# Foreign Language Learners Dropping out of Language Classes: Honoring Dropouts' Voice

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**Abstract**

Many language learners in foreign language contexts leave their courses halfway before reaching advanced levels of proficiency. Despite a large body of research on dropping out of school or higher education programs, few have delved into this multi-faceted phenomenon in language institutes and tutorial language courses. The current study, utilizing a qualitative approach, aimed at investigating EFL learners dropping out of face-to-face language classes in Iran. To this end, 20 participants were interviewed to explore their main reasons for abandoning classes in 44 dropout instances. The interviewees' responses were analyzed and reported through six phases of data familiarization and note-making; systematic data-coding; initial-themes generation; themes development and review; themes refinement, definition, and naming; and the report writing. Forty-nine major reasons were found which were classified into 5 themes of satisfying need for higher priority, teacher-induced dissatisfaction, administrator-induced dissatisfaction, satisfied language-class-related need, and improvement-related dissatisfaction. Administrator-induced dissatisfaction, however, was specific to public classes in language institutes – not private ones. Since English is taught mainly for academic purposes in Iran, the findings have implications for both research and practice purposes concerning any foreign language.

*Keywords*: Dropout, EFL, Foreign Language Learners, Reasons, Reflexive Thematic Analysis

## 1. Introduction

There are legions of Foreign Language (FL) learners going to English classes. However, past research (e.g., Amini, 2015), as well as anecdotal evidence, suggests that a host of EFL learners in Iran drop out of language classes before finishing advanced levels. On the other hand, although many studies to date have already examined students dropping out of school (e.g., Rumberger, 2011; Samuel & Burger, 2020; Tarabini, 2019) and university (e.g., Casanova, et al., 2018; Tino, 2015), few have specifically addressed learners dropping out of language classes. These studies have either investigated dropping out of language courses held by universities (e.g., Damron & Forsyth, 2012; Stracke, 2007) or, to a lesser extent, by language institutes (e.g., Dahman & Dağ, 2019). Also, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, there is almost no research concerning dropping out of tutorial (one-on-one or very small group) language courses.

In the EFL context of Iran, so far, only two studies have addressed this phenomenon. Amini (2015) studied reasons for students' dropout in certain branches of a language institute in Tehran. However, she only used past literature to develop her questionnaire items as well as for recommending the potential remedies. In the second research, Modarresi and Javan (2018) constructed a questionnaire for EFL learners' dropout of language institutes. Nonetheless, only teachers and experts – rather than the dropouts themselves- were interviewed in the first qualitative

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phase for extracting the themes regarding students' dropout reasons. Besides, in the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was administered to only 90 students and was limited to those who had studied English for at least five terms.

Therefore, there appears to be a paucity of research on FL learners' dropout of language courses, especially out of language institutes and private classes. It is this paucity that motivated this study. This paper is amongst the very few studies in which the dropout themes were – qualitatively and in-depth – elicited from the dropouts themselves, who might, better than any other sources, provide first-hand accounts of the major reasons for their own dropouts. This study investigated the major dropout reasons among adult EFL learners in face-to-face classes.

## 2. Literature Review

Theories, frameworks, and models of dropout abound. They have been mostly derived from studies pertaining to school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2011) and higher education dropout (e.g., Tino, 2015). Samuel and Burger (2020) longitudinally investigated both dropout intention and actual dropout at the upper secondary education level in Switzerland. He reported the determinant factors concerning dropout intention as being poor integration in scholastic social networks, low sense of belonging, low perceived educational control, pessimism and stress, low intrinsic motivation, and low self-determination; and those concerning the actual dropout as being low educational and cognitive achievement, poor educational expectations, low identification with school, low academic self-efficacy, school disruptiveness, having no school friends, poor socioeconomic status, school disengagement, and stressors consisting of parental imprisonment, youth arrest, and health problems.

There are also few models which have been developed in studies concerning language learners' dropout (e.g., Rodriguez, Carrasquillo, Garcia & Howitt, 2020; Wesely, 2010). It should be noted that due to the commonalities among different types of educational dropout studies, their theoretical foundations have been tapped into interchangeably across these various lines of research.

For example, Rodriguez et al. (2020) found four categories as the major dropout factors commonly mentioned in the literature on English language learners dropping out of school, including academic, institutional, school services, and additional factors (mainly socioeconomic and familial factors). Rowsell (1992) suggested that dropout reasons could be classified into external factors (e.g., employment, illness, and relocation) and classroom-related factors. In her research, she focused on studying the latter type through examining a few unpublished surveys and questionnaires (due to the paucity of the published ones) concerning adult ESL (and EFL) learners dropping out of language courses (mostly university language courses) in multicultural classrooms. She found that incongruity between students' expectations and teaching methods and materials, along with boredom (either as the symptom or consequence of this mismatch) was the most prominent factor resulting in poor attendance and eventually their dropout. In another study, Wesely (2010) reviewed the literature on foreign language dropout in both traditional and immersion programs. She found that foreign language learners' dropout is mainly influenced by the interaction between the institution and individuals revolving around four factors of instruction, academic achievement, motivation, and anxiety. As for the instruction, the incongruity between the institution and students' beliefs, expectations, and wants, especially, students' disapproval of the teaching method, might lead to foreign language learners' dropout. Second, when students are not satisfied with the way the institution's assessment interacts with their ability to achieve academic success (usually satisfactory grades), they are more likely to drop out. Third, the interaction between the motivation, attitudes, or goals of individuals and course content can correlate with foreign language learners' dropout decisions. Last, but not least, the interaction between the presence or type of anxiety in individuals and the pacing and style of instruction is another factor contributing to students' decisions to leave or stay in traditional foreign language programs.

Callahan (2013) reported the main dropout risk factors associated with language learners dropping out of school, as detected in the literature, as being in the racial-ethnic minority, being the child of an immigrant, and having parents of low education. He classified the dropout reasons in the

general population into two main factors of academic and social engagement, and opportunity to learn.

Previous research has also tackled the dropout phenomenon in higher education. Tino (2015), for instance, reviewed the major findings on higher education persistence (esp. those which emphasize the role of institutions) and found the combination of more academic and social integration of students as the most influential factors in the students' stay with the program. In another study, Casanova et al. (2018) surveyed 2970 freshmen in Portugal and found that academic performance was the primary factor contributing to students' decisions to drop out.

