

Learner Immunity in an EFL Context: A Qualitative Case Study of Iranian University Students Majoring in English

Abstract

Even though English is not the primary or even secondary source of communication in Iran, it is considered as the language of high importance due to several reasons. Iranian EFL learners experience a kaleidoscope of feelings and emotions ranging from extremely positive to highly negative to neutral. Considering that EFL learners encounter such feelings and emotions consciously or subconsciously, this study attempted to introduce the term 'language learner immunity' to incorporate the notion of EFL learners' ability to overcome psychological barriers such as demotivation and stress. They do so by shielding themselves with a protective armor, which in turn, might lead to effective language learning. To this end, 12 Iranian university students majoring in English were interviewed in depth in an attempt to gain a deep insight into their experiences. The data were then qualitatively analyzed by a thorough process of coding and memoing. Based on the analysis, language learner immunity was broken down into 5 categories depending on the extent to which the learners were immunized. Further follow-up studies would explore this avenue in a new light by studying language learner immunity using a clinical qualitative approach.

Key words: Demotivation, stress, emotions, psychological barriers, language learner immunity, EFL context

1. Introduction

English has been recognized as an international language and as a lingua franca (Brutt-Griffler, 2002) and its prevailing influence on different aspects of a person's life has made it all the more important to be learned. This can be seen through the way it has been made a compulsory program in schools and universities, even in foreign language contexts and also through the existence of numerous language schools and institutes. According to Hosseini and Jafari (2014), the two-fold purpose of learning English in a foreign language context like that of Iran are. Firstly, it is considered as an extremely important means of achieving higher education, and furthermore, it is considered as a way to gain entry into the foreign world and is strongly associated with traveling out of the country (Piller, 2010).

Despite its generally accepted usefulness, it has been observed that learners tend to lose their motivation or feel burnt-out through the process of learning it. In cases where English is compulsory, they are obliged to attend classes and complete the required courses whereas in situations where it is not compulsory to be learned, some learners tend to just drop out. The reasons that learners drop out may be a lack of motivation, demotivation, stress, burnout or resistance to language learning (Trang & Baldauf Jr, 2007; Canagarajah, 1999), among other factors.

Considering the amount of research done on demotivation, stress and burnout, it can be concluded that a large number of learners face such problems which can result in their

discontinuing the learning process. A significant number of students might lose their interest, enthusiasm and motivation towards language learning because of negative feelings such as peer pressure, pressure from parents, the inability to cope with such pressures, low self-confidence and esteem, debilitating anxiety, teacher's negative and discouraging attitude, unfriendly, stress-inducing classroom atmospheres and oversized classes. Furthermore, demotivated learners are said to lead to less successful educational programs and this, in turn, can make learning English more taxing and arduous (Haque, 2009).

On the other hand, there are a larger number of learners who continue their language learning and survive despite the number of obstacles, emotional or otherwise, they encounter. In spite of that, as mentioned by Pishghadam, Zabetipour and Aminzadeh (2016), the current literature has focused more on negative emotions such as anxiety while not paying attention that is needed to the impacts of positive emotions. While most of the research in this realm has focused on studying why learners fail to succeed in language learning and provide suggestions on how to improve the learning environment, this study intends to focus on what makes learners immune to these obstacles and continue even in face of emotional hindrances.

As mentioned above, one of the goals of this study is to investigate language learners' ability to overcome emotional obstacles such as demotivation, stress and anxiety, and burnout. This ability to surmount obstacles and make the best use of them can make learners immune to further obstacles they might face along the way. Hence, it can be said that learners develop immunity that protects them from being influenced by emotional obstacles, which is termed 'learner immunity' in this study. This immunity would function mainly as a defense mechanism against the emotional demands placed on learners, which would provide a meta-regulatory function which would, in turn, allow learners to be flexible without giving up. For this reason, developing some form of immunity appears to be a necessity for language learners to survive and avoid becoming embittered or indifferent.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that the concept of learner immunity is surprisingly an unexplored area in the field of language education. To the researchers' knowledge, no study so far has focused on the concept of language learner immunity and how it influences the learning trajectory of language learners' path. By understanding the characteristics outcomes of learner immunity and how it develops, there may be ways of using learner immunity as a tool which is compatible with change, development, and reflective learning.

Taking into account the fact that language learners face emotional or psychological hindrances that could promote or impede their process of language learning, this study intends to investigate whether psychological barriers such as demotivation, stress, burnout and resilience affect the L2 learner immunity and if they do, to what extent their effects prevail. Secondly, considering the situation that universities in Iran are mainly co-educational while schools are all single gender and that students from different parts of the country have to interact with each other in a classroom atmosphere, the study also seeks to determine if cultural variables such as gender and background affect the development of language learner immunity.

To investigate the above-mentioned purposes of the study, the following research questions have been formulated.

RQ1: To what extent do psychological barriers such as demotivation, stress, and burnout promote or hinder the development of language learner immunity?

