Teaching spoken English in Iran's private language schools: issues and options

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Abstract

Purpose – Mastery of spoken English is a priority for many learners of English in Iran. Opportunities to acquire spoken English through the public school system are very limited, hence many students enroll in "conversation" courses in private institutes. The purpose of this paper is to report a study of how institute teachers address the teaching of spoken English.

Design/methodology/approach – Eighty-nine teachers completed a questionnaire on how they teach spoken English. The information was supplemented with interviews and classroom observation.

Findings – Results suggest that institute courses reflect a poor understanding of the nature of spoken interaction, which is reflected in speaking courses that are unfocused and that do not address key aspects of conversational interaction.

Practical implications – Suggestions are given for a re-examination of the differences between "conversation" and "discussion" in spoken English classes as the basis for designing spoken English classes and materials, as well as for the use of out-of-class learning opportunities to enhance the learning of spoken English in Iran and elsewhere.

Originality/value – This paper is based on the authors' original research, and the authors believe this is the first study of its kind in the Iranian context.

Keywords English teaching, Curriculum English, Spoken English, Training speaking teachers, Teaching speaking, English in Iran

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The ability to use English for spoken communication is one of the main reasons many people around the world study English, and like people in other countries, Iranian learners often evaluate their success in language learning, as well as the effectiveness of their English course, on the basis of how well they feel they have improved in their spoken-language proficiency. The role of English as an international language means that more and more people today find that fluency in spoken English is a necessity for social purposes, for travel, for work, for business or for education. The way spoken English is used in these different situations is both varied and complex, and the ability to function well in one situation (e.g. buying things in a store) does not necessarily transfer to other situations (e.g. taking part in casual conversation). However, in language classrooms, the teaching of speaking skills has often misrepresented the nature of spoken English and spoken interaction, and, as a result, speaking classes are most often little more than unfocussed discussion sessions, with little real teaching of

what oral proficiency in spoken English entails. This paper explores issues involved in teaching English in the Iranian context, and offers suggestion to improve approaches to the teaching of spoken English. By so doing, the authors suggest that in Iran, "spoken English" is generally identified with only one aspect of spoken English, namely, "discussion skills". However the nature of discussion skills themselves has been poorly articulated and understood, resulting in generations of teachers who have little understanding either of what "speaking" consists or what "discussion skills" and "conversation" are, whether they need to be taught, and, if so, how they can be taught. The first issue to be resolved therefore is to determine what aspects of spoken English learners most need to master, whether it be small talk, casual conversation, telephone conversations, transactions, discussions, interviews, meetings, presentations or debates. Iranian professionals whose work takes them abroad, for example, will have very different needs for spoken English from learners who want to learn spoken English for purposes of tourism and travel or for arranging business transactions in English. The Common European Framework of Reference identifies very different learning outcomes for different genres of spoken interaction such as these.

2. Learning English in Iran

As in other countries where English has the status of a foreign language, the demand for learning English has greatly increased in Iran in recent years, as the importance of English has been acknowledged both at the national as well as the individual level. This is seen in the growth of the private language institute industry. In Urmia (the capital city of West Azerbaijan province), for example, there are more than 50 private language schools offering English courses at various levels and for various age groups (Sadeghi and Richards, 2015). Learners attend English classes for a variety of reasons. For some younger learners, it may be merely to follow the trend and they may have no immediate practical need for spoken English. However, it represents a valued "idea" for them, and as their parents pay for the costs involved, they need not take it too seriously. A different group of learners in the private sector are those who have a practical need for proficiency in English. University students, for example, may take English classes to better prepare them for their university examinations or to prepare themselves for MA or PhD entrance examinations. Some working adults may take English classes primarily to obtain a certificate of attendance, which can then be used for promotion purposes at work. Their motivation to master a high level of proficiency in English may be relatively low due to work and family commitments as well as the fact that they may have had little contact with English since high school and may find it difficult to move beyond the false-beginner level.

A third group of learners are those with a real desire to learn spoken English. Members of this group include learners who may hope to work abroad or to live in an English-speaking country as well those who have a strong personal interest in speaking English. Others may be studying English to prepare them for international tests such as IELTS and TOEFL or simply to improve their spoken English or their general level of proficiency in English.

3. Opportunities to learn English

In an ideal world, learners aiming to develop their proficiency in spoken English would take part in activities that systematically develop their understanding and use of spoken

English, as it is used for both transactional and interactional purposes. To do so, their courses and course materials would provide opportunities to develop and practice a variety of different kinds of oral skills. Teachers teaching spoken English classes would have a sound knowledge of the nature of communicative competence and the use of communicative classroom activities, and learners would be motivated to practice their spoken English skills both inside and outside of the classroom. In Iran, however, a number of factors mitigate against the successful teaching of spoken English. These include issues related to the curriculum and materials for teaching English, teacher competence as well as the limitations of classroom-based learning.

Opportunities to learn English in Iran are provided in both the state educational system as well as in the private sector. In the official curriculum of public education, English is listed as one of the required courses for middle and high school levels (www.talif.sch.ir). Students in middle and high schools take between two and four hours of English each week. The current "revised" syllabus used in public education aims to move beyond a focus on reading skills and to develop basic English proficiency; however, the course materials at middle school primarily address alphabet recognition, pronunciation and limited vocabulary development, while those used at high school continue to focus on reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary development, with little emphasis on writing beyond de-contextualized sentence practice. Listening is almost absent in the syllabus, and speaking is limited to a few drills (mainly intended to practice grammar) and short dialogues to introduce language functions. Consequently, after six years of English instruction, unless students have taken additional courses in a private institute, they normally have minimal communication skills in English. It is not an exaggeration to claim that an Iranian student who graduates from high school (and who has not attended any courses outside the formal education system) is hardly able to introduce himself or herself in English or to express or understand more than a few simple sentences, despite having studied English at school for at least six years (Ettelaat Daily, 2011; Dorshomal *et al.*, 2013). Discussing the problems of teaching English at Iranian state schools in her *Ettelaat Daily* report, the author (Zahra Bagheri Shad) rightly claims that the output of the Ministry of Education is so weak in foreign (English) language education that a graduating student can hardly write a short letter. One of the author's firsthand experience teaching at such schools attests to the reality that almost no written/oral proficiency is gained by school students towards the end of their formal school education unless they take English lessons outside the school system, which is increasingly the case nowadays.

