Challenges of implementing ELT in an EFL context

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Abstract. The current study aimed to investigate and explore the challenges of English language teaching in Iran from Ardebil students' points of view and bring about opportunities to call out the students' opinions and consequently make some reforms in English language teaching based on their needs. Cluster random sampling was utilized and the participants of the study were 324 students (181 males & 134 female students). The required data were gathered during the fall term of 2012 through a researcher-made questionnaire. It consisted of 5 open-ended questions which investigated the students' perceptions of the efficiency and deficiency of English language teaching in Iran and required them to give some suggestions on how to improve the present situation of English language teaching in Iran in order to take more advantages of it. The instrument was first piloted before it was administered. The open-ended items were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively and their results suggested that from students' perspectives, English language is important in all aspects of life and it is the most important language of the world; however, we cannot take the most advantage of it due to numerous problems and we should have some major and minor changes in different aspects it in order to take more advantage of it.

Keywords: ELT, EFL, Challenge, Failure Factors, Attitude

1. INTRODUCTION

The fact of nurturing the people with the first-hand knowledge of the world in the current societies is so important and crucial that there is a strive for getting the new ways and methods of teaching and training among the nations in an effective way and equipping them with the innovative and modern information and knowledge of the world. It is obvious that the achievement of every society depends on the success or failure of its education system and whether its objectives are achieved; nevertheless, there are always some unexpected problems that prevent educational systems from achieving their goals. These problems can not only have excessive financial and social losses on education system, they can also have lots of irrecoverable mental and psychological consequences on students and their families as well and consequently on society.

One of the courses in high schools which have the lowest grade in students' achievements is the English course (Sadeghi, 2002) and the results of researches have shown that failure rates in English course are high. English is the most frequently spoken language of the world and it is the most important language for connecting people all over the world and it has an undeniable place in educational curriculum in Iran. Yet, our students in schools do less than satisfactory and students' knowledge of English after being graduated from high schools is insufficient and useless and language learners after finishing the instructional programs are unable of uttering even the simplest sentences (Bigdeli, 2010).

The evidence provided in this paper shows that educational failure rate is high in Ardebil province and unfortunately, most of the students in Ardebil high schools do not show much interest for learning English and English has the lowest rank of graduation among general

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courses (Sadeghi, 2002). Since the objectives of Iranian education system are mostly directed towards the students and fulfilling their needs, it seems important to conduct a study through which we could detect the failure factors perceived by the students themselves and try to eliminate them. As Fonseca and Conboy (2006, p.1) stated, "one approach to acquiring this information is to improve our understanding of what the students themselves perceive as the causes and antecedents of school failure". Therefore, it seems important to investigate the reasons of these lags in English course and find ways for preventing the waste of more financial and human resources. In fact, students' perception of their failures is a neglected issue that has a "potential role that students might play in school improvement" (Rudduck, Chaplain, & Wallace, 1996, p.31). So, in the present study, we aim to trace the reasons of failure factors in English course among the high school students in Ardebil City based on the perceptions of the students.

2. BACKGROUND

There are lots of factors and variables in the system of education which dependently or independently seem important in influencing and directing success and failure of the students. Factors like: Student-based factors, teacher-based factors, factors related to the family, factors related to the instructional instruments, and factors related to the instructional contents seem to be influential and common in most of the studies conducted regarding the students' failure factors.

Due to the high rate of failure in the English course between the generations of 2004-2009 of the English language major in the Universidad de Quintana Roo in Mexico, Franco and Domínguez (2010) conducted a study to find out which of the causes of failure were in the English courses from the students' perspective. Since it was a case study, the participants were the UQROO (the University of Quintana Roo) students that entered the Teaching English as a Foreign Language program in 2004 and who failed an English course at any level from I through VIII. They used both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study showed that the students' low motivation due to the factors like the families' pressure to study the majors in entering the university and also some other participants' not knowing what they really wanted at that time led to their failure in English courses. In addition to these, all of the participants demonstrated to have a low achievement motivation because there was a tendency to avoid failure, and by not being confident in their abilities, they evaded situation where failing was present. However, a finding of the study which should be looked at cautiously and we need further research to make sure about is the claim by Franco and Domínguez (2010) that assessment was not believed to be an influential factor regarding failure.

Another study related to the students' insufficient learning and their high levels of failure was conducted in Ardebil province by Bigdeli (2010) in order to determine the factors related to the students' insufficient learning in English course in secondary and high school grades. He used questionnaires for the teachers and the students separately and analyzed the collected data using the exploratory factor analysis. He concluded that, according to the students and teachers, the teachers' interest and capability in teaching English was the main reason of the lower level of students' learning in English course and so, he commented on the need for talented teachers who are professionals in their fields.

