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Why Iranian High School Students Barely Communicate in English as a Foreign Language and Communication

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ABSTRACT

There have been a lot of discussions from the English language learning researchers regarding the issues of the students' learning of English, especially the communication section. Non-English speakers do not have any choice to learn English so that, they can survive in an international situation, in general, and in an education institution, in particular. In Iran, how Iranian students learn to speak English, is more difficult in compare with the other skills. The purpose of this paper is to show that learning and communicating in English as a foreign language is a problem for Iranian high school students. On the basis of above-mentioned seven students were selected randomly from three different high schools in Tehran, the capital of Iran to participate in an interview to explain their perceptions on English communication learning. And according to the findings, it is assumed that the problem of English communication is because of the many different factors. Wrong methods of teaching, lack of proper curriculum, insufficient English knowledge of the teachers and using Persian language during teaching English in high schools, role of teachers' experience in effective learning and the role of Grammar Translation Method in teaching English are the most probable factors that cause Iranian high school students fail to master in English communication after 6 years of learning.

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INTRODUCTION

English is the 'Lingua Franca' of the world. With the technological revolution and e-learning system, The English Language has developed as one of the world's most important tools of communication in the present cyber and digital age. A very important reason for considering English as a global language is that the world's knowledge is usually preserved in English. This language is widely used by many people based on its modern and trendy characteristic (Educational Research, 2011). Thus, English has been considered as a most preferred language, even in non-native English speaking regions where the local languages should be treated as equally as the culture. However, when the issue of Language Link has been highlighted, English language non-arguably plays its vital role in

communication. Teaching English as a foreign language never was an easy task. Furthermore, in a situation where The English language is least important, the challenges have become barely more difficult to be taught. Teaching English in the Middle East in general and Iran in particular, attracts the attention of many researchers and scientists, particularly when the issue is mostly related to classroom circumstances. Teaching English language in the most technical colleges in Iran serves two purposes: First, it strengthens the foundation of the English literacy and then set the standard of English proficiency for the related field, which will be applied across over all the major disciplines, such as business, health, computers, and etc. The english language is been taught even at school level, but it carries least important in the school curriculum, where this

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scenario is common in many other developing countries as well. The process of teaching and learning sometimes seems ineffective especially for the development of skills not found satisfactory, as it supposed to be. In regard to this, findings from studies' revealed it would be very useful in the direction of descriptive the actual causes and evolution of some new approaches and best-suited strategies in teaching English as a foreign language. It is generally assumed that a poor result in mastering The English language mainly due to the traditional approach of teaching English foundation during the early school stage. As a matter of fact, six years of studies in schools is not a guarantee of the student would master the English language. How could this be possible? On the basis of above mentioned the researcher studied some of the problems of Iranian high school students in learning English.

Background Of The Research:

When the Arab conquest took place in the 7th century, Arabic language became a foreign language in Iranian schools. It was the only foreign language learned by Iranian in religious schools in Iran. For almost twelve centuries, there were no agenda by the authorities to introduce another foreign language in the school curriculum in Iran. In the middle of 19th century, a number of French teachers were invited from France to teach various subjects such as medicine, engineering, military, science, French language, and etc. in Darolfonun High School, the first Iranian public high school which were founded by the government in Tehran (Nations encyclopedia, 2007). After establishing this new system of European education in Iran, the Ministry of Education included the French language in the high school education syllabus. Learning French as a foreign language had been made compulsory for all the high school students throughout the country.

Since then, French were taught as a foreign language in Iranian high schools for many years thereafter. Due to English people who infiltrated into Iran through the Anglo-Iranian oil company and the existence of the English speaking allied forces in Iran during World War II, the French language was replaced with English language (Hassan Pour, 2014). As a consequence, the Ministry of Education decided learning The English language for Iranians was more efficient than knowing the French language. Since then, The English language became a part of the Iranian high school syllabus. (Manouchehri, 1974).

