

A Qualitative Study of Socio-Cultural and Linguistic Factors Affecting Iranian EFL Learners' Language Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

Many factors may be involved in determining why some students are more and some are less proficient in language. This study tried to address the above issue by proposing a model encompassing 3 factors. For this purpose, a qualitative phase was run which aimed at exploring the sub-factors and factor(s) which are most influential in developing language proficiency. A semi-structured interview was run as the data collection instrument. The data obtained through transcribed interviews with 32 students studying English were analyzed through a grounded theory approach. Three categories of social, cultural and linguistic factors were devised, based on the literature and the qualitative results, which were believed to be effective in language proficiency. Using SEM procedures, the researcher was then able to develop a model. After analyzing the data, the obtained results seemed to be in line with Bourdieu's (1986) idea that social factors are considered as the most dominant factors.

Key Words: Social Factors; Cultural Factors; Linguistic Factors; Language Proficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Some students learn a new language more quickly and easily than others. This simple fact is known by all who either have learned a second language or have taught it to those using a second language at school. Clearly, some language learners are successful by virtue of their sheer determination, hard work and persistence. Language proficiency or the term linguistic proficiency

is defined as the degree of skill with which a person can use a language, such as how well a person can read, write, speak, or understand language (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). A large number of studies on language are done in the area of proficiency and the factors affecting learners' language proficiency. Linguistic proficiency or language proficiency is considered as a measure of language achievement which is known as a way of understanding language development in learners. There are various factors playing a significant role in the process of language development, such as motivation, learning style, learners' first language, cultural background and learners' beliefs about language.

However, there are other crucial factors influencing success that are largely beyond the control of the learner. These factors can be broadly categorized as socio-cultural and linguistic factors. The complex interplay of these factors determines the speed and facility with which the new language is learned.

Since these factors have a direct effect on learners' language proficiency, it is highly recommended to do further research on them. As previous studies have not considered all aspects of language proficiency, socio-cultural factors are important factors worth studying since their results would have important implications in course of language teaching and learning.

To date, it seems that no study has tackled the issue of all these factors that lead to the development of a model. As such, firstly this study addresses this point of significance and aims to explore factors which are influential in developing language proficiency in English as a foreign language university context. Secondly, as a contribution to the literature on EFL learner's proficiency, the study aims to develop a model of necessary factors, and their relationship with language proficiency is also of concern in this model. In this regard, there are studies which have considered the effect of socio-cultural factors; however, recent studies have advanced further and focused on the role of socio-cultural factors notwithstanding the fact that few or no studies have developed a model or have investigated the effect of socio-cultural factors affecting second language learning among the different groups of people with different L1 background exclusively.

A number of studies have, thus far, dealt with social, cultural and linguistic factors (Khalifa, 2012; Sato & Lyster, 2012; Rezaei, 2011; pishghadam, 2011; Razmjoo & Movahed, 2009; Bada, 2005; Arikan, 2011; Matsumoto, 2012; Moinvaziri & Razmjoo 2015). For example, Aghaei, K., Koo, Y., L & Noor, N. M. (2012) in their article have examined in detail the cognitive and socio-cultural approaches to language teaching and literacy. Rogošić and Baranović (2016) provided an overview of research focusing on the effects of social capital on educational achievement, while highlighting the fundamental differences between the two theoretical approaches most commonly used for research on the subject. But, to the best of researchers' knowledge, considering the fundamental status of language proficiency it seems that no study has taken into account different aspects at the same time. Among the studies carried out in the domain of English language teaching, Amirabadi and Razmjoo (2016) did a qualitative inquiry in the form of a grounded theory model of socio-cultural and linguistic factors affecting language proficiency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the last decades, various studies have been conducted to investigate language proficiency, socio-cultural factors, and their relationship. The influence of socio-cultural factors is often seen within the frame of a family. Belief and value systems, acculturation levels, socialization goals

and practices, attitudes, and the language used at home are known as the instances of socio-cultural factors (Gonzalez, 2001). Numerous researchers such as Cousin, Diaz, Flores, and Hernandez (as cited in Drame & Xu, 2008) have conducted a model of five sociocultural contexts focusing on the relationships among the contexts dealt with in educational processes for a learner.

