The Study of EFL Students’ Perceptions of Their Problems, Needs and Concerns over Learning English: The Case of MA Paramedical Students

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Abstract

Many English language courses in academic settings are based on the principle that language should be related to the purpose for which students are expected to use language after their studies. But the majority of the MA students are dissatisfied with the current ESP courses. Learning of English at MA level in Iran catches attention of few researchers especially when the issue is related to the classroom situations. Realizing the need for more investigation, this study aimed at exploring Iranian EFL students’ perceptions of their problems, needs and concerns over learning English at the university context using a qualitative approach. Data were drawn from a series of questions regarding what the students’ English problems and their English educational needs are. The questions were administered to 69 English students in four intact nursing and midwifery groups. The data were enriched by arranging semi-structured interviews to fill in the gaps in answers. The main inhibition in learning English was the role of English in the society as a foreign language and attrition mainly due to intervals between phases of learning English and lack of free time to spend on learning English. The results also revealed that reading, translating and writing skills have been rated as the most important skills needed. Furthermore, the students indicated need for listening and speaking skills. Hence, there is an urgent need for revision and reconsideration of English instruction in the Iranian educational system in a way that help students fulfill their needs at MA level.

Keywords: paramedical students, MA students, needs, problems, ESP

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1. The Status Quo

English language teaching in Iran has a history of, at least, more than fifty years. Although it has been in progress through its lifetime (for example, changing school books, moving towards employing more knowledgeable teachers, providing teachers with in-service courses, creating language institutes all over the country), still it doesn’t enjoy a good status quo; students’ scores on English exams at the state school levels can prove this claim (Valai, 2011). Learning of English as a foreign language is always a challenging task (Akbari, 2015). Especially, when it comes to the places where English serves a very limited purpose, it becomes more crucial and painstaking to teach and learn.

As part of the educational program, English is taught at all grades of high schools, and is offered as a compulsory course to all high school students across the country (Mehrani and Khodi, 2014). Twelve years of school study do not make students mastery over English. Even though students are studying English, they are not able to produce even a single sentence without any grammatical error in English. The reason stated for this is that they study school subjects from the examination point of view only. This is true with English language too. Our examination system is such that it tests students’ rote memorization rather than testing their analytical and creative skills. In this process, they memorize lessons, reproduce them in exam halls and forget them in the same day itself. Students learn basic grammar at school level for the purpose of passing only in the examinations and not to face any real life situations (Akbari, 2015).

To be successful in University Entrance Examination, as with MA Entrance Exam, only a good grasp of vocabulary, some grammatical points, and reading comprehension are sufficient, so the students pay little attention to speaking, listening and writing skills. In Iran, since Iranians speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is little chance to learn English through day-to-day interaction.

University students in almost all fields of study are required to pass a number of credits in English (Mehrani and Khodi, 2014). Iranian university students at the undergraduate level of different disciplines have to pass English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course which utilizes a text-centered approach and can be described as examination-centered. In most disciplines, students are optionally required to study related articles to their course in English language. However, most of the books studied at the undergraduate level are translated into Persian.

At the graduate level, the problem gets worse since students are expected to read the most recently published English reference books and articles and translate them into Persian. Above all, students majoring in different disciplines are optionally required to write academic articles in English to publish them in reliable English journals. Language needs as well as wants of students in a particular field are different at BA, MA, and PhD levels. For instance, while BA students can survive with basic reading skills, MA and PhD students are required to read English texts more extensively and sometimes write in English as well.

1.1. ESP in Iran

English plays an eminent role in higher education all over the world. There has been a worldwide growth in demand for English for Academics courses (Jordan, 1997). English, the lingua franca of all sciences, has come out in non-English speaking countries as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Ghanbari, 2010). ESP is a developing branch of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Iran (Moslemi, Moinzadeh & Dabaghi, 2011).

Teaching of English in the Gulf region in general catches attention of many researchers and scholars (Alam Khan, 2011). After the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978), there has been a doctrinaire move supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) to set up identical discipline-based EAP programs for academies (Esliami, 2010).

