period was after the Cultural Revolution in Iran in 1979-1982. In this period, a variety of textbooks were prepared for different subjects such as physics, chemistry, mathematics, biology and medicine. These textbooks are provided at two levels. At level one, the books contain a collection of relevant materials. For example, one lesson is about general principles of physics while a second is about general principles of chemistry. The level one book is for all basic science students (of physics, chemistry, maths, and biology). Level two is specific to each separate discipline and contains only that subject, such as physics or chemistry. Each lesson in these textbooks has a text as the main body of the lesson, which precedes different kinds of exercises such as comprehension questions, blank-filling exercises and short essay writing questions, but there are no communication exercises in these textbooks. The main difficulties with these textbooks are as follows:

1. English language students begin their English classes with a previously learned linguistic background known to the English teacher. Many teachers and almost all students are not fluent in English, and most of the science and technology lectures are given in Persian, containing potted information often translated from foreign textbooks or directly taken from those sources, referred as “Scaffolding” by Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991).

Whereas, Flowerdew (1994) has gone further and argued that: the need for further research into second language lectures before meaningful statements can be made about lectures which will have concrete effects on pedagogy.

2. Different classes through the medium of English may use different textbooks because they are in different disciplines.

3. The traditional method of learning no doubt affected the attitudes of students towards English: they were predisposed to view it as a content subject rather than as a means of communicating and of acquiring knowledge. Students have avoided using even that small amount of language they have learned. As a result the approaches used are not communicative at all and are not planned on the basis of the English learners' needs.

4. Even students with a strong background in English cannot use the language, because of approaches in which the students do not use the target language and do not practice it.

5. English classes, like other subject classes, are conducted as if they were teacher-centered types of teaching and in fact are not suitable for learner-centered activities, so that some alterations are needed in the approach to teaching.

However, no new method was developed for the new courses; this caused English teaching to become problematic in Iranian universities, particularly in the area of oral skills. These are certain characteristics of English teaching in Iranian universities, as I

have observed from my own observations. These are what I found through my research during 1994-1998 as well as experiences I already had from Iranian system.

I have been concerned with the problem of English use by the university students ever since I started my teaching at the university. In most cases the students could not even express themselves which is a key indicator of ELT failures in Iranian universities. This led me to search for a solution to solve the problem as to what teaching/learning factors such settings, textbooks and in particular what strategies are effective and how they could be used to improve oral discourse, especially the fluency of the Iranian university students. More precisely, this is important because it will fill the gap of the oral weaknesses of the students through the opportunities which the proposed approach offers to the students. Therefore, I shall introduce some English language teaching methods in Iran which would help provide an English speaking environment through the suitable teaching strategies being introduced and applicable to the Iranian university settings.

The first point to note is that there is no standard and up-to-date teaching approach used in existing English language teaching practiced by the teachers at university level. Almost all English classes are still teacher-centered in Iranian universities. Another major difficulty of English language teaching in Iranian universities is that students who can use the most complex scientific discourse in their native language often find themselves in the situation where they cannot comprehend the academic lectures given in English or interact with others in the English language. This is true particularly for students taking ESP (English for specific purposes) whose ability to communicate is minimal, and their oral expression poor. This is what I have encountered during my years of teaching in Iranian universities which is supported by the work of Iranian university teachers mentioned above. These problems are related to many factors such as lack of teacher training, cultural backgrounds, specific social context and the lack of English language as second language in Iranian society.

Since university students are to be specialized in a particular field should be enabled to use ESP. Brumfit (1981) noted that: First, it is clear that an ESP course is directly concerned with the purposes for which learners need English, purposes which are usually expressed in functional terms. ESP thus fits firmly within the general movement towards "communicative" teaching of the last decade or so. Similar definition of ESP has given by Strevens (1980) devised to meet the learners' particular needs; (2) related in themes and topics to designated occupations or areas of study (3) selective (i.e. not general) as to language content (4) when indicated, restricted as to the language skills included. But the distinctive differences between ELT and ESP are identified by many writers such as Widdowson (1978), Mackay and Mountford (1978), Crofts (1981) for „occupational and professional“ study.

Regarding settings as one of the other problems in the Iranian universities, the experiences in western teaching settings have proved that as you change the pattern of the seats to a circle, you will find more learning-taking place because people seem much more involved when addressing faces rather than the backs of heads in dense rows. Brown and Yule (1983) quoted Hymes (1972) that: A context can support a range of

meanings. When a form is used in a context it eliminates the meaning's possible to that context other than those the form can be signed: the context eliminates from consideration the meaning possible to the form other than those the context can support.