To develop practical skills in English, many young people take courses in private institutes. Textbooks used in institutes are often locally printed and are unauthorized versions of popular international courses such as Headway or Interchange [what Zandian (2015, p. 113) calls "pirated American ELT textbooks"]. In addition to studying English at institutes, some parents employ private tutors to teach their children at home. However, the complaint that one often hears from students attending courses in private institutes is that while they expect to learn English (i.e. to learn how to "speak" English, as Mirhosseini and Khodakarami (2015) claim), they are mainly taught grammar and vocabulary and take part in activities that do not develop their spoken English skills. Razmjoo and Riazi's (2006) study with 17 classes in five institutes in Shiraz, for example, indicated that only less than 14 per cent of average English conversation classroom time was spent on speaking, and the rest of the time was devoted to other skills and sub-skills,

including reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar and so on. Indeed, as Mirhosseini and Khodakarami (2015) highlight, private language directors believe that they are preparing their clients for English communication, without having a clear understanding of what communication in English means.

Most classes in institutes are held in traditional classrooms where seats are arranged in a linear format with students sitting back-to-face, with the teacher's desk in a front corner. When the number of students is fewer than 10, seats are often circular or rectangular (meeting-like). Almost all classes are equipped with a whiteboard; most have TV and video/CD-player facilities; a very limited number of institutes have access to computers, the Internet, intelligent whiteboards and language laboratories. (Language labs are generally found in universities or institutes of higher education offering English programmes). In small cities, language schools use chalk boards and a portable CD player.

The teachers who teach "speaking" classes have typically received little training in what proficiency in spoken English entails and in how to teach an effective spoken English course. Students often report that in such classes, they receive similar kinds of lessons to those encountered in high school, and many move from one institute to another to find courses that will improve their spoken English. At most, they might be placed in a "free discussion class", the characteristics of which are similar to those described by House (2012, p. 198):

> What thus often happens in secondary and tertiary education contexts is the incidental, non-explicit teaching of oral skills, for instance, in so-called conversation classes. These classes are often organized in a series of discussion groups with the structure of the course being determined by the topics which are handled in turn. These are generally matters of moment, taken from newspapers, magazines, and other sources, and it is hoped that the input materials will somehow generate interest and "engagement", thus stimulating good [discussions]. This model […] is of limited effectiveness in terms of improving oral skills.

The following is a segment of a longer speaking class we observed in a language institute and is typical of the approach to "speaking" that House refers to. The class consisted of 12 male students aged 14-16. The teacher started by drawing an "idea-map" on the board. She drew a circle in the middle of the board and asked students to suggest topics for discussion. Eventually the topic of "interests" was elicited and the teacher provided prompts such as "I'm into […]", "I'm interested in […]" and "I really like […]". The extract below is an example of the interaction between the teacher and the students:

T: What are the things and activities you like the best in your life?

S1: Different sports.

S2: I Like music.

S3: Music and sports are my favourites.

T: Which sports are interesting?

S4: Football is perfect because it is exciting.

S5: Basketball because it needs different skills.

T: What's your idea about science?

S5: I hate science because it's tiresome.

S6: Science can help us to get a job and make money.

S7: We can make money by other ways, for example painting.

S8: But painting is hard to learn but science is not.

T: Ok, so you think science is good as a profession. But what about science as a hobby (e.g. reading scientific news or surfing the net for new discoveries in science).

S9: I prefer to read about other things such celebrities.

S10: Sometime it's good to read scientific news.

S11: I like to read about science when there are a lot of pictures about it.

As House observes, it is difficult to see how activities of this kind can lead to improvement in oral skills. Indeed they do little more than develop vocabulary.

4. The English teaching profession
English teachers in Iran can be categorized into four groups depending on the nature of their duties:

(1) those teaching at state schools;

(2) those teaching at private institutes (also known as language centres);

(3) those teaching at universities and other institutes of higher education; and

(4) those teaching privately.

Many university and school teachers also teach private English classes; however, there are a sizable number of teachers who work only in institutes or privately.

4.1 Teachers in state schools
Teachers in the state school system are employed by the Ministry of Education and teach general English at middle and high schools. Most of these teachers hold BA (and increasingly MA) degrees in TEFL/ELT from Teacher Training universities in Iran. In their English lessons, they follow a set syllabus and teach from the prescribed Ministry textbook and almost all teaching is conducted in Persian with English as the "object" of study. In the current syllabus, there is a focus on reading comprehension and grammar, with little attention paid to spoken communication skills. (The new revised syllabus gives more emphasis to meaning-oriented communication; Sadeghi and Richards, 2015). As the teachers are generally products of the same school system, their own spoken English is generally minimal. The level of motivation is quite low among both teachers and students and student achievement is often unsatisfactory. Learning English at school level is synonymous with memorizing lists of vocabulary items and grammar rules to be able to pass final-term examinations (which include elements such as spelling, reading, word definition and grammar). Speaking is largely absent both in teaching and testing, and the English teacher's role is largely limited to leading students through the textbook materials, conducting repetition and substitution drills and occasional dialogue practice at best. According to Leather and Motallebzadeh (2015), although the authors of the new English books for junior high school claim their programme as being "a revolutionary process" where there is a shift from traditional to communicative approaches to teaching, the focus of teaching and learning is still on reading, grammar and vocabulary.

