English Language Teaching Problems in the Nomadic Society in Iran

Aliasghar Ahmadishokouh[1]; Naser Janani[2]; Fatemeh Samadi[3]

[1]Assistant Professor in TEFL, CASU, Tehran, Iran

[2]Ph.D. in TEFL, Foreign Languages Faculty, Shahid Sattari, Iran

[2]Aeronautical University of Science and Technology, Tehran, Iran

[3]Department of TEFL, Payame Noor University, Tehran, Iran

Email: ahmadishokouhtmu@gmail.com; naser.janani@gmail.com; samadi.f@student.pnu.ac.ir

Abstract

Education occupies the center stage in human life. Therefore, the importance of education has been adequately documented in the literature. In spite of the important role played by nomadic society in Iran, this society seems to be a neglected part of this Islamic country. When it comes to teaching English the problem becomes severe. Therefore, this study was carried out to highlight the burning issues ahead of English language teaching in the nomadic society in Iran. In order to go to the roots of problems in teaching and learning English in nomadic schools, researchers interviewed some English teachers and stakeholders in the nomadic educational center in Lorestan. Moreover, to find the possible differences between nomadic and non-nomadic students in terms of learning English as a foreign language, a total number of 75 nomadic students and 80 non-nomadic students participated in this study. Independent sample t-test was used to find the differences between the mean scores of two groups of students. The results of the study showed that the main obstacles in the way of English language learning in nomads are: formal school, Curriculum, student related problems, teachers-related problems, learning facilities and technological equipment, under norm problem and multimethod-multilevel classes.

Keywords: *Nomadic Society; Nomadic Education; English Language Teaching; Rural Area*

1.Introduction

Opportunities in children's lives are strongly influenced by the quality of their education. Education is the acquisition of data, various life skills, and values in order to become a better person. It brings positive changes to human life, and enhances the knowledge, skill, and intelligence of a person and enables him to lead a successful life. The best education systems are those that mix equity with quality. Equity in education means that personal or social features like gender, ethnic origin or family or personal history and background are not obstacles to achieving academic potential, and individuals reach a

minimum of a basic level of skills. In these education systems, the overwhelming majority of learners have the chance to gain high level skills, despite their own personal and socio-economic circumstances (OECD, 2012).

For more than two decades, education scholars have been warning about the improbability of transformational reform in educational systems and curricula without taking the element of classroom situation and local culture into consideration (Pennycook, 2000).

The ideology of critical pedagogy, put forward by Paulo Freire, could be an appropriate model for transformational reform in education, because critical pedagogy makes education a tool for equality, and gives voice to the voiceless and removes the unfair distance between central and marginalized people (Akbari, 2008). With specific reference to nomads, the goal of empowerment — through education— seems particularly appropriate, given that almost in every country where they are found, they are minorities suffering problems of under-representation, social, economic and geographic marginalization, incorporation by hegemonic groups.

Nomadic society includes tens of millions of people, mainly in Africa, the Middle East, and south, south-west and central Asia. They include some of the poorest and most vulnerable of all southern populations. Reaching them with formal schooling has become a major challenge, and millions of nomadic children remain outside the education system (Krätli, 2001). This will continue until more effective ways are found to bridge the gap between what formal education systems now try to teach and what pastoral children need and want to know.

In spite of the important role played by nomadic society in Iran, this society seems to be a neglected part of this Islamic country, at least in educational point of view. When it comes to teaching English for nomadic students in Iran, the problem becomes severe. Because, on one hand, although, English Language Teaching (ELT), in its most widespread form, takes place in educational settings, but it is surprising to note that little thought has been given to the relationship between language teaching and the study of education (Stern, 1983, in Johnston, 2003). Likewise, Pennycook (2000) observes that second language education is 'strangely isolated' from educational theory and suggests that, language is both the content and the medium of the L2 classroom, language teaching theory has tended to look in on itself and become overly concerned with the inner workings of language and language learning at the expense of other issues.

On the other hand, as Akbari (2008) puts it, the educational system in Iran- including English language teaching- is not emancipatory. Which means in such a system, the needs of the students are overlooked. The centralized system of education determines the materials, teaching method and evaluation procedures to be applied across the country, without considering the vast social, political, cultural and economic differences existing between different areas. With this in mind, this study is an attempt to highlight the burning issues which both English teachers and students in nomadic schools are faced with. Moreover, this study tries to find some solutions and provide the stakeholders in education with some practical ways to overcome such a problem. Therefore, in order to carry out this study the following research questions were formulated:

1-What are the problems of English language teaching in the nomadic society in Iran?
2- Is there any significant difference between nomadic and non-nomadic students in terms of learning English as a foreign language?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Nomads Education

Nomads are members of teams of individuals who do not have any fastened home and move consistent with the seasons from place to position in search of food, water, and grazing lands. Most nomadic groups follow a fixed annual or seasonal pattern of movements and settlements. (Kratli, 2001).