Consequently, my main aim in this paper is to propose a new approach, suitable for the needs of an English language programme for Iranian English teachers and learners. Such an approach might provide a solution to this critical problem of lacking effective communication. This is critical, because apparently the main purpose of learning any language is to interact with others in that particular language, to convey information and exchange views. One important deficiency is the limited use of oral discourse analysis in the majority of English language classes. Iranian university English learners, even after graduation, have urgent problems in the use of English language. Even though the majority of these learners know grammar and vocabulary at an advanced level, they are unable to use this knowledge orally. I found these points through my teaching experience and research. The main reason I found for this during my own teaching experience is that there are no oral practice opportunities or activities in designed course books, nor is this provided by the teachers in their teaching approaches. In fact, teaching/learning is not focused on oral performance and use of the English language. English language teachers apply their own methods to teach the students, which may incorporate a variety of teaching methods from the Grammar-Translation to the Audio-Lingual, but none are Communicative. The main purpose is to familiarise the learners with translation and reading the literature, and experiencing their native language through the grammar of the target language. Both the teacher and students focus on reading the target language and translating it into the native or L1 (mother language of the learners), using this language for most of the class time. For example, an English passage is read and translated into Farsi Language (L1) by the students. The teacher normally asks the questions and answers in Persian most of the time. This method puts more emphasis on reading and writing. Therefore, the students do not usually carry out oral performance in the target language and consequently it does not prepare the students for the use of the target language (English). Or normally the main purpose has been to use the target language in class activities with certain rules and structures. Although it is claimed that all four language skills are taught through this method, oral performance is very limited and it is insufficient for routine language use. In most cases certain aspects of language are emphasised and less attention is paid to communication. For example, in some classes a sort of rote learning through memorisation rather than internalisation and use of English is stressed. Imitating a language without understanding it may not be useful and the learners would not be able to make new speech patterns, in other words, it is a type of parrot learning. Structured learning is limited and does not help the learners to be empowered to initiate new patterns. This method provides insufficient practice to prepare learners for language expansion and use.

Therefore, these teachers obviously have difficulties in using English all the time in class, and those who have been educated in foreign countries are the sole speaker most

of the time. We have seen that in the process of teaching/learning the teacher has not been giving learners' opportunities to practise what they have been involved in, but rather has actually been preventing talk. The teacher's role, then, has been simply to interfere in the learning process.

English language learners in Iran are restricted in their language use generally by their textbooks, technological aids and even more so by the language teaching approaches employed by the teachers. In my experience, it is noticeable that in Iranian universities, the majority of the university students find it almost impossible to make themselves easily understood in a face-to-face discussion in English. This is chiefly due to the fact these students have been taught without using what they have learned, which has been grammar rather than content. Thus the teachers have been teaching the form of the language, rather than encouraging its use. In this case it is better to leave the English teaching to subject specialists as McDonough (1984) argued that: Learners being taught by a scientist with some language training will definitely have greater „face validity“ than lessons with a language teacher unwilling or unable to engage in scientific procedure.

Still there is another problem of not many opportunities to use English in public. Riley (1982) argued that the teacher has to provide optimum conditions for learning via modelling as Wilson (1986) also noted that not only teachers should have a sound knowledge of English but also should know how to use the tools. Wright and Bolitho (1993) proposed that to help trainee participants to ask questions about language to enable them to be effective teachers. To summarise, I have cited Schiffrin (1994) to clarify the previous discussion: Given the vastness and variety of topics and issues that fall under the label it should not be surprising that a wide range of data can be used to illustrate how to go about doing an analysis of discourse.

A. Materials and content

Based on Dahmardeh (2010) explanatory case study revealed that there are many inconsistencies between the learners' needs and the textbooks that are available for learning and teaching the English language though a few of them are reliable. Accordingly, the results of the findings has showed that even the used - textbooks in the classrooms are not communicative at all and the reason for this, based on one of the participants who was one of the designers of Iranian English textbooks (2007) explained by him as the structural approach that was adopted by the committee of writers. Also, it was emphasized that the current textbooks are not designed based on any curriculum at all and the national curriculum has been recently developed. However, the Responses given by the teacher participants in his research has shown some issues as their main concerns during teaching; even they use these materials for teaching the learners have some problems in understanding of content of text and they declared that a) Students achieve some skills at least in reading comprehension weakly. b) Preparing students for the final exam and help them to pass in the end. Thus, the textbooks which were designed to prepare students for examinations are not useful for English classes and they were needed to be restoration and renewal.