Review Of The Literature:

According to the (Huebener, 1965), language learning is forming a habit. Therefore, when the habit is formed the language is learned, but the question is how to form this habit. Huebener believes that we learn from the habit through the observance of rules. The authors think that this idea of Huebener mostly

applies to native language learning rather than to learning a foreign language because when we are learning a foreign language we are usually living in an environment in which we can't observe the rules. In this case, some students usually attempt to memorize the grammatical rules of the foreign language, but obviously, it is not the right way of forming the habit. This is the way most of the Iranian high school students take in learning English as a foreign language. Many people think that the best way to learn a foreign language is to live in the country where the language is spoken. Some others think that in order to minimize foreign language learning problems the teacher should be a native speaker of the language and he or she must speak the language as a native speaker would. The shortage of qualified English teachers in Iranian high schools is one of the most important factors causing problems for Iranian high school students in the process of learning and speaking English. Most of the teachers teaching English in high schools in Iran are not trained for the job they have. (Ministry of Education, 2009).

(Cornelius and Crowell, 1953) believe that most of the high school English teachers in Iran are not qualified for the job they have. Most of the students in Iranian high schools usually memorize the grammatical rules of the English language without understanding them well. Since they do not actually use the English language outside the English class, they forget the memorized grammatical rules very soon. And that is why they are never able to be fluent in English. They rarely pay attention to the grammatical meaning in studying grammatical structures; they try to memorize the forms of the grammatical rules without understanding the meaning. The lack of the environment in which they could actually use the language is the most important reason that why the students usually attempt to memorize the rules of the language rather than attempting to learn the language itself.

According to (Wilkins, 1974), grammatical form and grammatical meaning are the two sides of a coin. He believes that detailed examination of grammatical meaning is impossible without reference to the forms that carry the meaning, and the formal systems cannot be looked at in isolation from the meanings they convey.

The second reason that why the Iranian high school students try to memorize the grammatical rules is that most of the teachers usually dictate the English grammatical rules to the students in Farsi and then students are asked to memorize the rules as they are worded by the teachers. In this case, the students have to memorize the rules, even if they do not understand any of them because later on they will be tested on those points by their teachers. Based on (Cornelius, 1953), the testing methods of most of the teachers, as well as their teaching methods, also let

the students memorize the grammatical rules without comprehension.

Methodology:

An exploratory method was used to explain the data. A qualitative research method used as the methodology for this study for several reasons, In general, qualitative research methods are especially useful in brushing the experience of people have given (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Specifically, a qualitative approach is reasonable when the nature of research questions requires exploration Stake (1995). Qualitative research questions often begin with how or what, so that the researcher can gain an in-depth understanding of what is going on relative to the topic (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). Second, a qualitative study that allows the researcher to explore phenomena's, such as feelings, experience, attitudes or thought processes that are difficult to summarize or learn about through conventional research methods will be looked into (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006). In this paper, participants' experiences on problems in reading learning English will be explored. Last but not least, qualitative methods emphasize the researcher's role as an active participant in the study Creswell (2005). So, the researcher is the key instrument in data collection and the explainer of data findings Stake (1995).

Consequently, seven students from three different high school in Tehran, Iran were selected to take a part in an in-depth interview to explain their experience and opinion regarding the problems they faced during learning English in school. Finally, the findings and conclusion were designed from their responses and answers.

The length of time for the data collection was about six months. The average of the age of the students were seventeen years old and they were in grade three of the new system of high school education, theoretical branch.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Problem in Oral Communication:

According to students' point of view, most of the students have the similar opinion about their experience in oral comprehension which includes speaking and listening. Based on their feedback, the entire English conversation in the Graded English series that they studied during the high schools are very simple and easy in written form. If you ask why the students could not do well in this oral comprehension, the authors will say because they could not understand oral English well. In other words, the student has a poor level of competency in oral skills while someone speaks in English regardless whether the person is a native or non-native speaker of English. We believe that, most probably the reason why students cannot

communicate in English fluently is due to its status as a foreign language rather than second. When most of Iranian could only speak their native language i.e. Persian, as consequences they have been denied the opportunity to improve their communication skill in the particular language. What is the reason the high schools students are unable to understand when someone speaks in English? To answer this question, the authors interviewed the students and found many reasons behind it. The most important reason is that almost 95 percent of the English teachers who teach English in high schools in Iran, unwilling to speak English in the classroom. One of the reasons is that most of the English teachers are not trained for English teaching and English is not their main field of study and they do not have a good command of English themselves. It is quite weird to quote that some of them even cannot express out any content in English, but surprisingly they are teaching English language subject. Obviously, we can make a guess of their output quality; students!

