

Research Article

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## EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy in Omani Secondary Schools

Jokha Al Mahrouqi<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Forouzani<sup>2</sup>, Elham F. Shahraki<sup>3</sup>, Jaroslaw Dydowicz<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MA Graduate, Ministry of Education (MOE), Oman. [english-teacher@moe.om](mailto:english-teacher@moe.om)

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Nizwa, Oman (**Corresponding author**). [forouzani64@gmail.com](mailto:forouzani64@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Nizwa, Oman. [elham@unizwa.edu.om](mailto:elham@unizwa.edu.om)

<sup>4</sup>Assistant Professor, University of Nizwa, Oman. [jaroslaw@unizwa.edu.om](mailto:jaroslaw@unizwa.edu.om)

### Abstract

Autonomous learning is a study skill that may be challenging not only to learners with a dependent learning style but also to teachers used to teacher-oriented methodology. However, the considerable shift in the teaching and learning paradigm especially after the 2020 pandemic has made autonomous learning a must-gain skill. This research aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA), their actual practices, and the challenges of LA promotion at Omani secondary schools. It also investigated possible associations between teachers' beliefs about promoting LA and their academic level, gender, and years of experience. Within a convergent mixed-method parallel design, thirty Omani EFL school teachers were selected through convenience sampling to participate in the study. The instruments included teachers' perceptions questionnaire, classroom observation data, and interviews with teachers. Frequency counts, ordinal regression analysis, and grounded theory were used to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data. The results revealed that although EFL teachers at Omani secondary schools practice some strategies that promote learner autonomy, these practices are not intentionally and exclusively implemented for LA purposes. Moreover, the results showed some discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices of LA due to some constraints and challenges such as the intensive English curriculum, teachers being overloaded with numerous school tasks besides teaching, learners' limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and teachers' inadequate professional background in the concept, principles, and practices of learner autonomy. No significant association was found between the teachers' general beliefs about LA and their particulars. It may be argued that the concept of autonomous learning and strategies to promote LA should be included as a core component of teacher training programs. By the same token, more self-study and self-assessment practices may be added to the English course materials in schools to help learners develop this essential skill for their higher education.

**Keywords:** EFL teachers, learner autonomy, Oman, secondary schools, teachers' perceptions

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms and its various dimensions that make it difficult to define has been extensively researched (Alonazi, 2017; Dafei, 2007; Dang, 2011; Harmer, 2007; Kheira, 2015; Little, 1991; Waldispühl et al., 2015). The concept of learners taking charge of their learning was introduced in the 70s, but Holec's (1981) definition is the most popular one among researchers. In his view, learner autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's learning and be responsible for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012, p. 4). Holec's (1981) definition emphasizes the learner's responsibility and capacity as the main components of LA (Nguyen, 2014), which was generally accepted by other researchers (e.g., Al-Haysony, 2016; Benson, 2001; Crabbe, 1993; Hedge, 2001; Little, 1991, to name a few). These studies highlight the capacity to monitor one's learning by self-detachment in decision-making, critical reflection, and taking independent action. However, Hedge (2001) believed that this definition is quite limited and suggested that "learner autonomy is the ability of the learner to take responsibility for his or her learning and to plan, organize, and monitor the learning process independently of the teacher" (p. 410). Other studies such as Dam (1990), Littlewood (1999), and Sinclair (2000) also considered the willingness to act independently or in a group to be an instance of responsibility.

In their attempt to define learner autonomy, the above-mentioned studies highlighted the complex nature of autonomous learning as a process that involves learners' taking charge of their learning, making decisions, planning, organizing, and monitoring their learning independently of the teacher. With the rapid growth in technology and the consequent advancements in education, independent learning seems not only inevitable but also a must-gain skill from early school years. However, in some educational contexts in general and EFL contexts in particular, this essential trait may remain latent in learners due to the dominance of teacher-centered approaches. To further address the issue in the Omani educational context where school students are mostly teacher-dependent, this small-scale study was designed to assess venues for promoting autonomous learning in Omani schools with a focus on EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy (LA), the extent of their LA practice, and the challenges they might have faced in the classroom.

Learner autonomy in Oman still needs further investigation to see how far this skill is promoted in the school contexts, how EFL teachers perceive it, whether teachers put their beliefs into practice, and many other aspects of promoting learner autonomy. The present research reported below was designed in an attempt to address some of these issues. In addition to the

questionnaire and interviews, this study also included classroom observation protocols to closely study classroom instruction and practices. To conduct the study, the following research questions were addressed and two null hypotheses were developed.:

**RQ1.** How do Omani EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy regarding the promotion of language learning?

**RQ2.** What different practices do Omani EFL teachers implement to promote their students' autonomous learning?

**RQ3.** Is there any discrepancy between Omani English teachers' perceptions of learning autonomy and their actual practices?

**RQ4.** What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in promoting learner autonomy at secondary schools in Oman?

**RQ5.** Is there any association between the participants' academic qualifications, gender, years of experience, and their general belief about learner autonomy?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Learner Autonomy**

Autonomous learning is not a unidimensional trait. As discussed earlier, it comprises skills such as planning, organizing, and monitoring one's learning, making decisions, and assuming responsibility for those decisions. In addition to responsibility and capacity, Sinclair (2000) showed other related aspects of learner autonomy including learner metacognition, motivation, their active role in learning, and their awareness of the learning process (Reinders, 2010, as cited in Al-Muqbali, 2017). This awareness may imply the learners' use of individual learning strategies in line with their independent learning that would be backed up by the teacher's support (Nguyen, 2014). Along the same line, Little (1991) emphasized the vital role of teachers and suggested that autonomy is not to learn without a teacher or not attend any classes. Rather, instead of full reliance upon teachers, more autonomous forms of language learning are practiced, and more social interaction is required. Autonomous learners perceive the classroom as a place where they collaboratively work to learn from each other, a process that gradually develops independent learning. As a case in point, Koad and Waluyo (2021) conducted a survey to investigate the interrelationship between Thai learners' beliefs about autonomy, language learning, and learning strategies. Focusing on individual differences that would make language learners more or less proficient, their study showed that learner autonomy was one of the factors that could also predict language proficiency.

Regarding the extent of the teacher's role in LA promotion, Littlewood (1999) suggested two types of autonomy, namely, proactive autonomy and reactive autonomy. In proactive autonomy, learners take responsibility for

practicing their learning strategies and have their guide for learning. Reactive autonomy, on the other hand, is considered a lower level towards developing proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) and requires the teacher's direction to help learners organize their learning resources autonomously to achieve their aims. Learners act as collaborators rather than passive recipients.

In fact, an autonomous classroom is a place where learners and teachers interact with each other. The teacher as a facilitator (Nasri et al., 2015) is responsible for helping learners become aware of various learning strategies and learning styles (Benson, 2001; Camilleri, 1999). This facilitator role is manifested in different activities in an EFL classroom such as encouraging the use of English as the only language for classroom communication, encouraging learners to self-assess their progress and identify their needs and goals, involving learners in decision making, encouraging them to use online resources inside and outside the classroom to do tasks and prepare different kinds of activities for their lessons, and incorporating collaborative tasks inside and outside the classroom as well as encouraging learners' inquiries and attention to their errors to develop effective autonomous classroom behaviors (Scharle & Szabo, 2000).

Of course, it is crucial to provide continuous feedback to students to promote the students' responsibility for their learning (Dornyei, 2001; Joshi, 2011). The feedback may also be provided by peer tutors which enhances autonomous learning. Eleftheriou's (2019) study with Middle Eastern students showed that both directive and non-directive approaches in peer tutoring help the tutees decide their preferred type of feedback to enhance learning of lower-order and higher-order concerns respectively.

There are different approaches to learner autonomy and its implementation which are recapitulated in the following section.

## **2.2. Approaches to Learner Autonomy**

In traditional teaching, LA was thought to take place outside the classroom. However, modern education has strongly acknowledged that LA practices can effectively be implemented both inside and outside the classroom setting (Al-Zeebaree & Yavuz, 2016). Given this, Benson and Voller (1997) introduced four versions of autonomy: a) Technical: the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution without the teacher's intervention; b) Psychological: capacity that allows learners to take more responsibility for their learning; c) Political: conditions that allow learners to control the process and content of learning as well as the institutional context within which learning takes place; d) Social: capacity to interact and collaborate with others.

Later in 2001, Benson expanded the 1997 view and suggested six approaches to support learner autonomy in line with the previous and later research (Al-Muqbali, 2017; Lee, 1998; Littlewood, 1999; Nguyen, 2014; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1998). The approaches were identified as Resource-based, Technology-based, Classroom-based, Curriculum-based, Teacher-based, and Learner-based. Although Benson's (2001) model was more classroom- and practice-based, Oxford (2003) considered the 1997 framework more apt but revised the social and political versions to socio-cultural (with a focus on mediation) and political-critical (with a focus on ideologies and power structure). This is the model that Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) used in their study to develop a questionnaire to measure teachers' beliefs about the promotion of learner autonomy in their educational context, which in turn was slightly modified, validated, and used for the current study.

The definition of the concept of learner autonomy and the relevant approaches and models that have been developed were briefly presented above. However, the main issue in promoting learner autonomy, which is also the concern of this research is how teachers perceive it in terms of their role and classroom practice on one hand and the factors that may affect the development and promotion of this construct in the classroom context on the other hand. These issues are discussed in the following section.

### **2.3. Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learner Autonomy and Potential Challenges**

Perception refers to beliefs that guide behaviors (Pajares, 1992 as cited in Nguyen, 2014). A belief, in turn, is known as a personal thought that one holds consciously or without consciousness and which influences one's behaviors (Borg, 2011). Of course, beliefs and perceptions are used sometimes interchangeably (Joshi, 2011), but they should also be distinguished from knowledge. Nguyen (2014) clarified that knowledge is usually viewed as the information one has about a concept whereas holding a belief refers to the thought that influences the way that an individual uses his/her knowledge. A good number of research studies have been conducted on the relationship between teachers' knowledge and beliefs/perceptions of LA, their methodology, and the extent of autonomous learning opportunities they provide for learners (Alonazi, 2017; Borg, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Camilleri, 1999; Gebel & Shrier, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2013; Mansour, 2009; Nguyen, 2014; Phipps & Borg, 2009).

Camilleri's (1999) study, for example, showed the positive attitudes of teachers toward implementing some strategies to promote learner autonomy. This involves learners evaluating their progress and making decisions about some learning strategies. Nevertheless, because of some political reasons,

those teachers disagreed with involving students in making classroom decisions such as selecting the textbook and the time and place of learning. Camilleri (2007) also investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy in Malta to compare the results with the findings of his previous study in 1999. Interestingly, the teachers in the Malta study had positive views on involving students in deciding on their immediate goals, instructional materials, and assessment tools. The differences in the findings might be due to the different research contexts and the teachers' background in developing learner autonomy in students. A few other studies confirmed teachers' positive beliefs about the effective role of learner autonomy in improving language proficiency and the performance level of language learners (Joshi, 2011; Martinez, 2008; Shahsavari, 2014).

The studies discussed so far were all concerned with teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy, but it should also be investigated whether teachers especially those in favor of promoting LA implement it in their classrooms. In their studies, Al-Asmari (2013) and Duong (2014) focused on teachers' classroom activities and their attitudes toward learner autonomy. They found out that although the participants held positive views about the effect of learner autonomy on learning English, they faced difficulties in implementing it due to a variety of constraints. These constraints are very likely to turn into challenges that would affect the promotion and development of autonomous learning if they are not given due attention. Benson (2002, as cited in Alonazi, 2017) categorized them into internal challenges related to learners and contextual challenges concerned with teaching methodology, institutions, policy, and sociocultural context. Benson's categorization inspired several studies (Chan, 2003; Nakata, 2011; Smith, 2003; Vieira, 2003) which confirmed the impact of internal and contextual challenges on students' autonomous learning.

Nevertheless, despite all these constraints and the empirical research that confirmed the negative impact of the challenges, Benson (2002, as cited in Alonazi, 2017), like Voller (1997) and Littlewood (1999) believed that teachers are capable of developing learner autonomy in their students even to a limited extent. To see how far English language teachers were aware of the concept of learner autonomy and their attitudes toward promoting it, Al-Shaqsi (2009) conducted a study in the EFL context of Oman. Al-Shaqsi's participants were secondary school teachers who taught English as a Foreign Language in the Al Batinah region. The findings revealed that the teachers were familiar with the concept of learner autonomy and that they had a positive impression of their students' abilities in autonomous learning. However, the study could have been augmented using interviews to explore the connections between activities suggested by teachers for the promotion of learner

autonomy and its actual development. Three years later, Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) studied Omani EFL teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy and sought their attitude toward implementing it in the classroom. As far as the teachers' attitudes were concerned, the study showed participants' positive views similar to Al-Shaqsi's research. However, they found it infeasible to involve students in making decisions about learning goals and assessment tools. The study used questionnaires and interviews as data collection instruments. Al-Busaidi and Maamari (2014) specifically studied the understanding of Omani teachers about the definition of learner autonomy and the sources of their ideas on learner autonomy.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

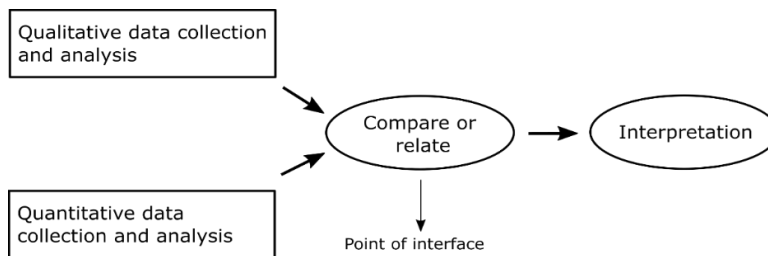
A convergent mixed-method parallel design was used to conduct this study. Mixed method design is used to collect, analyze, and mix both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies to gain a better understanding of the research problem compared to using one of the methods alone (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). There are three forms of mixed method design namely, convergent parallel design, exploratory sequential design, and explanatory sequential design. Explanatory and exploratory sequential are two-phase designs in which the analysis of the first phase data informs the collection and analysis of the second phase data.

In convergent parallel design, which was the basis of the present research, data may be collected from one or more sources followed by another source of data such as a survey followed by a focus-group interview. Data analysis may be in the form of side-by-side comparison, joint display, or data transformation merged analysis. As illustrated in Figure 1, either qualitative or quantitative data are first collected along with the other type in the convergent parallel design. According to Creswell and Plano-Clark (2011), the point of interface is where the two strands mix (i.e., either the qualitative/quantitative data collection is mixed, their analysis together, or the interpretation).

In this study, the quantitative data that comprised the teachers' questionnaire responses were collected at the same time as the qualitative data collected during classroom observations and interviews. The quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately using frequency counts and regression, and grounded theory respectively. The findings were later merged for final interpretation.

**Figure 1**

*Convergent Parallel Design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011)*



### 3.2. Participants

Due to the limited number of teachers who would agree to participate in the research and the lack of logistics to travel to other regions in the country, convenience sampling was used, but its shortcomings in terms of potential bias were considered in the interpretation of results. Thirty Omani male and female teachers (fifteen male and fifteen female) with BA and MA degrees and zero (recently employed) to twenty-five years of English teaching experience in secondary schools in the Dakheliya region were selected to participate in the study. From among the participants, fifteen teachers (seven male and eight female) volunteered to take part in the interview and classroom observations as well.

### 3.3. Instruments

Data collection tools included classroom observation protocols, a survey questionnaire (Appendix 1) adapted from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), and semi-structured interview protocols.

#### 3.2.1. Classroom observation

As mentioned earlier, fifteen teachers agreed to participate in the classroom observation and interview in addition to responding to the questionnaire. Classroom observations were conducted to collect in-depth data on the teachers' practices. Participant teachers were not informed about the focus of the classroom observation (i.e., teachers' practice of learner autonomy) so that more dependable reflection on their teaching performance would be elicited before seeking information on their beliefs through the questionnaire.

#### 3.2.2. Questionnaire

The survey questionnaire taken from Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) was reviewed and some changes were made to the wording and order of the items



as well as the Likert grids (for example, an “Unsure” box was added to the 4-scale grid in section 2 of the questionnaire). It was reviewed two more times by three university professors and then piloted with six Omani EFL teachers similar in characteristics to the research sample. Typos and vague items were fixed and the final draft with a reliability index of .80 was printed and copied for distribution.

### **3.3.3. Interview**

As to the third instrument, the interview questions were developed based on the main categories of the survey questionnaire. To categorize and validate the interview data, a list of techniques and challenges related to (promoting) learner autonomy was made from the questionnaire items and was given to the participants to rate the frequency of their use of such techniques and check the challenges they might have faced in practicing learner autonomy at school. The answers to the given lists were also discussed during the interviews to make sure that the participants gave their genuine opinions and thoughtful responses. The interviews which took between 30 to 45 minutes were audio-recorded and the transcriptions were later double-checked with the teachers to assure the accuracy of the transcribed data.

### **3.4. Procedure**

The following steps were taken to collect the data within the convergent parallel design. Qualitative data were first collected through classroom observations. The classroom practice and interaction of fifteen volunteer teachers who also responded to the questionnaire and participated in the interviews were carefully noted down in the researchers’ observation notes and the checklists were marked accordingly.

Next, the quantitative data were collected from the entire sample of thirty participants through a survey questionnaire on teachers’ perception of promoting learner autonomy in EFL classrooms. After collecting the survey data and during the classroom observations, the same fifteen teachers in classroom observation were invited for the interview.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

The qualitative data collected from the observations, interview protocols, and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire were analyzed using the grounded theory method. Qualitative data analysis was integrated with the data collection in an evolving process. This included notetaking, open and axial coding, categorizing, memoing, and sorting. The summarized data including the emerged themes from the interview and observations were

reviewed and double-checked for further connections based on the quantitative data explained below.

The following subcategories were defined according to the quantitative questionnaire items to facilitate comparison with the qualitative data:

- Technical perspectives on learner autonomy (items 2, 6, 18, 26)
- Social perspectives on learner autonomy (items 3, 14, 16, 21, 25)
- Psychological perspective on learner autonomy (items 5, 10, 24, 27, 28)
- Political perspectives (items 4, 7, 13, 19)
- Beliefs on teacher role in developing learner autonomy (items 8, 20, 29)
- Beliefs on learner autonomy and teaching methodology (items 15, 23)
- Language proficiency and learner autonomy (items 22)
- Learner autonomy and effective language teaching (items 11, 30)
- Age of learners and learner autonomy (items 1, 9, 17)
- The relevance of learner autonomy to cultural context (item 12)

The questions formulated at the start of the Method section are treated here. The data collected to answer Questions 1 and 5 were analyzed using frequency counts and ordinal regression analysis. To answer Questions 2, 3, and 4, the data were analyzed through open coding and axial coding following the grounded theory method.

## **4. Results**

The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are presented in separate sections as follows.

### **4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis**

To answer the first question (i.e., How do Omani EFL teachers perceive learner autonomy regarding the promotion of language learning?), the ratings of the thirty items in Section 1 of the questionnaire were merged based on their shared theme(s) and are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 shows that participants expressed +70% agreement with seven indicators that are likely to promote autonomous learning. The figure corresponding to the “Unsure” responses (43%) in the present research is alarming and may have different implications. It may imply that teachers know more about the characteristics that are directly related to the students themselves such as language proficiency, motivation, cooperative learning, and the like, but assessment is more of the classroom teacher’s responsibility. Another reason could be the teachers’ sense of authority when it comes to assessment. Their uncertainty may also lie in the importance of the decisions

based on assessment results, and they may believe that students do not have the expertise to decide about the assessment objectives, instruments, administration, and interpretation.

**Table 1**

*Sample of teachers' responses to learner autonomy principles*

Items	Agreement %
Effective role of cooperative learning	93.3
Learner-centeredness being ideal in promoting learner autonomy (LA)	70
Rejection of learner autonomy in the traditional teacher-centered classroom	66
Independent learning outside the classroom	90
Effect of students' motivation on LA promotion	83
Effect of LA on students' language proficiency	90
Students' freedom to decide about assessment methods	43 (Unsure)
Effect of learners' self-monitoring on their autonomous learning	90
Using classroom activities that promote autonomous learning	83

The lowest agreement (66%) is related to Item 15 in Section 1 of the questionnaire which reads “Learner autonomy implies a rejection of traditional teacher-led ways of teaching.” The low agreement on this item implies that respondents did not consider traditional teacher-centered methodology in conflict with autonomous learning. An interesting point about the last item in Table 1 above is that although 83% of teachers claimed to have provided some practices that could develop learner autonomy, in other items they expressed that they did not use those activities intentionally to develop autonomous learning in their students.

The high rates of agreement with the relationship between LA and language proficiency (90%), agreement with learner-centeredness (70%), and the student's independent learning outside the classroom (90%) are positive signs about the respondents' tendencies to practice and promote autonomous learning in their educational context. The teachers' general belief about the extent of their students' autonomous learning was summarized in Part 3 of the questionnaire and is presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Teachers' General Belief about their Students' Autonomous Learning in EFL Classroom*

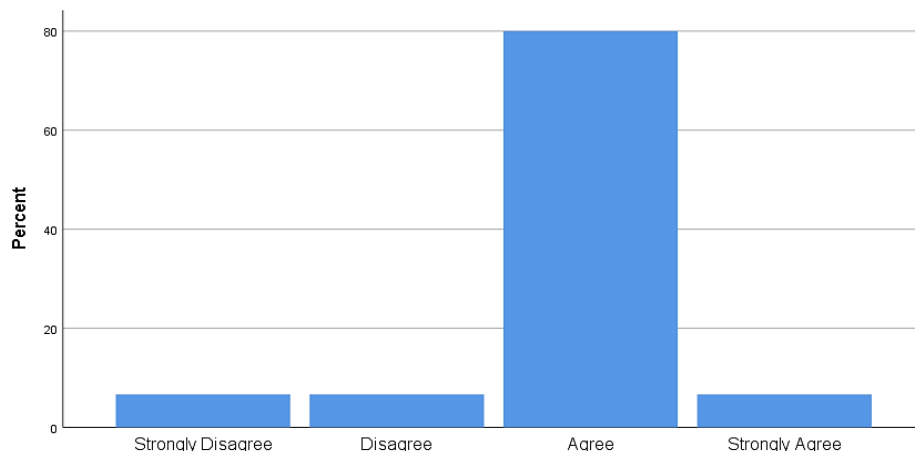


Figure 2 shows that 80% of the participant teachers observed autonomous learning in their students. They observed learners preparing for lessons and sample exam questions, providing materials related to the topic of a given lesson, searching for the meaning of new words, and designing their lexicon (word book). In addition, participants commented that high achievers would sometimes cooperate with low achievers to improve their language skills and help them feel motivated to learn English.

To answer research question 5 (i.e., Is there any association between the participants' academic qualifications, gender, years of experience, and their general belief about learner autonomy?), ordinal regression analysis was used to measure the degree of association between the variables specified in the question. Regression analysis in general is a set of statistical methods to determine the relationship between the dependent (DV) and independent variables (IV). In other words, Regression analysis shows if and to what extent the independent variables, also called predictor variables, can predict the dependent or outcome variable. Ordinal regression is used when the outcome variable is ordinal, and the predictors are either ordinal or continuous (ratio or interval).

In this question, the IVs include academic qualification (degrees), gender, and years of experience (service). The DV is the teachers' general belief about learner autonomy. Research question 5 was formulated to examine if the DV can be predicted from the IVs. Four levels were defined for the outcome variable (general belief (GB) about promoting LA), namely (1) Agree and practice, (2) Agree but not practice, (3) Unsure, (4) Disagree. Table 2 shows the proportion of cases in each category. Sixty percent of the participants agreed with promoting LA and practiced it in the classroom, 30% agreed but did not practice LA, 3.3% were unsure about the concept and 6.7% expressed their disagreement with LA promotion in their classroom.

**Table 2***Case Processing Summary*

		N	Marginal Percentage
GB (General Belief)	Agree & practiced	18	60%
	Agree but not practiced	9	30%
	Unsure	1	3.3%
	Disagree	2	6.7%
Years of experience as an English language teacher (Service)	0-4 years	6	20%
	5-9 years	8	26.7%
	10-14 years	13	43.3%
	20-24 years	2	6.7%
	Above 25 years	1	3.3%
Gender	Male	9	30%
	Female	19	63.3%
	3	1	3.3%
	999	1	3.3%
Qualification	Certificate	1	3.3%
	Bachelor's degree	24	80%
	Master's degree	5	16.7%
Valid		30	100%
Missing		0	
Total		30	

Regarding the years of experience, the highest proportion of teachers (43.3%) had 10-14 years of experience and the lowest proportion had 25+ years. Hence, the distribution of experience in the sample looks proportional. As to gender, the percentage of female participants is twice that of the male teachers, and it seems that 6.6% did not (or forgot to) specify their gender in the questionnaire. The last predictor variable (qualifications) shows that 80% of the participants held BA, 16.7% MA, and 3.3% had other teaching certificates.

The model fitting information in Table 3 shows if the model improves our ability to predict the outcome. In other words, it shows what the actual outcome is compared to the probability that the model predicts the outcome. Here the concern is whether there is any statistically significant improvement in the prediction if only the intercept (the mean value of the dependent variable when X or dependent variable = 0) is used to predict which of the four categories of the DV a participant will fall in. The model fitting shows a fairly significant improvement (.012) in the prediction regarding the explanatory (independent or predictor) variables that were included in this study.

**Table 3***Model Fitting Information*

Model	-2 Log Likelihood	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Intercept Only	45.251			
Final	24.089	21.162	9	0.012

*Link function: Logit.*

Table 4 shows the goodness of fit in the regression analysis measuring how well the observed data correspond to the expected data assumed by the model. The results show that the observed values do not correspond with the expected values in the model (.979 > .05). So, the null hypothesis for question 5 "there is no association between teachers' gender, years of experience, and their academic level with their general beliefs of LA" is retained.

