A Triangulated Study on the Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Their own Needs

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Abstract: *The present study aimed at finding out different perceptions of Iranian EFL learners in teaching English with respect to their own needs in order to shed light on the practice of language teaching in an EFL context. It is surely worthwhile to investigate the possible perceptions among learners and attitudes towards learners' needs, as they can influence the effectiveness of classroom instruction. To this end, a 4/5-point Likert-scale questionnaire based on Atai and Shoja's (2011) questionnaire called "Needs Analysis and Self-assessment" questionnaire was developed, piloted with 15 EFL teachers who were representative of the main group, validated, and administered to 120 Iranian EFL learners through mail and in person. To enrich the data, 30 Iranian EFL learners were interviewed, too. The learners' perceptions of their own needs were compared using mean scores and standard deviations. In order to determine whether there was any statistically significant difference between learners' perceptions regarding their own needs, a questionnaire and interview were given to the participants. The results indicated that there are not statistically significant differences among learners' perceptions in teaching English with respect to their needs for the whole scale. The results of the interviews confirmed these findings, too. Based on the findings of this study, it is proposed that learners should be given more voice and autonomy in different stages of English language teaching and learning especially "needs analysis".*

Keywords: *learners' perception, learners' needs, needs analysis*

INTRODUCTION

English is the language of globalization, international communication, commerce and trade, the media and pop culture. English as an international language has engrossed the attention of practitioners and researchers in various fields. Both teachers and learners have always been concerned and still are concerned with different factors that may influence the efficiency of teaching and learning. Language teaching and also learning has reciprocal relationship. Language learning according to learners' perceptions almost seem like a dream to the learners that they want to come true, while language teaching with respect to teachers' perceptions almost always reflect the real view of what teachers want learners to be able to do with the language.

Needs analysis (also known as needs assessment) has a vital role in the process of designing and carrying out any language course, whether it be English for Specific Purposes (ESP) or general English course, and its centrality has been acknowledged by several scholars and authors (Dudley-Evans & John, 1991; Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Iwai, Kondo, Limm, Ray, Shimizu, & Brown, 1999; Richterich & Chancerel, 1987; Robinson, 1991;

Tarone& Yule, 1989; West, 1994). According to Iwai et al. (1999), the term needs analysis generally refers to the activities that are involved in collecting information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the needs of a particular group of students. Brindley (1989) offers definitions of different types of needs and accounts of various problems and limitations in making use of this concept, including ways in which we might usefully distinguish between needs identified by analysts and those expressed or experienced by learners. In his state-of-the-art article, West (1994) gives a thorough overview of needs analysis in language teaching, including its history, theoretical basis, approaches to needs analysis, etc. From this research, needs analysis is a useful tool to investigate learners' needs, but as Chambers (1980) attempts to show it in his successful article, it is not an easy task. The first step in such an analysis is the attitude to adopt towards the terminology which is implied when the needs are associated to an analysis which should be, scientifically speaking, objective and accurate. The term "needs" is sometimes seen as necessities, wants, desires, and lacks. Therefore, to overcome this aspect of difficulty, Chambers proposes to see in needs "priorities" which are established by needs analysis as the first essential step. These priorities will determine in reality the ultimate objectives to be fulfilled and the form, the ways and the functions to which the English language will be put.

Strategy analysis or learning needs analysis has to do with the strategies that learners employ in order to learn another language. This tries to establish how the learners wish to learn rather than what they need to learn (West, 1998). All approaches to needs analysis, TSA, PSA, and to some extent deficiency analysis, have not been concerned with the learners' views of learning. Allwright (1982) who was a pioneer in the field of strategy analysis (West, 1994) started from the students' perceptions of their needs in their own terms. It is Allwright (1982) who makes a distinction between needs(the skills which a student sees as being relevant to himself or herself), wants (those needs on which students put a high priority in the available, limited time), and lacks (the difference between the student's present competence and the desired competence). His ideas were adopted later by Hutchinson and Waters (1987), who advocate a learning-centered approach in which learners' learning needs play a vital role. If the analyst, by means of target situation analysis, tries to find out what learners do with language learning needs analysis will tell us "what the learner needs to do in order to learn" (p. 54).

