Iranian University Instructors' Perception on English-Majoring Students' Speaking Needs: A Case of Shiraz University English Department

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Abstract

The present study investigated the English-speaking needs of Iranian English-majoring undergraduate and graduate students from their instructors' perspectives. To this end, four Iranian English instructors from Shiraz University participated in the study by taking part in an unstructured interview on their students' speaking problems, the magnitude of the problem, and the probable causes and solutions to the problems. The results revealed that the participants believed that there is a problem with their students' English-speaking ability at all levels of BA, MA and Ph.D. Despite the instructors' conflicting ideas, the findings indicated that students at BA and MA levels have more serious speaking problems. The causes of these problems were reported to be insufficient focus on improving speaking skills, the inefficiency of the preceding education and lack of any gate-keeping or post-admission speaking assessment. The instructors were in favor of introducing the speaking skill in the post-admission assessment and the EAP programs to solve the problem.

Keywords: EAP, Needs Analysis, Post-Admission Assessment, Oral Communication, Problems, Solutions

1. Introduction

There are more and more people speaking English these days and a lot more find learning to speak English a sound investment. Aside from its benefits like providing a competitive edge in career opportunities (Casale & Posel, 2011; Dávila & Mora, 2000; Pandey & Pande, 2014), some people such as students study English because they are required to. English-medium education has spread more widely in recent decades and universities in English speaking countries have been the destination of the ever-increasing number of students for whom English is not the first language. Also, there has been a growth in the number of universities in non-English speaking countries in which the instruction is partly or completely through the medium of English. However, one cannot assume that students entering these universities are adequately prepared to deal with the academic language skills demands of the English medium programs (Reads, 2016). These universities need to put measures in place to solve this problem; however, one needs to understand a problem before making any efforts to solve it. Various techniques are available to help those who are attempting to understand and solve a performance problem' and needs assessment is one of these techniques (Rossett, 1982).

Several needs assessment studies have been undertaken to examine university students' speaking needs and challenges in universities in English-speaking countries with various foci, perspectives and methodologies (e.g., Cheng, Myles, & Curtis 2004; Ferris, 1998; Ferris & Tagg, 1996; Gan, 2012; Kim, 2006; Morita, 2002). However, needs assessment is considered an on-going and endless process, as no process is perfect (Huang, 2010). Also, assuming that what is representative of one academic or cultural

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context is undisputedly applicable to another context might be unsound (Huang, 2013); needs analysis is "context-dependent and context-specific" (Huang, 2010, p. 535).

1.1.   *The Research Context*

In Iranian universities, university programs such as Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English Literature, applied linguistics, and other language-related programs are the only university programs that are delivered in English. In Shiraz University, Iran, a large number of students have been studying in these language-related programs at the bachelor, master and Ph.D. levels. These programs only use written tests of language proficiency which is a part of the universities' national entrance exam. These written tests are aimed at assessing prospective university students 'knowledge of reading, vocabulary, and grammar. None of these programs make use of any oral proficiency gatekeeping tests. Students at the Ph.D. level are required to take part in an interview session to enter the Ph.D. program assessing their oral proficiency as well as their content knowledge. In addition to these gate-keeping language tests, Shiraz university has also made use of a post-admission English test, which is called the English Exempt test, as one of its requirements. If the students fail to score above the cut scores set for different levels (bachelor, master, and Ph.D.), they are required to attend the university's general English language courses. Similar to the national university entrance exams' language test, Shiraz University's post-admission test only assesses students' reading and vocabulary at the bachelor level, and reading, vocabulary and grammar at the master and Ph.D. levels. The general English courses also offer lessons only on reading, grammar, and vocabulary. Although being able to communicate orally in English is of great benefit to students in all majors, the importance doubles for the students who major in language-related programs in which the medium of instruction is English. Also, the students of these programs most probably want to become English teachers after they graduate. Anecdotal evidence (TEFL instructors and Ph.D. students, personal communication, September 16, 2017) from the instructors and the students suggests that a number of the BA, MA and Ph.D. students in these language-related programs have limited English speaking ability.

Students' lack of the required oral proficiency to function effectively as they pursue their academic studies can adversely affect their academic success (Berman & Cheng, 2010). They may become frustrated and lose motivation to engage with the process of learning (Murray, 2010). Murray (2010) also believes that these students' inability can affect their classmates and instructors. More competent classmates may become frustrated if they see their progress as being hampered by classmates who should not, in their opinion, be accepted in the program if they do not have the required language skills. Instructors also feel frustrated when they are presented with students who lack the necessary language skills to keep up. Also, these instructors are not well equipped to address these language skills which are critical to students' academic success.

To address these issues, the problem needs to be identified and clearly defined; This can be achieved through needs analysis studies. Needs assessment contributes to making better decisions about students' needs by identifying the gap between the students 'current and desired achievements (Watkins, West & Visser, 2012).