In order to support the above statement, the authors would like to highlight below press article by Dr. Tuers, a professor of English language at Tehran University, 1990):

"Literally, any foreign language program is only as good as its teachers. In a recent class of methodology in TEFL at Tehran University, I had many opportunities to observe some of these teachers. I'd like to share with you some of their mindsets:

1. The teacher should teach in the way I think.
2. The teacher does not notice the pronunciation of the students.
3. How a student who understands and speaks English does not know present tense?
4. The teacher does not say that what he or she is going to teach
5. The students do not know the meaning of some words
6. The teacher talks about the matters very seldom
7. I think that the students have to learn the answers to questions
8. Interesting class

The people who commit these mistakes, please take note, neither are high school students nor engineering or technical students; they are English majors in their senior years at Tehran University (a few are even graduate students). And, what is worse, many of them are English teachers of our high schools. I find this an alarming situation. Why? As we are aware of, the earlier a person learns a habit or a skill, including a language, the longer he or she will remember it. Thus, the wrong patterns a student learns in elementary or high school will be very difficult, even it is not impossible, to change. So we have a vicious circle of incorrect English being learned and then taught over and over again" (Dr. Tuers, 1990).

Dr. Tuers further commented that we should break this vicious circle of incorrect English somehow someday. Then, she talks about the factors involved if required to teach English – or any other languages – unless the person has a university degree in the particular field. According to Dr. (Tuers, 1990), the teacher of English should be very well grounded in all aspects of the language, in all of the skills, no matter at what level he or she plans to teach. Especially he or she must be fluent in the spoken language (this presupposes correct pronunciation) and completely familiarized with the grammatical structures of the language.

According to the letter from the Ministry of Education to the Free University of Iran, dated 2002/04/06, in the academic year 2003/03/05, for 705009 public high school students in Iran, there were 2925 qualified English teachers with a B.A degree in English. The letter provides the statistics which show the number of English teachers needed for this year and for the next five years.

The final finding reveals that poor proficiency level of high school students in oral communication is because they do not really communicate in The English language. They do not use the language in class because most of the teachers do not encourage them to do so. These teachers usually read the text passage with relatively poor pronunciation in class and then translate it into Farsi sentence by sentence. Next, the students are requested to do the same thing on the same passage i.e. repeat the passage and then translate it into Farsi sentence by sentence. And that is why students are not motivated to actually speak English in the classroom.

Lack of Experienced and Qualified English Teachers and Facilities:

It is clear that practice is one of the important factors for understanding and mastering any language and without practice; English or any other foreign languages cannot be developed. Unfortunately, English language graduates do not have enough practice in English; they use Persian most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. They only use English when they meet a situation that they are required to use English as a medium of communication and this seldom happens. Most of those graduates communicate in Persian. Teachers in Iran use Persian to teach complex words and to explain English grammar structure.

The other factor that has an important role in the failure to be a master in learning and speaking English is the lack of effective methods in training the teachers. These methods do not assist the teachers to change their methodology in teaching The English language. They were trained using Grammar Translation Method. So they applied the same method when teaching their students. This is a repeating process just like in a circle. But the

approved and new methodology is emphasized on communicative approaches to teaching the language.

The final reason why students do not have the courage to learn English is due to lack of enough proper facilities. For instance, Audio Video Learning Kit is not used by the most of the high school teachers that are maybe because of the limited number of cassette recorders. So, teachers try to read dialogs to their students, and it does not provide the learners with the essential native speaker model. This also discourages the learners and makes them easily lost focus.