Due to the importance of removing the education failure among the first-grade high school students, Fani et al. (2010) conducted a study in Shiraz aimed at assessing the effects of educational factors on the educational failure of the first-grade high school students of Shiraz in 2009-2010. They categorized the educational factors for failure of the students as the following subsets: teaching methods, evaluation methods, the Iranian textbooks and their qualities, and the schools' management factors. 2175 students and 86 teachers took part in the study and questionnaires were used to gather the data. They analyzed the findings using the descriptive

and inferential statistics and reported that the factors of the teaching methods, evaluation methods, the contents and the quality of the textbooks used for the high school students, and the management of the schools are influential in the students' failure. They suggested the high school teachers to give the primary importance to the mastery of the different teaching methods and their applications in different situations regarding the students' needs. They also referred to a need for the systematic methods of evaluation and revision of the current textbooks used in high schools in order to prevent failure among the students.

Shahzad et al. (2011) conducted a study in Pakistan under the title of "Identification of the Causes of Students' Low Achievement in the Subject of English". The main objectives of the study were to identify the causes of student's low achievement in the subject of English, to analyze the results of the students in the subject of English, to identify the role of curriculum in students' low achievement, to analyze the role of teachers in students low achievement, and to identify the impact of environment on low achievement of students in the subject of English at secondary level. All the male Head teachers and English teachers of Government Secondary Schools of North West Frontier Province were taken as the population of the study. 52 head teachers and 208 English teachers were selected as the sample of the study. The instrument used for the data collection was a questionnaire which had been validated before the application. Finally, it was concluded that traditional curriculum which was around the content/knowledge along with some other factors like harsh classroom environment were the main causes of students' low achievement in English.

In another similar case, in order to find out the causes of rising failure of the students in the subject of English in Pakistan, Shahzada et al. (2012) conducted a study which was descriptive in nature. 100 English teachers were randomly selected as the sample of the study. A questionnaire for secondary school teachers was developed to collect data. The researchers concluded that teachers of English were not qualified and well-trained and they did not teach English in a proper manner. Some of the causes of rising failure of the students were due to the fact that audio-visual aids were not used in English class. So, they recommended the teachers of English to use modern teaching methods, to get linguistics knowledge, and to be trained in phonology and phonetics.

In a study conducted in King's College (London), Todres et al. (2012) interviewed eight re-sitting and ten high-achieving students which identified three core themes for the study: engagement with learning; reflections on learning methods and experiences and the application of learning to future practice. Then, using exploratory qualitative study, factors like attitudes, behaviors, and motivations appeared to contribute to success or failure at medical school. The findings also suggested ways to improve appraisal, remediation and support mechanisms for students.

Due to the students' poor perform in the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examinations in Lesotho, Lekhetho (2013) used a quantitative design to study the collected data from a total sample of 808 respondents consisting of students, teachers, principals, deputy principals, school board members, education secretaries and Ministry of Education officials for the aim of probing the participants' perceptions about student performance in COSC examinations. Using mainly frequency counts, the results reflected that the main reasons for the students' poor performance were as follows: a lack of selectivity, a lack of commitment on the part of teachers and students, and the grinding poverty afflicting mainly rural households, which made it impossible for parents to support their children's education.

3. METHOD

3.1 Participants

The population of the present study consisted of all high school students (15,843 females & 18,730 males) in Ardebil City during the fall term of 2012. Ten high schools were selected from all high schools in Ardebil City through cluster random sampling. The sampling was carried out to ensure that at least 380 high school male and female students were randomly selected to take part in this study (based on Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table with a confidence level of 95% and the population of 25,000 to 50,000). The population of the study after the sampling and counting the dropouts became 324 students (181 male students and 134 females and 9 people who did not specify their gender).

3.2 Instruments

For gathering the required information, a questionnaire was used for the students with four open-ended questions. The items of the questionnaire were developed by the present researcher through consultation with different experts and teachers in teaching English and also studying different resources, articles, and source books, as well as using the findings of the pilot study with 30 high school students.

3.3 Procedure

After making sure of the validity of the revised questionnaire, the present researcher administered the final version to the target group. The questionnaire was distributed during the students' class hour during the fall term of 2012. The open-ended items were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively and the common themes were extracted, grouped and compared.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Now, let's go to the analysis of the findings of the open-ended questions that the students were asked to answer and inform the researcher about their attitudes towards the English course and its importance in their future and also their views about the target language culture and the importance of learning English as a course in their curriculum as well as their comments on the instructional materials. We also analyzed their views about how they like the English course to be and what they think is important and motivating in English course.