Based on Bourdieu (1986), capital isn't only economic but is additionally social and cultural. That's to, society can moreover be organized by the differential dispersion of social and cultural capital. These two sorts of capital can be powers that characterize the chances of benefit in a given field. The more one has social and cultural capital, the more fruitful one may be in a particular range. In this way, these sorts of capital can be considered as ensures of victory. Bourdieu also claims that capital ownership and access are unequally distributed to society (Bourdieu, 1986). His theory of social reproduction, centered on economic and symbolic (cultural and social) capital, states that individual behavior is largely determined by external factors. H. Of socio-economic status. Bourdieu states that it is "... a society embedded in the body, a biological individual ..." (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 63). To prove his theory, Bourdieu also conducted empirical studies (1984, 1988, 1990) that justified his analytical tools. Following the Bourdieu tradition, the author explores and uses social capital available to individuals outside the family (rooted in the relationship between social capital and educational outcomes: Coleman vs. Bourdieu's friends, acquaintances, parents. School and business relationship). Explain how social capital works to help recreate social inequality.

Rezaei (2011) studied cultural and social aspects of second language learning and foreign language teaching and the mixture which builds the sociocultural aspects of language learning and teaching. It was basically to identify the connection that is between language learning and social factors. The findings revealed that in course of learning or teaching other languages, even though they are necessary to focus on sections such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation among others, it is obviously recommended to take socio-cultural aspects into consideration as well. According to him, there are cultural or social aspects in any language which might be different totally, or completely contrary to the things in one's own language, this is one of the reasons why cultural aspects must be taught.

Gholami (2012) conducted a study on the social context as a trigger in EFL contexts. The researcher investigated the value of the social context and its significant role it plays in language learning. He believes that the social context has an important effect on learners' motivation and attitude by supplying learning opportunities that develop students' outcomes. Based on the findings, the students learn a language by social communication with speakers of that language. However, the role of the social context is usually neglected in many countries.

Concerning the importance of the learners' cultural background, Bernaus et al. (2004) investigated the effect of the cultural background of immigrant children in their language learning process. 114 learners participated in this study. They were all given Gardner's Attitude - Motivation Test Battery questionnaire in their attitudes, motivation, and their anxiety were assessed towards language learning. It was concluded that there were few differences attributable to the cultural background.

As the socio-cultural and linguistic factors affecting language proficiency have been largely neglected by researchers in the field, researching into this area can be beneficial. Thus, this study is a contribution to the development of the models of socio-cultural and linguistic factors in the field in general, and the relationship between all these factors and language proficiency in particular.

This research aimed to explore linguistic factors considered to be influential in language proficiency. In particular, the study thus aimed to answer the following questions:

- Q1. What socio-cultural factors affect Iranian EFL learners' proficiency?
- Q2. What linguistic factors affect Iranian EFL learners' proficiency?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

For this phase of the study, the researcher interviewed 32 TEFL students. Out of this number, 11 students were male and 21 students were female. They ranged from sophomore to senior students, originally from different cities and not necessarily from North Khorasan. It was decided to interview the participants from all educational levels to have a representative sample of all the developmental groups. Although they got their diploma in Iran, their English knowledge was not very high. Moreover, the English courses during their study were not that much fruitful for them and did not provide them with the required knowledge for daily communication. Also, the interview in this study was conducted with only 32 of the students who had the same characteristics of the target sample. The age range of the participants was 18-25. As this part of the study was based on the qualitative design, more students were initially interviewed until no new theme was gained (data saturation). For this purpose, the number was limited to what it is mentioned above.

SITE

The context of the current study included the state universities located in North Khorasan (Bojnourd). The area was selected due to the researcher's access to this city and her connection with other professors at the universities. The universities had different departments, but the focus of this study was on English departments.

INSTRUMENTS

As this study employed grounded theory, a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) was run at first with 32 participants with the same characteristics of the target learners. The researcher herself conducted the interview with the learners. The aim of the interview was to gather the prerequisite information to design the questionnaire (see Appendix B). However, a 22-item interview was conducted in English; the students' viewpoints concerning each of the questions were transcribed, and then significant points were highlighted for further investigation.