**Table 4***Goodness of Fit*

	Chi-Square	df	Sig.
Pearson	18.640	33	0.979
Deviance	16.021	33	0.994

*Link function: Logit.*

Pseudo R-Square is a version of R-Square used when the outcome variable is ordinal, not continuous (hence teachers' general belief about promoting and practicing LA). From among the commonly used Pseudo R-squareds, three of which are usually presented in the SPSS analysis, the Nagelkerke is reported, since in this study the aim is to minimize the squared difference between the prediction and the actual y value. That is, the mean of the y (DV) values would be the best guess. The Nagelkerke R-Square shows that 59.3% of the variance in the outcome is explained by the explanatory variables (IVs or predictors) which is a considerable proportion.

**Table 5**

## Pseudo R-Square

Cox and Snell	0.506
Nagelkerke	0.593
McFadden	0.367

*Link function: Logit.*

Table 6 reports the Parameter Estimates. The table highlights the individual influence of each predictor variable on the outcome variable.

**Table 6***Parameter Estimates*

		Estimate	Std. Error	Wald	df	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
							Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Threshold	GB = 1.00	-5.80	3.79	2.34	1	0.12	-13.23	1.63
	GB = 2.00	-2.43	3.45	0.49	1	0.48	-9.20	4.32
	GB = 3.00	-1.67	3.44	0.23	1	0.62	-8.43	5.08
Location	Service = 0	-21.57	5671.83	0.000	1	0.99	11138.16	11095.02
	Service = 1	-3.15	2.37	1.76	1	0.18	-7.80	1.49
	Service = 2	-2.47	2.23	1.22	1	0.26	-6.853	1.90
	Service = 4	1.08	2.40	0.20	1	0.65	-3.62	5.80
	Service = 5	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	0	.	.	.
	Gender = 1	-1.09	2.42	0.20	1	0.65	-5.84	3.66
	Gender = 2	-3.03	2.46	1.52	1	0.21	-7.86	1.78
	Gender = 3	-21.53	0.000	.	1	.	-21.53	-21.53
	Gender = 999	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	0	.	.	.
	Qualification=0	-21.41	0.000	.	1	.	-21.41	-21.41
	Qualification=2	-0.96	1.15	0.69	1	0.40	-3.23	1.30
Qualification=3	0 <sup>a</sup>	.	.	0	.	.	.	

*Link function: Logit.*

a: This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant

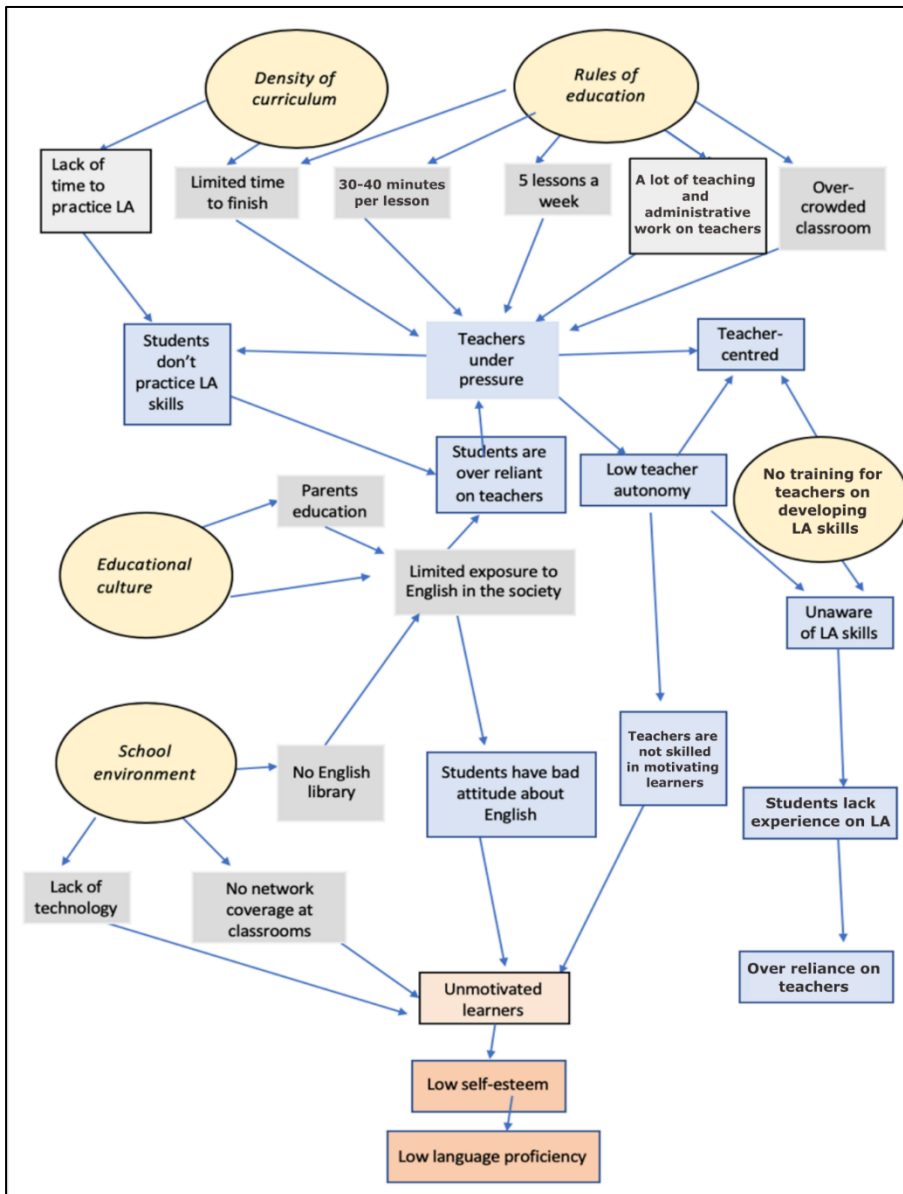
In Table 6, the threshold refers to our shift between each level of the outcome variable to another (e.g., from Agree and Practice to Agree but not Practice). Conventionally, the last level (hence Disagree) is not shown in the threshold list and is taken as the reference. Based on the values (cf. the Sig. column) in Table 6, no statistically significant association is found between the predictors and the outcome variable. Therefore, participants' general beliefs about LA cannot be predicted from their qualifications, gender, and years of teaching experience. In sum, since no significant association between the predictors and the output (response) variable is found, the estimate values (cf. Estimates column) cannot predict the likelihood of participants falling in each of the output variable's categories.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Data Analysis

Questions 2, 3, and 4 were analyzed using the grounded theory method. The interview and observation data and the written answers to the questionnaire items in Part 3 were subject to open (initial) and axial coding to find associations between the emerging themes (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**

*Themes from the Open and Axial Coding of the Interview Data and Open-Ended Questions*



The findings for Question 2 (i.e., What different practices do Omani EFL teachers implement to promote their students' autonomous learning?) revealed different practices implemented by EFL teachers in the Omani context that promote autonomous learning skills. These practices involve group projects, role play, making personal dictionaries, preparing materials for the lessons, and reading projects. However, although the participant teachers



had a positive view of developing autonomy skills in the students, and even implemented relevant practices in the classroom, they had no intentional focus on learner autonomy promotion. They claimed that they were not thinking of promoting autonomous learning in their students while engaging them in those activities. This may be rooted in the teachers' personal experience during their school years when they had possibly been engaged in independent learning activities.

Regarding Question 3 (i.e., Is there any discrepancy between Omani English teachers' perceptions of learning autonomy and their actual practices?), the analysis of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, the interview data, and the classroom observations showed some discrepancies between the teachers' beliefs and their practices of promoting learner autonomy. This discrepancy occurred in their beliefs and practices about the effectiveness of group work, the role of the teacher and learners in developing autonomy skills, learner-centered or teacher-centered teaching methods, technology and library implementation, and learners monitoring their learning and their motivation in learning. The difference between what teachers claimed and how they performed in the classroom could be attributed to some challenges that the EFL teachers encounter at secondary schools in Oman. These challenges were addressed in question 4 discussed below.

Based on the data analyzed to address Question 4 (i.e., What challenges do EFL teachers encounter in promoting learner autonomy at secondary schools in Oman?), the main challenges included cultural factors and limited exposure to English outside classrooms, lack of technology services and lack of English libraries at schools, the density of the curriculum, the impact of some rules imposed by the ministry of education at the secondary school level, and lack of a strong background in learner autonomy research and relevant training. The teachers believed that these challenges are likely to cause students' lack of autonomy and over-reliance on their teachers.

## **5. Discussion**

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative data from the questionnaire ratings and open-ended responses, interviews, and observations were compared for every participant. The former provided the frequency of agreements to the addressed ideas and extent of association between the IVs and the DV, while the latter collected from fifteen participants as a potential representative of the sample introduced deep insights into the participants' mindsets, concerns, ideals, and personal takes on the realities of LA promotion in the EFL classroom. The findings of this study are mostly in line with previous research while some contradictions are also observed. The teachers'

high rating of students' motivation (83%) as an effective factor in autonomous learning is supported by Littlewood's (1999) view and Duong's (2014) findings with Thai teachers. Duong (2014) also revealed that the participants did not believe in students' self-monitoring to promote learner autonomy while the findings of the current research revealed that teachers do value students' self-monitoring as an effective factor that contributes to their autonomous learning. This contradictory result might be due to the difference in educational cultures and contexts and/or the educational systems that shape teachers' belief in the scope of learner autonomy.

In support of students' involvement in deciding on assessment, however, Camilleri's (1999) study revealed the teachers' positive views. Concerning the teachers' use of autonomous learning practices and the activities that they used with no intention to promote learning autonomy related to Question 2, one is reminded of Raya and Sircu (2013) who emphasized the importance of teachers' first-hand, personal experience in autonomous learning to develop learner autonomy in their students. These practices involve group projects, role play, making personal dictionaries, preparing materials for the lessons, and reading projects. In support of these findings, similar promotion activities were reported by Al-Shaqsi (2009), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011), and Nguyen (2014).

The effect of learner autonomy on language proficiency which was highly rated (90%) by the participants is in line with Borg and Al-Busaidi's (2012) and Al-Zeebaree and Yavuz's (2016) findings. These studies together with the present research show that teachers believe in the relationship between language proficiency and learner autonomy. The high percentage of teachers' agreement with learner-centeredness (70%) and the students' independent learning outside the classroom (90%) are supported by Benson's (2001) learner-centered approach to learner autonomy and Sinclair's (2000) idea about learners' taking responsibility for their learning. These students' classroom activities are evidence for Sinclair's (1999) view of learner autonomy starting to develop first in the classroom.

The results of the regression analysis showed that participants' general beliefs about LA cannot be predicted from their qualifications, gender, and years of teaching experience. This was identified in Nguyen's (2014) study which revealed no relationship between EFL teachers' beliefs in Vietnam with their gender and years of experience. However, Nasri et al.'s study in Iran (2015) showed a significant difference between genders in that the female teachers used some learner autonomy strategies that the male teachers did not use. Similar to the current study, their research did not show any significant

association between the participants' academic degree and teaching experience as predictor variables and their beliefs as the outcome variable.

The studies, which reported similar discrepancies between teachers' beliefs and practices, include Nguyen (2014), Duong (2014), Borg and Al-Busaidi (2011), and Al-Muqbali (2014). The difference between what teachers claimed and how they performed in the classroom could be attributed to some challenges that the EFL teachers encounter at secondary schools in Oman. The main challenges included cultural factors and limited exposure to English outside classrooms, lack of technology services and lack of English libraries at schools, the density of the curriculum, the impact of some rules imposed by the Ministry of Education at the secondary school level, and lack of a strong background in learner autonomy research and relevant training. The teachers believed that these challenges are likely to cause students' lack of autonomy and over-reliance on their teachers.

The results of the qualitative data are also well supported in the literature. The themes that emerged from the open and axial coding have been observed in the previous studies conducted on cultural factors and exposure to English by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Al-Muqbali (2017), extensive curriculum factor by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Benson (2011, as cited in Al-Muqbali, 2017), Ministry rules factor by Harmer (2007) who specifically referred to the limited class time, and Nakata (2011) in Japan who found out that institutional rules negatively affected teachers' practice of learner autonomy in the classroom. Teachers' insufficient or lack of background in learner autonomy as well as school environment were also raised as challenges by Nguyen (2014) and Al-Muqbali (2017).

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

This study explored Omani EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of learner autonomy at secondary schools. The analysis of the data from perceptions questionnaires, classroom observations, and interviews revealed that the participant teachers used some autonomous learning strategies in the classroom, but they did not consciously do that to promote learner autonomy. While they agreed with the positive effects of autonomous learning on students' performance, the teachers found the promotion of learner autonomy quite challenging due to factors such as limited class time, the heavy English curriculum, and lack of knowledge about this construct, to name a few. Interestingly, teachers' gender, years of experience, and academic degrees did not show any significant association with their perceptions of learner autonomy and practicing it in their classroom.

The findings of this study may raise Omani EFL school teachers' awareness of the fact that autonomous learning skills in students can provide them with outside-classroom activities and more exposure to English as well as developing the habit of independent learning and self-reliance. The same may as well be brought to the attention of the Ministry of Education (MOE) to put more focus on LA promotion in the teacher training programs. Developing autonomous learning in school students will have a long-term effect on their higher education studies since the university environment requires students' self-reliance in learning and research. Students who are not prepared for independent learning may face serious challenges in adapting to university life and acquiring the necessary study skills in the academic environment. Promoting learner autonomy, independent learning, and self-reliance in classrooms in general and EFL contexts in particular may pave the way for students' autonomous learning and readiness for tertiary education.

Regarding the challenges faced by teachers, the principles by Cotterall (1999) on the design of language courses can help teachers to better implement and promote learner autonomy as well as share responsibility with their students. This can be coupled with the development of an autonomy culture based on the European Language Portfolio.

This study suffers from some limitations. First, the number of schools that participated in the survey was not enough to generalize the results especially because all schools were in one governorate only (i.e., Al Dakheliya). Another limitation was the number of classroom observations for each teacher. Each participant was observed only once due to the tight schedule of data collection and the limited logistics. Some other limitations occurred in the study which were not in the control of the researchers. For instance, the term learner autonomy was generally a new term for most of the EFL teachers in the pilot group, so the researcher provided a short simple definition for LA at the beginning of the questionnaire to facilitate conducting the survey. Moreover, although some of the teachers appeared to have the correct understanding of the different perspectives of LA based on their beliefs, they faced difficulties in transferring their beliefs and understanding into practice, which led to some contradictions between their beliefs and teaching practices.

Developing the culture of autonomous learning in secondary school classrooms requires some procedures. First, teachers and learners should raise their awareness of the learning autonomy skills and relevant activities that ultimately bring up independent learners. This can be achieved by conducting training programs about developing LA skills for both teachers and learners at the secondary school level. In addition, the challenges of limited exposure to language, lack of technology services, the density of the English curriculum,

having limited English sessions per week, short time of one daily lesson, and teachers being overloaded with different teaching and non-teaching tasks at schools should be considered. Finally, syllabus designers are suggested to consider and incorporate extra-curricular activities to enhance LA skills. It is also recommended that orientation workshops be organized for parents so that they are in the loop and are kept updated on the independent learning tasks that students are required to do outside the classroom and school context.

To more comprehensively measure the ground impact of learner autonomy practices, research studies involving the learners are necessary. One such example involving Omani students is the study by Al-Issa and Al-Bulushi (2012) where the attitudes of 141 freshmen were examined about their teachers and curriculum. Moreover, motivation is linked with the promotion of learner autonomy goals as studied in the work of Abdullah et al. (2019) in the context of Oman.

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Research Article

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## Impact of Online Peer Assessment via Wiki on Grammar Accuracy of EFL Learners: A Mixed Methods Investigation

Hoora Badsar<sup>1</sup>, Seyed Ali Asghar Soltani<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran.  
badsar\_hs@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup>Baqir Al-Olum University, Qom, Iran (**Corresponding author**). aasultani@yahoo.com

### Abstract

With the emergence of new online technologies and computer-mediated language teaching, many recent studies have been conducted on the effectiveness of online peer assessment. The present mixed methods study examined the effect of online peer assessment on Iranian intermediate-level EFL students' writing accuracy. In the quantitative phase of the study, 28 EFL learners studying in an English institute were randomly assigned to two groups and were taught for 14 sessions. The experimental group attended online peer assessment on Wiki as a forum for out-of-classroom discussions regarding English writing, and the control group attended face-to-face peer assessment. To analyze the numerical data collected through a pretest and a posttest, an independent sample t-test was used to investigate the difference between the two group scores before and after the assessments. The results showed that the difference between the posttest means of the experimental group and the control group was significant. Moreover, the results of analyzing the qualitative data, gathered through focus-group interviews, also confirmed the quantitative results, revealing the positive opinions of the interviewees about the role of technology in language learning. Therefore, online peer assessment seems to have benefits that make it worthwhile despite all the difficulties and extra effort of introducing and teaching it to students. The findings may have implications for material designers, language teachers, and language learners.

*Keywords:* accuracy, grammar, language assessment, online peer assessment, Wiki, writing

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## 1. Introduction

Today, new technologies have an important place in the educational process. Language teaching and learning is one of the academic areas that is highly interrelated with technological tools of teaching and learning. In this respect, computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that integrates information technology has received more attention (Fotos & Browne, 2004, as cited in Lin & Yang, 2011). Among the affordances of technology and computers, a number of different tools including blogs and Wikis are available (Ahmadi & Marandi, 2014). As Lin and Yang (2011) put it, Wiki is one of the innovative computer-assisted language learning that may be beneficiary to English writing. Leuf and Cunningham (2001) believed wiki technology will facilitate the evaluation of knowledge creation and publishing.

Through features like user edit ability and detailed page history, Wikis serve as powerful mediating artifacts for collaboration and support for collective production (Lund, 2008). These applications allow users to upload, build, and create content on the Web only by using their Web browser; they do not need any specialized technical knowledge (Matthew & Callaway, 2009). The collaborative context provided by Wikis encourages users to negotiate, collaborate with others, generate sparks of creativity as others react, reflect, have their insights deepened or changed and, in turn, contribute something new, learn from other people's work and they can easily complete and extend group work by continuing it asynchronously outside the course (Lamb, 2004).

Due to the shortcomings of traditional peer assessment procedures like the shortage of time for doing the job, the possibility of assessing a few papers and also postponing a part of the job most of the time (Macdonald, 2002; McConnel, 2002), and the significant role of peer assessment in the language learning process, one of the research areas which could be considered important is exploring new peer assessment forms in order to facilitate and accelerate the process. As one of the not-so-much-focused modern tools in peer assessment activities, Wiki was the main concern of this study. This study attempted to address the following two questions:

**RQ1:** Does Wiki as an online tool for peer assessment activities have any effects on Iranian EFL learners' grammar accuracy at the intermediate level?

**RQ2:** What are the students' perceptions of Wiki-based and face-to-face writing assessments?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Language Assessment

New approaches to learning and instruction such as the learner-centered approach require new assessment practices to make students active participants in all phases of the assessment process. As Scouller (1998) declared assessment methods should be associated with students' learning approaches; therefore, teachers must implement types of assessment tools that improve student learning. In fact, assessment of learning shifts toward assessment for learning. (Strijbos & Sluijsmans, 2010, Dysthe, 2004, as cited in Gielen & De Wever, 2012). For this purpose, formative assessment is a process in which students are evaluated to help them continue their growth process and also guide learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses (Brown et al., 2018), in this kind of assessment both teachers and students provide appropriate feedback to the students to improve and support their learning (which leads to closure the gap between current (actual level of performance) and desired performance (Sadler, 1989).

One of the common practices of formative assessment is peer assessment (PA) (Gielen & De Wever, 2012). The use of peer assessment as a type of evaluation method has immensely shifted the role of assessment itself. Peer assessment increases interaction between students and teachers, and students themselves can help the students know more about other students' ideas during the learning experience (Butler & Hodge, 2001; Falchikov, 1995; LeMare & Rubin, 1987). Topping (1998) and Cheng & Warren (2000) elucidated that peer assessment has an effective influence on the learning process both as a learning tool and as an assessment tool (Gielen & De Wever, 2012). As an assessment tool, peer assessment creates effective benefits for students. It increases motivation and makes them feel having a greater investment in what they are doing and also being assessed by someone other than their teacher, gives learners greater ownership of the learning they are undertaking and invest more in the preparation of their initial work and the subsequent revision of the work and it also develops active, autonomous, responsible, and reflective learners (Humphrey et al., 1997).

Scholars explained some conditions under which using peer feedback may produce positive effects on LP (Schunemann et al., 2017). Engaging students in the procedures of the assessment is broadly accredited as a useful technique for developing self-regulation because it permits students to find mistakes and create some strategies to solve them (Zamora et al., 2018).

Since the peer assessment is performed based on a set of criteria, students can review their peers' assignments. Thereby, peer assessment can be

considered as a process by which students assess or are assessed by their peers (Topping et al., 2000). Peer assessment contains many properties of collaborative learning. Collaborative learning is an approach in which students have a goal and work together in order to reach their common goal (Dillenbourg, 1999). As far as peer assessment focuses on interaction, we can consider it as a form of collaborative learning. Determining, negotiating criteria, and assessing their group members by fellow students and providing feedback, confirm that peer assessment is a specific pedagogical approach to collaborative learning (Prins et al, 2005).

Peer assessment can be applied in both traditional and virtual environments. Integrating peer assessment with the Internet is one of the current trends in education at all levels. As the traditional face-to-face classroom is based on a paper-and-pencil format, it has effort-demanding aspects such as collection, preparation and assignment of student work, compilation and calculation of feedback provided by peers, and the returning of feedback to individual students, especially if the size of the class is big and it would be delays in the grading procedure and so on (Davies, 2000). Davies (2000) claimed that such problems could be solved by the introduction of computer-aided assessment.

A recent example of peer assessment during CSCL is done by Chan and Van Aalst (2004). Students were asked to contribute in a threaded discussion forum, but the criteria by which the students performed their evaluation were set by the teacher in advance. In addition, students were not explicitly trained to apply these criteria. Moreover, studies of peer assessment in CSCL environments in distance education with adult learners are often limited to a quantitative approach whereby students give scores to peers on a list of criteria (Topping, 2003).

Using online peer assessment activities can not only speed up grading time and provide students with more thoughtful feedback but also help students to interact with the teacher and other students without limitation of time and location (McConnell, 2002). However, an important concern of implementing an online learning environment in assessment is the scaffolding factor. It is believed that in online peer assessment, scaffolding plays an essential role in the learning process because in such an environment students need to be more self-supporting (Warschauer, 1996).

Double et al. (2020) did a meta-analysis that assessed the impacts of PAs on academic performances in primary, secondary, or tertiary students across domains and subjects. A low to medium impact of PAs on academic performances was discovered. The outcomes suggested that using PAs developed academic performances in comparison with no assessments and

teachers' assessments, but there were no meaningful differences in its impacts from SAs. In addition, meta-regressions investigated the moderating influences of several feedbacks and instructional features (e.g., offline vs online, frequencies, education levels). The findings recommended that the use of PAs was noticeably significant across a wide range of settings.

Online peer assessment can be used to help mitigate these problems and to increase the potential of peer assessment. Numerous online peer-assessment systems such as CAP, NetPeas, Vee heuristic, Web 2.0, and SWORD have been developed to manage peer-assessment efficiently and effectively (Davies, 2000). Li and Cumming (2001) in a case study of a 29-year-old male Mandarin learner of English as a second language with intermediate proficiency in English. The learner wrote, over 8 months, 14 compositions alternating between the uses of a laptop computer as well as pen and paper. The result found that computers helped the learner stay on task longer and produce higher-level concerns in terms of planning, evaluations, and revisions.

## **2.2. Collaborative Writing**

Collaborative writing is a collaborative learning process. Collaborative interaction can improve learners' writing, particularly when they are asked to create texts together and do peer correction (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Furthermore, while the learners give and receive feedback, they become involved in collaborative scaffolding, which promotes the use of language among learners (Aydın & Yıldız, 2014). Swain and Lapkin (1998) argued that tasks that engage students in collaborative dialogue "might be particularly useful for learning strategic processes as well as grammatical aspects of language". Also, research on L1 writing has shown that writers who worked interactively improved significantly more than those who wrote alone because collaboration helps reflective thinking and idea explaining (e.g., Yarrow & Topping, 2001).

Social software embraces applications that allow learners to interact and collaborate in the online environment, and help the participant exchange their knowledge and information. Social software is the major component of Web 2.0 (Bragg, 2007). The history of using social software goes back to the 1960's when the networked computers were used to increase people's knowledge and ability to learn (Alexander, 2006). In 2004 as the internet became more entrenched, social technologies enhanced (Deters et al., 2010).

By developing social technologies, students will enter new and previously unknown territory and will benefit from the social dimensions that open before them. Virtual worlds such as Second Life, social tagging systems including Del.icio.us, and massively multiplayer online role-playing games

will help students experience a rich and dynamic collaborative learning education (Boulos et al., 2006). To fully appreciate the role the social web will play in education, it is important to comprehend the concept of communities of practice.

### **2.3. Wikis in Language Learning**

As Lin and Yang (2011) put it, Wiki is one of the innovative computer-assisted language learning. A wiki, one of the Web 2.0 tools, is a website that allows anyone with a web browser and Internet access to web pages from any location. Wiki pages can be used by all to publish new content directly to the Web, including text, images, and hyperlinks. Wikis progressively are used for education purposes mainly in E-learning. They aid different online learning activities that might be impossible in a typical classroom. In wikis, students collaboratively share their knowledge and are not passive in receiving information from their teachers.

Wiki has the potential to complement, enhance, and add new collaborative dimensions to the classroom (Adie, 2006, as cited in Parker & Chao, 2007). In other words, a wiki is a collaborative website that lets users easily and quickly create and edit web pages collaboratively, generate feedback, and track and compare additions, deletions, and changes to the pages within a shared and openly accessible digital space (Matthew & Callaway, 2009).