The concept of learners' needs is one of the essential criteria which is adopted and validated in ESP. Robinson (1991, p. 3), for instance, explains that an ESP course is based on a needs analysis, which aims to specify it is that students have to do through the medium of English. A needs analysis then aims at defining the needs of the learners as accurately as possible to specify the different uses of English for pursuing academic or occupational purposes "which aims to specify as closely as possible what exactly it is that students have to do through the medium of English." (Robinson, 1991, p. 3).Or, as Johns and Dudley-Evans (1993, p. 116) put it:" designed to meet specified needs of the learner."

Green and Oxford (1995) believe that, "ideal language education requires that there be no perceptual mismatches between a teacher's learning and objectives and what a student sees as the learning objectives. The ultimate quality of what is learnt is also affected by each teacher's understanding of exactly what, and how, to teach". Strong theoretical support exists that indicates gaps between a teacher's objectives, and what learners thought were the objectives, adversely affected the language acquisition process.In an attempt to let learners' voices be heard, this study recognizes learners' perceptions with respect to their needs in order to have an active voice and also make an efficient class.

Method

Participants

The main phase of this study was conducted with one group. This group consisted of 120 male and female Iranian EFL learners. This group of 120 EFL learners who participated in this study was chosen from Islamic

Azad University, Rasht branch. All of them had enough familiarity with English as a second language. Their age range was between 20 and 35. As a large sample was required for this study, the method of selection used was non-random convenience sampling of learner participants who were available for the study. Other participants in the study consisted of 30 EFL learners who attended in the interviews. EFL learners who participated in the interview were from different language institutes such as Zehtaban institute and Iran Language Institute in Rasht. They were selected randomly among adult learners. In fact, those who were higher levels participated in the interview. The questions will be presented in the following part.

Materials and Procedure

The data gathering instruments used in this study were a 4/5-point Likert-scale questionnaire developed based on Atai and Shoja's (2011) "Needs Analysis and a Self-assessment" questionnaire to analyze the needs of EFL learners.

Needs analysis questionnaire

A 4/5-point Likert-scale questionnaire based on Atai and Shoja's (2011) "Needs Analysis and Self-assessment" questionnaire was developed to assess the learners' perceptions of different needs of themselves. The first section of the questionnaire provided information about the purpose of the questionnaire and elicited some demographic information (e.g. learner participants' age and gender). The other 4 sections of this questionnaire were categorized into 3 sub-groups of Iranian language education related objectives: ELT course needs (section 5), general English experience (section 4), and language skills/language components (sections 2 & 3).

As it was mentioned a 4/5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'no idea', 'very slow' to 'very high', 'not important' to 'very important' were used in this study. The reliability in terms of Cronbach's α for the whole questionnaire was .81. This index was higher than the least minimum required (.70) and according to standards suggested by Barker, Pistrang, and Elliott (1994), it was considered an acceptable reliability index.

Needs analysis semi-structured interview

A 5-question interview was developed for learners to assess the learners' perceptions of different needs of themselves. The first section of the interview elicited some demographic information (e.g. learner participants' age and gender). The questions were concerned with the role of English in EFL learners' lives, priority in English language skills and components, and the necessity of learning socio-cultural norms for EFL learners.

The questions for learners were: Why are you learning English? Which role can it play in different phases of your life? Which English language skills (i.e. reading, writing, speaking, listening, and translation) do you consider to be more necessary for you as an EFL learner? Why? Which English language components (e.g. technical vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and… etc.) do you consider to be more necessary for you as an EFL learner? Why? Do you think learning English sociocultural norms is important for you as an EFL learner? Do you have any additional comments with respect to EFL learners' needs in the Iranian context? The languages used in the interview were both English and Persian.

Learners' responses to the questions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. What was done in this phase was content analysis and extraction of the common themes. After collecting the data and codifying the responses of the participants to different items of the interviews, they were fed into the computer.

Procedure

The data collection procedure for both the questionnaires and interviews was done in Islamic Azad University, Rasht branch, Zehtaban institute and some other language institutes in Rasht. The permit for conducting the research at Islamic Azad University of Rasht was obtained from the dear instructor of the class. The other group of data was gathered with the help of my kind and helpful colleagues at Zehtaban institute and some other friends at different institutes such as Safir.

