Assessing English Language Quality of EFL Students: Links to A Grounded Theory

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Abstract

This qualitative study was an endeavor to assess English language quality of EFL students with linking to a grounded theory. To this aim, first 20 teachers working in a non-profit language institute were selected based on chain sampling or snowball sampling. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation and were interviewed. After extracting the components and indicators obtained from the analysis of interviews, a questionnaire was created to collect the necessary information and data to assess the quality of English language students. Then, a total number of 100 English language teachers teaching English in different levels of proficiency participated in this survey. According to the careful analysis, findings identified the main evaluating criteria for English language quality of Iranian EFL Learners as individual characteristics, learning strategy, individual characteristics, learning dynamics, educational technology, content setting, anxiety, weakness in learning, assessing knowledge/skills, positive evaluation, as well as individual and social consequences. Moreover, the most important ones with the highest distribution of category concepts among EFL learners referred to learning strategy (like to acquire language skills, spirit of competitiveness, spirit of collaboration, planning, cognitive development, employing group learning), individual characteristics (using peers' experiences, using the experiences of others, appropriate evaluation, giving desirable homework, eagerness to attend the class), and learning dynamics (innovative

management, self-centered learning, having online learning, a positive learning context, access to up-to-date resources). The results can provide useful insight into curriculum development and improvement for seeking educational effectiveness in EFL setting.

Keywords: English Language Quality; EFL Context; Grounded Theory; Model Assessment

1. Introduction

The first attempt to measure language quality by comparison with other samples is found in Fisher's Scale Book. The quality of the language sample is the window into the ability of its producer. The assessment of language quality in the modern period can be traced directly to the work of George Fisher who attempted to measure language quality by comparison with other samples (Fulcher, 2015). Fisher developed his scale book, in which language performance was classified into five major levels, each with quarter intervals. This produced a 20-level scale. Each level was characterized by writing samples that represented what a pupil was expected to achieve at that level. For spelling there were word lists, and for speaking there were lists of prompts/tasks that should be undertaken successfully. Fisher had invented a method for the measurement of quality that is still in use today. There is clear evidence that Thorndike had seen, or was aware of, Fisher's methods (Fulcher 2015). He suggested attaching performance samples to the first attempt to measure language quality by comparison with other samples is found in Fisher's Book (Fulcher, 2015). Between 1834 and 1836, while headmaster of the Royal Hospital School in London, Fisher developed his scale book, in which language performance was classified into five major levels, each with quarter intervals.

Among many factors influencing student learning, teacher quality is the most determining one (Snook et al., 2013). Teaching quality is an important criterion for quality assessment of education utilized by students, parents, and authorities as it is the most determining factor in students' achievement (Sanders et al., 1997). Research indicates that teachers improve their teaching quality by acting on students and authority evaluations (Dresel & Rindermann, 2011). There is little attention on formative teacher assessment, and the existing studies on teacher evaluation are either certificate or accomplishment and product-based evaluation based on students' scoring. The problem with this type of evaluation is that they do not provide any information about the teaching practice teachers do (Bastian & Henry, 2016). Although new approaches have been introduced to the field of teacher education and evaluation, it

has been a long time that teacher evaluation was through the students' assessment of teachers' teaching. This evaluation has been conducted through teacher evaluation questionnaires (Marsh et al., 2009) which are under question for reliability concerns (Feistauer & Richter 2016). Although later classroom observation, student evaluation questionnaire, teacher individual interviews, teacher self-evaluation, and teacher testing (Santiago & Benavides, 2009; Smith et al., 2004) were introduced to the field of teacher evaluation, they provide little insights about how to improve teaching practice (Duckor et al., 2014).

Assessing the quality of language performances had two critical components. First, the explicit criterion-referenced relationship between the content of the test and the domain to which prediction was sought. Second, the level descriptor which summarized what a test taker at a particular level could do with the language in the non-test domain. These two components of performance tests allowed numerical scores to be invested with real-world meaning. Over a decade, policymakers and school administrators have emphasized that there is a relation between what students experience and what they achieve in class (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). In the field of education, the performance of students in school is affected by classrooms' atmosphere and teachers' performance. Classroom environment, the instructors 'experience and their competencies in assessing classroom and student's performance are three factors that impact students' learning and their growth (Ladd, 2008; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Examining teachers' qualifications and student achievement, Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor (2007) demonstrated that teachers' qualifications can systematically affect student achievement.

