Reflecting on performance-influencing factors in English course from high and low achieving students

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Abstract This paper investigates high achieving and low achieving students' perception of factors of importance in their achievements and failures in English course in Ardebil city. To accomplish the purpose cluster random sampling was utilized and with 324 students (181 males & 134 female students) through a researcher-made questionnaire. Using t-tests and ANOVA, the items of the questionnaire were analyzed. The findings revealed that from the high and low achieving students' points of view the following factors were believed to be more influential in high school students' low achievement: factors related to the content, teachers-based factors, factors related to the instructional instruments, factors related to the family, and the students-based factors. It was also shown that between the low achieving and high achieving students there were statistically significant differences in terms of their perceptions of the student-based factors (p= 0.015) and factors related to the family (p=0.014).

Keywords: High achieving, Low achieving, Reflection, English Course, EFL context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education can be defined as a set of acts based on which the adequate and favorable situations for flourishing the talents of the citizens are prepared. So, the main goal of the education in every society is the training of its nations. Accordingly, in every country, the education system is one of the most important systems of that country and most countries devote their highest budgets to teaching and training their nations and equipping them with the first-hand information and knowledge of the world. These systems are responsible for preparing people for the society who can at least in part show the efficiency of the training and education they have undergone.

Educational failure is a factor showing the unsuccess of any education system in reaching their goals. It includes the different senses and aspects of the students' educational failures including the complete departure of the school, leaving the school before the pre-planned period, replication of the previous year's grade, the lower quality of learning among the students compared to what it is supposed to be, and an emphasis on recitation instead of acquisition of knowledge which will not last long. Abdi et al. (2003) included the successive absence of school, unwillingness and not being interested to school, departing the school, and the low quality of learning and education among the students and the teachers compared to what it is supposed to be as different aspects and sorts of educational failure.

Educational failure or students' performing less than our expectations can be a shift in students' performance from a satisfactory level to an undesirable level. In other words, if there would be a distance between the students' potential capacity and their present situations, it can be called educational failure. It is implied that educational failure is not limited to only the

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dropouts and the leaving of schools by the students; but, any case in which students' performance is less than their potential capacities and aptitude is called educational failure.

Based on the findings of the studies conducted by different researchers like Sadeghi (2002), Abdi et al. (2003) and Bigdeli (2010) in Ardebil province, the high school students have lots of difficulties in English course which can lead to educational failure and its following problems and consequences like the loss of time, money, and other financial and emotional problems imposed to students, families, and the education system. The results of a study in 2000-2001 in the first grade of high school in Ardebil province showed that due to the replication of the grade of 2850 students, a sum of 5,700,000 Rials was imposed to the education system which may result in inequality of educational opportunities. It was also revealed that in the first five years of development programs the sum of 381 billion Rials in elementary level, 157 billion Rials in secondary level and 79 billion Rials in high schools was imposed to the education system for those who have replicated the grades (Abdi et al. 2003).

A look at the current situation of the society –including the high schools, universities, and the marketplaces-- shows that there seems to be some problems in achieving the mentioned goals: the number of students who are being educated while not showing any interests to the education, the teachers who are always supposed to deliver the students with the highest rankings while having the fear of being reprimanded in case they can't produce a sufficient number of students' success statistics, the situation in which the quantity is replaced with the quality, the number of students who have to pass the pre-university periods while even after being graduated from universities their situations are unclear and indeterminated, and the number of people who are filling the jobs while having the least qualifications and expertise and the others who have to do sorts of jobs different from their talents, interests, and their academic degrees, and lots of other situations which are talking about the lags we have forgotten to think about in our programmings.

The poor results in English course achievement seem to be a view showing the poor academic performance. The educational failure rate is so high and the situation is so crucial in Ardebil province that for years the research department of the province and even the governor of the Ardebil province have called the teachers, students, researchers, and other people for finding the reasons of the problem. The role of students in their own learning is a major concern of psychologists and educators today. So, as an important viewpoint, we tried to trace the factors influencing students' performance in English course based on the high and low achieving students in Ardebil city.