Wikis has the potential to provide an environment that embodies social-constructivist principles (Vygotsky, 1978) since learners can create and write a comment in an article easily where the result is seen immediately by all members. As a result, learners are actively engaged in their co-construction of knowledge (Boulos et al., 2006). Teachers can also provide feedback whenever it is required. Therefore, Wikis facilitates timely and particularly in-task guidance and improves the learning process (Beaumont et al., 2008).

Several researchers have investigated how students use and perceive wikis for collaborative authoring and group learning (e.g., Bonk et al., 2009; Deters et al., 2010; Elgort et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2022; O'Shea et al., 2006). Research evidence suggests that Wiki is an excellent tool for online collaboration in an educational context (Vassell et al., 2008). Vassell et al. (2008) evaluated the use of Wikis in student group work within Blackboard VLE. They described their experience of using Wikis which merged within Blackboard VLE to conduct and assess students' group projects in two undergraduate and one postgraduate module. The results showed that Wikis can prove a valuable group learning and assessment tool. Furthermore, students considered Wiki as a beneficial tool for facilitating learning.

Wiki's potential for fostering learning has just begun to capture the attention of researchers and teachers in second/foreign language teaching, especially in second-language writing (Li, 2012). Liu et al. (2022) used Wikis for group writing projects in creative English. They assessed the students' opinions regarding collaborative writing on Wikis. They found that Wikis improved students' writing abilities and inspired them to write in English with enthusiasm and positivity. The students gained experience providing and receiving group critique while participating in online collaborative writing.

Also, as Lin and Yang (2011) put it, Wiki is one of the innovative computer-assisted language learning that may be beneficiary to English writing. Web 2.0 tools provide more potential and opportunities for collaborative writing. Chao and Lo (2009) stated that writing on the web engages students more in self-monitoring and peer interaction. It provides a socially interactive environment, encourages student responsibility for learning, and lets students exercise a sense of control over tasks.

It should be considered that the most popular application of Wikis is collaborative writing (Lamb, 2004) and can be used for brainstorming, knowledge construction, project planning, problem-solving, resource sharing, case libraries, assignment submission, presentations, and community building (An, 2010). As long as Wikis can combine multimedia objects, such as pictures and videos, they provide opportunities for the participants to create E-portfolios, digital stories, or other multimedia presentations (EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, 2005; Engstrom & Jewett, 2005; Lamb, 2004; Parker & Chao, 2007). Collaborative writing assignments with Wikis encourage students to review each other's pieces and truly reflect on and critique what is being put together instead of just pasting separate components together (Ben-Zvi, 2007).

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

To address the research questions in this study, a mixed-methods research design was chosen. Data were gathered using a sequential design, whereby quantitative experimental data was first collected and analyzed. Consequently, as part of a sequential mixed-methods study that was followed by a qualitative phase using focus-group interviews. The study aimed to provide a realistic depiction of the individuals, emphasizing their qualities.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The participants involved in the research were 28 adult female Iranian EFL learners attending an English course, who were randomly selected from



the intermediate level of a private English language institute in Tehran, Iran. The participants were all female and taught by the same teacher. Their age ranged from twenty to forty, with a mean age of twenty-eight. The participants had different educational backgrounds. Participants of the study were all from the intermediate level. The participants were randomly divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group. Therefore, there was one group experiencing the online peer assessment activities through Wiki as a forum for out-of-classroom discussions, and one control group doing face-to-face peer assessment activities.

The participants of the second phase of the study (i.e., focus-group interview) were a group of 12 EFL students, who had an English writing course. Their ages ranged from 18 to 24. In line with Dörnyei (2007), a heterogeneous sample that consisted “of dissimilar people” was selected, which is “useful in providing varied and rich data that covers all angles” (p.144). Hence, they were not homogenous in terms of their language learning experiences, first language, age, and gender.

### **3.3. Materials and Instruments**

#### ***3.3.1. Materials***

The second edition of the American Headway (Soar & Soar, 2014) book was used as the instructional material for the intermediate level. The first five lessons of Headway 3 were chosen for the intermediate groups. The writing parts of these lessons were the target activities to evaluate the grammar accuracy of the participants' writing.

#### ***3.3.2. Instruments***

First, a Wiki-based system is a platform for online collaborative writing and learning. As a high-speed database platform, a Wiki online writing system, with its simple interface and functions, allows users to easily create, edit, modify, and delete web content (Lin & Yang, 2011). The teacher constructed the Wiki by drawing on Wikifoudary (a free website hosting service where anyone can create their own "Wiki" site whose photos are found in Appendix B. Two main pages set up for the Wiki:

- (a) Home page for students to sign up and to add their names and their photos;
- (b) A discussion forum for posting their text and comments: This page contained two tabs: “post a new thread” and “reply and edit”. To add their posts, the students were required to click on the first tab once they logged into the space. This activates the “reply and edit” tab.

Second, to compare the performance of groups, a scale for error annotation, a teacher-made scale for measuring learners' writings, was developed based on Diaz-Negrillo's error annotation scheme for grammar accuracy (Diaz-Negrillo, 2009) as is shown below.

**Table 1**

*Error Annotation Scale developed Based on Diaz-Negrillo's (2009) Error Annotation Scheme*

Category	Subcategories	Score subtraction for each error
Clause grammar	Clause constituents	0.5
	Syntactic processes	0.25
	Multiple structures	0.5
Phrase grammar	Phrase constituents	0.5
	Syntactic processes	0.25
	Multiple structures	0.5
Word grammar	Number categories	0.25
	Tense categories	0.5
	Case categories	0.25
Punctuation	All Punctuations	0.25

To check the validity of the error annotation scale developed based on Diaz-Negrillo's (2009) error annotation scheme for grammar accuracy, it was reviewed and verified by two university professors in the field of language teaching. A writing test with the evaluation by this scale was piloted and the internal consistency value for it was acceptable ( $\alpha = .73$ ). The same scale for evaluation was used to evaluate both the pretest and posttest learner corpus.

Third, an interview protocol was developed based on the themes from the literature on tech-assisted writing pedagogy to investigate the focus-group interviewees' experiences and perceptions of Wikis-based writing. The guide included three themes as follows: a) Technological tools enhance the learning experiences of students, b) Technologies influence students' writing originality and creativity, c) Language learners' way of thinking is transformed after technology use.

Finally, five topics were chosen as the pre-test and posttest topics for the participants to write a one-paragraph essay. These topics were similar to the topic of the first five units of the second edition of American Headway (Soar & Soar, 2014) intermediate level. The writing parts of these lessons were the target activities to evaluate the grammar accuracy of the participants' writing.

### 3.4. Procedure

The main purpose of the study was to investigate the effect of online peer assessment on learners' language accuracy in one-paragraph writing. A preliminary English Test (PET) published by Cambridge University was

administered to the learners who were attending the intermediate-level English course in the institute to homogenize them in terms of their language proficiency. Then, 28 learners at the intermediate level whose scores on the PET test were two standard deviations below and above the mean of scores ( $M= 16.23$ ,  $SD= 1.76$ ), were selected as the participants of the study. Afterward, the learners were randomly divided into two groups: the experimental group and the control group.

In the third step, the learners were given a writing test with a writing subject from their textbook, as the pretest, and the scores were evaluated by the teacher. The experimental and control groups were exposed to the same instruction. The classes of both were held twice a week for 14 weeks. Each session lasted for an hour and a half. They engaged in various classroom activities including reading, speaking, listening, and writing. The learners wrote a paragraph each session about the topic they were engaged in the class. The experimental group's members had access to a classroom Wiki. They wrote their paragraphs on Wiki corrected each other and wrote their comments on Wiki as well which was part of their course requirement (the photos are found in Appendix B. Their contribution to Wiki was not optional and learners' posts were assessed as a part of the course requirement. The first step of scaffolding was to provide support with other regulations for learners' self-regulation or for exceeding their ability to do a task. Once learners built up certain knowledge or skills, removing or fading (gradually reducing) support was the second step for learners to work on independently.

In the control group, the same activities were done with the only difference being that they assessed their classmates by correction, gave comments on each other's paragraphs on the paper, and discussed the correction. Afterward, after seven weeks of treatment, another writing test with a subject from their textbook was given to the learners of both groups as the posttest, and the scores were again evaluated for error annotation. Finally, a heterogeneous sample of 12 students, dissimilar in their age, gender, first language, and experiences learning the language, attended the focus-group interview. Their discussions on the themes of the interview guide were recorded and transcribed for the qualitative data analysis.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

In order to explore the first research question, since two groups of the same proficiency level were involved, a series of independent t-tests were conducted to measure the differences in mean scores. To obtain descriptive statistics, the means type of them were conducted. To investigate the normality of score distribution, the type of descriptive statistics was run. To address the qualitative research question of the study, the focus-group interview data were

transcribed and coded based on the three themes of the interview guide in line with Dörnyei (2007).

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results for the First Research Question

Before assigning the learners to control and experimental groups, the PET was administered to the intermediate-level learners of the institute to select homogenous participants for the study in terms of their language proficiency. The test was administered to omit the learners whose scores were two standard deviations below or above the mean of scores.

**Table 2**

*Descriptive Statistics for PET Test*

Group	N	M	SD
Intermediate	28	13.50	1.71
Total	28	13.50	1.71

Table 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics for the PET test ( $M=13.50$ ,  $SD=1.71$ ). As the table shows, the learners' language proficiency was in the same range with a standard deviation lower than 2. Before starting the treatment phase, a pretest was administered to the learners to investigate two issues. First, we wanted to find out if there was any significant difference between the performances of the two groups, and second, to compare the scores with the scores on the posttest. Then the writings of the learners were evaluated based on the teacher-made scale for error annotation and the scores initially were analyzed through the test of normality. As the significance values are more than .05 ( $p=.20$ ), they show that the scores on this test were normally distributed. Table 2 shows the results of the test of normality run on the scores of the pretest.

**Table 3**

*Test of Normality for Pretest*

	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	Control	.205	14	.200*	.881	14	.108
	Experimental	.155	14	.200*	.896	14	.163

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Afterward, these scores were subjected the descriptive statistics. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the control group and the experimental group. As shown in Table 3, the mean scores for both groups were very close to each other ( $M=11.36$  and  $M=11.72$ , respectively) with a standard deviation value of 1.36 for the control group and 1.48 for the experimental group.

**Table 4**  
*Descriptive Statistics for Pretest*

Group		N	M	SD	Std. Error Mean
pretest	Control	14	11.36	1.36	.41
	Experimental	14	11.72	1.48	.44

An independent sample t-test was run on the data collected from the pretest administered to the learners of both groups. The data in Table 4 shows the results of running an independent sample t-test on the scores of learners on the pretest. The significance value for Levene's test in this table explains that the variance in the pretest had homogeneity ( $p=.79$ ). As the p-value indicates ( $p=.55$ ) there was not a significant difference between the performance of control group learners and experimental group learners on the pretest.

**Table 5**  
*Independent Samples T-test for Pretest*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
pretest	Equal variances assumed	.069	.795	-.59	20	.55	-.36	.60
	Equal variances not assumed			-.598	19.84	.55	-.36	.60

To measure learners' progress after the treatment phase of the research procedure and also to find out the answer to the research question, is there any significant difference between the EFL learners who attended the online peer assessment and those who did not in terms of grammar accuracy of their paragraph writing at intermediate level, the learners were given posttest. After administration of the test, their writings were evaluated by the teacher-made scale for error annotation. In the first step of analyzing the posttest scores, they were subjected to the test of normality (Table 5).

**Table 6***Test of Normality for Pretest and Posttest*

Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	Df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
control	.191	14	.200*	.934	14	.452
experimental	.147	14	.200*	.968	14	.866

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

\*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

As shown in Table 6, the significance values for both groups were more than .05 ( $p=.20$ ) and showed that the obtained scores on the posttest were normally distributed. After running the test of normality, their scores were analyzed through descriptive statistics and independent samples t-test. Table 7 represents the results of descriptive statistics for the posttest ( $M=14.18$ ,  $SD=1.32$  and  $M=17.36$ ,  $SD=1.43$  for the control group and experimental group, respectively).

**Table 7***Descriptive Statistics for Posttest*

	Group	N	M	SD	Std. Error
					Mean
Posttest	intermediate-control	14	14.18	1.32	.40
	intermediate-experimental	14	17.36	1.43	.43

To find out if the difference in the scores of the control group and the experimental group was significant or not, the scores were subjected to the independent samples T-test. The results of the independent samples T-test run on the scores of the experimental and control groups are shown in Table 8.

**Table 8***Independent Samples T-test for Posttest*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				T-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
posttest							
Equal variances assumed	.212	.650	-5.401	20	.000	-3.18	.58
Equal variances not assumed			-5.401	19.88	.000	-3.18	.58

The significance value of Levene's test indicates the homogeneity of variance in the posttest ( $p=0.65$ ). The sig value of the T-test in this table explains that there was a significant difference between the performance of the learners in control and experimental groups of intermediate level ( $p=.00$ ) with the effect size of 0.52 ( $Eta^2= 0.52$ ). On the basis of the results of the

independent sample T-test run on the scores of the posttests ( $p=.00$ ,  $Eta^2=0.52$ ), the research null hypothesis was rejected.

#### **4.2. Results for the Second Research Question**

The interview responses of the focus-group interviewees have been analyzed and juxtaposed to the three themes, extracted from the literature as follows.

##### ***Question 1: Do you think that technological tools enhance the learning experiences of language learners?***

The interview responses gave a thorough insight into how the student's writing has been aided and their capacity to learn more effectively has been improved by the use of technology. They have asserted that they could not organize and refine their writings. All of the participants agreed that the introduction of technology has completely changed the way they wrote. The following two excerpts show the problems (i.e., lack of any ideas, content and language knowledge gaps, weakness of writing ability, lack of writing experience, no strategic knowledge of writing) they experienced in conventional writing classrooms:

*Extract 1:* "I got confused due to misunderstanding the writing topics."

*Extract 2:* "I didn't have much information about the writing process and strategies."

Regarding this, it appears that the students are quite self-assured to use technology to help them improve their writing skills by providing them with necessary knowledge and tools.

##### ***Question 2: Do you think that technologies influence students' originality and creativity?***

Technological tools play a key role in helping students develop their creative thinking skills. The participants' comments indicate that people believe that the use of such tools in the educational system has allowed people to make use of information resources and come up with original ideas. These have a stimulating influence on students' creativity since they provide a variety of alternative viewpoints and insights on numerous subjects, enabling them to gradually develop complex and logical arguments.

*Extract 1:* "I didn't know how to write a paragraph or a paper in a conventional writing class."

*Extract 2:* "I learned how to put my ideas on paper."

***Question 3: Do you think that your thinking of writing is transformed after technology use?***

According to their answers during the interview, the interviewees gave specific details about how they thought about writing before the prevalence of tech-assisted writing. They discussed how technology influenced their negative feelings and thoughts (i.e., fear of the final product, fear of journal evaluation criteria, and lack of interest in writing) about their writing abilities. The following two instances are the excerpts from the focus-group interviews:

*Extract 1:* It's not important for me to write a good essay.

*Extract 2:* All the time, I had the fear of failure, so I couldn't concentrate.

## **5. Discussion**

In the present research, this hypothesis was raised that there was not any significant difference between the EFL learners who attended online peer assessment and those who did not in terms of grammar accuracy of their written discourse at the intermediate level. After analysis of the obtained data, it was clarified that there was a significant difference in the performance of learners in the experimental and control groups on the posttest. The performance of the learners in the experimental group who attended online peer assessment during their English course was significantly better than the learners in the control group who performed face-to-face peer assessment in the same procedure of teaching and learning.

The results of face-to-face focus-group interviews with the learners confirmed that the learners who attended online Wiki-based peer assessment had positive attitudes toward such kind of peer assessment. They claimed that technology has helped create a collaborative atmosphere and a sense of confidence among the learners. They also mentioned that this type of assessment not only improved their grammar accuracy in writing but also motivated them to write more accurately in order not to be corrected by other learners and it made them wiser and more exact in evaluating and assessing each other writings.

Totally, because of the facilitating nature of online peer assessment through Wiki and also the better collaborative environment it offers for such activities, the peer assessment procedure was more successful and productive in the experimental group. Also, since this type of assessment was innovative for language classes, this innovation and interesting environment of Wiki motivated learners to attend more willingly in the process of peer assessment and try to improve their writing in order to contend with their peers in the experimental group. This is in line with the finding of the research done by



Owen et al. (2006) in which he found that using Wiki in English classes has a positive effect on learning. It also confirmed Harris and Zeng's (2008) finding that Wiki is a powerful tool for aiding language learning. Many other abroad research had the same finding in exploring the effects of Wiki and online collaborations on language learning (e.g., Bonk, et.al, 2009; Coutinho & Bottentuit, 2007; Glasser, 2004; Liu et al., 2022; Sula et al., 2021). The findings of the present study were in line with the findings of research done by Ahmadi and Marandi (2014), who reported that Wikis are proper environments for creating, editing, reviewing, tagging, assessing, and commenting for learners, as they had a positive effect on improving learners' language skills. It also corresponds with the findings of Liu et al. (2022), who looked into how Wikis affected the writing abilities of EFL students. They found that the participants gained knowledge, insights, and experience through participating in online Wiki-based collaborative writing.

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

As McConnell (2002) argued, using online peer assessment activities not only can speed up grading time and provide students with more thoughtful feedback, but also helps students to interact with the teacher and other students without limitation of time and location. The conclusion that could be drawn from the results of quantitative data analysis of the present study and the statements of learners in face-to-face interviews suggested that the application of online Wiki-based peer assessment in EFL classes has positive effects on grammar accuracy in writing by the intermediate-level EFL learners. It was also concluded that the use of online peer assessment is a motivating factor for learners in order to be more precise in their classroom paragraph writing. The important point obtained during the research period and also in interviews was that when peer assessment and especially online peer assessment are accounted for in a classroom activity and assignment, it can be more effective and motivating in comparison to when it is optional. As Owen et.al (2006) claimed, social networking helps students to get together from different locations and share their ideas and works in a rich environment so that they can create a new and informal knowledge structure, the participants of the present study claimed that they had a new experience of learning in a comfortable environment where they were exposed to other students and these factors help them to motivate more and improved their grammar accuracy in writing. Therefore, this point was gained that the novelty of online peer assessment activities in language classes was another motivating factor for its grace for language learners.

The findings of the present study can help material developers, teachers, and learners in the process of language teaching and learning. Firstly, it can be helpful for material developers in the sense that with the important

role of peer assessment in the language learning process especially online one, they can design and develop materials that have online peer assessment activities in their practice parts. Secondly, it informs language teachers about the positive effects of online peer assessment and its superiorities over face-to-face peer assessment in terms of its time-saving and novel nature and also its motivating role in grammar accuracy in writing among learners. Therefore, the teachers can be successful more and decide better if they include this sort of peer assessment in their language teaching courses. Moreover, the inherent flexibility in social software like Wikis promotes autonomy among learners and enables them to adapt to the learning context to satisfy their needs (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). Finally, this research can motivate learners to form Wiki groups and attend them in order to improve their language proficiency in all dimensions especially in their grammar accuracy in writing.

There were several limitations in the present study that need to be acknowledged. The study was conducted on 28 EFL learners who participated in the research on a voluntary basis. The number of the participants and the nature of participation indicate that the result might not be generalized beyond the context of the study. Furthermore, all learners were female and from the intermediate level. Comparing the male learners in attending and using online peer assessment through wikis and also learners with different proficiency levels can provide more valuable results and findings for readers. Finally, participants' prior familiarity with Wikis and online tools could not be controlled.

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Research Article

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## The Effectiveness of App-Based Language Instruction: A Blend of Productive Linguistic Knowledge Improvement and Users' Perceptions and Experiences

Maryam Khavaninzadeh<sup>1</sup>, Mohammad Golshan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD student, Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Iran.  
mim.khavanin@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Iran  
(Corresponding author). mohammadgolshann@gmail.com

### Abstract

The growing popularity of language-learning apps among language learners has highlighted the need for rigorous evaluation of their efficacy in second language acquisition (SLA). This study combined quantitative measures to comprehensively understand the effectiveness of the Busuu app in improving the productive vocabulary of Iranian intermediate EFL learners with qualitative data from in-depth interviews to explore their perceptions and experiences while using the app. Forty-three learners (17 males and 26 females with a mean age of 27.53) were selected to assess the effectiveness of the Busuu app on learners' productive vocabulary knowledge. Among them, 15 participants (all female with a mean age of 29.40) agreed to be interviewed after the Busuu study to gain insights into learners' perceptions and experiences with app-based learning. A pretest-posttest design using the LEX30 task, a standardized productive vocabulary assessment tool, was conducted before and after the Busuu study to evaluate participants' productive vocabulary knowledge. Paired samples t-tests revealed no significant improvement in participants' productive vocabulary knowledge. Nonetheless, the number of responses produced in the posttest was higher than in the pretest. According to the interview data, users rated vocabulary as the most favored feature of the app, while restricted access to premium content was noted as the least favored. Most participants acknowledged that the app exceeded their initial expectations before installing it. Additionally, improving vocabulary knowledge was the users' primary expectation from utilizing the app. Furthermore, approximately all participants found the app beneficial for language learning. However, most of them reported low levels of enjoyment during app usage. The results can contribute to understanding what needs to be done to upgrade the quality and potential of the Bussu app, how the app can better support EFL learners in effectively activating their lexical knowledge, and what the users' experiences and expectations from a language-learning app are.

**Keywords:** attitude, Busuu, computer-assisted language learning, EFL, language-learning application, mobile-assisted language learning, productive vocabulary knowledge

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary mastery plays a vital role in language acquisition. It has been classified into diverse dimensions. Receptive/productive linguistic competence is a well-known and pervasive framework. Receptive vocabulary knowledge pertains to processing words instead of creating them, while productive knowledge addresses creation and production (Harmer, 2007). In other words, the lexical items that learners can recognize and comprehend when they listen or read are passive, while the words that learners can use in their speech and writing are active lexical items. Therefore, having sufficient active lexical competence is essential for L2 learners to recall and use words effectively in their language.

With its effortless, instant, and roughly limitless access to various software, applications (or apps), and a host of additional resources, technology has revolutionized second-language learning (L2). In addition, the COVID-19 outbreak has further accelerated this shift towards online resources, making digital instruction a substantial issue in recent years. As such, digital instruction plays a crucial role in shaping the future of language learning and teaching, offering a promising outlook for the potential for app-based language instruction.

Prior research on technology has primarily focused on whether and how technology promotes SLA (El Hariry, 2015). However, comparatively less attention has been given to utilizing technology to instruct SLA outside the classroom (Rosell-Aguilar, 2016), possibly due to the rapid evolution of technology in language learning apps. The widespread growth and popularity of mobile apps among language learners have underscored the need for rigorous evaluations of their design and quality. These evaluations not only help developers understand the impact of their apps on users' real-life learning performance but also contribute to the ongoing discourse on the effectiveness of language learning outside classroom contexts.

Given the widespread usage of apps beyond formal learning settings, it is becoming increasingly crucial that autonomous users evaluate the fitness of apps for their learning needs (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017). However, the scarcity of research on the effectiveness of exclusive app-based language learning underscores the urgent need for further exploration. Our study, therefore, attempted to bridge this gap and contribute to the ongoing discourse on the effectiveness of apps in language learning outside classroom contexts, thereby underlining its importance.

While previous research has attested to the potential of apps in facilitating vocabulary acquisition, the issue of learners' ability to use the

gained vocabulary productively in their language use has been overlooked. The present study, therefore, examined the potential effectiveness of Busuu, a popular language-learning app designed for self-study, in developing productive lexical knowledge among Iranian learners. By focusing on Busuu's capacity to enhance productive vocabulary knowledge, this study contributes to the future of language learning and pedagogy.

Therefore, this study aimed to comprehensively evaluate Busuu's effectiveness in enhancing learners' vocabulary acquisition and sought to gain deeper insights into users' attitudes and overall learners' experiences while using the app. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

**RQ1.** To what extent does the Busuu app improve the productive vocabulary knowledge of intermediate EFL learners?

**RQ2.** How do L2 English learners perceive the effectiveness of the Busuu app in supporting their language learning journey?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Lexical Knowledge**

Vocabulary has always been considered the most vital component of all languages, underscoring its pivotal role in language learning and teaching. Given the importance of vocabulary learning for SLA, applied linguistics has been concerned with developing and enhancing learners' vocabulary knowledge, an indispensable component of language learning and teaching and the foundation of communication. This emphasis on vocabulary learning highlights the significance of our work within this domain.

Vocabulary knowledge is a complex construct involving several aspects. It is multidimensional, encompassing many classes and subclasses (Laufer & Goldstein, 2004; Nation, 2001). Nation (2001) classified this knowledge into three main categories: knowing the form, the meaning of the word, and how to use it, highlighting its intricate nature.

One area of lexical knowledge that has been extensively studied is the difference between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. An agreed-upon definition of these constructs remains elusive (Pignot-Shahov, 2012), and the interrelationship between these two types of knowledge and the process of learning them is still unclear and ambiguous (Fan, 2000; Read, 2000; Webb, 2005). Receptive vocabulary, or passive vocabulary knowledge, is used while listening to or reading something. Productive vocabulary knowledge, or active knowledge, is the correct use of words in productive skills (Nation, 2001). In other words, receptive vocabulary pertains to

processing the word instead of producing it; however, productive knowledge requires creation and production, as in speech or writing (Harmer, 2007).

The general belief is that words are initially stored receptively, necessitating intentional or incidental learning for productive use. Hence, linguistic knowledge can be conceptualized as a continuum; one end is receptive word knowledge, and the other is productive. However, this dichotomy is not absolute. In contrast to the general view that receptive knowledge grows first and faster than productive knowledge, Zhong and Hirsh (2009) reported that productive vocabulary grew faster among their participants than receptive vocabulary. Likewise, Hagtvet (1982) posited that productive lexical knowledge grows before receptive knowledge for some lexical items.