The present study designed and validated criteria to evaluate the English language quality of Iranian EFL learners to provide information about the foreign language learning and teaching systems and to improve the quality standards in Iran. Criteria should be able to provide detailed and appropriate evaluation by taking the multi-dimensional aspects of the English language into account. In developing criteria for evaluating English language quality, it is important to take several key factors into consideration. One such factor is to incorporate the widely used ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Standards for Foreign Language Learning (NSFLEP, 1996) into the criteria. Therefore, the current work aimed at developing a set of evaluation criteria based on the needs of four language skills, major language areas. In order to meet the research objective, the following questions have been formed:

1. Links to a grounded theory, what are the main criteria for assessing English language quality of EFL students?

2. How is the distribution of category concepts of the criteria in EFL students' language quality assessment?

2. Literature Review

In the most recent study, Orabah, Bijani and Ismail (2022) explored English teachers' understanding and practices of SCL assessment. A series of interviews and questions were used to elicit data from the participants. Findings of this study showed that each of the English teachers has their definitions and understandings of student-centered learning assessment (SCLA); however, it was difficult to understand teachers' definitions of SCLA due to the lack of a common definition for this term in the literature. Teachers should be encouraged to empower students by working in mixed groups on the basis that the advanced students each head up separate groups. The implication is to allow less able students to mimic and imitate their peers and improve their comprehension, pronunciation, and vocabulary in and out of the classroom. Future research could be enhanced by other stakeholders, such as students and administrators, involvement. In another recent study, Pham (2022) analyzed the qualities of a good English as EFL teacher perceived by English language teachers and EFL students at a Vietnamese university. The study also investigates how teachers and students perceived the qualities of a good EFL teacher and differences in teachers' and students' views on these qualities. Mixed-method research was employed under the participation of 22 teachers of English and 80 English-majored students. The results revealed that both teachers and students perceived knowledge of language teaching as the most considerable. Although teachers' and students' perceptions had major similarities, there were some differences between their views from quantitative and qualitative findings. Moreover, Wangdi and Shimray (2021) tried to identify qualities of effective EFL English teachers as perceived by students, using a qualitative method, photovoice. The findings revealed four main themes that could best reflect the qualities of effective EFL English teachers as perceived by the participants in the context. The themes included teachers' classroom instruction skills, their subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. In conclusion, this study built on the existing conceptual framework of effective EFL English teachers, and provides guidelines for teachers, universities, and policymakers in preparing or hiring English teachers.

Kim (2019) investigated specific needs of curriculum-takers for an English curriculum and compared the results with analyses of curriculum evaluation from curriculum-completers. Results showed similarities between students' needs and evaluation in terms of the ideal time for starting English education and time allotments. However, significant gaps found between the two groups in several domains related to their specific goals of learning English. While the current curriculum-takers showed a high motivation to learn English for both instrumental purposes and integrative purposes, the curriculum-completers were strongly biased toward instrumental purposes. In the Iranian context, Mohammaditabar, Bagheri, Yamini and Rassaei (2019) explored EFL teachers' perspectives of qualities of a good language teacher and to examine the possible differences in their perspectives as a function of educational contexts including language institutes, junior/senior high schools, and universities. The results showed that teaching boosters and care and enthusiasm were held in high regard by EFL teachers in all the educational settings in question. Evaluation, by contrast, was the last ranked quality of a good language teacher as perceived by EFL teachers. The results also suggested that language institute EFL teachers differed significantly from senior/junior high school teachers in terms of morality and booster. They were also significantly different from university, senior/junior high school teachers regarding accountability, evaluation, care and enthusiasm, and attention. However, no significant differences were observed between EFL teachers in the educational contexts under study concerning attendance.