Therefore, it should be said that these textbooks were the main and the only materials available in Iran for guidance in high schools which are not useful and follow the old version of contents and texts. In these books the text has been accompanied with a large number of exercises and questions for practice on what they have assumed to be more important for examinations. Insights into the recent researches and results by Dahmardeh (2010) there were good materials in relation with communication and improving spoken proficiency, because of this matter it is needed to bring some of the results and focus on the participants' replies. Concerning the supplementary materials, 50% of the teacher participants claimed that these materials are not available to them.

Even the rest of the teachers who claimed that such materials are available were not happy with the content of supplementary materials and described them as 'poor quality'. Furthermore, with respect to authentic materials, only 15% of the teachers claimed that they use authentic materials and the rest of them argued that because of limited- time they were not using such materials, and teachers do not have enough time to practice communication and speaking skill.

The textbooks were designed based on the reading comprehension and grammar competent and teachers were given time to have lecture and take grammatical drills, in such a manner, the speaking skill is out of the class time; in the following, as it is clear, it can be declared limited –time for English classes is in the core of the problems. Regarding to Dahmardeh (2010) results, the central emphasis is on reading comprehension, because it was assumed that this skill is required more in tertiary education. Therefore, using the activities in the class should be based on the teacher creation a task in an environment and real situation or a setting for students to acquire English by using it in which is the most important task for these students in short time. However, regarding to Singh and Li, (2005) the major problem and issue is how to make efficient use of the limited class time to improve students' language competence by communicating in class. The limited – time was produced by Iranian education system curriculum and in the following it teachers must follow the given time to have English class. In the sum up, it needs to state by increasing the time of class by education system the students will be encouraged to participate to the English classes and learn each four skills.

A careful look at the English language textbooks in Iran demonstrates that a foreign language culture or any comparison of cultures is totally ignored in them (Birjandy et al, 2012, High school English textbooks; book 1, 2, and 3). Although the content of High School English textbooks is expected to teach the language and the culture which are different from the learners' mother tongue and the culture of their own country, no foreign language culture or tradition is explicitly discussed in the texts of the textbooks or implicitly reviewed in the pictures, which any language learner is naturally eager to know.

As our research hypothesis is that the present high school English textbooks, procedures, methods and techniques used for teaching English cannot help learners to overcome their communication problems in English, the research should answer whether it is possible to make proper changes in the content and structure of Iranian

high school English textbooks to help to improve the learners' ability to deepen their knowledge of the language and their intercultural communication skills of EFL in Iran. The problem here seems to be bidirectional. First, the textbooks themselves should be written in a way that may encourage and motivate the learners to be engaged in the learning activities, and, second, teachers should base the teaching on new methods, techniques and strategies to prepare their students to take an active part in learning activities in order to achieve the goal: i.e. communication.

In any pages of the a.m. textbooks one can only find proofs of irrelevant, contradicting and even culturally meaningless images which only represent Iranian culture. The pictures presented in these books are irrelevant with regard to the presentation of culture which is crucial in any language learning environment. So, for a new language learner who is eager to learn about the people and their culture along with learning their language, these books appear to be boring and tiresome. No reference to English Speaking countries was found, nor was a picture exclusively dealing with cross-cultural comparison. High school textbooks developed in Iran seem to fail to meet the standards normally used in the preparation of materials of this type. Incorporating the cultural and social aspects of language in these books is an important issue which seems to have been neglected (Aliakbari, 2004, Rajabi & Ketabi, 2012, Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011). Since textbooks have very great role in any teaching and learning settings and students usually willingly and uncritically absorb knowledge represented by their textbooks, this study is going to investigate a discourse analysis of cultural factors which are implicitly or explicitly mentioned in the texts and through the pictures presented in Iranian High School textbooks.

The texts selected for high school textbooks should be authentic or authentic like, not too difficult for the learners, suitable for the teaching goals and usable in the series of activities, lending themselves as a resource of information and ideas. They should also have currency of topics, situations and contexts. Some of the reading texts, included in high school textbooks, lack currency.