4.2 Teachers in private institutes
The situation at private institutes is very different and the kind of classes a teacher teaches depends on the level and age group he or she is teaching. Most language teachers regardless of the level at which they teach follow a set syllabus adopted by the language centre (which usually varies from one institute to another), typically an integrated multi-skilled syllabus, with the core methodology being Communicative Language Teaching and the major textbooks being *American File, Top Notch* and *New Interchange* (Leather and Motallebzadeh, 2015). At lower proficiency levels, the emphasis is primarily on vocabulary and pronunciation, with reading, writing and grammar receiving greater emphasis at intermediate levels and speaking at advanced levels. At each level, skills are integrated – the curriculum does not include courses addressing a specific skill such as speaking or writing. The closest one gets to a speaking class would be a course focusing on "free discussion". Some students, however, may request a private course addressing specific needs they may have related to spoken or written English.

English teachers in language centres are mainly contract teachers paid on an hourly basis, often have a good and sometimes an excellent command of spoken English and are normally better qualified than teachers working in schools. At more prestigious centres, English teachers are MA holders or PhD students in TEFL (some with PhD degrees) and many may have lived or studied in an English-speaking country. Teachers in this group are generally young (less than 35 years old) and motivated and their students are more highly motivated than those studying English at school. At the best institutes, there is strong competition for teaching positions and procedures for selecting teachers are rigorous, including examinations, interviews and demonstration lessons. However, unlike in the state school system, there is no job security in the private sector, so teacher performance plays an important role. Teachers are supervised and they are required to meet certain standards for promotion purposes or for contract renewal. However, in some institutes, supervisors lack the professional knowledge required to provide adequate leadership, as this institute teacher comments:

> Most of the institutes have supervisors who do not have any language teaching knowledge and don't know anything in this regard. I once asked one of these supervisors "Which one is better: holistic or analytic?" and he even didn't know what these terms were. He had not studied English at all and after studying for several semesters at the language school, he had been promoted to the position of a supervisor [...]. The supervisors are also main role players in placement and most often they place students in the wrong level.

Hence a supervisor in a private language school may have a degree in English literature but have no education in second language acquisition or language teaching methods and pedagogy.

4.3 Teachers in universities
University English teachers usually hold a PhD in an English-related subject and teach general English courses, ESP courses as well as English-related subjects in English departments. Most general English teachers are contractual teachers (MA holders or PhD students); ESP teachers are usually subject-matter teachers or academic staff members who are also competent in English; and English-related subjects are mainly taught by permanent faculty members of the English department. The language of instruction in both general English as well as ESP courses is usually Persian with

substantial use of translation, as the aim is to enable students to read and understand material related to their university major (Farhady *et al.*, 2010). There is little or no spoken English component in these courses. This differs from English courses in ELT or English Literature departments, which are taught exclusively in English; however, in these departments, the only course students can take that has a speaking component is generally the "English Conversation" course, also known as "Listening and Speaking" or "Language Lab".

4.4 Private English teachers
Private language teachers are often teachers who also work at institutes but less commonly at universities. There are also many English teachers who only teach privately. Their clients often have specific needs, such as preparation for an examination, an overseas trip or a work assignment. Private teachers are usually young and highly motivated and can charge relatively high rates for their services.

Common to all of the teachers above is a very limited understanding of the nature of spoken English, as depending on where they teach, it is generally assumed if a person has some kind of relevant qualification, and in the case of institute teachers, evidence of their ability to speak English, little more is generally expected. Their primary resource is generally the coursebook they use in their classes, which may have been the same book they studied as a student. Their training would not normally have included an awareness that what we understand by "speaking skills" covers a wide range of different genres of discourse, including small talk, casual conversations, telephone conversations, transactions, discussions, interviews, meetings, presentations and debates. They would be unlikely to recognize that each genre has distinct features and characteristics and that each poses quite different issues for teaching and learning. In spoken English classes in Iran, as in many other countries as the quote from House above illustrates, even if the topic of the course is "conversation", the focus is not on conversation as a distinct genre of spoken interaction but rather than on unstructured question and answer exchanges prompted by a topic chosen by the teacher.

5. A survey of Iranian teachers of spoken English
To provide a clearer picture of how spoken English is taught in Iran's private language schools and the problems teachers typically report in teaching English, we conducted a small survey of teachers of English in private institutes in Urmia, interviewed a sample of the teachers and observed a number of "conversation" classes. We now turn to the information obtained from this investigation.

5.1 The questionnaire survey
The major aim of this study was to explore the nature of speaking classes in Iran's private English institutes. The researchers were interested to find out what resources English teachers used to teach a typical spoken English lesson, what challenges they faced in teaching speaking and what kind of assistance they thought they needed to better prepare them for such classes. For this purpose, we chose Urmia (in North-West Iran), where, like many other capital cities in Iran, there is a huge interest among the young generation in learning English and where there is a flourishing private ELT industry (Sadeghi and Richards, 2015). Our assistants, who were either MA or PhD students in TEFL, visited several institutes and administered the questionnaires in-person to interested teachers.

Overall, 89 teachers, aged 19-39, agreed to complete the questionnaire on their teaching experience as well as challenges they faced teaching spoken English. In addition to a cover letter, the questionnaire was made up of four parts and included 64 items intended to elicit information on teachers' background, the speaking course they offered and the challenges they faced in teaching spoken English as well as their suggestions for future workshops they wished to have on the teaching of speaking. The questionnaire was developed by the researchers themselves for the purpose of this study and was piloted on a small group of teachers. Then, input from informal conversations with the teachers who took the pilot questionnaire was used to further refine the final questionnaire (which appears in the Appendix AI). The reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be 0.937, using Cronbach alpha.

The data elicited through the questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistics. Table I presents information on the teachers' background.