As it was mentioned earlier, the primary method for data collection in a qualitative design of a research is interview. A semi-structured interview was used to gather all 32 participants' views. The questions asked about students' viewpoints about what they exactly believe about factors affecting EFL learning. They were free to add any new points to each question.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

Interviews were done separately; all of them were recorded and saved for further transcription and analysis. There was no time limit for interviews, which allowed participants to have enough time to reflect on the questions. The questions focused on the factors influencing EFL learning proficiency.

DATA COLLECTION ANALYSIS

All the interviews were transcribed. After collecting the data through interviews (transcribed interviews), the data was coded. As the first stage of codification, the researcher repeatedly read, grouped and considered comments and viewpoints made by each participant to find out similar reports between various comments. Using axial coding, the researcher then endeavored to develop the concepts and categories. Finally, some of these categories were integrated through selective coding, and grouped together into some general themes.

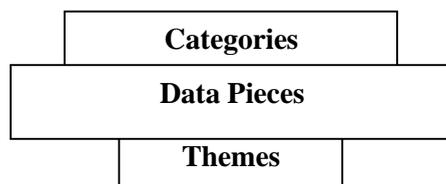


Figure 3.1: Data Pyramid (taken from Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010, p. 294)

The developed concepts obtained through interview helped the researcher move towards the focused direction of research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part presents the qualitative results obtained from the analysis of the interview transcripts. The results are presented in three parts. The first part includes the results obtained from the analysis of the socio-cultural factors leading to learners' development in language proficiency. The second section focuses on the linguistic factors obtained from the analysis of the transcribed interviews.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FACTORS

Socio-cultural factors examined in this study were a series of factors, including the economic position of family, age, educational level of parents, media, motivation, culture class, and tradition, which were focused upon to look for their prevalence in the transcribed interviews. For the analysis of each factor, the interviews were used then. For this purpose, each factor was defined in terms of the keywords and indicators found in the literature. Explanations of each of these factors will be presented in the following sections.

ECONOMICAL POSITION OF THE FAMILY

Res: Most of the interviewees believed good economical position causes higher achievement in learning a language.

According to Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo (2015), university students may experience some challenges due to the demands of an unfamiliar situation, stress of work, or some other personal reasons unconnected to their academic life. These problems could interfere with individual students' motivation to exert effort in their courses. Most studies indicate that pupils from upper socio-economic homes come to school with more background knowledge and experience than those from lower socio-economic homes. The past experiences that the middle class children possess help them learn the tasks in a fast manner (Henry, 1963).

The information on this factor was gathered through analyzing the interview comments using confirmatory method. By analyzing the interview transcripts, the researcher confirmed the economic position of family have effect on learning a new language.

One of the students stated that:

I'm sure you agree the economic status of family plays a huge role in their own education. Parents with lower income often have to work longer hours to earn salary. This causes less time for them to get more involved in their kids' learning process.

Another student emphasized how important is economic position in learning a foreign language. She mentioned that:

Well, honestly, I believe that money talks. Having good economical position and high social class leads to various types of classes from childhood to adulthood. During these classes the background of the person is made then we can see how different is the person who was rich and the one that was from a lower position of the society. Undoubtedly, the richer one after all those classes is better in proficiency from someone who hasn't seen any English class.

AGE

Res: Age has an extremely important influence on learning a foreign language. The lower the age, it's better for children to begin learning a foreign language.

The students referred to different experiences they had, and the various papers they had read in various journals to see how important the age is in learning a language. A third-year student emphasized how age had helped her develop her language proficiency in the following:

According to my own experience, Childhood is the best period for learning a foreign language. Children can spend more time and effort on learning than adults. The children are more effective in learning EFL.

It is evident from their comments that almost all believe that children are more motivated and talented in learning a foreign language, whereas some had a different view. They admitted that adults are even more efficient. It is virtually in line with Krashen's (1981) claim that older learners are better and quicker in the acquisition of the morphological aspects of language than younger ones.

Another student commented that:

Adults are in many ways better at learning a language than children. Adults have more opportunity to arrange some meetings and appointments to practice the language so that they can improve morphologically.

It is in contrast with a different view regarding the age issue according to Sadeghi (2013). He claimed that children are in all aspects more efficient and effective second language learners than adults and adolescents.