Suggestions:

All students should be encouraged to take a risk and communicate. This means that the learners should use all their available resources to communicate language without being afraid of making errors. (Yule and Tarone, 1990)

If the teachers of English practice the points audio-visually and use audio-visual aids in their teaching, they will get the best result. Dr. (Manouchehri, 1974) shared her experience the use of the audio-visual material in the first seminar on teaching English language in Iran, Tehran. The following are some of the practical experience she has in teaching English audio-visually:

“A few years ago when I was running my own school of English language, I compiled a book in English. I filed-tested all the materials in this book in my classes, and then I refined them according to the result of the filed-testing. I made many slides on my own initiative for the points practiced in the book. The book which is titled “Graded Drills in English Grammar” was taught in English language school for some years. When I was teaching a point drilled in the book, I used to, first, show the slides related to the grammatical points made the lesson very interesting and easily understandable. When I showed the slides by the projector, I also explained the points orally. This let the students learn English audio-visually and understand the points very well. After showing the slides and explaining the grammatical points to the class, it was the time for the students to do the exercises in the book which were related to the use of the points already showed and explained. Almost all the students could easily handle the exercises because the audio-visual aids used at the beginning of the lesson could help them a great deal in understanding the target points drilled in the exercises.”

A teacher of English language can make his class interesting by using audio-visual aids. If a teacher uses audio-visual materials in his or her class, his or her students will also get interested in the lesson and therefore, they will be able to easily understand the points taught.

Most of the English teachers in high schools usually explain the important aspect of structure to their students in Farsi. They dictate the English

grammatical rules in Farsi to the students and they write them down in their notebooks often without understanding any of them. These teachers usually waste the time devoted to grammar in this way. He or she can make any point he wants to teach understandable to the students by illustration or demonstration. There are some points which can be easily illustrated, and there are some others which can be demonstrated in a very interesting way in class without any need to speak Farsi.

The researchers would say again that any teacher who plans to teach the whole English elements to Iranian students should have already become familiar enough with the sentence structures of both Farsi and English. There is no reason to explain these points in Farsi to Iranian students in English class. As mentioned before a good English teacher can teach any grammatical structure in English by illustration and demonstration and without any need to say even one word in the native language of the students. This, of course, can be done at any level and it is in this way that the students will be able to master the language step by step.

The teaching method of teacher is also very important for students in understanding the subject which is taught. If the method is not right one in which the subject should be taught, then, even an interested student may lose his interest in the subject, and hate learning it forever.

Deficiencies Of This Study And Some Guide-Lines For Further Studies In This Field:

Although, the number of problems which Iranian high school students face regarding learning and communicating in English as a foreign language is numerous, however, the researchers could not study all of these problems in this paper. The most crucial ones studied in this research were problems in oral communication and lack of experienced and qualified teachers and facilities. Therefore, those who are interested in doing research in this field can also study some other problems such as cultural differences between English and Persian. And the differences between the sound system of the two languages.

The problems studied were not discussed in details. Each of them could be discussed in a separate research. One can study those problems in details and compile a book.

There were only seven samples in this study. The result of a study with this number of students may not be so accurate. If more students were interviewed, the results of the study would be more precise.

Since the time devoted for this study was not enough and the authors could not travel through the country in order to interview groups of high school students in all the cities so, the English knowledge of the high school students studying in many other schools and in other cities in Iran may be quite

different from that of the students who were chosen for this research. So the results of this study could not be generalized to other cities in Iran.

Conclusion:

Today in Iran, English is being taught as a foreign language. However, in secondary schools, most students did not receive a significant impact on English as a language. Teachers are not well trained about the effective methods of teaching the language or structure of teaching English. This is a serious pedagogical and educational issue in teaching English in Iran. Teaching English in Iran is facing many challenges.

Students are taught English for six times a week for six years. But they are unlikely to have the ability to speak and write in English with minimal errors. The condition under which English is taught in schools is far from satisfactory.

It is known that an average second language learner is seldom able to engage naturally and extensively in a target language environment because, the learner neither lives in the midst of English language speakers nor he/she is isolated from full participation with other second language learners. Thus, almost every student feels nervous when he/she learns a new language particularly while he/she learns The English language.

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