From the information provided by the teachers above, we can see that they reflect a range of teaching experience, qualifications and professional knowledge. Some appear to have had other career goals in mind and have qualifications in un-related fields – perhaps reflecting the uncertain job market in Iran in some professions and the marketability of English language skills in the private language industry. Many have heavy teaching loads typical of teachers in private institutes, which leaves them with little or no time to spend on updating their knowledge base or attending professional training courses. Almost half of the teachers are student teachers working part-time. In Iran, while students (MA and PhD) are admitted to universities as full-time students, they rarely study on a full-time basis and almost all have to work part-time, both to gain experience and to support their studies, a situation which adversely affects both their studies and their teaching.

5.2 Teachers' use of resources
The teachers described the resources they use, as presented in Table II.

As noted earlier, textbooks are the teachers' primary teaching resources. Most international textbook series are accompanied with video and audio resources and these are likely to be those the teachers refer to. Computer-based materials are less often used, perhaps because most institutes have not invested significantly in technology due to its high cost, nor trained teachers in the use of computers and other technology. Indeed in the institutes where such technology exists, it often plays a more decorative than a teaching role.

5.3 Typical classroom activities in a speaking class
The activities speaking teachers reported they used in their classes are summarized in Table III.

These figures reflect, on the one hand, the predominance of dialogues, role-plays, pair and group work in the international textbooks widely used in private institutes in Iran. On the other hand, such books do not typically contain drills of the kind found in the older generation of audio-lingual materials, so it is possible that the high frequency of drills reported by the respondents suggests that many teachers often revert to an audio-lingual drill-based mode of teaching in their spoken English classes. This observation may also be due to the nature of speaking classes taught in one of the

Item	Option (%)
My present situation	
Full-time teacher	38.8
Part-time teacher	48.3
Student teacher	14.9
My ELT qualifications	
BA	37.3
BA student	6.0
MA	34.9
MA student	34.9
PhD student	3.6
My non-ELT qualifications	
Microbiology	12.5
Mechanical engineering	12.5
Electrical engineering	12.5
Civil engineering	12.5
Veterinary medicine	12.5
English literature	12.5
Architectural engineering	12.5
Mining	12.5
My teaching experience in years	
0-5	42.0
5-10	38.3
10-15	12.3
15-20	4.9
20+	2.5
My weekly teaching load (hours)	
0-15	32.6
15-30	50.6
30-45	11.2
45-60	1.1
60+	4.5
Number of hours/credit units on ELT methodology during my university education	
None	8.3
1-2 credit units	11.1
3-5 units	34.7
6-9 units	18.1
More than 10	27.8
Number of hours I spend weekly reading professional literature	
None	32.2
1-2	31.0
3-5	26.4
6-9	3.4
10+	14.0
16+	23.4

Table I.
Characteristics of the participants taking part in the survey

institutes providing many of the teachers who participated in this study – where speaking activities are largely drill-based.

5.4 Typical problems in teaching spoken English
The teachers also rated the difficulties they face in teaching spoken English. Table IV represents the 17 most challenging problems (out of a total of 42 items on the questionnaire) for at least 40 per cent of the teachers (based on the sum of ratings given for the categories of "challenging enough", "very challenging" and "extremely challenging") listed in a decreasing order of challenge.

The problems Iranian teachers report above are probably typical of teachers in similar situations elsewhere (Safari and Rashidi, 2015) and reflect the difficulty of teaching mixed-level classes, developing both accuracy and fluency, finding suitable topics and encouraging learners to speak up in class. "Speaking" here is identified with "discussion skills" rather than with other aspects of speaking referred to earlier. On the other hand, a few items were rated by teachers as not posing a challenge in their speaking classes. The ten items mentioned in Table V were found to be the least challenging for at least 60 per cent of the respondents, taking the sum score of the categories of "not at all challenging" and "a little challenging" as the criterion.

5.5 Interviews
A follow-up group interview was carried out with five of the teachers (conducted in Persian) to obtain further information on the problems they encountered in their speaking classes. The primary issues that emerged in the group discussion are summarized as follows:

- difficulty in finding suitable topics;
- students have little to say about topics and lack relevant background knowledge (e.g. on topics such as globalization);

Teaching resources	Never	Not often	(%) Sometimes	Often	
Textbook	0	0	10.1	89.9	**Table II.**
Videos	13.5	28.1	40.4	16.9	Teaching resources
Audio material	5.6	3.4	28.1	62.9	used by speaking
Computer	47.2	18.0	15.7	13.5	teachers

Typical classroom activities	Never	Not often	(%) Sometimes	Often	
Dialogues	0	1.1	16.9	80.9	
Drills	1.1	11.2	20.2	67.4	
Pronunciation work	1.1	14.6	39.3	44.9	**Table III.**
Role plays	3.4	7.9	31.5	57.3	Typical classroom
Pair work	0	4.5	24.7	70.8	activities used by
Group work	3.4	20.2	32.6	41.6	speaking teachers

Typical problems I face in teaching a speaking class	Not at all challenging	A little challenging	Challenging enough (%)	Very challenging	Extremely challenging	SUM
1 Developing fluency in speaking	10.1	24.7	38.2	20.2	4.5	(62.9)
2 Dealing with mixed proficiency levels	6.7	30.3	24.7	27	10.1	(61.8)
3 Motivating students to speak out	14.6	25.8	29.2	16.9	10.1	(56.2)
4 Providing interesting practice activities	19.1	23.6	40.4	12.4	3.4	(56.2)
5 Encouraging weaker students	6.7	36	29.2	21.3	5.6	(56.1)
6 Developing accuracy in speaking	9	31.5	27	20.2	6.7	(53.9)
7 Dealing with lack of background/topical knowledge	13.5	28.1	22.5	21.3	10.1	(53.9)
8 Teaching speaking to a large class	18	29.2	34.8	13.5	4.5	(52.8)
9 Using sensitive topics for speaking	18	24.7	31.5	14.6	5.6	(51.7)
10 Lack of ideas on certain topics	19.1	27	32.6	11.2	7.9	(51.7)
11 Teaching beginning student	22.5	22.5	18	23.6	9	(50.6)
12 Lack of student interest in learning	10.1	37.1	23.6	20.2	6.7	(50.5)
13 Teaching appropriate use of forms	19.3	34.1	29.5	12.5	1.1	(43.1)
14 Finding engaging speaking activities	20.2	38.2	27	13.5	1.1	(41.6)
15 Maintaining use of English during the lesson	19.1	40.4	31.5	9	0	(40.5)
16 Teaching idioms	19.1	37.1	20.2	12.4	7.9	(40.5)
17 Using technology to teach speaking	21.3	31.5	22.5	11.2	6.7	(40.2)