A widely observed finding is that learners' receptive vocabulary tends to expand faster than productive vocabulary knowledge. Laufer (1998) concluded that there was a significant improvement in learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge, whereas little to no progress was shown in their productive vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, a study by Fan (2000) showed a slower rate of advancement for productive vocabulary knowledge. Correspondingly, Webb (2005) noted that learners with greater receptive vocabulary knowledge tended to show more productive vocabulary knowledge. Given the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, effectively transferring receptive lexical knowledge to productive mode is a crucial objective in language teaching.

Laufer and Paribakht (1998) emphasized that word frequency is essential in facilitating the transition from receptive to active vocabulary knowledge. Although the issue of transferring vocabulary knowledge from receptive to productive mastery is substantial in SLA, it is relatively under-researched (Heidari, 2019). Furthermore, using what has been learned receptively within authentic situations stimulates learners' notice of the vocabulary items and their pragmatic applications (Lee & Muncie, 2006). Lehmann (2007) also stated that the gap between learners' passive and productive knowledge is more noticeable in EFL contexts compared to ESL environments, and this could be attributed to more opportunities available to ESL learners to apply the vocabulary they acquired receptively and turn them to the productive mode. Due to the limited opportunities for EFL learners to use the language, productive vocabulary knowledge activation rarely occurs. Thus, from all the points mentioned, it is apparent that vocabulary learning is not just memorizing the meaning of words without using them (Swain, 1985). Uchiyara and Saito (2016) used the LEX30 task to efficiently assess productive vocabulary knowledge. They also investigated the predictive power of L2

learners' productive vocabulary knowledge in predicting multiple dimensions of spontaneous speech production. Findings revealed a significant correlation between productive vocabulary scores and L2 fluency but not comprehensibility or accentedness, suggesting a pivotal role of productive lexical knowledge in developing L2 learners' oral proficiency.

## **2.2. Evaluating Language Learning with Mobile Applications**

In recent years, the remarkable growth of digital technologies has been exponential, providing more opportunities and affordance for language learners. Gorjian (2012) stated that technology use in language teaching had increased over the past decade and had outstanding upshots on language learning. The widespread use of mobile technologies, such as smartphones, provides instant access to enormous educational resources, such as language-learning apps.

Many learners use one or more apps as their primary form of instruction to learn languages (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). The value and potential of these apps as language-learning resources differ enormously. Based on a large number of research findings, apps have been shown to improve several language skills, such as vocabulary acquisition (Steel, 2012; Xodabande & Atai, 2020; Rezaei et al., 2014), reading and writing (Steel, 2012), speaking (Hwang et al., 2014b; Shadiev et al., 2015), listening comprehension skills (Kim, 2013; Sorayyaei Azar & Nasiri, 2014), and grammar (Castañeda & Cho, 2016). On the one hand, some researchers have stressed the downsides of some language learning apps, noting a mismatch between pedagogical and technical qualities and contending that these apps only offer fragmented language practice (Pareja-Lora et al., 2013). Others argue that apps provide only basic learning activities without adding anything extra to what has been done earlier with other technologies (Burston, 2014). On the other hand, some believe apps can boost learners' autonomy and interest in language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Language learners can use them as a valuable supplementary tool for traditional classes (e.g., Lord, 2016), particularly when in-class language practice is inadequate. Furthermore, regular practices provided by apps can support language learners who are no longer formally studying a language but still want to keep practicing it (Rosell-Aguilar, 2017). New users, stakeholders, analysts, and researchers are willing to know the benefits of using language-learning apps, identify which app offers the best experience, and explore ways to improve the quality and potential of language-learning apps.

Zhang (2011) believed that learners' perceptions of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) significantly predict the successful use of computers in language learning. Several studies have reported learners' positive attitudes toward learning with apps (Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Ebadi &

Bashiri, 2018; Khodarahmi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Kim, 2013; Steel, 2012). For instance, Kim (2013) researched a group of Korean students and found positive effects of the apps' authentic listening materials on the listening comprehension of the experimental group. In addition, positive attitudes were reported toward using apps for this purpose. Relatedly, Sorayyaei Azar and Nasiri (2014) compared the effects of audiobooks on cell phones with traditional CD-ROM/ audiocassettes. The study showed that mobile learning effectively improves listening comprehension and presents an exciting and innovative approach to learning a new language.

In a similar vein, the findings of Khodarahmi and Heidari-Shahreza (2018) within the Iranian context confirmed the substantial influence of mobile apps on vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, EFL learners showed a positive attitude toward using Telegram, a mobile app, for the purpose of mastering word stress patterns. Correspondingly, Ebadi and Bashiri (2018) investigated EFL learners' perceptions of vocabulary learning via smartphone apps. Their results indicated that the participants harbored positive attitudes toward the app (Vocabulary Flashcards, 2016) due to its beneficial impact on their learning and its provision of both form and meaning-focused instruction. Steel (2012) emphasized the value of using language learning apps outside the classroom. According to his study, many students used more than one app and valued the opportunity to engage in language learning outside the classroom. The features reported by participants that they preferred most were portability, convenience, flexibility, and the potential to personalize their learning experience. The language areas perceived as highly beneficial were vocabulary, reading and writing, grammar, and translation activities. Basal et al. (2016) investigated the Effectiveness of WhatsApp, a mobile app, in facilitating learning idioms. The control group was instructed to learn material and tasks in printed form (paper-based), while the experimental group was engaged with the learning content through WhatsApp. In within-group comparisons, both groups showed significant progress; however, in between-group comparisons, the experimental group outperformed the control group.

### **2.3. Busuu Application**

Busuu is a popular language-learning program that operates across Android and iOS operating systems, and it is also accessible via the web (available at <https://www.busuu.com/en/logout>). It is easy to access the Busuu app; one only needs an email address or a phone number to create an account. This app offers a diverse selection of 12 languages, permitting users to choose the language of their interest to begin learning. This app offers language courses from beginner level A1 to upper intermediate level B2 (using CEFR). Users can follow the courses in a linear fashion or navigate freely through them

to find the topics of interest. While Busuu is not entirely free, it offers substantial content at no cost for learners who sign up for a basic account. They can access additional features and sections if they upgrade to a premium membership. This program offers a comprehensive range of exercise types, topics, and situations that facilitate practicing essential language skills. The activities are designed to enhance reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary, translation, and grammar, providing learners with a well-rounded language learning experience.

Moreover, users can access smart vocabulary reviews and quizzes. Learners can visually monitor their progress to see how much of the lesson they have completed, and they can also create a report showing their achievements over seven days, promoting self-monitoring. Additionally, the Busuu community allows learners to provide feedback on each other's writing exercises, fostering a motivational environment for learning. Although Busuu is one of the most widely popular apps and claims to have over 60 million registered users (Busuu, 2016), there is a paucity of research studies on Busuu as a language-learning platform, indicating a need for further investigation. Some examples of such studies are provided in the following paragraphs.

Rezaei et al. (2014) investigated the effectiveness of mobile apps (Interactive English and Busuu) in enhancing English vocabulary learning. They found that using these apps significantly improved vocabulary acquisition, increased learners' confidence, enhanced class participation, and fostered a positive inclination toward implementing multimedia in education. In a large-scale survey involving 4,095 participants, Rosell-Aguilar (2018) used an online questionnaire to assess user experiences with the Busuu application. The study revealed that 83% of the participants found the app beneficial for improving their language skills, with vocabulary acquisition being the main area of improvement. The study concluded that users considered the app a reliable resource for language learning, as evidenced by their high expectations. Notably, one-third of the respondents (36%) reported using it as their sole resource for language acquisition. Additionally, 40% of them relied solely on apps and digital resources for language learning, while 24% used formal language learning programs. The survey highlighted several important app features, such as interactive exercises, personalized learning paths, and the inclusion of native speaker feedback, all of which contributed to its usefulness. This research suggests that a significant number of adults worldwide rely exclusively on apps for their language learning, emphasizing the need for further studies into app-based learning. Moreover, in a non-peer-reviewed study conducted by Vesselinov and Grego (2016b) about the effectiveness of the Busuu app, it was reported that after two months (on average, 22.5 hours of study), 84 percent of the participants demonstrated

improvement in their writing skills, and over 75 percent of them improved their oral proficiency.

## **2.4. Autonomous Language Learning via Apps**

One of the potentials of using apps recognized by earlier studies is their ability to trigger learners' autonomy and interest in language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Leis et al., 2015). Using mobile apps inside the classroom context with teacher guidance differs significantly from using them autonomously. While many studies have been conducted on mobile device activity within a classroom setting, less is known about how learners engage in mobile learning independently outside the classroom.

Leis et al. (2015) examined the benefits of implementing smartphones in an EFL setting in Japan, focusing on learners' motivation and autonomy. The outcomes suggested that learners encouraged to use their smartphones in the classroom demonstrated motivation to study more during their leisure time. Furthermore, these learners showed high autonomy, took responsibility for their learning, and actively sought ways to enhance their study habits and language proficiency. Similarly, Mason and Zhang (2017) investigated how learners of Chinese as a foreign language with different proficiency levels used mobile apps to promote their learning of Chinese characters. A survey and semi-structured interviews found that 94 percent of the participants used apps independently; however, learners used only a small part of the available functionalities.

The previous sections have highlighted the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of apps in aiding language learning. While current literature suggests that these apps help develop language skills and vocabulary acquisition and that learners generally have positive attitudes toward them, some research gaps still require further investigation. Firstly, researchers employed applications not specially designed for language learning in many studies, such as Telegram or WhatsApp (e.g., Basal et al., 2016; Khodarahmi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2018). Therefore, the assessment of these apps differs from that of dedicated language-learning apps. Moreover, some studies concentrated on apps designed for a single language skill, such as flashcards (e.g., Xodabande & Atai, 2020), while others utilized apps that offer a combination of skills (e.g., Busuu) (e.g., Rosell-Aguilar, 2018; Rezaei et al., 2014). Since language skills are inherently interconnected and complement each other in the context of language learning and use, this study used a language-learning app (Busuu), which includes all skills for learning a new language.

Another gap identified in most studies mentioned in the extant literature is that educators frequently integrated app features into their instruction, interfering with learners using the app independently (e.g., Khodarahmi & Shahreza, 2018). As a result, it is challenging to associate users learning improvements with the app directly. Building upon these findings, this study aimed to evaluate a language-learning app when learners use it independently without the influence of teacher intervention. In addition, previous research has consistently demonstrated the usefulness of app learning in improving vocabulary knowledge. It is worth noting that vocabulary knowledge is multi-dimensional, and the ultimate goal of vocabulary learning is to use it actively. Accordingly, this study seeks to determine the extent to which apps contribute to expanding learners' active vocabulary repertoire. Lastly, although numerous studies have reported a generally positive attitude among users, variation exists in their assessment criteria, participants' age groups, language proficiency levels, and expectations.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

An explanatory sequential mixed-method research design was used, combining quantitative data from pretests and posttests with qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The quantitative component facilitated a robust comparison of learners' productive vocabulary knowledge before and after using the Busuu app, providing numerical evidence of the app's effectiveness. However, the interviews evaluated its effectiveness, providing deeper insights into the users' perceptions and experiences.

Participants were chosen using convenience sampling, following Dörnyei's (2007) approach. This method was selected due to the ease of access and availability of participants who met specific criteria and were willing to take part. These criteria included: (a) being native Persian speakers, (b) not currently enrolled in any formal English study, (c) having an intermediate level of English proficiency, and (d) being willing to commit to studying English on Busuu for at least 250 minutes (over 4 hours) for fewer than three months.

#### **3.2. Participants**

Sixty-five participants met these benchmarks and agreed to participate in the study. Participants were asked to report their average usage time on Busuu every two weeks to ensure they received enough treatment. Of the 65 participants, 47 diligently studied English on Busuu for at least 250 minutes and reported their work to the researcher. Finally, 43 of these participants (17 male and 26 females,  $M_{age} = 27.53$ ,  $SD = 13.82$ ) completed the posttests. Of



those, 15 participants (all female,  $M_{age} = 29.40$ ,  $SD = 9.48$ ) volunteered and were seated for the interview after their experience with the Busuu study.

### 3.3. Materials and Instruments

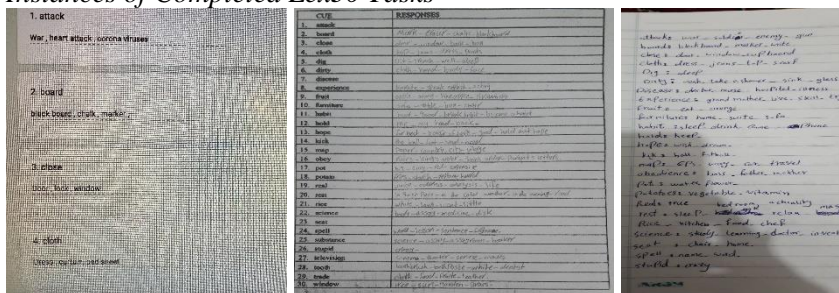
#### 3.3.1. Productive Vocabulary Test (Lex30)

Lex30 task, a significant tool in our research, elicited participants' productive mental lexicon through word associations. The Lex30 task is a widely recognized and validated tool for measuring productive vocabulary knowledge. It was built on the relatively familiar construct of vocabulary frequency and yields rapid, quantitative score data (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2010). Moreover, Lex30 produces a lexically rich text economically, involving minimal employment of receptive knowledge (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2010).

In this task, respondents were required to write up to four other words that they considered semantically related to each cue. We used the computerized version of the Lex30 task (available at <https://www.lognostics.co.uk>) and replicated the same stimulus, spaces, and instructions to create a digital format of the Lex30 task. The digital format was designed using Google Forms. The participants were provided with the link, a brief explanation, a picture of the LEX30 task, and an example, which improved the transparency of the process.

Lex30 was first developed and validated by Meara and Fitzpatrick (2000). Clenton (2010) concluded that Lex30 offers a valuable means of understanding the construct of productive lexical knowledge. Also, it was reported to be effective in "broadly measuring productive vocabulary knowledge" (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2010, p. 545). According to Fitzpatrick and Meara (2004), "Lex30 is a robust enough measuring tool to fill an important gap in the battery of tests currently available" (p. 72). Figure 1 displays some instances of the completed tasks.

**Figure 1**  
*Instances of Completed Lex30 Tasks*



Earlier research studies have shown high validity for this task, with significant correlations reported with the Productive Vocabulary Levels Test (PVL; Laufer & Nation, 1999) (Fitzpatrick & Clenton, 2010; Walters, 2012). Three experts in the field meticulously proofread the questionnaire to establish its validity. The questionnaire was then piloted with five EFL learners similar to the main participants. The test/retest reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was estimated, yielding an index of .937

### ***3.3.2. New Inside Out Quick Placement Test***

International organization Macmillan Publishers (2015) developed the New Inside Out Quick Placement Test. The test scores are equivalent to CEFR levels and indicate students' English level of proficiency after they reply to multiple-choice questions on vocabulary and grammar. Only 15 minutes are required to answer the test's questions. The test can be downloaded or used online (available at <http://www.insideout.net/new/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/quick-placement-test.doc>). According to the test conversion Table, the range required for the intermediate level (B1) is 30-39 points.

### ***3.3.3. Interviews***

Students' attitudes and willingness toward technology affect the effective application of computers in education (Pektaş & Erkip, 2006). Therefore, to evaluate the app and explore users' attitudes, perceptions, and experiences about using it after using it, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 participants in Persian. Six interviews took place via Skype, and the remaining were via WhatsApp. Each interview lasted roughly 15 minutes on average. The sessions were also audiotaped and transcribed for further analysis.

A content analysis was conducted on all meeting data to identify common themes regarding learners' attitudes toward the learning materials and their experience using the app. Although many comments were elicited for analysis, we focused on the most frequent themes. The data extracted from the interviews offered valuable insights into the nature of linguistic gains and learners' experience with the app.

## **3.4. Procedures**

The current investigation comprised three parts: first, pretesting; second, Busuu study; and finally, post-testing and interviewing. After selecting participants based on the research criteria, a link to the online Lex30 task was designed using Google Forms. Essential explanations and an example were shared with the participants. The participants completed the Lex30 task for

about 15 minutes. Then, participants announced their agreement to participate in the Busuu study. A brief explanation of how to use the app was provided to ensure that users could use the app properly. An invitation link was sent to the participants, enabling them to access a 30-day free trial. Participants used Busuu for less than three months for at least 250 minutes between pretesting and posttesting. They were required to complete Busuu lessons several days a week and to report their progress to the researchers verbally or by text weekly. However, they were also encouraged to study every day if they wished.

After about three months, the researcher conducted posttesting using Lex30. For scoring, each participant's responses were assembled and any misspellings were corrected. Subsequently, the responses underwent lemmatization following strict principles similar to the approach used by Meara and Fitzpatrick (2000). According to the lemmatization criteria in their study, if a word has an affix included in designated lists, it has to be simplified to its base form, called “lemmas”. If a word does not have an affix from the designated lists, it has to remain unchanged. The data was converted into a text file using Gboard and Google Keyboard and sorted alphabetically for each individual. The JACET list in Vocabprofile (Cobb, n.d.) was used to analyze the responses (available at [https://lex tutor.ca/freq/lists\\_download/jacet/jacet1000.txt](https://lex tutor.ca/freq/lists_download/jacet/jacet1000.txt)). One point was scored for every low-frequency word produced (not being in the 1000 most frequent English content words). In this study, we used raw scores for the scoring method. Volunteered participants were then seated for semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted 10–15 minutes and was recorded with participants' consent for further exploration.

### **3.5. Data Analyses**

The Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 was used for the quantitative part of the study (descriptive statistics and inferential statistics). A paired samples t-test, a statistical tool, was used to analyze the learners' pre- and post-test scores. The interview data was analyzed using the two-cycle coding procedure outlined by Miles et al. (2014). In the first cycle, open coding was performed. researchers examined the interview transcripts to identify recurring concepts and themes independently. In the second cycle, axial coding was used to further refine and organize the initial codes into broader categories. Codes were compared and discussed until a consensus was reached. The coding process revealed major themes: user features, expectation alignments, perceived learning outcomes, motivation and engagement factors, and overall user satisfaction. Each theme falls under three dimensions: user experience, effectiveness of learning, and engagement and motivation.

## 4. Results

The results of the quantitative and qualitative data analyses are presented in separate sections as follows.

### 4.1. Quantitative Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the paired samples t-test. A Kolmogrov-Smirnov test was conducted through SPSS 22 to check the normality assumption. Table 2 depicts the results of the normality assumption.

**Table 1**

*The Descriptive Statistics of Paired Samples T-test for Pretest and post-test scores*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest_score	23.7907	43	16.46144	2.51035
	posttest_score	24.3721	43	15.37627	2.34486

The data presented in Table 1 show that the observed mean of the scores the participants gained in the pretest was 23.8, while the average of the posttest scores was 24.4.

**Table 2**

*One-Sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test of Pretest and Posttest Scores*

		pretest_score	posttest_score
	N	43	43
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	23.7907	24.3721
	Std. Deviation	16.46144	15.37627
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.154	.124
	Positive	.154	.124
	Negative	-.112	-.124
	Test Statistic	.154	.124
	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.052	.093

As the analysis results in Table 2 show, the assumption of normality of pretest and posttest scores is met (pretest,  $p=.052$ ; posttest,  $p=.093$ ). To plot the subjects' progress after the Busuu study, a paired samples t-test was conducted to compare the Lex30 scores before and after the Busuu study.

**Table 3***The Paired Samples T-test for Pretest and Posttest Scores*

Pair		Paired Differences				T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
1	pretest_score - posttest_score	-.58	1.95	.29	-1.18	.02	-1.95	42	.058

As indicated in Table 3, the difference between participants' scores in the pre and posttest shows no significant difference between the two sets of scores. In other words, the participants' performance in the pretest ( $M=23.8$ ,  $SD=16.5$ ) was statistically the same as their performance in the posttest ( $M=24.4$ ,  $SD=15.4$ ),  $t(42) = -1.950$ ,  $p = .058$ . The eta squared statistic (.08) shows an insignificant effect size.

**Table 4***A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test of the Number of the Words Produced in the Pretest and Posttest*

	pretest_replied	posttest_replied	
N	43	43	
Normal Parameters <sup>a,b</sup>	Mean	58.5116	73.8837
	Std. Deviation	35.59519	29.83064
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.192	.136
	Positive	.178	.067
	Negative	-.192	-.136
Test Statistic	.192	.136	
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.045	

As the p values of the pretest ( $p < .001$ ) and posttest ( $p = .045$ ) show, the normality of the number of words the participants produced in each test is not assumed. A Wilcoxon signed rank test will be appropriate for comparing the number of words produced in each test.

**Table 5***The Descriptive Statistics of the Number of Words Produced in Pre- and Posttest*

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
posttest_replied - pretest_replied	Negative Ranks	17 <sup>a</sup>	300.00
	Positive Ranks	26 <sup>b</sup>	646.00
	Ties	0 <sup>c</sup>	
	Total	43	

The descriptive statistics in Table 5 show that the mean of the number of words increased from the pre-test ( $M=17.65$ ) to the post-test ( $M=24.85$ ).

**Table 6**

*A Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for the Number of Words Produced in Pre- and Posttest*

	posttest_replied - pretest_replied
Z	-2.089 <sup>b</sup>
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.037

From the test statistics in Table 6, it is evident that there is a significant difference between the number of responses in the pretest and posttest ( $Z=-2.089, p=.037$ ). The eta squared index is .31, which indicates a medium effect size. Identifying the test in which more responses were produced is possible by referring to the bar graph.

**Figure 2**

*The Bar Graph of the Number of Words Produced in Pre- and post-tests by Age Groups*

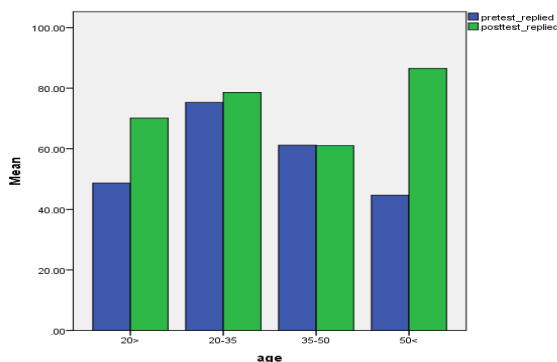


Figure 2 depicts that the number of words in the posttest is more than the number of words the participants produced in the pretest, almost for all age groups categorized in the study.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Findings

Semi-structured interviews were implemented to address the second research question on users' perceptions and experiences. Although loads of comments were elicited for analysis, here we tried to focus on the most frequent themes concerning

- 1) More/less favored app features: user feedback on app features they enjoyed or found frustrating
- 2) Expectations alignment: if the app met their initial expectations from a language learning app
- 3) Perceived learning outcomes: learners' assessment of their language gains after using the app
- 4) Motivation and engagement factors: app influence on learners' motivation and enjoyment during the learning process
- 5) Overall user satisfaction: general satisfaction and quality of the app

according to users' experiences.

#### 4.2.1. What specific app features do they like more/less than other features?

Tables 7 and 8 present the users' responses about the app's features that they liked more and less than others. The features reported by learners that they liked more than other features of the app were as follows: 66.66 percent of the learners reported that they liked Vocabulary activities, 53.33 percent mentioned that they liked listening activities, and 33.33 percent believed recap and quizzes sections were the parts they liked more than other ones. Moreover, 20 percent of learners reported that they liked that they could skip through the lessons and choose the lessons they wished to learn, and 60 percent acknowledged that the app was easy to use. Other comments were referring to the visual stuff.

Less-liked features were reported as 40 percent grammar practice and 60 percent speaking exercises. Twenty percent of comments were related to a dearth of decent writing activities, and 66.66 percent were about the necessity of full premium access to the app's contents. Other comments referred to the users' issue with the app's speech-to-text glitch and difficulty using it.

**Table 7**

*Learners' More-liked Features of the Busuu App*

More-liked	Examples
Vocabulary practice % 66.66	Using the mobile app helped me learn my English vocabulary better, and it was more fun.
Listening practice % 53.33	The apps' listening activities improved my listening skills and gave me confidence, as I could listen to the activities repeatedly and do them anyway.
Recap & Quizzes section % 33.33	The tests provided by the app regularly helped me feel confident knowing how much I have learned.
Choose the topic of their interest % 20%	Picking up my preferred topics was excellent. I did not have to stand the boring topics.
Easy to use 60%	I could easily and quickly go through the app materials, and the app saved my progress, which was easier than browsing the web.
Other 6.66%	I like using the app more than reading a book as it presents the material in multiple ways (photo, sound, examples, test, etc.)

**Table 8**  
*Learners' Less-Liked Features of the Busuu App*

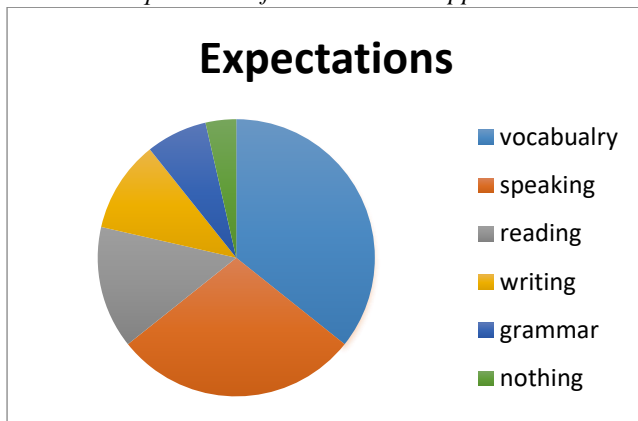
Less-liked	Examples
Speaking exercises 60%	Speaking exercises were only saying what we heard.
Grammar practice 40%	I am afraid I have to disagree that this app can help me to develop my grammar.
Writing activities 20%	Writing activities were only dragging some words into their place or ordering the words in a sentence.
Accessing to full premium content 66.66%	I did not like that some sections of some lessons were not free, and I could not complete some lessons.
Other 13.33%	The voice recognition did not work correctly. Sometimes, even when I know I am not pronouncing accurately, Busuu just accepts what I say.