The reading parts of the high school English textbooks have not been organized according to the level of difficulty or background knowledge of the learners. The first lesson of grade one is more difficult than the next two lessons and it has so many new vocabulary items and expressions (see: high school textbooks; Book 1, 2, and 3). The type of activities and exercises included in the comprehension part are not enough to really develop reading skills in the students as for developing this skill all the techniques related to it such as predicting the content of a text, scanning, skimming, intensive reading, extensive reading and guessing the meaning of unknown words can be dealt with. It seems that the focus is on grammatical points because a high proportion of work is on this point. "Speak out" includes some drill exercises which seem to be more grammar exercises than developing speaking skills. Although these exercises are oral drills and should be practiced orally in the classroom, they are mostly assigned as homework assignments to be done at home and are changed to writing exercises so the real aim of this part is ignored.

In "Write it down" most of the exercises are completion of sentences, responding to questions, or writing out some items related to grammatical points. Most of the exercises have a model to follow, which will detract from motivation of new answers and decrease creativity in responses. There is little room to expand on these exercises. Some of the questions require students to select a verb tense but do not invite them to go further and create their own sentences. There is little recycling of the grammatical points learned and practiced throughout the lessons so a grammatical point which is so emphasized in a lesson is forgotten during the course. Some exercises lack clarity of directions so they are not clear to both students and the teacher. Let's consider Book 1 for grade one, lesson 8, Speaking 3, the instruction requires the students to answer the questions. Some of the questions are in passive voice and others are in active voice and the grammatical point taught during the lesson is passive so the students become confused if to answer all questions in passive or not. Apart from these drawbacks, the type of activities and exercises do not require the students to have active participation and do not encourage group work. The dialogue sections provided in the "Language Function" present few genuine or real-life situations. The conversations are superficially organized and pronunciation is taught by using exercises based on contrastive pairs.

The analysis of high school textbooks shows that in most English classes, the teachers cannot use English as a means for communication since this will take longer time to present the lessons which may cause anxiety for the teachers. They explain types of activities, grammar points and cultural information in Farsi. They translate the reading passages and new words into Farsi and do not allow the students to work out the meaning of the new words from the passage and comprehend the text for themselves. This prevents the students from achieving the desired goals and most of them cannot understand the unseen passages. However, the teacher can ask the students to translate some words or phrases just to show him/her that they have understood it. In presenting vocabulary, the teachers can use different techniques for example, showing a real object, showing a picture, using actions and facial expressions, giving examples, using synonyms and antonyms, etc. But most of our teachers just resort to giving Farsi equivalents of the words and ask the students to memorize the words in the list along with their Farsi translation. But we know that we tend to recall words through their meaningful association with other words which appear in collocation in the texts (e.g.: Doctor is likely to appear in texts in which medicine, patient, pain or hospital appear). It is for this reason that learning vocabulary in context is much more useful than learning isolated words. It is better when introducing a new word, the teacher draws the attention of the students to other related words. As most of the words introduced in a lesson do not recycle through other lessons, and if the students do not encounter or use acquired words for a long time, they forget them rapidly, the teacher can introduce games and exercises regularly to give the students an opportunity to help them recall words they have learned before. In that way, the students refresh their mind and the availability of the words is increased.

The materials selected for a textbook should satisfy the students' needs and interests and motivate them to get involved in classroom activities and in the learning process. The researchers' findings showed that most of the reading texts included in English textbooks are not suitable for the age and do not motivate the students. To find out how the students feel about their course book materials, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed among learners in three high school levels both for girls and boys in two high schools in Iran. The analysis shows, that the content of the textbooks does not motivate the learners to get involved in classroom activities. The results of the research proved the researchers' viewpoints.

Most of the problems which Iranian students have regarding English learning are due to the content and structure of the textbooks and teaching techniques. In order to test the hypothesis, a questionnaire including 30 questions was distributed between 58 boys and 75 girls in two high schools in Tabriz, Iran. The answers rated "very much or excellent", "fair", "poor" and "very poor". Among those questions only 15 items directly related to the topic of this paper i.e. evaluating high school textbooks and techniques used in the class were chosen.

B. Speaking Persian language in English classrooms

Speaking is one of the four macro language skills which are required to be developed in order for EFL/ESL students to communicate effectively in different contexts. Experts assume that the ability to communicate orally is equal to knowing the given language since speaking is the main means of human communication (Lazarton, 2001). However, as some experts in the field maintain, speaking has proved to be a demanding skill for EFL learners. For example, Brown (2001) believes that colloquial language, reduced forms, performance variables, redundancy clusters, rate of delivery, stress, rhythm and intonation are among the characteristics of speaking that contribute to the difficulty of this skill. Lazarton (2001) also believes that spoken English is difficult since it is almost always accomplished through interaction with at least one interlocutor. This necessitates the existence of such factors as monitoring and understanding the other speakers, thinking about one's own contribution, producing the contribution and monitoring its effect, etc. Moreover, in order for language learners to manage oral communication, they need to produce connected speech, have interaction ability, speak in different contexts, develop a balance between accuracy and fluency, and talk about unfamiliar issues based on their knowledge (Lindsay & Knight, 2006).