Table IV.
Typical problems
Iranian teachers face
in teaching a
speaking class

Typical problems I face in teaching a speaking class	Not at all challenging	A little challenging	Valid (%) Challenging enough	Very challenging	Extremely challenging	SUM
1 Using drills	55.1	29.2	5.6	5.6	1.2	(84.3)
2 Using pair activities	47.2	31.5	12.4	6.7	0	(78.9)
3 Lack of teacher interest in teaching	40.2	36	13.5	5.5	2.2	(76.2)
4 Using dialogues	48.3	27	16.9	4.5	1.1	(75.3)
5 Using a course book to teach speaking	32.6	41.6	14.5	5.6	2.3	(74.2)
6 Managing classroom discipline	30.3	41.6	20.2	4.5	1.1	(71.9)
7 Establishing a friendly atmosphere	46.1	23.6	18	5.6	4.5	(69.7)
8 Using group activities	32.1	35.7	22.6	8.3	1.2	(67.8)
9 Finding appropriate homework	33.7	30.3	25.8	9	1.1	(64)
10 Focusing on new vocabulary	38.2	24.7	22.5	5.6	4.5	(62.9)

Table V.
Least challenging
issues for Iranian
teachers in speaking
classes

- students are too shy to speak in front of their peers;
- students are afraid of making mistakes;
- students have insufficient vocabulary to express ideas;
- students are not talkative in the *L1*; and
- the difficulties of speaking in a mixed-level class.

A comparison of ideas coming out of the interview with survey results indicates that the challenges for interview participants are almost the same as those identified by respondents to the questionnaire: *Difficulty in finding suitable topics* was ranked as the 14th most challenging problem in survey data; *mixed ability level classes* came 2nd; and *lack of background knowledge* and *topical ideas* ranked 7 and 10, respectively, in the questionnaire results. While interview data highlight learners' affective factors such as *being shy* or a*fraid of making mistakes* and *not being talkative in L1* as challenges for teaching speaking, these challenges do not surface in survey data probably because no item existed for them in the questionnaire to be ranked by students.

In addition to sharing their experience of challenges of teaching a speaking class, the interviewees also described a variety of strategies they used to encourage students to speak, such as by giving students a coloured card whenever they initiated a discussion. At the end of the lesson, students could see who had accumulated the greatest number of cards. One teacher gave an example of the cultural inappropriacy of some topics in international coursebooks:

> The topic was about animals and the general question was "What are the advantages and disadvantages of having a pet?" Since nobody in the class has a pet as we don't have this in our culture, most students didn't have anything to contribute.

6. Reconsidering the problem of teaching spoken English in Iran
The problems Iranian learners of English have in learning English have often been raised at conferences and seminars in Iran and are generally attributed to obvious and well-documented factors such as the limited time available for English instruction in schools, issues related to the curriculum, tests, teaching resources, teacher competence, teacher and learner motivation as well as to lack of opportunities to use English outside of the classroom (Abbasi *et al.*, 2009; Behroozi and Amoozegar, 2014; Fariadian *et al.*, 2014; Tabatabaei and Pourakbari, 2012). For instance, Behroozi and Amoozegar's survey study with 180 EFL teachers coming from 150 schools indicated that English teachers' low proficiency in English, lack of technological resources at schools and insufficient teaching time are some of the factors responsible for the ineffective English education system in Iran.

Indeed, most research in this area has concentrated on problems of English teachers or learners in teaching/learning English (focusing on all its component skills/subskills), with little attention paid to teaching or learning "spoken" English. Furthermore, almost all studies in this regard have been devoted to challenges of learning/teaching English in the state education system. This study fills these two gaps by highlighting the spoken component of English (which for many learners is the most important skill to be developed), on the one hand, and by addressing how private language schools (regarded as more effective deliverers of English) have failed to deliver proper "speaking" lessons, on the other. We have little to add to the copious amount that has already been expressed

about the issues related to English at state schools, but would like to take the discussion in a different direction by considering two issues that we consider central in addressing the teaching of spoken English in Iran. One has to do with what we understand by "spoken English", and the other deals with opportunities to extend learning beyond the classroom.

7. Conversation and discussion compared
7.1 Conversation
Many learners identify "spoken English" with the ability to use English for conversation; yet, in language institutes, "spoken English" is largely identified with "discussion". But how do these speech genres differ? If we were to compare them, we would find a number of important differences. One of the most important aspects of conversation is managing the flow of conversation around topics. Conversation involves a joint interaction around topics and the introduction of new topics that are linked through each speaker's contributions. The skills involved include (adapted from Goh and Burns, 2012, p. 180):

- initiating a topic in casual and formal conversation;
- selecting vocabulary appropriate to the topic;
- giving appropriate feedback responses;
- providing relevant evaluative comments through back-channelling;
- taking turns at appropriate points in the conversation;
- asking for clarification and repetition;
- using discourse strategies for repairing misunderstanding;
- using discourse strategies to open and close conversations; and
- using appropriate intonation and stress patterns to express meaning intelligibly.

