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## **Learner-Centered Education in the Iranian EFL Context: A Glance through the Impediments**

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### **Abstract**

Though learner-centered paradigm of education has long been introduced to pedagogy in general and language teaching in particular, it seems that scant heed has been given to its implementation as well as the restrictions and challenges on its way. In an attempt to shed more light on the status of learner-centered instruction in Iranian language schools, particularly as regards the impediments hindering its proper application, the current researchers selected a cohort of 240 teachers and 450 students for the questionnaire phase through convenience sampling, as well as 29 male and female language school learners and 30 EFL teachers for interview. Due to its mostly qualitative nature, the study made use of data gathered via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. As the findings revealed, students referred to resource constraints and teachers' tendency toward applying traditional practices as the two overriding barriers restricting proper LCE implementation. The other two prominent factors singled out by the findings obtained out of students' attitudes were lack of clear definition of LCE and lack of familiarity resulting from improper training. As regards teachers' perspectives of impediments, however, poor motivation on the part of teachers and parents' lack of receptivity for LCE were identified as the most prominent barriers. Finally, in line with the interview findings, all three categories of teacher-induced, learner-induced, and context-relevant factors were reported to be responsible for limiting LCE implementation with variable degrees of influence. The study findings are thought to have practical implications for English language pedagogy in the Iranian context.

*Keywords:* Learner-centered education, Impediments, EFL teachers and learners

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Language education in the current millennium has taken a distance from mere teaching of language in its own right. New methodologies of language teaching have revealed a tendency to center on the preparation of learners for proper functioning in the society in keeping with the needs stipulated on education by modern advances in technology and science (e.g., Richards, 2017). In line with the new directions in education, communicative competence is said to be the overriding purpose of learning and instruction. As Lizuka (2019, p. 134) maintains, “it is no longer sufficient to rely on a grammatical syllabus in the classroom; rather, it is necessary to create some kind of communicative context relevant to the learners.”

Among the more extensive objectives of current education, one may refer to issues like socio-cultural development and the provision of life-long sustainable learning. One of the principal tenets of life-long learning might be education for sustainability. From this perspective, the learners are prepared for appropriate citizenship and proper functioning in the community. One way to bring about more sustainable education in a way that meets the needs of society in which the individual lives is through adopting more learner-driven approaches (Herranen, Vesterinen, & Aksela, 2018).

Though introduced to education around more than four decades ago, learner-centered education (LCE), which has its roots in Hymes’ (1971, 1972) communicative competence as well as in communicative approach (Widdowson 1990, as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011) and communicative language teaching, seems not to have been endorsed in different educational contexts worldwide the way it deserves (Schweisfurth, 2013).

Emanating from cognitive psychology (Kumaravadivelu, 2006), in general, and constructivist school (McCoy, Pettit, Kellar, & Morgan, 2018), in particular, learner-centered pedagogy rests upon five overarching goals in education: *communication*, *culture*, *connections*, *comparisons*, and *communities* (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The main foci of these goals are

interaction and negotiation of meaning, awareness of the relationship between language and culture, context-based use of language, cross-cultural comparisons, and lifelong use of language beyond the school, respectively.

To keep abreast of the current needs around which the modern learner-centered approaches to education have been configured and to move in line with the fluctuations in educational philosophies advocated by today's progressive pedagogy, there is a dire need for transformations and modifications in the structure of education, in terms of both curricula and approaches (Fterniati, 2006).

Quite relevant to the concept of learner-centeredness are the notions of self-regulation and learner autonomy. Characterized as "a process-oriented construction, focusing on self-regulatory mechanisms, involving regulation of the self, by the self, to meet particular goals or to manage achievement" (Brown & White, 2010, p. 434), self-regulation is said to be a very fundamental prerequisite for LCE. Besides, learner autonomy, which is delineated as "the capacity to take control of one's learning" (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017, p. 9), is another principal foundation of LCE. Nakata (2011, p. 901) argues that learner autonomy can be viewed from three interrelated perspectives of "control over learning behavior", "psychology of learning" and "learning situations." Furthermore, Nguyen and Gu (2013, p. 9) characterize learner autonomy as "learner self-initiation and learner self-regulation."

Sometimes referred to as self-directed learning, autonomous learning entails the acquisition of different skills, including learners' ability to set goals for their own learning, evaluating the amount of progress, managing the time, and being self-motivated (Gieve & Clark, 2005). Furthermore, as Larsen-Freeman (2019) notes, learners need to develop a sense of agency in learning, and this sense of agency can be given to them on the part of learning context and with the help of instructors. One aspect of this sense of agency that she highlights is 'learner-driven feedback' in which the learners decide how and

on what issues the feedback is to be provided by the teacher. The privilege and effectiveness of learner-initiated feedback have been underscored by researchers like Robertson and Fowler (2017).

