



Motivation and English Language Teaching in Iran

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Received 28 July 2012; accepted 15 October 2012.

Abstract

The present article arises from a three-year cross sectional investigation into English language teaching in secondary schools in Iran and it aims to discuss the role of students' motivation within English language teaching in Iran.

In order to investigate this situation, a range of research instruments were used including a thorough review of literature, a desk based analysis of existing curriculum documentation, questionnaires and interviews completed by English language teachers in Iran and some of the authors of the curriculum and its linked textbooks.

It will be explained while the issue of motivation has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the English language teaching programme.

Key words: Motivation; English Language Teaching; Iran

Mahdi Dahmardeh, Marilyn Hunt (2012). Motivation and English Language Teaching in Iran. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 5(2), 36-43. Available from <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/view/j.sll.1923156320120502.798> DOI: 10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120502.798

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is one of the complex and challenging issues facing teachers today. Indeed, Carrasquillo (1994) and Ellis (1994) have called it the most important variable in foreign language learning. The present article arises from

a three-year cross sectional investigation into English Language Teaching (ELT) in secondary schools in Iran and the role of Communicative Pedagogy within this. The study examined the extent of communicative pedagogy within the Iranian national ELT curriculum, the ELT programme and to some extent the English language coursebooks used in secondary schools. This article sets out to examine one aspect of the study: the motivation for students to learn English in Iran.

In order to investigate this situation, a range of research instruments were used including a thorough review of literature, a desk based analysis of existing curriculum documentation, questionnaires and interviews completed by English language teachers in Iran and some of the authors of the curriculum and its linked textbooks.

The findings of the research suggested whilst the issue of motivation has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the English language teaching programme.

1. THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN IRAN

To understand the main aspects of this research study, it is important first to provide some initial information about the educational system in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Schools in Iran are composed of three levels. The first level (primary school) includes five years of study. The students start school at this level when they are 6-7 years old. This is followed by middle school which is composed of three years of education. If the students pass the exams of the middle school successfully, they will then be qualified to enter into secondary school which involves four years of study. Basically, the students should study twelve years to be entitled to take the national university entrance exam in order to go to university. Concerning ELT, the English language is a foreign language in Iran and students are taught this subject from the first year of

the middle school at the age of eleven. Therefore it is a compulsory element of the curriculum for seven years.

The schools are under the administration of the Ministry of Education. English language textbooks are designed by the Ministry of Education and there are no alternatives – all schools, both state and private, being compelled to use these textbooks.

At present the dominant trend in Iran is towards an increasing emphasis upon ELT. As a required course from the first year of middle school, English is taught for three to four hours per week. There is an extensive and still growing private sector of education in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools English receives a great deal of attention and probably extra hours of practice (Aliakbari, 2004).

Aliakbari (2004) has argued that English is perceived by Iranians as so crucial that the quality of the English programme and the skill of the teacher or teachers working in each school may determine a family's choice to send their children to one school or another. Private language schools or institutes have attracted an increasing number of interested learners from young children to adults. The multiple variations observed in the programmes delivered signify a great desire to learn English in Iran, on the one hand, and an endeavour to fulfil the learners' communicative needs, on the other.

However, whilst learning English is growing in importance, there is also some hostility towards English. For example, swearing at and making slogans against western countries, particularly America and Great Britain is something which is quite common in Iran and part of people's daily lives. It must be borne in mind that based on the comments made by the author participants, authors of the curriculum as well as the textbooks, the English which is taught in Iran is American English and the majority of Iranian teachers and students are taught in American English. Moreover, according to the teacher participants there is a stereotype among the common people in Iran that the English language belongs to America. Having said that, it might be inferred that this issue also could have an effect in learning, teaching and generally speaking, treating the English language in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

It has increasingly been recognised that students' expectations and attitudes play an important role in foreign/second language learning, e.g. studies investigated by Dornyei (2001), Dubin and Olshtain (1986). Some even argued that motivation has been recognised as the most important factor in foreign/second language learning (Carrasquillo, 1994) or even essential to success (Harmer, 2001). But what does motivation really mean? According to Dornyei (2001), motivation is a process whereby a

certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached. He (2001) further argued that most language learners who really want to learn a foreign/second language i.e. who are really motivated, will be able to master a reasonable working knowledge of the language as a minimum, regardless of their language aptitude. Dornyei's comment could be further complemented by clarifying that motivation is a necessary tool but insufficient solely to fulfil the aim of language teaching and learning.

