

## AN EVALUATION OF EFL PROGRAM OBJECTIVES AT TERTIARY LEVEL IN IRAN

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### Abstract

This study was an attempt to evaluate, firstly, whether the objectives specified by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) of Iran for a BA degree in English Language and Literature (ELL) are relevant and appropriate, and secondly, whether these intended objectives match those reported to have been achieved by students and graduates. For this purpose, 178 participants from Urmia University took part in the study, and different questionnaires were developed and used for collecting relevant data. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis through the use of both open-ended and closed questionnaire items. The results revealed that the current objectives for education leading to a BA in ELL are regarded as unacceptable. Furthermore, what is expected does not exactly match what is actually achieved. The findings showed that significant changes must be made to English language education in Iran's university sector by revising the current curriculum to place greater emphasis on the needs of the society and students. Additional findings and implications are also discussed.

**Keywords:** course objectives, EFL, higher education, Iranian context, program evaluation

### INTRODUCTION

The success of any educational enterprise hinges on the specification of appropriate objectives which should then be pursued to bring about desired outcomes. The issue of whether the specified objectives are indeed appropriate and efficient is itself of paramount importance, as basing instruction on improper goals may be even more detrimental to the process and product of education. To ensure quality of education, accordingly, the processes and products of education must be evaluated from a variety of perspectives (Bridges, 2009a; b; Sadeghi, 2010). A major component of this evaluation is the program objectives, which should be studied from the viewpoints of not only government authorities, but also all other stakeholders in education, including those for whom education exists in the first place, i.e. learners. Because learners are the most important stakeholders in all educational systems, this study focused only on this group. The desire to evaluate the appropriateness of curriculum objectives is by no means an exception in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Iran's centres of higher education.

Therefore, this study sought to evaluate, first of all, whether the objectives specified by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) were relevant and appropriate, and secondly, whether these intended objectives match those that participants reported to have been achieved. In other words, the researchers aimed to evaluate the current EFL program objectives in Iran's higher education system in order to understand whether the existing program is efficient and whether its objectives are valid in the eyes of those for whom the program was planned (i.e. university EFL majors). This study used both quantitative and

qualitative procedures for data collection and analysis. Most of the quantitative findings are under review elsewhere and this paper mainly concerns the qualitative findings, although brief quantitative results are reported where relevant.

## RELATED LITERATURE

Education centres in general and universities in particular all over the world aim to train candidates with different abilities to meet their society's needs. Thus, administrators, professors, and students should put forth their best effort to achieve the desired outcomes of learning. Chastain (1988) asserts that the quantity and quality of learning are still the primary goal of education and students' achievement is the number one criterion for judging the quality of the course and the teacher. As such, both the extent and quality of learner achievement should be evaluated to gauge the amount of correspondence between what is expected to be achieved and what actually is, if this achievement can at all be measured. Any evaluation procedure or technique bears, implicitly or explicitly, a number of assumptions about the specific objectives of learning as well as the learning process itself. Effective curricula, therefore, are those which are based on appropriate objectives. The objectives may differ from one context to another; however, conducting a detailed needs analysis of the learners as well as their society and taking into account the resources available for the implementation of the objectives all play a role in appropriately determining the appropriate curriculum and program objectives. Such a framework for linking context and curriculum has been proposed by McDonough and Shaw (2003). However, choices regarding the objectives of education, rather than being based on a true needs analysis, are 'made by government in the name of their citizens' in most societies (Leung, 2010: 2) including Iran.

Effective program evaluation requires an understanding of the nature of the program as well as the evaluation procedure. Weiss (1972) defines evaluation as 'the systematic gathering of information for the purpose of making decisions' (cited in Bachman, 1990: 22). Language programs can be evaluated for their 'appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency' (Bachman, 1990: 62). Of paramount importance in a program evaluation (or macro-evaluation, in Bachman's (1981) term) is that the information on which decisions are to be based should be as comprehensive and as accurate as possible; otherwise, wrong decisions may be made, rendering the evaluation process futile. To collect accurate information, the most appropriate data elicitation tools should be used. Such tools are, in most cases, tests or questionnaires; the latter were used in this study. To provide the most comprehensive information as input for decision making, data should be collected from all stakeholders (if possible) or from those who are directly affected by any changes in the program (that is, the learners, who were the participants in this study).

Few studies have investigated the possible link between curriculum objectives and the achievement of university EFL students. Our literature review reveals that limited published research addresses the internal evaluation of English language education in Iran's universities, and few English departments in the world have dealt with evaluative programs focusing on different areas of English language education. Before reviewing a few relevant studies, this section provides a brief overview of the ELT curriculum in Iran's higher education system.