Learners need a wide range of topics at their disposal to manage the flow of conversation, and managing interaction and developing topic fluency is a priority in speaking classes. Initially, learners may depend on familiar topics to get by. However, they also need practice in introducing new topics into conversation to move beyond this stage. Casual conversation between friends or people who know each other well has these characteristics (Pridham, 2001, p. 64):

- topics switch freely;
- topics are often provoked by what speakers are doing, by objects in their presence or by some association with what has just been said;
- there does not appear to be a clearly defined purpose for the conversation;
- all speakers can introduce topics, and no one speaker appears to dominate the conversation;
- speakers comment on each other's statements;
- topics are only elaborated on briefly, after follow-up questions or comments from listeners;
- comments in response to a topic often include some evaluation;
- responses can be very short;

- ellipsis is common;
- the speaker's cooperation is often shown through speaker support and repetition of each other's vocabulary; and
- vocabulary typical of informal conversation will be present, such as clichés, vague language and, sometimes, taboo language.

Conversation also requires the use of a number of specific skills (Wajasath, 2005):

- *It requires being a good listener*: This can be indicated through the use of back-channel signals such as "well", "I see" and "really".
- *It involves asking questions*: Conversation develops through the participants asking questions and following through on the answers they get with further questions.
- *It involves sharing of information*: Participants are expected to share information they have that is relevant to the topic being discussed.

Ways of teaching conversation include:

- *Awareness-raising activities*: Students examine examples of conversation, either recorded (audio or video) or transcribed examples, and look for examples of how openings, topic introductions, back-channelling, etc., are realized, and for indicators of casual or formal speech.
- *Dialogue completion*: Students are given transcripts of conversations with selected features removed (such as openings, closings, clarification requests) and asked to try to complete them. They then listen to or read the completed dialogues, compare and practise.
- *Planning tasks*: Students are given topics to include in a conversation and asked to write dialogues that include them and that also include personal recounts. They then compare and practise.
- *Improvisations*: Students are given skeleton dialogues or dialogue frames (e.g. containing a sequence of topics or functions they should use in a conversation) and use them to improvise conversations

7.2 Discussion skills

Some learners may need English primarily for the purposes of managing discussions in English. This is an important skill for students using English in school and academic settings as well as for those using English for business communications. However, poorly planned discussion activities allow stronger students to dominate, are unfocused and do not provide for systematic feedback. Discussion and conversation, however, are very different modes of interaction. If discussion skills are to be taken seriously as an important component of a spoken English course, rather than as a filler-activity, their nature and features need to be addressed systematically.

A discussion is an interaction focusing on exchanging ideas about a topic and presenting points of view and opinions. Of course, people often "discuss" topics in casual conversation, such as the weather or recent experiences, but discussions of that kind are often merely "chit-chat" – a form of politeness and social interaction. They do not usually lead to "real" discussions where more serious topics of interest and importance

are talked about for an extended period, to arrive at a consensus about something, solve a problem or explore different sides of an issue. It is discussions of this kind that are the focus here, particularly those that take place in an educational or professional setting. Skills involved in taking part in discussions include:

- giving opinions;
- presenting a point of view;
- supporting a point of view;
- taking a turn;
- sustaining a turn;
- listening to others' opinions;
- agreeing and disagreeing with opinions; and
- summarizing a position.

Approaches to teaching discussion skills centre on addressing the following issues (Green *et al.*, 2002):

- *Choosing topics*: Topics may be chosen by students or assigned by the teacher. Both options offer different possibilities for student involvement.
- *Forming groups*: Small groups of four to five allow for more active participation, and care is needed to establish groups of compatible participants. For some tasks, roles may be assigned (e.g. group leader, note-taker, observer).
- *Preparing for discussions*: Before groups are assigned a task, it may be necessary to review background knowledge, assign information-gathering tasks (e.g. watching a video) and teach some of the specific ways students can present a viewpoint, interrupt, disagree politely, etc.
- *Giving guidelines*: The parameters for the discussion should be clear so that students are clear how long the discussion will last, what the expected outcomes are, roles of participants, expectations for student input and acceptable styles of interaction.
- *Evaluating discussions*: Both the teacher and the students can be involved in reflection on discussions. The teacher may want to focus on the amount and quality of input from participants and give suggestions for improvement. Some review of language used may be useful at this point. Students may comment on their own performance and difficulties they experienced and give suggestions for future discussions.

However, mastering discussion skills can be a challenge, particularly with more advanced-level learners. They can deal with the topic (they have something to say about it), they have an "opinion" and they can deal with the target language (they take pains to use appropriate lexical and syntactic rules), but when it comes to the interactional dimension of discussion, that is the ways by which speakers take note of and act upon their partner's discourse, they show a rather limited range of resources.

From the comments above, it should be clear that in planning courses in spoken English, a sound understanding of the nature of the different genres of spoken English is the required starting point. This is the domain of pedagogical content knowledge.

Without such a knowledge base, there is no foundation from which to develop relevant course objectives, choose activities and materials and prepare teachers in appropriate ways to teach specific genres of spoken English.

8. Learning spoken English beyond the classroom

In addition to the lack of the relevant pedagogical content, knowledge that is necessary to develop sound approaches to the teaching of spoken English, the limitations of classroom-based learning have often been cited in relation to teaching English in Iranian schools and classrooms. As noted earlier, these include unfavourable class-size, time limitations, inadequate teaching materials, the English teachers' limited English proficiency and a test-driven curriculum. The opportunities for learning or "affordances" available in the classroom are hence quite restricted, consisting of a restricted range of discourse and literary practices. However, despite limitations available in opportunities to learn English in the classroom in Iran, in our conversations with young Iranians, we often meet people who are fluent and expert users of English, despite the fact that they have never travelled abroad or had extended opportunities for interaction with native speakers of English. What accounts for their mastery of spoken English?

Common to every one of these individuals in our experience is four features that contribute to their successful learning of English:

(1) they have a strong motivation to learn English;

(2) they set learning goals and targets for themselves;

(3) they monitor their own progress and compare themselves with others; and

(4) they look for opportunities to learn English outside of the classroom.

It is this last issue that we want to explore further here.