Having said that, two different types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic can be addressed. According to Harmer (2001),

Extrinsic motivation is caused by any number of outside factors, for example, the need to pass an exam, the hope of financial reward, or the possibility of future travel.

Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better (Harmer, 2001, p.51).

One of the main elements of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is claimed to be the Information Gap. Harmer (2001, p.85) described it as "a key to the enhancement of communicative purpose and the desire to communicate". According to Richards and Nunan (1990), the information gap is based on a belief that an activity involves the students in using language for a real communicative purpose rather than just practising language for its own sake. In order for this to occur a gap is required that the students seek to bridge when they are communicating. In simple terms, language learners regularly work in groups to transfer meaning in situations in which one person has information that the other(s) lack, this lack of information is referred to as the gap. Also, the information gap is so important because of its motivational impact. To clarify based on Johnson's findings (2001), without the information gap, language activities might be tedious for language learners because students would constantly be telling each other things that they already knew and could in fact see before their very eyes and then it would be almost impossible to motivate them to learn the foreign/second language. Moreover, Haines (1989, p.1) argued that "students' interest and involvement are considered essential if they are to be expected to work independently on activities which must be planned and carried out in collaboration with others" and is one of the main characteristics of student-centredness and consequently CLT.

Motivation research has received much attention in the past decade. The trend towards motivational theories related to classroom learning has generated more interest in the topic among language teachers and researchers of foreign/second language. In a series of studies, Pica and Doughty (1985, p.246) concluded "neither a teacher-

fronted nor a group format [required information gap] can have an impact on negotiation as long as tasks continue to provide little motivation for classroom participants to access each other's views".

Results of research reported by Liuolienė and Metiūnienė (2006, p.96) on second language learning motivation revealed that "students' wishes and needs to work independently depend on their motivation, attitude and responsibility. The higher motivation, the more autonomous learning students want to have in this learning process". They further concluded,

- Learning motivation is a driving force in learning a foreign language;
- Students' wishes and needs to work independently depend on their motivation, attitude and responsibility.
- The higher motivation, the more autonomous learning students want to have in the learning process (Liuolienė & Metiūnienė, 2006, p.97).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

"The purposes of the research determine the methodology and design of the research" (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p.78).

Presented in this section are the methods and procedures that were used in order to conduct this investigation. A discussion of the rationale for the research methods is followed by a description of the populations that were sampled for the study. The current study might be considered significant bearing in mind the shortage of relevant literature and research about ELT in Iran.

This study is part of a larger investigation examining the extent of communicative pedagogy within the Iranian National Curriculum for Teaching Foreign Languages (INCTFL), the ELT programme and to some extent English language coursebooks for secondary schools.

There were couple of reasons why the current investigation was conducted. Firstly, as students' lack of success in communicating in English in different parts of Iran was considered in Dahmardeh (2009), it has been realised that textbooks alone are not the entire issue and there are other factors like the national curriculum that needs to be analysed as well. Besides, according to the literature that was being touched upon, many scholars believe that in a setting where English is taught as a foreign language, if the emphasis is on the communicative aspect of language learning, or in other words on the pupils' ability to use the target language for communicative purposes, then planners would be likely to design a utilitarian-oriented curriculum, one that encourages the development of communicative teaching materials.

The current research study should be viewed as exploratory in nature, rather than an attempt to prove or disprove a hypothesis. It stems from an epistemology which views knowledge of the world as a social construct rather than as a given, external reality. Accordingly, in

order to understand the aspects of this world in which the researcher is interested, it was required to inquire principally into the ways in which this world had been constructed – that is, through the individual and shared perceptions of the key participants in the world. The purpose of this research was to discover how the educational system in Iran worked, with particular regard to the role of students' motivation within English language teaching in Iran. The study sought to find out what the English curriculum authors had in mind while designing the curriculum and how they intended their curriculum to be implemented. It also sought to find out about the teachers' understanding of the programme and textbooks this curriculum had engendered, and whether these were the same as the authors claimed they should be. Finally, this research aimed to discover if the current ELT programme in Iran as implemented by teachers was as requested by its designers or was something totally different. Thus, the current investigation was mostly about finding out rather than proving something.