The literature on nomads and education is relatively scarce, disparate and inaccessible. The studies on individual countries or even regions are usually no more than a sparse handful of secondary sources, different in nature and relevance, distant in time from one another and focusing on different areas (Krätli & Dyer, 2009).

As Liégeois (2009) says, history shows that nomads were seen as marginalized, outside the social norm, living an outmoded life. The desire to regulate these nomads an ethnocentric belief in social evolution led to the effort to assimilate them into the majority population. He also goes on to say that education and social work were viewed as the perfect vectors for this assimilation. Because moving from place to position was thought of an obstacle to schooling, the political project was to settle the nomads for the 'good' of their youngsters.

Abbasi (2008) believes that although education is an effective instrument to achieve a consistent development in a society, many nomadic and tribal communities are agitated for the same opportunities of education. Ogundele (2008) noted that education is an essential and fundamental way for having conscientious community and dutiful community members. As Ojuekaiye (2014) noted excluded zones and marginalized communities of a society as nomadic groups have the lower chance to enjoy the same formal educational opportunities.

NCNE, The National Council for Nomadic Education, concerns for Nigerian nomads' educations and observes various strategies for migrants' education. NCNE's goals stands in the same counterpart with the U.S. policy for children's education which concerns the idea of No Child Left Behind. In the U.S., NCLB, 2001 authorized a meticulous, stringent policy for young learners' education and with the official aim of enhancing learners' accomplishments (Corson 1999; Harper & Platt 2007; Menken 2008). Regarding the used language in schools, NCLB plays a meaningful role and sheds the light on its implications (Moore 2007; Byrnes 2005). Many other scholars have noted the importance of NCLB and its guidelines on instruction and assessment frameworks (Abedi 2004; Crawford 2004; Byrnes 2005; Evans and Hornberger 2005; Wright 2006; Menken 2006; Harper et al. 2007).

According to the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD, 2008) large number of Afghanistan population are not living in municipal areas, however nomads and tribal population are not calculated in this country. Based on MRRD announcement the literacy level of the both sexes of nomadic community are exceedingly low. Many other averting factors of nomadic children's literacy are e.g. poverty (tuition and expenses), child-labor (opportunity cost), however the main factor is their life style itself (Kratli, 2001).

The term Education for All (EFA) is not accessible unless except by affording and preparing a situation in which nomads' children can face and benefit from the education (Dyer 2012).

In a complete generic term, nomads are those members and citizens of the society that move and live in different parts of a country. Iran's nomadic groups are named Bakhtiyari, Torkaman, Kord, Lor, Ghashghaei, Afshar, and Shahsavan which respectively are in Khozestan, Ease coast of Caspian Sea, Eastern zones of Iran, Lorestan, Fars, Kerman, and Azarbayejan.

Trying to conform with the nature and earning the chance of living was a part of tribal life, this claim is easily accessible by doing a historical research about Iranian nomadic and tribal life (Ghaziani, 1997).

Many years ago, literacy and education was not accepted in today's sense, but it was consider as gaining the ability of reading and writing. The person who had the knowledge of reading and writing were called *Mirza* or *Mullah* and such people were asked to teach young learners (Sohrabi, 1994 in Amanellahi Baharvand, 2004).

This system was moved toward evolution by emersion of Educational System; and teachers of the nomadic communities were asked to be more educated and to be familiar with fans and modes of instructing by entering to the first Nomadic College which is founded in 1336 (Amanellahi Baharvand, 1991).

There are many different criteria in the nomadic education success; namely: camps of training, training accommodations and facilities, funds, motivating nomadic teachers, using ethnic teachers. Moreover, teachers should be trained and guided and informed about how they can meet the nomadic education needs otherwise unqualified instructors should be fired (Zamiri, 2001).

According to Zamiri (2001) nomadic education problems can be ramified as the following:

1. Fragmentation problems such as differences in accents, financial conditions, commuting problems and difficulties with make nomads convince to study.
2. Tribal culture, traditions, and their lifestyle is exclusively differing from micro planning and macro planning of the Educational System.
3. Most of the national funds and investments would donate to urban areas based on the better performance of the urban citizens.
4. The uniformity of the curricula for all Iranian tribes and nomads is neither wise nor feasible.
5. Problems with religious and tribes' beliefs.
6. Lack of attention toward macro and micro educational planning and lack of facilities in tribal schools.

2.2. Nomadic Education in Iran

As Amanelahi Baharvand (2004), puts it during the past millennia economic, social and cultural changes have influenced both the rural and urban modes of living in Iran, that's why Iran has witnessed the three basic forms of living, which are nomadic, rural and urban. Moreover, some scholars believe that the nomadic lifestyle has undergone less powerful changes, in a way that they have even been deprived from full usage of the recent achievements of the modern age (Akbari & Mizban, 2004).