A significant aspect of language instruction on the higher educational level is learning English for a given purpose, with the specific aims of getting to know specialized vocabulary, increasing one’s knowledge about the subject matter by reading in English, and being able to use the language in the prospective profession or study area by becoming prepared for some common situations such as carrying out higher level studies, going for an interview or conducting professional communication (Varnosfardani, 2009). So, careful examination of the expectations and perceptions of learners and instructors is seen to be important in determining the success of ESP courses.
EAP is a part of EFL instruction in Iran and enjoys a crucial position in the higher education. All undergraduate students majoring in various fields of studies have to pass EAP as a compulsory course subject (Moslemi, Moinzadeh & Dabaghi, 2011, Souriyavongsa et al. 2013). Certainly, reading has been regarded as the most required EAP skill in students’ tertiary education (Jordan, 1997). In a similar vein, the main objective of EAP courses in Iran is developing reading comprehension of students to read academic texts in their specialty area (Erfani, Iranmehr, & Davari, 2011; Farhady, Sajadi Hezaveh, & Hedayati 2010; Hayati, 2008).

Hayati (2008) has conducted a theoretical research study on ESP teaching challenges in Iran through which he sheds light on some common problems of ESP programs and gives some practical suggestions to improve their quality. In his study, he has asserted that although academic requirement of university students to pass ESP courses has dramatically increased, there is not enough literature on practical issues of these types of classes.

In much the same vein, Kiani (2010) also aimed to explain the current problems of English language learning and attitudes toward English in Iranian EAP context. She began her discussion by reviewing the historical status of English language learning and teaching in Iran over the last 160 years. Then, coming to the present time, she pointed out the remarkable role of EAP courses as part of the curriculum for different academic disciplines in Iranian universities context. She highlighted that in spite of the great financial investment on English teaching in Iranian tertiary education, yet students cannot get satisfactory results in national and international proficiency tests which, in effect, bring about both learners and teachers dissatisfaction of EAP courses.

Kiani (2010) also mentioned that although there has been a systematic effort to create uniform EAP programs and discipline specific textbooks by the Center for Research and Development of Texts for University Students, well-known as SAMT in Iran, researchers criticized these textbooks for lacking communicative component and encouraging students to promote their reading skill merely through translation and grammatical skills (Farhady and Hedayati, 2009).

Problems of English for Specific Purpose courses in Iran are: they are being offered without advanced planning in course design, systematic needs analysis, teacher education, time, textbooks, and systematic research on the effectiveness of these programs (Eslami, 2010; Karimkhanlouei, 2012, Hayati, 2008).

The available literature regarding the present state of EAP programs in Iran shows the educational system has failed to improve students’ language abilities (Atai, 2000; Atai and Tahririan, 2003). “Given the significance of EAP programs in Iran as a major part of English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum with noticeable educational and financial investments” (Atai and Nazari, 2011, p. 32), much more attention should be paid to needs analysis so as to design more to-the-point courses.

The prevalence of problems and challenges in adult second language acquisition and particularly EFL contexts such as Iran has attracted researchers’ attention to extensive research on finding the sources of problems and developing foundations to eliminate such problems.

1.2. Research questions

1. What are EFL students’ perceptions of their problems?
2. What are EFL students’ perceptions of their needs?

2. The Study

2.1. The participants

The participants included 13 midwifery students, 18 medical-surgical and pediatrics nursing students, 18 NICU and neonatal nursing students, 20 surgical technology and psychiatric nursing students. The participants were in four intact classes. They were all MA students who were passing their ESP1 in their first semester in Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. Of all participants, 11 were male and the rest were female. The language teacher was the same for the four classes and she was the researcher who collected the data.
Table 1: The participants’ features