As illustrated in Tables 7 and 8, vocabulary practice is the most liked feature of the Busuu app, and not accessing full premium content was the least liked feature.

**4.2.2. Did the app meet users' expectations?**

A total of 28 comments were extracted. The most popular expectation from the app was improving vocabulary knowledge (36%), speaking skills (29%), reading (14%), and writing (11%), followed by improving their grammar knowledge (7%). Ultimately, four percent reported that they had zero expectations. The visual representation of the results appears in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Learners' Expectations from the Busuu App*





To gain learners' insights about their overall view about the usefulness of the app, they were asked to choose one of the statements: "The app was better than what they expected before," "The app was worse than what they expected," or "the app was as they expected." Regarding fulfilling users' expectations, 66.66 percent acknowledged that the app was better than they had expected before installing it, 26.66 percent admitted that the app was as expected, and 6.66 percent alleged it was worse than expected. As Figure 3 depicts, most participants' expectations from the app were improving their vocabulary knowledge and speaking skills. They did not believe the app could help them at all or help promote their grammar skills.

#### ***4.2.3. Do they think using the app has improved their language learning?***

The app was generally found to be effective for language learning by the learners. However, some respondents suggested that the app could provide more free content or that the app's language of instruction should be their L1 (Persian). The interviewer asked learners to choose one of the following statements: "Using the app has helped me improve my knowledge of language" or "Using the app did not help me improve my knowledge of language" to understand learners' views better. Fourteen out of 15 respondents selected the first statement, meaning that 93.33 percent of participants confirmed that the app has helped them improve their language knowledge.

#### ***4.2.4. Do they enjoy using the Busuu app?***

Eleven out of fifteen (73/33 percent) participants stated that they did not experience enjoyment while using the app. Some instances are: "Only gaming apps keep me motivated and encouraged to continue," "There is no fun in Busuu; it is only language learning," or "I wish I could do something enjoyable like collecting coins and shopping." Conversely, one participant said that the app's progress report was a source of inspiration and motivation to continue using the app. She further explained that she felt satisfied upon seeing her improvements.

#### ***4.2.5. How satisfied are they with their Busuu experience?***

Many comments were about learners' experiences using the app. A broad theme extracted from their experience was persistence. Notably, a positive attitude toward learning with an app does not necessarily guarantee that the app will be used (Dashtestani, 2016).

While app use can provide invaluable opportunities for engagement in learning, the learning experience with mobile devices can often be highly fragmented and full of distractions (Kenning, 2007). Some users reported difficulty using the app, either finding the appropriate time and place (66.66%) or focusing and avoiding distraction during the Busuu study (20%). These findings indicate two properties of this fragmentation.

Regarding persistence over time and place constraints, several participants reported that they postponed using the app when busy and occasionally forgot or did not feel like using it. However, some participants were successful in integrating the app into their routines. One learner mentioned that using the app had become a regular habit for her, describing, "Going through the app lessons has become my routine before going to bed." Also, some participants (13.33%) reported difficulties in pronunciation and speaking practice. They could not take advantage of this app feature from place to place or from time to time, feeling awkward and discouraged from practicing in crowded or public places or in situations where others were resting.

Concerning constraints that distract learners during language learning via Busuu, responses were about unexpected notifications about other programs and other apps' magnetism, which distract the users during Busuu study. The following statements demonstrate this theme: "When I decide to practice English through the app, it is hard to ignore notifications from social media apps and stay focused during language learning."

Despite the discussed constraints, some learners found motivational factors that kept them persisting with using the app. The positive experiences with the app serve as a testament to its potential. For instance, one learner found the option to skip some lessons and move through the lesson list made the app interesting. Another participant stated, "The progress report provided by the app is actually encouraging. I keep checking my progress after completing each lesson."

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1. Vocabulary knowledge**

The results from the first research question revealed no statistically significant difference in the participants' productive vocabulary knowledge when comparing the pretests with the posttests. In other words, after 250 minutes of using the Busuu app study, there was no evidence to suggest that the app effectively promotes users' active vocabulary repertoire. Nonetheless,

concerning the number of words produced by learners in the LEX30 task, participants generally produced more words as their responses in the posttests than in the pretests. This result is consistent with Laufer's (1998) findings. Laufer concluded that the study subjects' productive vocabulary knowledge did not progress after one year of regular school instruction. This result may be due to inadequate transfer of receptive vocabulary knowledge to active use. Poor exercise design or lack of enough exposure may fail to provide the ideal learning environment for using vocabulary knowledge actively. Research suggests that abundant exposure and ample practice are fundamental to successfully transferring words from receptive to productive status (Laufer & Paribakht, 1998). Laufer (1998) argued that pushing to use the newly learned vocabulary is required to activate vocabulary knowledge. This can be accomplished by designing appropriate speaking or writing activities that provide a context for learners to apply the newly learned lexis. Another reason for this lack of progress may be due to insufficient time allocated for the successful transition of receptive vocabulary knowledge to productive knowledge. These results support Laufer (1998) and Fan (2000), who found that learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge usually develops faster than their active vocabulary knowledge. Thus, while learners may experience an increase in passive vocabulary knowledge, this period might be insufficient for substantial growth in their productive vocabulary knowledge.

The increased number of responses in the posttest suggests that, generally, learners tend to learn frequent words earlier than infrequent ones. One possible explanation for this finding lies in Rezaei et al. (2014) asserting that enhancing confidence is one of the potentials of using apps. Therefore, app-based learning might bolster learners' confidence in their language learning, allowing them to think better and retrieve more words.

Language skills and cognitive processes (recognition, recall, and comprehension) are at the forefront of many language-learning apps. However, they often suffer from inadequate socio-cognitive activities or collaborative learning opportunities (Kim & Kwon, 2012). The disconnection between the pedagogical and technical qualities of language learning apps also results in fragmented language practice (Pareja-Lora et al., 2013). These outcomes support the perspectives of researchers who stressed the downsides of using apps due to their fragmented language practice and failure to adequately integrate communicatively based foreign language curricula (Burston, 2014; Pareja-Lora et al., 2013). As suggested by Fan (2000) games can effectively bridge the gap between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge

facilitating implicit learning. Thus, employing gamification strategies might help to improve learners' productive vocabulary knowledge.

## **5.2. Users' Perceptions and Experiences**

The findings related to the second research question revealed that vocabulary practice was the best-liked feature, and not accessing full premium content was the least-liked feature of the Busuu app. Regarding the app's best-like feature, this result agrees with Rosell-Aguilar (2018) and Khodarahmi and Heidari-Shahreza (2018), as vocabulary knowledge was perceived as the language skill that apps could help learners develop.

Regarding participants' expectations, the majority of them confirmed that the app is better than what they had expected before using it, and improving vocabulary knowledge is the participants' number one expectation from the app. These findings are not consistent with what Rosell-Aguilar (2018) found. He found that speaking skills (15.6%) were the most popular expectation from the app. Regarding learners' satisfied expectations in his study, 61.9 percent (more than half of the participants) stated the app was not as expected. However, in this study, 66.66 percent said the app was better than expected.

Moreover, the outcomes suggested that learners predominantly had positive opinions about using the Busuu app for language learning. This finding conforms with previous research about learners' positive impressions of using apps for language learning in general (Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Kim, 2013; Rezaei et al., 2014; Sorayyaei Azar & Nasiri, 2014; Steel, 2012) and the Busuu app in particular (Rezaei et al., 2014; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018).

In addition, virtually all participants believe that the app is not interesting enough to use. This might be because learning apps should battle other apps on users' devices to capture their attention, perhaps by incorporating games, pop-up notifications, and other engaging elements. One possible result of the absence of participants' enjoyment is not using gamification strategies in the app to induce learners' interest and make learning more appealing. As Tang, Hanneghan, and El Rhalibi (2009) suggested, using games for educational purposes could make learning more enjoyable and motivating; games can offer an engaging learning environment for language learners and extend situational experiential learning. To promote vocabulary learning, which was found to be the number one expectation of the users in this study, Fan (2000) suggested subconscious learning of words by playing games as a

strategy to narrow down the gap between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge.

Furthermore, according to self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985), activities that are carried out because an individual does them for inherent enjoyment in the process facilitate sustained engagement (like games). These outcomes seem to contradict the views of researchers who contended that using apps for language learning encourages learners' interest and motivation toward language learning (e.g., Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Ebadi & Bashiri, 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Khodarahmi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Kim, 2013; Steel, 2012). Another reason might be Iranians' restrictions in accessing international payment services or even credit cards as a result of sanctions which handicap users from activating some of the features of the app, which can nullify the inherent motivation that technologies (Busuu in this study) generate for learning as claimed by Stockwell (2013).

A broad theme extracted from learners' experience was persistence. Some learners have difficulty persisting in using the app, finding an appropriate time or place (66.66%), or focusing and not being distracted during the Busuu study (20%). In evaluating language-learning apps, issues about learners' persistence, which guarantees further learning due to more input, are essential. Persistence issues with app use among users were reported in previous studies (e.g., Nielson, 2011; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Rosell-Aguilar (2018) contended that persistent individuals who used Busuu longer were more likely to report positive language improvement than short-term users who were more likely to perceive no improvements in their language abilities. Issues with user sustainability are a common observed finding in MALL-oriented studies. Usually, these studies have a high rate of attrition that evidences a dearth of user persistence. However, the underlying reason in this study can be learners' lack of knowledge to independently use language-learning apps effectively, as they were not proficient language learners (intermediate). Thus, Petersen and Sachs' (2016) claim appears accurate, as they alleged that "technology is not a substitute for instructional expertise [yet]" (p. 5). This study supports their claim by showing that the Busuu app designed for self-study has limitations, particularly for low-proficient learners.

Another reason Busuu was not used persistently in this study is that EFL learners often receive support and encouragement from their teachers and peers in classroom settings. Typically, EFL learners rely on language classes to promote their language proficiency. However, motivation is critical for

learners' engagement and persistence in autonomous use of applications. These apps should incorporate more appealing activities or approaches to address users' persistence issues. One possible solution is using language-learning apps as part of learners' assignment with teacher guidance to gradually foster independent learning.

This study has a few limitations that future researchers should address. First, a larger sample size is necessary to generalize the findings across diverse populations. Second, the gender imbalance within the sample of the qualitative phase of the study may skew the results, primarily reflecting the female experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, since the participants were intermediate language learners, examining different proficiency levels is needed to shed more light on the effectiveness of app-based instruction with Busuu. Also, examining Busuu's effectiveness in improving users' productive vocabulary knowledge with an extended learning treatment and using delayed posttests would provide a more accurate assessment. Another area for future research to investigate the effectiveness of app-based language learning is to examine popular language learning apps from various perspectives, including user engagement, and compare them with other language learning apps.

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

Based on the study results, it can be concluded that although this is a small-scale study, there was no evidence of the participants' productive vocabulary knowledge improvement. These findings suggest that Busuu's study did not help them promote their active vocabulary knowledge. Users cannot depend only on the Busuu app to improve their active vocabulary knowledge. Among all aspects of the app, vocabulary practice emerged as the most-favored feature, while not accessing full premium content was the least favorable aspect. Regarding participants' expectations, the majority acknowledged that the app exceeded their initial expectations. Moreover, improving vocabulary knowledge was the most important expectation from the app. Furthermore, nearly all participants acknowledged that the app helped them improve their language knowledge. However, it is worth noting that a significant number stated they did not enjoy when using the Busuu app.

The present study offers valuable insights into what the Busuu app needs to help activate learners' lexical knowledge in EFL contexts, where learners' opportunities to use the words that they have receptively learned are limited. These findings can also contribute to a broader understanding of how this mobile app can effectively support vocabulary learning. It highlights the

experiences and expectations of EFL users from a language-learning app to better fit into their lives. By identifying users' real needs, the study provides recommendations on what could be done to maximize the quality and potential of language-learning apps.

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Research Article

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## Enhancing Reading Comprehension through Critical Dialogs as Pre-task: The Case of the Students of Psychology and Accounting

Tahereh Movahhedi<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>PhD, Department of English, Maybod Branch, Islamic Azad University, Maybod, Iran  
(Corresponding author). [tatanmovahedi@yahoo.com](mailto:tatanmovahedi@yahoo.com)

### Abstract

The effects of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on reading comprehension of EAP students has not received due attention in the literature. Using a mixed-methods approach, the research examines whether TBLT improves reading comprehension more effectively compared to traditional English for academic purposes methodologies. In this study, a sample of 100 intermediate-level Iranian university students was selected through convenience sampling and randomly divided into four groups of 25 participants each (comprising two control groups and two experimental groups). The experimental groups, one in psychology and one in accounting, were instructed using TBLT, while the control groups, also in psychology and accounting, followed traditional EAP instruction as dictated by the curriculum and course instructor. Initially, all groups completed a piloted, researcher-developed reading comprehension pretest. In the experimental groups, the syllabus was co-constructed through negotiation, reflecting the students' needs and rights. In contrast, the control groups were taught using textbooks predetermined by the curriculum. Upon the completion of the treatment sessions, all participants took a posttest. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses revealed that TBLT significantly enhanced the reading comprehension skills of Iranian university students compared to traditional EAP methods. Additionally, the study found that the field of study did not influence the effectiveness of the instructional method (TBLT or EAP). These findings provide valuable insights for English for specific purposes (ESP) teachers and material developers, emphasizing the potential benefits of incorporating TBLT into EAP instruction.

**Keywords:** English for academic purposes, reading comprehension, sequential mixed-methods study, task-based language teaching

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## 1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, English proficiency has become a crucial factor for academic success, particularly in higher education institutions where English serves as the primary medium of instruction (Arnó-Macià et al., 2020). This is especially significant in non-native English-speaking countries, where students must attain a high level of English proficiency to excel in their academic pursuits (Hyland, 2006). English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has been the cornerstone of language education in such contexts, focusing on equipping students with the necessary academic skills to understand and produce academic texts (Anthony, 2018; MacDonald, 2016).

However, despite its widespread adoption, traditional EAP approaches often emphasize rote learning and decontextualized language practice, which may not adequately prepare students for real-world language use (Li, 2020). This gap in effective language instruction necessitates exploring innovative teaching methodologies that foster meaningful and practical language learning experiences. One such promising approach is TBLT, which emphasizes the use of language as a tool for achieving specific tasks, thereby making the learning process more engaging and relevant to students' academic and professional needs (Van den Branden, 2016).

TBLT is a communicative approach that has gained considerable attention in the field of language education (Littlewood, 2014). Unlike traditional EAP, which relies on a pre-determined syllabus and often involves passive learning (Benesch, 2013), TBLT uses tasks as the central unit of planning and instruction (Sholeh et al., 2020). Tasks are defined as activities in which the target language is used by learners for a communicative purpose to achieve an outcome (Kafipour et al., 2018).

TBLT promotes active learning by engaging students in tasks that mirror real-life situations, thus encouraging the use of language in a meaningful and authentic context (Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu, 2021). This approach not only enhances students' linguistic abilities but also develops their problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Chen & Wang, 2019). By focusing on task completion, TBLT helps students integrate language skills in a practical manner, which can lead to improved language proficiency and greater motivation (Córdoba Zúñiga, 2016).

In the context of Iranian higher education, where students often face challenges in acquiring academic English proficiency, TBLT offers a promising alternative to traditional EAP methods (Alhadih, 2021; Sholeh et al., 2020). By aligning language learning with students' academic and

professional goals, TBLT can better prepare them for the demands of their respective fields (Guardado & Light, 2020; Sholeh et al., 2020).

Given the empirical gap, this study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of TBLT in improving reading comprehension among Iranian university students majoring in psychology and accounting. The findings of this study would contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of TBLT in higher education and offer practical implications for language educators seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their teaching practices. To achieve this objective, a mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative assessments of reading comprehension with qualitative insights from student interviews. Specifically, the research sought to address the following questions:

**RQ1.** Does TBLT improve reading comprehension more effectively than traditional EAP methodologies among Iranian university students?

**RQ2.** How do students' perceptions of TBLT compare to their experiences with traditional EAP methods?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Overview of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)**

TBLT is an instructional approach that has been widely recognized for its effectiveness in language education (Van den Branden, 2016). Rooted in the principles of communicative language teaching, TBLT centres on the use of tasks as the primary unit of planning and instruction (Jackson, 2022; Kafipour et al., 2018). Tasks in TBLT are defined as activities that require learners to use the target language to achieve a specific outcome, often reflecting real-life scenarios. This approach encourages active engagement and meaningful language use, as learners focus on completing tasks that simulate real-world language demands (Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu, 2021).

One of the key features of TBLT is its emphasis on learner-centered instruction. By involving students in communicative tasks, TBLT promotes interaction, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning, which are essential components of language acquisition (Jackson, 2022). Additionally, TBLT provides a context for integrating various language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing, in a cohesive and practical manner (González-Lloret, 2015). TBLT shifts the focus from form-focused instruction to meaning-focused activities. Where traditional EAP may involve repetitive drills and isolated grammar exercises, TBLT engages students in authentic tasks that require the use of language in context (Jackson, 2022). This approach not only enhances linguistic competence but also fosters critical thinking and

problem-solving skills (Chen & Wang, 2019). Furthermore, TBLT's interactive nature promotes student motivation and engagement, which are crucial for effective language learning.

This holistic approach contrasts sharply with traditional methods that often isolate language skills and focus heavily on form rather than function (Jackson, 2022). Traditional EAP methodologies have long been employed to prepare students for the linguistic demands of higher education (see Li, 2020). These methods typically involve a pre-determined syllabus that focuses on teaching academic vocabulary, grammar, and writing conventions through structured exercises and decontextualized language practice (Hyland, 2012). While traditional EAP courses aim to develop students' academic literacy, they often emphasize rote learning and passive knowledge absorption (Li, 2020).

Research has shown that traditional EAP methodologies, while effective in imparting academic skills, may not fully prepare students for the dynamic and interactive nature of real-world communication (Tavakoli & Tavakol, 2018). In contrast, TBLT addresses this gap by providing opportunities for learners to practice and apply language skills in a meaningful way, thereby better preparing them for academic and professional contexts (Chen & Wang, 2019).

## **2.2. Previous Studies on TBLT and Reading Comprehension**

Numerous studies have investigated the impact of TBLT on various aspects of language learning, including reading comprehension. For instance, Ellis et al., (2020) demonstrated that TBLT can significantly improve learners' reading comprehension skills by engaging them in tasks that require critical thinking and inferencing. Similarly, Robinson (2011) found that TBLT tasks designed to reflect academic reading demands led to greater improvements in reading comprehension compared to traditional EAP methods. A study by Carless (2015) explored the effects of TBLT on secondary school students' reading skills and found that students who were taught using TBLT showed significant gains in their ability to understand and analyse texts. The study highlighted the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting deeper engagement with reading materials and enhancing comprehension skills.

In the context of higher education, a study by Skehan (2014) revealed that university students who participated in TBLT-based reading tasks outperformed their peers in traditional EAP courses on measures of reading comprehension and retention. The researchers attributed these gains to the interactive and task-oriented nature of TBLT, which encourages active processing and application of reading strategies. Additionally, Kafipour et al. (2018) explored how task-based writing instruction impacted the writing proficiency of Iranian EFL learners. Their findings revealed that the learners



who engaged in writing activities through task-based language teaching methods experienced significant enhancements in their writing skills.

Moreover, Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2018) conducted a study with Iranian EAP students and found that those who were exposed to TBLT activities demonstrated significant improvements in their reading comprehension compared to those who received traditional EAP instruction. The study emphasized the role of task complexity and authenticity in enhancing learners' engagement and comprehension.

In a separate study, Khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi (2016) investigated the influence of feedback from EAP students and teachers on the development of the EAP curriculum. The study found minimal collaboration among students, educators, and academic departments during the curriculum development process. Furthermore, Sharndama et al. (2014) examined the impact of an EAP course on learners' proficiency in English language skills. Their study indicated that the EAP course primarily influenced students' success in their specific academic disciplines rather than in general English.

Furthermore, the research highlighted that the EAP course was not designed with sufficient consideration of students' specific language needs for learning English. In a related study, Karimi and Dastgoshadeh (2018) investigated the impact of strategy-based instruction on the reading ability and autonomy of Iranian EAP students. The findings revealed positive effects on comprehension, although autonomy did not show significant improvement. Notably, the treatment influenced the relationship between reading ability and autonomy.

Furthermore, Zohoorian and Pandian (2014) evaluated the authenticity of EAP textbooks in Iran using a checklist, gathering qualitative and quantitative data through interviews with lecturers. The findings indicate that, although teachers prioritize authenticity in context, teacher, student, and text, the current EAP textbooks are considered to have limited authenticity. This observation underscores the necessity for significant revisions, a recommendation expressed by the majority of EAP teachers during interviews.

Overall, the body of research on TBLT and reading comprehension suggests that TBLT offers a more effective and engaging alternative to traditional EAP methodologies. By focusing on meaningful tasks that integrate language skills and promote active learning, TBLT has the potential to significantly enhance students' reading comprehension and overall language proficiency.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative (QUAN) and qualitative (QUAL) approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the effects of TBLT on reading comprehension among Iranian university students. The sequential exploratory design (QUAN → QUAL) was chosen to first gather quantitative data on the effectiveness of TBLT using a quasi-experimental research design, and then supplement these findings with qualitative insights to explore students' experiences and perceptions using semi-structured interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' views on the instructional methods used.

#### 3.2. Participants

A sample of 100 out of 125 students, selected through convenience sampling technique from private universities in a city in central Iran, took part in this research. These fields were chosen to ensure a broader spectrum of academic disciplines, ensuring the generalizability of the findings. The participants were all at an intermediate level of English proficiency, as determined by the Quick Oxford Placement Test. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 32 years, with a mean age of 21.3 years. Both male and female students were included in the study to capture a diverse sample.

Additionally, the qualitative phase involved 10 ESP students, specifically from the control groups, with 5 students from psychology and 5 from accounting. These students were chosen according to a predetermined criterion: they had successfully completed the ESP courses for computer science and architecture students. This selection process was conducted prior to sampling, as recommended by Dörnyei (2007). All participants were Iranian and native speakers of Persian.

#### 3.3. Materials and Instruments

##### 3.3.1. Materials

Based on the purpose of this study, a textbook, titled English in psychology (Leal, 2023) was used for selecting 10 topics on psychology. Moreover, 10 topics were chosen from another textbook special English for the students of accounting (Moghadam, 2005). The procedures of how these topics were selected are elaborated in the procedure.

The selected topics for the computer group were as follows: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), developmental stages in childhood, the impact of

trauma on mental health, neuroplasticity and brain development, social psychology and group dynamics, the psychology of motivation and emotion, theories of personality, mental health disorders and treatments, the role of genetics in behavior, psychological effects of social media, cognitive biases and decision making, stress and coping mechanisms. Moreover, the following are the topics for the accounting group: financial statement analysis, accounting principles and standards, cost accounting and budgeting, auditing practices and procedures, taxation and tax planning, forensic accounting and fraud examination, management accounting and performance evaluation, international financial reporting standards (IFRS), accounting information systems, corporate governance and ethics in accounting, financial modelling and forecasting, accounting for mergers and acquisitions.

### ***3.3.2. Quick Oxford Placement Test***

The Quick Oxford Placement Test was administered to all participants to determine their level of English proficiency and ensure homogeneity across the experimental and control groups. This standardized test comprises multiple-choice questions that assess various aspects of language proficiency, including grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The results of the QOPT were used to confirm that all participants were at an intermediate level of English proficiency.

### ***3.3.3. Reading Comprehension Pretests and Posttests***

Two researcher-made reading comprehension tests were developed to measure the participants' reading comprehension skills before and after the intervention. Each test consisted of 30 multiple-choice questions designed to assess the ability to understand and analyse academic texts. The pre-tests were administered prior to the instructional period to establish a baseline for each group. After seven weeks of instruction, the post-tests were administered to measure any changes in reading comprehension. The tests were piloted with a similar group of students to ensure their reliability and validity, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88 indicating high internal consistency.

### ***3.3.4. Interview Protocol***

Following the quantitative phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants from each group to gain qualitative insights into their experiences with TBLT and traditional EAP methods. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed responses about the students' perceptions of the instructional methods, their engagement with the tasks, and any challenges they faced. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for

thematic analysis, allowing for the identification of common themes and patterns in the data.

### **3.4. Procedure**

Initially, a sample of four ESP classes, comprised of 125 students, was selected from private universities through the convenience sampling technique. The decision as to which groups received the treatments was made randomly. Then, to homogenize the sample in terms of English proficiency, the Quick Oxford Placement Test was administered to all participants. Afterward, 100 students, identified as intermediates in the matter of English proficiency, were selected. Then, each of the two researcher-made reading pretests were administered to the related groups before the treatment sessions.

Subsequently, in the experimental groups (i.e., TBLT classrooms), the syllabus was neither predetermined nor imposed by the teacher or institution. By the same token, the syllabus was constructed dialogically, providing a chance for the class members to engage in a group dialog (Ellis et al., 2020). To that end, the teacher chose 25 topics from the ESP coursebooks of each discipline and presented them to the participants so that they might negotiate and select the topics based on their interest. Accordingly, they studied and interrogated their linguistic and cognitive challenges with those topics in their courses, rather than unconditionally accepting them. The main task in the TBLT classrooms involved the negotiation of topics from the presented list. Dialog was used as a pre-task, enabling students to discuss their preferences and interests regarding the topics before engaging in the primary learning activities (Chen & Wang, 2019). This dialogic interaction served as a pre-task option that prepared students for subsequent reading and other related tasks (Kamalian et al., 2013). From a TBLT perspective, the procedure involved using the dialog to facilitate engagement and ensure that the topics chosen were relevant and motivating for the students.