Based on our operational definition of the students' achievements, we defined low achievers as those who get the scores less than 12 in the final examination of the English course (in Khordad or Shahrivar of 2011-2012) and the students who get a score higher than 12 are considered as average and high achieving students.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In an outstanding study regarding the reasons of low achievement in Kansas State Board of Education in the United States in 2000, some issues like the review of the related literature dealing with the characteristics of low achievers and school factors impacting the likelihood of student academic success and interacting with their characteristics, and actions that Kansas and other states were taking with the aim of improving the achievement of students was conducted. A database of the school wide reform models and other interventions in different States of the USA alongside the data from the professional development and early childhood studies were gathered and used to improve the quality of education in Arkansas and other States of the USA.

After gathering the required data and its analysis, the results were given in section called "Schools That Work" which was indeed a list of reports to inform schools about practice to follow in order to take the most out of the available resources. As shown in table 1, an outcome of the paper is to show the next step to be taken to reduce the rates of low achievement and also to educate the low achieving students effectively.

Table 1. The report prepared for the Kansas State Board of Education in the United States with the aim of improving the achievement of students (from The report to the Kansas State Board of Education, 2000)

Policy Area	Why Important	Current Initiatives	Possible Action
1. Expanded early childhood learning opportunities for children and their families and programs that include preschool and all-day kindergarten	Some children come to school with as little as 300 hours of "early language experience" while others come with as many as 3,000. Low income children are about half as likely as other children to attend preschool, and the preschools that low income children do attend are unlikely to be rated as good or excellent. Because children learn new skills and knowledge by building on what they know, and because there is such a discrepancy between lower and higher income preschool groups in opportunity to learn, there is an achievement gap when children begin kindergarten.	a. 4-Year-Old At-Risk Program b. Early childhood certification c. Intra- and interagency early childhood committees d. Parents As Teachers e. Even Start and Migrant Even Start f. Early Childhood Special Education g. Early childhood research projects	a. Provide all 4-year-olds who may be at risk of school failure with a quality preschool program b. Provide Parents As Teachers to families until a child's 4th birthday c. Provide kindergartners with extended learning opportunities, especially if they are at risk of school failure d. Work with other stakeholders to define school readiness and to identify the indicators of readiness
2. Challenging standards and curriculum for all children	Low achieving students often receive instruction that is broken down into short, disjointed segments that do not correspond well to the children's educational needs. The curriculum they receive is less challenging and engaging than the curriculum for high achievers; and these students often lose ground through successive years of schooling. In classrooms that have been successful in educating all students, state standards are a universal presence in day.	a. Challenging state standards in core subject areas b. Inclusion of teachers in the development of standards and assessments c. Development of curriculum models d. Support of Reading Recovery and other models	a. Make professional development and technical assistance related to teaching to the standards priorities when allocating resources b. Help each district put into place a challenging and engaging curriculum that is aligned with the state standards c. Provide districts with information about research-based programs that have been effective with a broad

Anthony (2000) reported a study of the teachers' and students' perceptions of factors influencing success in mathematics and emphasized the role of motivation. Students and lecturers agreed on the importance of motivation; however, their opinions diverged in relation to factors such as the importance of active learning, help-seeking and student effort. Lecturers emphasized controllable student characteristics, while students were more prone to blame failure on course design and teaching quality (cited in Fonseca & Conboy, 2006). In another study which consisted of the interview of the residential high school students in the USA, Easton (2002) interviewed students in order to determine perceptions of learning needs. The needs for self-esteem, personal accountability, and personalized learning were the most important needs identified by the students (cited in Fonseca & Conboy, 2006).

In a study in Pars Abad, northern Iran (Ardebil province), Sadeghi (2002) determined the factors affecting the students' weak performance in English course from the teachers' points of view. He made use of a variety of instruments and techniques for eliciting the necessary information including questionnaire, interview, observation, and the researchers' self-produced instruments. The results showed that factors like: the teachers' insufficient knowledge of English; unsuitability of the goals of the English course; unstable economic and cultural conditions of families; and unorganized educational atmosphere and teaching contents have the main effects on students' weak performances in English course.

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The study conducted by Abdi et al. (2003) in order to survey the educational failure factors in Ardebil province based on the call of the governor of the Ardebil province, it was revealed that factors related to the education system like the teachers' inabilities in teaching different methods, scoring more than the students' real scores, lack of expert staffs, and no application of the available resources and educational aids are the most important factors leading to the students' performing less than the expectations. The researchers also gave the second place of importance to the factors related to planning and programming like the lack of in-service classes related to the families, insufficiency of the expert teachers, the economic and financial problems of the teachers, and the voluminous books used for the students. They made suggestions for reducing these factors of failure by taking the economic and financial problems of the teachers into account and promoting their social positions, employing the teachers by formal employments, and the teachers' keeping from complaining about the professional problems in front of the students.