Thus, informed by the significance of LCE, on the one hand, and the need for further research into the status of learner-centered instruction, on the other, the researchers in the current probe set out to appraise the status quo of LCE in the Iranian educational context through a special focus on the impediments complicating the process. In so doing, the researchers mainly dealt with the issue in the domain of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the milieu of language schools.

### **Literature Review**

Learner-centered environments for learning, as Dunn and Rakes (2010) maintain, “move away from the one-size-fits-all, teacher-centered, lecture-oriented classroom and move towards custom-built classrooms for optimal learning” (p. 518). As Schuh (2004) asserts, “Instruction based on learner-centered principles provides opportunities for learners to draw on their own experiences and interpretations of the learning process” (p. 835). Moreover, Kumaravadivelu (2006) is of the view that the paramountcy of LCE rests mainly upon its success in drawing the attention of educationalists away from grammatical competence toward a communicative conceptualization of learning purposes.

One of the major pedagogical approaches in which learner-centeredness reaches its peak is Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) or Task-Based Instruction (TBI). A task “is a communication activity that has a well-defined objective for learners to achieve through interaction and exchange of meanings in L2” and it “enables learners to use the target language communicatively and advances their L2 skills” (Wang, 2019, p. 83). A task-based syllabus is a sub-category of analytic syllabi, and TBLT, according to Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011), falls within the strong version of the

communicative approach, in which language learning is said to be contingent upon language use.

The literature is replete with studies that have revealed the efficacy of LCE for improving the language learning process from different perspectives. Among the recent studies that have delved into this issue, reference can be made to Lambert, Philp, and Nakamura (2016) and Yamagata (2016). The former compared the effectiveness of learner-generated versus teacher-generated tasks on students' engagement and performance. Basing their judgment on five different measures of engagement (amount of content contribution, time spent, degree of content elaboration, amount of content negotiation, and responsiveness), Lambert et al. concluded that learner-generated tasks and content led to a tremendously greater extent of engagement with the task. The latter, however, probed the alternative effects of learner-centered and teacher-centered approaches in the process of verb learning. Using image-based learning of verbs for treatment, Yamagata found that learner-centered mode of instruction produced better learning outcomes in terms of both retention and accuracy measures.

Also interested in gauging the role of LCE in learning enhancement, Marwan (2017) conducted a qualitative study using observation and semi-structured interviews. A total of 25 students majoring in information technology from an Indonesian polytechnic center, as well as their teacher, were involved as the participants of the study. As the findings revealed, the implementation of LCE led to considerable learning enhancement, particularly as regards speaking betterment. Furthermore, the practice of LCE engendered a more meaningful, fascinating, and democratic atmosphere in the classroom. However, as the participating teacher's familiarity with LCE was restricted, the need for LCE training to come up with better outcomes was also highlighted by the researcher.

Striving to find the potential impact of LCE on augmenting learners' motivation, Amiri and Saberi (2017) embarked on an investigation with 50

male and female learners from an Iranian high school. Making use of pretest-posttest design, the researchers analyzed the contribution of LCE to furthering learners' motivation. As the results of the questionnaire administration revealed, LCE was proven beneficial in enhancing learners' motivation.

In like manner, Kassem (2019) probed the effect of learner-centered pedagogy on improving learners' affect, in general, and their motivation, in particular. Adopting a quasi-experimental design of research, he selected a total of 86 male students from a college in Saudi Arabia. To gather data, he devised and validated a questionnaire that tapped into different aspects of learners' affect, including their motivation. As the results depicted, the experimental group participants who were taught through LCE outperformed their counterparts in the control group in terms of all facets of affect scale, including integrative motivation as well as general achievement.

As regards studies that have investigated the impediments on the way of LCE, Schweisfurth's (2013) case study is worth citing, in which she listed some obstacles hobbling the implementation of LCE. Among the major barriers referred to by her lie factors such as large class size and poor economy. Furthermore, as she asserts, the inaccessibility of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas, is another stumbling block restricting successful LCE practice. Other researchers also underscore the adverse effect of large class sizes on LCE (e.g., Hayes, 1997; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996).