For that purpose, the teacher instructed the whole group to rely on their experiences and interests for topic choice because a crucial aspect of community development in a critical classroom is democratic decision-making, which is necessary when choosing a common topic for the entire class. For the same reason, the teacher encouraged the participation of all students and welcomed all participants' remarks. Moreover, the participants' role was to share their topic choices with the other class members and explain the choices upon the request of others, which led to the discussions of unmapped issues and ideas. As a result, it involved students in developing the EAP curriculum as they learned about the demands (Jackson, 2022). Then,

the participants selected the topics they needed most and were asked to gather relevant information on them from different sources. Finally, the participants presented one topic clearly in every session and explained the terms and concepts, and engaged in challenging and critical dialogues over the presented topic (Ellis et al., 2020).

In the control groups, the traditional method of EAP teaching was used. In keeping with Benesch (2001), the traditional EAP syllabus adhered to the curricular requirements, and the participants were not involved in syllabus design. For the same reason, the topics from the content course were assigned by the teacher, excluding students' contribution to the syllabus and curricular decision-making (Benesch, 2001). In the same vein, the participants were required to study the textbook chosen by the language teacher as the syllabus was predetermined by the curriculum and was imposed by the teacher, and the curricular goals just focused on content course goals (Benesch, 2009). The prepared students for the demands, their academic programs would place on them and pursue the objectives of the course such as the micro-skills of reading (Benesch, 2009).

Accordingly, the teacher translated the reading passages and defined new words, and students noted down the translations, sometimes definitions in English, and equivalents in their first language (i.e., Persian). Hence, most of the class time was devoted to comprehending the reading passages (Benesch, 2001). As a consequence, there was little collaboration between the teacher and students in the control groups, and the teacher did not allow the participants to choose any topics to meet the expectations of the target contexts (Benesch, 2001). Afterward, the students did the relevant exercises in the imposed textbooks. Finally, the teacher checked their responses. After five weeks of treatment, the RC posttests were administered to all participants, and the collected quantitative data were analyzed.

In the second phase of the study, the face-to-face semi-structured interviews were run with 10 participants of the quantitative phase (i.e., 10 ESP students). Before running an interview, each interviewee was briefed on these concepts for five minutes at the beginning of each interview to ensure that no misunderstanding occurred during data collection. To anonymize the interviewees' identities, care was taken not to reveal their details. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Methodological rigor was met through validation of data analysis and coding, which were replicated by a senior researcher, who had a PhD in applied linguistics (Creswell, 2013). Moreover, to achieve research validity, verification was fulfilled through

literature analyses, using an adequate sample, and interviewing until data saturation (Meadows & Morse, 2001).

### 3.5. Data Analysis

To analyze the quantitative data, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0 was utilized. Initially, the reliability of the researcher-developed reading comprehension (RC) tests was assessed using Cronbach's alpha method following a pilot study. Furthermore, a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied to address the research question. In the second phase of the study, a phenomenological analysis was performed to interpret participants' experiences with the phenomenon under investigation, specifically EAP pedagogy. The interview data were transcribed, organized, and subsequently analyzed within the discussion section.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results for the First Research Question

To evaluate the impact of TBLT with that of traditional EAP pedagogy on the Iranian ESP students' reading comprehension, a two-way ANOVA was conducted. This statistical method was used to analyse the pre-test and post-test scores of the participants from both experimental (TBLT) and control (traditional EAP) groups across two disciplines: psychology and accounting.

Before the intervention, the pre-test scores were analysed to ensure the homogeneity of the groups. The two-way ANOVA results indicated no significant differences between the groups' pre-test scores, suggesting that all groups had comparable reading comprehension levels at the start of the study.

**Table 1**  
*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the Pretest*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Partial $\eta^2$
Group	.36	1	.36	.040	.84	.001
Fields	.16	1	.16	.018	.89	.001
group * Fields	.04	1	.04	.004	.94	.001
Error	855.68	96	8.91			
Total	24082.00	100				

The lack of significant differences in pre-test scores ( $p > 0.05$ ) confirmed that the groups were homogenous in terms of their initial reading comprehension abilities. After the seven-week instructional period, post-test scores were analyzed.

The two-way ANOVA results showed significant differences between the experimental and control groups, indicating that the TBLT method had a substantial impact on reading comprehension.

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for the Posttest; Group v. Fields of Study*

Group	Fields of Study	M	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimental	Psychology	22.56	.58	21.41	23.71
	Accounting	21.52	.58	20.37	22.67
Control	Psychology	18.32	.58	17.17	19.47
	Accounting	18.52	.58	17.37	19.67

As shown in Table 2, the experimental psychology ( $M= 22.56$ ,  $SE = .58$ ), and accounting ( $M = 21.52$ ,  $SE = .58$ ) had larger means on the posttest than the control psychology ( $M= 18.32$ ,  $SE = .58$ ), and accounting ( $M = 18.52$ ,  $SE = .58$ ). The post-test mean scores of the students in the experimental groups (both psychology and accounting) were higher compared to those in the control groups. Table 3 shows the results of the two-way ANOVA for the posttest.

**Table 3***Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for the Posttest of RC*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig	Partial Eta Squared
Group	327.61	1	327.61	39.01	.000	.28
Fields	4.41	1	4.41	.52	.47	.00
group * Fields	9.61	1	9.61	1.15	.28	.01
Error	806.08	96	8.39			
Total	42073.00	100				

As Table 3 displays, the significant F-value for the group variable indicated that the experimental groups (TBLT) significantly outperformed the control groups (traditional EAP) on the post-test,  $F = 39.01$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

#### 4.2. Results for the Second Research Question

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subset of participants from each group to gain insights into their experiences with TBLT and traditional EAP methods. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns in the interview data.

### ***Theme 1: Engagement and Motivation***

Participants in the TBLT groups reported higher levels of engagement and motivation, attributing this to the relevance and interest of the tasks. The interactive and communicative nature of TBLT provided students with a sense of purpose, as the tasks were often aligned with real-life scenarios that required practical language use. This approach contrasts with traditional EAP methods, which often focus on rote memorization and isolated language exercises that can feel disconnected from students' academic and personal lives. According to Carless (2015), the authenticity of tasks in TBLT plays a crucial role in making learning more meaningful, which in turn enhances students' intrinsic motivation. When students perceive tasks as relevant and applicable to their future academic or professional contexts, they are more likely to invest effort and show sustained interest in their learning activities. The increased engagement observed among TBLT participants is supported by the findings of Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2018), who noted that task-based approaches naturally foster a more interactive and dynamic classroom environment. This environment not only encourages students to participate more actively but also promotes collaboration and communication among peers, which further enhances their learning experience. By engaging in tasks that mimic real-world challenges, students can better see the value of what they are learning, leading to deeper cognitive processing and improved retention of information (Pintrich & Schragben, 2012). This is supported by Dörnyei (2001), who argues that task-based activities can effectively boost learners' motivation by providing immediate, tangible goals that are directly relevant to their needs. Example excerpts are as follows:

- "The tasks were very engaging and related to real-life scenarios, which made learning enjoyable."
- "I felt more motivated to participate in class because the activities were interesting and interactive."

### ***Theme 2: Practical Application of Skills***

Students in the TBLT groups appreciated the practical application of language skills. They felt that TBLT helped them better understand and retain the material by engaging them in meaningful tasks that closely resembled real-life situations. This practical approach aligns with findings by Ellis et al., (2020) , who noted that TBLT fosters deeper cognitive processing and encourages learners to use language purposefully, enhancing their comprehension and retention of information. Moreover, Bygate (2016) emphasized that the task-based approach allows students to practice language



in context, which improves their ability to recall and apply language skills in both academic and real-world settings. The authenticity of tasks used in TBLT, such as problem-solving and discussions on real-world topics, allows students to see the relevance of what they are learning, thereby increasing their motivation and engagement. According to Pintrich and Schragben (2012), when students perceive tasks as relevant and related to their personal or future professional lives, they are more likely to invest effort in understanding and mastering the material. This relevance helps bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application, leading to improved retention and understanding. The following are two excerpts:

- "TBLT allowed me to apply what I learned in a practical way, which helped me remember the concepts better."
- "The tasks required us to use language in real situations, which was very helpful."

### ***Theme 3: Challenges with Traditional EAP***

Participants in the traditional EAP groups expressed frustration with the rigid and less interactive approach. They felt that the traditional methods were monotonous and less effective in improving their reading comprehension. Participants in the traditional EAP groups expressed frustration with the rigid and less interactive approach. They felt that the traditional methods were monotonous and less effective in improving their reading comprehension. This dissatisfaction is consistent with previous research indicating that conventional EAP approaches often rely heavily on teacher-centered instruction, textbook exercises, and rote memorization, which can lead to a lack of engagement and motivation among students (Jordan, 2002). According to Benesch (2001), traditional EAP methods typically emphasize linguistic accuracy and the passive acquisition of language skills rather than fostering interactive and meaningful communication. This approach can create a classroom environment that feels disconnected from real-world language use, leaving students feeling unprepared for authentic academic and professional communication tasks. Two excerpts are the following:

- "The traditional EAP classes were boring and repetitive. It was hard to stay focused."
- "I didn't find the traditional methods very useful. The tasks were not related to real-life situations."

## 5. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative analyses both indicated that TBLT significantly improved reading comprehension among Iranian university students compared to traditional EAP methodologies. The results of this study showed that TBLT was more effective than traditional EAP in improving reading comprehension among Iranian university students. The quantitative analysis, which involved pre-tests and post-tests, demonstrated that students in the TBLT groups achieved higher scores on the post-tests than those in the traditional EAP groups. This suggests that the interactive, task-oriented nature of TBLT effectively enhances students' reading comprehension skills.

One critical component contributing to the success of TBLT in this study was the pre-task phase, which prepared students for the main reading tasks by activating relevant background knowledge and introducing key vocabulary and concepts (Chen & Wang, 2019). This phase helped students understand the context and purpose of the tasks, leading to better comprehension and performance (Kamalian et al., 2013). By focusing on pre-task activities, TBLT ensures that students are adequately prepared, which is crucial for engaging with and successfully completing complex reading tasks (Chen & Wang, 2019). The effectiveness of the pre-task phase in this study aligns with Ellis's (2013) findings, which emphasized the importance of task preparation in promoting meaningful language use and improving reading comprehension.

The findings of this study are consistent with existing literature on the benefits of TBLT. Previous research has shown that TBLT promotes active learning, improves language proficiency, and enhances student motivation and engagement (Ellis et al., 2020; Robinson, 2011; Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu, 2021). The present study corroborates these findings, demonstrating that TBLT is particularly effective in improving reading comprehension among university students. For instance, Ellis (2013) highlighted the effectiveness of TBLT in engaging learners and promoting meaningful language use. Similarly, Robinson (2011) found that TBLT tasks designed to reflect academic reading demands led to greater improvements in reading comprehension compared to traditional EAP methods. The current study extends these findings by providing empirical evidence from a non-native English-speaking context, further validating the efficacy of TBLT.

Additionally, Carless (2015) and Tavakoli and Zarrinabadi (2018) emphasized the role of task complexity and authenticity in enhancing learners' engagement and comprehension. The qualitative findings of the present study align with these insights, showing that students in the TBLT groups were more

engaged and found the tasks more relevant and practical than those in traditional EAP groups.

The dissatisfaction expressed by students in the traditional EAP groups also echoes the concerns raised by Jordan (2002) and others regarding the limitations of traditional EAP methods. These studies have pointed out that traditional approaches often fail to adequately prepare students for real-world communication, leading to lower levels of student motivation and engagement. The present study supports these critiques, demonstrating the need for a shift towards more dynamic and interactive teaching methodologies like TBLT (Sholeh et al., 2020; Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu, 2021).

Additionally, the secondary outcome of the quantitative phase revealed that the participants' field of study did not influence the effectiveness of the treatment. Consequently, students in both experimental groups, regardless of their academic discipline, experienced similar benefits from the CEAP pedagogy. This indicates that the approach was equally effective across different discipline-specific contexts, thereby negating the need for tailoring the methodology of ESP courses to specific fields of study. This finding aligns with Hutchinson and Waters' (1987) definition of ESP, which emphasizes that methodological and material choices should be driven by the learners' motivations for learning. It also echoes Clapham's (2001) recommendation for student-provided materials, regardless of the specificity of their ESP courses.

The qualitative findings further supported the effectiveness of TBLT. Students in the TBLT groups reported higher levels of engagement and motivation (Ellis et al., 2020; Robinson, 2011). These findings suggest that TBLT not only enhances reading comprehension but also promotes a more positive and effective learning experience. The integration of meaningful tasks that reflect real-life scenarios appears to be a key factor in the success of TBLT, making it a valuable approach for language educators seeking to improve their teaching methods and student outcomes (Subrahmanyam Vellanki & Bandu, 2021). They found the tasks relevant and enjoyable, which contributed to a more positive learning experience. These students also noted that TBLT helped them apply language skills in practical contexts, leading to better retention and understanding of the material (González-Lloret, 2015). Jackson (2022) supports this observation by highlighting TBLT's focus on learner-centered instruction, which fosters interaction, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning—key elements in effective language acquisition.

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

This study demonstrated that TBLT significantly enhances reading comprehension among Iranian university students majoring in psychology and

accounting compared to traditional EAP methods. Key findings include higher post-test scores and increased student engagement and motivation in the TBLT groups. Despite these positive results, the study had limitations, such as the use of convenience sampling and a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples and explore the long-term effects of TBLT on various language skills. Additionally, educators are encouraged to integrate TBLT into their curricula to foster practical language use and improve student learning outcomes in higher education.

The findings of this study have several important implications for the implementation of TBLT in higher education. The significant improvement in reading comprehension scores among students taught using TBLT suggests that this method can effectively enhance learning outcomes in higher education. Educators should consider incorporating TBLT into their language teaching practices to foster better comprehension and retention of material. The qualitative data indicate that TBLT increases student engagement and motivation. By making learning tasks relevant and enjoyable, TBLT can create a more stimulating and effective learning environment. This increased engagement can lead to higher levels of participation and effort from students, further enhancing their learning experience.

TBLT's focus on real-life tasks allows students to apply their language skills in practical contexts. This not only improves their academic performance but also prepares them for real-world communication. Higher education institutions should integrate TBLT into their curricula to ensure that students develop practical and transferable language skills. The success of TBLT highlights the need for curriculum designers to move away from rigid, traditional EAP syllabi and towards more flexible, task-oriented approaches. By aligning the curriculum with the principles of TBLT, educators can better meet the needs of their students and enhance the overall effectiveness of language instruction.

Despite these results, the study had limitations, such as the use of convenience sampling and a relatively small sample size, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger, more diverse samples and explore the long-term effects of TBLT on various language skills. Additionally, limitations such as the lack of control over extraneous variables and the short duration of the intervention may impact the validity of the results. To address these limitations, future studies could employ randomized controlled trials and extended intervention periods to better assess the impact of TBLT.

The findings of this study have several important implications for the implementation of TBLT in higher education. The significant improvement in reading comprehension scores among students taught using TBLT suggests that this method can effectively enhance learning outcomes in higher education. Educators should consider incorporating TBLT into their language teaching practices to foster better comprehension and retention of material. The qualitative data indicate that TBLT increases student engagement and motivation. By making learning tasks relevant and enjoyable, TBLT can create a more stimulating and effective learning environment. This increased engagement can lead to higher levels of participation and effort from students, further enhancing their learning experience.

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Research Article

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## A Mixed Methods Study of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in Terms of Learner-Centeredness

Narjes Ashari Tabar<sup>1</sup>, Farideh Kasehgari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of English, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran (Corresponding author).  
narcis.ashari@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Department of English, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran.  
kasehgari.farideh@gmail.com

### Abstract

The paradigm shift from traditional language curricula to communicative ones necessitates the (re)evaluation of language materials from the perspective of learner-centered pedagogy. The purpose of this study was to compare two English coursebooks (i.e., *Interchange 2* and *Four Corners 2*) in terms of learner-centeredness based on the criteria of the existing theories. For the purpose of this mixed methods study, a directed content analysis (DCA) was initially done to develop a framework based on the related theories for evaluating learner-centeredness of the activities and tasks in language materials, involving six subcategories (i.e., information gap, open-endedness, contextualization, authenticity, discursivity, and skill integration). Moreover, fourteen types of learner-centered activities and tasks were identified from different theoretical sources, which fell under the six categories of the learner-centeredness framework. To validate the framework, it was expert-wised. It was found that the directed approach to content analysis supported and extended the existing theories of learner-centeredness using the contextual aspects of the phenomenon. In the second phase of the study, the types of tasks and activities in the two coursebooks were identified and analyzed through summative content analysis using the researcher-developed framework. Finally, the quantitative data gathered after coding the corpus were statistically analyzed to check whether there was any significant difference between the two coursebooks in terms of the learner-centeredness of their tasks and activities. The result of Mann-Whitney Test showed that there was no significant difference between the frequency of the learner-centered activities and tasks in *Interchange 2* and *Four Corners 2*. The findings of this study may carry implications for the language instructors, learners, and material developers.

**Keywords:** authentic language, contextualization, discoursed language, information gap tasks, learner-centeredness, skill integration

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching styles have always been an important issue for teachers in how to hold their classes (Jones, 2007; Reigeluth et al., 2017). For many years, the teacher-centered curriculum has been dominant in classrooms, and teachers make all the decisions concerning teaching methods, language materials, and the different forms of assessment in this instruction. In a teacher-centered approach, teachers spend extraordinary time and energy during their teaching, and usually, they do not achieve a satisfactory product (Garrett, 2008). In contrast, learner-centered methods are those “concerned with learner needs, wants, and situations (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 91). As Nunan (2013) asserted, “A learning-centered classroom is designed to carry the learner toward the ability to make critical pedagogical decisions by systematically training them in the skills they need to make such decisions” (p.53). In fact, ELT methods and post-methods revolve spin around learner-centeredness (Hall, 2017; Nunan, 2012).

There are two main reasons why a teacher should incorporate learner-centered teaching practices. Initially, they motivate students to broaden their knowledge (Ellis, 2017). Second, in addition to the importance of the cognitive component, the social and affective components and their role in second language acquisition through cooperative and collaborative activities should be highly valued (Donato, 2016).

Weimer (2002) stated that “because we so seldom see independent, autonomous learners and function in mostly teacher-centered environments, we forget how effectively some individuals assume responsibility for their own learning” (p.15). Duckworth (2009) also asserted that teacher-centered learning actually prevents students’ educational growth. In contrast, in a learner-centered classroom, students are actively involved in what they learn, how they learn it, and when they learn it. In the same vein, Brown (2008) claimed that learner-centered pedagogy is more suitable for the more autonomous, and more self-directed learners who not only participate in what, how, and when to learn, but also construct their own learning experiences. In learner-centered classrooms, the teachers provide opportunities for learners to think and analyze the activities, interact with their peers, and collaborate with each other (Doyle, 2008). As the learners familiarize themselves with the process of their consciousness learning, they depend on the teacher less and participate in interactional activities more (Doyle, 2008).

Regarding the importance of the learner-centered approach and the mutual role between the teacher and learner, Kumaravadivelu (2006) stated that “The learner’s cognitive capacity mediates between teacher input (stimulus) and learner output (response). The learner, based on the data

provided, is capable of forming, testing, and confirming hypotheses, a sequence of psychological processes that ultimately contribute to language development” (p. 118). While learner-centered teaching is not new (see Nunan, 1988), the popularity of communicative language teaching (CLT) has made it more crucial than ever to find innovative and efficient ways to engage students (Senior, 2006) since "The success of teaching rests largely on the student's involvement in the learning process" (Murphy, 1999, p.365).

Overall, several studies have been done on learner-centered teaching and its benefits on language learning (e.g., Gelisli, 2009; Philominraj et al., 2017; Sudiran & Vieira, 2017; Wolk, 2010); however, there is a scarcity of studies on the evaluation of coursebooks from the perspective of learner-centeredness. Regardless of the existing bulk of learner-centered studies (e.g., Reigeluth et al., 2017; Starkey, 2019; Weimer, 2002), it seems that no studies have been done on the activities and tasks in language coursebooks from the learner-centered perspective. All the same, although the focus of language pedagogy has reoriented in recent decades from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach (Muir, 2018), prearranged coursebooks still organize the core part of teaching processes in the Iranian educational system (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011). Furthermore, although learner-centered approaches have been more successful than teacher-centered approaches (Van Viegen & Russell, 2019), learner-centered approaches have not received enough attention in Iranian EFL contexts; teacher-centered approaches continue to rule most Iranian EFL classes despite the fact that they fall short of their main objectives (Hemmati & Azizmalayeri, 2022), and the learner-centered features of the language materials remain in the vagueness.

In most language classrooms, learner involvement is strongly affected by the language materials. After all, it is the coursebook that outlines the topics and provides most of the activities that language teachers count on in the classroom. Although effective coursebook topics have been described as “provocative but not offensive, intellectually stimulating but not too arcane, and popular but not bland” (Hedge, 2000, p.351), there is no guarantee that the activities chosen will align with the interests and backgrounds of every student in every classroom across the globe. Thus, in the present study, the main intent was to develop a framework to evaluate the learner-centeredness of the language materials, and also find out whether there was any statistically significant difference between the activities of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness. To that end, the following two questions were put forward:

**RQ1.** What are the criteria of learner-centeredness in the current literature on English language teaching?

**RQ2:** Is there any statistically significant differences between the activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Learner-Centered Language Pedagogy

The concept of learner-centered learning has been around for over 100 years and it has not been the primary model of design in public education (Ahmed & Dakhiel; 2019; Kaput, 2018; Van Viegen & Russell, 2019). Dupin-Bryant (2004) defined learner-centered teaching as a responsive, collaborative, problem-centered, and democratic style by which both the learner and teacher control how, what, and when learning happens. As Kumaravadivelu (2006) opined, learner-centered pedagogists follow a form- and meaning-based approach and help learners practice and produce grammatical as well as notional/ functional categories of language. As Nunan (2013) declared, it is so important for learner-centered curriculum developers to be supported at the local level by teachers who have the skills and knowledge necessary to help their peers plan, implement, and evaluate their educational programs. Nunan (2013) stated that learners do not learn what teachers teach. The reason for this matter mainly can be found in a mismatch at the level of the learning process. The solution is a continuum in the learning process domain, which can help and lead learners in the direction of autonomy, and supply them with process skills for negotiating the curriculum by encouraging learners to identify the strategy implications of pedagogical tasks. In the same vein, Nunan (2013, p.96) categorized the different levels of language learners as follows:

**Table 1**

*Learner-centeredness: levels of implementation in the experiential content domain*

Level	Learner action	Gloss
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals and objectives from a range of alternatives on offer.
3	Intervention	learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom.

In the same vein, Savignon (2002) outlined five goal areas, which represented a learner-centered communicative approach to language learning as follows: a) The communication goal area that represents the learner's ability to use the target language to communicate thoughts, feelings, and opinions in a diversity of settings; b) The culture goal area that represents the learner's understanding of how the products and practices of a culture are indicated in the language; c) The connection goal area that represents the necessity for learners to learn to use the language as a tool to achieve process information in a variety of contexts, out of the classroom; d) The comparison goal area which is made to promote learner insight and understanding of the nature of the language and culture; e) The community goal area which describes how learners use the language during their lives both in communities and contexts. According to Jonassen (2000), learner-centered learning requires students to identify their learning objectives and select resources that will help them accomplish those objectives. This suggests that learner accountability and learners' involvement are the fundamental components of this approach (Cannon & Newble 2000) and all students' actions have meaning for them when they follow their own goals (Pedersen & Liu, 2003). Overall, the primary learner-centered approaches in ELT are: addressing learners' needs by integrating language and content (Lyster, 2017), increasing students' awareness of their active role through tasks and projects (Ellis et al., 2019), and guiding learners toward autonomy through peer cooperation and communication (Karim, 2018).

## **2.2. Tasks and Activities in Learner-Centered Approach**

It is generally believed that language materials and activities should be coherent and consistent with theories of language acquisition and development, principles of teaching, the current knowledge of how the target language is actually used, and the evaluation of materials in use (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Tomlinson, 2010). As Thomson (1992) has pointed out, activities and tasks should be more interesting in the ways that learners interact with the language than the result of the language use. Therefore, tasks play the roles of authenticity and meaningfulness for the learners who think that what they are doing is controlled, valuable, and real activity. In the same vein, Chen (2018) stated that working on activities and tasks and sharing ideas may result in learning cooperatively and constructively with peers. As Tin (2013) stated, language tasks should help learners use language for a real purpose. Learners should learn to use meaningful context and communicate as they do outside of the class.

Davies and Elder (2004) articulated that teachers, school administrators, textbook writers, and publishers recognize and formulate the

needs of the culture. It is important to link language, thought, and culture in language teaching. Class time should be spent on practices leading towards communicative language use and activities that learners require to do in class should be what they will have to do outside. Kumaravadivelu (1993) articulated that a communicative classroom seeks to promote interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning. In other words, they should be encouraged to ask for information, seek clarification, express an opinion, and agree and/or disagree with peers and teachers.

Doyle (2008) also mentioned the necessity for students to recognize the written and oral language that they use in their intended message. Students need to recognize how others may react or make personal judgments based on their language. This process will help them to make a great contribution to their understanding of adult communication. As Kumaravadivelu stated (2006), language teachers must foster meaningful communication in the classroom by using information-gap activities, open-ended tasks, contextualization, authentic language, language at a discoursed level, and integrating language skills.

Nunan (2013) argued that an information gap task is a kind of basic task type in TBLT in which learners in pairs, know related but different pieces of information. Information gap activities are used in second-language classrooms. As Richards and Schmidt (2010) explained information gap activities as an information which is done by some learners in a group of two or more persons or even between learners and their teachers. In the information gap, the learners may act more communicative rather than mechanical and artificial. Communicative language teaching enhances real communication between students.

