Attitude of Iranian Graduate Students toward English: A Case Study

Masood Khoshsaligheh [*]
Assistant Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
Ferdos Jamali
Assistant Professor, Razi University of Kermanshah
Abdulbaset Saeedian
MA, Razi University of Kermanshah

Abstract

This study aimed at gaining insights into the Iranian graduate students' attitudes toward English language and the current education policies in addition to the purposes for which they learn the foreign language. Based on a mixed methods design, the study collected the required quantitative and qualitative data using a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. A purposive sample of 30 MA students from Razi University completed the questionnaire and 15 volunteers participated in the interview. The findings of this case study seem to indicate that Iranian higher education students hold positive attitudes toward English and the purposes for which they learn the foreign language. The participants, however, seemed to hold negative attitudes toward the current education policies. The study finally recommended that the participants' dissatisfaction with the current English language education curriculum offered in the universities, textbooks, and teaching methods should be taken into consideration by the authorities in charge to improve the TEFL in Iranian educational system.

---

[*]Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Khorasan Razavi, Iran

1. Introduction

Attitude is "a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior" (Baker, 1992, p.10). Attitude toward the foreign language is frequently referred to as one of the primary factors in successful foreign language learning. For example, Gardner and Lambert (1959) suggest that while aptitude is the main factor behind effective language learning, attitude is the second most crucial factor. English has been used dominantly in the context of foreign language learning and teaching in Iran, and it is taught in Iran from the first grade in junior high school and continues to tertiary education. At university, a good command of English, especially in reading comprehension, is quite necessary for students. However, in spite of studying English as the foreign language for about seven years in junior and senior high school, students are often incapable of using it effectively in receptive or productive skills. As Rajaee Nia and Abbaspour (2012) state in addition to the teaching material, teachers, and learning environment, learner's attitude is also of great significance in the success of English language learning. Similar studies also indicate that the attitude toward language learning is influential in learning a language and influences learners' success or failure (Finch, 2008; Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi & Alzwari, 2012).

Of course, Soleimani and Hanafi (2013) carried out a study on a sample of Iranian medical students' attitudes toward English language learning, while focusing on differences between male and female medical students. They concluded that male students' attitudes toward English was more than female ones. But what the present researchers are attempting to do in this study is master's students' attitudes toward the English language and not language learning. Gender-based differences which were of high significance in the just-mentioned study are not by any means taken into close consideration.

Various researchers such as Matsuda (2000) in Japan, Friedrich (2000) in Brazil, Yu (2010) in China, and most recently Martínez, Pérez, and Fernández, (2013) in Mexico, among others, have investigated the attitudes of language learners toward English as the world's current lingua franca, in different parts of the world. To address this question in terms of Iran, the present study was an endeavor to investigate the attitudes of Iranian learners toward English language. Due to a number of practical considerations, the study was, however, limited to investigate the attitudes of master's students in Razi University in Kermanshah and the sample does not represent EFL learners from the entire country. As the attitudes of language learners have great significance in directing

language policies and language learning (Snow, 2007; Young, 2006), this study also investigated learners' attitudes toward the current English education policies in Iran and these learners' purpose for learning English. The following questions were designed to direct this study:

   1) What is the attitude of MA students in Razi University toward English in general?

   2) What are the attitudes of MA students in Razi University toward the current English education policies in Iran?

   3) What are the attitudes of MA students in Razi University toward the purposes for which Iranian college students learn English?

2. Literature Review

Kachru (1985) have proposed the Concentric Circle Model which includes the inner, outer, and expanding circles, which provide a fundamental framework to discuss the spread of English as a lingua franca. To Kachru, people in the Inner Circle countries use English as their first language. Those in the Outer Circle countries use it as the official language or one of the official languages. While in the Expanding Circle countries, it is used as a foreign language. Crystal (1997) also explains how English has become a "global language" since the twentieth century. One factor which has also been underscored by Crystal is the influential role played by almost countless non-native speakers of English who have made English international, as they outnumber the native speakers of English. That's why Widdowson (1994) asserts that English now belongs not only to its Native Speakers (NSs) but also to the Non-Native Speakers (NNSs).

        The attitude of EFL learners toward English has been taken into consideration by some researchers from different parts of the world (e.g., Friedrich, 2000; Martínez, Pérez, & Fernández, 2013; Matsuda, 2000; Yu, 2010). To build upon the Concentric Circle Model proposed by Kachru (1996), Matsuda (2000) conducted a study on the attitude of Japanese students toward English Language. The study was carried out in a private senior high school in Tokyo over 75 days and a questionnaire with 44 Likert scale items was used to identify their general attitudes toward English. The results of the study showed that the participants did not consider that English belonged to the international community. Friedrich (2000), in a similar manner, conducted a survey study to examine the attitude of 190 adult Brazilian English learners toward English and English language learning. The main finding of the study was that all the participants were aware of the status of English as an international language and expressed interest in learning this language to

be able to be part of the global society, where English serves as the primary communication tool.