RQ2: To what extent do cultural variables such as gender and background promote or hinder the development of language learner immunity?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learner Demotivation

The concept of motivation has been researched extensively in the past couple of decades (Dornyei, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2001a, 2002, 2003, 2009, 2010; Dornyei & Otto, 1998; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011; Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Gardner, 1985; Gardner, Lalonde, Moorcroft, & Evers, 1985; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Noels, Clement & Pelletier, 1999; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Warden & Lin, 2000). It is believed that in comparison to motivation, demotivation, its negative counterpart, has not received the attention it deserves from researchers (Kavianpanah & Ghasemi, 2011; Meshkat & Hassani, 2012). Furthermore, referring to Dornyei's (2001b) definition of demotivation, Meshkat and Hassani (2012) believe teachers' and students' experiences indicate that motivation is influenced by certain negative influences, or demotives. Dornyei defined demotivation as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (2001b, p. 143).

Dornyei (2005) believes that despite the positive and negative forces influencing ongoing student behaviors, past research on motivation has tended to disregard the negative motives. Researchers who regard demotivation as another side of motivation claim that students' motivation is under the influence of negative external and internal factors during the process of second language learning (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011; Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Kikuchi, 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). The construct of demotivation is gaining importance in recent years and more research is being done on it when compared to the past (Akbarzadeh & Sharififar, 2011; Arai, 2004, 2011; Falout et al, 2009; Heidari & Riahipour, 2012; Hirvonen, 2010; Hosseini & Jafari, 2014; Kavianpanah & Ghasemi, 2011; Keblawi, 2006; Kikuchi, 2009; Meshkat & Hassani, 2012; Rudnai, 1996; Sahragard & Alimorad, 2013; Sahragard & Ansaripour, 2014; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Most of the research suggests that student demotivation, the loss or reduction in motivation due to certain circumstances, is a major problem in foreign or second language learning contexts.

2.2. Learner Burnout

Another important factor that might contribute to learners' dropping out or their disinterest in learning another language is the construct termed 'burnout' which is considered to be emotionally related to the construct of demotivation (Ghanizadeh & Jahedizadeh, 2015). In relation to jobs concerning human service including teaching, Jennett, Harris and Mesibov

(2003) define burnout as a condition of physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion as a result of being involved long in emotionally demanding or stressful occupations. According to Dworkin (1987), when individuals receive disapproval on their functioning, they feel a sense of powerlessness leading to a sense of meaninglessness. However, learner burnout has been under-researched when compared to demotivation and teacher burnout.

2.3. Learner Stress and Anxiety

Learners, during the process of learning a new language, experience some psychological obstacles, one of which is termed as 'foreign or second language anxiety'. Spielberger (1983) defined anxiety as “a subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the automatic nervous system” (p.15) and MacIntyre (1998) defined second/foreign language anxiety as “the worry and negative emotional reaction aroused when learning or using a second language” (p. 27). Language anxiety could be the result of not only intrinsic motivators e.g. one's own self perceptions, perceptions about others and second/foreign language communications situations, one's beliefs about second/foreign language learning but also extrinsic motivators such as different social and cultural environments, cultural differences, social status of the interlocutors, power relations between them, gender, limited exposure to the target language and the authoritative, embarrassing and humiliating attitude of the teachers towards students (Hashemi, 2011).

Considerable research has been conducted on the psychological construct of foreign language anxiety and it is believed to transpire in situations where students are exposed to several negative experiences in a foreign language context (Chen & Chang, 2004; Elaldi, 2016; Sparks, Ganschow, & Javorsky, 2000; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012; Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Horwitz, Tallon & Huo, 2010; MacIntyre, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991; Saadi, 2009; Sparks & Ganschow, 2007).

2.4. Immunity

All living things experience unpleasant situations and to protect themselves they have developed systems known as the immune system, which is essential for their survival in a world full of potential dangers. Immunity is defined as the ability of the body to recognize, neutralize, or destroy harmful foreign substances in our body, which is considered to be similar to the resistivity of the body (Srushtik, 2012). In other words, immunity can easily be described as the defense system of our body. With regards to immunity in the field of medical science, they are of two kinds: innate (natural) immunity and the adaptive (acquired) immunity, with the latter being more specific and slower in comparison to the former. Furthermore, the adaptive immunity could either be actively or passively developed. Active immunity is said to result when a person is exposed to a disease organism which triggers the immune system to produce antibodies to that disease. When in contact with that disease in the future, an immune person's system will recognize that particular disease and immediately produce the antibodies needed to protect itself. On the other hand, passive immunity is provided when a person is given antibodies to a disease rather than producing them through

his or her own immune system. Both active and passive immunity could be induced by either natural or artificial mechanisms.

In a similar vein, Hiver and Dornyei (2015) state that immunity refers to the condition of resistance to or impunity from something and that it "can be broadly defined as a defense system that protects the organism against the negative, undesirable, or harmful impact of the external environment" (p. 3). Furthermore, it is the system that is in charge of protecting the body from externally harmful or destructive acts and also helping fight off infection. Hiver and Dornyei (2015) adopted this conceptual metaphor from the medical field and applied it in the L2 teaching context to suggest that language teachers develop this protective mechanism and use it to their advantage. According to Hiver (2015), teachers develop a resistance to increased pressures, deteriorating conditions in teaching contexts, burnout, attrition, stress and emotional overload that allows them to function effectively. Hiver applied the dynamic systems theory (DST) to study and understand how teachers form a resistance that shields them from emotional obstacles, which he termed 'teacher immunity.' The construct of language teacher immunity is considered to be the aggregate of other constructs such as burnout, hardiness and resilience (Hiver & Dornyei, 2015). However, the term language teacher immunity proposed by Hiver and Dornyei (2015) is more comprehensive than the term resilience and encompasses features such as those of self-organization and the adaptive process of its formation, the dual nature of the protective armor developed by teachers, its integration in the professional identity formation and also its promotion of resistance to change.