Based on the curriculum developed and published by the MSRT in 1989, the objectives of preparing EFL candidates for a BA qualification in higher education are both socio-economic and educational. English is taught for communicative, cultural, research, and teaching purposes. To achieve these objectives, students are trained in various skills during their four years of study. Most have socio-economic and academic motives for choosing the field of EFL. Their motivation is instrumental rather than integrative; that is, they do not major in EFL for the purpose of developing their knowledge of the English language and literature or

culture per se, as most have little hope of living in an English-speaking country in the future. Rather, students often choose the field mainly because they hope it will increase their employment opportunities after graduation.

Course objectives can be divided into first phase and second phase objectives. During the first phase, which lasts two years, students are trained mainly in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in order to enable them to communicate effectively in English. On the whole, courses in the first phase serve as a general background for the study of English Language and Literature (ELL).

During the second phase, which lasts two more years, education is intended to develop the training that students were given in the first phase and further develop their knowledge in specific areas. Accordingly, *linguistics, introduction to research, translation* courses, and, mostly, *literature* courses are introduced to provide students with a more solid background in English by developing their fluency and accuracy (Curriculum of ELL, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 1989).

A close look at the ELT university curriculum in Iran shows that a cultural component is obviously present as an implicit element of the program. On the whole, ELL objectives in Iran's universities are divided into general and course-specific objectives. The general objectives of ELL are as follows. Receiving university training in ELL is expected to help students to:

- a) convey Persian literature and culture as well as Islamic thought to foreign countries;
- b) inform Iranian society of the world's latest scientific advances by searching English language books;
- c) meet society's needs in the areas of writing analytic and critical essays in English, translating articles and books (related to the humanities), and teaching English; and
- d) gain readiness for further education at the MA level. (Curriculum of ELL, Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 1989)

Foruzandeh, Riazi and Sadighi (2008) conducted a research study to evaluate the Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) curriculum in MA programs at nine major universities in Iran with regard to the Official Curriculum developed in 1987. Participants included 68 MA students, 34 instructors, and nine administrators. Data were collected through three questionnaires, interviews, and written responses. Interviews were also conducted with 18 instructors and 30 students. The findings revealed that (1) there was no consensus among the participants regarding the overall aim of the program, (2) the implemented curriculum was partially compatible with the Official Curriculum, and (3) the participants generally felt the need for (a) a revision of the Official Curriculum, (b) reform of the program delivery, and (c) reconsideration of the screening system.

By administering the same questionnaire to four groups of students (156 first-year students, 52 second-year students, 75 third-year students, and 71 fourth-year students), Ennaji (1990) intended to determine students' viewpoints and reasons for studying English and to elicit their attitudes and reactions to English course objectives. The results showed that the aims and objectives of different courses were not clear to most students. Only 7% of first-year, 10% of second-year, 8% of third-year, and 7% of fourth-year students reported that the course objectives were very clear to them. In addition, only a small percentage of students (4% of first-year, 8% of second-year, 7% of third-year, and 8% of fourth-year students) thought that the course aims and objectives could often be attained within the expected time limits. Further, only 28% of all students thought their English studies were relevant to their training for a good job. The reason behind this low percentage may be that students realized

their English syllabus did not directly aim at training them for future jobs. Most (53%) stated that they studied English mainly to develop their intellectual ability. Only 21% of the students found the English program to be relevant to their learning needs.

Sadiqi (1990) investigated and evaluated linguistics courses at the Department of English, University of Morocco. The study reflected on the nature, quantity, and quality of the linguistics courses. A questionnaire was distributed to 100 third-year and 73 fourth-year students. It was found that there did not seem to be a match between the academic aspect of linguistics as a discipline and student expectations: 60% of third-year students and 49% of fourth-year students found linguistics difficult because they found its terminology too confusing; 17% of third-year students and 8.2% of fourth-year students blamed the teachers for this state of affairs. However, 51% of third-year students and 36.9% of fourth-year students thought linguistics courses were the most important ones. Also, 11% of third-year students and 6.8% of fourth-year students said they did not see the aims of linguistics but would like to learn about them. Regarding motivating factors, 10% of third-year students and 24.5% of fourth-year students considered the teacher, topic, books, and job opportunities as equally motivating factors. Finally, 99% of third-year students and only 2.7% of fourth-year students indicated that books alone were a source of motivation for learning linguistics.