1. What is your attitude towards the English language and its culture?

The students believed that the English language is the most important language of the world and learning this international language is necessary for everybody (61.5%), but, unfortunately, there hasn't been enough attention to it (15.9%) and both its content and method of teaching are improper (52%). For example, we haven't paid enough attention to the productive skills and we have only been manipulating the form (40.8%). Some students related this lack of attention to the political strategies of the country and they talked about the problem that most of the authorities don't have good opinions about the English speaking countries culturally and politically (5.63%). Some wrote about the importance of the English language in bringing in the facilities and modern technologies and they believed that it is the way of the modern life (22%). They also believed that it is the common language of the people around the world and we need

it to get connected to the world and meet success in life and development (61.5%). A student stated that: "While the English speaking people have one of the most complete and modern cultures of the world, which makes everybody eager to learn the English language, we have separated teaching English language from teaching its culture" and we haven't been good enough in using its culture in our textbooks. Another student also referred to Imam Khomeini's remark that: "Nowadays it is required for all Muslims to learn a foreign language". Some others believed that we shouldn't be so strict in teaching English and we can be successful in this field if we make the students interested as well as by improving their intellectual and linguistic abilities (16.4%). It is important to state that some of the students believed that the English course had no good for them and they didn't have any interest in it (17%) and even some believed that: "It should be omitted from among the formal courses taught in high schools".

2. How is it important for you in your life to learn English?

Almost all students believed that the English language is important in all aspects of life including the social, political, cultural, economic, and more importantly scientific aspects of the people's lives (63.3%). As an example, a student stated: "Nowadays, one should know English for doing almost everything in their life, and if anybody doesn't know it, it is as if he is blind". The students also suggested that regarding the quick developments of the world in science and technology, we need a way to keep up with this mass of information and the English language is the only way to access the most recent knowledge of the world and to make our country developed (22%). They also wrote about the importance of the English language in using the media and technologies like the internet, laptop, PC, cell phone, tablet, etc. (12.2%). Yet, a student believed that "since I only use English when I am working with my cell-phone or computer, it seems that it doesn't have any important functions in life". Some of the students suggested that it is the way of connecting to the people around the world (13%) and getting informed of the cultures and the ways of living of other people and enjoying their literature and it is also a gate to the modern life (9.8%). It was also believed that people knowing English may have better social positions, confidence, self-esteem, social connections and even higher prestige and acceptability (4.69%). Among other functions of learning the English language are getting the chance of education in foreign countries, using it in case of traveling abroad or visiting tourists (13%), getting better jobs and even using it as a job in different fields (7.5%), getting familiar with better ways of living (less than 9%), and developing linguistic competence and eloquence (16%). Related to these findings, a student stated that "as I am going to study in medical university, it is necessary for me to learn English".

3. What do you think about the current English text books used in English classes and how do you think the English course books can be more efficient for you?

The students gave interesting answers to this question. 52 percents of the participating students had the common opinion that the textbooks used for the high school students are out of date and they haven't considered the recent innovations and developments in language teaching and some believed that they are non-effective, boring, unattractive, and not applicable for the real life. For example, some students stated that "studying them is a waste of time, and they should totally be revised". So, they suggested that the books should be updated in accordance with the students' ages and interests and there should be coordination between the contents (29%). They also complained about the priority of grammar and translation of the book to listening, speaking, and pronunciation and believed that the books should primarily help the students in productive skills and meaning making (40.8%). They also suggested that it is better to start teaching English from the earliest ages (16.9%) using colored books with fewer pages, and media and pictures, and through teaching the most frequent vocabulary, idioms, various exercises, and authentic sentences and dialogues with interesting themes (29%). They also emphasized the role of the teachers and the collaborations we should have between the teacher

and the students and the situations the teacher can make to improve teaching (9.8%). Some of the students also believed that the time assigned for teaching English is not enough and we should devote more time to this important course (8.9%). Several students suggested that: "We shouldn't be bound to the textbooks and we can bring in realia and authentic materials from outside the classroom" (8.4%) and they also talked about the need to have English for specific courses like chemistry and biology (1.8%).

4. What challenges do you face with ELT in your classes and what suggestions do you have to eradicate these problems and make the English classes more effective and fruitful?