A number of EAP needs assessment studies have been conducted focusing on Iranian students' language needs in universities; yet, there is few, if any, studies on English-majoring students' English language needs during their tertiary studies. Given the fact that in these programs, English is both the subject and the medium of instruction, students' language weaknesses might affect their university achievements more significantly. Therefore, a study that identifies the difficulties that English-majoring students experience in their academic studies would be beneficial. Therefore, the present study attempted to conduct a needs assessment study to investigate Shiraz University English-majoring students' academic speaking needs. This study addressed the following research questions:

Research Question One: Is there any problem with BA, MA and Ph.D. English-majoring students of Shiraz University's academic English-speaking ability as perceived by their instructors?

Research Question Two: What is the magnitude of the problem with the academic English-speaking ability of students at each level of education as perceived by the instructors?

Research Question Three: What are the causes of the problem with the students' academic English-speaking ability as perceived by the instructors?

Research Question Four: How can the problem with the students' academic English-speaking ability be solved as suggested by their instructors?

2. Literature review

The first step for gaining a broad picture of university students 'needs and to support their academic language skills 'development is to conduct a needs assessment (Huang, 2013). To begin any effective needs assessment, the academic needs in the target context should be identified (Deutch, 2003); the description of the needs should be in line with the specific characteristics of the academic context under the study (Holmes & Celani, 2006). The next step is to determine all the possible measures that can be taken to improve the performance (Watkins, West & Visser, 2012).

Various studies have been conducted to identify university students 'speaking difficulties in academic institutions in English-speaking countries from the perspective of the students themselves. Concerning the speaking needs, some studies have mainly focused on the microlinguistic features of spoken language such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, while some other studies have focused on the interactional aspect of the language and have investigated the macrolinguistic needs of students such as language functions and/or the communicative interactions in which the students are required to take part. For instance, Gan (2012), mainly addressing the components of the language, attempted to identify university students 'challenges with oral English skills at a university teacher-training program in Hong Kong. Using semi-structured interviews with twenty students, the study found that inadequate vocabulary, grammar and imperfectly learned pronunciation and intonation were the main challenges that the students had in their studies. Factors such as lack of enough opportunities to speak English in class, insufficient focus on language improvement in the curriculum, and the input-poor environment for spoken communication outside class could worsen the situation. Based on the findings of the study, the author concluded that the effectiveness of the content-based ESL teacher-training curriculum should be questioned, and language intervention programs should be incorporated in the university programs.

In another needs-analysis study, Kim (2006), using a survey, examined East Asian international graduate students 'views on their academic listening and speaking skill needs in their university courses and their challenges in meeting these needs. Focusing on the interactional aspect of the language, the participants reported that speaking tasks such as whole-class discussions, small-group discussion and asking questions in class were the most common tasks in their classes. They experienced difficulty in leading class discussions and in taking part in whole-class discussion tasks. To the students, formal oral presentation tasks were the most important speaking skill for academic success and pronunciation was the least important one. These results were in line with the findings of Ferris '(1998) study, in which the views of students in three American universities about their challenges in English listening and speaking skills were investigated. Similar to the findings of Kim's study, Ferris found that the participants experienced greater difficulty with oral presentations and whole-class discussion tasks.

According to Rosset (1982), in needs analysis studies not only should we obtain the views of the individuals on their own needs, but the needs can also be described from the perspective of others. According to Watkins, West and Visser (2012), the inclusion of various perspectives in the needs assessment process can add significant value to the information that is collected and to the decisions

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which are going to be made based on such information. One significant source of information for needs analysis studies in the target contexts is university instructors' perception of students' needs. Ferris and Tagg (1996) believed that one of the most vital steps in needs analysis for EAP is to view the problem from the viewpoints of the instructors and to describe their expectations and requirements. These expectations tend to be implicit and they are not apparent to students and instructors themselves and they need to become explicit through needs assessment studies (Ferris and tag, 1996). Some researchers have attempted to identify students' EAP needs from the perspective of the instructors (e.g. Ferris and Tagg, 1996; Huang, 2013; 1996; Sawaki, 2017; Zhu and Flaitz, 2005). However, according to Tavakoli and Tavakol (2018), these studies have examined the actual classroom practices to figure out where exactly the problem lies, and they have only come up with a list of difficulties rather than the causes or how to solve them. Rossett (1982) asserts that needs' assessment questions should focus on the identification of the problem, the magnitude and priority of the problem, and the causes and possible solutions. To illustrate, Singh (2019), in a study on EFL students of MA programs in a Malaysian university, investigated academic English language-related challenges in listening and speaking faced by students from the perspective of 16 university instructors. Using interviews, the study found that the difficulties were lack of field content knowledge to communicate, lack of confidence to speak, difficulty in comprehending classroom oral tasks, and dealing with differences in learning culture. The results suggested some policy changes and programs to equip instructors and other stakeholders to solve the problems faced by the students.