More recently, in an attempt to internally evaluate the quality of education in Iranian universities, scholars have conducted an increasing number of research projects, particularly ones carried out for MA theses, with such an orientation. Rezaei (2009), for example, conducted an internal evaluation of the English Language Department, Urmia University and found that the level of satisfaction of students, graduates, and academic staff was desirable enough, and educational programs as well as research facilities were rated as acceptable. Yet despite the limited number of studies examining issues in university EFL education, it is our strong belief that there is a very positive case for further evaluative studies in this area and, in particular, those focusing on the viewpoints of various stakeholders in education and primarily the viewpoints of learners themselves regarding their current and future needs. Based on these viewpoints, more plausible objectives can be identified and defined for operationalization. It was indeed based on this assumption that the current study was designed.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants were 178 EFL students and graduates. The main participants were learners (all from Urmia University) because the purpose of the study especially demanded the inclusion of this group as stakeholders. The participants consisted of five subgroups as follows:

1. 57 first-year English students (freshmen),
2. 23 second-year English students (sophomores),
3. 34 third-year English students (juniors),
4. 35 fourth-year English students (seniors), and
5. 29 EFL graduates (holding a BA degree in English), including 21 graduate MA students at Urmia University, and eight more with a BA degree in teaching from Jahade Daneshgahi (JD) Language Institute of Urmia.

Table 1 summarizes the data on participant demographics.

Table 1 Participants' demographic information

		Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Graduates
Gender*	Male	19	14	8	14	8
	Female	38	8	25	21	21
	Age	19.6	21.7	21.6	22.4	26.2
First language	Azeri	35	16	27	24	18
	Kurdish	14	3	2	5	2
	Persian	8	4	5	6	9
Second language background	ILI certificate	11	2	--	12	--
	JD certificate	--	2	--	--	--
Experience of	Teaching	--	---	--	--	18
	Translation	--	--	--	--	1
Fluency in other languages	Turkish	4	2	--	5	2
	French	2	1	1	--	--
	Arabic	2	--	--	--	--
	German	2	--	--	--	--
	Hebrew	--	--	--	1	--

\* One junior and one sophomore did not indicate their gender.

### Instruments

Five paper-and-pencil questionnaires including different and shared items were developed for the five participant groups, i.e. freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and graduates and university teachers. The questionnaires comprised two sections, each consisting of both Likert scale and open-ended items which were developed and piloted by the researchers. To ensure the validity, colleagues and experts were asked to read the questionnaires and identify any irrelevant items; these items were removed from the final questionnaires to ensure the questionnaire validity. The questionnaires also had acceptable reliability indices ranging from 0.6 to 0.8.

The final versions of the questionnaires contained three parts. The first was a cover letter which introduced the questionnaire, the purpose for which it was constructed and administered, and the importance of the answers and ideas of participants. It also included instructions on how to answer the questionnaire items, information on the voluntary nature of participation, and a statement assuring participants that their personal information would be kept confidential and that the data gathered would be used collectively for research purposes only. The second part gathered demographic information (i.e. age, sex, language background, mother tongue, fluency in other languages, and years of English language teaching). The third part included Likert scale as well as open-ended items. Open-ended items were integrated into the body of Likert scale items because they were relevant to the Likert scale items they followed. The participants were asked to express their ideas based on a five-point Likert scale (to a great extent, to some extent, to a small extent, not at all, I don't know). They were also asked to write their answers to the open-ended questions.

### Procedure

The questionnaires were administered in person to freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and MA students studying at the English Language Department, Urmia University as well as EFL graduates working at JD institute.

Except for the freshmen, all students were given the English version of the questionnaire. Freshmen were given both English and Persian versions, with the option to answer the one they preferred. Even in the English version of the questionnaire, all the students were

allowed to answer the open-ended questions in Persian if they so desired. Participants were provided with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire before they attempted to do so. All the questionnaires were administered at the beginning of the spring semester of the academic year 2009-2010, and they took about 20 minutes to complete.

## Data Analysis

The responses to open-ended items were analysed mainly qualitatively and those to closed items, quantitatively. While closed items asked about the acceptability of the objectives of different courses (see the results section below), open-ended items asked for participants' opinions and suggestions for the best way to achieve the objectives of selected courses. This paper focuses primarily on data obtained from the open-ended items. These items were analysed using a thematic approach and, where appropriate, the data were also quantified for descriptive analysis.

## Findings

While this paper focuses on answers to the open-ended questionnaire items (intended to elicit participants' ideas), there is a mixed approach (Mackey & Gass, 2005) evident across the following analysis: The focus remains primarily on qualitative analysis; however, quantitative information is also provided wherever relevant. In the description of analysis, tables that summarize responses to each open-ended item are presented first, followed by the corresponding analysis. To begin, the analyses of the shared items for all participants are dealt with at one place, in order to save space. Then, different open-ended items are analysed for each group.