Tin (2013) also defined information-gap or opinion-gap tasks as ones in which students have different pieces of information and in the process of this task should connect the information they have through communication. Information gap tasks can also be found in many free tasks, for example in the situation that learners want to use language to talk about familiar topics. In such tasks, learners use language to present known meaning part to their interlocutors who do not know that information.

Moreover, an open-ended task or choice of response is one type of different types of test items, which Richards and Schmidt (2010) presented as a free response item, also an open-ended response, “one in which the test taker is free to answer a question as he or she wishes without having to choose from among alternatives provided” (p. 592). As Nunan (2013) stated, an open-ended task can be answered with no limitation in other words, there is no single correct answer in an open-ended and it is recommended to use for advanced

level, whereas in a closed task there is a single correct answer or a limited number of correct answers.

Nunan (2013) also explained that if learners read a text on the topic of habits, they may be required to have an open-ended discussion on the topic of bad habits. Chinn et al. (2001) stated that open-ended questions are presented in a way that has no single correct answer and students can answer them in a number of different ways. Teachers typically are eager for learners answer to open-ended questions. In such tasks, they do not evaluate the answers as right or wrong. The increasing number of open-ended questions at higher levels indicates a partial shift in control over topics from teacher to student.

According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), contextualization which can be lexical or grammatical, provides information that can be used to understand the meaning of an item. In spoken context, it involves the verbal, paralinguistic, and non-verbal signs that help speakers understand the full meaning of speech of the speakers in context. Furthermore, Moltz (2010) considered contextualization helps with deep learning which is a combination of ideas and concepts across courses. If the target language takes place in a clear and realistic situation, contextualization may make the learning process profound, objective, and meaningful. In the classroom, contextualization can be used in a new word, or in a telephone role-play to practice functional language.

Klein and Samuels (2010) declared that writing to learn and writing across the curriculum are the other types of contextualization that are recommended to teachers appoint writing tasks to promote subject-area knowledge. Ellis (1994) pointed out that contextualization strategies are effective for learners who are at a fair level of second language knowledge. In the contextual approach, the role of learners is life and death. Learners are convinced to use the language creatively and collaboratively. The teachers emphasize some strategies like clarifying instruction goals, stressing their own preferred strategies, and encouraging the use of language in and outside the class to make a superb opportunity for language learners.

Gilmore (2007) defined, authentic language input as a kind of material that carries a real message and is created by a real speaker or writer for a real audience. In other words, authentic language materials are spoken or written language materials that have been produced in the field of real communication and produced outside of the classroom not for the purpose of language teaching (Nunan, 1999). "Texts which are taken from newspapers, magazines, etc., and tapes of natural speech taken from ordinary radio or television programs, etc., are called authentic materials. It is argued that these are preferred classroom

resources since they illustrate authentic language use” (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 43).

Richards and Schmidt (2010) opined that in the language teaching field, there is a difference between text material and authentic material because both of them are made for different purposes. Text in materials that have been specially prepared to practice specific teaching purposes and the texts and tapes which have been taken from real-world sources such as the mass media, are called authentic materials.

Searle (2002) mentioned that there are only four types of discursive goals that speakers can utilize by conversing: descriptive, deliberative, declarative, and expressive goals, each of which corresponds to others to fit between words and things. Searle (2002) defined the four goals of discourses and stated that how and when they may happen. The discursive goals are with the words-to-things that describe what is happening in the world, such as news, public statements, memoirs, forecasts, theoretical debates, confidences, and interviews. The deliberative discourses are with the things-to-words that deliberate goals that occur in future actions in which should accomplish a commitment in the world, such as negotiations, bargaining sessions, peace talks, discussions aiming at a friendly settlement, contracts, bets, sermons, and auctions. Declaratory discourses transfer the world by doing what one says. Such as official declarations like inaugural addresses, licenses, amnesties, testaments, discourses held in ceremonies of baptism, and judgments at court. Expressive discourses that express common attitudes of their speakers involve the exchange of greetings, welcomes, eulogies, cheers and boos.

Moreover, Richards and Schmidt (2010) defined classroom discourse, as the type of language used in classroom situations. Because of the special social roles that students and teachers have in classrooms and the kinds of activities they usually carry out there, discourse is often different in form and function from language used in other situations. For example, teachers like to answer a discourse structure with the initiation, response, and evaluation pattern. The units such as paragraphs are considered as examples of discourse and the field of discourse is related to events or what is being talked about. Nunan (2013) stated that tasks provide opportunities for learners to practice the key grammar and vocabulary in real-world texts just as in authentic communicative situations. Tasks also develop the skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in an integrated way. They make situations for learners to practice cooperating with other learners and with their teachers to creative use of the language they have learned.



## 2.2. Empirical Studies

Research on learner-centered materials in language classrooms is still dearth as it is thought that the teacher-centered method of teaching English is the predominant teaching style. All the same, Badjadi (2020) investigated the ways in which university instructors have adapted learner-centered education to the teaching of second languages. In doing so, a random sample of 128 instructors received a questionnaire and were interviewed. More crucially, by connecting the conceptual underpinnings of learner-centered education to teachers' views and practices within a specific setting, the analysis of qualitative interview data presented a contextualized framework.

Marwan (2017) conducted a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews and observation. There were twenty-five information technology students and their teachers in the sample. It was evident that using learner-centered pedagogy significantly improved learning, especially speaking. Additionally, the use of learner-centered pedagogy resulted in a classroom environment that was more expressive, appealing, and independent.

Lak et al. (2017) conducted research to determine how the learner-centered versus teacher-centered approaches affected the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students. They came to the conclusion that the growth of Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension performance was positively impacted by learner-centered and teacher-centered training. However, it was shown that in order to improve the reading comprehension skills of Iranian EFL learners, learner-centered teaching was more effective than teacher-centered education.

Sudiran and Vieira (2017) reported on a small-scale qualitative study that was conducted as part of a university program that trains secondary school English language instructors. The program includes learner-centered materials design and implementation to examine the benefits and drawbacks of this approach to professional learning and autonomy. Interviews, classroom observations, and practicum portfolio analysis were used to gather data. The findings show that while there are obstacles related to their prior experiences, the unpredictable nature of the practice, and the prevailing pedagogical cultures in schools, trainees believe in and work toward developing learner-centered resources and autonomy-oriented teaching. For novice teachers, learner-centered teaching seemed to be an important but difficult activity that needed a supervisor's support.

Arroitia and Marquez (2014) investigated the focus of authenticity texts in textbooks for advanced students of English at B2 and C1 levels, according to the Common European Framework of Reference. For this study, a sample

of 60 texts used in six English textbooks from several prestigious publishing houses, drawing upon ten texts per book, were selected. The aim of this study was to examine whether the authentic texts selected in ELT textbooks meet a number of requirements in relation to their authenticity. The results showed that they were mostly descriptive or expository, representing British English variety.

Roshan (2014) studied a comparative critical evaluation of the New Interchange Intro and New Headway Pre-intermediate series. He employed in EFL/EFL contexts and some teaching experiences that teachers obtained from teaching these books in the context of Iran. The evaluation is based on, at first cultural and ideological and secondly, assumptions about language, language learning, and best practices. Findings revealed that both New Interchange and New Headway texts reflect ideological and cultural assumptions through their focus on the US and UK way of life respectively. In the field of language, the focus of the two books is both on form and meaning and the grammar is inductive and implicit.

Mcconachy (2009) explored the reasons for ignoring the role of sociocultural context in dialogues and dialogue-related activities using examples of dialogues from the New Interchange series. Many contemporary commercial English language textbooks were utilized as examples. This essay aimed to illustrate the ways in which this neglect materialized before making some recommendations for educators. It was found that in order to foster sociocultural meta-awareness, teachers may need to become more conscious of the overall significance of sociocultural context.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

This study followed a design with two different methods: directed content analysis (DCA) and summative content analysis (SCA) (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). DCA was employed to analyze the extent of learner-centeredness in English language coursebooks. The approach to content analysis is used when the existing theories are to be extended or a new theoretical framework is going to be developed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Since a theoretical framework for learner-centered activities and tasks was available in the literature, this approach to content analysis was adopted. This framework was developed to provide clear definitions, examples, and coding guidelines for every deductive category to specify the precise conditions in which a text can be assigned a category (Mayring, 2000). Then, SCA was run to identify and analyze the learner-centered activities and tasks in the contents

of two English coursebooks in terms of the framework developed through DCA. Finally, the researcher quantified the SCA data by counting the frequency of the types of learner-centered tasks and activities (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to run inferential statistics beyond presenting descriptive data.

### **3.2. The Corpus of the Study**

To carry out this research, *Interchange 2* and *Four Corners 2* were selected as the corpus of the study to gather the required data. The first selection criterion was that these two coursebooks have a clear communicative approach. The second was that they have been developed based on the common European framework of reference (CEFR); therefore, their language proficiency levels are homogenous. Finally, the other selection criteria were their recency and prevalence in language institutes in Iran and across the world as language materials. According to Richards (2017), the *Interchange* series is a four-level series for adult and young-adult learners of English learners from the beginning to the high-intermediate levels. The series delivers a flexible unit structure and easy-to-use digital support, giving teachers the tools that they need, and empowering students to achieve their goals. *Interchange 2* includes eight units. Every unit contains two cycles, each of which has a specific topic, grammar point, and function. The units contain a variety of exercises, including a snapshot, conversation, perspectives, grammar focus, pronunciation, discussion, word power, listening, writing, reading, and *Interchange* activity. The sequence of these exercises is contrived in dissimilar locations so the arrangement of exercises differs from unit to unit.

According to Richards and Bohlke (2012), *Four Corners* is a four-level communicative series, published by Cambridge University Press. The *Four Corners* series is informed by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and takes students from the A1 level (true beginner) through to a strong B1 level (mid-intermediate). Putting practical outcomes at the heart of its syllabus ensures that the language and situations covered do prepare students for life outside the classroom.

*Four Corners* combines effective communicative methodology and a practical “can-do” approach, giving students the language and confidence that they need to communicate accurately and fluently in English. Can-do statements mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference provide benchmarks to measure students’ progress. Designed for A2 level, *Four Corners 2* includes twelve units. Each unit contains nine pages and four lessons: A, B, C, and D. Part A consists of vocabulary, language in context, grammar, speaking, keep talking and sometimes listening and pronunciation are added to them. Part B includes interactions, pronunciation, listening, and

speaking. Part C includes vocabulary, conversation, grammar, speaking, keep talking, and sometimes pronunciation is added to them. Part D consists of reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Each part of the unit has its learning outcome and culminates in a personalized speaking activity. It follows the American accent. Each unit ends with a wrap-up page that consolidates the vocabulary, grammar, and functional language from the unit and encourages students to use different sources such as the internet, websites, and TV shows from the real world to learn more about a topic of interest.

### **3.3. Instrument**

A framework for analyzing the extent of learner-centeredness in the English coursebooks was developed through DCA (Figure 1). To that end, the theoretical literature on learner-centered language pedagogy was deeply studied (i.e., Doyle, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nunan, 1999, 2013; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Searle, 2002). Then the clear definitions of the underlying category of this concept were identified. Moreover, the types of each underlying category (i.e., information gap, open-endedness, contextualization, authenticity, discursivity, and skill integration) were also found in the literature with their examples as guidelines for every deductive category (Table 3). Moreover, to enhance the validity of the deduced framework, two experts were asked to help validate the framework. Both experts, who were MA graduates in English language teaching, worked as the teachers of English language and had taught both coursebooks (i.e., Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2) at language institutes in Iran.

### **3.4. Procedure**

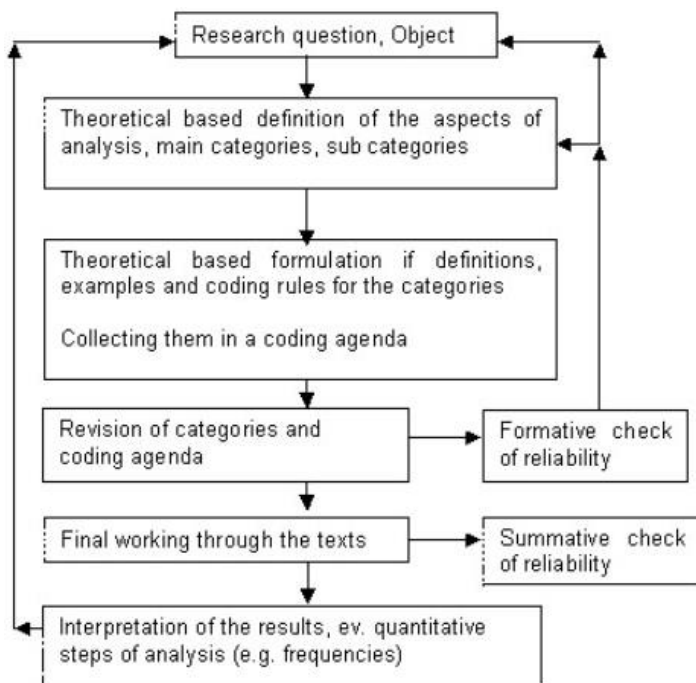
The researcher aimed to investigate the learner-centeredness of the tasks and activities of the two corpora of this study. Initially, a framework was developed using a DCA method. To that end, the important concepts were identified and selected as initial coding categories based on the existing theories of learner-centered language pedagogy (i.e., Doyle, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Nunan, 1999, 2013; Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Searle, 2002). Next, the preexisting theories were used to determine the operational definitions for the types of each category. Then, the activities and tasks of the corpus of the study (i.e., Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2) were coded using the researcher-developed framework. After that, the codes were collected and listed using SCA. Finally, the coded quantitative data were fed into a statistical software and subjected to descriptive and inferential analyses.

### 3.5. Data analysis

Initially, the DCA or deductive category application was employed (Figure 1). It constituted a general framework for identifying and analyzing the learner-centeredness in two corpora of the study. Then, the quantitative data gathered through SCA of the activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20. To compare the mean ranks of the categories of the learner-centered framework, the Man-Whitney Test was employed.

**Figure 1**

*Step Model of Deductive category Application (Mayring, 2000)*



## 4. Results

### 4.1. Results of Qualitative Directed Content Analysis

Table 3 displays the results of DCA of the first phase of this study which was run to answer the first research question.

**Table 3***A Framework for the Extent of the Learner-Centeredness of ESL Books*

Characteristics	Types	Description	Source(s)
Information Gap	Spot the difference	Two or more learners are given similar but not identical pictures and are asked to discuss their pictures to identify the differences.	Richards and Schmidt (2010)
	Describe and draw(tell)	One student is given a picture, and must describe it to another student, who creates a drawing from the description.	Larsen Freeman (2000)
	Jigsaw activity	In listening or reading activities, different groups in the class may process separate but related parts of a text and then later combine their information.	Richards and Schmidt (2010)
	Compare and Contrast	Finding similarities and differences, building timelines, putting things in an outline, creating concept maps, finding the main ideas and significant details.	Doyle (2008)
Open-endedness	Discussion and Opinion exchange	Taking part in a small-group discussion on a topic. Working in a group sharing your opinion and giving reasons for your opinions.	Nunan (2013)
Contextualization	Lexical context/ Grammatical context	The verbal, paralinguistic, and non-verbal signs that help speakers understand the full meaning of a speaker's utterances in context	Richards and Schmidt (2010)
Authenticity	Audio-Visual/ Textual	Authentic language input can be drawn from various sources of audio-visual mass media technologies including TV, News, etc.	Nunan (1999)
Discursivity	Descriptive	Discourses that serve to describe what is happening in the world. Such are news, public statements, memoirs, forecasts, theoretical debates, confidences and interviews.	Searle (2002)
	Deliberative	Discourses that serve to deliberate on which future actions speakers and hearers should commit themselves to in the world. Such are negotiations, bargaining sessions, peace talks, discussions aiming at a friendly settlement, contracts, bets, sermons, and auctions.	
	Declarative	Discourses that serve to transform the world by way of doing what one says such as official declarations, inaugural addresses, licenses, amnesties, testaments, discourses held in ceremonies of baptism and judgments at a court.	
	Expressive	Discourses that serve to express common attitudes of their speakers such as the exchange of greetings, welcomes, eulogies, cheers, and boos.	

Skill integration	Writing Listening Reading Speaking	The teacher is expected to integrate language skills wherever possible. Language skills and other forms of language use, including gestures and mimes can be used.	Kumaravadivelu (2006)
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As shown in Table 3, the six characteristics of learner-centeredness of tasks and activities were identified (i.e., information gaps, open-endedness, contextualization, authenticity of language, discursivity, and skill integration). Moreover, the types of learner-centered tasks and activities were unearthed from different sources in the related literature. The information gap constituted four types (i.e., spot the difference, describe and draw, jigsaw, and compare and contrast), open-endedness involved two types (i.e., discussion on a topic and opinion exchange), contextualization covered two types (i.e., lexical and grammatical), the authenticity of language led to two types (i.e., audio-visual and textual), discursivity resulted in four types (i.e., descriptive, deliberative, declarative, and expressive), and four skill integration types were identified.

#### 4.2. Results of Quantitative Content Analysis

Table 4 shows the frequencies of the summative content analyses of the two books.

**Table 4**

*The Frequency of Types of Tasks and Activities in Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2*

Types	Interchange 2	Four corners 2	Total
Spot the Difference	15	40	55
Describe and Draw	2	13	15
Jigsaw Activity	27	48	75
Compare and Contrast	33	58	91
Discussion/Opinion Exchange	151	154	305
Lexical context	61	42	103
Grammatical context	51	47	98
Audio Visual	8	0	8
Textual	20	33	53
Descriptive	18	35	53
Deliberative	14	14	28
Declarative	1	0	1
Expressive	16	31	47
Integrated	57	36	93
Total	473	548	1021

Table 4 presents the frequencies of learner-centered types of activities and tasks. Discussion had the most frequency in both books; however, authentic language and declarative discursivity had the lowest frequencies in the two books. Table 5 shows the mean ranks in two books and the sum of the ranks.

**Table 5**  
*Mann-Whitney Test Results*

	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Interchange	14	13.57	190.00
Four Corners	14	15.43	216.00
Total	28		

As displayed in Table 5, the mean rank of Four Corners 2 is higher than Interchange 2. Table 6 shows the results of Man-Whitney test, which was run due to the data nominal nature (i.e., frequency counts) to answer the second research question (i.e., Is there any statistically significant differences between the activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness?).

**Table 6**  
Test Statistics<sup>b</sup>

	exercise frequency
Mann-Whitney U	85.000
Wilcoxon W	190.000
Z	-.598
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.550
. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.571 <sup>a</sup>

a. Not corrected for ties.

As shown in Table 6, the significance level is more than 0.05 (.571 > 0.05); therefore, there was no significance between the frequencies of activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness.

## 5. Discussion

This study initially aimed to develop a theoretical framework for learner-centeredness of language materials based on existing theories to address the first research question (i.e., What are the criteria of learner-centeredness in the current literature on English language teaching?) The finding of the DCA phase showed that there was a shortage of such a framework in the literature and an attempt to develop such a valid framework was a sine qua non to fill the gap in the literature. To deal with the second research question (i.e., Is there any statistically significant differences between the activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness?), the researcher-developed framework in the second phase of the study (i.e., SCA) was employed to analyze the corpus of the study. It was found that the activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 were not



different in terms of the framework categories. The results indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between activities and tasks of Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centeredness. However, the pattern of learner-centered activities and tasks is not consistent throughout the two books as there is an abundance of some (i.e., discussion) and a dearth of others (i.e., declarative discourse). The present study is in line with McConachy (2009), who used examples of dialogues from the New Interchange series. It was found that the sociocultural contextualization in dialogues and dialogue-related activities is neglected.

Moreover, the finding that the two coursebooks are not authentic enough in terms of learner-centeredness is in line with the study of Arroitia and Marquez (2014), which showed that recently published English coursebooks, even at higher levels (i.e., CEFR B2 and C1) lack authentic language, as well as contextualization and argumentative discourse. Overall, it can be argued that the international developer and publisher of these language coursebooks (i.e., Cambridge) have not paid equal attention to different aspects of learner-centeredness in language materials development (Salimi & Nourali, 2021; Zohrabi et al., 2012), and they take an approach to ELT that contradicts SLA findings (Long, 2015).

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

The primary purpose of this study was to develop a theoretical framework for evaluating the activities and tasks of the language coursebooks in terms of the learner-centeredness criteria. Based on the findings of the first phase of this study, it may be concluded that directed content analysis can be employed as an appropriate analysis technique in this area of interest to extend or develop theoretical frameworks to fill the gaps. Based on the findings of the second phase of the study, which intended to compare the frequencies of the learner-centered activities and tasks in Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2, it can be concluded these coursebooks are the prime examples of the educational commodification to the disadvantage of educational ideals, leading an unrelenting push towards ELT for profit (Copley, 2018).

Some beneficiary groups can benefit from the findings of the present study. It is obvious that finding an appropriate learner-centered coursebook is difficult for language learners and teachers because there are a variety of coursebooks with different methodologies in the market (Jordan & Gray, 2019). Therefore, language learners and teachers may use the researcher-developed framework to overcome their hesitancy in choosing their ideal learner-centered coursebooks. This may also help language learners be encouraged to become independent in selecting coursebooks. Researchers in the field of language materials development and evaluation may also be

interested in this study. They can use this framework to evaluate other coursebooks. Language material developers and publishers may benefit from the present study by designing learner-centered activities and tasks in their future coursebooks.

The following limitations in this study have to be considered. This study compared Interchange 2 and Four Corners 2 in terms of learner-centered approaches to language learning; therefore, the findings may not be generalized to other language coursebooks. Another limitation was that these two coursebooks mostly identify with the American English variety; as a result, the findings may not be other coursebooks with other varieties of English.

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Research Article

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## Content Analysis of Internationally Developed English Coursebooks: The Case of Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1

Ebrahim Tobeyani<sup>1</sup>, Fatemeh Mirarab<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Baqir Al-Olum University, Qom, Iran (**Corresponding author**). [ebrahim.tobeyani@gmail.com](mailto:ebrahim.tobeyani@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran.  
[mir135.f@gmail.com](mailto:mir135.f@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The growing interest in learning English language as an international language through international textbooks has necessitated the need for the evaluation of the cultural content embedded in English coursebooks. With regard to the close interrelation of language and culture, this study investigated the extent to which cultural aspects are represented in two international EFL textbooks. To this end, content analysis was used to analyze two commercial coursebooks (i.e., Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1), which are used in Iranian language institutes. The results of the directed content analysis revealed that two subcategories emerged from the content analysis (i.e., technology and environment), which were coded as an off-list category. Therefore, it was found that the reevaluation and extension of Stern's (1993) framework for culture is necessary. Moreover, the results of the quantitative content analysis showed that there was not a balanced representation of cultural aspects in the selected coursebooks and the most frequent element was individual values in life. In addition, it was found that there was significant variation between the two coursebooks in the representation of culture. The study concluded that more in-depth investigation of cultural content is needed to develop cultural awareness of language learners. This study has implications for language material developers, language teachers, and language learners.

**Keywords:** content, cultural content, English coursebook, language material evaluation

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## 1. Introduction

Many studies on teaching culture have confirmed that language and culture are interrelated (e.g., Kramsch, 1998; Risager, 2007; Stern, 1993; Schulz, 2007). Outlining the notion of culture is tough because it is “a very broad concept embracing all aspects of human life” (Seelye, 1993, p. 15). According to Taylor (1871, p.1, as cited in Shaules, 2007), “Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” Another useful concept stated by Stern (1993) contrasted the traditional concept of culture, referred to culture with a capital C (geography, history, institution of the country, art, music, and literature) with way of life culture (personal relationship, value system, social behavior), referred to culture with small c or deep culture. Stern (1993) emphasized these aspects of cultural teaching must be included in foreign language programs, and learners in language courses should get closer to “people who use language, the way they live, what they do...” (p. 211).

English language in the EFL context is taught through international or localized commercial materials, especially coursebooks. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999) can take several roles in the form of a teacher, map, resource, trainer, authority, and ideology. One of the most criticized issues of English language learning materials is “their superficial and biased representation of reality” (Byram, 1990, p. 85). The efforts to develop a useful framework for identifying aspects and criteria of cultural contents in English materials have been made by many scholars.

Various studies have been done to investigate and analyze the cultural content of international and local English coursebooks (e.g., Chao, 2011; Imada, 2012; Song, 2013; Teo & Kaewsakul, 2016). In Iran, some studies have also been done to analyze the content of international and localized English coursebooks (e.g., Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010; Taki, 2008; Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). A gap in the studies is that the frameworks used to explore the cultural agenda of the coursebooks have not been gone through validation. Moreover, a few studies have analyzed how all aspects of culture are embedded in EFL materials.

Therefore, the primary goal of this study was to examine the validity of Stern’s framework of culture to see if it presents what it claims to present (i.e., culture), and then to analyze and compare the cultural contents of high intermediate-level (CEFR: B2) of two international EFL coursebooks used in Iranian language institutes to understand what they present to make learners aware of target culture. The significance of this study is that it tries to narrow the theoretical gap in the literature which requires the evaluation and validation



of the existing models of culture. Moreover, another importance of the study is that it filled the practical gap in the literature by comparing the differing cultural profiles of two international English coursebooks through quantitative content analysis. For the purpose of this study, the following research questions were put forward:

**RQ1:** To what extent can Stern's (1993) framework for culture provide a valid model of the cultural items in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1?

**RQ2:** Is there a statistically significant difference between the frequency of each cultural category in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Culture and Language**

Culture has been conceptualized by numerous scholars; however, there is no consensus on one operational definition of culture (Schulz, 2007). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) defined it as “the framework of assumptions, ideas, and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words, and patterns of thinking” (p. 197). Stern (1993) contrasted the traditional concept of culture referred to as culture with a capital C (geography, history, institution of the country, art, music, and literature) or in Brooks' terms “formal culture” with the way of life (personal relationship, value system, social behavior) referred to as culture with a lowercase c or in Brooks' terms “deep culture”.