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field of study</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Age (mean)</th>
<th>Employed %</th>
<th>Married %</th>
<th>Interv between BA and MA (yrs)</th>
<th>MA Exam English score (mean)</th>
<th>Those who attended English Institute %</th>
<th>Those who attended MA Preparation English Courses %</th>
<th>Motivation for learning English %</th>
<th>Interests in learning English %</th>
<th>Intending or like to continue education</th>
<th>Intending to attend language institutes %</th>
<th>Intending to attend language institutes %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>midwifery</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>81.81</td>
<td>45.45</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>24.31</td>
<td>15.38%</td>
<td>23.07%</td>
<td>93.84%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>89.67</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NICU/neonatal nursing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33.72</td>
<td>88.88</td>
<td>83.33</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>33.16</td>
<td>22.22%</td>
<td>16.66</td>
<td>81.11%</td>
<td>91.66%</td>
<td>81.11%</td>
<td>94.44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surgical technology/psychiatric nursing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>37.7</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
<td>89.5%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pediatrics/medical-surgical nursing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25.61</td>
<td>44.44</td>
<td>27.77</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>33.66</td>
<td>11.11%</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>87.22%</td>
<td>91.94%</td>
<td>83.33%</td>
<td>88.88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it is shown in table one, there are four groups to be studied. The first and the second group were all females, the third group included four males and the last group included seven males. A large number of the participants in each group were employed and married and there was long interval between their BA and MA which in addition to other factors led to language attrition. As they had not felt the importance/necessity of learning English during their academic education, just a few of them attended language institutes during their educational life and it was either because of their interest in learning English as a foreign language (i.e., to speak English fluently and accurately) or their family encouragement rather than the necessity of learning English. But now that they understand the necessity of knowing English at MA level to satisfy their needs, they intend to attend language institutes or private classes to fulfill their educational needs as soon as possible. The main inhibition to do so is lack of free time.

When they were asked about their English score in MA Entrance Exam, 80.4% had their scores below 50% and 19.5% had their scores above 50%. In the first group, the lowest score was 5% and the highest score was 45%; in the second group, the lowest score was 54% and the highest was 75%; in the third group, the lowest score was 7% and the highest was 70%; and in the fourth group, the lowest score was 0% and the highest was 70%. This implies that MA classes are heterogeneous as far as the students’ MA English score and the time interval between their BA and MA level are concerned. To solve this problem, they suggest a pre-requisite English course for the weak students to help fill in the gap in their English knowledge.

As most of the participants who attended MA Entrance Exam were weak in English, there were two alternatives available to them: on the one hand, they had to study their specialized subjects with higher coefficients and forget about English due to their low language proficiency level. On the other hand, they had to improve their English language proficiency to increase their ranking score and at the same time work on their specialized subjects to be more successful in the exam competition. As most of them had low English language proficiency and limited time to prepare for the exam, they chose the first alternative. They tried to study English sources for the exam on their own. As table one shows, few of them had enough time to take part in MA preparation English courses. As one possible solution, more weight should be given to English in the MA Entrance Exam. It was thought that this would increase the motivation of the students to improve their language proficiency (Moslemi, Moinzadeh and Dabaghi, 2011).

When those who had low English score were asked why they took part in MA exam in spite of their low English proficiency, they answered that only a small part of the exam was English section with low coefficient and they prepared themselves for the specialized part with higher coefficient. On the other hand, there was not any formal English requirement for entering MA level. So, all of them who were interested in continuing their education could enter MA level just with high scores in specialized subjects (above 50%) and even with very low English score (below 50%). In addition, they presumed that they could eliminate their English weaknesses by attending MA
English courses and/or English institutes. Moreover, it was in the first semester that they really understood the role of English language proficiency as the main requirement for passing specialized courses and doing research in MA.

Most of the participants (see table one), whether weak in learning English or not, were eagerly interested in learning English and highly motivated to do so as they felt the necessity of knowing English at this level to satisfy their present and future educational needs. They mentioned that it was as if they had learned English for no purpose up to now as they have not been expected to do anything special with English whereas at the MA level they felt the urgency of learning English as it was an indispensable part of their specialized courses. The findings are consistent with what Yarmohammadi (2005, p.4) points out, “language teaching in Iran doesn’t follow any specific purposes, i.e. it can be characterized as language for no specific purposes”.

In other words, as they all cited, so far they have learned English without knowing its virtual importance in their life; so they did not take it seriously but now that they know its importance, they do not have enough time to spend on learning it from scratch as they have household and job responsibilities in addition to educational responsibilities. It is at MA level that they understand wholeheartedly that knowing English language skills and computer skills which are intertwined with English knowledge can help them encounter new horizons in their academic and occupational settings.