Yet another gap in the literature is that most of the studies including the studies reviewed above examined the language needs of university students who were studying in ESL academic contexts. These studies should also be conducted in EFL academic contexts; since the universities in EFL contexts that provide English-medium education have been growing in number and popularity, and although there are some commonalities between ESL and EFL academic contexts, significant differences can be found in terms of EAP education, principles and curriculum (Hori et al., 2016). These universities have hosted a large number of students who have not been equipped with sufficient language skills to pursue their studies. Therefore, needs analysis studies need to be conducted to identify the language needs of the students studying in these universities to take appropriate measures to support these students. For instance, Sawaki (2017) conducted a small-scale needs analysis study to examine university instructors' views on English language needs in their courses. Concerning speaking ability, which is the focus of the present study, the qualitative analysis of the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with six university instructors indicated minimal involvement of language use tasks requiring speaking at the undergraduate courses as opposed to other skills such as reading. Based on the findings, the academic English demands sharply increase at the graduate level creating challenges for the students especially with speaking tasks including oral presentation tasks, raising questions and discussions at academic conferences. The study also investigated the instructors' perceptions of introducing a four-skill English language assessment as the university gate-keeping test in Japan. The instructors were generally in favor of the introduction of a university entrance assessment including all four skills, even though there was not a balanced representation of these skills in their classes.

Some studies have also focused on the EAP demands of the students in Iranian universities (e.g. Atai, 2000; Eslami, 2010; Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2004; Gooniband, 1988; Khajeie, 1993; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008). For instance, Moslemi, Moinzadeh and Dabbaghi (2011) investigated the English needs of Iranian MA students studying biology, psychology, physical training, accounting and west philosophy from the view of 80 MA students and 25 instructors at an Iranian university. Using interviews, questionnaires, and texts, the study found that the students were mostly dissatisfied with their ESP courses and they demanded an urgent change and reconsideration of English teaching policies in Iranian school education and universities. The reason was said to be lack of enough exposure to English language during their studies. Another solution suggested by the participants was giving more

weight to English in the MA admission exam so that the students get encouraged to improve their English proficiency prior to entering the universities.

Similar studies in the Iranian context mostly analyzed the students' language needs in EAP programs as there is no English-medium education in Iran except for in language-related programs such as TEFL and Linguistics. Given the lack of research into language problems university English-majoring students may experience in an EFL academic context, a study that examines the challenges of the students in the language-related majors would be beneficial to EAP practitioners.

The results of the above-mentioned studies are significant in that they add to the body of knowledge that can guide future studies in the field; however, needs assessment is context-specific. According to Watkins, West and Visser (2012), in needs assessment studies, the findings of the past studies and their solutions should be considered as the past findings can provide context for current decisions about the problems. However, "successful solutions exist at a point in time and in a certain context, and they have limited transferability to different times and contexts" (P. 36).

Considering Shiraz University English-majoring students, needs analysis studies are needed to identify the problem with students' speaking ability, its causes and probable solutions and instructors are considered a good source to provide the desired information (Ferris & Tagg, 1996). With this background, the present paper reports on the results of a small-scale needs assessment study that aimed to identify the academic speaking needs of students in the English department of Shiraz university based on the perspective of their instructors.

3. Method

3.1. Design

This inquiry is a data-driven case study in nature focusing on the English-majoring students at the department of English of Shiraz University. The study attempts to identify the English difficulties BA, MA and PhD students face during their studies, sources of these difficulties and probable solutions from the view of their instructors.