1. In your opinion, what/who plays the major role in the achievement of a student?

Table 2 Major role players in student achievement

	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors
Students themselves	13 (22.8%)	5 (21.7%)	9 (26.5%)	9 (26%)
Students and professors	33 (57.9%)	16 (69.6%)	18 (52.9%)	13 (37%)
Professors	1 (1.8%)	---	1 (2.9%)	---
Educational facilities	8 (14%)	---	3 (8.8%)	8 (23%)
Fame of the university	1 (1.8%)	---	2 (5.9%)	1 (39%)
Other factors	1 (1.8%)	1 (4.3%)	1 (2.9%)	4 (11%)

As Table 2 shows, the role of both teachers and students dominated all the other factors in the responses of all groups. That is, all four groups gave more weight to both professors and students who, in their opinion, play the major role in student achievement. It should thus be understood that the role of these two groups in bridging the existing gap can be considerable and that, in order to implement a successful curriculum and achieve the desired objectives, more attention should be paid to human resources, including teachers and the learners themselves.

2. In general, which courses you have passed so far that were effective for you?

Table 3 Courses described as effective by participants

Shared item 2	Freshmen	Sophomores	Juniors	Seniors	Graduates
No response	9 (15.8%)	6 (26%)	16 (47.1%)	6 (17.1%)	---
Teaching methodology	---	---	1 (2.9%)	---	8 (27.6%)
Linguistics	---	---	1 (2.9%)	---	4 (13.6%)
Reading comprehension	8 (14%)	8 (34.8%)	2 (5.9%)	3 (8.6%)	5 (17%)
Letter writing	---	---	---	1 (2.9%)	2 (6.8%)
Essay writing	---	2 (5.9%)	---	3 (8.6%)	1 (3.4%)
Phonology	1 (1.8%)	1 (4.3%)	---	5 (14.3%)	2 (6.8%)
Testing	---	---	---	---	3 (10.2%)
Translation	---	2 (8.7%)	---	---	2 (6.8%)
Courses related to literature	---	---	6 (17.7%)	9 (25.7%)	4 (13.6%)
Grammar and writing	3 (5.3%)	1 (4.3%)	3 (8.8%)	6 (17.1%)	3 (10.2%)
Research method	---	---	---	1 (2.9%)	3 (10.2%)
Reading media texts	---	---	4 (11.8%)	---	---
Study skills	6 (10.5%)	---	---	---	1 (3.4%)
Conversation	17 (29.8%)	---	1 (2.9%)	3 (8.6%)	2 (6.8%)
Advanced writing	---	2 (5.9%)	---	3 (8.6%)	2 (6.8%)
None of the courses	2 (3.5%)	2 (8.7%)	1 (2.9%)	---	1 (3.4%)
All the courses	11 (19.3%)	---	---	---	---

Except for a few courses, such as Reading and Conversation, which seem to have been somewhat effective for candidates, not many other courses have satisfied the participants' expectations (see Table 3). This observation raises questions on (among other factors) the possibility of a mismatch between curriculum objectives and those implemented in the classrooms or on the inefficiency of curriculum objectives if they have been strictly followed during the courses. All open-ended items for freshmen were among shared items analysed above. What follows is an analysis of a sample of open-ended items for other groups of the study.

3. What is your suggestion for teaching Advanced Writing?

Table 4 Suggestions for teaching Advanced Writing

Question 3		Students
No response		14 (60.6%)
Comments	Asking more knowledgeable teachers to teach this course	4(17.3%)
	Encouraging students to work more/harder	1 (4.3%)
	Having a limited number of students in writing classes	1(4.3%)
	Analysing other's writing in class and correcting their mistakes in addition to writing on our own	1 (4.3%)
	Familiarising students with good grammar before starting the course	1 (4.3%)

Sixty percent of the students did not give suggestions in response to Question 3. Four students believed that the best solution is to ask knowledgeable teachers to teach this course. Other students gave different suggestions from those listed in Table 4. For example, one student wrote, *'In teaching this course, the main emphasis should be on quality of education rather than on quantity. But unfortunately, as quantity was much highlighted, there was little time and so much to do and work on.'* Another student reported, *'It was useful and I developed the skill of writing to some extent, but due to lack of direct contact with the professor because of the large number of students, the teacher was not able to check students' writing one by one.'*

Based on these findings, the advice for program developers and curriculum writers is to make suggestions regarding the type of teacher to teach Advanced Writing and the number of students to include in writing classes, which, for practical considerations, is unfortunately too large for the teacher to be able to manage in our context.