Now that they are accepted at this level in spite of all difficulties, they are more interested in continuing their education (see table one). They know well that they must have an English certificate as a prerequisite for entering Ph.D level. Moreover, as it is also research based, knowledge of English plays an important role during Ph.D education. All this helps to increase their motivation for learning English.

2.2. Data collection method and procedure

The researcher prepared a list of open-ended questions regarding what the students’ English problems, abilities and English educational needs are. Some questions also elicited demographic information. The open-ended questionnaire serves as the cornerstone of soliciting specific information from the participants. These questions were needed to be answered as part of their classwork. And they mailed the answers to the researcher. As the answers were returned back, the researcher identified and developed categories for coding. To clarify the answers and fill in the gaps in them and assess the depth of students’ ideas and answers and the rationale behind them, the researcher arranged semi-structured interviews with the participants. Each interview lasted half an hour until the researcher arrived at saturation in data collection procedure. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were analyzed with qualitative methods. Then, the common patterns among students’ answers in interviews were identified and extracted. Furthermore, based on reports of students in interviews, some questions were added, modified or reworded. The final version of the questionnaire yielded the overall reliability of α=0.74. In addition, the content validity of the questionnaire was also checked and confirmed by two experts in the field.

2.3. Data analysis

The responses of participants to questionnaire items were coded and analyzed. Statistical software package SPSS for Windows (Version 13) was used for data analysis. Descriptive statistics was applied to different items of the survey. To analyze the data, data were coded and a series of schemes were developed.
3. Findings

Table 2: Inhibitions to learning English, problems of English learning and weaknesses in learning English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inhibitions to learning English</th>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of free time to spend on learning English</td>
<td>Working in health care centers in shifts and studying at MA level at the same time</td>
<td>Limited vocabulary knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large no. of credits each semester at MA level</td>
<td>Being married and having children</td>
<td>Limited grammar knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focusing on specialized courses during BA and MA and even in pre-university education</td>
<td>The interval between different levels of education including BA and MA</td>
<td>Weakness in the four language skills especially speaking, listening and writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of continuous exposure to language during academic life</td>
<td>Not knowing how to learn English</td>
<td>Limited knowledge of pronunciation and spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attrition mainly due to intervals between phases of learning English</td>
<td>Increasing age and decrease in learning ability as mind is not free for learning anymore and body is not as healthy as before</td>
<td>Weakness in translation skill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High tuitions of English language institute classes</td>
<td>Not having effective teaching system throughout academic education</td>
<td>Weakness in recognizing the grammatical functions of different parts of a sentence esp. in complex/compound sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low motivation due to the mentioned problems in few cases</td>
<td>Learning English is challenging and time-consuming</td>
<td>Low language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not having sufficient English credits during BA and MA</td>
<td>Fear of learning English due to low language proficiency</td>
<td>Not knowing the essential study skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low self-confidence to use English because they are afraid of mistakes and shy feeling</td>
<td>Not knowing where and how to start learning English</td>
<td>Not knowing the essential language learning strategies including reading and vocabulary learning strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Being a foreign language</td>
<td>Lack of will and perseverance to learn English mainly during undergraduate education</td>
<td>Not having a clearly defined purpose for learning English during undergraduate studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap between pre-university English level of difficulty and post-university English level of difficulty</td>
<td>Not enough use in daily life</td>
<td>Not understanding the key role that English plays before postgraduate studies in spite of knowing its importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing English as a general lesson to be passed during undergraduate studies even in pre-university education</td>
<td>Lack of motivating teachers whether language teacher or content teacher for learning English during undergraduate studies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of English demanding environment mainly in the workplace and in the academic settings before MA</td>
<td>Viewing learning English as memorizing a list of words and a set of grammatical rules during academic education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavy assignments at MA level in each semester</td>
<td>Living in rural areas with limited facilities for learning English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table two indicates, the main inhibition in learning English is the role of English in the society as a foreign language and attrition mainly due to intervals between phases of learning English in general and lack of free time to spend on learning English in particular. Lack of free time arises because they are working in shifts and/or have household responsibilities and because learning English for them who do know how to learn it and from where to start learning it is challenging and time consuming.

