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Opinions related to the main reasons on Iranian Students' difficulties in Spoken English proficiency

[1](Romana) Iran Dolati, [2]Peyman Mikaili

[1]Department of Language, Mahabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahabad, Iran.
[2]Department of Pharmacology, Faculty of Medicine, Urmia University of Medical Sciences, Urmia, Iran.

Abstract: There have been a lot of purposeful debates within the English language learning profession on issues related to the students' learning of English, especially the speaking component in non-native countries like Iran. Non-English speakers have no choice but to learn English in order to survive in an international relationship, global business and in an education environment, particularly in Iran. How Iranian students learn the spoken English proficiency, is more complicated than in the case of other skills. The bulk of investigations on Iranian students' English speaking weaknesses were reviewed to find the main points of view about the major problems. The most significant finding was unacceptable method, Grammar translation method (GTM) used to teach English language in Iran. This paper will have a short look at to the other researchers' opinions, the judgments and insights achieved in some of papers that researches have explored such as textbooks, limited- time, using Persian language in the English classroom and curriculum matters which could be the main descriptive issues in this paper.

Keywords: *Speaking Proficiency, Using Persian Language, GTM method, Textbooks design, Limited – time*

Overview:

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.

For the majority of people, the most important aim of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate and speak in that language. This learning could be through communication and make relationship with the others and send and receive messages effectively and negotiate meaning (Rubin & Thompson, 1994: 131). Nowadays, due to the different situation people think about how to speak and communicate efficiently in foreign language learning which it becomes much more important than reading and writing Jing Meng (2009). Therefore, a vast and huge number of information about language learning modes and methods is applicable regardless of what learner's first language is that will support them in their communication and speaking skill in language.

Learners Needs, Textbooks and Limited-Time:

For many years research in foreign and second language development in natural as well as formal setting has encouraged us to pay attention to the learner and learning oriented activity. Therefore, currently, there has been more and more emphasis on the basic role of the learner in the language learning process. Speaking English is usually the first step to learn a second or foreign language which preferable than the other three English language skills (listening, reading and writing).

In the elaborating the speech of DeVito (1986) researchers has tried to define that speaking is a process of conveying some messages through talking, gesture language and using some instruments which were the human first communication way and in the shadow of technology and relationship with others, people were taught how they improve this connection via international language. Although, it seems there have been some obstacles in this process in some of non-native countries moreover, there have been observing major problems in the learning of this language. When a process of language learning has difficulty it means that the learning is not completed and is still poorly defined in learning protocols and some wrong issues in relation with.

Experience has proved that if the learners have given an obligated to present a high-quality speech, they will search about the accuracy and goodness of their speaking; due to this fact, they were tired to have successful role in their presentation. It is found that if they feel their duty well, the learning and the procedure improvement of speaking skill will be increased effectively and fruitfully. This succeed is because of their

Corresponding Author: (Romana) Iran Dolati, Department of Language, Mahabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Mahabad, Iran.
E-mail: romi1356@yahoo.com

requirements and attempting to solve their problems in the association with the great quality in speaking proficiency.

In the following of this issue 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. This claim has been supported by some researchers like Makarova, Rifkin (2000) Moreover, Rifkin asserts that learners' beliefs (including their preferences) about the learning process are "of critical importance to the success or failure of any student's efforts to master a foreign language" (p. 394). However, on other hand, Allwright (1984) says, "very many teachers seem to find it difficult to accept their learners as people with an optimistic contribution to make to the instructional process" (p. 167). Additionally, Based on Bada and Okan,(2000), many teachers acknowledge the need to understand learners' preferences, but they may not essentially consult learners in conducting language activities. Teachers may believe that learners are not able of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn. In the following, researchers like Block (1994, 1996) asserted that learners do have an awareness of what goes on in classes and that teachers should therefore, make an attempt to align their task orientation to that of learners. Breen (cited in Block, 1996) showed that students were able to identify specific techniques adopted by the teacher that they preferred and believed that it helped them with understanding the new language. In relation with this issue, Nunan (1989) describes two Australian studies that show learners favor traditional learning activities over more communicative activity types. Some students want more opportunities to participate in free conversation, expressing their wish towards a more communicatively oriented approach. This research about those students means they were interested in to participant to the conversation classes and it will be their motivation to learn English language with the application of the other three skills in the future. On the other hand, there are those who would prefer more emphasis on grammar teaching (Bada and Okan). As it is clear, the learners' requirement is under more focusing. Along the same line Nunan, D. (1988:177) says "no curriculum can claim to be truly learner-centered unless the learners' subjective needs and perceptions relating to the process of learning are taken into account". Regarding to Nunan , the speaking process is the learners' subjective therefore, this need has to be taken into account.