In another research, Xavier and Menesus (2020) reviewed the dropout issue in online higher education programs in 138 studies and concluded that course and program factors (student support), student factors (motivation, time management skills, and satisfaction), and environmental factors (time- and financial-related issues) were among the most influential factors.

As far as empirical studies are concerned, a few studies have addressed the dropout issue in language courses. They have mostly been concerned with university language courses (e.g., Damron & Forsyth, 2012; Nagle, 2021; Northwood & Thomson, 2012; Stracke, 2007). As a case in point, Damron and Forsyth (2012) studied the reasons that caused students to quit learning Korean in university courses in the U.S. They found that the main reason for quitting was that the language class did not fit the students' schedules. The students also mentioned 10 more contributory factors to their dropout, including the course being too difficult, not challenging enough, and too time-consuming, as well as having language-learning anxiety (especially test anxiety), no native significant other or friend anymore, not enough confidence to go to an upper level, learned enough already, lost interest in the language, progressed less than their expectations, and no academic requirement anymore (e.g., due to graduation).

Even fewer studies have investigated language learners dropping out of language institutes (regarding dropout predictors or reasons). Dahman and Dağ (2019), for instance, found higher scores on motivation, attitude, and low-anxiety tests along with lower scores (though surprisingly) on placement tests as the strongest predictors for adult EFL learners' dropout in a language institute in Turkey. Evans and Tragant (2020) surveyed dropout reasons among adult EFL learners in a language academy in Spain. Shortage of time, irrelevance to job, personal reasons, unaffordable tuition, teaching method, insufficient progress, teacher, language learning difficulty, and resources were reported to be amongst the most important reasons for leaving the academy.

In the FL context of Iran, up to now, two studies both adopting a mixed-methods approach, have addressed this phenomenon. In the first one, Amini (2015) studied reasons for dropouts among 12 years old (and above) students in several branches of one language institute in Tehran. She found eight factors including external forces, teacher, loss of interest, educational material, educational technology, failing experience, class characteristics, and peer pressure as the major reasons for the students' dropout. However, only the past literature was drawn on for developing dropout questionnaire items. Moreover, this literature mainly comprised studies of school dropout, higher education dropout, and demotivation. In the second research, Modarresi and Javan (2018) constructed and validated a questionnaire for adult EFL learners' dropout of language institutes. Major factors turned out to be demotivation, emotions, teacher cognition, socioeconomic problems, teaching methodology, and administrative evaluation and decisions Nonetheless, in the quantitative phase, the questionnaire was administered to only 90 students, which did not meet the minimum requirement of 150 participants for factor analysis (Pallant, 2020), and was limited to those who had studied English for at least five terms. Besides, only teachers and experts – rather than the dropouts themselves – were interviewed in the first qualitative phase for extracting the themes regarding students' dropout reasons. The purpose of the present study was to investigate dropout reasons from the perspective of learners. To this end, it was intended to address the following research questions:

**Research Question One**: What are the major reasons contributing to FL learners' decisions for dropping out of language classes from their own perspective?

**Research Question Two**: What themes of dropout reasons can emerge from the participants' interviews?

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Design of the Study

The current study aimed at investigating EFL learners' major reasons for dropping out of face-to-face language classes in language institutes and private classes in Iran in the academic year of 2021-2022. As far as the researchers could tell, in the scanty literature on FL learners dropping out of language institutes, the dropouts taking surveys had to choose the major dropout reasons only from among a repertoire of items which had not been elicited from the literature specific to FL learners' dropout nor from the dropout themselves as the first-hand source of information. This justified the need for a more detailed exploration of the main reasons for FL learners' dropout from their own perspective utilizing a qualitative approach. The epistemological standpoint of the present research was more in line with a contextualist method, which sits somewhere between pure essentialist and constructionist paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This epistemology was taken on since not only the meaning made by the participants of their experiences was reported but also the social context of Iran was taken into consideration.

Among different approaches to phenomenological research, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was adopted for this investigation. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a generic method aimed at identification, analysis, and reporting themes or patterns within a dataset in a systematic manner (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The rationales for this adoption, instead of interpretative phenomenological analysis (e.g., Mcleod, 2011), according to Braun and Clarke's (2020) recommendations, are as follows. The sample in the present study is fairly large and heterogeneous (i.e., dropout instances at a variety of age levels, proficiency levels, etc.). Second, identification of themes across the whole dropout instances – instead of distinctive features of individuals – was the researchers' main concern. Third, the researchers' main goal was furthering the understanding of the whole phenomenon, rather than just focusing on personal experiences. Next, the findings were also supposed to bear some practical implications. Last, but not least, the dropout experiences were intended to be explored within the socio-cultural context under investigation. Among three types of TA, including coding-reliability, codebook TA, and reflexive TA, the last one was adopted for the current study. The other types would be more suitable where the data were supposed to be categorized, mainly, into predetermined themes, where the themes were defined as domain summaries (rather than meaning-based patterns), and where the coders had preferably no prior knowledge of or experience with the topic under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2020). In contrast, reflexive TA allowed for a more flexible, open-ended exploratory design for the less-investigated phenomenon of FL dropout; and the researchers' reflexivity and subjectivity were prioritized so that seeing the phenomenon through the lens of their academic knowledge, ideological commitment, theoretical assumptions, and cultural membership could enhance the interpretation of data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### 3.2. Participants

A purposive sample of twenty adults, who had already had at least one instance of dropping out of language institutes or private language classes in Iran at any age during their lifetime, voluntarily participated in a one-on-one semi-structured interview with one of the researchers. The first five participants were found through convenience sampling and the others through snowballing. The participants included even those who were learning English at the time of the study. Different numbers of interviews have been recommended for reaching saturation in TA studies, including 6-12 interviews (Ando, Cousins & Young, 2014), 16-24 interviews for more deep-level coding in TA (Hennink, Kaiser & Marconi, 2016), and division of 6-10, 10-20, and over 20 for small, medium, and large research projects, respectively (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, the justification for recruiting twenty interviewees in the present research, apart from being consistent with the aforementioned formulaic recommendations, was considering factors such as the number and diversity of dropout instances, richness of data, meaning sufficiency, information redundancy, and identifiability of influencing dropout factors (while not drowning in the data).