Because this research was framed by such a socially constructive paradigm, there were implications for the research methods employed. The purpose of the current study was to find out about people's understanding and what they felt about the programme. Therefore, because of the issues that were being investigated, it was necessary to collect qualitative data. Consequently questionnaires and interviews were used in order to ascertain qualitative responses regarding people's own assumptions, thoughts and attitudes.

Cohen and his colleagues (2007, p.78) have clarified that "the purposes of the research determine the methodology and design of the research". This research is mainly based on what they presented as the elements of research design.

The data for this study derived from a variety of sources. A variety of research instruments were applied in order to collect the required data for the purpose of this research. The very first thing that had to be considered was the curriculum document as the main source for this investigation. In order that one can analyse a national curriculum; different procedures may require to be followed. The first phase can be regarded as (a) an analysis of the curriculum by the researchers. At this stage a desk-based analysis of the ELT curriculum in Iran, using CLT criteria as a guide, was conducted.

Prior to starting the field work, a sampling strategy had to be considered very carefully. The first step in the sampling procedure was to identify the target population. The population is the group of interest for which the researchers would like to generalise the results of the study. Due to the purposes of this study, it was determined that there had to be three groups of participants in this project. The first group was composed of authors of Iranian national ELT curriculum; the second group involved authors of the English language textbooks for

secondary schools and the third group was composed of English language teachers of secondary schools in Iran. Since all the authors were from Tehran (capital city of Iran) and due to accessibility as well as other constraints it was decided to carry out the research in Tehran.

Basically, this study is considered as a cross-sectional study. According to Cohen *et al.* (2007),

Cross-sectional studies involve indirect measures of the nature and rate of changes in the physical and intellectual development of samples of children drawn from representative age levels. The single 'snapshot' of the cross-sectional study provides researchers with data for either a retrospective or a prospective enquiry (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p.213).

When the population of interest is large or geographically scattered, the study of such a population requires too much effort, money, and time. The purpose of sampling is to obtain information about a population. According to Gay and Airasian (2003), sampling is the process of selecting a number of individuals for a study in such a way that the individuals represent the larger group from which they were selected. Selection of a sample is a very important step in research since the appropriateness of a sample determines the generalisability of the results.

Having performed the analysis stage as well as identifying the target population, the researchers then approached (b) authors of the curriculum in order to inquire further about the case. (c) Comparing textbooks with the curriculum, (d) questioning authors of the textbooks, (e) teachers and (f) students about their opinions as well as (g) observing the actual field, classrooms, were considered as other strategies to collect the required data in order to find out about the degree of communicative pedagogy of the national curriculum and in particular the role of student's motivation within English language teaching in Iran.

Prior to going to Iran, due to circumstances, the researchers were not sure whether it would be possible to interview even one of the authors of the curriculum but they managed to interview 3 of them. Having interviewed one of the authors, the contact details of two more authors were provided and they agreed to be interviewed as well. It was also planned to interview 12 teachers in Iran but no official permission was granted in order to conduct interview

sessions with the teachers. However, 3 teachers, 2 males and 1 female, kindly agreed to be interviewed voluntarily.

Concerning the group of authors (both curriculum and textbooks), each interview took about an hour and according to the participants' preference, two of them were conducted in English while the other two were in the Persian language. In total, there were 3 male and 1 female participants. Two of them were PhD university lecturers with 10 and 9 years of experience in designing foreign language curriculum, one of them was a language teacher with 4 years of experience in designing foreign language curriculum and the other one was a head teacher at an in-service training institute for English language teachers with 23 years of experience in ELT.

20 questions were prepared for each interview. The questions aimed to address issues like goals of the curriculum, students' achievements, availability of the curriculum, whether the curriculum documents include communicative materials, authors' constraints, the importance of the culture of English speaking countries, the balance in presenting 4 language skills, supplementary and authentic materials, chosen topics for the curriculum, the role of meaning and form, students' motivation, student centredness, whether an English language teacher should be able to speak English, role of activities like role-playing, group working and games and testing and assessment.