In a study in Turkey, in order to determine the relationship between academic achievements and students' characteristics like demographic properties (age, gender, employed/unemployed), self-efficacy beliefs of distance education, and self-regulation and achievement goals for distance education, Ergul (2004) used questionnaire to 124 freshmen students who enrolled in Anadolu University's distance learning programs. The findings of the study showed that there was a significant correlation between self-efficacy for distance education to student's academic achievement and also between self-efficacy for distance education and self-regulation and also achievement goals. Similarly, self-regulation also correlated highly with achievement goals. But a significant relation was not found between academic achievement and other variables. Ergul (2004) concluded that motivation has a great importance in student achievement and students with higher self-efficacy beliefs have higher academic achievement.

Due to the fact that Wake County Public Schools (WCPSS) students who compared to state and national results and based on the results of a wide variety of national and state tests including the SAT, Advanced Placement (AP) exams, state End-of-Course (EOC) tests, VoCATS tests, career/technical education courses, etc., were indicated to be among the successful students in terms of their performance, persistence, and academic achievement, a study was conducted with this students in 2005-6 and the outcomes and the processes of such success were examined and identified. It was also believed that some standards should be set regarding the changing student population and rising standards in order to improve the results of the achievement of the students. The study consisted of surveying and reporting with teachers and students and it was found that factors like students' meaningful, relevant, and supportive engagement in their use of time in school and in coursework, increasing the higher-level standards in education together with advanced courses, mixing the instructional practices and including a wider variety of instructional activities, and using research-based strategies by teachers in their instruction can lead to a harmonized educational environment followed by high achieving students.

Vedder and Robe (2007) in their study in the United States warned about the emerging problems that growingly endangered the education system of the Georgia State which had with themselves the danger of raising problems in the other states too:

Costs have risen sharply over time, and productivity has likely fallen, unlike in the remainder of the U.S. economy where productivity has risen at an average annual rate of over 2 percent for over 135 years. . . . Graduation rates generally appear to be much better at the private schools than at the public schools (four of the public schools have graduation rates less than 35 percent), but even here there is wide variation at the institutional level (p.1).

They presented their study's finding in a table that can be of much help in knowing the rates of the educational failure and different topics related to this failure in the Georgia State and some strategies to overcome them (table *2*).

Table2. The Educational Attainment in the United States (from Vedder and Robe, 2007)

Dependent Variable: ATTAINMENT_2006 Method: Least Squares Sample: 150 Included observations: 50				
Variable	**Coefficient**	**Std. Error**	**t-Statistic**	**Prob.**
Constant	-0.192214	0.194486	-0.988320	0.3291
Average Appropriations (Real per Capita)	4.40E-05	9.60E-05	0.458053	0.6495
Dummy Private Tuition	-0.025700	0.016953	-1.515976	0.1376
Migration Rate	-0.361961	0.126854	-2.853377	0.0069
Growth in Real Per Capita Personal Income	0.096102	0.032358	2.969940	0.0051
Percentage of 18-24 Population enrolled in college	0.132610	0.104186	1.272827	0.2106
Average SAT Composite Score	0.000353	0.000172	2.051185	0.0470
Percentage who take SAT	0.129383	0.046340	2.792028	0.0081
Hispanic Population	0.138476	0.049452	2.800189	0.0079
Average Poverty Rate	-0.741848	0.181734	-4.082046	0.0002
Average Unmarried Households	0.632664	0.315794	2.003410	0.0521
R-squared	0.766965	Mean dependent var		0.271820
Adjusted R-squared	0.707212	S.D. dependent var		0.052325
S.E. of regression	0.028313	Akaike info criterion		-4.099438
Sum squared resid	0.031264	Schwarz criterion		-3.678793
Log likelihood	113.4859	F-statistic		12.83566

Another exploratory study which consisted of interview with high-achieving and re-sitting medical students was conducted by Todres et al. (2012) in June and July of the academic year 2007/2008 in London medical school to explore the students' perceptions of the factors influencing their academic performance. These interviews were recorded and transcribed with eight re-sitting and ten high-achieving students and then, thematic content analysis was conducted. Finally, similarities and differences in factors perceived to affect the academic performance of high-achieving and re-sitting students were identified and it was concluded that identified attitudes, behaviours 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.