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The interviewees had already dropped out of their language classes one to five times; the total number of dropout instances was 44. Ten interviewees were male with 25 instances, and ten were female with 19 instances of dropout. Their ages at the time of the interview ranged from 25 to 38.

The interviewees' information at the time of the dropout is as follows. Their ages ranged from 6 to 38. They had dropped out of public classes of language institutes (34 times) or tutorial courses (10 times). The English proficiency level of the courses of which the participants dropped out varied from Pre-A1 to C1, with the Pre-A1 and A1 levels being the most frequent levels (with 11 and 10 instances, respectively), and B1+ and B2+ levels (with one instance each) being the least frequent ones. They were either students or graduates ranging from kindergarten to PhD level in different majors. The participants were attending their classes in seven different cities in four provinces.

The three researchers had 15 to 25 (an average of 18) years of experience in teaching TEFL courses (from A.A. to Ph.D. level) at university, as well as general English courses (at all ranges of age and levels of proficiency) at language institutes, private language classes, and high schools in Iran.

### 3.3. Instruments

A semi-structured interview protocol was prepared to investigate FL learners' major reasons for dropping out of language classes. Its content and face validity were checked by two experts in the field before the final administration.

The interview protocol consisted of three sections. The first section gave a brief account of the purpose of the interview, the way it was conducted, the confidentiality of the responses, and the approximate time it took. The second section dealt with the participants' demographic information about their status at the time of the research. The third section consisted of the main interview questions. Since some of the interviewees had more than one instance of dropout, the first question asked which dropout instance, in order, they were talking about. The next seven questions required information at the time of the dropout, including their age, type of class, the proficiency level of the course of which they dropped out, their educational status, level, and major, and the city in which the class was held. Question nine, as the major question of this interview, entailed the participants to explain the reason(s) for their dropout.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The one-on-one interviews were conducted in a face-to-face mode in person, where possible, and were not feasible, they were online. The interviewees were informed that the purpose of the interview was to explore the reasons for dropping out of language classes. They were ensured about the confidentiality of their responses, and that wherever they are quoted, their actual names will be replaced by pseudonyms. After getting the participants' demographic information at the time of the research, they were asked about the number of dropout instances for which they could remember the reason(s). Then, they were asked to answer the interview questions about as many of those instances as they were willing to discuss. The questions were orally asked by one of the researchers in their native language (Persian). Probe questions were also asked, where necessary, to obtain more detailed responses. All the interviews were recorded – following the interviewees' consent – while the interviewer was taking field notes. The duration of the interviews varied depending on the number of dropout instances each interviewee had experienced and was ready to talk about; generally, each interview took from 15 to 35 minutes, with an average of 25 minutes. The interviews were then transcribed and translated into English by the researchers for further analysis.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

The analysis served to find the themes about the main reasons for dropout. In the current study, themes were conceptualized as a shared meaning-based pattern (rather than just a domain summary) since they accounted for both the essence and concrete meaning of a large amount of the dataset. In addition, they were conceptualized as analytic outputs (rather than inputs) as the identification and development of the patterns were not at the beginning of the analytic process. The significance and

meaningfulness of patterns in relation to the research questions, rather than just the frequency of their occurrence, were of higher importance in counting them as subthemes and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Yet, the frequency counts were reported to give a more subtle account of the reasons and to enhance comparability with similar studies. Accordingly, following the guidelines presented in Braun and Clarke's (2006) work, the interviewees' responses were analyzed and reported through six phases of data familiarization and note-making; systematic data-coding; initial-themes generation; themes development and review; themes refinement, definition, and naming; and the report writing, as follows.

First, each interviewee's transcription was read and notes of the main dropout reasons, mentioned in the responses, were made. Second, these reasons were coded and the data relevant to these codes were collated. They were coded inductively since the responses themselves (rather than the specific research questions, conceptions or theories) were supposed to be the starting point in the present analysis. In the early part of this phase, coding was more at a semantic level but latent codes were also made via the researchers' collaborative work as they approached the end of this phase. This combination of independent and collaborative work continued all through the other phases to enhance quality coding and achieve a wider range of codes as well as richer interpretation of the data (without a need to reach consensus among coders through measures such as Cohen's kappa, as in coding reliability approaches to TA). Third, from a list of unique codes, similar ones, along with their associated extracted data, were collated to form the candidate themes and sub-themes. Fourth, the themes (and sub-themes) were revised to ensure that they enjoyed internal homogeneity as well as external heterogeneity, reaching maximally non-overlapping themes. More specifically, in the first level, the compiled codes and relevant extracts were checked to see if they constituted a coherent theme (and sub-theme). In the second level, the sensible relationship of each theme to other themes and to the whole dataset was checked. The codes within sub-themes and the sub-themes within overarching themes were repeatedly refined until the two aforementioned criteria were met. This refinement continued in the fifth phase until the essence of each theme and the whole phenomenon were identified, the content and scope of each theme were clearly described, and a concise and self-explanatory name was assigned to each theme. Finally, the themes were checked again to see how well they worked with the dataset; vivid examples along with relevant analysis were presented, and the analysis was linked to the research questions and the literature. It is worth noting that a rich thematic description of the whole data set (rather than a detailed and subtle account of a particular theme) was reported. It better met the goals of the present research since it was aimed at conveying the sense of significant and predominant themes in the whole dataset concerning FL dropout. This rich description also facilitated judging the transferability of the findings. The consistency and strength of the analysis were also rechecked against the fifteen criteria in Terry et al.'s (2017) TA checklist and the twenty questions in Braun and Clarke's (2020b) TA evaluative tool for conducting a qualitative thematic analysis. Moreover, validation strategies of member checking and external auditing were employed to further enhance the credibility of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Accordingly, the participants were asked to confirm the account, two TEFL professors were asked to review both the process and product of the research, and finally, their feedback was applied.

## 4. Findings

This section includes the delineation of the major qualitative themes found regarding the main dropout reasons. All the demographic information presented in this section, including age, proficiency level, etc., pertains to the time of the dropout.