Some experts in the field hold that EFL students' speaking skills might be affected by a multitude of factors. Al Hosni (2014) states that EFL students may face numerous problems in the way of developing their speaking skills regardless of their linguistic knowledge. These problems can be traced back to their minimal direct exposure to the target language (Shumin, 1997).

Aleksandrak (2011) also believes that the source of speaking skills problems in the EFL context is the insufficient speaking varieties and opportunities in the EFL classrooms compared to a multitude varieties and genres in real-life situations. Hojati and Afghari (2013) maintain that speaking skills are under the influence of a number of linguistic

and non-linguistic factors such as grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic variables, affective factors, and so forth, which, when combined, compound the problems of speaking skills. Therefore, EFL learners not only need to equip themselves with sufficient vocabulary and grammar knowledge, but also need to pay due attention to both fluency and accuracy in order to manage meaningful communication (Hinkel, 2006). Shumin (1997) states that speaking is a demanding skill for EFL learners as they need to have not only grammar and lexical knowledge, but also knowledge of socially-appropriate language. He further adds that age, aural medium, sociocultural and affective factors can affect adult EFL learners' speaking skills. Thornbury (2005) also believes EFL speakers need to have sufficient knowledge of culture, genre, speech acts, register, discourse, grammar, vocabulary and phonology in order to manage oral communication in second language in different real-life situations. Moreover, Wang (2014) notes that cognitive, linguistic, and affective factors could affect the speaking competence of EFL speakers.

Regardless to the current method, educators and teachers were compulsory to use Persian language in the English language classrooms because the students were habited to understand the meaning of every sentence and translate it into their own languages. This style of teaching and learning has referred to the eve of Iranian revolution and all the teachers were trained to utilize this method. One of the most important issue in the relation to this matter that needs to state is about using the other different accents or local dialect like Turkish in some of Iranian cities like Tabriz city, because of being fanatical in this city especially, the children in the beginning to talk were learned to talk their mother tongue and have never talked Persian as a formal language; moreover, they were believed that their own language is Turkey and should use it at work, at home and their study and business. Due to this serious matter, there is increased the challenges among using of the different accents, Persian language and English language. Courageously, because of this matter, it can be told that English language is going to be buried and in not so far in the future this language will be omitted from education courses. The perceptions of teachers and students in learning English were not in real and authentic circumstances. Although, grammar translation was the method used, the teachers could be encouraged to use English language. The results have illustrated that the advantages of using English language for teaching was one of the basic elements to persuade students to acquire communication skills.

The absolute majority of the teacher participants have stated that their English instruction started in Persian language. The English language structures and vocabularies were translated into Persian. The use of Persian language has grown into a habit to students and teachers. The GTM method has aggravated the situation and that was how teachers presented their lectures in Persian language.

Using the native speakers in learning process is the major point to the learners to learn and understand the foreign language but, it should be considered that Iranian speaking learners of English encounter problems in most of the language skills. This is due to the using of Persian language even in their English language classes. Furthermore, students are confronted with little opportunity to learn English through natural interactions with native target groups such as tourists or foreign employees. Because of this fact, it can be

said that these students have never been in directly situation to learn English language unconsciously. Keashen (1985) stresses of learning process in environment as indirectly and unconsciously that is not possible for these students, this is that fact, that Iranian learners need it and should be under emphasizing.

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).

C. Teacher-centered classrooms

Firstly, the traditional teacher-led or administer-centered learning are used more frequently than student-led learning. A student is viewed as learner, who passively receives information and teacher's role is information provider or evaluator to monitor learners to get the right answer. The problem is that it never let students use their potential, so the main focus is getting the learners to perform well on state-mandated tests rather than catering to students' need. This method is unsuccessful because the knowledge of students is judged based on their performance in the final exam scores (Lynch, 2010).

Course books barely fulfill students' and teachers' needs. They do not allow teachers to be creative in the class. Therefore, teachers do not rely firmly on their knowledge and performance. There is little motivation for innovation in teaching and the effort is to relay information or referring directly to the answers. First, teachers cannot choose a course book in line with their students' needs. Furthermore, teachers' input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, they couldn't develop tests which have positive washback on teaching and learning. Third, since obtaining a higher score is commonly important to both teachers and students, teaching process is controlled by grading pressure from students, parents, and school principals. Therefore, teachers are pushed to a close system in which all the focus is on getting good marks and performing well on the final exam.