Borrowing and extending the term language teacher immunity from Hiver and Dornyei (2015) to language learners, the present research intends to study the psychological construct of language learner immunity. Language learner immunity might allow learners to survive within the learning environment by protecting them against emotional upheavals, motivational hindrances, and self-threatening situations. For the purpose of this study, language learner immunity is defined as a protective system (innate or acquired) that enables language learners to show flexibility and resistance and to actively or passively deal with both favorable and unfavorable emotions and conditions with regards to internal and external factors in a particular social and psychological context which, in turn, promotes change, development, and reflective learning.

One of the reasons that this study focuses on learners and their positive attitudes is that learners' high motivation and positive attitude facilitate language learning. If a learner isn't interested or lacks the tendency to acquire a second language, this learner will develop an unfavorable attitude and will be unmotivated and unenthusiastic about language learning (Eshghinejad, 2016). Moreover, in language learning or any learning in general, it would be an understatement to say that teachers matter; however, the same importance needs to be given to learners and their emotions as well. The study done on immunity in language classes has focused on language teachers (Hiver & Dornyei, 2015); hence, this study would focus on language learners in particular to explore the other equally important factor in the learning/teaching process. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the concept

of language learner immunity, which could be useful in understanding learner motivation, identity and experiences.

3. Method

The current study entails interviews to investigate the experiences of language learners in a foreign language context. The study is a data-driven exploratory study conducted on some language learners for the purpose of understanding the reasons as to why some learners continue their language learning process and seemingly succeed in it whereas some others seem to have difficulty withstanding it and tend to quit it. To answer the two research questions, the following procedure was employed.

3.1 Participants

Overall twelve L2 learners participated in the interviews. The participants were university students majoring in English; 7 of the participants were university students majoring in English who are in the seventh semester at Yazd University and the other 5 were English majors in their third semester at Yazd University. The sampling strategy employed was that of critical case sampling where the samples that are likely to "yield the most important and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge" (Patton, 2001, p. 236) were asked to participate. In this case, university students in a particular class (second and final year students) were asked to participate with the cooperation of the faculty members of the English Department of Yazd University on the basis of the students' average scores.

Furthermore, 42 other participants were asked to fill out open-ended questionnaires with the aim of broadening the scope of the study and enriching the data (Dornyei, 2007). These participants were English students at University of Science and Arts in Yazd; 19 of the participants were second year students while 23 of them were final year students.

3.2 Procedure

Data for this phase of the study was collected through single-session in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the ten participants. Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes and these one-to-one interviews took place in a classroom at Yazd University. Interviews were conducted in Farsi since the learners might not be comfortable in expressing their views in a foreign language. Following that, the interviews were transcribed, translated by a professional translator and then analyzed. The focus of the interviews were diagnostic wherein the aim was to explore language learners' experiences concerning situations where they have felt or experienced some form of emotional problems such as demotivation, undue stress or anxiety and burnout and to share their reactions or solutions to these problems, in particular to determine what the learners do to form a resistance to emotional barriers, thereby becoming immune to them.

In addition to conducting interviews, open-ended questionnaires were filled out by 42 participants. The questions in the questionnaires were based on the interview questions and the purpose of this concurrent design was to broaden the research perspective which would

help test how the different findings would corroborate each other (Dornyei, 2007). The procedure used was that of QUAL + quan, wherein the primarily qualitative data were supplemented by questionnaires.

3. 3 Data Analysis

The interview data and open-ended questionnaire data were subject to bottom-up analysis based on the Grounded Theory (GT) proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Grounded theory methodology provided the research study with guidelines on how to identify categories, how to make links between categories and how to establish relationships between them. The sequence of coding followed were first of open coding, then focused/axial coding followed by selective coding where coding was done in relation to core concepts developed in the initial coding phase. The open coding, an emergent coding technique drawn from GT methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), is considered as a way of generating a participant-generated 'theory' from the data (Blair, 2015). The second phase in discovering grounded theory involved axial coding which refers to identifying "categories that are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.24), while the third phase, selective coding, involved organizing categories around a central explanatory concept.

One of the reasons for adopting Strauss and Corbin's concept of coding is that Strauss embraces the open coding practice which includes the conceptualization of even solitary occurrences (Kendall, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). As mentioned by Howard-Payne (2016) it is necessary to "give credence to the emergence of even a single incidence from the data (p. 56)" According to Howard-Payne (2016), single incidents seem important to the analysis process because they could prove to be related to other categories later on in the research process and so need to be included in the interpretation of data. Another reason for opting for conceptual coding rather than line-by-line coding is that coding lines of data could seem to be "rather arbitrary in that the amount of data on each line would be dependent on the size font used and the length of the line rather than the quality of the data (Blair, 2015, p. 18)" The theoretical coding continued until theoretical saturation was achieved by employing constant comparative analysis. The coding of data in grounded theory was done in conjunction with analysis through a process of conceptual memoing, considered as the core activity of GT data analysis (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013), to gain an insight into codes' meanings and their relationships to each other. The purpose of this was to identify the global categories into which language learners can be categorized on the basis of the type or form of immunity they have developed.