3.2. Participants

A total of four (two males, and two females) Iranian full-time faculty members aged between 40 to 55 years participated in the interviews (They are referred to as participants 1 to 4). All the participants hold a PhD. in TESL and have at least 10 years of experience teaching courses at the English department of the faculty of Literature and Humanities of Shiraz University. They were chosen due to their experience in teaching all the three levels of education and their experience in teaching speaking courses. The faculty members reported on the BA, MA and Ph.D. courses they had taught within the same faculty.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled with the participants. All of the interviews were conducted during the first weeks of the fall semester (academic year 2018-2019) in the instructors 'offices. Each interview session took about 40 minutes, and covered the issues related to research questions: determination of the problem, instructors 'perception of the problem, severity and magnitude of the problem, causes of the problem and the recommended alternatives to solve the problem. The interview data were carefully transcribed by the first researcher, and they were double-checked by her research assistant. A set of themes and topics were identified based on the research questions and the analysis of the data using NVIVO12 (Figure 1).
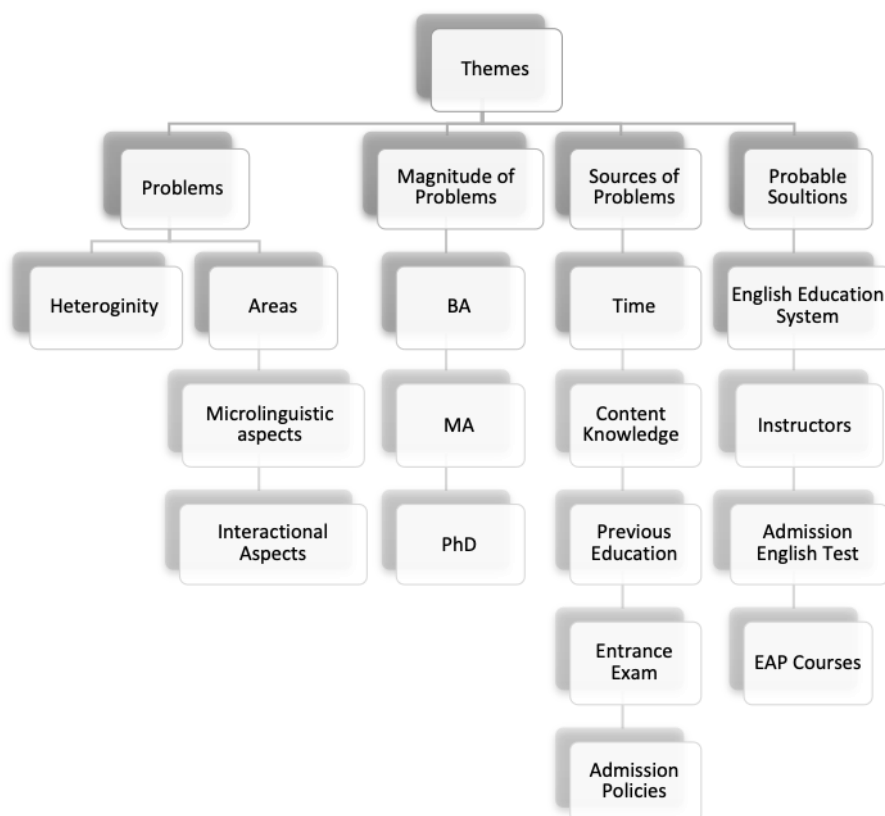
Figure 1: NVIVO Themes and Sub-themes

To ensure the reliability of the coding, a portion of the data was randomly selected from the full data set and was coded by a second coder to estimate the level of agreement (75.3 %). The researcher and the second coder then engaged in a discussion to resolve any ambiguities and disagreement regarding their coding.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the current study are presented based on the participants' views on any problems related to university students' speaking ability, the severity of the problems, the probable causes to the problems and any recommended solutions (Figure 1).

4.1. The Problem with Students' Speaking Ability

4.1.1. Heterogeneity

When asked if they have any problems regarding students' speaking ability, all four instructors acknowledged that there are some students at the BA, MA and Ph.D. levels who suffer from very low levels of speaking ability which creates a lot of problems for themselves, their classmates and their teachers. They considered heterogeneity concerning oral proficiency level as one of the problems they have at all three levels of education. Some students were reported to be weak in terms of their speaking ability while others were said to be proficient in speaking and this created heterogeneous classes. One of the instructors who was teaching BA students then stated that heterogeneous classes create a lot of problem for her especially in choosing the right course materials since she usually does not know students' oral proficiency level before the commencement of the courses:

> *…we do not know what to do with different groups of students… Another problem is that I do not know the students before going to the classroom, for example for freshman students, I didn't have*

> *any idea about students 'oral proficiency level, the first session I entered the classroom I started speaking to them, then I decide which textbook is suitable, it's too late because they enter the university later than other students. (Participant 1)*

Some MA and Ph.D. students were also said to have low levels of speaking ability. According to instructors, these students are usually good in terms of writing, especially on the written tests, they have to pass. They receive high scores on written tests and pass them, whether entrance or course tests, but their speaking ability is low. As one of the instructors put it,

> *...They cannot convey their ideas, they cannot speak, they cannot cooperate in classroom discussions, some of the students even during their defense session, they are not able to defend their thesis because their speaking ability is not that developed if we can call it. (Participant 3)*

4.1.2. Areas

4.1.2.1. Microlinguisticl Aspects

When the instructors were asked to elaborate on students' oral proficiency level and weaknesses, some focused on microlinguistic features of the language, and some focused on the interactional aspect of the language. One of the instructors believed that undergraduate students need to focus on their pronunciation due to the following reason:

> *Because I think some of the students may want to take these tests such as IELTS and TOEFL in the future, we have to focus on accuracy, even pronunciation, lots of students complain about pronunciation. They say as far as what we say is intelligible there is no need to follow British or American pronunciation and they're right. But I tell them because you are English students you should speak English accurately; you should pay attention to the stress patterns intonation and all these... (Participant 1)*

Another instructor also believed that undergraduate students have serious speaking problems due to their weakness in pronunciation.