4. What is your suggestion for teaching Translation Methods?

Table 5 Suggestions for teaching Translation Methods

Question 4		Sophomores
No response		15(64.9%)
Comments	Using capable teachers	2(8.6%)
	More time allocation	2(8.6%)
	More motivation	1(4.3%)
	Giving assignments	1(4.3%)
	Having the students work in groups	1(4.3%)

As shown in Table 5, 15 students did not respond to Question 4. Those who did respond gave various suggestions. Two students believed that a teacher's knowledge and capability were important for teaching the course, and two others suggested that more time should be allocated to the course. The other suggestions were to provide more motivation, give assignments, and have group work. One student suggested the following: *'Teachers should first introduce the basic principles that are essential for a simple interpretation and then ask students to follow these rules in different translations.'*



The fact that students believed more can be done to improve translation courses is again indicative of the need to improve the course objectives and to aim for a match between the desirable and observed objectives, which will lead to higher student achievement.

- In your opinion, how can students be motivated to achieve the course objectives?

Table 6 Motivating factors for achieving objectives

Question 5		Sophomores
	No response	19 (82.8%)
Comments	By lowering anxiety	1 (4.3%)
	By establishing good relationships between students and teachers	1 (4.3%)
	Through professors' guidance	1 (4.3%)
	By creating a good environment at universities	1 (4.3%)

Table 6 shows that 19 students did not give their opinion concerning student motivation to achieve the objectives (Question 5). Three students regarded affective factors as important in shaping student motivation. One student, for example, wrote, '*The sole important role players are the students themselves. If they have a goal in their minds, if they truly want to achieve that, then it is impossible to hinder it. Whatever your mind sets as its goal is achievable and by itself is a source of motivation.*' As stated earlier, increasing the level of student motivation can lead to higher achievement, which is a step towards attaining a better match with the curriculum objectives. The lesson here is that increasing learners' motivation may help raise the level of student achievement, which will directly contribute to realization of the course objectives.

- What is your suggestion for teaching Letter Writing?

Table 7 Suggestions for teaching Letter Writing

Question 6		Juniors
	No response	19 (55.9%)
Comments	Writing letters on different topics	1(2.9%)
	Making students active by giving them writing assignments	1(2.9%)
	Bringing English letters to class	1(2.9%)
	Making the course more practical	1(2.9%)

Nineteen students in this group did not give suggestions in response to Question 6, and just four students wrote suggestions for of teaching Letter Writing, as shown in Table 7. The suggestions indicate that the effectiveness of Letter Writing courses can be improved by increasing student involvement and adding more tasks to the course.

- What is your suggestion for teaching Linguistics?

Table 8 Suggestions for teaching Linguistics

Question 7		Juniors
	No response	21(61.8%)
Comments	More explanation given by the teacher	1(2.9%)
	More student involvement	1(2.9%)

As shown in Table 8, 21% of the students did not answer Question 7. One student suggested the course teacher needed to offer more explanations, and another thought students should be more involved in the class. Similar to the comment for the earlier item, the responses here suggest that teachers' and students' cooperation in the classroom will make the lessons more successful, thereby helping to achieve the course objectives and fostering student achievement.

8. Do you think the objectives of the courses you are studying are acceptable, or do they need change?

Table 9 The appropriacy of course objectives

Question 8		Seniors
No response		7 (20%)
Comments	Yes, they are okay and do not need change	3 (9%)
	No, they are not okay and need change	25 (71%)

As shown in Table 9, 20% of the students did not comment on the appropriacy of objectives. Seventy-one percent of them indicated that the objectives needed assessment and revision. Among the students' comments, the following are noteworthy: *'The objectives need change, the purpose of learning should be actual learning, not rote learning, because actual learning causes the creation of goals and satisfaction with education'* and *'First of all, the objectives must be clear and related to the kind of course we have. For example, a literature student cannot be a good English teacher without taking special courses in teaching English.'*

The participants' belief that, in most cases, course objectives to be revised is clear evidence that if course objectives follow the existing curriculum objectives, they are faulty and need revision, or that there is a mismatch between the two, and either one or both need improvement. Faults in either will result in inappropriate teaching and insufficient learning/achievement.