Many studies on teaching culture have confirmed that language and culture are interrelated (e.g., Kramsch, 1998; Risager, 2007; Schulz, 2007; Stern, 1993). As Brown (2018) stated, language and culture are inextricably linked, making it impossible to separate them without diminishing the importance of both. As Risager (2007) has explained, language and culture are linked; language would be a cultural practice and is not considered neutral because culture has meaning. Hence, it is obvious that lots of cultural phenomena, such as food, music, or architectural styles are linked to language, but the point is that language and culture are always different from individual to individual, because of specific emotional and cognitive factors as well as language users' perspectives (Risager, 2007).

According to Weninger and Kiss (2013), between the mid-1950s and the early 1990s, culture was treated as an object or a set of facts to be learned about the target language culture. In the same vein, studying culture aims to immerse the learner into the target language society and culture, as explained in Schumann's (1986) acculturation theory. The second period is relatively shorter and spans from the early to the late 1990s. However, in this period major changes happened in how culture was conceptualized. In the last period

since 2000, such keywords as critical citizenship, intercultural competence of the world citizen, global cultural consciousness, and intercultural citizenship have been taken into consideration (Weninger & Kiss, 2013).

Baker (2012) proposed some approaches for teaching intercultural awareness in the classroom as follows: a) exploring local cultures, b) exploring language learning materials (like content analysis), c) exploring the traditional media and arts through English, d) exploring IT/ electronic media through English, e) cultural informants, f) face-to-face intercultural communication (often with non-local English teachers). Similarly, the transnational paradigm was proposed by Risager (2007) that is based on “empirically demonstrable linguistic, discursive and cultural complexity. The transnational paradigm involves awareness that variation and variability exist in linguistic practice, and correspondingly that many local linguistic norms exist” (p.194). Language teaching must make students aware of lingua-cultural variability because their various biographies have resulted in the development of partially different lingual cultures. The fundamental of a transnational understanding of language and culture pedagogy is “the target-language community is not confined to a nationally defined language area but exists in a linguistic network with a potentially global range, mainly as a result of transnational migration and communication” (Risager, 2007, p.236).

Furthermore, the concept of World Englishes has emerged in English as an international language context, conceptualized by Kachru (1992) that categorized the spread of English use around the world in three concentric circles: a) inner circle including USA, British, Canada and New Zealand; b) outer circle such as India, the Philippines, and Nigeria, where English is used as an official language; c) expanding circle such as Korea, Japan, and China, where English is used as a foreign language. Topics such as linguistic imperialism, linguistic hegemony, and linguistic human rights have already attracted linguists, sociologists, and political scientists’ attention who are interested in language issues in the context of English (Kachru & Smith, 2008).

## **2.2. Models of Teaching Culture**

In examining the issue of culture in language learning and teaching, various aspects and dimensions are considered. One of the earliest models of cultural analysis is presented in Brooks’ (1968) list that appeared to be central in the analysis of a culture. This list incorporates a) symbolism; b) value; c) authority; d) order; e) ceremony; f) love; g) honor; h) humor; i) beauty; and j) spirit. It is a general list but can help find some important aspects of culture. Later, Adaskou, Britten, and Fahsi (1990) described four dimensions of culture as follows:

1. The aesthetic sense: refers to Culture with a capital C such as the media, the cinema, music (whether serious or popular), and literature.
2. The sociological sense refers to Culture with a small c such as the organization and nature of family, interpersonal relations, customs, and institutions.
3. The semantic sense: how the conceptual system of culture is expressed in the language and, according to the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis, conditioning all our perceptions and our thought processes.
4. The pragmatic (or sociolinguistic) sense: the ability to master language code and make successful communication through background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills that, generally use cultural norms.

To identify whose culture to teach, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) distinguished three types of cultural information that can be embedded in language coursebooks and materials:

1. Target culture materials that use the culture of a country where English is spoken as a first language;
2. Source culture materials that draw on the learners' own culture as content;
3. International target culture materials that use a great variety of cultures in English and non-English-speaking countries around the world.

Another model that is used in examining culture is Fairclough's (1989) model of cultural discourse analysis. This model of discourse analysis examines content (i.e., one's experience of the social or natural world like cultural contrasts), social relations (social relationships enacted via the text, people's social relation in discourse), and subject positions (the social identity of interactant, people position in discourse).

### **2.3. Language Materials Development and Evaluation**

Materials development involves the production, evaluation, and adaptation of materials. As a field, it investigates the principles and procedures of the design, writing, implementation, evaluation, and analysis of materials (Tomlinson, 2012). Much of the early literature on materials development attempted to help teachers and materials developers develop criteria for evaluating and selecting materials (Tomlinson, 2012).

Tomlinson (2016) has reviewed some of the new trends in language materials, claiming that a lot of English coursebooks do not deal with the

aspects that he calls essential for the learning process. Tomlinson (2016) listed these ignored aspects that need more attention as follows “students’ needs and wants, the use of authentic texts, the use of speaking communication between non-native speakers, pragmatic-awareness activities, the use of non-native written texts, the teaching of language items and features that are important for international communication, the development of intercultural competence, and the teaching of capabilities which are particularly important in achieving successful communication in a *Lingua Franca*” (Tomilson, 2016).

In another research, Byram (2022), has considered the previous studies on the case of CEFR. He suggested that the notions of globalization and internationalization can be introduced by the teachers who are implementing CEFR. The other recommended responsibility of educators is to make students know and try to have international thinking, take steps out of their comfort zone, and try to think at a global level. He concluded that this can all be achieved through the CEFR materials by the trained teachers.

#### **2.4. Empirical Studies**

Song (2013) investigated cultural representations and intercultural interactions in Korean high school English coursebooks published by large Korean coursebook publishers. The race, gender, nationality, and English variety or dialect were analyzed through an examination of the images and written forms as well as audio companions to the coursebooks. Intercultural interactions and relationships between different cultural groups were also evaluated. It was found that the coursebooks are dominated by the American standard variety and favor American English over others. Also, American culture (inner circle English-speaking nations) was the most prevalent culture. It was concluded that intercultural understanding as a policy of the revised curriculum does not happen. This shortage of critical intercultural interactions showed that teachers need ample resources and select diverse examples and data for their teaching. The finding of this study suggested teachers should have a critical cultural and linguistic consciousness and analyze their coursebooks.

Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad (2010) studied the ideologies presented in the internationally and locally developed coursebooks and language learners’ attitudes toward them. They tried to understand the difference between learners’ attitudes toward the two types of coursebooks; therefore, they examined the ideological values (consumerism, hegemony, and social relation) in the internationally produced coursebooks and the variation of the amount of ideological presentation from beginner to higher level coursebook series. The corpus of the international coursebooks were Spectrum I, Spectrum VI, True to Life Elementary, and True to Life High-Intermediate series. The

researchers also investigated if teachers of these coursebooks were aware of the ideological patterns. They concluded that there was a difference in learners' attitudes toward these coursebooks due to the representation of different coursebooks with different ideological values. Also, the results of the questionnaire data showed that teachers did not make the learners aware of the ideologies in the international coursebooks. Therefore, they suggested teachers try to convey their awareness to the learners (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010).

Moreover, Zarei and Pourghasemian (2012) aimed to examine how English language learners who were taught a special series of books (i.e., Interchange) could prioritize the cultural issues differently from their parents who had not studied the series. The participants were the students from the 2nd year of junior high school to the 2nd year of senior high school and their parents. They used a researcher-constructed questionnaire to collect data on the effects that particular books have on the learners' perceptions of some cultural issues, which have been extracted from the Interchange series. They found that younger learners of English had a stronger tendency towards Western sides while their parents did not tend to do so. The results of this study confirmed that learning a foreign language may lead to certain identities.

A recent study also on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), has been provided by Nakatani (2021), who focused on the implementation of CEFR on Japanese students. They used a pre-test, a post-test, and a questionnaire. The researcher suggested that the use of CEFR and communication strategies positively affected the students' test scores. Shehata and Sheik (2020) analyzed the implementation of CEFR-based coursebooks, focusing on how much language tests are matched with the rules and style of CEFR books. To do so, they investigated a group of test designers using a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. Analyzing the data, they concluded that teachers, material developers, and test designers need to be trained to prepare the CEFR-based tests and language materials for the beneficiaries in this field.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Design**

For the purpose of this study, content analysis was used as the design, which involves both qualitative and quantitative methods (Krippendorff, 2012). The first phase of the study aimed to gain "evidence on structural validity" (Krippendorff, 2012, p.320) of the theoretical framework of the study. Hence, Stern's (1993) framework for culture was used to see if there existed any "structural correspondence between available content analysis data and the

established theory” (Krippendorff, 2012, p.320) and “to determine if they represent a new category” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p.1282). This framework is based on “a combination of humanistic and anthropological categories” (Stern, 1993, pp. 219-221)

In the second phase, the summative content analysis was run to focus on the content of the two texts (i.e., two English coursebooks) to count the frequencies of cultural items and categories and conduct statistical analyses (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **3.2. Corpus**

The selected EFL coursebooks in this study were Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1 students’ books. These commercial coursebooks are developed for young adult and adult learners at a high intermediate level of English language proficiency (CEFR: B2). The second edition of Summit 1a (Saslow & Ascher, 2012) is published by Pearson. It includes a student’s book with a workbook, a teacher’s guide, a lesson planner, a complete assessment package, a Summit TV video program, and a full-course placement test.

The second edition Viewpoint 1 (McCarthy et al., 2013) is published by Cambridge University Press. It includes a student’s book, a workbook, a teacher’s manual with an assessment program, a video DVD, class audio CDs, and downloadable video activities. The reasons for the selection of these coursebooks were as follows:

1. The selected coursebooks are global and international English coursebooks, used widely in language institutes in Iran.
2. For consistency American English coursebooks and based on CEFR classification, level B2 were selected.
3. They have been written by well-known applied linguists and published by accredited publishers.

### **3.3. Instrument**

For this study, Stern’s (1993, pp. 219-221) model was used. The key components of cultural items derived from Stern’s model are as follows:

1. places (physical locations of the target language in an order of priority by native speakers; street plans or maps), coded as A1 and A2.
2. Individual persons and ways of life (local lifestyle, ideas, values of the individual, expectations, problems the individual concerned, and customs), coded as B1 and B2.
3. People and society in general (various groups by social stratification) encoded as C.

4. History (historical development; historical perceptions of the native speaker), coded as D1 and D2.
5. Institutions (system of government, education, social welfare, economic institutions, the military and the police, religious institutions, political parties, media), coded as E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, and E8.
6. Art, music, literature, and another major achievement (artifacts commonly accepted in the target society), coded as F and F2

### **3.4. Procedure**

In this study, the cultural contents and items found in selected EFL coursebooks were evaluated. This evaluation was done based on the theoretical framework and content analysis components mentioned above in four steps:

First, two International English coursebooks were selected based on the inclusion criteria. Then, the analysis was delimited to four parts of each coursebook (i.e., conversations, grammar, vocabulary, and readings). Then, a list of cultural items was identified and developed according to the key components of cultural items derived from Stern's (1993) model. The list of cultural items was coded from A to F. Afterward, a coding scheme was developed.

After that, two other instructors of the English language confirmed and validated this list of items extracted from cultural items presented in the EFL coursebooks. Subsequently, the frequency of each item was counted and analyzed in the above-mentioned texts. Finally, the frequencies of cultural aspects were subjected to statistical analysis.

### **3.5. Data Analysis**

For this study, descriptive statistics and chi-square were utilized to analyze the obtained data. The data was collected by counting the frequency of each cultural item in both coursebooks and computing the percentage of total frequency related to each item in each coursebook separately. The chi-square analysis was done to compare the result of the total frequency of each item in selected coursebooks.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Results of First Research Question**

In order to address the first research question (i.e., To what extent can Stern's (1993) framework for culture provide a valid model of the cultural items in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1?) the cultural items in four parts (i.e., grammar in context, vocabulary in context, conversation strategy, and reading

in Viewpoint 1, and grammar snapshot, conversation snapshot, vocabulary, and reading in Summit 1a) of selected coursebooks were coded. The results of the directed content analysis showed that the framework of culture by Stern (1993) needs retheorizing and extending since an off-list category emerged after categorizing and sorting the coded contents in the two coursebooks, which involved technology (e.g., cellphone, email, internet, laptop, social network, computerized shopping, debit card, online shopping, instant messaging) and environment (e.g., environmentalist, protecting the environment, environmentally friendly issues, greenhouse effect). As a result, an off-list category labeled G category was added to Stern's (1993) framework as another category of culture for the purpose of this study.

#### 4.2. Results of the Second Research Question

The percentages of the total frequency of each cultural category in Summit 1a are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Percentages of Cultural Codes in Summit 1a*

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
A	68	18.68	18.68
B	157	43.13	43.13
C	12	3.3	3.3
E	1	.3	.3
F	19	5.2	5.2
G	75	20.88	20.88
Total	31	8.52	8.52

The obtained data in Table 1 show that item B, including individual values and way of life, is the most frequent aspect of culture presented (%43.13). The detailed analysis of this item as divided into B1 (i.e., local lifestyle) and B2 (i.e., individual values, expectation, and thought) shows that values represented in analyzed texts were the most frequent. These values involve various values in people's lives related to personal or social matters.

The next frequent categories for Summit 1a were F (i.e., art, music, and major achievement) (%20.88), A (i.e., place) (%18.68), G (off-list) (%8.52), E (i.e., institution) (%5.22), and C (i.e., people and society in general) (%3.3), respectively. The least frequent was category D (i.e., history) (%.3). The frequency of the most and the least frequent cultural categories of each unit in Summit 1a is shown in Table 2.



**Table 2***Frequencies of Cultural Codes in Summit 1a by Units*

Items	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10	Total
A	0	7	6	6	21	4	5	6	12	1	68
B	11	2	36	30	26	3	15	21	1	12	157
C	0	0	5	0	2	4	0	1	0	0	12
D	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
E	0	0	0	7	0	0	2	2	8	0	19
F	0	39	26	5	0	0	1	0	5	0	76
G	0	1	2	2	1	1	1	0	3	20	31

*U= unit*

The frequencies of items in Table 2 show that category B occurred the most in unit 3 (including values of financial goal setting, saving, problem of consumerism, and humanitarian work of celebrity as an actor, and philanthropist Paul Newman). The next unit with the most frequency is unit 4, the issue of dress code in the US and Australia, and fashion and style values are evaluated. The next frequent case of category B in Summit 1a belongs to unit 5, where the issues of community and public conduct responsibility are discussed. Category B was identified as the least frequent in units 9 and 2, respectively.

The next frequent category in Summit 1a was F (i.e., art, music, and major achievement). There are 39 cases in unit 2 that was about music. Then, 26 codes in unit 3 were about money, and 25 codes in this unit occurred in the reading part that was about an actor and philanthropist. The frequency of this item in units 1, 5, 6, and 8 was zero.

Following categories B and F, category A (i.e., place) was the third most frequent code in Summit 1a. This category involves the geography of different countries around the world; therefore, mentions were made of the names of countries and places. The issue of community is discussed in unit 5, which had the highest frequency of this category (21 codes) in Summit 1a. The names of megacities, and first-world and third-world countries were mentioned in this unit, mostly in the reading part. However, there was no occurrence of category A in unit 1, which is about new perspectives in life.

The total frequency of 31 belongs to the off-list category G in Summit 1a. The codes of this category occurred the most in unit 10, which is about technology and free time (n=20). The topics that involved cell phones, emails, internet, laptops, instant messaging, and so on, were coded and categorized under technology as a new code. There was one case of category G in Units 2, 5, 6, and 7, which covered website addresses. There was no occurrence of this category in units 1 and 8. The three last items with the frequency of 19, 12, and 1 belonged to the categories E, C, and D.

As mentioned earlier, category D with a frequency of 1 occurred in unit 9, which is about the mysteries of history. The most frequent occurrence of category E was in unit 9 in the reading part, involving TV and magazines in some countries, then unit 4 with 7 codes that occurred in the reading part. Category C had 5 occurrences in unit 3 as the most frequent that discussed humanitarian services and charitable organizations. Then, 4 codes were identified in the reading part of unit 6. There is no occurrence of this item in units 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, and 10. Table 3 shows the percentage of the frequency of each category in the units of Viewpoint 1.

**Table 3**  
*Percentages of Cultural Codes in Viewpoint 1*

Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
A	76	18.74	18.74
B	152	37.81	37.81
C	19	4.73	4.73
E	27	6.72	6.72
F	52	12.94	12.9
G	77	19.1	19.1
Total	402	100.0	100.0

As shown in Table 3, the most frequent item in the coursebook Viewpoint 1 like Summit 1a, was B (%37.8), including personal and social values. This is followed by G (i.e., off-list codes of technology and environmental issues) (%19.1), A (i.e., place) (%18.74), F (i.e., art, music, and major achievement) (%12.9), E (i.e., institutions) (%6.72), and C (i.e., people and society in general) (%4.73). There is no occurrence of item D (i.e., history) (%0) in Viewpoint 1. Table 4 shows the frequency of each category in the units of Viewpoint 1.

**Table 4**  
*Frequencies of Cultural Codes in Viewpoint 1*

Items	U1	U2	U3	U4	U5	U6	U7	U8	U9	U10	U11	U12	Total
A	0	0	6	1	3	0	0	8	10	15	26	7	76
B	20	26	6	9	21	1	23	4	21	0	17	4	152
C	0	0	0	0	15	0	0	0	2	1	1	0	19
D	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
E	0	21	0	0	0	0	2	3	0	0	0	1	27
F	0	13	1	2	0	9	1	0	8	0	9	9	52
G	24	20	0	0	4	19	1	4	5	0	0	0	77

*U=unit*

Table 4 shows the most frequent code of category B in Viewpoint 1 occurred in unit 2 (26 codes), involving celebrity obsession and gossiping in the grammar part, and violence and aggressive behavior in the reading part. This is followed by unit 7 with 23 codes, including living with roommate and

house rules, family support, independence, and time for oneself), unit 5 with 21 codes, involving helping others, donating, charity work, eradicating hunger, distribution of food, and generosity in unit 5, and 21 codes for vision, persistence, passion, hard work, happiness, and success in unit 9. Moreover, there was no occurrence of category B in unit 10.

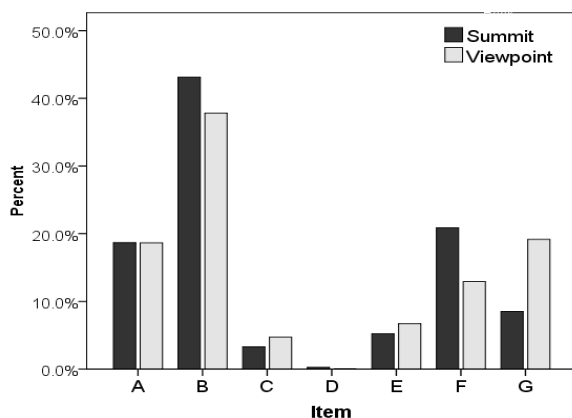
As shown in Table 4, the next frequent item is the off-list category G. The most frequent codes of item G in Viewpoint occurred in units 1, 2, and 6. Unit 1 is about the issue of social networks and technology, unit 2 is about the media, and unit 6 is about the future of technology, including computerized shopping, debit card, and shopping online.

Based on Table 4, category A (i.e., place) is the next frequent item. Like Summit 1a, the name of countries and the places about which people have expressed their opinions. The most and the least frequent occurrences of item A happened in unit 11 (26 cases), which were about culture in different countries around the world. This is followed by units 10, 9, 8, and 12 with 15, 10, 8, and 7 coded occurrences of category A.

All the same, no occurrence of category A was identified in units 1, 2, 6, and 7. Following category A, the most frequent item is item F (i.e., music, art, artist, artist works) in Viewpoint 1. The most frequent of this category occurs in unit 2, which is about the media (e.g., TV, magazine, music). Units 6, 11, and 12 have the most frequent occurrences of F (e.g., movies, art, music, craft, paintings, and a celebrity) with 9 codes each.

With 27 total occurrences, category E (i.e., institution) is the next frequent category after the above-mentioned ones in Viewpoint 1. In unit 2, which is about the media (e.g., TV) 21 codes were identified. There is no occurrence of this category in units 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11. Category C (i.e., people and society in general) with 19 cases in total. 15 codes occurred in unit 5, which is about the challenges in the world (e.g., Hunger Project in Africa, Mercy ship). This is followed by unit 9 with two codes, and units 10 and 11 with 1 code each. There is no occurrence of this category in units 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 12. Overall, the cultural items frequency percentages of Summit 1a and Viewpoint are shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Percentages of Cultural Codes in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1*



In order to make a comparison between the total frequency of cultural categories of Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1, the chi-square test was computed (Table 5).

Table 5  
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	26.669 <sup>a</sup>	6	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.676	6	.000
N of Valid Cases	766		

a. 2 cells (14.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .48.

As shown in Table 5, Pearson's chi-squared test results show that there was statistically significant variation between the occurrences of the cultural categories in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1,  $\chi^2(6,766) = 26.66$ ,  $p < .001$ .

## 5. Discussion

The first purpose of this study was to examine if Stern's (1993) framework for culture could provide a valid model for examining the cultural content in EFL coursebooks. After all possible occurrences of the phenomenon under study were captured, it was found that two subcategories emerged from the content analysis (i.e., technology and environment), which were coded as the off-list subcategories in the corpus of the study, presented with exemplars. The finding from this directed content analysis offered non-supporting evidence for Stern's (1993) framework for culture, which necessitates the reevaluation and extension of the framework. However, this finding supports

Murphie and Potts (2003), who found that culture and technology are interrelated as the latter affects tourism and cultural events (Salehan et al., 2018). This finding is also in line with Dang (2020), who revealed how different cultures shape the environmental participation of their people.

With regard to the question of this study (i.e., Is there a statistically significant difference between the frequency of each cultural category in Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1?), it was found that there was a significant variation between the cultural content of the two selected coursebooks. The summative content analysis of cultural items extracted from the two EFL coursebooks (i.e., Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1), revealed that most aspect of culture is presented as the individualist values of life explicitly or implicitly. In addition, there is not an appropriate balance among the representation of cultural aspects.

The results show that the most frequent aspect incorporated in the two international EFL coursebooks (i.e., Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1) is the second category of Stern's (1993) model, including individual values and expectations (B2). Therefore, the results of this study have confirmed that the most presented values reflect individualistic values (e.g., consumerism, financial independence, fashion and style, ethics and manners, having time for yourself, leisure, success, and happiness).

In line with Imada (2012), who found that American stories contained more individualistic values (e.g., taking a first-person perspective, focusing on success, making dispositional and self-serving attributions) than Japanese stories. Another interesting point about the representation of consumerism through entertainment, fashion, shopping, and technology (Abdolazadeh & Baniasad, 2010) confirmed that the English coursebooks discuss positive cultural values and customs of Western countries, reflecting individualism. Moreover, Teo and Kaewsakul (2016) emphasized the representation of individualism under the theme of Small "c" culture was the most frequently found item such as differences among people in various fields and countries in their ways of doing things.

This finding clarified the tendency towards the principles of English as an international language because the nationalities mentioned in these two coursebooks are the places where English is used as a second language for business or a foreign language. It was found that the coursebooks show an interest in the inner circle cultures and inattention to the global, multicultural perspectives. This is in line with Taki (2008), who revealed that the internationally distributed ELT coursebooks tend to represent the discourse of the Western economy, and Song (2013), who proved that despite the emphasis

on intercultural understandings, the culture in ELT coursebooks is the representations of the American English.

In contrast, the findings of this study do not agree with Teo and Kaewsakul (2016) and Tajeddin and Teimournezhad (2015), who declared that an international culture gained slightly higher attention than source and target cultures in ELT coursebooks, tending to reflect more of the non-target culture to respond to the need for intercultural understanding.

## **6. Conclusions and Implications**

This study tried to examine the validity of Stern's (1993) framework of culture using directed content analysis and investigate the difference between the representations of cultural content in two English coursebooks using summative content analysis (i.e., Summit 1a and Viewpoint 1). The findings of this study revealed that there is a hidden agenda of the individualistic ideology of culture embedded in internationally developed ELT coursebooks. The finding has demonstrated that the most frequent aspect of culture manifested in values explicitly or implicitly reflect mostly individualistic values (e.g., financial independence, style, and importance of privacy. Hence, students unconsciously think that English-speaking countries or Western countries are those who they should learn from, and may feel inferior to English-speaking countries (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010).

It can be concluded that the coursebooks tend to the principles of English as an international language. However, in spite of an emphasis on intercultural awareness, adequate information on different cultures is not mentioned to make learners aware of cultural differences. The last notable finding is that the analyzed coursebooks have not represented a balanced pattern of cultural content. Generally, most studies confirmed the global use of English language as an international language. However, many attempts must be made to make English language learners aware of cultural elements and content presented to them as a source of target culture. In addition, further applicable criteria for the evaluation of English commercial materials presented locally or internationally are strongly needed.

The important implication drawn from the findings of this study was the necessity of English language materials evaluation through reliable and valid criteria and frameworks. The importance of incorporating a balanced pattern of culture in English coursebooks provides a reason for enhancing all beneficiaries' awareness of the elements of culture. The most important implication is to make language learners and teachers aware of the ideologies hidden in commercial English coursebooks. If they figure out how values and attitude can change their way of learning, they may become more interested in

knowing culture. Generally, the findings of this study highlight the examination of English coursebooks to make material developers, teachers, and learners aware of cultural content needed for developing intercultural awareness through language materials.

The current study has some suggestions for researchers who are interested in coursebook evaluation. Further studies can analyze other commercial English coursebooks in the first place. Future research can be done to ask teachers' and learners' attitudes and perceptions about the representation of cultural items. Furthermore, the native speakers' point of view can be questioned to figure out their preferences for culture.

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