Deygers and Malone (2018) worked on the assessment literacy with the main goal of checking the amount of the assessment literacy of the university admission officers and policy makers in which the only instrument used was the interviews conducted with the so-called officers and policy makers. Then, the data collected was qualitatively analyzed. The point is that in the case of this inquiry as well, there was not a tool, a questionnaire for instance, to be used as an instrument for collecting more clear-cut data. As there are a range of different classroom instructional practices from individual work of doing a task to group discussions or to the use of media such as video in the classrooms all of which can be used as the materials for assessing learners, it is of utmost importance for each and all EFL teachers to have a fair amount of information about such matters. Once again in Iranian context, Soodmand Afshar and Doosti(2014) carried out a study on the qualities of effective EFL teachers in Iranian high schools and concluded that teachers and students alike

acknowledged identical teacher professional qualities including the knowledge of subject matter, ability to impart knowledge, interpersonal relationships, and qualities related to classroom management. In another study, Shishavan and Sadeghi (2009) explored the qualities of effective language teachers from the EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions. Their findings revealed that the command of the target (English) language, the use of useful teaching and learning methods, good knowledge of pedagogy, and good personality were perceived as the remarkable characteristics of an effective EFL teacher. In the same year, Coniam (2009) examined the quality of tests that EFL teachers produce for their own EFL students. He examined the effects on graduate teachers of a language testing program where participants produced objective tests, proceeding through the stages of test specification, moderation, and item analysis and test refinement. In general, the number of 'good' items produced was, however, not as high as participants expected. Participants commented that the experience was revealing in terms of setting test specifications and test moderation which few had ever undertaken, noting that they had become aware that tests they had previously produced had not provided them with usable, accurate information about their students' abilities. The paper concluded that, if classroom tests are to accurately report test takers' abilities, all areas of training in test development and production and, in particular, the empowerment of teachers through support and training in the principles of assessment require attention.

Considering the above studies, most of them analyzed the qualities of effective English teachers in educational context (Pham, 2022; Wangdi & Shimray, 2021; Mohammaditabar et al., 2019; SoodmandAfshar & Doosti, 2014; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009), some of them evaluated student-centered learning assessment and the amount of the assessment literacy (Orabah et al., 2022; Deygers & Malone, 2018), specific needs of curriculum-takers (Kim, 2019) and the quality of EFL teachers' tests (Coniam, 2009). None of them analyzed English language quality of EFL students. Also, most of the existing evaluation guidelines for English language learning tend to be too general. Consequently, it remains an important and challenging issue to develop a multi-dimensional set of evaluation criteria that are suitable for evaluating English language quality of EFL students based on teachers' opinions. To cope with the mentioned gaps, this work aimed at developing a multi-dimensional set of evaluation criteria based on the needs of four language skills.

3. Method
3.1. Design of the Study

The present study needs to identify important variables in the field of language quality assessment. In fact, the study explored the changes in language learner's English quality. To do this, a qualitative-method design was used. The design and validation of the English language evaluation criteria model with the data-based theory approach were considered, so the research was applied research in terms of purpose. In terms of the method of conducting research, qualitative research method was used as it involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences. It can be used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research (Bhandari, 2020). This method is subjective and findings are gathered in a written format as opposed to numerical. In a qualitative research process of coding can be implemented if common categories can be identified during analysis. For this purpose, qualitative data were collected through an in-depth interview to develop a model for assessing English language quality of EFL students. Therefore, the present work in terms of implementation was completely done in a qualitative form. Also it should be mention that since the components and indicators were to be extracted and analyzed, the study was analytical-exploratory research.

3.2. Participants and Sample

The statistical population of this research (in the qualitative section) includes 20 teachers working in a non-profit language institute (Safir Language Institute) in Bandar Abbas, a southern city in the province of Hormozgan, Iran. The teachers have been teaching at different levels for more than a decade and thus be considered as experienced ones. Therefore, sampling was performed theoretically using chain sampling or snowball sampling. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation, and after 20 interviews, data analysis showed that no new data was added to the previous data because a large percentage of the data extracted from the last interviews were duplicates. After that, a total number of 100 English language teachers teaching English as a foreign language in different language institutes took part in this study.

They were selected from ten language institutes who teaching at different levels as elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate and advanced language proficiency level. The participants were experienced EFL teachers of both genders (34 males & 66 females) with the range of ages 28 to 55. It should be noted that 23 of them were

Ph.D., 36 of them were M.A., and the rest (41) were B.A. A questionnaire is distributed among the participants via Google. It can guarantee the heterogeneity of participants. Because there is an equal chance for different genders and different ages and also proficiency level of their teaching experiences.