9. What is your suggestion for teaching Essay Writing?

Table 10 Suggestions for teaching Essay Writing

Question 9		Seniors
No response		29 (83%)
Comments	Providing students with examples of essays and analysing them	2 (6%)
	Focusing on the content, not just the structure of writing	2 (6%)
	Using group work for writing essays	1 (3%)
	Teaching the principles of writing and encouraging students to write voluntarily	1 (3%)

Twenty-nine participants did not give suggestions in response to Question 9. Just six students wrote comments, as shown in Table 10. It seems that incorporating the students' suggestions will help more of them to gain the relevant skills of the course, which, again, will contribute to the better realization of course objectives.

10. What is your suggestion for teaching Teaching Methodology?

Table 11 Suggestion for teaching teaching methodology

Question 10		Seniors
Comments	No response	25 (71%)
	Using up-to-date materials	2 (6%)
	Having the teacher applying each method in each session	3 (9%)
	Asking students to teach in class	4 (12%)
	Asking students to visit different EFL classes	1 (3%)

As Table 11 shows, 25 students did not write comments in response to Question 10. Those who gave suggestions indicated the need for practicality. Four of them believed that teachers should ask students to practice and gain experience teaching in class. Three students suggested that each session the teacher could use one of the methods introduced in the book so that students could observe it in practice. Two other students suggested using up-to-date materials, and one requested that teachers ask students to visit different EFL classes. The suggestion given by these few participants, that the course should be practical, is worth expanding here. It is an unfortunate fact that most EFL courses in Iran are theory-oriented, and learners do not find many opportunities to put course contents into practice, thereby transforming their knowledge into skill. The implication is that either course objectives should be revised to be made more practical, or that learners and teachers do not focus enough on practical aspects of the objectives.

11. Do you think there was a match between the course objectives and the syllabi followed by your professors? If no, where were the areas of mismatch?

Table 12 The match between course objectives and syllabi

Question 11		Graduates
Comments	No response	16 (55%)
	Yes	4 (13.6%)
	No	9 (34.5%)

As shown in Table 12, 16 graduates (55%) did not respond to Question 11. Nine graduates reported that there was a mismatch between course objectives and the syllabi followed by their professors, but four maintained that there was a match between them. One of the graduates stated that there was a match, but not in all courses. For example, he pointed to a 'Testing' course which he believed did not teach students how to write good tests or test items. Among the various responses, the following comments are noteworthy: *'Most of the time, there was a match and if not, in some cases, the teacher couldn't follow the syllabus due to the shortage of time'* and *'The syllabi should have been designed to have more practical purposes. The courses meet primarily theoretical needs; there isn't any practical experience about what it is required in a future job.'*

Like the other groups, the graduates indicated the need for revision of the course objectives. The fact that, in most cases, teachers were claimed not to have followed the objectives is enough evidence for the mismatch between what was actually implemented and what was

expected. It is possible, however, that the teachers themselves used different objectives based on their appraisal of the old course objectives.

12. Do you think the course objectives were acceptable, or did they need change?

Table 13 The appropriacy of course objectives

	Question 12	Graduates
Comments	No response	10 (34.5%)
	Yes	9 (31%)
	No	10 (34.6%)

As shown in Table 13, 10 graduates did not give their opinions concerning the appropriacy of course objectives (Question 12). The graduates who suggested changes to the objectives made the following comments: *'Language is a dynamic process, and we should try to meet the needs and set new objectives'* and *'The objectives were not okay. Almost all of them were based on developing translation skills, and there were not communicative objectives.'*

In other words, graduates who did not agree with the course objectives thought that the objectives should be based on the learners' needs. Their responses hint that there does not seem to be a match between the objectives and the real current and future needs of EFL learners; a proper needs analysis seems to be required, based on which more appropriate objectives may be defined.

13. Do you have any suggestions for changing the system of ELL education?

Table 14 Suggestions for changing the ELL curriculum

	Question 13	Graduates
Comments	No response	22 (76%)
	It should deal with practical issues	2 (6.8%)
	Task-based approach should be used	1 (3.4%)
	Teacher-student centred approach should be used	1 (3.4%)
	More attention should be paid to evaluation procedures	1 (3.4%)
	More attention should be to learning four skills	2 (6.8%)

As Table 14 shows, 76% of the students did not answer Question 13. Those who did answer gave various suggestions, all of which imply that task-oriented, learner-centred, and practical lessons contribute more to deeper learning. In revising course objectives, these considerations should receive due attention to help students properly master the relevant knowledge and skills.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the data analysis, we tentatively conclude that there is a mismatch between the desired curriculum objectives and students' achievement in the courses they were asked about (see Table 12). Regarding the appropriacy of objectives and the system of ELL education, the qualitative analysis of student comments shows their belief that the existing system should be changed. The main goal of providing educational facilities in every country

is to provide students with an educational experience and to ensure that they learn a basic core of knowledge and skills that will prepare them for employment and further training. Our findings reveal that to achieve this goal, significant changes must be made to English language education in Iran's university sector. Specifically, the current curriculum must be revised to place greater emphasis on the needs of the society and students. As mentioned, the current university EFL curriculum was developed about 20 years ago and has not been reformed since. Clearly, the needs of the society as well as those of students have changed during this period. Further, it is important to conduct an appropriate needs analysis before a new curriculum or program is developed; it would therefore be completely logical that the MSRT should perform a thorough needs analysis before making any revisions to the curriculum.