### 3.1. Dropout-reason Themes

The interviewees mentioned 49 reasons in total for their dropouts which were more than the number of dropout instances (44 times) since some of them stated more than one reason for each instance. Out of these 49 reasons (codes), 19 sub-themes emerged which were then combined into five major themes, including *satisfying need for higher priority*, *teacher-induced dissatisfaction*, *administrator-induced dissatisfaction*, *satisfied language-class-related need*, *and improvement-related*

*dissatisfaction*, in order of the most cited reasons. Table 1 shows all these codes, sub-themes, and themes sorted based on their frequency.

Table 1: Dropout-reason Themes

| Theme | $T_n$ | Sub-theme | $St_n$ | Code | $C_n$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Satisfying need of higher priority | 43 | Academic involvement | 30 | 1- End of summer vacation | 10 |
| | | | | 2- Having more time for school work | 9 |
| | | | | 3- Having more time for university courses | 4 |
| | | | | 4- Having more preparation time for high-stake exams (except Konkoor) | 2 |
| | | | | 5- Having more preparation time for university entrance exam (Konkoor) | 3 |
| | | | | 6- Clashing with school schedule | 2 |
| | | Occupational involvement | 4 | 7- getting too busy at work | 3 |
| | | | | 8- Clashing with working hours | 1 |
| | | Moving to another place | 4 | 9- Going to university in another city | 2 |
| | | | | 10- Emigration | 1 |
| | | | | 11- Having found a job in another city | 1 |
| | | Learning other skills | 3 | 12- Having more time for learning other skills (sport, music, etc.) | 3 |
| | | Forced conscription | 1 | 13- Doing compulsory military service | 1 |
| | | Family problems | 1 | 14- Illness of a family member | 1 |
| Teacher-induced dissatisfaction | 27 | Teaching skills | 19 | 15- Not working on all language skills and components | 3 |
| | | | | 16- Too lenient | 2 |
| | | | | 17- Cursory teaching | 2 |
| | | | | 18- ineffective meaning conveyance | 2 |
| | | | | 19- No utilization of supplementary materials | 2 |
| | | | | 20- No utilization of the Persian language (students' mother tongue) | 2 |
| | | | | 21- poor command of English | 2 |
| | | | | 22- Lack of confidence | 2 |
| | | | | 23- Little speaking in English | 1 |
| | | | | 24- Not having more to teach | 1 |
| | | Teacher's manner | 7 | 25- strictness | 2 |
| | | | | 26- impatience | 2 |
| | | | | 27- Scornful behavior | 2 |
| | | | | 28- favoritism | 1 |
| | | Teacher's abandonment | 1 | 29- Teacher's movement to another city | 1 |
| Administrator-induced dissatisfaction | 15 | Placement-related problems | 7 | 30- Wrong placement to a higher level | 2 |
| | | | | 31- Heterogeneous age groups | 2 |
| | | | | 32- heterogeneous proficiency of the class | 2 |
| | | | | 33- Wrong placement to a lower level | 1 |
| | | Teacher substitution | 4 | 34- Replacement of favorite teacher | 4 |
| | | Numerous terms | 3 | 35- Numerous terms from beginner to advanced level | 3 |
| | | Not reaching quorum | 1 | 36- Not reaching quorum for the next term | 1 |

| Theme | $T_n$ | Sub-theme | $St_n$ | Code | $C_n$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Satisfied language-class-related need | 10 | Academic need | 5 | 37- Having learned enough to cope with prerequisite English tests for PhD graduation | 2 |
| | | | | 38- Having passed a failed English course at school | 1 |
| | | | | 39- Having learned enough to cope with the English course at school | 1 |
| | | | | 40- Having learned enough to cope with the English language section in Konkoor. | 1 |
| | | Social need | 3 | 41- Having changed decision to emigrate | 2 |
| | | | | 42-No need to find a significant other in a coeducational class after marriage | 1 |
| | | Occupational need | 1 | 43- No English requirement in the new job | 1 |
| | | Psychological need | 1 | 44- False pride | 1 |
| Improvement-related dissatisfaction | 8 | Lack of progression | 6 | 45-Slow progression of the book | 4 |
| | | | | 46- No improvement in certain language skills | 1 |
| | | | | 47- Having found a better teacher | 1 |
| | | Failure-related problems | 2 | 48- Failing the term | 1 |
| | | | | 49- Failing apprehension | 1 |

Abbreviations: $T_n$, Frequency of Theme; $St_n$, Frequency of Sub-theme; $C_n$, Frequency of Code.

### 4.1.1. Satisfying Need of Higher Priority Theme

This theme was comprised of *academic involvement*, *occupational involvement*, *moving to another place*, *learning other skills*, *forced conscription*, and *family problems* as its main sub-themes. They included 14 different dropout reasons mentioned in 43 dropout instances.

Within the *academic involvement* sub-theme*,* the *end of summer vacation* and *having more time for school work* were the most reported reasons specifically among young learners of the school age. In some cases, their parents saw FL learning only as an extra-curricular activity to be done during the summer so that their children spent their free time in a more fruitful way. They were also "afraid that devoting time to English learning [during the academic year] might jeopardize [their children's] school lessons," as Mehrgan put it. Moreover, having more time to study school lessons was not always due to the end of summer or just a parental decision, but the learners' own decisions (esp. for the teenagers) as they felt they could not cope with the school work and English learning simultaneously. Next, *having more time for studying university courses* was reported as another excuse by some learners, regardless of their majors or degrees. Furthermore, *having more preparation time for high-stake examinations (other than university entrance exam)* such as the Doctoral Comprehensive Exam, Lawyers' Association Exam, and Engineering Association Exam was reported as a reason for leaving the English classes by three interviewees. Next, since *the university entrance exam* is of high priority for Iranian students, some of the participants postponed their English learning to devote more time preparing for that exam. Finally, Taher, speaking of his first and second dropout instances, said that his English class time clashed with his school schedule.

The next sub-theme was *occupational involvement* reasons and included two codes of *getting too busy at work* and *clashing with working hours.* For example, Majid, who was running a chicken farm, said, "I got so engaged with my business that I could not attend the class regularly; so, I could not learn well and the less I learned, the more demotivated I became." The other reason for this sub-theme, which was reported by Elnaz, a full-time shop assistant, was the clash of the working hours with her language class schedule.