According to Iran's Center of Statistics, moving nomads are said to be those communities that hold a minimum of these three characteristics: social group structure, reliance on animal farming and shepherding as the key element of lifestyle (Bahmanbeigi, 2005). To put it in another way, moving nomads are those groups of people that thanks to their specific means of living ought to have associate itinerary within the summer and winter every year and blood relations form their social relations.

As Sohrabi (1994) reports on the worth of acquisition among the mobile tribes in his "Education among the Iranian Nomads", acquisition has created no distinction in their social and economic structure, has brought no progress in removing injustice and financial condition dominating the community and will not improve the established order. In fact, literacy has had no impact on employment and social status, and that has lessened motivation to achieve literacy. Sohrabi's account of the mobile tribes in older times still sounds true.

2.3. Primary and Secondary Education in Iran

According to the Iranian constitution, primary education is necessary for all Iranian children. Although primary, secondary and higher education is provided free, private schools and universities abound and have the government's permission to charge tuition fees. According to the latest statistics,

over 95% of Iranian children are now registered in primary and secondary schools which all are single-sex. The number of schools throughout Iran exceeds 150,000, i.e. accommodating over 14 million children who are currently receiving education. The estimations express that there are over two hundred thousand teachers within the education system (Iran Ministry of Education, 2007).

School education in Iran consists of 5 cycles. In each grade examinations determine the qualifications of students to pass to the next grade. National examinations are administered at the end of grade three of the secondary school and also at the end of pre-university cycle. Students receive their first official educational degree (called Diploma) at the end of their secondary school cycle.

2.4. ELT in Iran

A cursory look at the units of English courses offered in educational system demonstrates the fact that learning English is one of the most important goals pursued by both government and the students. English as a second language is introduced from the first grade of secondary school (for children aged 12). Due to the shortage of facilities, classes are usually over-populated and as a result any group work is nearly impossible.

As Farhady and Hedayati (2009) put it, English as a foreign language is formally taught to Iranian students from the first year of guidance school for three years, three years during the guidance school, and for another year during the pre-university level (generally three hours a week). The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing the curriculum, a top-down and product-oriented one which is revisited and revised occasionally based on the reports prepared by different "educational groups" at various organizational levels (Eslami and Fatahi, 2008). They believe that all of the decisions made by the central government are implemented through provincial organizations at lower levels which have less authority in decision-making. All major educational policies concerning the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system and so on, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

The lack of a coherent body of research on the evaluation of second language programs, alongside with an obsession with outdated theories of language teaching and learning has made the teaching of second languages in the public sector nearly a failure. Thus, a comprehensive investigation of the current state of affairs in language education seems to be the prerequisite if any long term and permanent improvement in the quality of language education is desired.

As it is said before, nomads suffer lots of problems in education, and when it comes to learning English, the problems become severe. So in this study the researchers tried to shed lights on some difficulties in the way of English language teaching in nomadic society in Iran.

3. Method

This study was conducted in two phases namely qualitative and quantitative phases. In order to go to the roots of problems in teaching and learning English in nomadic schools, the researchers used the qualitative approach. To do so, some English teachers and stakeholders in the nomadic educational center in Lorestan were interviewed. Moreover, to find the possible differences between nomadic and rural students in terms of learning English as the foreign language the quantitative approach was employed. To this end a total number of 55 nomadic students and 60 rural students were selected using cluster sampling participating in this study. They were learning English at high school level as a part of national curriculum. They were both males and females. Their scores from provincial English test was taken as the point of investigation.

4. Results

RQ1: What are the main problems of English language teaching in the nomadic society in Iran?

To answer this research question, 5 English teachers, 4 school directors and 4 course programmers were interviewed. Based on their ideas the following main problems could be listed:

1-Formal Education

It seems that formal education systems are designed for sedentary people in well-connected and densely populated areas. But, there are some technical problems ahead of formal education in the nomadic society in Iran. Among them are; mobility, sparse population, harsh environmental conditions and remoteness, which make the formal education difficult for nomads.

2- School Year

The time table of education programs and schools for nomads are not adapted to their particular environment. The school calendar is dictated from the above, and it is not flexible to the pattern of nomadic life. For example, some holidays are to be taken when children are needed most to help their families.

3- Teachers

First of all, English language teachers in the nomadic society are not well trained, and the management and supervision of officials are not effective either. Moreover, teachers from urban centers are not familiar with the nomadic context, and, therefore, are not willing to work among nomads. Furthermore, teachers who are teaching in the nomadic society are not given special and suitable training for the nomadic environment. It is therefore very difficult to place quality staff in schools accessible to nomads.