3.3. Data Collection

Considering the nature and content of the research, information and data were collected in two ways as (1) Library studies that were conducted by referring to documents and searching the Internet to identify literature and background related to the pattern of English language quality assessment criteria, and (2) Semi-structured interview which is necessary to conduct interviews with expert at the end of the initial studies and knowledge of practical research. Therefore, the extracted categories and components were analyzed and modified, and the English language quality assessment categories and components were prepared for coding. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview tool with an exploratory approach was used. It can be one of the most primary, practical, and worthwhile means of exploring a person's thoughts, attitudes, knowledge, and feelings about a phenomenon (Groom & Littlemore, 2012).

Interview is the verbal conversation between two people with the objective of collecting relevant information for the purpose of research. Moreover, it is particularly useful for getting the story behind a participant's experiences (McNamara, 1999). In this qualitative study, an interview was conducted with 20 EFL teachers. The interview consisted of some questions investigating language learners' quality. To design the interview questions, while considering the initial studies and previous documents, the questions were first asked in collaboration with some experienced professors, and then the validity of the questions was confirmed. Before interviewing, the intended objectives were presented and explained to the interviewees. After that, with the permission of the participants, the interviews were recorded using the interviewer smartphone. Immediately after the interview, the recordings were transcribed to ensure the reliability of information provided. The current study employed grounded theory to analyze data in the qualitative section and develop a model of language learners' quality. For this purpose, three coding procedures were followed thoroughly. In the open coding phase, the data were broken down into parts for the purpose of comparing and contrasting. Some words, phrases and statements given by the participants were selected as delivering helpful material for the purported method. In

the axial coding phase, the researcher investigated each category considering who, what, where and why of it. The purpose was to investigate and describe explicit relationship between categories. Third, in the selective coding phase, among different categories, the researcher searched for the core category with the highest links to guide further data collection. After completing the steps of the qualitative research method (data-based theory), all indicators that resulted in the English language quality assessment model in Iranian learners were prepared to provide information about the English language quality in Iranian language learners.

3.4. Data Analysis Method

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994), the data analysis is the heart of qualitative research and something that most distinguishes qualitative from quantitative research. Considering three steps in the grounded approach theory known as open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the researcher tried to cod the data. The steps are referred to as pieces of data, categories and themes suggested by Ary et al., (2014). This part is arranged based on the steps noted in grounded approach theory. The process of analyzing the data obtained from the interviews was performed in the mentioned three coding steps. That is to say, the data was codified as open coding in order to come to shared concepts and to form categories. Then, the categories obtained were further worked on and the similar concepts were put together to form larger categories. At the end, the categories were attributed to more comprehensive categories labeled as "themes". In these three steps, which were performed consecutively, the interviews were collected and analyzed through MAXQDA. In fact, the researcher benefits from Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory regarding three types of coding procedures. Thus, the underlying theory was derived based on the model of Strauss and Corbin (1998). Finally, the English language quality assessment model of Iranian language learners was formed.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1. Open data coding

For extracting the codes, Tall the interviews were evaluated word by word to gain a deeper and more accurate analysis, then the data from the interviews were gathered as grouped agents. This process continued gradually from code extraction to naming them. The extracted codes were grouped into some categories based on the differences or similarities. In

the last step, evidence was quoted from the text for each concept. In fact, the open coding process continued until the main category emerged at the end of the twentieth interview and theoretical saturation. Table 1 is provided with the specific code of the interviewee.

Table 1. *Main concepts after open data coding*

N	Main Concepts	N	Main Concepts
1	Like to acquire language skills	18	Benefit from experienced people
2	Sharing opinions	19	Desire for success
3	Having collaborating spirit	20	Creating positive learning context
4	Learning correct way to read	21	Reasonable acceptance of the test
5	Having a plan	22	Regarding feedback
6	Cognitive improvement	23	Having online learning
7	Practicing useful techniques	24	Using up-to-date resources
8	Practicing metacognitive strategies	25	Eagerness to attend the class
9	Theory assessment	26	Language level improvement
10	Increasing motivation	27	Practice previous tests
11	Benefit from participatory learning	28	Giving desirable homework
12	Decreasing anxiety	29	Optimal use of time
13	Use the peers' experiences	30	Improving self confidence
14	Decreasing dependency	31	Increasing comprehension
15	Pay attention to individual differences	32	Benefit from technology
16	Innovative management	33	Self-centered learning,
17	Employing group learning	34	Practical evaluation committee

4.2. Axial data coding

In the second step, similar and contemporary concepts placed in the main themes based on the concept they had with each other. Themes were extracted like abstract categories and they presented for analysis were reviewed. By defining and reviewing, the nature of the theme is discussing and it was determined which aspect of the information each theme contained. Table 2 reveals the identified categories after the axial coding.