Lekhetho (2013) used a quantitative design to study the reasons of the students' poor performance in the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) examinations in Lesotho. He collected data from a total sample of 808 respondents--students, teachers, principals, deputy principals, school board members, education secretaries and Ministry of Education officials--for the aim of studying the participants' perceptions about student performance in COSC examinations. He mainly used frequency counts, and the results of his study reflected that the main reasons for the students' poor performance were a lack of selectivity, commitment on the part of teachers and students, and the grinding poverty resulting in hard situations for parents to support their children's education.

3. METHOD

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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 both open-ended and closed sets of items (with 80 closed items and four open-ended questions) (see Appendix). The closed 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, and eliciting from and revising the works of some other researchers like Ne'matollahie Lahroudi (1999), Bigdeli (2010), and Shahzad et al. (2011) as well as using the findings of the pilot study with 30 high school students and 18 high school teachers. After piloting, the final questionnaire showed the reliability of %78.

3.3 Procedure

After making sure of the validity of the revised questionnaires, 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.Descriptive statistics were used for the analysis of the data. SPSS software (version 20) was used to run t-test and ANOVA test to analyze the items of the questionnaire to check the differences between the perceptions of males and female students and the differences among different grade students' perceptions. The open-ended items were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively and the common themes were extracted, grouped and compared.

4   RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the following emergent themes were identified from the analysis of the data regarding the high school students' perceptions of low achievement in English course in Ardebil City:

Table 3 shows the differences between the perceptions of low achieving and high achieving students:

Table 3. The differences of the perceptions of low achieving and high achieving students regarding the high school students' low achievement factors

Factors of low achievement	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Df	T. test	Sig.
Student-based factors	Low achievers	38	101.07	10.2	204	2.4	0.015
	High achievers	168	105.3	9.5			
Teacher-based factors	Low achievers	29	136.6	23.6	180	0.89	0.37
	High achievers	153	140.8	23.4			
Factors of family	Low achievers	39	28.7	6.7	233	2.4	0.014
	High achievers	196	31.1	5.2			
Factors of content	Low achievers	37	31.2	7.8	223	0.14	0.883
	High achievers	188	31.4	6.9			
Factors of instruments	Low achievers	40	19.7	6.8	237	0.54	0.588
	High achievers	199	20.3	6.2			

It is shown that between the low achieving and high achieving students there are statistically significant differences in terms of their perceptions of the student-based factors (p= 0.015) and factors related to the family (p=0.014), but as far as their perceptions of other factors (factors related to the content, teacher-based factors, factors related to the instructional instruments) are concerned, there are no statistically significant differences (p>0.05) which implies that these two groups did not have different perceptions of the above-mentioned factors. In sum, the following factors were believed to be more influential in high school students' low achievement from the low and high achieving students' points of view: factors related to the content, factors related to the instructional instruments, teacher-based factors, student-based factors, and factors related to the family.

The results of the current study is in line with the results of studies conducted by Sadeghi (2002), Abdi et al. (2003), Bigdeli (2010), Shahzad et al. (2011), and Shahzada et al. (2012) which show that the poor content of the English text books and their neglecting the source language culture, disorganized educational atmosphere and teaching contents, and the goals and method of teaching English in our country which are mostly based on repetition and drilling and teaching the sounds and words in isolation are among the main factors affecting the students' low achievements in English course.

Among the reasons of the lower ranks of the students in English course addressed by Sadeghi (2002), we can see some factors like the disorganized educational atmosphere and teaching contents which are believed to be the reasons of lower ranks of the students. He also criticizes the poor content of the English textbooks and their neglecting the source language culture and believes that the goals and methods of teaching English in our country are mostly based on repetition and drilling and teaching the sounds and words in isolation. The results of the work by Abdi et al. (2003) revealed that factors related to the education system are the most important factors related to the students' failure factors. These factors include sub-factors like the insufficiency of educational instruments, having the overcrowded classes, the teachers'

inabilities in teaching different methods, scoring more than the students' real scores, lack of expert staffs, and no application of the available resources and educational aids. Bigdeli (2010) also in his study showed that the lack of teaching and learning aids as well as the content and background of teaching materials are the second and third factors of the students' low achievement (after the teachers' interest and capability in teaching English) from the high school students' points of view.