Attitude is defined by Baker (1992) as "a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behavior" (p.10). This definition was adopted by Matsuda (2000), as she construed the construct with three components: cognitive, affective, and conative (termed, behavioral in Sonda, 2011). The affective component concerns the participants' feelings toward English language. It may be manifested in the form of love, hate, anxiety, and the like. The cognitive component, in contrast, concerns thoughts and beliefs about the language of learners. For instance, one learner may believe that one certain language (e.g. English) is a democratic language which is beneficial to the development of their country, while another may think that it is an oppressive language destroying her native culture (Sonda, 2011). Finally, the conative (or behavioral) component refers to a behavioral intention or plan of action. For example, a person may like out of their habit to watch American movies using Persian subtitles though they study English as a Foreign Language and is adequately proficient in English. Therefore, in the survey items, equal and sufficient attention is paid to these three components.

However, defining language attitude is of high significance as well because it is the principal term in this study. King (2000) defined language attitude as a "specific response to certain aspects of a particular language" (p. 2) and by the same token, Choi (2003) refers to linguistic attitude as "being an individual or collective expression toward language and any issues related to language; it is the act of responding to certain aspects of language, linguistic ideologies and linguistic use" (p. 5). As it can be seen both of the aforementioned researchers agreed upon one point, that is, responding to certain aspects of a language.

Recently, Gajalakshmi (2013) carried out research in this domain on 600 high school students and investigate their attitudes toward learning English language. The researcher had taken gender, locality of the school, type of school, and type of management into close consideration and concluded that students' attitudes to learn English can improve if more classroom activities are included in the study of English.

The study aims at providing a better understanding of (a sample of) Iranian learners' attitudes toward English language learning regarding possible variables that may affect the construction of their attitude. Depending on the effect of the students' attitudes- positive or negative- on their language learning proficiency, the findings are valuable for English education policy makers and administrators, as well as language teachers in Iran.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The target population which was aimed at in this study was graduate students in different fields at Iranian tertiary education. Using purposive sampling technique (Dörnyei, 2007), a sample of participants studying at Razi University, in the West of Iran, was selected. The sample comprised of ten master's students from each of the schools of Arts and Humanities, Social Studies, and Experimental Sciences who were invited to participate to the study. Eventually, ten TEFL students (Arts and Humanities), ten Psychology students (Social Studies), and ten Physics (Experimental Sciences) agreed to participate. Eventually, all the participating MA students were asked to complete the questionnaire instrument and five from each cluster were invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. In other words, a total of 30 MA students from the three schools were chosen to respond to the questionnaire items and a total of 15 students who have already responded to the questionnaire were interviewed.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments used for data collection included a closed-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. In the study, a questionnaire including three sections, with 48 items based on a Likert scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (SD), Disagree (D), Slightly Disagree (SLD), Slightly Agree (SLA), Agree (A), to Strongly Agree (SA), was utilized. To address the research questions of the study, each questionnaire item, classified under each section, was discussed separately, the discussion of which was supplemented by the findings from the interviews.

3.3. Design

The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitude of a sample of English language learners at graduate level in Iranian tertiary education. To examine the participants' attitude, a descriptive, cross-sectional, mixed-methods design (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2006) was used which included quantitative data using a questionnaire and qualitative data using in-depth interviews. The reason for using interview data was to improve the researchers'understanding of the participants' attitudes; that is, the qualitative data was benefited to contextualize the quantitative data. In addition, the study combined the findings of two forms of data, quantitative and qualitative, assuming that the shortcomings of each paradigm are compensated by the strengths of the other (Dörnyei, 2007).

As qualitative analysis can be used as an in-depth description of the quantitative findings (Yu, 2010), interviews were used, aiming at improving the response validity of the findings by permitting the

participants to express their unrestrained ideas about the questions, in addition to from the fixed options on the quantitative instrument. Likewise, this design was benefitted by Matsuda (2000) in his research on attitude who, to stress the importance of qualitative supplementary data, states that "in questionnaire studies, each respondents' experiences are lost as they are reduced to numbers" (p. 16). Sakui and Gaies (1999) confirm this concept as they write that "well-conducted interviews allow learners to reveal beliefs which are not addressed in the questionnaire and to describe the reasons, sources, behavioral outcomes, and other dimensions of their beliefs" (p. 486).