Based on Maxine Eskenazi (2009) under his study there are some main and various elements and issues in the interaction with the students in order to learn speaking skill. Also in the following it 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. With respect to the study of Bernstein *et al.,* (1989) the spoken language proficiency of non- natives generally, and the techniques should be developed for increasing these students 'abilities to learn to speak. He also mentioned that pronunciation, stress and intonation are the major speaking skill factors deserving of special concentration and attention. Although, many teachers acknowledge the need to understand the ways in which learners differ in terms of needs and preferences; they may not consult learners in conducting language activities. The basis for such reluctance to cooperate may be that learners are not generally regarded capable of expressing what they want or need to learn and how they want to learn it (Bada & Okan, 2000). Besides, it is argued by many teachers, quite rightly, that in some societies, like Iran, with a top-down curriculum, social roles of teachers and learners are so rigidly drawn that expecting learners to participate in decision-making in the classroom may not be viewed as appropriate which is one the key factors in Iranian society (Eslami R. & Valizadeh, 2004). The traditional learning styles and habits of the learners may influence learners' perceived self-confidence and their knowledge base to make informed choices in relation to instructional activities. In these contexts promoting learners' participation in the educational process needs to be done with care and sensitivity.

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, suing 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.

Curriculum substance and Focus on Reading Comprehension:

Generally, Iranian students' national curriculum for teaching English formally as a foreign language started from the second year in junior high school. For each week, the students had at least three hours of formal instruction in English language in a week. The teaching approach consisted of a combination between grammar-translation and audio-lingual method. This combination was considered of central consideration for teaching in all schools.

One of the main aims of the national curriculum was to teach the four skills of English language. However, it was found that for many years, English language teaching in Iran within its education system, the component that gets most priority was reading comprehension. Grammar and other skills were explained and defined in the framework of reading. Teaching four language skills has also been emphasized as one of the core plans of the national syllabus. However, careful analysis of the curriculum document suggests that its main application is about reading comprehension and grammar. It is the case, because each skill is defined in the framework of reading. Furthermore, the bulk of the document is devoted to a presentation of reading strategies and how to teach this skill as well as teaching grammar.

It was found as a worried case in relation with the giving much insistences on reading comprehension and grammar which has become one of the most serious matters in increasing the Iranian students' difficulties in spoken English.

The teachers had to obey the education system and focus on reading and grammar skills for the past 20 years. The spoken component of English language has been treated as unimportant matter in education system, so that, it is seemed not only speaking skill but also English language is going to out from the education majors in the schools and universities. The teachers admitted the usefulness of the use of contemporary materials to teach and learn English language. Unfortunately, the lacks of these materials cause a significant number of students to lose their interests to learn English language. In addition, the time spent on learning grammar and reading comprehension was so much that not only speaking skill but also English language learning has lost its value in Iranian schools and universities. Although, the grammar skill is emphasized in these schools, insights from the findings showed that students' inabilities to make correct sentences to converse was not due to their weakness in grammar (they memorized some formula and structure to make sentences in their drills) but because of passing an exam and achieving mark. Obviously, a few of students were mastered on the English language in all four skill and the rest were passed at least mark.

GTM and CLT Methods:

This is essentially on methods used in the English classrooms. The approach of teaching English in Iran was found to be teacher–centered. One of the English language teaching (ELT) approaches is Grammar Translation Method (GTM) which focuses on grammatical rules, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts, doing written exercises. As it is clear each section of English class lessons was dependent on teacher and the role of students is the techniques that is pointed in this method; doing a wide range of exercises, activities or tasks used in the language classroom for realizing lesson objectives. GTM requires a teacher–centered approach to explain and translate English grammar to Persian and vice-versa and students are good listeners; due to this matter, they can memorize the formulas and adapt English language

structures to Persian grammar and structures. This was found to be the main duty of students and later to drill and prepare themselves for exam.

Based on the different tests and surveys on students and teachers in many schools in Iran carried out by Mahdi Dahmardeh (2010) and Azam Noora (2008) it can be claimed that the method used is actually not effective. This method, in fact, drives students away from these schools as this compels students to refer to outside institutions to learn spoken English. At a glance, it is found the importance of this method in improving the learners' learning and their attitudes forward to develop their communication is not benefit. Due to this fact, it can be stated that the central and fundamental characteristic of communication language teaching (CLT) is that "the most of everything that has done has done with communicative intent" (Larsen-Freeman cited in Rao 2002, p.81)

It has been accepted that learning a foreign language is more than a simple system of rules. Language is now generally seen as a dynamic resource for the creation of meaning. According to the advocates of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), it is generally accepted that there is a need to distinguish between learning that and knowing how. In other words, there must be a distinction between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively and appropriately when communicating. In 2007 the first Iranian national curriculum for teaching foreign languages was being developed by a team who was working under the supervision of the Ministry of Education based on CLT. Considering the extent of compatibility of the curriculum with CLT was felt to be important in evaluating the degree of success in achieving the goals of CLT. There were also efforts taken into consideration in order to consider the ELT in Iran from other perspectives. To do so, since the current programme and textbooks had been designed prior to introducing the new curriculum; therefore, it was felt necessary to consider them as well in the following of Dahmardeh (2006). Respecting to Sato, (2002) a growing number of studies indicate that classrooms in which CLT is used effectively are rare. Based on Savignon (2002, p.2), "the term communicative attached itself to programs that used a notional-functional syllabus based on needs assessment". But in truth the trend which has come to be known as CLT originated in the mid- 1960s as a result of two related concerns. According to Tudor, (1996) one of these concerns was discontent with the essentially code-based view of language teaching found in the approaches most widely practiced at that time (Audio Lingual and Grammar-Translation Method); the other was the desire to develop course design structures which were more flexible and more responsive to students' real word communicative needs.