4. Results

Data from both interviews and open-ended questionnaires were first categorized through open coding in order to identify some initial concepts. To answer the first research question regarding the extent to which psychological barriers such as demotivation, stress, and burnout promote or hinder the development of language learner immunity, participants were asked to

mention any unfavorable experiences that had during their English learning process at university.

When asked to recall the above-mentioned experiences, the first thing that came to several of the students' minds was their teachers. They considered their teachers as major sources of demotivation and anxiety, the main reasons for which were lack of competence, lack of proficiency, lack of preparation for the class, teachers' just memorizing and reciting or reading out what was to be taught in class, boring teaching styles, partial behavior toward some students, some of them having competence just in one particular field of study, discouraging attitude, preferring traditional teaching styles, not being risk-taking, resisting change, and some of them using too much Farsi in class especially when teaching literature.

Another reason for demotivation was the books used in classes and lack of varying materials to be used in classes. Surprisingly it was not the content of the books that dissatisfied the students but it was number and thickness of the books that had to be covered during a course based on the syllabus. Most of the participants believed that the quantity of teaching materials was considered important by the teachers at the expense of the quality of learning. Several participants said that relying just on books especially simplified ones to teach a language at university doesn't lead to effective and native-like language learning. They wanted exposure to different kinds of materials and different forms of media like authentic textbooks, story books and novels, movies, music. They also expected the teachers to use technology more creatively in class and not just prepare PowerPoint presentations and read out from the slides in classes.

Another demotivating factor was the exams which didn't meet the students' expectations. For courses like literature, students expected to take exams where they could interpret poems, short stories, narratives, and other text types and voice their own opinions and interpretations. Having to take multiple-choice exams for such courses was quite unexpected. Another factor was the economic capital that was invested on language learning at university. For students studying at private nonprofit higher education institutions like Science and Arts University, the cost of education is much higher than studying at state-funded universities. Even for non-local students studying at state-funded universities the cost of education is considered to be a little high due to dormitory expenses and other living expenses.

Another factor that was demotivating for some while stressful for some others was their peers. One of the participants, when asked about her peers and her relationship with them, she said, "Maybe sometimes people from Yazd are somehow reserved and they don't want to reveal their knowledge to all the people." Some participants considered their peers to be jealous while some others to be highly competitive showing unwillingness to cooperate. Some other demotivating factors were lack of importance given to humanities students, feeling left out because their presence was not acknowledged by others, unfavorable behavior of the non-teaching staff towards students, and traditional educational system.

When participants were asked if being in a co-educational class or in a class with students from different cities and cultures had any effect on them, their answers were somehow

contradictory. While some participants mentioned that cultural variables like gender and cultural background had no bearing on them or on their language learning, some others cited experiences regarding their being shy or anxious when being around peers of the opposite gender and also experiences regarding some cultural clashes. Concerning co-educational classes, a couple of the interview participants said that some of their female peers were too shy and nervous to be able to even say hello to their male peers and sat far away from the boys. Regarding cultural differences, some participants narrated experiences where they had cultural clashes with peers from another nearby city, Esfahan. One of the participants strongly claimed that her peers from Isfahan held negative attitudes towards peers from Yazd.

In addition to being in coeducational classes, another factor that caused anxiety was the teachers who were supposedly unnecessarily strict. With regards to this factor, there were again some contradictory responses. Some participants mentioned that they were stress-free in classes due to the teachers' relaxed attitudes and their being indifferent towards the students' learning. In contrast, some students claimed that teachers were a major source of stress because they had high expectations from their students and if the students didn't meet their expectations in class, they were humiliated in front of others for making a mistake. This caused students not to utter a single word in some classes. One participant recounted an incident where her teacher tore her exam paper because she handed in her paper a couple of minutes late. When asked later, the teacher asserted that it was done to teach her the importance of time management, which would be beneficial to her in future. This incident lead to the concerned participant's being stressed out during all her other exams. Hence, some factors like teachers, peers and exams were both demotivating and stress-inducing.

When participants were asked if they ever felt too tired and felt like dropping out, some of them mentioned that they felt so but decided against dropping out because of the time they had already spent on coming to university and also in the hope of getting a job in the concerned field. The participants also mentioned that some of their peers had dropped out in the freshman year due to their difficulty in coping with their stress and demotivation. Besides the feeling of tiredness and helplessness, another factor that caused female students to feel stressed and to want to drop out was their marital situation. One of the female participants mentioned that she and one of her peers had to face more difficulties than their other peers due to their marital situation. She said that marriage posed some restrictions on them, in turn, causing stress and burnout.

Despite the fact that students, some if not all, encounter the above-mentioned psychological difficulties, they persist with their language learning. To understand their persistence and perseverance in majoring in English at university, the participants were asked to mention some positive factors that motivated them to commence language learning and to adapt themselves to the language learning process. They were asked to narrate any event or experience that they could recall concerning themselves or their peers. Furthermore, they were encouraged to mention any strategies that they employed to cope with the psychological difficulties that they faced.

