

# Effective Language Learning Programs for Iranian Managers

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This research tends to specify the characteristics of a suitable management English Language Training (ELT) program from the Iranian managers' point of view. The researchers conducted 11 semi-structured qualitative interviews with top managers of different organizations working in different industries including banking, petroleum, etc. The interviews had seven main dimensions including the learner, context for learning, content of the learning, learning methods and final assessment, learning environment, and teacher. The interviews were recorded and then the scripts were co-read; applying theme analysis, it was classified into concepts, then subthemes and finally main themes. At the end, a proposed model was provided. This research will help both language teachers and organizations gain some insights regarding how to organize suitable language training programs for Iranian managers which would lead to their better preparation for global settings.

Keywords: Effective learning; Corporate language learning; Learning contributory factors; ELT

## Introduction

Training in general and language training in particular has become an important function of human resource management in almost all companies and organizations operating at the international levels. English as a lingua franca in international arena is more than just a mirage; but, as a neutral medium in international business, it has played its role as a competitive advantage (Nickerson 2005). The need to learn English is growing tremendously among all non-English-speaking managers including Iranian ones. There is a plethora of occasions such as meetings, social interactions,

presentations and so many other occasions in which Iranian managers need English skills to be able to handle international situations successfully. Not knowing English and not being familiar with international business culture may bring about assignment failure, disrupted international relationships, reduced productivity, lost opportunities, and damage to company's image (Bennett et al. 2000). However, the time boundary of managers, their changing and unpredictable work schedules and also their continuing preoccupation with their workplace issues has made management English language training such a difficult task which cannot be handled with the common ELT programs; e.g. "For these adult trainees, (classroom) management is not so much for keeping discipline and order in classroom but rather for keeping them motivated and facilitating learning." (Zou 1998).

This study tries to explore the features of effective language training programs for managers in Iran. The focus of the present study is on teaching methodology, time and place of language learning program, teacher's qualifications, assessment strategies and learners' expectations. Following we will provide a summary of the available literature (though we almost found none!), the methodology, results and finally a brief discussion.

### **Corporate Language Training**

As Harold Koch (1996) stated, "We all want to train and develop the 'stateless executive' who not only possesses the technical knowledge but a global perspective and the language skills to be a cultural chameleon" (p. 24). Vitality of English language skills has been perceived much more than before among companies and organizations in developing countries around the world. Continued globalization of industry has placed significant demands on managers especially in developing and transitional economies around the globe, requiring the development of various kinds of skills crucial to success in an international business environment. Thus, firms and organizations in developing countries with transitional economies entering internationally competitive markets are investing on language training and human resource development activities to survive. (Elbadri 2001; Koch 1996; Neupert and Baughn 2004).

In a large research project Vandermeeren (2005) aimed to investigate the use of foreign language in European business companies located in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Portugal and Hungary made it clear that foreign language skills should be seriously considered as a prerequisite for economic success. In addition, Carnevale (1990) referred to a worldwide investigation into the importance of foreign languages for business people in Finland, Turkey, Hong Kong and some other countries as part of their communication skills in global market.

Government support for employees to reach appropriate English language proficiency level in Hong Kong (American Chamber of Commerce, Hong Kong 2001) and the undeniable role of English-speaking Chinese professionals in China's economic success (Zhang 2007; Zou 1998) are a few examples of studies that prove the fact that English language as a competitive advantage in multinational settings facilitates business developments.

In many Iranian organizations English language training is provided by language institutes with different teaching methods and programs. In these language training programs the features such as methodology, content, time, and place of language training program, specific qualifications of language teachers and many other features are not compatible with corporate language training principles. In

addition, some learner-related factors such as beliefs and attitudes (Bernat and Gvozdenko 2005) and corporate related issues such as cultural context (Yang et al. 2009) of the organization are sometimes totally ignored. Moreover, less attention is paid to the contributory factors that could make effective language learning possible for managers. This approach to language training has been practiced for so many years in Iranian organizations; however, according to the second and the third authors' experience in corporate language training in Iran, there are many organizations which have not still achieved their language learning goals.