Today, the Internet, technology and the media and the use of English in face-to-face as well as virtual social networks provide greater opportunities for meaningful and authentic language use than are available in the classroom. As Lankshear and Knobel (1997) and Jones and Hanfer (2011) point out, these learning opportunities are more likely to be interactive, social and multimodal. Learners can interact using English with people in almost every part of the world. They can download Apps that support many aspects of language learning and can use these while waiting for the bus or train or travelling to school. And when they get home, they may enter a chat room to interact with other language learners or with native speakers, they may enter game sites and play video games that require them to understand and use English or they may watch a TV programme or movie in English, following with subtitles if necessary.

Anecdotal evidence often confirms the power of such out-of-class learning. For example, it has been observed that young people in the northern European countries such as Finland and Denmark have good listening skills and are often quite fluent in English compared to their counterparts in countries such as Portugal and Italy (Richards, 2014; Nunan and Richards, 2015a, 2015b). The reason for this has been suggested to be that in the northern countries, English language movies on TV and cinemas are shown in their original language with subtitles, while in many other countries, they are dubbed, hence denying young people exposure to comprehensible input in English. Researchers are increasingly focusing on these new opportunities to

learn English beyond the classroom. These opportunities for out-of-class learning are fully described by Benson and Reinders (2011) and Nunan and Richards (2015a, 2015b) as well as in many other sources and include activities such as the following:

- participating in an on-line chat room in English;
- using the resources of a self-access centre;
- interviewing foreign visitors;
- a period of stay in an English village (a residential village-like setting in the learner's country in which all activities are conducted in English);
- playing on-line language-based digital games;
- keeping listening logs (monitoring out-of-class experiences that involve listening, such as listening to airport announcements);
- using on-line resources, such as Ted Talks;
- using social media (e.g. interacting via a blog with the teacher and other students and sharing reactions to an assigned reading or a video clip);
- e-mediated tandem learning (linking up through Skype or e-mail with a learner in another country;
- making a video documentary in English; and
- watching televisions series or movies in English.

Participating in an online chat room can, for example, be very motivating for a learner, whereby in addition to enjoying a genuine communication, he or she can unconsciously boost his speaking and listening skills. Similarly, interviewing foreign visitors can be a fulfilling exercise for learners who have always looked for opportunities to use their English in a real context. Using social media not only can entertain language learners by allowing them to keep in contact with friends and group-mates, but also will offer them ample practice opportunities either in writing (and reading) or in speaking (and listening). In like manner, other out-of-class activities listed above can help incidentally develop language skills while the focus is not on learning the language but on enjoying the activity.

The growth in affordance for out-of-class learning such as these provide many opportunities for learners to extend their learning beyond the classroom and offer many benefits for learners. For example, they allow for flexibility and convenience in learning so that learners can manage their place, mode and manner of learning; they provide a pleasurable and positive language use experience; they reflect learners' needs and interests; they reflect learners' out-of class activities; they allow for social interaction with others; and they help them recognize the role they can play in managing their own learning. However, they create challenges as well as opportunities for teachers and learners. New roles emerge for teachers, as learners become more actively involved in managing aspects of their own learning. A starting point is to recognize that language learning *can* occur in many contexts beyond the classroom. Teachers need to become familiar with the range of activities learners make use of and the potential such experiences have for making connections with classroom-based teaching. Teachers may also need to acquire the skills needed to guide their learners in effective ways of using out-of-class learning to support their in-class learning. Such activities often involve

careful preparation and follow-up on the part of the teacher, and in this way, the out-of-class activities serve as additional input to classroom-based teaching.

9. Conclusions

There are many aspects involved in the mastery of spoken English in the Iranian context. The classroom is the primary source of learning for many learners and doubtless much can be done to improve the quality of teaching and learning that is provided in Iranian classrooms. On the one hand, the language proficiency of teachers, their use of teaching resources as well as the techniques they use in teaching spoken English could surely all be improved through workshops and courses addressing these and other issues. However, a more fundamental issue first needs to be addressed and that has to do with the knowledge base teachers draw from in choosing materials and planning their lessons. If curriculum developers and teachers have a confused or inadequate understanding of the nature of spoken English and the different genres of spoken interaction, it is likely that they will similarly be confused regarding both the aims and means of teaching different genres of spoken language. Those responsible for training English teachers in universities and teacher training institutions need to replace outmoded and inadequate conceptions of spoken English with better-informed understandings of the pedagogical content knowledge they provide to teachers in training.

Both teacher trainers and teachers should be made aware of the distinctions between "discussion" and "conversation" skills discussed above. One major reason why the Iranian English institutes (and public education system) have failed in training "speakers" of the language is that the ability to develop speaking has been considered the same as developing skills such as giving opinions, presenting a point of view, supporting a point of view, taking a turn, sustaining a turn, listening to others' opinions, agreeing and disagreeing with opinions and summarizing a position, the skills which are mainly characterized with "discussion". To develop competence in "speaking" English, however, English teachers should instead focus on such skills as initiating a topic in casual and formal conversation, selecting vocabulary appropriate to the topic, giving appropriate feedback responses, providing relevant evaluative comments through back-channelling, taking turns at appropriate points in the conversation, asking for clarification and repetition, using discourse strategies for repairing misunderstanding, using discourse strategies to open and close conversations and using appropriate intonation and stress patterns to express meaning intelligibly, the skills which are associated with "conversation", what counts as real "speaking" for most learners.

At the same time, the role played by out-of-class learning in the development of spoken English needs to be acknowledged and better understood. Research in the use of out-of-class learning suggests that many out-of-class activities offer a wider range of affordances for language use and second language acquisition than are generally available in the classroom (Raghini, 2015; Beatty, 2015; Sasaki, 2015; Webb, 2015; Arnold and Fonseca-Mora, 2105). They can provide opportunities for learners to develop aspects of linguistic, communicative and pragmatic competence; to learn through interaction and negotiation of meaning; to have extended contact with English; to make use of multimodal sources of learning; and to develop skills of autonomous learning. For instance, television, which is the greatest source of first language input (Webb, 2015),

can play a significant role in developing pronunciation, vocabulary and listening comprehension in L2 learning. Likewise, social media can offer learners the opportunity of "going public" by expressing themselves authentically through online resources such as blogs and Facebook (Raghini, 2015). For individuals who are lucky enough to meet a native speaker of English in EFL contexts such as Iran, the enthusiasm to interact with such "sources of language", even as a short interaction, can boost their motivation to improve themselves for future encounters.