A strikingly important factor that emerged was the effect of teachers on students' motivation to learn. Even though some participants mentioned the teachers to be a demotivating or stress-inducing factor, some other participants mentioned that some of their teachers, not all, were the source of their inspiration and their role model regarding their encouraging behavior, their native-like accent and pronunciation and stress-free classes. The presence of even one such teacher was enough to motivate students to learn more effectively. Furthermore, some teachers encouraged students to be autonomous and give lectures or presentations in classes on any topic of their choice and also to do some research work. One teacher had students choose the topic of their interest and discuss whatever they wanted in any accent or dialect. Another participant mentioned her motivation gradually increased until her final year semester.

A factor previously mentioned unfavorable factor causing demotivation and anxiety, namely peers, could actually turn out to be a positive, motivating factor too. Some participants mentioned that their peers from their hometown were motivating and cooperative and praised and encouraged each other. Also, few participants mentioned that their peers from other cities were friendlier because they tried to form relationships with others in order not to feel left out. Another factor that was a very motivating factor and appealed almost all the students was the opportunity to read different genres of literature and to be able to analyze and interpret them. The participants mentioned that reading literature and voicing their own opinions and having others in class just listen to their ideas was very satisfying and motivating. They felt like they were being heard, something which doesn't happen much in university classes in general.

Besides the above-mentioned factors, something else which motivated the participants and made them more interested in studying English was the fact that they were given the opportunity by some teachers to do research work and present their research in class. This enabled them to feel more independent and autonomous and take charge of their own learning and also to gain knowledge and update their information outside the classroom context. Moreover, giving lectures and presentations in class was encouraging for most participants even though some of them were stressed out during the beginning of course as they were shy and embarrassed to speak in English before others.

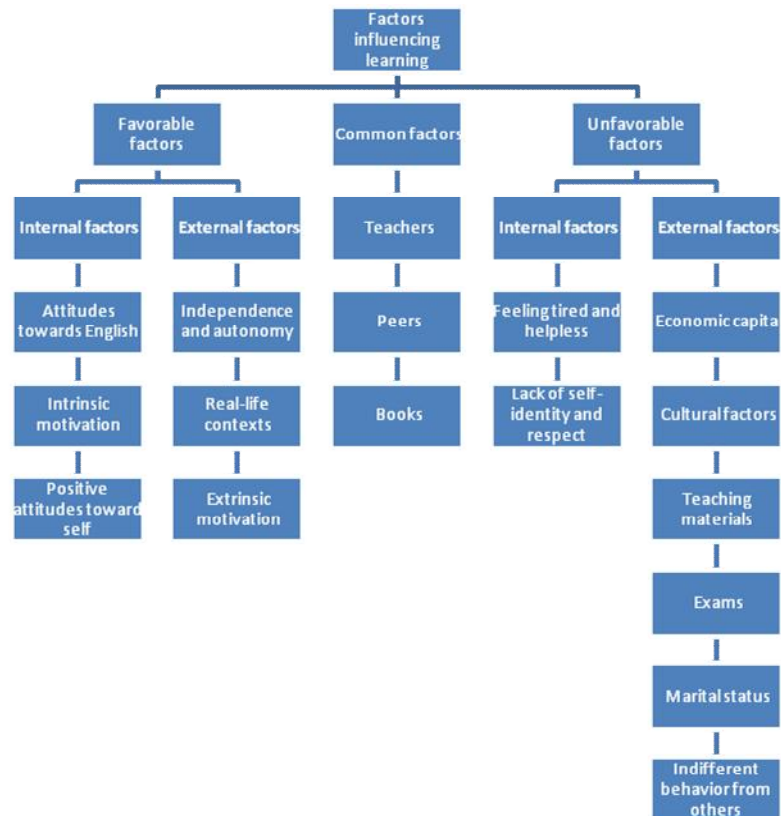
With regards to the cultural aspects of learning English, some participants held neutral attitudes towards English and the English-speaking community while some others held favorable attitudes towards them. One participant said that English was a gateway to access the outside world and also to become acquainted with English speaking people's culture. Some participants wanted to speak like native speakers imitating their accent and pronunciation. Interestingly, none of the participants held negative attitudes towards English and the English speaking people's culture. In an interview, to make sure this was the case, the interviewer asked the participant directly if she held any negative attitudes towards English and the English community or culture, she showed surprise and replied "Why would I think like that?"

Furthermore, what encourages learners to learn more is gaining the ability to read authentic texts and books in English, to listen to native English songs and to watch English movies and also to read articles in English because only some of them are translated into Persian and even the ones that are translated may not meet their expectations. Also, as English learners in a language institute what had effect on their language learning was doing tasks which simulated real context of language use e.g., letter writing. Participants mentioned doing such tasks in university classes would increase their interest in learning English. Additionally, when participants were asked as to the reason why they opted for majoring in English at university, they mentioned that they did so volitionally and there was no outside pressure or influence to do so. One main reason was that they were just interested in English and wished to learn it and another reason was that they thought they would have better job opportunities after completing their education. Furthermore, some participants mentioned an interest in learning English to feel superior to those who can't speak English and stated that learning another language made them feel more valuable.

Based on the above mentioned factors, one rudimentary model of students' unfavorable, negative factors (including demotivating and stress-inducing) was drawn and another rudimentary model was induced regarding the favorable, positive factors, both of which are presented below.