Another problem in learning English is absence of effective and efficient teaching system throughout academic education in which learning English is viewed as memorizing a list of words and a set of grammatical rules (Akbari,
Furthermore, the students have lack of many key factors to support them such as motivational encouragement, learning strategy and other related variables (Souriyavongsa et al. 2013).

The main weakness is low language proficiency as far as knowledge of language skills and language learning strategies and knowledge of subcomponents of language are concerned. Another weakness is not having a clearly defined purpose for learning English during undergraduate studies and understanding the key role that English plays so late (i.e., in postgraduate studies).

So far during academic education, English course has been considered a minor, general course without which specialized courses could be handled; for instance by reading pamphlets and translated books but now at MA level, English course is a major course whose proficiency is essential in handling specialized courses in which they have to refer to original English texts. It is as important as, and in some cases even more important than, specialized courses.

When the participants were asked where language problems occur, they unanimously announced that in educational environments they would have more language problems than occupational environment. All university students need it as one of their educational tool requirements (Khader & Mohammad, 2010). They believed that in occupational settings, they mainly needed knowledge of their specialized medical terminology to satisfy their needs. So, they asked for medical terminology courses in their workplace as in-service courses to keep their specialized knowledge up to date.

Therefore, according to them, on average, they needed English 30% in workplaces and 70% in the university. However, in some medical facilities in which the participants work, they are optionally required to keep the knowledge of their field of study up to date through translating the new drugs brochures, searching for articles about new nursing care methods, diseases, surgical procedures and techniques, etc. But as they are optional, their need is not deeply felt. However, all this depends on the facility’s policy. Generally speaking, the participants use the English knowledge acquired throughout their academic education to satisfy their routine occupational needs. However, as they are MA students, they are expected to know more English and to do more research in the workplace than BA graduates.

Even if they all knew that English as a foreign language could play an important role in their academic, professional and personal achievements, they all confessed unless there were a highly motivating and demanding situation for its use, they would not make an attempt to improve their language proficiency except in few cases in which there was integrative motivation.

They also referred to few English credits in BA and MA as inhibitions for continuing learning English. They held three credits of general English and two credits of special English in the first two consecutive semesters in BA and two two-credit special English in the first two consecutive semesters in MA. To solve this problem, they all suggested a curriculum in which their basic general language proficiency, language learning strategies and study skills are developed to the level of mastery throughout preuniversity education from the beginning of primary school to the end of high school and a curriculum in BA and MA in which they have English courses each semester to develop their academic English skills such as having access to up-to-date information in their field of study through reading their specialized texts effectively and efficiently, translating their specialized texts for oral presentation and writing their thesis, writing academic English via English articles, submitting an English article to a journal, having contact with the professionals in the field through e-mails, presenting their ideas in international conferences, watching/listening to educational English films in a given field of study, etc.

In spite of all this, they mention that it’s too late to start learning English from scratch at MA. In other words, they should have been prepared for MA English requirements during their academic educational life as they really have time restrictions at this level with the focus on doing research. These findings are in line with those of Tsao, Wei and Fang (2008) as cited in Tabatabaei and Mokhtari’s study (2014) that before students start ESP learning, they require acceptable grounding in basic English skills.

As a result, to improve LSP instruction in Iran, practitioners should merge general English instruction and LSP/ESP instruction as a single coherent and interconnected system. Hence, they may bridge the gap between general language ability and specialized language ability (Barjesteh and Shakeri, 2013).
Table 3: The ability in the five skills and the need to them at MA degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mean</th>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Translation into Persian</th>
<th>Writing</th>
<th>Translation into English</th>
<th>listening</th>
<th>speaking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ability</td>
<td>70.24%</td>
<td>70.36%</td>
<td>28.53%</td>
<td>32.80%</td>
<td>42.80%</td>
<td>35.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need</td>
<td>210.68%</td>
<td>109.14%</td>
<td>83.65%</td>
<td>67.92%</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
<td>39.39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it is indicated in Table three, participants in this study feel that they are able to some extent to read and translate English materials into Persian. However, as it was found by Kashef, Pandian and Khameneh (2014), the Iranian students of EAP with seven years of experience in learning English at school starting from junior high school are not only unable to benefit from the language and linguistic knowledge they have learned during this period but also they cannot apply this knowledge in reading comprehension tasks. The inefficiency of English programs at Iranian schools is that they revolve around sort of teacher-centered grammar-translation method (Barjesteh and Shakeri, 2013). As they are familiar with the specialized content of the texts, it becomes much easier for them to understand their original texts. However, they feel weak in the other skills as they did not work on them during their academic education and they themselves tried to work on them either by going to language institutes or by working on their own.