*Moving to another place* (city or country) for work or study was the third sub-theme. Two interviewees mentioned that they left the class because they had to go to another city to continue their education at university, and the other one stated emigration to another country for the same purpose

as his reason for dropout. Another participant said that he had found a job in another city and had to abandon his private class.

The fourth sub-theme was labeled *learning other skills*. Some learners preferred to allot more time for learning other things such as sports or art. For example, Mahdis, a 19-year-old university student, said that she did not have enough time for the language class anymore since she had to attend a music class and do more sports activities.

*Forced conscription*, as a sub-theme that was specific to male adults, was only mentioned by one participant. This might be partly due to the fact that in the majority of instances (17 out of 25 male dropouts), they were still students and thus were not enlisted. It is also worth noting that four out of ten male participants in this study were exempted from doing compulsory military service.

Finally, the sub-theme of *family problems* was reported as a major reason for dropping out in one instance. Mohsen, a 28-year-old boy who was living with his parents, mentioned his father's illness as the reason for his second dropout experience. He said, "I had to stay home to take care of him."

### 4.1.2. Teacher-induced Dissatisfaction Theme

This theme, consisting of the second most frequent reasons, included the major sub-themes of teachers' *teaching skills*, *teacher's manner*, and *teacher's abandonment*, in order of frequency. They consisted of 15 different dropout reasons reported in 27 dropout instances.

*Teaching skills* included the most-cited teacher-induced dissatisfaction reasons. Some adult participants, at pre-intermediate (A2+) level or above, complained that their teachers did *not work on all the necessary language skills and components*. For example, Bita said that her "teacher didn't have any listening [activity] in the class." Two other codes which were also specific to adults at the aforementioned levels were teachers' *too much leniency* and *cursory teaching*. Parimah, an advanced (C1) level student, said "the problem was that my teacher wasn't strict enough." Bita and Mehrgan, two A2+ level learners, also complained of their teachers' "lack of follow-up" and that the teachers did not check their homework nor did they work on the books that they had introduced. Bita said that her "teacher passed over the course materials cursorily," and Mehrgan said that his "teacher didn't go on based on the [main course-] book and only taught it selectively." Regarding the fourth code, Behnaz, an A1 level learner, complained of her teacher's *ineffective meaning conveyance*. She said that her "teacher did not explain [the subject matter] well; she had poor meaning conveyance ability." As for the next code, some interviewees mentioned that their teachers only dealt with the main coursebook and did *not utilize any supplementary materials* such as movies, songs, or other books. The sixth reason was *no utilization of the Persian language (students' mother tongue)* in teaching and was specific to adult students of low proficiency levels. For example, Sheila, a beginning (A1) level learner at her first dropout, said, "It was too bad that the teacher didn't speak Persian at all because, first, you need to relate to your teacher to understand him." The next four reasons including *poor command of English*, *lack of confidence*, *little speaking in English*, and *not having more to teach* were only of concern to adult learners. Behnaz, an A1-level learner, referred to the teacher's poor command of language and said, "The teacher himself had problems with speaking [in English]." Sheila, concerning her second dropout, said that the teacher lacked self-confidence and that she and her classmates had a bad feeling when the teacher said it was her first teaching experience. Elnaz, an upper-intermediate learner, mentioned teachers' little English speaking as a reason. Mehrgan, who was at an upper-intermediate (B2) level and was tutored by a native speaker, who didn't have an academic degree in English teaching, said, "I felt she didn't know anything more to teach because no matter how long I'd go to her class, every time I sat the IELTS, I couldn't get above 6."

*Teacher's manner* included four codes of teacher's *strictness*, *impatience*, *scornful behavior*, and *favoritism*. While complaining of the teachers' too much leniency was reported by relatively higher-level students (A2+ and above), the teachers' strictness was mentioned by Nikan when he was at A1 and A2 levels. Two adult interviewees referred to their teachers' impatience as a contributing factor to their decisions to leave. Behnaz, for instance, said that her teacher "didn't give students any

further explanation when they had difficulties." The teachers' scornful behavior was reported by Samira, a ten-year-old girl, as a major reason. Samira said, "If the students didn't answer, he [i.e., the teacher] would treat them badly and scornfully." In addition, she complained of the teacher's showing favoritism toward a boy with the highest language proficiency in the class. She said, "The teacher asked questions only of him, encouraged only him; as if the class was only his."

*Teacher's abandonment* referred to the teacher's own decision to leave the class rather than a forceful substitution by the institute. Taher, an adult learner, had to discontinue his one-on-one private class since his tutor moved to another city.

### 4.1.3. Administrator-induced Dissatisfaction Theme

This theme was only reported by the interviewees in the current study regarding their dropping out of public classes in language institutes – not private classes – and was divided into four sub-themes of *placement-related problems*, *teacher substitution*, *numerous terms*, and *not reaching quorum*, in order of frequency. They included seven different dropout reasons mentioned in 15 dropout instances.

*Placement-related problems* were the most commonly cited sub-theme among administrator-induced dissatisfaction themes. Sheila, a secondary school student, complaining of "falling behind other students," and Samira, a child learner, complaining of "feeling like a fool," were among the participants who reported *wrong placement to a higher level* than their actual level as their major reason for quitting their classes. Classes with *heterogeneous age groups* were only a source of complaint about young learners. Ziba, for example, a nine-year-old girl who was placed in a class with older students, said, "I was taken aback when I first entered the class…I kept asking myself why am I here? They are not my age." *Heterogeneous proficiency levels* were more of a concern for the dropouts when they were less proficient than the other students in the class. To clarify the distinction of this code with its preceding and following one, it is worth noting that sometimes a learner himself/herself is placed at the right level of proficiency, but there are some other students in the class who are misplaced; in other words, the class is not homogeneous. For instance, Sheila, who was satisfied with class for the first four terms, complained that after some students at higher levels from classes out of the institute joined her class, the level of the class rose sharply and the teacher asked the students to catch up with those more proficient learners. However, she fell behind and passed that term by the skin of her teeth, as she put it, and finally dropped out after a short while. *Wrong placement to a lower level* as a reason was mentioned by Elnaz, an upper-intermediate learner. She said, "The grammars were repetitive and boring" and that "The class was not challenging" for her.