According to Savignon (2002) CLT refers to both processes and goals in classroom learning. Communicative competence plays a vital role within CLT. Competence is defined in terms of the expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning and looks at both psycholinguistic and sociocultural perspectives in SLA research to account for its development (Savignon, 1997). The term communicative competence was introduced into the field by Hymes in 1971, implied earlier by Wales and Marshall (1966) and Jakobovits (1970). This was presented as a reaction to Chomsky's characterisation of the linguistic competence of the ideal native speaker (Hymes, 1971). Hymes' theory of communicative competence was intended to represent the use of language in social contexts, and the observance of sociolinguistic norms of appropriateness. Carrasquillo (1994) further elaborated that the focus of communicative competence has been the elaboration and implementation of programmes and methodologies that promote the development of functional language through pupils' participation in communicative events in which second language learners communicate with speakers of the target language.

Regarding to Ellis (1994) communicative competence consists of the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language. It could be argued that communicative competence includes the ability to use linguistic forms to perform communicative acts and to understand communicative functions. To sum up, communicative competence includes knowing not only the form of language, but also what to say to whom and how to say it appropriately in any given situation. It deals with both social and cultural knowledge that speakers are presumed to have which enables them to use and interpret linguistic forms as well as meanings. Although, it is tried to replace GTM but, unfortunately, teachers are continuing their own methods.

The usage of Persian language in teaching English language:

Our findings showed that, 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 Turky 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.

Discussions and Conclusions:

According to Mahdi Dahmardeh (2010) Iranian textbooks could not meet the requirements of the learners and the teachers. As a result, it emphasized structural methods and ignored the communication role of the language. Iranian Education Ministry should think about this seriously. Technological materials such as those using TV, video and movie were available in Institutions and those who were interested to learn English could enroll in these Institutions. Nevertheless, materials used in school had been textbooks.

Many learners wished their teachers would consult others and know their actual needs in relation to learning language activities. Unfortunately, they were never asked about it due to their teachers 'beliefs on students' inabilities to express their requests and needs that they want to know or to learn. However, some researchers like (Block 1994, 1996) claims that the learners should be aware of what goes on in classes and their teachers should meet their students' requirements to learn in class.

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

Although, GTM method is not really usual method for teaching in Iran however, it should be given opportunities to students to drawing themselves forward the language creatively by practicing some substitution drills to dialogue with their partner thus, it will be the basic eager for communication thus, by increasing the CLT method they will attempted to understand the structures and formulas instead of memorization which it is one of their problems in making good sentences to converse and try to converse together. According to Harmor (1991) one of the more effective and interesting – ways of presenting GTM method is to let students see/or hear a new language, drawing their attention in a number of different ways to the grammatical elements of which it is made. Based on this words Mahdi Dahmardeh (2010) says that the first and fundamental problem which refers to grammar drills is its contradiction with the basic and primary principles of CLT obviously is its emphasizes on drilling exercises. In order to achieve a good level of speaking skill and having high quality of communication ability the essential matter is using different varieties of methods for learning English. Based on Azam Noora (2008) English speaking and communication skill requires a well- structured teacher training and useful method in relation to communication.

Recommendation:

The following recommendations for further researcher could be possibly improve the findings on this area:

a) Based on the study carried out, it is recommended that similar research to be conducted should take into account other types of factors of Iranian English language learning weaknesses used in this study. Therefore , time, students' psychological problems, CLT method , teachers' regulated method for teaching and other types of factors and problems need to be added to tested and studied. The comparisons of these factors are essential in order to find out the most effective type of English language learning methods in particular speaking skill that can be used in English language learning.

b) Besides that, it is also recommended that the ability of the subjects (students) to be varied from advanced, intermediate and low level of proficiency. These subjects need to be grouped separately according to

their abilities of English speaking proficiency and comparison will be made among the groups. By having these three levels, the appropriate questionnaires should be designed and the finding will be easy to classify and it can be given a clear evidence of which group is in the lowest level of weaknesses. Thus, the best way of English speaking skill method will be advised to come over to their problem.

c) Another recommendation is that the subjects that were chosen for the study can also be selected from different schools which consist of only female students or only male students. And also the new graduated teachers from universities in this subject who can give more effectively information

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