Concerning the teacher participants, since there was no official curriculum document available to them to consult with it was decided to base the interviews on the programme that was running at the time of data collection in schools for ELT. By the programme it is meant textbooks and possible teaching strategies that might be advised or introduced by the Ministry of Education. The questions in interviews were divided into two main parts, *Teacher's Understanding of the Programme* and *Teacher's Personal Teaching Strategies*.

Another phase of data collection was distributing questionnaires among the Iranian teachers. Each questionnaire was divided into two main parts and the relevant question to this study is:

Question 1: Is Student's Motivation Important in the Current Programme?

Extremely Important	Very Important	I cannot judge	Of little importance	Not at all important
1	2	3	4	5

Question 2: Do Students Like the Programme They Study?

Very Much	Mostly	I cannot judge	Not Much	Not at all
1	2	3	4	5

Furthermore, according to Maclellan (2008), the theoretical underpinnings of student-centred learning suggest motivation to be an integral component. Also, with the use of valuable learning skills, students are capable of achieving life-long learning goals, which can further

enhance student motivation in the classroom. According to Deci and Ryan (1985), the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) focuses on the degree to which an individual's behaviour is self-motivated and self-determined. Therefore, when students are given the opportunity to

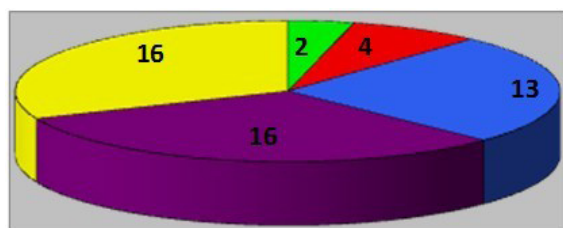
gauge his or her learning, learning becomes an incentive. Because learning can be seen as a form of personal growth, students are encouraged to utilise self-regulation practices in order to reflect on his or her work. For that

reason, learning can also be constructive in the sense that the student is in full control of his or her learning. That is why the question below was also included.

Question 3. To What Extent Do You Consider the Current Programme Student Centred?

Completely	To a great extent	To some extent	Hardly at all	Not at all
1	2	3	4	5

These questionnaires were distributed among 100 schools in Tehran; 51 completed questionnaires were returned. Each school was provided with a number of questionnaires equal to the number of teachers. For instance, if one school had 3 English language teachers then 3 questionnaires were being sent.



- Private School - Female Teachers
- Public School - Female Teachers
- Public School - Anonymous
- Private School - Male Teachers
- Public School - Male Teachers

Classroom observation was considered as another research method to collect data. Unfortunately, due to the regulations that existed within the Iranian educational system, the researchers were not allowed to do this on a systematic basis.

4. FINDINGS

Considering the motivation within the ELT programme as well as the textbooks is the next issue that is going to be addressed. The role of motivation within the Iranian ELT programme, Textbooks and Curriculum can be considered from different sources. These sources are the answers given by the teacher participants through questionnaires and interviews along with the comments made by the authors of the curriculum and the textbooks through the interview sessions. While the answers given by the teacher participants were quite varied, the author of textbooks explicitly stated that motivation was not considered important at all during the designing process of textbooks.

It was argued by two teachers that this factor was not important at all in the programme and this comment was backed up by the author of textbooks too. This author also believed that while designing the textbooks there was no discussion about student's motivation at all. On the contrary, one of the teachers considered students'

motivation as a very important issue in the programme but no further comments were made in this regard.

Furthermore, all the authors of the curriculum commented that this factor was considered extremely important during the designing process. The researchers then learned that the curriculum document was never been published and no permission was granted for the document to be implemented and it is only being kept in the Ministry of Education as a big scale project. According to one of the authors, this type of attitude towards motivation was one of the main reasons for the document to be rejected since the document did not take policy makers' comments seriously. The researchers were not told further in this regard what policy makers were thinking of.