*Teacher substitution*, as a sub-theme within the administrator-induced dissatisfaction theme, was different from *teacher's abandonment* (within the teacher-induced dissatisfaction theme) in that here, the decision for replacing the favorite teacher of a specific class was made by the institutes' administrators, not by the teachers themselves. For example, Morteza, a 21-year-old student, said, "The new teacher couldn't replace the previous one well, and this lowered my willingness and eagerness."

The existence of *numerous terms* from beginner to advanced level was an issue for some learners. Mahdis, a 19-year-old girl, said that she always got bored with any long-term course, including the language course. Misconception about how long the language course takes was reported as the main reason for Narges's dropout (at the age of 24). She said, "I had a vision, before the beginning of the course, that I could finish it much sooner, but it did not come out so, and this was the reason for which I abandoned it."

*Not reaching quorum* for the next term (i.e., the minimum number of students in a class for it to be financially reasonable to meet), led one of the students to drop out at the C1 level.

### 4.1.4. Satisfied Language-class-related Need Theme

This theme included *academic*, *social*, *occupational*, and *psychological need*s sub-themes. They consisted of eight reasons reported in 10 instances.

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The first reason within the *academic needs* sub-theme was *having learned enough to cope with prerequisite English tests for Ph.D. graduation*. In Iran, doctoral students need to get the minimum passing score (determined by the ministry of science, research and technology) on one national (e.g., MSRT, TOLIMO, and EPT) or international (e.g., IELTS) English test to be eligible for graduation. Since this was the purpose of some of the interviewees to study English, they quit studying it after they had learned enough to get the required score on one of those tests. The second reason was reported by Nikan, a student at secondary school, who once had failed an English exam at school; and so, he had gone to a language institute for a few months to be able to pass his school exam. However, after he had *passed* his *failed English course at school*, he "had no reason to continue" the English class at the institute. *Having learned enough to cope with the English course at school* was a reason that Sheila, another student at secondary school, mentioned. She said, "I had learned grammar to the extent I needed in high school." The last reported reason in this category was *having learned enough to cope with the English language section in Konkoor*. Mahdis, a learner at the A2+ level, said, "I did an excellent job on the English section of the university entrance exam and that was all I wanted then."

Concerning the first code within the *social needs* sub-theme, two participants stated that because they had *changed* their *decision to emigrate*, they did not need to learn English anymore and hence dropped out. For instance, Nikan said, "After I found out that it was too hard to win a scholarship in the U.S., I changed my mind to emigrate." As for the next code, although holding mixed language classes in language institutes is against the law in Iran, few institutes, with some connections in high, hold them. Mehrgan, a 34-year-old bachelor who was at an Advanced level, said that his main purpose for going to that coeducational class was impressing girls with his speaking proficiency and finding a girlfriend. However, he had *no need to find a significant other in a coeducational class after marriage*, so he abandoned the class.

Lack of *occupational needs* was reported when an interviewee *did not require English in the new job*. Elnaz, who used to teach English at a kindergarten, but then became a shop assistant, said, "English was of no use in my job anymore."

The last sub-theme referred to the satisfied *psychological needs* of the learners which, in the case of one of the interviewees, was her false pride regarding her language proficiency. Elnaz, an upper-intermediate learner, said that after finding a job as an English teacher in a bilingual kindergarten, "I had a feeling of false pride so that I thought my English was very good since I could pass the job interview in English." This obviated the need to learn more, in her perception, and led to her dropout.

4.1.5. Improvement-related Dissatisfaction Theme

This theme consisted of two sub-themes of *lack of progression* and *failure-related problems*. They were comprised of five reasons that were mentioned in eight instances.

Concerning the *lack of progression* sub-theme, some participants, specifically those studying in the public classes, rather than the tutorial ones, complained of the *slow progression of the main coursebook*. For example, Sheila said, "Later on, we found out that the teachers were asked to talk so much about miscellaneous issues that we didn't go forward for more than one or two pages of the book per session." *No improvement in certain language skills* was another reason which was reported by Mehrgan. He said, "Each time I sat on the IELTS, my writing was below 6." Consequently, he got disappointed and left the class. *Having found a better teacher* was reported as a reason which dealt coup de grace to one of the participants' persistence. Sheila had already been dissatisfied with the class due to some other reasons and was about to leave that class, but as soon as she found a better teacher (based on the description she heard from one of her friends), she made her final decision to quit it. This reason could also be included within the teacher-induced dissatisfaction theme; nevertheless, it was classified under improvement-related dissatisfaction. The rationale was that although it indicated discontent with the teacher, this dissatisfaction alone was not enough to cause the dropout; the learner's need for more improvement was the final determinant here.

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The next sub-theme was the *failure-related problems,* which were specific to dropping out of language institutes rather than tutorial classes. *Having failed the term* at the A2 level, Nikan abandoned the class. He said, "I didn't want to study the same level twice; I wanted to learn new vocabulary." In addition, sometimes the *failing apprehension*, not failing itself, might be a reason for the dropout. Sheila, an 18-year-old girl, when her class became heterogeneous, following the addition of some more proficient students who were wrongly placed into that class, fell behind them and could hardly pass that term. Consequently, according to what she said, since she was afraid of failing the following term, she left the class after one more month in the new term.

## 5. Discussion

The present research found 49 major reasons and five themes of reasons (as shown in Table 1) for Iranian EFL learners dropping out of face-to-face language classes from their own perspective. The majority of these reasons had analogous equivalents in similar studies (Amini, 2015; Damron & Forsythe, 2012; Evans & Tragant, 2020; Modarresi & Javan, 2018; Rowsell, 1992; Wesely, 2010) or could at least be identified with their found factors (or reasons) in some ways, as shown in Table 2. However, they were categorized differently or were just labeled in a different way, and/or with different order of frequency. Some of them were even analogous to more than one factor/reason in those studies.