Table 2. *Main categories after axial coding*

N	Axial categories	Concepts
1	Learning strategy	Like to acquire language skills, spirit of competitiveness, spirit of collaboration, planning, cognitive development, employing group learning
2	Individual characteristics	Using peers' experiences, using the experiences of others, appropriate evaluation, giving desirable homework, eagerness to attend the class
3	Learning dynamics	Innovative management, self-centered learning, Having online learning, a positive learning context, access to up-to-date resources
5	Educational technology	Benefit from technology
6	Content setting	Pay attention to individual differences
7	Anxiety	Practice of previous tests, practice useful techniques, practice of metacognitive strategies, learning the correct way to read
8	Weaknesses in learning	Optimal use of time, desire for success, increasing learning motivation
9	Positive evaluation	Reasonable acceptance of the test, improvement language level, regarding feedback
10	Assess knowledge/ skills	Increasing comprehension, theory assessment
8	Individual consequences	Improving self-confidence, reducing anxiety, decreasing dependency
9	Social consequences	Benefit from participatory learning

4.3. Selective data coding

Conceptual codes that had semantic and content similarity with each other, were combined in a broader category, and in the last stage of coding, the English language quality assessment of Iranian learners was considered as the basis and main pillar of the research (central category). The categories which are regarded as causes are listed under the causal conditions. The ones under certain conditions are contextual conditions. Also, those categories that have been adopted in response to the central category and under the influence of intervening conditions, are strategies. The categories that reflect the results and consequences of the strategies are listed in Table 3.

Table 3. *Selective coding results*

Conditions	Axial categories	Concepts
Causal conditions	Learning strategy	Like to acquire language skills, spirit of competitiveness, spirit of collaboration, planning, cognitive development, employing group learning
	Individual characteristics	Using peers' experiences, using the experiences of others, appropriate evaluation, giving desirable homework, eagerness to attend the class
	Learning dynamics	Innovative management, self-centered learning, Having online learning, a positive learning context, access to up-to-date resources
Underlying conditions	Educational technology	Benefit from technology
	Content setting	Pay attention to individual differences, Practical evaluation committee
Interfering conditions	Anxiety	Practice of previous tests, practice useful techniques, practice of metacognitive strategies, learning the correct way to read
	Weaknesses in learning	Optimal use of time, desire for success, increasing learning motivation
Strategies	Positive evaluation	Reasonable acceptance of the test, improvement language level, regarding feedback
	Assess knowledge/ skills	Increasing comprehension, theory assessment
Consequences	Individual consequences	Improving self-confidence, reducing anxiety, decreasing dependency
	Social consequences	Benefit from participatory learning, employing collaborative learning

4.4. English language quality assessment model

To improve the process of classifying codes into categories, a theoretical comparison tool by Strauss and Corbin (1998) has been proposed. Accordingly, the mentioned concepts are categorized into 11 categories. Figure 1 presents the conceptual pattern of English language quality assessment criteria for EFL students.
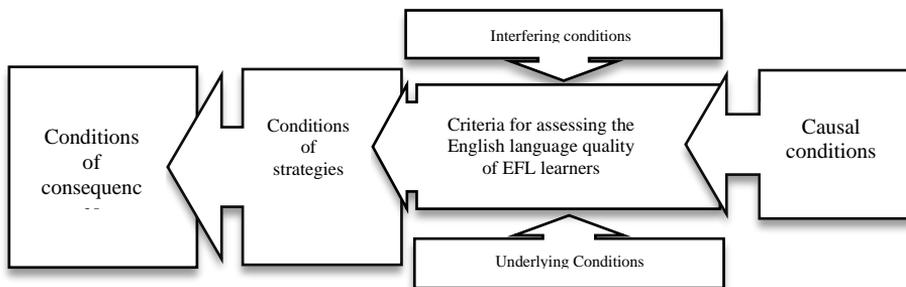