### **Learning Contributory Factors**

Very few studies have been conducted to identify the contributory factors in corporate language learning programs; however, there are a large number of studies investigating the key variables in language learning that are related to learner, trainer and environment. For instance, Peter Honey (2003) classified these contributory factors into five groups of learner, context, content, methods and environment.

Learners' attitudes, beliefs, expectations and meta-cognitive knowledge, that should be respected by teachers (Arnold, 1999), play a pivotal role in their learning process. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) argue that "...foreign language learners may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain learning strategies, the existence of aptitude, their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies." (p. 1) Horwitz (1995) contended that language learning is an "...ego-involving undertaking which requires a positive emotional stance on the part of the learner." (p. 573).

In this regard, as a contributory factor, language teachers play a profound role in language learning contexts such as in classrooms. Through promoting positive affective characteristics and making the emotional needs of their students as instructional priority, language teachers can increase the willingness of learners to engage actively in language learning process. Bagshaw (2000) believes that a trainer ought to be cognizant of "...any particular vulnerability in the group ... " (p. 63) and "... should not simply set exercises and stand back, but move around groups, and keep aware of any changes in the emotional atmosphere." (p. 64) Cherniss and Goleman (2001) define effective trainers as the ones "who could be able to monitor the emotional atmosphere during the training process by paying attention to their own feelings as well as those of the participants" (p. 223). Thus, learners and teachers, as the most important players in learning process, can generate a context in which training could take place effectively. (Yang et al. 2009)

According to the literature reviewed, almost all of studies are either concerned with learning or with language learning contributory factors in a general sense. Rarely have they investigated and identified key variables in corporate language learning programs for managers. This could count for lack of relevant literature provided.

### **Methodology**

The present study has conducted semi-structured interviewing. The reason for choosing such an approach is that going through the available literature showed that despite today's great need there doesn't exist much research with primary focus on effective ELT programs for non-English-speaking countries managers. The other

reason was that we needed deep information on different aspects of the issue and such information is not normally gained in quantitative research.

To begin the study, we tried to identify the main factors affecting English language learning. Based on what Honey (2003) has mentioned to influence effective learning and also the over 12 year English language teaching experience of the second and the third author we prepared 8 questions to be asked; the questions are listed as follows:

- 1) Tell me the story of your English language learning (Language learning background).
- 2) In your opinion, how different is the condition of a manager for language learning from the condition of a teenager, a college student or a person at the same age but without your managerial responsibilities? Why? (Exclusive conditions of managers' language learning practice)
- 3) What is your opinion about the appropriate time and place for teaching English language to managers? (Appropriate time and place)
- 4) What do you think is the appropriate way for teaching English language to managers? Why? (Appropriate methodology)
- 5) What do you think is the best way to assess English language learning among managers? (Appropriate assessment strategy)
- 6) What are the features of a suitable physical environment for managers to learn English language? (Appropriate physical environment)
- 7) Reflecting on your English language learning experience, what does an Iranian manager expect to be capable of doing as a result of acquiring English language skills? (Learners' expectations)
- 8) In your idea, what qualifications should your favorable English language teacher possess regarding knowledge, ability and personality points of views? (Ideal language teacher's personality traits)

As the study is still in progress (the paper has been submitted as a working paper) we now report on the interviews we have had with 10 managers (2 female and 8 male). All of them were in high managerial positions in different Iranian organizations.

The age range of the respondents was from 42 to 52 and their work experience was between 15 to 33 years. Their positions were as the following: 2 of them were senior audit managers, 3 of them were CEOs, 3 of them were vice presidents, 1 was a board member, and 1 was the director of an international department.

Before the interviews we arranged the interview sessions via phone calls. The sessions were held in participants' own office during the working time. The duration of each interview was about an hour. All the interviews followed the same structure. At the beginning of every interview the goal of the study was explained and it was emphasized that the interviews had research purposes only.