Moreover, overreliance on structure-based teaching and developing mere linguistic competence is regarded by some other researchers (e.g., Dong, 2007; Liao, 2004; Rao, 2002; Yu, 2001) as a further impediment on the way of LCE. As these researchers assert, both EFL teachers and learners reveal a greater tendency for focusing on sentence structure rather than interactive communication tasks in line with the requirements of examinations, which are rarely performance-based and communication-oriented.

As regards obstacles restricting the proper implementation of LCE, An and Reigeluth (2011) highlighted the adverse effect of factors like time

management issues, assessment-related variables, institutional barriers, unfamiliarity with the characteristics of learner-centered instruction, cultural barriers, and teachers' misconceptions about LCE.

Another investigation aimed at pinpointing LCE barriers was conducted by Tawalbeh and Al-Asmari (2015). Gathering data from the academic context in Saudi Arabia, the researchers surveyed teachers' perceptions of LCE and the possible barriers on the way of implementing it. Like previous studies investigating barriers, their research indicated the thwarting role of factors such as the class structure and size, students' negative attitudes toward LCE, lack of training, and institutional barriers, among other factors. However, contrary to An and Reigeluth's (2011) findings, Tawalbeh and Al-Asmari did not regard teachers' attitudes as a hurdle for implementing LCE.

Other researchers, including Namazi and Arjomandnia (2000) and Shahmansouri (2012) proclaim the negative role played by organizational and administrative issues stipulated by policy-makers and educational authorities, which in turn result in lack of freedom on the part of teachers to stick to more learner-centered versions of classroom conduct.

Finally, in another investigation, Moradi and Alavinia (2018) explored the effects of LCE-directed training on the improved practice of learner-centeredness. Holding hands-on workshops with a cohort of EFL language school teachers, they gauged teachers' performance in line with LCE tenets both prior and successive to training. In so doing, direct observation of teachers was carried out based on LCE criteria. The findings revealed a significant amount of difference in trained teachers' LCE performance.

Drawing on the body of literature allotted to LCE practice, part of which was briefed in this section, the current researchers concluded that there is still a notable gap in the literature on the issue, particularly as regards impediments on the way of LCE. Thus, in their attempt targeted toward addressing this under-researched area, the researchers formulated the following research question:

**RQ:** What are the impediments on the way of implementing Learner-Centered Education in EFL classes at Iranian language schools?

## Method

### Design of the Study

As stated earlier, the study was carried out to investigate the potential impediments on the way of implementing LCE in the Iranian EFL context. Thus, in terms of design, the research was more of a survey type, and the venue for conducting the study was that of language schools across three provinces in Iran.

### Participants

Making use of convenience sampling, the researchers arranged with a total of 240 teachers and 450 students to participate in the survey to fill the questionnaire. Furthermore, 30 language school teachers and 29 EFL learners from the same venue were chosen as the participants of the interview phase. The selected teachers and learners were from both genders, and they were recruited from three Iranian provinces, namely Khuzestan, Mazandaran, and West Azarbaijan. The participants were quite varied in terms of demographic factors like age and background, and the teacher participants enjoyed a diverse profile of experience (from three to beyond 20) and academic degrees (BA, MA and PhD).

### Instrumentation

The data required for the current study were mainly gathered via questionnaire administration and interview analysis. Following the lead of Schweisfurth (2013), an LCE questionnaire was developed, which was later submitted to robust expert validation. Both teacher and learner participants received the questionnaires, and were asked to complete them in a matter of thirty minutes. In addition to attempts made at validating the questionnaire, it



was also piloted prior to use to control for the reliability and suitability of the devised questionnaire, and a satisfactory coefficient of reliability was reported ( $r = .76$ ). The questionnaire comprised 16 statements tapping EFL teachers' and learners' attitudes concerning LCE impediments. All statements were in a 5-point Likert type scale ranging from strongly disagree (with the value of 1) to strongly agree (with the value of 5).

To triangulate the research and consolidate the obtained data, use was also made of a semi-structured interview. As the interview data were garnered from three provinces in Iran, it took quite a while to gather the data. The respondents were all ensured about the confidentiality and anonymity of responses. Furthermore, to cater more to ethical considerations of research, all the interviewees were reminded that they had the right to withdraw from the interview at any time they wanted. Besides, consent was obtained from all the interviewees to have their voices recorded by the interviewer.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The study was initiated by administrating the questionnaires to both teacher and learner participants. The devised questionnaires, as stated before, encompassed 16 Likert type items, and the participants were expected to fill in the questionnaires in nearly half an hour. Prior to administration, all the participants were briefed about the research objectives and reassured about the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Successive to questionnaire administration, the second phase of research, which consisted of running a semi-structured interview, was carried out. To prepare suitable conditions for conducting the interview, the participants were chosen on a voluntary basis. While conducting the interview, due care was given to providing the appropriate timing and venue to come up with more reliable data. Due to the hardships of reaching respondents at their convenience, the interview phase of the study endured over a period of around two weeks.