The first model summarizing the students' unfavorable, negative influences included ten major categories as follows:

1. Teachers (lack of proficiency, lack of competence, lack of preparation for classes, partial behavior, discouraging behavior, boring teaching styles, use of traditional educational ways, and use of excessive Farsi in class)
2. Peers (unwillingness to cooperate, unhealthy competition, jealousy and relaxed attitude towards classes and learning)
3. Economic capital (tuition fee, expensive books, and living expenses)
4. Books (too many thick books indicating the importance of quantity over quality of learning)
5. Cultural factors (coeducational classes and cultural clashes due to different cultural backgrounds)
6. Teaching materials (lack of authenticity, use of only books as teaching materials, and lack of technological creativity)
7. Exams (unexpected test format and content)
8. Marital situation
9. Lack of importance given to humanities students (students' emotions and presence not being acknowledged inside and outside class and letting their opinions go unheard)



10. Feeling tired and helpless

The second model induced regarding the favorable, positive factors included eight major categories as mentioned below.

1. Teachers (some of them were encouraging, competent enough and created stress-free environment for optimal learning)
2. Peers
3. Content of literature books (poetry, narratives, short stories and novels)
4. Independence and autonomy (by doing research work and giving presentations and lectures, gaining self-confidence to voice opinions)
5. Attitudes towards English and English speaking community and culture
6. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation
7. Simulating real-life contexts
8. Positive attitudes towards themselves

Besides asking the participants to recall the experiences that they had gone through during their language learning process, participants were also asked to recount any strategies or ways that they used to overcome any psychological barriers such as demotivation, anxiety or tiredness. One of the strategies used was to just avoid the problem by ignoring it or not doing anything about it in the hope of letting it pass. The participants felt that by doing so the problems would just fade away. Another strategy used by some was to prepare themselves for the classes so that they would be able to answer the teacher's questions and participate in classes. Some other ways for reducing stress or overcoming other problems were taking walks before classes, drinking water, and taking deep breaths. Another one used was thinking one knows more than the peers or they are at least on the same level, and this reduced their anxiety levels. One interview participant mentioned that her anxiety level was so high that she had to consult a psychologist and doing so helped her dramatically. She claimed that "speaking her heart out" and having someone to listen to her was greatly relaxing.

5. Discussion

One of the aims of the current study was to investigate the positive and negative factors that influenced university students' language learning process and how these factors shaped the way learners became immune to the psychological barriers. The current study indicates that factors namely teachers, peers and books can have both beneficial and harmful effects on language learning, in turn, having an effect on the way language learner immunity is formed. This is in line with previous studies that have indicated that teachers, that is, their competence, proficiency, teaching style and method and behavior are demotivating factors (Arai, 2004; Chambers, 1993; Dörnyei, 2001a; Heidari & Riahipour, 2012; Muhonen, 2004; Miyata et al., 2004; Oxford, 1998, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001; Ushioda, 1998). The results were also consistent with more recent studies conducted in the Iranian universities (Moiinvaziri & Razmjoo, 2015; Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi & Hamed, 2017) which indicated teachers were considered as demotivating factors by undergraduate learners of non-English majors. This study indicates that teachers as external factors can have not only demotivating effects but also positive motivating effects on undergraduate learners of English majors. Regarding the role of peers, they are considered as important external factors influencing learners' demotivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Noels, 2009; Williams & Burden, 1997; Chang, 2010; Tanaka, 2017). Tanaka (2017) states that peer engagement can positively influence learners' motivation; however, its effect may differ depending on the learning context. This is consistent with the results of the present study which indicates that peers can

have both positive and negative effects on the learners according to the learning context. The third influential factor, namely books, is found to have both demotivating and motivating effects on learners. However, in this study, it was not the content of the books that was demotivating as found by Ghonsooly et al., 2017 but the quantity and amount of materials that had to be studied. Unlike the non-English majors in the above-mentioned study who cited that "uninteresting reading topics, long passages and outdated material led to their loss of interest in English learning (p. 430)", the participants in this study claimed that what interested them was the content of the literature books including text types like poetry, stories and narratives.

With regards to the unfavorable or negative factors influencing language learning, they were categorized into two subcategories depending on whether they were externally or internally influential. The first one in the external category is the economic capital. This accords with the study by Ghonsooly et al (2017) which found that economic capital was a demotivating factor that led to the lack of success. However, in this study, even though economic capital was found to be a demotivating factor, it did not contribute to a feeling of lack of success. An influential factor that could be considered negative was culture, including cultural differences and co-educational classes, a factor which should be dealt with in more detail in future studies. To the researchers' knowledge, no study so far has shown cultural differences and co-educational classes to be negative factors affecting language learning. Cultural differences and co-educational classes led to learners' decrease in motivation and an increase in their anxiety levels. The third factor causing negative effects was the teaching materials. It was found in this study that the only teaching materials used in classes were textbooks and PowerPoint presentations, the latter being ineffectively used. This was consistent with the study by Ghonsooly et al (2017) that highlighted the "importance of using technological facilities such as computers, films, CDs, the Internet, and audio-visual materials (p. 428)" Likewise, some other studies indicated school facilities and learning equipment are one of the major demotivating factors (Arefinezhad & Golaghaei, 2014; Dornyei, 2001a; Farmand & Abdolmanafi Rokni, 2012; Kavianpanah & Ghasemi, 2011; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2007; Meshkat & Hassani, 2012; Muhonen, 2004; Sharififar & Akbarzadeh, 2011).