Among the 10 interviews 7 of them were recorded and the notes of the other 3 were carefully taken. The researchers tried to build a rapport with the respondents and create a friendly productive ambiance. The questions were asked when the interviewer felt it was appropriate to ask each; however, the wording of questions were not the same in different interviews. At the end of each interview the respondents were asked to share some further ideas concerning the main theme of the study.

The transcriptions and the notes taken during the interviews were thoroughly studied and analyzed. Then, all the independent ideas were extracted from the texts in

the form of concepts and after that the sub-themes were coded. Finally the main themes were clarified among the ones identified throughout the interviews.

## Results

Although this study is still in progress we have gone through the transcripts of the interviews we have already done and provide our results in the order of the questions we have made:

*Q1. Tell me the story of your English language learning (Language learning background).*

In this question we had the intention to find out the personal issues Iranian managers had in common regarding English language learning; the issues which might have the same effect even if they didn't have any managerial position. This would give us the opportunity to distinguish general variable from the ones managerial positions impose on language learners. To our great surprise all the managers had rather similar backgrounds; participants' age mix might account for the things they had in common and all middle-aged Iranians might share these problems regardless of their position. They believed they had had no access to a professional ELT system and their university courses had led all of them to improve their translation skill without any concern for speaking, listening or even writing. They all claimed that they had a good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but felt incapable of putting them into practice once needed.

Reviewing the given answers we came up with 30 concepts which were summarized into three sub themes which come as the following:

- Lack of a professional educational system(guidance school, high school and university)
- Not feeling the necessity of English language learning during youthhood
- Discontinuing English language learning

*Q2. In your opinion, how different is the condition of a manager for language learning from the condition of a teenager, a college student or a person at the same age but without your managerial responsibilities? Why?*

The main purpose of this question was to come up with the factor that distinguishes the situation of a manager in language learning from that of a normal person. As we expected having managerial position puts great limits on your language learning capacity as it is a position filled with heavy responsibility and pressure.

All managers found themselves in a dual position in which you have great need to improve your English and at the same time no fixed dependable time and mind to devote to it. Analyzing their answers we came up with 30 concepts. Then we put similar concepts into 5 subthemes which come as the following:

- Preoccupied mind and lack of concentration
- Lack of trust in translators and tendency to do English-related matters her/himself
- Lack of time control and the unpredictability of time schedule
- Being pressed for time
- Inability or fear to present in public

*Q3. What is your opinion about the appropriate time and place for teaching English language to managers? & Q6. What are features of a suitable physical environment for managers to learn English language? (Appropriate physical environment)*

The fact that the special work condition of managers doesn't give them the opportunity to take part in normal ELT classes led us to ask this question. Managers whom we interviewed all claimed that they work much more than forty hours a week and their workload and critical role inside the organization doesn't let them leave it for English class. Besides the obligation to take part in several consecutive meetings stops them from having English classes at the middle of the work day. Going through their answers we came up with 7 concepts which were not enough to result in any subthemes but that they preferred flexible classes, very early in the morning before the work starts and motivating place inside the organization.

*Q4. What do you think is the appropriate way for teaching English language to managers? Why? (Appropriate methodology) & Q5. What do you think is the best way to assess English language learning among managers? (Appropriate assessment strategy)*

In this question we looked for the methods they found suitable for people at their position. Of course their answers were based on the successful experience they had had. Most interviewees were interested in this question and spend most of the interview time on it. It seemed as if their previous learning experience had not fulfilled their requirements and there were considerable rooms for improvement. For example they all looked for individualistic flexible approach or early feedback on their improvement. In our analysis we came up with 61 concepts which were summarized into 6 subthemes which come as the following:

- Individualistic method with frequent feedback
- No tendency for self-study
- Method concentrated on class time
- Method providing opportunity for extra relationship with the teacher
- Fixed method over a period of time
- Method based on collective learning

*Q7. Reflecting on your English language learning experience, what does an Iranian manager expect to be capable of doing as a result of acquiring English language skills? (Learners' expectations)*