Also, the instruction process is affected by some social demands such as university entrance exam, being accepted to schools dedicated to intelligent students, etc. (Ghorbani, 2009). According to Khaniya (1990) "a large number of teachers help students cope with examinations in order to preserve their reputation as good teachers" (p.51) Teachers try not to lose their face because of their students' poor performance on public examinations, which lead them to teach English for testing purpose (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Consequently, for ELT learners in Iran, professionalism means to master textbooks and performing well in final exams, which are mostly grammar-oriented. So in this culturally-loaded pedagogic situation, the concept of high ability teacher is

dependent on students' achievement in the exam, then the teacher "becomes" a good teacher (Ghorbani, 2009).

Another good point about teacher-centered classes stated by Huba and Freed (2000) is that the cultures of teacher-centered learning are competitive and individualistic which means students cannot think aloud or interact. In contrast, the culture of a student-centered classroom is cooperative and supportive. They also asserted that students in teacher-centered classroom should be quiet, because, a noisy class means that the teacher cannot manage the class, so she/he is not a good teacher. This is the main reason why teachers avoid noise and student-centered learning.

Noise is unavoidable in a student-centered environment due to the exchange of information and this is not acceptable in teacher-centered classes.

D. Time for learning English is not efficient

Students in Middle and High schools take between two and four hours of English instruction each week with different syllabi for different years, which are revised from time to time. The syllabus and course content are pre-scribed for all schools, and teachers are not able to make changes to course content or structure.

METHOD

The design of any study is in a close relation with the purpose of the study. The design of this study is in the form of quantitative method. The participants of the study includes 10 teachers who teach English in high schools of region 5 in Tehran, and 30 students of one of the high schools of region 5. Two questionnaires were developed in this study. One is the students' questionnaire and the other one is the teachers' questionnaire. The first part of each questionnaire relates to the personal information, and the second part includes some questions with six options based on Likert scale. The validity of questionnaires was confirmed by the university teachers, and the reliability was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha which equaled 0.70.

RESULTS

After gathering data from the questionnaires, the teachers and students' views on the strategies for improving learning English in high schools were analyzed through ANOVA.

Table 1. Mean, SD, and Results of ANOVA for the teachers and students' views on the strategies for improving learning English in high schools

The strategies for improving learning English in high schools		Mean	SD	SE	Df	F	Sig.
Speaking English in classes	Teachers' view	3.394	.788	.135	1	18.917	0.000
	Students' view	4.003	.442	.031	230		
Making content and materials efficient	Teachers' view	3.363	.697	.119	1	23.675	0.000
	Students' view	3.773	.399	.028	230		
The role of learners should be emphasized	Teachers' view	3.474	.673	.115	1	16.212	0.000
	Students' view	3.815	.408	.029	230		
More hours and sessions should be considered	Teachers' view	3.316	.664	.113	1	24.761	0.000
	Students' view	3.789	.481	.034	230		

According to the teachers and students' views on the strategies for improving learning English in high schools, they believe that speaking English in classes and learner-centered classes are the best solution for improving learning English. The teachers believe that the efficiency of the content and materials is more important than allocating more hours and sessions, however, the students think that it is vice versa.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was set up to investigate various problems regarding teaching and learning English as a foreign language in high schools in Iran. After collecting and analyzing the data, it was found that some weaknesses in learning English in Iran and offered some strategies. The teachers and students both agreed on these strategies, and we ranked them as speaking English in classes and learner-centered classes are the best solution for improving learning English. Devito (1986) pointed out that speaking and using it in our interaction with other students in the class has its own system and methods and it needs to train a teacher to learn how the students can speak very fluently and confidently. Makarova (1997) emphasized that if the curriculum is learner – centered; as it has shown that learners have the greatest role in a learning process, it can be the result of the students' interest in language learning.

We have also found that the efficiency of materials and content is essential for improving English in high school classes. According to Leather and Motalebzadeh (2015), although the authors of the new English books for junior high school claim their program as being “a revolutionary process” where there is a shift from traditional to communicative approaches to teaching, the focus of teaching and learning is still on reading, grammar and vocabulary. Also, there is lack of time for learning English, as it can be seen that the maximum time for learning English is 2 hours in a week. Therefore,

allocating more hours and sessions should be considered that both teachers and students agreed on it.

Furthermore, 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.

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