It was stated by one of the students that:

The sooner a child starts to learn a second language, the better in my opinion. It certainly seems to make sense that the earlier you start, the longer you will have to learn and the more progress you will make as compared with someone who starts later.

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF THE PARENTS

Res: Parents with higher level of their education can have the positive impact on learning proficiency.

According to Grissmer (2003), parents' level of education is the most important factor affecting students' academic achievement. Along with the same line, the participants believed that it can be a predictor of their educational achievement as it was evident from the comments of some students:

Parents have an influence on their children for many reasons, but one of the most important ones is that they are their children's first teachers.

According to another student,

What is important to say is that children learn better through observation at home; for example, if a child's parents read a book and attend classes, this will help them value success and learning.

The importance of promoting literacy in the home environment is emphasized by Leichter (1984), who wrote that "it may be that children can learn to become literate on their own without formal instruction, but when experiences with literacy take place in family environments, the emotional reactions of the parents can affect the child's progress significantly" (p. 46).

However, another student had a different view:

Some parents believe that education is not necessary for children. I lived in such a family with the same view, but now I am one of the top students of the group. So, students with illiterate parents can reach high level of proficiency, too.

MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY

Res: Technology really enhances learning a foreign language.

There was a major paradigm shift in the pedagogical and research focus of technology applications in language education recently (Chapelle, 1999, 2001; Pennington, 1996; Salaberry, 2001). It was a shift away from traditional drill-and-skill computer-aided instruction (CAI) models toward multimedia, intelligent CAI, and integration models.

Sufficient instructions such as the availability of laboratories seem to have some influence on EFL learners to have a native-like pronunciation, as most of the students believed that facilities such as computers and laboratories are very important in teaching and learning. For example, the following interview excerpt indicates one language learners' perception about the benefits of using such technologies in his classroom:

I think laboratories have strong influence on EFL learner. For example, when we learn pronunciation in a wrong way, it will become hard for us to make it correct because it would become a habit.

Another student discussed that:

Hearing the right pronunciation through listening in laboratories and media with accurate intonation will reduce deficiency. So, such efficient instructions are absolutely efficient.

Other students believed that we cannot only rely on black and white books to achieve a native-like pronunciation. New technologies and laboratories help the students expose themselves to the foreign language.

According to some of the interviewees, today social media is being used for language learning and educational purposes such as online learning. It also helps the students communicate with other people and learn about their culture. One of the students stated that:

Social media will have even a greater presence in our daily lives, and it can have a dominant influence over the development of language.

MOTIVATION

Res: The participants enjoyed different types of motivation and, as such, the curriculum can be a motivator.

According to Oxford and Shearin (1994), motivation has been widely accepted by both teachers and researches as one of the key factors influencing the rate and success of L2 learning. Therefore, it is extremely important for L2 learning, and it is crucial to understand what learners' motivations are. This point is clearly illustrated in the following interview excerpt:

You know, there are many reasons for learning language that attract us to learn. One of them is that I would like to travel and love to know the language, culture and the way they live. It really makes me feel I like I am being more aware of the world, but the most important thing that makes me motivated is teaching other people.

Some of the interviewees were familiar with different motivation types. One of the students who was in his second year of university stated that:

Well, honestly, my motivation is integrative. I really want to learn English to be part of my entity. The curriculum is a good motivation to learn English but a person, herself, should be really active in this case and learn things more than usual.

Attitudes toward learning a language can be changed and turned into positive or negative ones. It is not fixed.

At first, I began participating in English classes for practical uses. But some courses changed my objectives in this field and right now my motivation is to become a proficient English learner in my city.

It is important for EFL learners that the totality of their educational experience is appropriate for their needs. Language learning is less likely to take place if students are fully submersed into the mainstream program without any extra assistance or, conversely, not allowed to be part of the mainstream until they have reached a certain level of language proficiency. In this sense, one of the students mentioned that:

Learning a new language is like starting a new life. Speaking in another language gives you different feeling that you should try to understand it. About curriculum, schools in Iran start teaching two languages from the age of 12. I think this a strong motivation for students to start learning those languages.

CULTURE CLASS AND TRADITION

Res: Most of the participants believed that culture of the people is one of the most effective factors in learning a language.