Skills most needed are reading comprehension and translation into Persian respectively as they are expected primarily to read and translate their recent articles and references into Persian and present them orally in each specialized course and also to read and understand their instructors’ English slides which are presented in the classroom. They also need to read their English sources and translate them into Persian to write their MA thesis. Generally speaking, MA courses are research based so the assignments in each course require knowledge of English as their prerequisite. It is in line with Tabatabaei and Mokhtari’s findings (2014) that it seems necessary for university students to be able to read English language books, articles, journals, and Internet sources related to their fields of study.

They need writing and translation into English to write the abstract of their thesis in English, extract English articles from their thesis to be published in international, highly indexed journals and to communicate with the professionals in their field of study.

They primarily need listening to understand their instructor’s speech which is infested with specialized words or the physicians’ speech in the hospital rounds or the surgeon’s speech in the operating room, to encounter foreign patients, travel to foreign countries or take part in international conferences.

They need speaking to talk to the potential foreign patients, travel abroad or take part in international conferences.

They also believed that as MA students, they are expected to master the four language skills at least 50% on average to satisfy their needs during MA degree on the one hand and to help them continue their education at Ph.D degree on the other. These findings are consistent with those of Tabatabaei and Mokhtari (2014) who found that four basic skills of the language need enough attention and of Barjesteh and Shakeri (2013) who proposed the notion that all language skills should be given equal importance. In other words, all four skills should be integrated in the curriculum (Moattarian and Tahririan, 2014).

Table three shows that the participants expressed considerably high ability in the four skills compared to their frequently mentioned low language proficiency. It is in line with Hejazi’s study in which most students compared to their instructors overestimated their ability in English skills and subskills. According to their interviews, it seems that they estimated their ability in the four language skills with respect to their ability to use/understand the medical terminology in their field of study which is commonly used in educational and clinical setting.

Another point to be considered in the analysis of the findings is that they are in the first semester and highly involved in the tasks required in this semester and may not exactly know what they are expected or supposed to do in the following semesters. Now what is of utmost importance to them is their needs in the current semester. The last but not the least important point to be considered is that the participants who enter MA level usually look at MA
level as a bridge to reach Ph.D so they expressed their needs in such a way to cover their Ph.D needs and achieve its objectives.

4. Conclusion

In recent years, the language teaching focus has been shifted from teachers to learners. As a result, learners' needs have been considered pivotal in curriculum development (Khajavi and Gordani, 2010).

In the current era of science and technology expansion, increasing demands for international communication, exchanging, and progress have made English language learning an essential tool required by many people around the world in general and students of universities in particular. Such needs basically impressed the content matter, the skills and strategies which are enclosed in English for academic purpose (EAP) or English for specific purpose (ESP) (Rostami and Mahdavi Zafarghandi, 2014). English plays an eminent role in higher education all over the world (Boniadi, Ghojazadeh, and Rahmatvand, 2013). Undoubtedly, the most required EAP skill in students’ tertiary education has been reading comprehension (Jordan, 1997). Similarly, the main goal of EAP courses in Iran is defined as developing reading comprehension of students to read academic texts in their related fields of studies (Hayati, 2008).

There are a lot of problems that confront Iranian students in their course of studying the English language. By and large, Iranian Master of Arts (MA) students are not qualified enough to write English article or express their views while competing in important educational arenas.

The main aim of conducting this study was to investigate the English language learning needs, wants and desires of MA students of Isfahan university of Medical Sciences specifically those majoring in nursing and midwifery in order to help them overcome their problems. The assessment of learners’ needs was performed by considering the views of the main stakeholders including students. Literature pertaining to English language learning in general is available in bulk, but studies discussing the present research objectives are quite rare.