Table 2: Theme Identification with Similar Frameworks

| Theme | Amini (2015) | Modarresi & Javan (2018) | Evans & Tragant (2020) | Wesely (2010) | Damron & Forsyth (2012) | Rowsell (1992) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Satisfying need of higher priority | External Forces; Loss of interest | Socioeconomic Problems; Demotivation | Shortage of time; Personal reasons | Motivation | Too time-consuming; Not fitting the students' schedule; Lost interest in the language | External |
| Teacher-induced dissatisfaction | Teachers; Class materials; Class characteristics; Educational technology | Teaching Methodology; Teacher Cognition; Emotions; Administrative Evaluation and Decisions; Demotivation | Teacher; Method utilized in class; language Learning difficulty; Resources | Instruction; Anxiety | Language-learning/ test anxiety; Not Challenging enough; Too difficult a course | Classroom-related room |
| Administrator-induced dissatisfaction | Peer Pressure; Loss of interest; Class characteristic; External Forces | Administrative Evaluation and Decisions; Demotivation; Emotions; Socioeconomic Problems | Teacher; Language learning difficulty; Unaffordable tuition | Anxiety; Academic Success; Motivation; Instruction | Language-learning/ test anxiety; Not challenging enough; Too difficult a course | Classroom-related room |
| Satisfied language- | Loss of Interest | Demotivation | Personal reasons; | Motivation | Learned enough already; No | External |

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| Theme | Amini (2015) | Modarresi & Javan (2018) | Evans & Tragant (2020) | Wesely (2010) | Damron & Forsyth (2012) | Rowsell (1992) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| class-related need | | | Irrelevance to job | | academic requirement anymore; Lost interest in the language; No native significant other or friend | |
| Improvement-related dissatisfaction | Experience of failure; Teacher | Emotions; Teaching Methodology; Administrative Evaluation and Decisions | Little progress; Language learning difficulty | Academic Success; Anxiety; Instruction | Progressed less than the students' expectation; Language-learning or test anxiety; Too difficult a course; Not enough confidence to go to an upper level; Too time-consuming | Classroom -related |

Note. Factors and reasons within each framework are ordered based on the frequency of their identification with the corresponding theme in the present study.

Their identification with Rowsell's (1992) external/classroom-related factors dichotomy was quite straightforward. *Satisfying need of higher priority* and *satisfying language-class-related need* themes were all *external* factors while the other three including *teacher-induced dissatisfaction*, *administrator-induced dissatisfaction*, and *improvement-related dissatisfaction* themes corresponded to *classroom-related* ones. The identification with other frameworks, however, requires more specification as follows.

Satisfying the need for higher priority theme included the most frequent reasons in our study. It referred to needs emanating from events, decisions, or periods in the participants' lives which were of higher priority for them over learning English. Most of the reasons included in this theme could be mostly identified with *external forces* in Amini's (2015), and *shortage of time* in Evans and Tragant's (2020) studies, which were the most significant dropout factors in their studies. A few reasons, though, corresponded with the *loss of interest* in the former and *personal reasons* in the latter study. Moreover, this theme, except for the reasons in *moving to another place* sub-theme, was compatible with Damron and Forsyth's (2012) research in that they could be associated with three of the main reasons found in their study, including *too time-consuming*, *not fitting the* [students'] *schedule*, and *loss of interest in language*. Some of the reasons within this theme could also be identified with *socioeconomic problems* in Modarresi and Javan's (2018) study, as one of the probable sources of occupational, movement, conscription, and familial problems; or just *demotivation*. Yet, some of the high-priority involvements – especially a majority of the academic ones – which led the participants to dropout were not reported in their study. Wesely's (2010) framework, however, can hardly associate with any reasons within this theme since external forces, other than those exerted by the

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institute (administrator), such as societal or familial forces cannot be accounted for by her review-based framework, as she herself conceded. Nevertheless, quitting the course resulting from reasons including *end of summer vacation* or *learning other skills* could still be ascribed to *motivation* factors in her framework.

Teacher-induced dissatisfaction theme introduced reasons for which teachers were seen as the main source. This theme like *teachers* factor in Amini's (2015) study turned out to be the second most common theme. However, it was a broader theme in our study and primarily encompassed *teacher*, and then *class materials*, *characteristics of class*, and *educational technology* in Amini's (2015) work. It was also in line with Evans and Tragant's (2020) study in that *teacher* and *method utilized in class* corresponded with the majority of reasons within this theme. *Language learning difficulty* and *resources* in their study were analogous to a few of the reasons, too. A majority of the reasons within this theme, like Damron and Forsyth's (2020) study, heightened language learners' *anxiety* and/or made language learning either *not challenging enough* or *too difficult* for them. *Teacher-induced dissatisfaction* theme could also be identified with Modarresi and Javan's (2018) *teaching methodology*, *teacher cognition*, *emotions*, *demotivation*, and even *administrative evaluation* (manifested in teacher's lenient scoring). In addition, they could be well associated with Wesely's (2010) *instruction* (teaching method) as well as *anxiety* (resulting from teaching style or pacing) factors.

*Administrator-induced dissatisfaction* theme included the reasons caused by the administrators of the language institutes. As the third most frequent theme of reasons, it could be mainly identified with *class characteristics* and *peer pressure* in Amini's (2015), but with a different level of importance in these two studies. It is worth noting that Amini (2015) considered not liking classmates along with the classmates' loss of interest in English as peer pressure. Since reasons emanating from placement were reported to decrease the sense of belonging and losing interest in the classmates among some of the interviewees in our study, such reasons were identified with peer pressure in her research. Also, a majority of reasons within this theme could be identified with *administrative evaluation and decisions* and a minority with *demotivation*, *emotions* and even *socioeconomic problems* in Modarresi and Javan's (2018) study. One instance of socioeconomic problems reported in their study was the students' inevitable commute to larger cities for more advanced levels. Apart from the unavailability of qualified teachers or other required facilities, this commute might have resulted from the class *not reaching quorum* and the students' inability to pay extra tuition fees to compensate for a class in which quorum was not reached. Hence, the quorum not only pertained to administrative decisions but also had to do with socioeconomic problems. The reasons in *administrator-induced dissatisfaction* theme could be primarily identified with *teacher* in Evans and Tragant's (2020) study. This would be the case in private classes where teachers rather than administrators are the chief decision-makers. However, it should be noted that in our study, this theme was not an issue for the interviewees who dropped out of private classes. Few reasons corresponded with *language learning difficulty* and *unaffordable tuition* in their research, too. This theme is mainly associated with the same reasons in Damron and Forsyth's (2012) study that corresponded with teacher-induced dissatisfaction theme (i.e., *anxiety*, *not challenging enough*, and *too difficult*), in addition to the course being *too time-consuming*. It could also encompass all four factors, even *instruction*, in Wesely's (2010) framework. *Instruction* (besides lack of *motivation*) could be relevant to *numerous terms* as a dropout reason in our study since this reason might have emanated from students' insufficient understanding of the required time for learning a language utilizing a specific method of instruction. It is worth noting that *not reaching quorum* sub-theme was not accounted for in any of the two latter studies.