Based on Atai and Shoja's (2011) "Needs Analysis and Self-assessment" questionnaire, a 4/5-point Likert-scale questionnaire consisting of 3 sub-components (i.e. ELT course needs, general English experience, and language skills/language components) to analyze the needs of EFL learners was developed, piloted with 30

participants (i.e. 30 learners), and administered to 120 Iranian EFL learners through mail and in person. They were asked to complete the questionnaires carefully. Because of the vast number of participants the process of data collection took almost two months. Learners and teachers' responses to 5 separate sections of the scale used in this study were coded by assigning each response option a number for scoring purposes. Participants' responses were coded as follows: Strongly agree= 5, agree= 4, disagree= 3, strongly disagree= 2 and no idea= 1, very high= 5, high= 4, slightly= 3, low=2, very low= 1 and very important= 4, rather important= 3, important= 2, not important= 1 . A participant's response to any item, therefore, fell between the highest possible score (5) and the lowest possible score (1) and for section two, fell between the highest possible score (4) and the lowest possible score (1). After 5 sections had been coded; the group average score for the whole questionnaire was calculated. These average scores also fell within a range between 5 and 1 and for section two, it fell between 4 and 1. Teachers and learners' perceptions of different needs of Iranian language education, then, were compared.

As it was mentioned earlier, to enrich the data, 30 Iranian EFL learners were interviewed, too. A 5-question interview was developed for learners to assess their' perceptions of different needs of themselves. The participants in this interview consisted of 15 Iranian EFL teachers and 30 Iranian EFL learners. They were asked to answer to the questions carefully. Teachers and learners' responses to the questions were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. What was done in this phase was content analysis and extraction of the common themes.

After collecting the data and codifying the responses of the participants to different items of the questionnaires and also the interviews, they were fed into the computer. For the data analysis, SPSS statistical software was employed. For the first step, the reliability of the 5- section questionnaire used in this study was estimated by Cronbach's Alpha (table 1). For the second step, and in order to test the research hypothesis, the questionnaire and interview were given to the instructors. The descriptive statistics (minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, range, Skewness and kurtosis) along with inferential statistics to provide answer for the research questions are presented in chapter four.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items	N
Needs analysis questionnaire	.81	37	30

Results

The prominent point this study clarified was the effectiveness of different perceptions of Iranian EFL learners in teaching English with respect to their needs in the efficiency of a classroom. As a matter of fact, in case of importance of language skills or components they believed that "listening to different texts" and "speaking about different subjects" are much more significant than other factors.

learners' perceptions of the main goal of teaching language for ELT course is "assisting EFL learners to acquire a level of English proficiency that would allow them to evaluate their knowledge and performance." The results showed that there were not statistically significant differences among learners' perceptions of their own needs. Similar results have been obtained in the "Needs analysis semi-structured interview", too. In fact, the results of the interviews (table 2) confirmed those findings in the questionnaires.

Table 2. Statistics for the importance of foreign language learning

Statistics	
	groups
	Learners
continuing education study abroad	45%
building better relationships with everyone	90%

migrating for working or living	50%
travelling abroad and eliminating the possible problems	80%
playing computer games and using computer efficiently	70%
comprehending research texts, English articles, and reference books	30%
business, knowledge exchanging, having access to the world technology	20%
doing scientific experiments and publishing articles on different issues	25%
improving self- confidence	55%
international language	65%

Most of the learners focused on speaking (95%) and listening (70%) in case of the importance of language skills. They also stated that "technical vocabulary" and "grammar" are more important than other factors in case of the importance of language components. Moreover, learners explicated rather low point of view towards assigning the same amount of emphasis on "all language components."

The main goal of the present research was to investigate the possible foreign language learners' perceptions with respect to their language needs. One hundred and twenty EFL learners were non-randomly selected for the present study. They completed the needs analysis questionnaire. Before doing the main study, the reliability of the questionnaire employed in the study was estimated through the pilot study on 15 EFL students who were representative of the main group. Afterwards, descriptive statistics were run to the data obtained through the questionnaire that was in the form of Likert Scale to answer the research questions. Then, an interview and a questionnaire were given to learners to the rank order data collected from the ratings to investigate the possible perceptions in terms of their perceptions of foreign language learners' language needs.