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

As for constructing the quantitative instrument, the items of the questionnaire were collected through a wide and selective review of a number of relevant studies such as Yu (2010), Chen, Warden and Chang (2005), Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2007) and Rajaee Nia and Abbaspour (2012). To form a pool of items for the instrument to use, the items of all the questionnaires employed in the aforementioned studies were collected, and the duplicate or the contextually inappropriate items were excluded. To appropriate the list of items contextually, in a later step, a focus group interview on the topic under investigation with a purposive selection of nine graduate students (similar to those selected for the actual data collection) from different clusters studying at Razi University was conducted. Inclusion of most of the selected items in the pool were confirmed and a few new items were also added. The final items were categorized into three groups thematically as in the following:

- Attitudes of Iranian MA Students toward English Language in General
- Attitudes of Iranian MA Students toward the Current English Language Education Policies
- Attitudes of Iranian MA Students toward the Purposes for Learning English Language.

To establish content validity, the list of items and the categories were subjected to the review, revision, and reclassification of a number of EFL experts, whose comments and revisions were considered and applied to the list. To achieve face validity, a number of potential participants were asked to review an earlier edition of the questionnaire and were invited to comment on the layout, readability of the items, and their relevance. Likewise, their comments were considered and most were applied.

As for the qualitative data, to avert the possible language barrier, the interviews were conducted in Persian, and after the analysis, the relevant segments were transcribed and translated into English to be

reported. Within descriptive statistics, the frequency, mean, and percentage of responses to each of the options of the items on the questionnaire were computed and discussed. For that matter SPSS 19.0 was used to facilitate questionnaire data computation. The analysis and interpretation of the interview data was conducted through qualitative content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007) to explain and contextualize the quantitative data. Using a tentative rubric, following Yu (2010,), the criteria for analysis and judgment was set as in the following. If the mean score for each item is lower than 2.5, it is called a low and negative attitude. The score 2.5 until 3.5 would be construed as a medium and neutral attitude. The score 3.5 until 4.5 is interpreted as a high and the score 4.5 until 6 is interpreted as very high and positive attitude.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the percentage of the responses to each of the options for every item pertaining to the first section of the questionnaire that addresses the first research questions of the study.

4.1. Research Question I

The first research question addresses the attitude of MA students at Razi University toward English language in general. The findings based on the questionnaire and interview results are presented and discussed in the following sections.

4.1.1. Quantitative Data

The questionnaire results from the first section of the instrument (see Appendix A) indicate that the participants agreed on the statement that English is the international language. This fact could be found from the participants' responses to the first item's statement; %90 of them strongly agreed to the statement. About %93 of the participants agreed that knowing English is important in understanding people from other countries. Unexpectedly, results from the fourth item showed that the participants hardly wish to travel to English speaking countries even if they have a chance to do it. The results of the fifth item shows that the participants strongly would like to learn and improve their command of English. As for the sixth item, the responses are less unanimous; that is, the responses did not clearly indicate to either of the two extremes of the scale (i.e., Strongly Disagree and Strongly Agree). This item also shows that the respondents did not have a consensus on recognizing English as the most frequently used foreign language in Iran—as some could think of Arabic perhaps. In item 7, the respondents claim that instrumental motivation plays a key role in their desire to learn English and if they

know English, they will be considered as practically educated people as well.

Regarding their feelings when speaking English, the respondents strongly disagreed that they were not Iranian anymore. To underscore this note, item 11 showed that the fear of not being patriotic is one of the reasons that the students are thinking of, while writing or speaking in English. Contrary to the results of items 9 and 11, in item 12 the participants feel uneasy when hearing an Iranian speak in English. Among the participants, 21 of them strongly agreed that they did not like hearing an Iranian speak in English which is not in line with what could be understood from the other two related items. English is the only foreign language which the participants really like to learn and prefer learning it over other languages. This could be seen from the fact that 73 percent of them strongly agreed and 27 percent of them agreed on learning English and not French. Item 18 shed some more light on the issue of the participants' uneasiness, while hearing an Iranian speak to another Iranian in English. In addition, the majority of the participants slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed that they wanted to sound like a native speaker of English (%64 altogether).

Though items 14, 15, and 16 are about spoken English, comparison of the results of these three items is in apparent contrast with each other. In the first one, the participants strongly agreed (%100) that they love speaking with foreigners in English, although in the second one just %10 of them strongly agreed that they wish that they could speak fluently and accurately in English. Meanwhile, in the third one, the participants strongly disagreed that they felt uneasy and lacked confidence when speaking in English. This is a finding of great interest that the respondents wanted to talk with foreigners in English eagerly and at the same time did not desire to be fluent and accurate, necessarily. This could be one of the interview questions to provide possible reasons or explanations for the seemingly inconsistent responses of participants.

4.1.2. Qualitative Data

The results of this study draw primarily from the quantitative data from the questionnaire, yet since there are apparently certain inconsistencies in the questionnaire results, interviews were conducted to cross-validate the responses and illuminate the results.