Genc and ErdoganBada (2005) investigated the relationship between culture in language teaching and language learning. In this project, it was concluded that a culture class is thoroughly beneficial in various aspects such as changing attitudes towards native and target societies, language skills, raising cultural awareness, and contributing to the teaching itself. Therefore, cultural instruction is of great help for language learners to progress their proficiency.

Sometimes, tradition and culture class is preventive for female students to achieve their goals toward learning another language. In this way, one of the students stated that:

In a society where people would not accept women to work, it may cause differences in learning a second language.

Another student seemed to disagree and argued that:

I don't believe it. There are many women who have great positions in different offices, universities and etc.; they don't have any problem.

However, other students had different ideas based on their own experiences. Some of them believed that it is the family who gives them opportunity to learn a language.

One of the students supported this in the following:

Parents nowadays compensate for their limited knowledge of English by sending their children to English classes in institutions. Thus, our future generation in Iran will have a proper understanding of English.

INTERACTION AND INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

Res: Both have an effect on learning another language.

Interaction is very important in second language learning; it is seen in reviews of work involving peer support during oral activities. Ohta (1995) has contributed much research in this area of socio-cultural theory. She performed a study with seven adults learning Japanese as a second language and obtained results that illustrated effective peer scaffolding during oral collaboration. Learners used strategies such as repair and co-construction to assist their peers. She ranked the strategies used in order of explicitness. Her study showed learners producing language they otherwise could not have without the collaboration of their peers. She explained that the reason why this study was successful and important is that it illustrates the abilities that learners have while collaborating. For a beginning speaker, producing output is difficult and overwhelming; however, the listener is not overwhelmed with attention demands such as grammar and has the ability to evaluate what is being said while being able to predict what will come next. For this reason, the collaboration between the listener and speaker is essential in order to produce a productive learning environment.

Along with this idea, one student stated that:

I prefer to study in a group. Group study allows me for various views, insights and information to be shared. This means you have more time to focus on key concepts and spend less time stuck on idea that has hung you up.

In this case, another student believed that:

According to the sentence that "two heads are better than one", group projects can help students develop a host of skills that are important in the professional work, so I prefer to work with a group.

We all know that understanding a language involves not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis, but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. To be able to communicate internationally inevitably involves communicating interculturally as well, which probably leads us to encounter factors of cultural differences. Such kind of differences exists in every language, such as the place of silence, tone of voice, appropriate topic of conversation, and expressions as speech act functions (e.g. apologies, suggestions, complains, refusals, etc.). Bearing these points in mind, it can be stated that language is a part of culture while culture is a part of language. In other words, "the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture" (Brown, 1994, p.164).

Regarding this point, one of the students in the fourth year of university stated that:

We don't know much about English culture; we should have communication with them to know their culture and traditions.

Another added that:

Different versions of English tones they use when speaking and the different meaning of words they profit when translated or interpreted can help influence our learning.

LINGUISTIC FACTORS

According to previous studies, linguistic factors included linguistic background, historical affinity and word order which were focused upon to look for their prevalence in the transcribed interviews. For the analysis of each factor, interviews were used. For this purpose,

each factor was defined in terms of keywords and indicators found in the literature. Explanations of each of these factors will be presented in the following sections.

LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND

Res: The native language of learners exerts a strong influence on the acquisition of the target language as was proposed by Brown (2001).

According to Brown (2001), “while the native system will exercise both facilitating and interfering effects on the production and comprehension of the new language, the interfering effects are likely to be the most salient.” (p. 66). The native language effect is present during the learning process until the learner has reached a level of language internalization; at this point the level of interference has lowered.

Undoubtedly, a learner’s performance on learning a second language is influenced by the first language (Bhela, 1999; Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Teachers should thus develop the awareness on students’ diversity, further gaining insights into linguistic variations that ELLs bring to classrooms. Given that first language interference affects SLA (see Bhela, 1999; Lightbown & Spada, 2006), this section attempts to uncover its linguistic impact on SLA through delineating the dimensions of phonology, morphology, and syntax, respectively followed by examples.

In line with this point, one of the students mentioned that:

In my class, there are a lot of students whose mother tongue is not Persian. I think they have difficulty learning English than those whose language is Persian.