> *I actually notice students whose knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is okay but when it comes to pronunciation because they usually have a lot of problems with the correct stress patterns of the words or intonation contours of the phrases or sentences when they even design their utterances to target at this specific point due to pronunciation problem, we usually face. some. obstacles in conveying ideas. And in some cases, if they are not familiar with the correct pronunciation of the words, the correct stress patterns and intonation contours of utterances, they might find it hard to convey their meanings or even understand what others. (participant 2)*

Derwing and Rossiter (2002) also found that the students in their study reported communication breakdowns due to their mispronunciation and inaccuracy of suprasegmental features. In Gan's (2012) study, imperfectly learned pronunciation and intonation were among the main challenges that undergraduate students had in their studies. As stated by Gan, the instructors believed that such weaknesses can be due to insufficient opportunities to speak English both inside and outside the classroom and less focus on language improvement in the curriculum. Similarly, In Soodmand Afshar and Asakereh's (2016) study, the instructors believed that one of the speaking difficulties that their undergraduate EFL students experienced was that they did not possess a good command of English pronunciation. Pronunciation, in line with Kim's (2006) study, was not an issue for graduate students as they experienced difficulty with more interactional aspects of the language.

4.1.2.2. Interactional Aspects

One problem that the instructors referred to was that the students especially the graduate ones find presentation tasks challenging and they are usually in the habit of memorizing what they are supposed to talk about before they attend a specific class. As one of the instructors put it, "even the Ph.D. students do not see the real function of monologues and oral presentation tasks. They usually memorize

the content and do not try to make themselves understood clearly and they do not pay attention to the way the interaction goes on or how effective their presentations might be" (Participant 3). The instructors also elaborated on the difficulties the students had with language functions especially when they participated in whole-class or group discussion tasks. They believed that the students at the graduate level need to improve their ability in using functions such as justifying opinions, arguing, paying more attention to communication breakdown, etc. Berman and Cheng (2010) suggested that graduate students would benefit from EAP instruction in speaking which emphasizes speaking skills such as raising and responding to questions, participating in small and large group discussions, and delivering oral presentations.

4.2. The Magnitude of the Problem

While all four instructors' comments supported the fact that there is a problem with the speaking ability of the students of all three levels which affects the learning and teaching processes in negative ways, they had conflicting ideas about the severity of the problem at each level. Two instructors believed that students' low level of oral proficiency is more problematic at the graduate level compared to the BA level. In instructors' terms, the assumption in the BA program is that the students enter the program to learn and they are not expected to demonstrate high speaking abilities.

> *...but regarding BA because we have two courses conversation 1 and 2, the assumption is that some of the students may not be able to speak fluently so we want to teach them, we are teaching them explicitly how to speak, I myself teach them phonetic alphabets and how to read the words, and how to pronounce the words. (Participant 2)*

> *The point is that we know that they [BA students] already acquired English to some level, more or less intermediate. Now when they enter university, our purpose is to improve their language ability in different skills and components, one of them is speaking. And speaking is one of the most important ones. So that's why we have specific courses designed to explicitly practice and teach speaking like conversation course or oral reproduction courses. (Participant 4)*

Also, nowadays because most students willingly attend private language institutes, especially the students from big cities, they are more willing to speak English. These two instructors believed that the situation in the MA and Ph.D. programs is more problematic because the assumption is that these students have already mastered English speaking abilities.

> *but we do not teach speaking at the level of MA and PhD explicitly because the assumption is that they are already able to speak English. (Participant 4)*

> *The expectation is that someone who is an MA student has no problem with speaking, he has already acquired language e skills and he is at the high level of language, speaking, reading, writing, whatever. (Participant 2)*

Furthermore, according to instructors, the MA and Ph.D. students and in particular MA students have low speaking abilities and more severe speaking problems in comparison to the two other levels due to the following reasons:

> *... but regarding MA and PhD, because they are older or from the previous generation they are not that good in speaking English, some of them are good, but most of them are weak, even when I ask them to present something they are they will become stressed out and they ask me to choose another person, or another activity instead of speaking and presentations. (Participant 2)*

> *For master the speaking is totally missing, so it's only written exam, that's why I said MA would be very problematic, the same case is for BA, For BA we do not have any oral exam, but for BA the assumption is that they are here to learn language as well, so that's why we have at least within the first year plus half of the second year is specifically dedicated to teaching and practicing language explicitly. (Participant 4)*

The findings are in line with Berman and Cheng's (2010) study in which undergraduate students were generally doing satisfactorily in their studies despite possible language difficulties. The authors suggested that graduate students, on the contrary, would require EAP instruction on their speaking skills such as taking part in discussion tasks and giving oral presentations. Sawaki's (2017) findings indicated that the speaking demands increased at the graduate level as opposed to the minimal involvement of speaking skills at the undergraduate and the graduate students faced challenges with speaking skills such as delivering oral presentations, handling questions and discussions in English at academic conferences.