All the 15 students who were interviewed agreed that it is very important for them to learn English. But most of them stated that although they just wish to be able to speak in English, what is more important to them at this time is the ability to read and comprehend English papers. That is, the ability to speak fluent in English is of less significance to them. Based on the interviewees' responses, the most

frequently mentioned reasons for learning English are the following 1) English is an international language; 2) it plays a major role in getting a decent job and also in advancing in a job, and 3) English is spoken by almost all tourists even those whose native language is not English, so to communicate with almost all the foreign visitors, one needs an effective command in English. The two experts in Figure 1 and 2 can exemplify the issue.

Interviewer: What is your opinion about learning English language?   Interviewee 12: I like English because it is the international language and if you know English, everybody respects you.   Interviewer: Why do you think English is important?   Interviewee 14: Because English is the most commonly spoken language in the world and if you know English you will have no problem in communicating with foreign visitors. It is the best, the most useful, and the easiest language in the world.

Figure 1. Interview Excerpt 1 in Response to RQ1

A noticeable reason was mentioned by one of the interviewees which was in line with the results obtained from the questionnaire.

Interviewer: What do you think about learning English?   Interviewee 7: Because at graduate levels, all the professors require us to read the most recent research articles and this is not possible without an effective reading knowledge of English as state of the art knowledge mostly comes from the West published in English journals. That is, if you know English, you will certainly succeed in getting access to such articles, and you will have no problem understanding them.

Figure 2. Interview Excerpt 2 in Response to RQ1

In brief, most of the interviewees argued that knowing English can enhance the opportunities for them to get a better job and even if they have a good job,their position in that job is not good, and they can improve their status just by knowing English. Needless to say, a majority of them had something in common: English is an international language and it is the most frequently spoken foreign language in the world. Since there seemed to be some inconsistency between some items in the questionnaire which were related to the attitude of learners toward Persian language, the interviewees were asked about their attitude toward an Iranian speaking in English. As it could be understood the interviewers

had a negative attitude toward the accent and pronunciation of Persian individual while speaking in English. Two examples of the case are presented in Figure 3.

Interviewee 1: I usually can't stand listening to an Iranian individual speak in English because as far as I have be involved typically, Iranians hardly master the English language, especially in terms of the oral skills. I think accent and pronunciation are the most important aspects of a foreign language and if a person doesn't learn them accurately, they are likely to be mocked by others.

Interviewee 2: If I speak with an American individual, I can both understand them very well, and I can also make sure that they understand what I have to say. But understanding people from other countries is very difficult and because they are not native speakers of English they cannot convey their message well and worse they sometimes misunderstand you. Generally, I think people should learn authentic English in order to avoid misinterpretation.

Figure 3. Interview Excerpt 3 in Response to RQ1

The interviewees also made use of English in different occasions such as watching English language movies, listening to English language songs, and more importantly reading English articles which were related to their majors. What is noticeable here is that only one of the interviewees stated that he used English to communicate with foreign people and the others mostly stated that they used it to enhance their knowledge in their major and keep themselves up-to-date.

In summary, with regard to the first section of the questionnaire and the aforementioned interview results, it can be concluded that students in general have a positive attitude toward English language. It was shared by almost all the participants that English is instrumental and helpful in their career advancement and facilitates trans-national communication. The participants were mindful of different accents and varieties of English, but they argued that it is very difficult to understand the minor ones. They, then, suggested that it is better for all learners to try to sound like native speakers of English at countries like the USA and the UK so as to prevent misunderstandings. In general it is safe to assume that the participating MA students hold a positive attitude toward English language.

4.2. Research Question II

The second part of the instrument (see Appendix B) seeks to answer the second research question. The findings presented are based on questionnaire and interview data, respectively.

4.2.1. Quantitative Data

To clarify, those items which include the term, "should", are the policies which currently do not exist in the Iranian educational system, but they are included in the questionnaire to investigate if they need to be regarded as policies in the view of the participants.

There are 18 items in this section for which the percentage of the respondents' opinions are calculated individually. As can be seen, in the first item, the respondents completely strongly agree (%100) that all Iranian students need to learn English. This indicates that the Iranian educational policy makers should be aware of the need of the students to the proficiency in English from the early stages of public education. Item 23 supported this claim with 100 percent degree of unanimous agreement. Among the 30 participants of this study, 21 of them strongly agreed that Iranian university students should use English in both spoken and written communications with one another. It is a noteworthy result to see that the participants also disagreed to the statement that English should not be a mandatory subject in the Nationwide University Admission Examination in Iran. This reveals that the participants are aware of the value of English as a substantially important foreign language.

The enthusiasm of the participants to learn English is reflected in item 25 that they would study English on their own even if it were not a compulsory subject at schools. The responses to item 26 demonstrate that the participants are unmotivated to learn another foreign language if they have mastered English.