The fourth external factor that has a negative bearing on language learning causing demotivation and anxiety is the exams. Ghonsooly et al (2017) found that a sub-factor that caused lack of success among non-English majors was the notion of falling behind their classmates on exams. In contrast, this study found that it was not the idea of falling behind their classmates on exams but the exams themselves which caused unwanted effects on English majoring learners. The exams didn't meet the learners' expectations as learners expected to take subjective exams for certain courses but had to take objective exams like multiple choice. Also, in the subjective exams, some teachers' expectations were different from the learners' performances. Learners preferred to be able to voice their own interpretations in their own words, while teachers expected learners to memorize the materials and jot them down word-to-word. The fifth external factor affecting few female learners' language learning was their marital status. Even though it is unusual to find male students at universities in undergraduate courses to be married, it is not unlikely to find

female undergraduate students to be married. Being married can impose some restrictions on female learners which can lead to demotivation and anxiety, leading some of them to drop out. As mentioned previously, it seems necessary to pay importance even to single occurrences (Howard- Payne, 2016) because they can be important factors later on. The sixth external factor in this respect is the learners' being the recipients of indifferent behavior from others, whether it from teachers, peers, university staff including the dean and other members in the society. This is somehow consistent with the study by Moivaziri and Razmjoo (2015) which mentioned that learning English is not given much importance in the society and by the media.

Regarding the internal factors that negatively influence language learning at university, the study found two such factors, namely, feeling tired and helpless, and lack of self-identity and respect. With regards to feeling tired and helpless, in other words, burnout, Lin, Qing and Shen (2014) claim that learning burnout is "a common emotional, attitudinal and behavioral problem (p. 117)" among medical college students. However, there is a little gap with regards to learning burnout in the field of language learning where much of the focus has been on teacher burnout instead. It was found in this study that language learners do feel tired and helpless and want to drop out. Despite wanting to drop out, not all of them do so, which indicates that learners form a kind of protective armor called language learner immunity that prevents them from dropping out and helps them become more resistant and tolerant. The second negative internal factor is the feeling of lack of self-identity and respect. According to Bonny (2013), identity in language learning research refers to "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how a person understands possibilities for the future." Language is considered as a social practice wherein identity highlights language and a variety of relationships construct each other. Taylor (2013) claims that adolescent foreign language learners who feel that they cannot disclose their real private self, that is, their language learning anxiety or their low perceived ability in the classroom may tend to adopt a disruptive or indifferent public self in order to gain acceptance or respect from at least their peers. Sometimes they might withdraw effort or in the case of failure, blame it on the lack of effort rather than lack of ability. Thus, it can be concluded that lack of identity and respect could result in negative attitudes towards language learning in general.

Despite having to deal with the above-mentioned negative factors that could affect the psychological state of the learners' minds, learners also go through some positive experiences that influence their state of mind and thus, affect language learning in learning. The positive, favorable factors extracted from the data were classified into external and internal factors. The first such factor was independence and autonomy gained while studying English at university. Here this factor is considered as an external factor because it was the teachers who provided opportunities for learners to gain independence and autonomy and it was not something innately found among Iranian EFL learners who are not trained to be independent and autonomous in schools. Liu (2015) claimed that learner autonomy is a very unique learner variable because it encourages learners to be responsible for their own learning. Learner autonomy was said to comprise of 3 components: sense of responsibility,

engagement in learning activities and perceived ability, all of which play a very crucial role in effective language learning. Furthermore, as cited in Ghonsooly et al (2017), teachers who support autonomy can instill higher intrinsic motivation among learners.

The other externally positive factor found was the positive effect of using simulated or real-life contexts while language learning. Learners showed a strong preference and interest in using real-life or authentic tasks. Previous studies have indicated that authentic materials connect the classroom context to the real language situation (Murdoch, 1999; Shrum & Glisan, 2000; Velazquez & Redmond, 2007) and hence, increase motivation and interest in language learning (Mishan, 2005; Murdoch, 1999; Oguz & Bahar, 2008). Zohoorian (2015) found that higher motivational level was attained by learners in the authentic context in comparison to students in the traditional context. The third factor playing an important beneficial role is extrinsic motivation. Learners in this study mentioned that one of the most important reasons for choosing English as their major was their future career options such as teaching, being a tour guide and translating. Their interest in being a tour guide has increased dramatically since the time Yazd was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in July, 2017, which led to a dramatic increase in the number of visitors to Yazd. The results of this study contrast the findings of the study by Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo (2015) which stated that learners lacked intrinsic motivation due to having no use for learning English and considering other courses to be more important than learning English. However, it must be kept in mind that the current study was conducted on English majors, while the participants in Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo's (2015) study were English non-majors.