The other two instructors had opposing ideas about the magnitude of the problem at three levels. They found the situation at BA level more severe due to the students' level of autonomy at different education levels:

> *I think a Bachelor's level is much worse because you know at the bachelor level our responsibility is much greater. The students are not that much autonomous. And that's why they need a lot of good guidance. And the problem is that they don't have that much time to devote to guiding the students as to how to be independent. We do our best but that's not enough. But at the Ph.D. level I think because of different reasons we can somehow give only paints and the students can do the job on their own because they are mature enough. (Participant 3)*

> *...because of the courses that they study, somehow, they become more aware and more conscious about the way we are learning, the way we are teaching and how they can improve but at the bachelor's level they don't have this awareness. (Participant 1)*

MA and Ph.D. have developed more autonomy in diagnosing their areas of weakness and in developing them. Besides, most MA and Ph.D. students have received instruction in their preceding programs which might have contributed to alleviating the situation. As stated by these two instructors, the situation is most favorable at the Ph.D. level, the reason being that Ph.D. students must take part in an interview session before they enter the program. Although the purpose of this interview is not solely to assess the Ph.D. candidates 'speaking ability, it can partly compensate for lack of any entrance or post-admission speaking assessment.

4.3. The Causes of the Problem

4.3.1. Time

The instructors enumerated some causes of the above-mentioned problems. One of the causes that they repeatedly referred to was lack of time. Based on the instructors 'comments, not only do the instructors not have enough time to improve students 'English level especially at the graduate level but also the students do not have enough opportunities in their classroom to practice speaking skills. One of the instructors elaborated on the lack of time at the graduate level:

> *They are always presenting chapter topics all the time in all courses. They were all prepared monologues, and students usually learn nothing... There is not enough time to discuss topics, or to practice any other speaking skills because we are under pressure to present because there are lots of topics to be covered... (participant 4)*

> *There is not enough time to discuss topics, we are under pressure to present because there are lots of topics to be covered, it would be very difficult for me to deal with such students honestly in MA classes. Because we have subject matters and you do not have time to deal with these issues like you have a course like statistics teaching whatever, you have lots of issues to be discussed (Participant 2)*

In addition to the number of materials to be covered in the courses, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) stated that in classes with a large number of students, the students usually have very little time for speaking and some learners generally dominate the whole class while others speak very little or never speak.

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Therefore, class lack of time due to class size leads to low participation and weakness in speaking ability.

4.3.2. Content Knowledge

Another reason why undergraduate students do less satisfactorily concerning their speaking skill in comparison to graduate students is, according to one of the instructors, students' lack of content knowledge at the undergraduate level and low knowledge of terminologies and vocabularies that may lead to low participation which in turn leads to less practice in the speaking skills and consequently low speaking ability. Another instructor highlighted content knowledge reflecting on Ph.D. students' good performance during the Ph.D. interview:

> *… And the interview is based on the content knowledge and students are able to talk about these terms and terminologies they have studies in the textbooks but when it comes to speaking about themselves or general knowledge or general topics, it would become very difficult for them. (Participant 3)*

The results are in line with Moslemi, Moinzadeh and Dabbaghi's (2011) study in which the findings indicated that the students' knowledge of core and technical vocabulary was satisfactory while the students struggled with general English content. Lack of topical knowledge and low participation are the inhibitions that the instructors come across in helping the students to speak in the classroom (Tuan & Mai, 2015).

4.3.3. Previous Education

The third reason for students 'poor performance concerning the speaking ability is the inefficient previous education including both school education and beginning university levels. Soodmand Afshar and Asakereh (2016) also referred to the inefficient education system as a speaking skills problem commonly reported by Iranian EFL students. Iranian school teachers only minimally emphasize speaking skills in their classes (Azizifar, 2009; Azizifar, Koosha & Lotfi, 2010); therefore, after the students graduate from high school and enter their tertiary education as university students, they experience serious problems concerning their speaking ability. One of the instructors highlighted the importance of previous education in fostering language skills by stating that, "if the focus is on language skills, this is what should be paid attention to from the very beginning levels of language education. It should start from primary levels" (participant 3). English learning calls for experienced and students' problems cannot be solved only in university (Moslemi, Moinzadeh and Dabbaghi, 2011). In addition to school education, inefficient BA education in which enough attention is not given to improving speaking skills was also considered a reason for graduate students 'low speaking ability.