Responses to items 27, 28 and 29 indicate that what the Iranian students are enthusiastic to learn is written English and not spoken English necessarily, and while most of them do not like their professors to hold classes entirely in English, most of these participants prefer classes both in English and Persian. The participants, however, who were all majoring in non-English fields, did not agree at all to conduct Math, Psychology, etc, classes in English. Again this was not in line with this statement that students' social science and mathematics textbooks should be written in English. Only two participants strongly disagreed with this statement while 13 respondents strongly agreed with it. This can be another support to item 27 in which the students were more willing to learn written rather than spoken skills in English.

The results of item 32 which directly measures attitudes toward the English education policy in Iran shows that 63 percent of them are just slightly satisfied with the English education policies. When interviewed, these students stated that it is a good policy which English Language Institutes are allowed to teach in English but what these institutions are suffering from is the lack of observation from the government side to control the quality of books, environment, teachers who teach there, etc. Though these participants were satisfied with the English education policies, they were not satisfied with the university English education curriculum in Iran. A total of 73 percent of them strongly disagreed and disagreed with the university English education curriculum in Iran.

One more thing which most of the respondents (%96) disagree with is the English learning textbooks used in our schools. They all agree that the quality of these books along with the teaching methods is not appropriate and some changes should be made to make them more suitable for the Iranian context. This request of theirs has been supported by Lewis (1981 as cited in Baker, 1992). He argued that the attitudes of the target group for whom a textbook is designed should be taken into special consideration in any language policy and planning. Therefore, what these students are unanimous in doing is the change which can alter the quality of these books and subsequently an improvement which can be seen in students' English learning.

Regarding the best dialect for Iranian learners of English to learn, 93 percent of the students strongly agreed with the American English but only 7 percent of them agreed with the British English. This should also be taken into consideration in employing teachers and textbooks by those who are in charge of education. With regard to native or non-native teachers, 9 of the participants slightly disagreed with native English teachers and 8 of them slightly agreed with having native English teachers in their classes.

4.2.2. Qualitative Data

In the interviews with the students, almost all the respondents blamed the unsuitable English policies for their ineffective command of English. They argued that the textbooks, the teachers, and the learning environment when they were at high school were not suitable and that's why they are presently having problems with English. The interview results were also consistent with the questionnaire results in that the participants slightly agreed with the English education policies and strongly disagreed with the English language education curriculum in Iran, as the attitude is, for instance, reflected in the following interview excerpt (see Figure 4):

> Interviewee1: Nowadays the policies are great because the government allows managers of English Language Institutes to employ teachers who are qualified based on their criteria to teach there and this is a very good policy because most of the time just good teachers are employed, of course, regardless of nepotism.

Figure 4. Interview Excerpt 4 in Response to RQ2

To contextualize the questionnaire results more, the interviewers were also asked why they disagreed with the English education curriculum in Iran. The responses of two of the interviewees presented in Figure 5 were more noticeable than the others. In short, the participants are satisfied with the English policies but not with the education curriculum in Iran.

> Interviewee 4: I can divide English learners into three groups: first, those who learn it to get high scores in exams; second, those who learn it to get a decent job; and third, those who learn it because they like it. I don't think there are too many people who learn English because they like it and this is all because of the wrong education curriculum which motivates students from the very beginning to be like that. And this is going to be terrible if the people in charge do not take this into consideration and change it.
>
> Interviewee 15: insufficient time is dedicated to the English lesson neither in schools nor in universities, so students can hardly be expected to be able to learn English. Also it is extraordinary if a person is satisfied with this curriculum. I strongly disagree with it.

Figure 5. Interview Excerpt 5 in Response to RQ2

Some interviewees talked about good English teachers and to clarify what he meant by this. They were asked about their opinions regarding a good English teacher (see Figure 6 for example).

> Interviewee 4: I prefer Iranian teachers over native ones because we do share the same culture, so I know what to do and what not to do. Gender is not important for me at all. What is more important is the teachers' English proficiency, behavior, and their kind of personality. Personally, I like those teachers who are knowledgeable, have good behavior, and always try to motivate students to cooperate with each other.

Figure 6. Interview Excerpt 6 in Response to RQ2

In general, the Iranian master's students hold a negative attitude toward the English education policies.

4.3 Research Question III

The last section of the questionnaire (see Appendix C) seeks to address the third research question using the findings based on both the questionnaire and interview data, respectively.

4.3.1 Quantitative Data

This section includes nine items. They are the most common reasons for which Iranian university students attempt to learn English. The analysis of the quantitative data revealed that while nearly %97 of the participants agreed that knowing English is more useful than the knowledge of any other foreign language in Iran, the same percentage of the participants disagreed with the importance of English in the contemporary society in Iran. Having interviewed the participants, it was found out that the interviewees interpreted the word "society" differently. Most of them (%97) considered it as just "Iran", while only few (%3) had considered it as "the whole world". The interviewees believed that English is not very important in Iran. The results also indicated that the participants did not want to learn English to catch up with economic and technological developments in the world.