Dahmardeh's findings (2009) also support the comment made by the author of textbooks. Although more than half of the participants believed that motivation was taken into consideration as a very important concern within the ELT programme still there were some other participants who argued that this matter was quite neglected. The responses collected from the teacher participants through questionnaires (*Question 17: Is student's motivation important in the current programme?*) were quite varied. 24 people out of 51 seemed to suggest that the issue of motivation was being considered quite important within the Iranian ELT programme; however, 18 respondents had an opposite view. The rest of the participants believed that they could not make any judgements on this matter. Furthermore, having asked teachers about their suggestions on how the current programme might be improved (*Question 26: How could this programme be improved?*), 8 participants tended to suggest that those who design ELT programmes in Iran as well as textbook writers should bear in mind the role of students. According to these participants, those who are responsible for these matters must design a programme that would draw students' interest and motivate them to learn the English language.

In terms of the responses that were collected from the teacher participants through the interview sessions, all the 3 participants seemed to suggest that no attention was given to motivation either in textbooks or the ELT programme. Similarly, Dahmardeh's findings (2009) as well as the author of textbooks explicitly stated that motivation was not considered important at all during the designing process of textbooks.

Thus, although more than half of the participants believed that motivation was taken into consideration as a very important concern within the ELT programme still there were a substantial number of people who argued that this matter was quite neglected. On the other hand, concerning the textbooks, from what was said by the author of textbooks as well as Dahmardeh's findings (2009), it could be argued that the textbooks did not take into account the motivational factor.

Furthermore, the results from the curriculum analysis did suggest that motivation as an important factor was raised and discussed many times in the curriculum document. For instance, the curriculum document stated that,

Since students' motivation is linked with their needs and interests, it is necessary to put into consideration two factors of being attractive and real during designing the programme. In order to involve students' feelings there is need for an attention that would be given to their needs and interests. In this curriculum, two factors are going to be considered, attraction and authenticity. (The Iranian National Curriculum for Teaching Foreign Languages, 2006, p.16)

To sum up, it could be argued that the authors of the document had explicitly pointed out the importance of motivation and this was considered quite imperative. However, according to them, this standpoint cost them a lot and caused the whole project to be stopped.

5. CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS

Every researcher needs a detailed plan prior to implementing a research project. They may start by considering the method that is going to be applied for the purpose of research and then there would be some predictions about the procedures for data collection and the possible constraints that might merge in this. Afterwards during the research implementation, the researcher might encounter situations or difficulties that he/she may have not been prepared for. This is absolutely normal and was certainly true for the current study. While it was predictable that certain possible problems might emerge during the execution of the research, there were other problems that were unforeseen. In this section some of the limitations and constraints of this research will briefly be discussed.

One of the main problems surrounds the relatively small amount of data which the research had, in the end, to work with. Plans were originally made to collect a greater range of data, including classroom observations of teachers in action, and a large number of interviews with teachers. However, permission to collect such data was not given by the Iranian authorities. The reasons for this lack of permission were never explicitly stated, but the likely explanation stems from a worry that this data would be published in Great Britain or anywhere else outside of Iran, thereby risking possible criticism of the Iranian Educational system.

On the other hand, one of the main advantages of this research would be the interviews that were conducted with authors of textbooks and curriculum document since they provided great insight into the ELT system in Iran and confirmed many of the issues that were raised and discussed by teachers. Another advantage of this research might be its uniqueness and pioneering nature. Apparently, according to the participants as well as some authorities within the Iranian Ministry of Education, no one has ever before done such research on such a scale in Iran. Bearing in mind the shortage of relevant literature and research about ELT in Iran, the current study might be considered fairly precious.

6. DISCUSSION

While there is a widespread recognition that motivation is of great importance for successful second language acquisition, Ellis (1994) has stressed there is less agreement about what motivation actually consists of. Ellis continued by arguing the main determinants of motivation are the learners' attitudes to the target language community and their need to learn the second language. "Motivation, so measured, affects the extent to which individual learners persevere in learning the second language, the kinds of learning behaviours they employ and their actual achievement" (Ellis, 1994, p.36). Similarly the findings of this research suggest that the participants in this survey believed that both students and parents were concerned with the English language learning and Iranian parents in particular would do anything so that their children could learn the English language. That is because they have realised the importance of this language in the future life of their children. Therefore, the main determination raised by Ellis (1994) could be claimed to exist among the learners.