HISTORICAL AFFINITY AND WORD ORDER

According to Comrie (1990), different factors comparing any two languages include phonetic similarity, shared vocabulary, syntactic affinity, etc. Although it is not easy to specifically measure the linguistic distance between two languages from the quantitative point of view, languages are not really agreeable to quantitative analysis; therefore, linguists pay less attention to numbers when comparing the languages. Regarding the point, we chose these two linguistic distance variables for the practical reasons (a) historical affinity; and (b) word order. The reason for this was because they are probably the most reliable quantitative linguistic measurements which can be applied to more than 4000 languages around the world. One of the students contended that:

We know that grammar is an important part of learning a language to speak well.

Lack of grammatical patterns makes our speech silly and vague.

Another student stated that:

In my opinion, grammar is the important component of language without which we cannot put the words into the sentences when we want to talk about something.

A third-year student also mentioned his opinion about being worried about grammar below:

I know many believe that grammar is the grave of language, to all these people learning grammar is a nightmare. But surely this nightmare can be the basis of language.

All the above comments show that there is a desire and internal motive behind students' efforts to acquire and develop grammar. Based on the findings of this study, the following model (Figure 1) was proposed by the researcher.

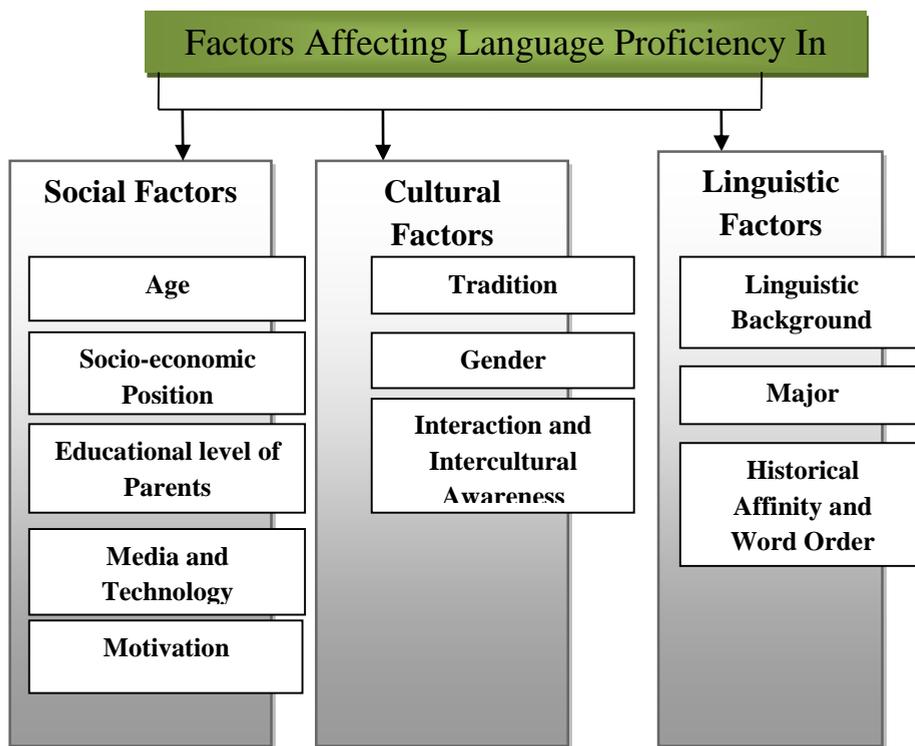


Figure 1: Proposed model for factors affecting EFL Learners' language proficiency

CONCLUSION

The results in this phase of the study showed us that the university participants, to some extent, experienced the relationship between different factors and language proficiency. These factors were age, socio-economic position of the family, educational level of the parents, motivation, media and technology, culture class and tradition, interaction and intercultural awareness, linguistic background, historical affinity and word order. Based on this general categorization, a set of factors (social, cultural and linguistic) were developed which were believed (based on the

literature and the analysis of interviews) to be possibly effective in developing language proficiency. Finally, social factors were identified as the most influential factors (based on the results of the interviews) affecting the language proficiency of the participants of this study and a model proposed by the researchers according to the factors identified in the interviews seeming influential on language proficiency of Iranian EFL learners.

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