The most noticeable item was item 42 in which all the participants unanimously admitted that they had reprioritized their purposes for learning English after starting university from obtaining a good rank in the University Admission Examination to learning it to the right sense of the word and for functional purposes. This could be further supported by item 43 in which 97 percent of participants disagreed with learning English to obtain a university degree. But this claim was rejected in the next item in which 23 participants agreed that their purpose to learn English is to get a decent job.

The results of the questionnaire also showed that 29 participants of this study disagreed with this statement that their purpose to learn English is to travel abroad to be familiar with English-speaking culture. Since most of the participants' parents were illiterate, they disagreed with this statement that their parents believe that learning English is important, and that can influence the participants' motivation to learn English.

In the end, even though 97 percent of the participants disagreed that their purpose to learn English is not to obtain a university degree, the purpose of %53 of them to pass TOEFL is to have a higher academic degree. This is indicative of the fact that Iranian university students consider learning English in contrary with holding a TOEFL degree.

4.3.2 Qualitative Data

To let the participants mention their own purpose for learning English, three questions were also proposed by the researcher to be answered by the interviewees. Most of their responses were similar to the 9 items discussed above. Though all of them argued that the purpose to learn English should be acquiring real communication skills, most of them agreed upon getting a degree like TOEFL and a good job subsequently.

It was interesting that no one liked to learn English because of being familiar with the culture of English-speaking countries. Some of them stated that they want to learn English because they hope to go to foreign countries once in the future. An example illustrates the point below (see Figure 7).

Interviewee 5: To travel abroad. Though I know it is impossible for me to go abroad, I hope once I can go to one of the English-speaking countries. If it is the USA, it'll be much better.

Figure 7. Interview Excerpt 7 in Response to RQ3

When the interviewees were asked how they would use English in the future, they believed that it would be necessary for them to know English because they would need it for PhD admission interviews and if they were not accepted to a PhD program, they would have nothing to do. So they needed English to get a graduate degree (PhD) but this was not consistent with what is written in item 43 of the questionnaire; %97 disagreed with learning English to obtain a university degree. Two more reasons in this regard were: 1.Getting access to the most up-to-date knowledge which comes from the Western countries; and 2. Pushing their career forward through putting "Excellent knowledge of English" on their resume.

With regard to the interviewees' parents' beliefs, it is interesting to say that the interview results were consistent with the questionnaire results in that most of them argued that because their parents were not educated they do not exactly know the importance of English and do not have any ideas about it.

In brief, Iranian university students, in higher education, are fully aware of the importance of English for the current situation and in the future. They have some goals such as getting admission to a PhD program and a good job subsequently but it should be mentioned that these goals are too short-term and it is highly recommended that Iranian learners set more long-term goals such as acquiring communication goals. In general, the MA students hold a positive attitude toward the purposes for which Iranian university students learn English.

5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The present case study brought insight into the positive attitude of a qualitative sample of Iranian graduate students toward English language. This case study indicated the participants' attitude helped facilitate learning English better. However, it was also indicated that there were some problems which could influence the speed and efficiency of their learning process. These students were not satisfied with the English education policies in Iran and believed that some of these policies should be improved. Private English language schools, unlike state-run high schools affiliated with the Ministry of Education, employ teachers who are adequately qualified based on academic criteria and examination, without nepotism and that is what the students believed to be the effective factor in helping them learn English in private language schools. In contrast, the lack of success at public schools relate to poorly selected and unqualified teachers who simply have an undergraduate degree. In addition, since no effective, on-going in-service training services are provided, the teachers are burnt out and demotivated after a few years of service, yet continue to teach for thirty years to retire. To top it off, the textbooks and the teaching aids do not provide any more promising help to the teaching process.

Although these students preferred having Iranian teachers over native teachers of English- that is they had a positive attitude toward Iranian teachers- they did not have the positive attitude toward an Iranian speaking in English to another Iranian. What can be understood from this argument is that they like Iranian teachers to be their teachers simply because they can talk with them in Persian, or they may mean those teachers whose English accent is native-like and is familiar with Iranian culture as well. If the latter is the case, it is very promising and can be also taken into consideration by those in charge of education through employing teachers who meet these criteria.

In a brief, the results of this study showed that Iranian higher education students, in general, have a positive attitude toward the English language, although simply having a positive attitude toward English does not guarantee students' success in learning English and other crucial factors such as the English education policies toward which the participants of this study had a negative attitude are also pivotal in their success. Among other factors for the EFL learning success are teachers who are employed both in state schools and universities and private language institutes, textbooks, learning environments, curriculum and assessment, and many more should be taken into account to boost the opportunities for learners to learn English.