To provide answer to the research question (What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions towards foreign language learners' language needs), the participants' ratings made for the items of the questionnaire were analyzed in terms of the mean ranks and standard deviations (table 3). Then, comparisons were made between the ratings done by the learners to inspect their attitudes towards the importance of language skills or components, English language skills and components they suggested for improving EFL learners' language learning, experiences they thought EFL learners needed in general English courses, and the main goals of language teaching for ELT courses.

Table 3: The main goals of language teaching for ELT courses

	Learners		
	Mean rank	**SD**	**N**
1. Assist EFL learners to acquire a level of English proficiency that will allow them to evaluate their knowledge and performance.	3.69	.81	120
2. Promote the acquisition of a level of English proficiency that will allow the EFL learners to use English independently for their academic goals and needs (reading and writing, listening, speaking, etc.)	3.41	.94	120
3. Assist EFL learners to acquire the autonomous language use in their communication of interactional contexts.	3.45	.84	120
4. Foster EFL learners ' attitudes towards linguistic and sociolinguistic knowledge.	3.25	.80	120
5. Focus on language components such as vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.	3.50	.85	120
6. Assist EFL learners to translate the reading texts and tasks from Persian into English and vice versa.	3.22	.87	120

7. Promote the ability of EFL learners to understand the subjects that are presented in scientific conferences.	3.16	.88	120
8. Assist EFL learners to write e-mail in English.	3.31	.97	120
9. Encourage EFL learners to study in order to continue education in higher field of education.	3.41	.91	120
10. Help EFL learners to use computer efficiently.	3.40	.94	120
The main goals of language teaching for ELT courses	3.38	.29	120

Moreover, the test compared learners' responses in terms of their attitudes towards the experiences they thought EFL learners needed in general English courses, and the main goals of language teaching for the ELT courses.

The scales picked out by the respondents for the items of the questionnaire were considered ranks across the learners' responses. Then, the ranks for them were compared to see if they differed significantly. As the data were ranks, the actual distributions of the scores did not matter. The results showed that there are not significant different perceptions among learners in teaching English with respect to their own needs.

Discussion

In the case of teaching a group of EFL learners, it is very important for teachers to reach the predetermined aims of teaching and learning a foreign language. To the teachers aims mean statements that teachers set out to reach at the end of an educational period such as a semester. Of course, assuming learners' aims, a unique purpose is not always right. Teachers intend to teach the students according to the goals of language teaching, while it is not always possible. The findings showed that learers by minimizing the different perceptions in teaching English and attitudes and those of themselves can expect an efficient classroom. For this purpose, they should be as active and autonomous participants in pedagogic decision makings. The findings of this study revealed that there is not a significant difference among learners' perceptions of their own needs.

The findings accord with Savignon's (1997) findings, which indicated that ultimate success in learning to use a second language most likely would be seen to depend on the attitude of the learner. So policy makers, teachers and researchers should consult learners and involve them in the teaching and learning process (Schulz, 1996).

The findings of this study are also in agreement with Kern's (1995) findings, which suggest that teachers cannot assume confidently that they know what their learners' preferences are. These findings also indicate that learners hold various ideas and beliefs about how they should learn a foreign language and how teachers can help them do so effectively.

The results of this study are also in line with Atai and Shoja (2011). Atai and Shoja (2011) indicate that curriculum developers and syllabus designers have neither identified nor defined the needs of students operationally in order to formulate specific objectives for the corresponding program. Their findings show that the discrepancies found between the program under study and needs of undergraduate students of computer engineering highlight the importance of renewing the courses and accommodating the voice of all stakeholders involved.

Conclusion

As the findings of this study in both the questionnaires and interviews proved that there are not significant different perceptions among learners in teaching English with respect to their own needs, one of the considerations that teachers should not neglect in educational settings is to get more familiar with the needs

of the learners. If they know about it, they can decide better what and how to teach in order to have an efficient class. For this purpose, learners should be as active and autonomous participants in pedagogic decision makings. It is proposed that teachers and policy makers take learners preferences for the various classroom activities and aims into consideration whenever they want to make decisions on the needs of the learners. It is also proposed that teachers consider giving learners more voice and autonomy in different stages of English language teaching and learning especially "needs analysis".

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