Some students believed that we should have free discussion classes in English with the focus on the pronunciation and meaning making and the English should be spoken in English classes (10.7%) and some other declared the need for classes for grammar and problem solving for the students (11.7%) and they stated that: "We should avoid having the classes merely for passing the exams or entering universities". They also believed that we need classes with the modern methods of language teaching (32.8%) like using the language lab, the internet, media, movies with the English language, pictures, catalogues in English, making the classes interesting with authentic topics and collaboration between the teachers and the students in English, making use of the students potentials and their opinions in the process of teaching by asking them questions and making them involved, and paying special attention to the less gifted students by making groups of students and not overexpecting them (9.85%). They also declared their need for less populated classes and even special places for teaching languages (7.9%). They also believed that the teachers should introduce and use more than one textbook in classes (3.2%) and make ongoing evaluations (5.1%). The respondents also indicated that those who are responsible should solve the teachers' problems like social and financial ones to let them not bring in their personal problems to the class (2.8%), and the instructors should also be constantly evaluated and their teaching methods should always be renewed. And they also talked about the need to have qualified people in the positions of the teachers and other responsible people (like the managers) (15.9%). They (9.3%) believed that if we want to be more successful in English teaching, we should change our attitudes towards it instead of trying to devalue that language and culture (by propagandas and slogans). They also referred to the success of English teaching in institutes and claimed that: "If we start teaching English from the childhood with the methods common in institutes, we would gain better results in English" (7.9%). Finally, they believed that the hours of English teaching are not enough for the students and they should be increased (8.9%).

The shortcomings which can be seen in Iranian curriculum do not mean to take no actions. Despite the problems and shortcomings that we can see in ELT in Iran, the teachers should not be bound to singles textbooks, materials, and methods and they should always try and use the most effective ones by keeping themselves motivated and updated. The teachers can develop their own products and softwares based on the needs of their students and their teaching situations. They can use their own versions of teaching aids using the methods of developing the softwares and products like the waterfall model of Royce (n.d). In order to make the programming meet the needs of users and learners, Royce (n.d) described a 'waterfall model' of software development which involves a sequence of set events where one flows into the next. This is illustrated in figure 2. Royce (n.d) suggested that if it is improved by feedback and iteration, this process would ensure that needs are established before the next phase of development which would build on them and so irrelevant design can be avoided (cited in Jordan et al. 2008).
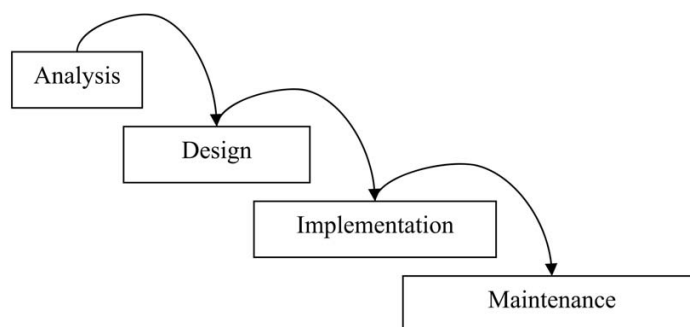
Figure 2. Waterfall model of software development (From Van Vliet, 2000; cited in Jordan et al. 2008).

5.   CONCLUSION

The aim of current study was to investigate and explore the challenges of English language teaching in Iran from Ardebil students' points of view and bring about opportunities to call out the students' opinions and consequently make some reforms in English language teaching based on their needs. The results of the study clearly showed that there are lots of unexpected problems and shortcomings that are not under the teachers' and students' controls: there have been no planning and specifications in the general plans provided for the contents used in the textbooks for these instructional aids and it becomes hard for the teachers to use the relevant resources and their own content and books for their classes which may be of more help while having in mind other criteria. Some of these criteria include the followings: limited time specified for the English course (once a week for most grades); fixed set of content which mostly does not allow the fruitful communication between the teachers and students and also its priority on grammar and translation and keeping the listening and speaking skills as minimum, the long lists of vocabulary which should be recited by the students without paying any attention to the current methods of vocabulary learning, and the negligence of culture. In fact, the recent developments and innovations and the current body of knowledge dominating the world are viewed skeptically in Iranian ELT textbooks.

It is inevitable in modern learning systems to make extensive use of multimedia-enriched learning instruction and learning objects, from still images and illustrations to more complex forms such as pieces of animation, simulation, and video often combined with narration, audio clips or voice-over (Jordan et al., 2008). So, the modern teacher should be enhanced with the knowledge of the instructional instruments and how to handle them. Teachers need to be aware of social and contextual developments in the world; they cannot limit themselves to the classroom atmosphere or to the abstract reformulation of knowledge. "The world enters the classroom on two legs. Already, networks and new technologies are being used in ways that could not have been predicted when they were developed" (Jordan et al. 2008, p.250).

We can conclude that despite the problems and shortcomings that we can see in ELT in Iran, the teachers should not be bound to single textbooks, materials, and methods and they should always try and use the most effective ones by keeping themselves motivated and updated. The teachers also should be aware of the fact that there is no single theory of learning and no single method of teaching that can help them confront all of the challenges and problems of their teaching context and it is the task of the teachers to use their own intuitive ability and experiential knowledge to decide what works and what does not work for their own classrooms (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Professional and active teachers can always develop their own products and softwares based on the needs of their students and their teaching situations, no matter of the shortcomings of the system of education.

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