As one of the limitations, construct validity from a quantitative perspective was not established in this study, as exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was not run on the data to extract the underlying factors to empirically justify grouping of the items as manifestation of underlying constructs (i.e., latent variables) by the relevant items (i.e., observable variables). Factor analysis, however, was not used since the sample was not adequately large enough. In addition to the statistical procedures and formulas for precisely determining the sample size for EFA, as a rule of thumb, the sample size should approximately equal to ten times the number of variables under analysis, and a sample of such size (nearly 400 participants) due to practical reasons and the qualitative design of the current research was not feasible to be employed. Nonetheless, it is recommended to other researchers to use a larger sample size and benefit from exploratory factor analysis for categorization.

This qualitative, case study needs to be supplemented by other studies in the context of Iran. The prospective supplementary studies could be more useful if they improved on the limitations and delimitations of this preliminary research by using larger samples based on probability sampling for more extensive generalizability, and could benefit exploratory factor analysis to establish construct validity and probably structural equation modeling procedure to achieve external validity and generalizability. Prospective qualitative research, on the other hand, could benefit inter-subjectivity for interpreting the data and triangulation of multiple samples and data collection procedures for further credibility and warrantability of the findings.

References

Baker, C. (1992). *Attitudes and language*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Chen, J. F., Warden, C. A., & Chang, H. T. (2005). Motivators that do not motivate: The case of Chinese EFL learners and the influence of culture on motivation. *TESOL Quarterly, 39*(4), 609-633.

Choi, J. K. (2003). Language attitudes and the future of bilingualism: The case of Paraguay. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 6*(2), 81-94.

Finch, A. (2008). An attitudinal profile of EFL learners in Korea. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching, 5*(2), 206-219.

Friedrich, P. (2000). English in Brazil: Functions and attitudes. *World Englishes, 19*(2), 215-223.

Gajalakshmi, V. (2013). High School Students' Attitude toward Learning English Language. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications, 3*(9), 1-7.

Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology, 13*(4), 266-272.

Kachru, B. B. (1996). World Englishes: Agony and ecstasy. *Journal of Aesthetic Education, 30*(2), 135-155.

King, K. A. (2000). Language ideologies and heritage language education. *International Journal of bilingual education and bilingualism, 3*(3), 167-184.

Martínez, D. U., Pérez, J. G., & Fernández, M. D. (2013). Attitudes of Mexican American students toward learning English as a second language in a structured immersion program. *Portal Linguarum, 20*, 205-221.

Matsuda, A. (2000). Japanese attitudes toward English: A case study of high school students (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

Rajaee Nia M., & Abbaspour, E. (2012). Language attitudes of Iranian junior high school students toward the English language and its use in Iranian context. *Iranian EFL Journal, 9*, 234-245.

Sakui, K., & Gaies, S. J. (1999). Investigating Japanese learners' beliefs about language learning. *System, 27*(4), 473-492.

Snow, D. (2007). Sustaining self-directed language learning in the Chinese context. In J. Liu (Ed.), *English language teaching in China: New approaches, perspectives and standards* (pp. 211-230). London: Continuum.

Soleimani, H., & Hanafi, S. (2013). Iranian medical students' attitudes toward English Language Learning. *International Research Journal of Applied and Basic Sciences, 4*(12), 3816-3823.

Sonda, N. (2011). Japanese college students' attitudes toward English as an international language: A structural equation modeling analysis. In A. Stewart (Ed.), *JALT2010 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 358-377). Tokyo: JALT

Yihong, G., Yuan, Z., Ying, C., & Yan, Z. (2007). Relationship between English learning motivation types and self-identity changes among Chinese students. *TESOL Quarterly, 41*(1), 133-155.

Young, C., & Yee, M. (2006). Macao students' attitudes toward English: a post-1999 survey. *World Englishes, 25*(3-4), 479-490.

Yu, Y. (2010). *Attitudes of learners toward English: A case of Chinese college students* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ohio State University Columbus, Ohio.

Zainol Abidin, M. J., Pour-Mohammadi, M., & Alzwari, H. (2012). EFL students' attitudes towards learning English language: The case of Libyan secondary school students. *Asian social science, 8*(2), 119-134.

Appendix A

Table 1
Attitude of Iranian MA Students toward English Language in General (in Percentage)