Figure 1. Model for Assessing English Language Quality of EFL Students

5. Conclusion and Implications

Findings of the present study identified the main evaluating criteria for English language quality of Iranian EFL Learners as individual characteristics, learning strategy, individual characteristics, learning dynamics, educational technology, content setting, anxiety, weakness in learning, assess knowledge/skills, positive evaluation, as well as individual and social consequences. Moreover, based on the careful analysis, the most important ones with the highest distribution of category concepts among EFL learners referred to learning strategy (like to acquire language skills, spirit of competitiveness, spirit of collaboration, planning, cognitive development, employing group learning), individual characteristics (using peers' experiences, using the experiences of others, appropriate evaluation, giving desirable homework, eagerness to attend the class), and learning dynamics (innovative management, self-centered learning, Having online learning, a positive learning context, access to up-to-date resources). It is worthy to note that English language teaching has become a priority due to the improvement of information, technology, communication, etc. However, language teaching especially at Iranian schools that are the basis of English language teaching, is facing some challenges as unclear plan or policy in EFL context (Shahi, Khany, & Shoja, 2022). Thus, a short-term solution seems unlikely, although the document on the fundamental transformation of education places great emphasis on developing EFL teaching within the selected (semi-prescriptive) part of the program. Findings of this project are partially in line with Wangdi and Shimray (2021) who tried to identify qualities of effective EFL English teachers as perceived by students. They found four main themes included teachers' classroom instruction skills, their subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills.

The qualities of a good EFL teacher were perceived by both teachers and learners. The most appreciation to identify a good EFL teacher refers to knowledge of language teaching. Language teachers need to be equipped with techniques and strategies to deal with challenges of foreign language teaching. In teacher training programs, various aspects of language teaching should be highlighted and enough information regarding the direct and indirect changes among students should be considered. Besides, language teachers as the facilitators of language teaching curriculum can remove the weak points of the curriculum design stage, which will not happen unless they can employ collaborative and participatory teaching approaches in the implementation of the English

language teaching curriculum. The implementation of such approaches requires the professional potentials. These results are in accordance with (Brown & Rodgers, 2002; Park & Lee, 2006). EFL teachers should concentrate on enhancing teaching methodologies to meet the lesson aims. They were aware of the qualities and knew what and who they were in their teaching profession in order to try for effective language teaching. In addition, it can be said that English language books play an important role in a learner's success. The books reflect language learning objectives and address the students' needs, goals, methods, and values of language learning.

Additionally, findings revealed that content regulation and educational technology are effective in analyzing the English language quality of EFL students. More importantly, teaching aids should be regarded as a facilitator and of teaching and learning EFL context. All the mentioned factors in EFL context should be considered by education experts. The educational system can control the coordination between the English language teaching curriculum and the goals, textbook content, evaluation and time as elements of the curriculum. Whereas, other elements of the curriculum as teaching and learning methods, activities, resources are largely outside the scope of control of the educational system and are influenced by individual variables. Teachers and learners, as well as interpersonal variables, by creating the desired coordination and alignment of the curriculum and the four objectives, i.e., elements, textbook content, evaluation, and time will strength language communication skills. All in all, teachers and learners should gain an insight into the mentioned qualities. Teachers would improve themselves to meet standards for an EFL teacher, and students would be aware of who they are working with. Since all the views are matched, the quality of English language teaching is likely to advance itself in Iranian educational context.

On the basis of findings, the study has certain implications for some individuals. Education officials should try to inform the authorities of the importance of teaching English as a means of communication and fully explain the conditions and facilities needed to achieve the desired level of English language teaching. Educational policy centers, especially the Ministry of Education, should seek help from university centers in their policies. Due to the impact of teaching aids and educational technology on language learners' learning, the essential learning tools should be provided for English language students and teachers. Because the use of teaching aids will make the senses more efficient and involved in the

teaching process. On the other hand, the use of new tools should be taught, due to the strong interest of English teachers in this type of tool. Of course, some schools are completing audio-visual facilities. But they are not used properly. Furthermore, the language teachers can apply what he/she has learned in order to strengthen the students' communication ability if all the elements of the curriculum, especially assessment, are designed in a coherent and coordinated manner in this regard. Therefore, with the continuous evaluation, the internal consistency of the elements of the English language curriculum and their coordination with the English language curriculum should be considered.

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