4-Curriculum

The contents of the English language curriculum are generally considered inappropriate for the children of nomads. The books are published for urban schools and the nomadic life and problem and their voice is not considered in the English course books. So they cannot easily connect to the books published for language teaching.

5-Student Related Problems

In comparison with urban society, nomad children do not see any joy in learning English, so that they are not motivated in learning.

6-Learning Facilities and Technological Equipment

Technological facilities for language teaching and learning are built in towns or major villages that served settled communities only, and nomads do not have access to these facilities such as computer and internet to make use of these resources for language learning.

7-"Under Norm Problem" and Multimethod-Multilevel Classes

All the interviewees agreed that "Norm", by their definition is a serious problem. Norm with this new concept is "the least number of the students for a class is 5". When this norm is flouted then the students in different levels of education should be mixed together to maintain the norm. And this happens for almost all classes in nomadic society. And this is the starting point and the main reason for multilevel classes.

When it comes to language teaching this multi-level classes get a new name, "Multimethod-multilevel classes". As the methods for teaching English as a foreign language in Iran is theoretically

different for different grades, e.g. the first grade in guidance school follows Grammar Translation Method, the second and the third grades try to implement Communicative Language Teaching.

RQ2: Is there any significant difference between nomadic and non-nomadic students in terms of learning English as the foreign language?

The null hypothesis for this research question was that; there is no significant difference between nomadic and non-nomadic students in terms of learning English as the foreign language. To answer the research question and test the hypothesis the researchers made use of the descriptive statistics.

The descriptive statistics of leaners' scores for two groups, presented in Table 1, revealed that the mean scores for the two groups are different. The mean score for the nomad students is 41.36, and that of the rural students is 65.20. which means that the mean scores of nomad students is less than the mean scores of rural students. However, in order to check whether the observed difference could reach statistical significance, the results of the main table of the T-test (Table 2) were reported.

Table 1. Group Statistics

	students	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	nomad	55	41.36	13.48	1.81
	rural	60	65.20	11.78	1.52

Table 2. T-test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
		F	Sig.				
score	Equal variances assumed	2.77	.098	-10.11	113	.001	-23.83
	Equal variances not assumed			-10.05	107.726	.001	-23.83

As it could be shown in the Table 2, the mean scores of the two groups significantly differed from each other (**t= -10.13, df=113, p=.001(p<.05)**). So, the null hypothesis is strongly rejected. Therefore, we are in a safe ground to argue that there is a significant difference between nomad and rural students in terms of the scores received from the provincial test.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study was an attempt to touch upon some basic problems for English language teaching in the nomadic society in Iran. The main problems in this way were listed in the result section. As it was mentioned earlier, urban and rural English students outperformed the nomadic language learners, which is a further emphasis on the problems of English language learning in Iranian nomadic society.

The rest of this section is devoted to some possible solutions for the above mentioned problems:

1-What we need is an effective educational system for nomads, which recognizes their educational needs and culture and truly intends to solve problems that create many challenges for English language teaching in and management of nomadic classes.

2-It is quite necessary to adjust the nomadic children's curriculum to their lifestyle. Educational system in Iran should provide an opportunity to develop a curriculum related to nomadic communities' lifestyle with which the children are familiar. The curriculum development system in Iran should dispense with the centralized educational system and supply some contents specially tailored to the nomadic lifestyle, and take into consideration the differences between urban, rural and nomadic settings.

3-In addition, adopting a flexible timetable for nomadic schools is necessary. In winter and summer, nomads usually migrate to areas which provide grass and water resources for their herd. Regarding this unique lifestyle feature, it seems that the existing curriculum is hardly compatible with the nomadic lifestyle and slows down the learning pace of nomadic students.

4-The time spent by students inside the class should be also shortened. Nomadic parents need their children to assist them in animal rearing, so some of them do not send their children to school, even though they value the children's education.

5-Since teachers from urban centers are not willing to work among nomads, and even if they are willing to do so, they should be given special and suitable training for the nomadic environment, so it is better to recruit nomadic teachers from nomadic society.

6- The new advances in technology made it possible for the nomadic society to be benefited from the advantages of incorporating technology in the process of learning in general and language learning in particular. Therefore, those who are involved in educational decision making should help to bring the technology to the service of learning in nomadic society. Mainly, as these days cell phones could be found in nomadic societies, educational stakeholders must be familiar with the facilities provided by *Mobile Assisted Language Learning*, and help the nomadic students to make use of it as a great resource for learning everything mostly language learning. In this way, it is possible for the nomadic educational policy makers to get rid of the "norm" problem.

7-Today information communication technology (ICT) providers do not provide the nomadic society with using internet and social networks. But, by improving the infrastructures, it is again possible for the nomads to get the benefits of social networks in learning. So, it is deeply recommended that educational stakeholders provide the budget for building ICT infrastructures so that the nomadic students can use it as a great resource for learning.

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