	Attitude Items	SD	D	SLD	SLA	A	SA
1	English is an international language.	.0	.0	.0	.0	10.0	90.0
2	English is the language used most widely in the world.	.0	.0	.0	3.3	30.0	67.0
3	Knowing English is important in understanding people from other countries.	.0	.0	.0	6.6	43.3	50.0
4	If I have a chance, I would like to travel to English-speaking countries, like the US or the UK.	10.0	13.3	30.0	13.3	13.3	20.0
5	I do not like learning English.	83.3	16.6	.0	.0	.0	.0
6	It is a good thing to have English as the most frequently used foreign language in Iran.	10.0	13.3	26.6	16.6	10.0	23.3
7	If I use English, I will be praised and approved of by my family, relatives, and friends.	.0	.0	3.3	10.0	40.0	46.6
8	English is the quality feature of an educated person.	.0	.0	3.3	.0	20.0	76.6
9	When using English, I do not feel that I am Iranian any more.	70.0	26.6	.0	3.3	.0	.0
10	If I use English, my status is raised.	.0	.0	3.3	.0	20.0	76.6
11	If I use English, it means that I am not patriotic.	.0	.0	.0	.0	43.3	56.6
12	I feel uneasy when hearing an Iranian speaking English.	.0	.0	6.6	6.6	16.6	70.0
13	I want to learn English rather than French.	.0	.0	.0	.0	26.6	73.3
14	I love to speak with foreigners in English.	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
15	I wish that I could speak fluent and accurate English.	6.6	13.3	6.6	30.0	33.3	10.0
16	I feel uneasy and lack confidence when speaking English.	56.6	36.6	.0	3.3	3.3	.0
17	I like watching English speaking movies.	16.6	13.3	3.3	23.3	26.6	16.6
18	I feel uncomfortable when hearing an Iranian speak in English.	.0	.0	3.3	6.6	26.6	63.3
19	When I speak in English, I want to sound like a native speaker.	6.6	3.3	20.0	26.6	13.3	30.0
20	The command of English is very helpful in understanding foreigners and their cultures.	.0	.0	23.3	36.6	20.0	20.0

Appendix B

Table 2

Attitude of Iranian MA Students toward English Language Education Policies in Iran (in Percentage)

Attitude Items		SD	D	SLD	SLA	A	SA
21	All Iranian students should learn English.	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.
22	Iranian university students should use English in spoken and written communication among each other.	3.3	.0	.0	.0	30.0	70.0
23	Teaching English as a foreign language should start from elementary school in Iran.	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.
24	English should not be a mandatory subject in the Nation-wide University Admission Examination in Iran.	23.3	30.0	20.0	13.3	10.0	3.3
25	I would not take English if it were not a mandatory subject in school.	70.0	10.0	6.6	10.0	3.3	.0
26	I don't need to learn any other languages after I master English.	0.	6.6	.0	.0	.0	93.3
27	Speaking and listening skills are more important than literacy skills in undergraduate education.	30.0	16.6	20.0	.0	3.3	30.0
28	English classes at university should be entirely taught in English.	60.0	6.6	13.3	6.6	10.0	3.3
29	English classes at university should be taught in English and Persian together.	10.0	10.0	16.6	13.3	26.6	23.3
30	In addition to English classes, other classes at university such as Math should also be conducted in English.	30.0	30.0	10.0	30.0	.0	.0
31	My social science and mathematics textbooks should be written in English.	6.6	3.3	3.3	20.0	23.3	43.3
32	In general, I am satisfied with the English education policy in Iran.	3.3	3.3	10.0	63.3	16.6	3.3
33	In general, I am satisfied with the pedagogy of English Language in Iranian at university level.	43.3	30.0	20.0	6.6	.0	.0
34	I am satisfied with the EFL textbooks used at high schools.	70.0	23.3	3.3	3.3	.0	.0
35	I am satisfied with the EFL methods used at high schools.	63.3	20.0	10.0	.0	.0	6.6
36	American English is the best dialect for Iranian EFL learners.	6.6	.0	.0	.0	.0	93.3
37	British English is the best dialect for Iranian EFL learners.	93.3	.0	.0	.0	.0	6.6
38	I prefer native speakers rather than non-native speakers as my English language teachers.	16.6	3.3	30.0	26.6	10.0	13.3

Appendix C

Table 3
Attitude of Iranian MA Students toward Purposes for Learning English (in Percentage)

	Attitude Items	SD	D	SLD	SLA	A	SA
39	In Iran, knowledge of English is more useful than knowledge of any other foreign languages.	3.3	.0	.0	20.0	33.3	43.3
40	Learning English is important for me, because English is a very useful tool in the modern society.	60.0	23.3	13.3	.0	.0	3.3
41	I learn English to catch up with economic and technological developments in the world.	23.3	30.0	16.6	20.0	3.3	6.6
42	Before university, my main purpose for learning English was to obtain a high score in the Nation-wide University Admission Examination.	.0	.0	.0	.0	.0	100.0
43	An important purpose for me to learn English is to obtain a university degree.	20.0	76.6	.0	.0	.0	3.3
44	An important purpose for me to learn English is to get a decent job.	3.3	6.6	13.3	23.3	26.6	26.6
46	I learn English so that I can go abroad to experience English-speaking cultures.	80.0	16.6	.0	.0	.0	3.3
47	My parents believe that learning English is important.	23.3	10.0	53.3	.0	6.6	6.6
48	An important purpose for me to score high on TOEFL is to have a higher academic degree.	16.6	20.0	6.6	3.3	10.0	43.3