To create an appropriate curriculum, Nunan (1988) argues for the necessity of needs analysis, which, as far as language programs are concerned, is divided into a learner analysis and task analysis. The central question in performing a learner analysis is for what purpose the learner is learning the language; and the main concern of task analysis is what language skills or knowledge areas will be required by the learners to function effectively in their future career or social roles. In needs analysis, information is collected not only from the learners but also about them on diverse issues such as why they want to learn, what the societal expectations and constraints are, and what the available resources are for the effective implementation of the curriculum.

Although different models of needs analysis have been offered for curriculum development in ELT, the most sophisticated one was proposed by Munby (1978). In this model, information is collected on nine components: participants, purposive domain, setting, interaction, instrumentality, dialect, target level, communicative event, and communicative key. However, for language-based curricula, and because university students need skills beyond language, including in skills content areas such as research methods, teaching, correspondence, etc., we suggest that a needs analysis schedule for ELT students at the university level should be even more sophisticated, including information on future social roles of the students as well. Indeed, our observations in this study offer implications for a comprehensive needs analysis in the future modification of the ELL curriculum.

Perhaps the reason that the current ELL curriculum seems to have failed the test of evaluation of its objectives is that when it was developed, the curriculum was dictated and designed by educational authorities 'on behalf of the people' (Leung, 2010: 2) rather than being based on the needs of the main stakeholders themselves and the future needs of the society at large. Furthermore, as time changes, people's interests and goals change, too; and there is no accommodation made for such changes in the two-decade old university curriculum in Iran. The curriculum revision proposed here should, therefore, be based on a detailed evaluation of the current and future needs of the Iranian university student body as well those of other community members for whom these graduates will be offering services. Moreover, consideration should be given to the available resources and associated costs resulting from proposed changes (in particular, costs associated with adding new technology to the existing education system). As explained above, the final decision should be based not only on information coming from learners themselves but also from their parents, graduates, teachers, administrators, policy makers, directors of education, experts, and any other informed and interested groups across the country. Having access to such extensive information will require employing researchers with skill, interest, and experience, who should also have an eye to the programs used in other, more developed countries in order to learn from their experiences and localize the gains for their own benefit.

Accordingly, the objectives and goals of teaching English in Iranian universities must be revised to make them compatible with the new needs and state of Iranian society. Courses must be devised with new goals and objectives, taking the society's and students' needs into

consideration. As Marris (1964) has rightly stated, student needs are often taken for granted and are thus neglected (cited in Ennaji, 1990).

Our informal observations and experience and the data collected from graduates show that most of the ELL graduates are employed as teachers. As one of the students commented, *'I think the objectives need change. My major was English literature, but most of the students graduating in this field are employed as teachers, and they like to continue their studies in teaching English, not literature. So, of course something is missing here, that the students do not show enough interest to continue.'* For this reason, some of the students suggested that literature courses be replaced by other courses to ensure that they gain more knowledge of the general field of English.

It seems that separate objectives should be specified for particular fields of study: for example, the separation of Literature and Teaching at the early stages of higher education, as was the case in the past. The researchers do not suggest the exclusion of literature courses in the curriculum for those who aim to teach EFL in the future, since as Arab (1990) states the teaching of literature may still respond to humanistic aspirations and lead to a better understanding of life. Similarly, Ginestier (1979) writes, 'Teaching literature, whether we like it or not is, first of all to give a taste for reading, which in turn will improve language proficiency and pave the way to the pleasure of literary appreciation, leading to a better understanding of life' (cited in Arab, 1990).

What is clear from the results of this study is that there is not a proper match between objectives and student achievement. Many factors create this gap. First of all, to achieve any goal or objective, we should first be aware of it; without full awareness of the objectives, the expectation of finding a perfect match between objectives and student achievement seems a bit illogical. If we do not know what our destination is, arriving there is very difficult. Similarly, if we expect EFL students to achieve the objectives of English language education, or in other words, if we expect a perfect match between curriculum objectives and student achievement, we must make students aware of the objectives. Most of the students in this study were not completely aware of the objectives of English language education in Iran's higher education system. The study results show that among the participants, 17.5% of freshmen, 2.9% of juniors (just one student), 3% of seniors (just one student), and, surprisingly, none of the sophomores were aware of the objectives of English language education in Iran's higher education system.