> *I have problem with master students who come from other majors or the ones who have in fact a long interval between their previous level and the next level. It is also really disappointing when I see that even the students who majored in English at the BA level cannot deal with the language demands of the graduate and I honestly blame BA programs' curriculum and instructors for not improving students' speaking skills at early stages. (Participant 2)*

4.3.4. Entrance Exam

Another important cause of students 'poor speaking performance was said to be the university entrance exam. One instructor, confirming that BA inappropriate education might be the reason for low speaking ability at MA and Ph.D. levels, mainly blamed the screening test.

> *When you have a test in which speaking and even writing is missing, you have students who are not good in terms of speaking. Although we may somehow blame previous education as well, that cannot be an excuse to accept students with low speaking or writing ability as university students (participant 2).*

The view that the four instructors held in common was that all the problems referred to emanate from a lack of a speaking test which can assess prospective students 'preparedness to enter and continue their studies at any of these three levels. According to one of the instructors,

> *[The problem is the] Entrance exam, the way we choose students. We do not have any interviews or oral exams, they just take the test based on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension; they do not have writing, listening and speaking tests, so this is the problem of entrance exam (participant 1).*

According to instructors, the Ph.D. interview cannot be completely relied on since the interview is not specifically designed to assess speaking ability; its purpose is to assess Ph.D. candidates 'knowledge and expertise in the subject areas. The instructors reported that less than one-third of the interview score is devoted to speaking ability and the remaining score is devoted to candidates 'written entrance exam scores, their content knowledge, their GPA, and their other qualifications such as publications and work experience. The candidates are finally accepted based on a composite score of all these abilities which according to instructors can create problems,

> *... finally, we come up with a composite score, which is a combination of the written exam plus oral score and oral score is again two scores, one is proficiency score and one is knowledge score. We have different possibilities for students who are accepted sometimes their proficiency is probably low, but their content knowledge is good so that part will compensate for proficiency. We don't have any minimum score for proficiency. We focus on the composite score (participant 4).*

Although one of the instructors believed that when a Ph.D. candidate has a low level of speaking ability, he is incapable of conveying his content knowledge and so the probability of him/her being accepted to the program is low, the other instructor believed that "usually, candidates can talk about content knowledge and terminologies they have studied in the textbooks but when it comes to speaking about themselves or general knowledge or general topics, it would become very difficult for them". (Participant 4).

4.3.5. Admission Policies

All having agreed that the screening test should be very important and done differently, they concur with the fact that universities are not responsible for the gate-keeping tests and all the policies on selecting and assessing prospective students are determined by high authorities namely the ministry of education. As one of the instructors put it,

> *We are not involved in selecting students. Students are already selected. One of the major problems concerning our educational system as far as language education is concerned is that the whole thing is managed Top-down. Even for Ph.D., it is Sanjesh that decides how much of a score should be dedicated to written or the interview. For example, last year half of the score was dedicated to the written exam, this is a big part and it is too much, I guess... (participant 3).*

Generally, speaking is the language skill that features the least in gate-keeping language tests, especially in EFL academic contexts as the government and the responsible institutions are not able to commit the required resources and funding.

4.4. Probable Solutions to the Problem

4.4.1. English Education System

The instructors made some recommendations to solve the aforementioned problems. Firstly, the instructors believed that the aforementioned problems could be solved by revising and enhancing the quality of approaches to English teaching and assessment at the school level. According to Soodmand Afshar and Asakereh (2016), these problems cannot be eradicated without revolutionizing the current education system of Iran. This can be achieved by emphasizing a balanced four-skills language

education from the primary school onwards and a shift toward more communicative methods of language teaching.

4.4.2. Instructors

Another solution recommended by one of the instructors was the teachers acting as reminders. He believed that although the responsibility of taking care of language problems is personally on the students 'shoulders and the instructors especially at the graduate level might not have enough time to focus on improving language and speaking skills, they can at least act as reminders providing feedback on students 'language problems or guide them with appropriate intervention or extra-curricular programs.

4.4.3. Admission English Test

Concerning the speaking assessments, firstly, two of the instructors called for the revision of Ph.D. interview's rating.

> *I do recommend a cut-off score for each of these exams. That is, you have to set a cut-off score for proficiency if somebody is below that proficiency even if his knowledge is quite high, he should fail the test. (Participant 1)*

Secondly, as there seems to be no plan for introducing a speaking component into the national university entrance exam, all four instructors agreed on the necessity of the introduction of a post-admission speaking assessment for the department of English of Shiraz University.