Shahzad et al. (2011) in their study concluded that one of the main causes of students' low achievement in English was traditional content/knowledge oriented curriculum. Besides, harsh classroom environment, which was often rowdy, congested and noisy, was the other cause of students' low achievement in English. Shahzad et al. (2011) believed that some of the causes of increasing failure of the students were due to the fact that audio-visual aids are not used in English class and the course was not compatible with the conditions of the present time.

In recent years and decades, the birth and development of different methods like computer-based learning (CBL)—which makes use of computers to facilitate learning—has made a great change in different areas of teaching and learning like the content area and it has changed the different rules which were previously assumed by the teachers and the learners. The ultimate aim of the CBL is to develop learners who not only take responsibility for their own learning and decide when and where to interact and learn, but they also select content related to their learning goals and according to learning preferences and they determine the pitch of the lesson by interacting at their own pace and regulating and assessing their own learning through feedback (Jordan et al., 2008).

The teacher as an organizer and leader in classroom should also determine the objectives of the classroom beforehand and should not bound himself to the content of the coursebooks. If the teacher bounds himself to the book and its contents, the students won't be able to have any innovations and they won't be able to use their creativities and so, they may have problems in applying their aptitudes. Sometimes, the lack of connections between the courses and subjects students take and the real and authentic objectives may make the student worried and contradicted and he may think that the education system and its management and programmers have failed to address the main demands of the society and he may begin to ask questions like: "why are we required to study English language or the other lessons? What functions or goodnesses can it have in my everyday life?" By asking these kinds of questions, he wants to know the objectives of the contents of lessons he studies and so he tries to study the lessons which are necessary for his everyday life and so he doesn't waste the time learning the materials which seem to be worthless. He feels the need for that kind of knowledge which can be applied right after the acquisition in order to satisfy his everyday needs and can be used in the future and in his professional career for helping him gain more independence. So, it is the teacher's task to elaborate on the possible connection between the contents of the lessons and the related objectives.

5   CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the current study, the first thing to talk about is the English curriculum and the content specifications. Other than the problems we face in English classes in Iran–like the fixed set of contents, its emphasis on grammar and translation and keeping the listening and speaking skills to a minimum, its separation from the English culture, the out of date content, etc., some content used in the classroom may be beyond the capability and learning experiences of the students and their learning may be hindered. We should also consider the daily issues and other authentic contents for the aim of teaching. The curriculum should also include a variety of learning activities inside and outside the classroom. It should

not be confined just to the classroom. Learning activities in which various capabilities are taken into account can lead to the increased motivation and higher rates of learning among the students. It is also suggested that different aspects of teaching materials such as the content of material, cover, its design and attractiveness, its coordination with the everyday needs of students, the organization of the materials, and its relevance to the cognitive, affective and sensory-motor fields and the students' mental abilities should be enhanced and improved.

Curriculum plays a vital role in obtaining the objectives of education. It is recommended that curriculum be made activity based and market-oriented and there should be horizontal and vertical articulation among different concepts.

One of the most important factors related to the contents is that they should have such clear objectives that can be achieved by teaching and instruction. The specification of the objectives has an important position in educational programs; so, it should be set prior to other specifications since it is the objective that gives the sense to other educational activities (Maleki, 2008). Likewise, the foreign language teaching in Iran should follow and include the following objectives:

A) *The cognitive domain:*

1. Gaining a relative ability for having a simple daily conversation in English and being able to comprehend simple and common texts;

2. Developing familiarity with proper application of linguistic abilities for making connections with the others, learning the grammar, punctuation, and compositional rules;

3. Deepening the familiarity with different thinking and judgment ways;

4. Recognizing different personal and social affairs;

5. Getting familiar with the famous literary characters of the world and their works and also different styles in Iran and world literature.