### Data Analysis

In tackling the research question which strove to single out the major impediments on the way of LCE implementation, the means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were obtained for all the statements on the questionnaire. However, as regards interview data, major themes were extracted from the interviewees' responses, and then the coding process was carried out regarding the frequent responses, via assigning the statements to three respective categories agreed upon by the researchers after consulting the relevant body of literature, that is teacher-induced, learner-related, or context-relevant factors.

### Results

The study probed the potential impediments on the way of implementing Learner-Centered Education in EFL classes at Iranian language schools. Therefore, the responses given by teachers and students to sixteen items on the Likert-type questionnaire are first reported in terms of obtained means and then frequencies and percentages for both groups. Table 1 illustrates the obtained means and standard deviations for the students' responses concerning the impediments on the way of LCE.

Table 1.

*The Obtained Means and Standard Deviations for the Students' Responses*

No.	The statement	Mean	SD
1	There is no single clear definition for LCE and it means different things to different people	4.03	.93
2	Teachers don't have good familiarity with LCE due to lack of proper training	3.99	.86
3	Teachers are not committed to LCE	3.64	1.05
4	Teachers have a tendency to retreat to traditional practices when confronted with classroom realities and unsupportive management or inspection	3.44	1.01

No.	The statement	Mean	SD
5	Teachers are not motivated enough (due to poor job satisfaction and lack of extrinsic rewards) to implement LCE	3.83	1.00
6	Teachers are part of a wider culture, which may not be inherently supportive of some aspects of LCE	3.67	1.00
7	LCE is seen as part of the modern, global world, and this brings with it some sort of resistance; LCE is not welcome in poor, third world countries	3.68	.95
8	Large classroom sizes block the proper implementation of LCE	3.80	1.05
9	Students are accustomed to spoon feeding and are not ready for shifting to LCE	4.04	.97
10	The curriculum is fixed and inflexible	4.05	.94
11	Resource constraints (in terms of facilities and materials) might act as another impeding factor on the way of implementing LCE	4.11	2.12
12	Teachers are reluctant to implement LCE due to low salary	3.73	.90
13	Although policymakers superficially advocate LCE, in practice they don't support its implementation	4.10	.96
14	Learners are not sufficiently receptive to LCE	3.88	.82
15	Parents are not sufficiently receptive to LCE	3.72	1.13
16	There are misconceptions about LCE; LCE and its real objectives and components are misinterpreted by teachers and learners	3.86	1.04

As Table 1 indicates, the mean obtained for statement 11 on the questionnaire ( $\bar{x} = 4.11$ ) was higher in comparison to other statements. In other words, the majority of students participating in the study referred to *resource constraints* as the principal impeding factor on the way of implementing LCE. Furthermore, statement 4, which was related to *teachers' tendency toward applying the traditional practices*, enjoyed the lowest mean ( $\bar{x} = 3.44$ ). Table 2 lists the frequencies and percentages obtained for students' responses on the questionnaire exploring the impediments.

Table 2.

*The Frequencies and Percentages Obtained for the Students' Responses*

No. of Statement	SD		D		U		A		SA	
	1		2		3		4		5	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
1	14	3.1%	21	4.7%	44	9.8%	228	50.6%	143	31.7%
2	11	2.4%	17	3.8%	51	11.3%	255	56.5%	116	25.7%
3	11	2.4%	73	16.2%	75	16.6%	198	43.9%	93	20.6%
4	14	3.1%	88	19.5%	82	18.2%	218	48.3%	48	10.6%
5	17	3.8%	18	4%	115	25.5%	174	38.6%	126	27.9%
6	11	2.4%	43	9.5%	129	28.6%	166	36.8%	101	22.4%
7	8	1.8%	47	10.4%	109	24.2%	200	44.3%	86	19.1%
8	5	1.1%	72	16%	59	13.1%	185	41%	129	28.6%
9	6	1.3%	41	9.1%	44	9.8%	194	43%	165	36.6%
10	8	1.8%	19	4.2%	85	18.8%	167	37%	171	37.9%
11	9	2%	38	8.4%	47	10.4%	192	42.6%	163	36.1%
12	14	3.1%	18	4%	122	27.1%	216	47.9%	80	17.7%
13	11	2.4%	22	4.9%	58	12.9%	177	39.2%	182	40.4%
14	8	1.8%	20	4.4%	77	17.1%	258	57.2%	87	19.3%
15	5	1.1%	97	21.5%	46	10.2%	170	37.7%	132	29.3%
16	11	2.4%	48	10.6%	73	16.2%	178	39.5%	140	31%