As with Khajavi and Gordani (2010), this study looked at what academic sub-skills students expected to need in order to successfully complete their studies and a self-assessment of their ability in using English in academic setting. Generally, the study indicated that the present practice of EAP in the curriculum is not consistent with the perceived needs of students. It is hoped that the findings of this study would shed light on syllabus design and curriculum development for EAP programs in Iran. Furthermore, the time allocated to English language classes must be extended in order to provide more opportunities for students to learn and practice English language in their studies.

Given that language learning is a dynamic process and the role of Iran’s educational system cannot be neglected throughout twelve years of study at schools, the researcher hypothesized that the problem of English proficiency of MA students might be deep-rooted in Iran’s educational system. As with Souriyavongsa et al.’s study (2013), the curriculum is inappropriate for helping students to improve their English proficiency.

As it was too late to develop language proficiency from scratch at MA level due to time restrictions, a preliminary curriculum was suggested in which the students’ basic general language proficiency, language skills, language learning strategies and study skills are developed to the level of mastery throughout preuniversity education from the beginning of primary school to the end of high school. Furthermore, a supplementary curriculum is suggested for BA and MA levels in which students have English courses each semester to develop their academic English skills. These skills include having access to up-to-date information in their field of study through reading their specialized texts effectively and efficiently, translating their specialized texts for oral presentation and writing their thesis, writing academic English via English articles, submitting an English article to a journal, having contact with the professionals in the field through e-mails, presenting their ideas in international conferences, watching/listening to educational English films in a given field of study.

As with Boniadi, Ghojazadeh and Rahmatvand’s study (2013), results showed that ESP instruction was limited to training special vocabulary and reading and translating numerous texts within restricted number of credits available. Of course, such methods didn’t reflect students’ entire needs. This study assumes that the English language is used widely in the para-medical fields. Therefore, ESP courses for para-medical students should be based on target needs of students representing communicative use of language in addition to linguistic categories.
This study also indicated that most of the students perceived that they needed to learn English to read textbooks and articles in professional journals, to read texts on the internet, to listen to conversations on general topics and to write papers for oral presentation. Additionally, the result of interviews showed that most of the students were dissatisfied with their reading and writing abilities and grammatical knowledge. However, they were satisfied with their knowledge of technical vocabulary in contrast to general vocabulary. Partly similar to Moattarian and Tahririan’s study (2014), it was concluded that all the four language skills in addition to translation skills from English to Persian and vice versa need to be emphasized in their ESP courses in order to satisfy the specific needs of MA para-medical students.

It can be observed that the proficiency level of most university students in Iran is below the threshold level. Tabatabaei and Mokhtari (2014) also refer to the fact that most of the ESP learners are considered as pre-intermediate or intermediate. Indeed, poor English proficiency might have negative impacts on the academic and occupational position of adult EFL learners. As a case in point, the majority of Iranian EFL learners at university level have difficulty in using English as a medium of academic communication. They also have a hard time learning English (Ebrahimpourtaher and Eissaie, 2015).

The weakness of English language learners in general has been attributed to various factors: lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join the university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment and the learners’ motivation (Suleiman, 1983; Mukattash,1983; Zughoul, 1983, 1987; Abrahim,1983). In his study, Abdul Haq (1982, p.1) also revealed that most English instructors and University officials complained about the continuous deterioration of the mastery in the English language among the students. As to students’ motivation, it is believed that since English in Iran is a foreign language, that is, there is no real contact with the target culture; classes and teachers can be the main sources of motivation especially for young learners.

To learn this language requires constant practice and patience. The kind of feeling that prevails among students is that it is not possible to achieve fluency or mastery over English language.

It should be mentioned here that since English is viewed as a foreign language in Iran, EFL teachers are not only the instructors but also the sources of input, sometimes the only source, to students and this suggests the teachers’ crucial role in the students’ achievement of English. As it is stated by Souriyavongsa et al. (2013), the majority of English teachers are not well-trained; for instance, they use the native language when teaching, so they cannot perform well to attract the interest of the students.

References