B) *The affective domain:*

1. Improving the sense of warding the Persian language and its promotion;

2. Improving the sense of altruism;

3. The right application of linguistic abilities in life;

4. Getting familiar with Islamic countries and being attentive about their destination;

5. Knowing the different ways of modern imperialism and colonialism, the enemies' propaganda and the ways of their opposition;

6. Improving the sense of bravery, antagonism, patriotism, and self-confidence.

C) *The socio-motor domain:*

1. Getting more ability in listening to the speaker and understanding his speech;

2. Getting more ability in speaking, impression, and eloquence and Communication;

3. Getting more ability in reading and comprehending the simple texts of different genres;

4. Getting more ability in writing and its additional stuff;

5. Learning Arabic for the aim of comprehending the meaning of some of the verses of Quran, sayings, and prays;

6. Getting ability in using references;

7. Comparing different styles in literature and studying the world literature (cited in Maleki, 2008).

Therefore, the contents of the lesson produced for the aim of foreign language teaching should directly or indirectly try to support these objectives. We should also be aware that the excessive nativization of the target language and its content and denying the culture of the target language or trying to devalue it might have a dramatic influence on the students' motivations in learning the foreign language.

Finally, yet importantly, knowing that the textbooks and materials needed for the teaching should undergo some processes before the final publishing, we refer to a framework for adaptation of content of materials which can be shown as follows:
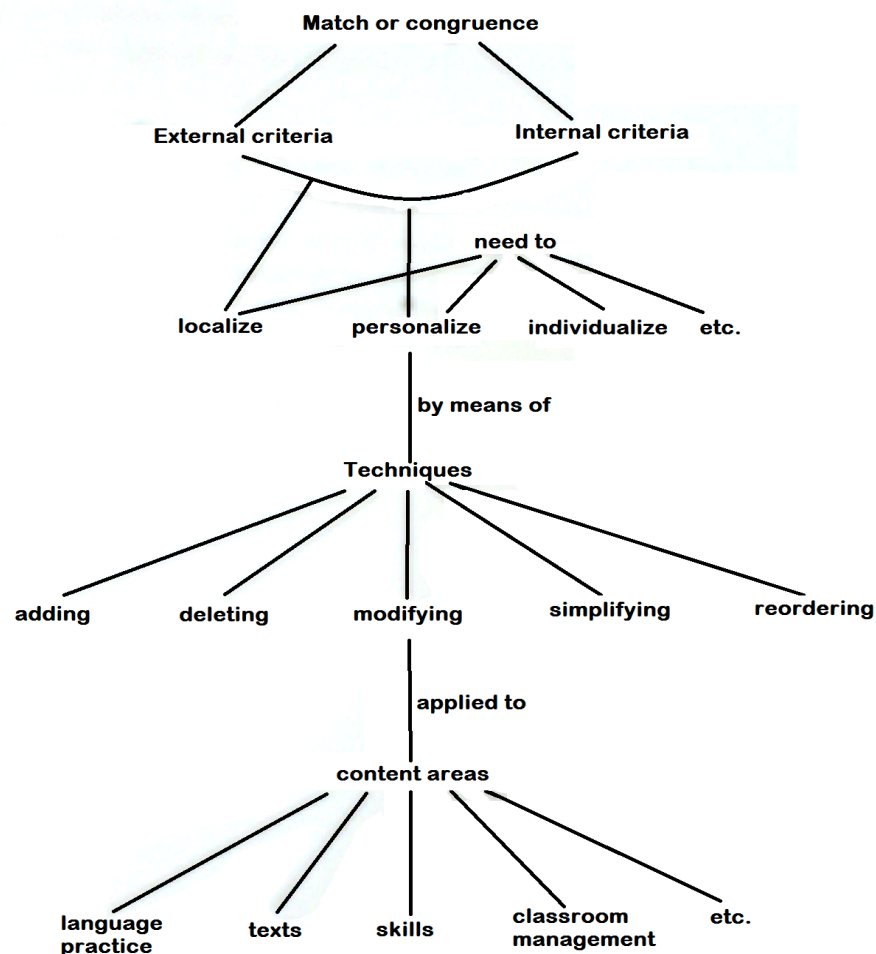
Match or congruence

External criteria   **Internal criteria**

need to

localize   **personalize**   **individualize**   **etc.**

by means of

Techniques

adding   **deleting**   **modifying**   **simplifying**   **reordering**

applied to

content areas

language practice   **texts**   **skills**   **classroom management**   **etc.**

Figure 1. A framework for adaptation (from McDonough & Shaw, 2003).

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