The satisfied language-class-related need theme referred to dropout reasons concerning the satisfaction of the learners' needs, which used to be satisfied by going to language classes. As the fourth frequent theme, it was mainly identified with *loss of interest* in Amini (2015), *demotivation* in Modarresi and Javan (2018), and *personal reasons* and *irrelevance to jobs* in Evans and Tragant's (2020) research. Most of the reasons in this theme were analogous to *having learned enough already*, having *no academic requirement anymore*, *loss of interest in the language*, and *no significant other*

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in Damron and Forsyth's (2012) work. However, the satisfaction of occupational needs was not reported as a reason in their research. This theme was also identified with Wesely's (2010) *motivation* factors, as they represented incongruence between the students' needs (goals) and the course content.

Improvement-related dissatisfaction theme, as the fifth and the least frequent theme of reasons, consisted of the reasons concerning lack of adequate or ideal improvement in language learning or the perception thereof. This theme could be nearly equated with *little progress* in Evans and Tragant's (2020) and *progress less than expectations* in Damron and Forsyth's research, which were also the fifth most important reasons (but not the least frequent ones) in their study. However, it also encompassed *language learning difficulty* in Evans and Tragant's (2020), *course difficulty, not enough confidence to go to an upper level*, *anxiety*, and being *too time-consuming* in Damron and Forsyth's (2012) research. This theme included *experience of failure* and *teacher* in Amini's (2015) study; *emotions* (e.g., *not satisfied with their progress*), *teaching methodology*, and *administrative decisions and evaluation* in Modarresi and Javan's (2018) study; and *academic success*, *anxiety*, and *instruction* in Wesely's (2010) study.

All in all, it seems that themes found in the present research were inclusive enough to be identified with those of similar studies and thus, to a great extent, consistent with their results. The only reason – not necessarily a theme – which was common among the similar studies but was not reported as a major one among our participants was the students' financial problems. This might be partly due to the fact that we only had a small number of participants who were not economically representative of the whole community of Iranian EFL learners. On the other hand, face-to-face interviews, compared to unanimous close-ended surveys, might have reinforced the cultural barriers which inhibited them from mentioning financial problems as a major reason for their dropouts.

## 6. Conclusion and Implications

In this research, twenty interviewees were inquired about their major reasons for dropping out of their language classes, whether in language institutes or tutorial courses. Forty-nine reasons were found to be the most influential ones in this regard. For these reasons, 19 sub-themes and five themes emerged. They included *satisfying need of higher priority*, *teacher-induced dissatisfaction*, *satisfied language-class-related need*, *administrator-induced dissatisfaction*, and *improvement-related dissatisfaction* themes, in order of frequency. It should be noted that although *administrator-induced dissatisfaction* theme was specific to the participants (in our sample) who dropped out of language institutes, all of its sub-themes, except for *teacher substitution* (by the institute), could be possibly considered *teacher-induced dissatisfaction* reasons in case of private classes among other groups of dropouts.

The findings of this study entail several implications for both research and practice purposes. From a research point of view, these findings, which were purely based on the dropouts' perspective, could provide a more reliable foundation for conducting large-scale research and surveys on EFL learners' dropout than those based on other stakeholders' perspectives or studies which were not specific to EFL learners' dropout. Second, a good grasp of reasons seemingly specific to language learners' dropout such as those in codes 15, 20, 21, 23, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, and 46 could shed some light on future research from a dropout standpoint.

Concerning practical purposes, having a deeper understanding of the dropout reasons from the dropouts' point of view, of their feelings toward these reasons, and of how these reasons ended up in their final decision to leave might better guide teachers, administrators, and even parents to provide appropriate intervention strategies. For example, knowing that the majority of dropout reasons (thematized as *satisfying need of higher priority*) simply resulted from the learners' lack of time indicates the necessity of providing more flexible class timing, and teaching time management skills to the dropouts, or even their parents (as some of them were afraid of their children being under time pressure for doing their schoolwork). Being aware of the importance of teacher-induced dissatisfaction reasons and of how different aspects of teachers' teaching skills and manners affect learners' decision to leave the course, calls for more attention to various aspects of teacher education, particularly the improvement of general English, self-confidence, teaching and assessment methodology, and temperament. The obvious role of administrative (institutional) decisions in the

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students' dropout suggests that more attention needs to be paid to accurate placement; and substituting students' favorite teachers should be done more cautiously, if at all. It also indicates institutes' requirement for reconsidering the entire course length and their quorum policy, if possible. Also, some students' views on how long it takes to learn a language need to be revised to match the reality. Recognizing the students' true language learning goals and their roles in satisfying their academic, social, occupational, and psychological needs could be helpful; spotting when those needs are about to be met could be helpful for teachers and administrators since they might be one of the warning signs of the learners' forthcoming dropouts. This also suggests that the students need to be reminded of how language learning could be useful in various aspects of life and in satisfying their prospective needs, even other than those already recognized by them. Improvement-related dissatisfaction reasons revealed the importance of the students' perceptions of their progress which were mainly perceived by the pace of their textbook progression and their scores. It should be noted that these criteria do not always and necessarily equate the actual improvement of the learners' proficiency or lack thereof. Thus, it indicates how beneficial it is if students' understanding is raised of how actual improvement in proficiency should be evaluated, and their actual progression be tangibly shown to them. It also implies that designing textbooks with fewer content materials on each page may be psychologically more encouraging for the learners.

Although the findings were in line with the previous studies, some variation in the priorities given to the analogous factors in different studies might suggest the context-specificity of this phenomenon. This calls for further research to disclose the primacy of these themes under each specific context.

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