> *... if students being admitted to BA program go through more screening processes, when it comes to MA or PhD programs, we will have much less problems so the nature of the exam at BA level determines the quality of instruction offered to students and to a great extent the final outcome of the success of the program is again determined by the quality of the exam. So, I think we had a post-admission speaking test especially at the BA level, our students would have higher speaking ability. (Participant 4)*

The easy solution is to use some popular standardized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL which are commonly used by English-speaking academic contexts. The use of such internationally recognized tests in various academic contexts may lead to a concern which was pointed out by Bachman and Palmer (2010) as one of the misconceptions about language assessment which lies in the belief that there is a single ideal test for any given testing situation. This misconception may lead test-developers to blindly make use of particular language tests for any contexts simply because they are commonly used or are popular while such tests may not be suited for specific test-takers or may not meet the test-users 'needs. When asked to comment on the utility of standardized high-stakes tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, there was a general feeling among all four instructors that these tests might be suitable to be used; however, in line with Bachman and Palmer (2010), the instructors cautioned that there is no such a best method which suits any given situation. More studies are needed to determine the appropriateness of these high-stakes tests as tools for placing students in university programs in particular academic contexts (Arrigoni & Clark, 2015). According to the participants,

> *.... different students in different contexts have different needs and different backgrounds because of the different backgrounds. And this means that we can't have one cure all medicine. So standardized test seems to be to function as one cure all medicine. (Participant 2)*
> *... we know that in real world I think those exams might not be valid, if we call it validity because what we do in real situations is not what is tested in international exams. (Participant 3)*

Another alternative suggested by the instructors was to develop a post-admission speaking test that satisfies the needs of the stakeholders.

> *I think it is necessary to consider the context in which the students have to do their jobs. So, I'm sure the context in which we are teaching and the students are learning is not exactly the same as*

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the context in which students study abroad. So different functions are more essential in this context which may not be that much in those contexts. (Participant 1)

Yeah that's more valid, if they have tests for their own context, obviously they are more valid than these tests. And I think we need some tests because lots of students are not going to travel abroad or are not going to take IELTS and TOEFL tests. So, we need another test but I'm not sure whether we can develop such a test or not. (Participant 2)

Post-admission language tests, with a diagnostic purpose, can assess students 'preparedness for the variety of challenges awaiting them and can identify weaknesses in language and thus intervene learning by advising the students to appropriate EAP enrichment programs or guiding instructors ' subsequent teaching activity (Ransom, 2009; Read, 2015). These tests also enable the students to understand and take responsibility for their needs (Ransom, 2009). In line with Read (2015), the instructors who were concerned with the students 'autonomy in learning, believed that post-admission language tests can help the students to take responsibility of their learning activities and to gain an acceptable level of autonomy in deciding whether to seek assistance, based on their study goals and learning styles.

4.4.4. EAP Courses

Another alternative referred to by instructors is revising and enhancing the quality of English credit-bearing courses by including a speaking component into these courses. As mentioned earlier, current EAP courses in Shiraz University English department mainly focus on the reading skill and language components such as grammar and vocabulary. Including speaking activities in these courses might improve the English-speaking ability level of the students. However, as also mentioned by one of the instructors, the universities might not be prepared to resource EAP speaking courses for all the students due to problems such as cost, scheduling and finding space in the curriculum (Murray, 2010). The universities can decide on the appropriate alternative based on their resources. The first step is, however, conducting needs analysis studies that serve as a model of the English skills needed by Iranian university students to study at the university level in English-related programs.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The findings of this study indicate that the instructors at Shiraz University English department believe that there is a problem with their students' English-speaking ability at all levels of BA, MA, and Ph.D. Although instructors had conflicting ideas, the findings suggest that students at BA and MA levels have more serious English-speaking problems. The causes of these problems were said to be insufficient focus on improving speaking skills at the university programs, the inefficiency of the preceding education and lack of any gate-keeping or post-admission speaking assessment. The instructors were generally favorable about the introduction of the speaking skill in the post-admission speaking assessment and/or the EAP programs which can solve the problem to a great extent.

The findings of the current study have implications for the development of post-admission tests as well as designing EAP courses. A longer-term benefit of this study is the impact it might have on English education in Iran by necessitating the revision and enhancement of the quality of approaches to English teaching and assessment at the school level. To achieve these goals, future studies can focus on a more detailed analysis of students 'speaking needs by analyzing the spoken discourse involved in their courses. Another viable approach would be to examine the perspectives of the instructors as to what should be included in the post-admission speaking assessments or the speaking content of the EAP programs. The current study was conducted as a preliminary investigation that can inform future larger needs analysis studies focusing on identifying students' English-speaking needs that can contribute to the design and development of post-admission tests and EAP programs. Care should be taken in using the findings of the present study as it is only based on a small sample; although the instructors 'views

are quite valuable in making informed decisions in any needs-analysis study, the perspectives of other stakeholders can strengthen the validity of the findings.

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