Coming to the last category which included the internal positive factors, the first such factor was attitudes towards English and the English speaking culture and community. This study found that learners held either neutral or positive attitudes towards English without any negative feelings. This was somehow in line with Moiiinvaziri and Razmjoo's study in which participants indicated no negative feelings towards English and their community which contrasted with studies in other second or foreign language contexts where learners held negative attitudes toward English and their community (Dornyei, 1998, as cited in Dornyei, 2001; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). The other subcategory was intrinsic motivation. Learners in this study indicated a strong interest and enjoyment in learning English, some of them as early as their childhood. This is in accordance with the self-determination theory (SDT), according to which, intrinsic motivation is the desire to engage with a task for its own sake, and is often characterized by personal enjoyment, interest, and feelings of positive affect (Oga-Baldwin, Nakata, Parker & Ryan, 2017). In the field of language education in general, SDT has positively explained students' desire to continue learning the new language (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000) and interact with foreign cultures (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 2001; Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005, as cited in Oga-Baldwin et al, 2017). The final subcategory was learners' having a positive, encouraging attitude toward self. Some learners in this study mentioned that when they were stressed out or demotivated, they tried to encourage themselves by indulging in positive talk with self and convincing themselves that they were good enough and had the ability to succeed despite the negative situations. This could be in accordance with the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987)

based on which learner beliefs are closely related to the "actual self," the ideal self," and the "ought self." This subcategory of having positive attitude about self can be associated to the actual self which refers to one's representation of the attributes that someone believes one actually possesses. These beliefs and also individual motivations could strongly influence both cognitive and affective factors and the quality of the learning experience overall (Xiao & Hurd, 2010). Furthermore, from the perspective of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), "what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave (p. 25)" Hence, learners who develop such attitudes immunize themselves by resisting negative behaviors and attitudes and thus forming defense mechanism to allow them to continue language learning more productively.

Upon further analysis of the data and the results of this study, current researchers have been able to claim that despite all the problems and barriers faced by EFL learners in Iranian universities, these learners tend to intrinsically or extrinsically immunize themselves, either actively or passively to protect themselves and make them continue language learning willingly or not. This language learner immunity may be innate or acquired through the language learning process. The findings of this study led the current researchers to classify language learner immunity into the following categories:

- 1) Productive auto-immunity

This kind of immunity refers to the immune system which is innately present in learners and is a robust productive system which facilitates flexible adaptability to varying situations and contexts, and resilience ensuring learners can surmount adversities. Learners who possess this kind of immunity hold positive attitudes toward themselves and about learning, subconsciously use different ways of coping stress and demotivation, are open to change, actively deal with problems, are increasingly motivated, reflect on their learning and are aware of their emotions.

- 2) Maladaptive auto-immunity

This kind of immunity refers to the immune system which is also innately present in learners but is less productive and less flexible and is more resistant to change. Learners possessing this kind of immunity hold negative or neutral attitudes towards themselves and about learning, can deal with stress and demotivation but with difficulty, are resistant to change, passively deal with problems, having difficulty reflecting on their own learning and ignore their positive emotions.

- 3) Productive adaptive (acquired) immunity

This type of immunity refers to the robust productive immune system which learners do not possess innately but acquire during their learning process. It facilitates adaptability to different situations and contexts, and resilience ensuring learners can bounce back from difficulties. Learners acquiring this ability or quality hold positive attitudes toward themselves and about learning, consciously use different ways of

coping stress and demotivation, are open to change, actively deal with problems, are motivated, reflect on their learning and are aware of their emotions.

4) Maladaptive adaptive (acquired) immunity

This kind of immunity refers to the less productive, less flexible immune system which learners acquire through their language learning process with difficulty and is more resistant to change. Learners acquiring this kind of immunity hold negative or neutral attitudes towards themselves and about learning, have difficulty dealing with stress and demotivation, passively deal with problems, find it difficult to reflect on their own learning, ignore their positive emotions and focus on their negative emotions.

5) Non-immunity

This refers to the inability of learners to form any kind of immunity, innate or acquired, productive or maladaptive. These learners can't deal with stress and demotivation even if they try, let negative emotions outweigh the positive ones, go through the burnout phase and can't overcome it, and display apathy and amotivation.

6. Conclusion

This study has attempted to study various positive and negative experiences that language learners go through at universities. Also, this study has attempted to use the data collected to study language learner immunity and categorize it into 5 types to understand what learners feel, think, believe and do about language learning. This can help researchers and teachers understand the language learning process better from the perspective of language learners. For instance, researchers and teachers can understand how learners who are productively immunized believe and do and what strategies they subconsciously or consciously use to overcome psychological barriers and enjoy their language learning process. They can, thus, teach learners who are maladaptively immunized or non-immunized to employ those strategies to progress their own learning productively. Furthermore, researchers and teachers can get help from consultants or psychologists to consult with learners who have problems immunizing themselves, or universities can employ consultants to help students.

One of the aims of the future studies, as a follow-up to this study, would be to analyze language learner immunity using a clinical approach. In the field of education, "a clinical approach would result in a situation in which sufficient experience as a teacher is required for becoming a researcher and in which researchers remain active as teachers during their research careers" (Riehl, 2006, p. 418). In a clinical study, it is believed that the knowledge of practice and the results from research become integrated. Participants in clinical practice are said to explore not only their own classrooms, but also a world larger than their own classrooms, and gain an insight that is personal as well as shared with others. The findings of this kind of research are highly probable to contribute to theories relevant to practice and to the development of a professional language. Qualitative clinical studies are often about

understanding better what it is like to live with a condition and how people feel about their care and treatment. Among the different types of clinical research approaches applied, the most suitable ones that can be applied to education research, specifically language learning, are *diagnostic* and *quality of life*, while the former refers to the practice of looking for better ways to identify a particular condition and the latter also known as *supportive care*, explores ways to improve comfort and the quality of life for individuals with a disorder or chronic problem.

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