It has increasingly been recognised that learners' expectations and attitudes play a role in advancing or impeding curricular change. Savignon (2002) has argued that among the available scales measuring learners' attitudes, the BALLI (Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory) scale developed by Horwitz (1988) is designed to survey learners' views in issues affecting language learning and teaching. The scale includes five parts: (1) difficulty of language learning, (2) foreign language aptitude, (3) the nature of language learning, (4) learning and communication strategies, and (5) motivations and expectations. As Horwitz (1988) suggested, classroom realities that contradict learners' expectations about learning may lead to disappointment and ultimately interfere with learning. At the same time, classroom practices have the potential to change learners' beliefs. Similarly, the participants were asked about the possible lack or positive interest that might exist among the students while studying the language. Some of the participants rejected the whole idea that there

were no interests for learning English among students. They further stated that students might not like this subject because of other bilateral issues. According to one of them, "since students could not see any actually immediate needs to use the language outside the class this would make them not interested". Also at the time of conducting this research because the textbooks as well as the syllabus were both structure based, students would look at language as an academic subject not as a subject which might be skilled based and helpful in future, so that could be one of the factors that might affect the motivation and attitude of the students towards learning English while facing it at school. However, one of the participants believed that a subject like Math or the English language could not be removed from the system only because of students' likes or dislikes. It was all up to experts and authorities based on a variety of research and experience and what they thought might be better. According to him, it was the basic rule all around the world not only in Iran. Although, he further added that it is true that student's motivation has a vital role within language learning and it can be increased by designing appropriate materials and textbooks and applying relevant and interesting images as well as strategies. While discussing the same issue with the author of the textbooks, he considered this matter as a constraint. Apparently, he wanted to do more about this but his hands were tied and he had to follow the rules.

So, the main determinants of motivation are the students' attitudes to the target language community and their need to learn the L2. According to Ellis (1994), student attitude has an impact on the level of L2 proficiency achieved by individual students who are themselves influenced by this success. Thus, pupils with positive attitudes, who experience success, will have these attitudes reinforced. Similarly, pupils' negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of success.

Motivation is related to one of the most significant aspects of the human mind, and most teachers and researchers would argue that it has a very important role in determining success or failure in any learning situation. Dornyei (2001) referred to his personal experience and believes that 99 percent of language learners who really want to learn a foreign language (i.e. who are really motivated) will be able to master a reasonable working knowledge of it as a minimum, regardless of their language aptitude. He further argues that,

During the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language (L2), the learner's enthusiasm, compliment and persistence are key determinants of success or failure (Dornyei, 2001, p.5).

Furthermore, motivation has a key role within the CLT as well. According to Harmer (1998), the second strand of CLT developed from the idea that if students get enough exposure to language and opportunities for its use and if they are motivated then language learning will take care of itself.

Also, as discussed earlier, one of the reasons why CLT has become very successful and attractive is because "it can provide realistic and motivating language practice" (McDonough & Shaw, 2003, p.28). Moreover, it needs to be borne in mind that motivation is one of the reasons why the information gap, as one of the vital principles of CLT, is important. Johnson (2001) justified such a claim by arguing that it must be rather tedious for students constantly to be telling each other things that they already know. But more important is that without the information gap present, important communicative processes may not get practised.

Therefore, from what has been said it could be concluded that, Motivation is Central to Foreign/Second Language Proficiency. However, the evidence collected from the participants in this survey seems to suggest while the newly designed curriculum tried to raise some concerns in this regard and considered this as an important factor, it has been ignored or maybe forgotten to be included in the current educational system. As a result, while the curriculum document can be regarded as communicative one, the current programme has failed to meet the prerequisite requirement of motivational aspects of teaching foreign languages, let alone being communicative.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to look at one aspect of the study which is the motivation for students to learn English in Iran. While the issue of motivation has been addressed and considered within the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, this issue appears to play no role in either the textbooks or the ELT programme. Having said that, it could be postulated that changes have to be made if we want to prepare the students to communicate in the multicultural world of English and if we want to use the nationally developed textbooks for optimum benefit.

The participants in this study were enthusiastic and serious language teachers as well as university lecturers who were willing to devote considerable private time to become better teachers as well as helping their society to gain a better understanding of the role of the English language and how vital it is these days. All of the teachers mostly put the blame for their lack of success as well as the current difficulties and flaws that they and students face on the shoulder of textbooks, the educational system and on top of that the governments of Iran.

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