Another important consideration regarding objectives is their appropriacy. The appropriacy of objectives is dependent on whether the objectives are all right, up-to-date, and achievable and whether they are based on the students' and society's needs. The survey shows only 13% of sophomores, 8.8% of juniors, and 10.1% of seniors thought the objectives were up-to-date 'to a great extent'. None of the graduates believed the objectives were greatly up-to-date. Another important consideration which frequently appears in the students' comments is the request to place more emphasis on general English and communicative skills. This finding indicates that curriculum developers should reassess objectives with an eye to developing a more communicative curriculum. Furthermore, many student responses reflected the idea that the objectives were not practical, and in the syllabi followed at universities, theoretical issues dominated practical ones. Only 5.1% of seniors, 11.8% of juniors, 20.7% of graduates, and 39.1% of sophomores believed that the courses met society's needs, and only 34.5% of graduates stated their job's needs were met. It is clear that more practicality of the curriculum leads to increased motivation on the part of students, which naturally produces more achievement, as discussed.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to investigate whether the current ELL curriculum used in Iran's tertiary education system fulfils its function appropriately. According to Nunan (1988), curriculum development includes the obligatory stages of planning, implementation, and evaluation as well as optional phases of administration and management. This study focused mainly on the evaluation stage, which required the researchers to examine the appropriacy and effectiveness of the program in terms of whether the objectives set by the MSRT are acceptable and whether the program is successful in the delivery of the objectives. Although information for evaluation has to be obtained from different sources, including learners, teachers, authorities, and experts among others, this study drew on learners as the primary sources of information, as they are the main reason that any educational program is developed in the first place. The data described and analysed above indicated that, firstly, most of the MSRT's objectives for the implementation of the ELL curriculum in Iran's higher education system were unsatisfactory; and secondly, these inappropriate objectives were not fully implemented in courses. While we recommend further research to substantiate these findings in other Iranian universities, we expect little difference to be found, as the same curriculum developed by the MSRT is to be followed by all state universities in the country. However, we admit that the same program may be implemented quite differently in different institutions, as university teachers are more or less free to adopt their own teaching content and materials as long as they adhere to the general curricular framework. Our findings give us enough confidence to suggest that the current ELT curriculum is out-dated enough to need revision in consideration of the new needs of learners and recent technological changes.

The present study was motivated by a genuine interest in improving ELL teaching at the university level and, hence, improving the general performance of our graduating students. The fulfilment of this ambitious aim is most possible in light of a commitment on the part of authorities, professors, and students themselves. Among the ELT-related changes suggested to be made in the curriculum, two are particularly noteworthy. Authorities in higher education are invited to revise the goals and objectives of teaching ELL in Iranian universities to make them more practical and compatible with the needs of students and current situation of Iranian society. Moreover, courses must be devised that are compatible with the curriculum goals, reflect the objectives, and accommodate both the students' and society's needs.

Teachers are invited to engage students as a first step toward meeting their learning and academic needs by using more effective and affective techniques of teaching and by employing more useful materials in class. Finally, the most important role-players in bridging the existing gap between the objectives of English language education and student achievement are the students themselves; they should do their best and study harder toward achieving curriculum objectives. However, the pre-requisite for urging students to work toward achieving learning goals is to make sure that the goals are appropriate, realistic, and attainable. To arrive at a list of such educational goals, we recommend that authorities should collect as accurate and complete information as possible from and about students, using a variety of sources. Therefore, we recommend that further research engage in similar program evaluations at other universities before a definitive proposal may be made to authorities in higher education regarding the urgency of discarding or modifying the existing ELT program.

Our study suffered from at least two limitations: We used self-report questionnaires to elicit data on participants' perceptions of the appropriacy of learning and teaching goals; and we admit that data elicited in this way may not be very accurate. To eliminate this problem, we recommend that future research should use methodological triangulation by using other data collection tools, such as interviews and introspection techniques, as well as other sources of data from experts, teachers, educational authorities, and stakeholders in education. The second shortcoming of the study was that it used a convenience and opportunistic sampling of learners involved in a single university context, and for this very reason, the findings may

not be readily generalizable to the whole country. We suggest that future research look at the possibility of recruiting participants from other universities (using cluster sampling).

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