These new learning opportunities coupled with classroom methods that are informed by a better understanding of the nature of spoken interaction will better provide learners with learning experiences that are valid, authentic and relevant to their needs.

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Appendix I. The questionnaire

Dear teacher

We would like to invite you to participate in a research project that will help us better prepare teachers for the problems they face in the English classroom.

We would first of all like to thank you for your valuable participation in this study and for taking the time to answer the questions in this questionnaire.

Please note that your participation in this project is voluntary and that the information you provide will be kept confidential. The information provided by you will be used for research purposes only. We will be happy to share the findings with you.

In case you may have any questions concerning this project, please feel free to contact the on-site researcher (******) through email: *********

Thank you.

The researchers

Instructions

The questionnaire is made of four parts. Please read the questions/items carefully and then provide your answer in the space provided for the item or tick the right box. If you need more space, you can use the reverse side of the page to provide additional information. If you have problems in understanding a question, you may ask the contact researcher (Karim Sadeghi) for assistance. If you would like to take part in a possible follow-up interview, please provide your contact number and/or email address for further arrangements:

PART I: Background information

1. Number of months and years I have been teaching English: _____

2. Average number of hours I have been teaching English in a week: _____

3. My age: _____

4. My gender:
   Male ☐   Female ☐

5. My present situation:
   Full-time teacher ☐   Part-time teacher ☐   Student teacher ☐

6. My qualification:
   a. *University degree in TEFL/ELT:*
      BA ☐   MA ☐   PhD ☐
      BA student ☐   MA student ☐   PhD student ☐

   b. *University degree in a different field (please specify)* _____

   c. *Other qualifications:* _____

7. Number of hours/credit units I have had on ELT methodology during my university education:
   No course on ELT methodology ☐   1-2 credit units ☐
        3-5 credit units ☐   6-9 credit units ☐
   More than 10 credit units ☐

8. Number of hours I spend every week reading papers/books related to ELT methodology:
   None ☐   1-2 ☐   3-5 ☐   6-9 ☐   More than 10 ☐

9. Number of workshops/in-service training courses I have attended during the last one year:
   _____ hours

   The duration of the courses/workshops altogether: _____ hours

PART II: The speaking course

NOTE:
Please answer questions below with a speaking course (you are currently teaching or have recently taught) in mind. If the course covers other skills as well, only focus on the speaking part of it while doing the following parts.

1. Name of the course: _____

2. Level of the class:
   Basic ☐   Intermediate ☐   Advanced ☐   Mixed-level ☐

3. Goals of the course:
   _____

4. Number of the students in the class: _____

5. Their average age: _____

6. Gender of the students: Male ☐   Female ☐   Both ☐

7. Reasons they are taking this class:
   _____

8. Typical length of a lesson (e.g. 90 mins.): _____

9. Number of lessons per week: _____

10. Teaching resources I use (please tick one box):

	Teaching resources most often used	Often	Some times	Not often	Never
1	Textbook				
2	Videos				
3	Audio material				
4	Computer				
	Others: Please specify				

11. Typical classroom activities I use (please tick one box):

	Typical classroom activities	Often	Some times	Not often	Never
1	Dialogs				
2	Drills				
3	Pronunciation work				
4	Role plays				
5	Pair work				
6	Group work				
	Others: Please specify				

PART III: Typical problems I face in teaching a speaking class

The following table is a list of possible challenges teachers may face in a speaking class. Indicate to what extent each item poses a challenge for you in your speaking class by ticking the relevant box in front of it. At the bottom of the list, there is space for you to add other challenge/s you face in your speaking class (in case they do not appear in the list) and to indicate the extent of the challenge. If you would like to give additional explanation or comments on the items, feel free to add this in the 'Additional comments' section which follows the table.

	The challenge	Not at all challenging	A little challenging	Somewhat challenging	Very challenging	Extremely challenging
1	Teaching speaking to a large class					
2	Finding engaging topics					
3	Maintaining use of English during the lesson					
4	Providing interesting practice activities					
5	Encouraging weaker students					
6	Dealing with mixed proficiency levels					
7	Giving feedback on performance					
8	Finding engaging speaking activities					
9	Assessing student performance					
10	Finding suitable materials					
11	Finding appropriate homework					
12	Using a course book to teach speaking					
13	Holding free discussion classes					
14	Managing the class discipline					
15	Managing the time					
16	Using group activities					
17	Using pair activities					
18	Using dialogs					
19	Using drills					
20	Using communication activities					
21	Developing fluency in speaking					
22	Developing accuracy in speaking					
23	Teaching advanced students					
24	Teaching intermediate students					
25	Teaching beginning students					
26	Teaching idioms					
27	Teaching pronunciation					
28	Teaching grammar					
29	Focusing on new vocabulary					
30	Teaching politeness forms					
31	Using technology to teach speaking					
32	Using sensitive topics for speaking					
33	Stopping chatterboxes					
34	Motivating students to speak out					
35	Running out of time					
36	Dealing with student anxiety					
37	Teaching appropriate use of forms					
38	Dealing with lack of background/topical knowledge					
39	Establishing a friendly environment in the classroom					
40	Lack of student interest in learning					
41	Lack of teacher interest in teaching					
42	Lack of ideas on certain topics					
43						
44						
45						

Additional comments:

PART IV: Future study

If you had the chance to take a further course or workshop on teaching spoken English, what are some topics you think such a course should include?

1.

.
2.

3.

4.

5.

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