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The Study of EFL Students' Perceptions of Their Problems, Needs and Concerns over Learning English: The Case of MA Paramedical Students

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Abstract

Many English language courses in academic settings are based on the principle that language should be related to the purpose for which students are expected to use language after their studies. But the majority of the MA students are dissatisfied with the current ESP courses. Learning of English at MA level in Iran catches attention of few researchers especially when the issue is related to the classroom situations. Realizing the need for more investigation, this study aimed at exploring Iranian EFL students' perceptions of their problems, needs and concerns over learning English at the university context using a qualitative approach. Data were drawn from a series of questions regarding what the students' English problems and their English educational needs are. The questions were administered to 69 English students in four intact nursing and midwifery groups. The data were enriched by arranging semi-structured interviews to fill in the gaps in answers. The main inhibition in learning English was the role of English in the society as a foreign language and attrition mainly due to intervals between phases of learning English and lack of free time to spend on learning English. The results also revealed that reading, translating and writing skills have been rated as the most important skills needed. Furthermore, the students indicated need for listening and speaking skills. Hence, there is an urgent need for revision and reconsideration of English instruction in the Iranian educational system in a way that help students fulfill their needs at MA level.

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1. The Status Quo

English language teaching in Iran has a history of, at least, more than fifty years. Although it has been in progress through its lifetime (for example, changing school books, moving towards employing more knowledgeable teachers, providing teachers with in-service courses, creating language institutes all over the country), still it doesn't enjoy a good status quo; students' scores on English exams at the state school levels can prove this claim (Valai, 2011). Learning of English as a foreign language is always a challenging task (Akbari, 2015). Especially, when it comes to the places where English serves a very limited purpose, it becomes more crucial and painstaking to teach and learn.

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 and Khodi, 2014). Twelve years of school study do not make students mastery over English. Even though students are studying English, they are not able to produce even a single sentence without any grammatical error in English. The reason stated for this is that they study school subjects from the examination point of view only. This is true with English language too. Our examination system is such that it tests students' rote memorization rather than testing their analytical and creative skills. In this process, they memorize lessons, reproduce them in exam halls and forget them in the same day itself. Students learn basic grammar at school level for the purpose of passing only in the examinations and not to face any real life situations (Akbari, 2015).

To be successful in University Entrance Examination, as with MA Entrance Exam, 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. In Iran, since Iranians speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is little chance to learn English through day-to-day interaction.

University students in almost all fields of study are required to pass a number of credits in English (Mehrani and Khodi, 2014). Iranian university students at the undergraduate level of different disciplines have to pass English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course which utilizes a text-centered approach and can be described as examination-centered. In most disciplines, students are optionally required to study related articles to their course in English language. However, most of the books studied at the undergraduate level are translated into Persian.

At the graduate level, the problem gets worse since students are expected to read the most recently published English reference books and articles and translate them into Persian. Above all, students majoring in different disciplines are optionally required to write academic articles in English to publish them in reliable English journals. Language needs as well as wants of students in a particular field are different at BA, MA, and PhD levels. For instance, while BA students can survive with basic reading skills, MA and PhD students are required to read English texts more extensively and sometimes write in English as well.

1.1. ESP in Iran

English plays an eminent role in higher education all over the world. There has been a worldwide growth in demand for English for Academics courses (Jordan, 1997). English, the lingua franca of all sciences, has come out in non-English speaking countries as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Ghanbari, 2010). ESP is a developing branch of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Iran (Moslemi, Moinsadeh & Dabaghi, 2011).

Teaching of English in the Gulf region in general catches attention of many researchers and scholars (Alam Khan, 2011). After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978), there has been a doctrinaire move supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to set up identical discipline-based EAP programs for academics (Eslami, 2010).

A significant aspect of language instruction on the higher educational level is learning English for a given purpose, with the specific aims of getting to know specialized vocabulary, increasing one's knowledge about the subject matter by reading in English, and being able to use the language in the prospective profession or study area by becoming prepared for some common situations such as carrying out higher level studies, going for an interview or conducting professional communication (Varnosfardani, 2009). So, careful examination of the expectations and perceptions of learners and instructors is seen to be important in determining the success of ESP courses.

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