This question aimed at addressing the managers' real needs as far as English is concerned. Almost all managers had similar needs and expected to be able to accomplish some certain tasks with their English knowledge. Although they had all spent a considerable time on improving their English, it seemed as if the programs they had gone under had not succeeded in fulfilling those needs. The reason might be the variety of their needs and the impossibility of focusing on all of them simultaneously. Analyzing the transcripts of the answers to this question we came up with 22 concepts which were finally summarized into 7 subthemes as the following:

- Expressing viewpoints in formal public settings
- Email writing
- Travel needs (airport, taxi, shopping, etc.)
- Understanding work-related clichés

- Informal small talks
- Listening skills
- Taking benefit of data bases

*Q8. In your idea, what qualifications should your favourable English language teacher possess from knowledge, ability and personality points of views? (Ideal language teacher's personality traits)*

This question seemed to be the second managers' favourite question. They all believed that the teacher was the most important variable in their learning. As said before, none of them preferred self-study classes and claimed that their main motivator for taking part in the class was the teacher. They didn't expect their English teachers to solely have English knowledge but all preferred teachers with great general knowledge. Besides they expected the teacher to have enough knowledge about their job and their situation. Here we came up with 54 concepts which could be summarized into 4 subthemes:

- Teachers conduct
- Teacher's general knowledge
- Teachers communication skills
- Teacher's EI

## **Discussion**

As mentioned before we needed to base our research on a primary model and used Honey's (2003) model for effective learning and had based our questions on his model which included the learner, the context for the learning, content of the learning, learning methods, and the learning environment as the main factors for effective learning. Trying to come up with the main themes, we went through the transcripts, then concepts and then subthemes and this brought us to the belief that as far as ELT for Iranian managers the learner, the learning methods, the content of the learning and the teacher (the factor we had considered separately) are the main themes (or the main factors) and the other two factors (the context for the learning and the learning environment) haven't received much attention from the managers point of view (this is crystal clear from the number of the concepts and subthemes provided) and could not be considered as independent themes. Besides we focused on assessment in one of our questions and thought it might receive special attention from the managers' point of view but it was not so. Furthermore we decided to exclude the subthemes related to their personal background (Q1) as they were general subthemes irrelevant to their managerial positions. The main and the subthemes are provided in table 1.

Table1. Factors Affecting Managers' ELT Programs

<p><b>The learner</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preoccupied mind and lack of concentration</li> <li>• Lack of trust in translators and tendency to do English-related matters her/himself</li> <li>• Lack of time control and the unpredictability of time schedule</li> <li>• Being pressed for time</li> <li>• Disability or fear to present in public</li> </ul>	<p><b>The method</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individualistic method with frequent feedback</li> <li>• No tendency for self-study</li> <li>• Method concentrated on class time</li> <li>• Method providing opportunity for extra relationship with the teacher</li> <li>• Fixed method over a period of time</li> <li>• Method based on collective learning</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Content</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expressing viewpoints in formal public settings</li> <li>• Email writing</li> <li>• Travel needs (airport, taxi, shopping etc)</li> <li>• Understanding work-related clichés</li> <li>• Informal small talks</li> <li>• Listening skills</li> <li>• Taking benefit of data bases</li> </ul>	<p><b>The teacher</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers conduct</li> <li>• Teacher's general knowledge</li> <li>• Teachers communication skills</li> <li>• Teacher's Emotional Intelligence</li> </ul>

So it could be concluded that Iranian managers do need a tailored ELT program designed especially for them and in this program the factors: the learner, the content, the method and the teacher must receive special attention. The subthemes provided in the results section (also table 1) must be taken care of when working on each factor. Although we have limited our interviews to Iranian managers, we could predict that these results might be applicable to managers' ELT programs in other cultural settings as managers encounter common situations globally and must accomplish similar tasks in different cultural settings. The emergence of international and global organizations requires managers to have a good command of English and this need could only be fulfilled with the help of tailored ELT programs which consider their special needs and situation. The model we have provided is surely in its early stages and needs to be completed in further research.



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