To come up with a clear idea about which factors impede the implementation of LCE, the researchers first added up the percentages obtained for each statement and in so doing, the sum of percentages for the last two columns entitled 'agree' and 'strongly agree' was calculated. As the results revealed, most learners (82.3 percent) believed that the *lack of a clear definition* for LCE is the major impediment on the way of applying LCE (statement 1). Moreover, the second major factor with a very close percentage (82.2 percent) was statement 2, which stated that *lack of familiarity resulting from improper training* is the principal impediment for LCE implementation. Moreover, item 6, which referred to *the non-supportive role of community culture*, was singled out as the least influential impediment (59.2 percent) on

the way of LCE. Table 3 illustrates the obtained means and standard deviations for the teachers' responses regarding the impediments on the way of LCE.

Table 3.

*The Obtained Means and Standard Deviations for the Teachers' Responses*

No.	The statement	Mean	SD
1	There is no single clear definition for LCE and it means different things to different people	3.35	.85
2	Teachers don't have good familiarity with LCE due to lack of proper training	3.40	1.16
3	Teachers are not committed to LCE	3.40	.85
4	Teachers have a tendency to retreat to traditional practices when confronted with classroom realities and unsupportive management or inspection	3.03	1.02
5	Teachers are not motivated enough (due to poor job satisfaction and lack of extrinsic rewards) to implement LCE	3.89	1.02
6	Teachers are part of a wider culture, which may not be inherently supportive of some aspects of LCE	3.56	.97
7	LCE is seen as part of the modern, global world, and this brings with it some sort of resistance; LCE is not welcome in poor, third world countries	3.35	.91
8	Large classroom sizes block the proper implementation of LCE	3.46	.96
9	Students are accustomed to spoon feeding and are not ready for shifting to LCE	3.18	.88
10	The curriculum is fixed and inflexible	3.72	1.16
11	Resource constraints (in terms of facilities and materials) might act as another impeding factor on the way of implementing LCE	3.70	.96
12	Teachers are reluctant to implement LCE due to low salary	3.44	.96
13	Although policymakers superficially advocate LCE, in practice they don't support its implementation	3.77	.79
14	Learners are not sufficiently receptive to LCE	3.61	1.11
15	Parents are not sufficiently receptive to LCE	3.75	.92
16	There are misconceptions about LCE; LCE and its real objectives and components are misinterpreted by teachers and learners	3.39	.86

As Table 3 reveals, the mean obtained for statement 5 on the questionnaire ( $\bar{x} = 3.89$ ) was higher in comparison to other statements. In other words, the majority of teachers participating in the study mentioned *poor motivation on the part of teachers* as the chief impeding factor on the way of implementing LCE. Furthermore, statement 4, which was related to *teachers' tendency toward applying the traditional practices*, enjoyed the lowest mean ( $\bar{x} = 3.03$ ). Interestingly, teachers' attitudes regarding the least influential factor in impeding LCE comply with learners' choice, since both groups have referred to statement 4 (*teachers' tendency toward applying the traditional practices*) as the factor that has the least amount of influence on impeding LCE implementation. Table 4 lists the frequencies and percentages obtained for teachers' responses to the questionnaire exploring the impediments.

Table 4.

*The Frequencies and Percentages Obtained for the Teachers' Responses*

No. of Statement	SD		D		U		A		SA	
	1		2		3		4		5	
	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.	Freq.	Per.
1	7	2.9%	36	15%	67	27.9%	126	52.5%	4	1.7%
2	7	2.9%	69	28.8%	29	12.1%	91	37.9%	44	18.3%
3	1	.4%	51	21.3%	43	17.9%	141	58.8%	4	1.7%
4	22	9.2%	43	17.9%	92	38.3%	71	29.6%	12	5%
5	0	0%	34	14.2%	38	15.8%	88	36.7%	80	33.3%
6	8	3.3%	30	12.5%	51	21.3%	121	50.4%	30	12.5%
7	3	1.3%	52	21.7%	53	22.1%	120	50%	12	5%
8	12	5%	34	14.2%	36	15%	146	60.8%	12	5%
9	8	3.3%	44	18.3%	90	37.5%	91	37.9%	7	2.9%
10	5	2.1%	46	19.2%	37	15.4%	75	31.3%	77	32.1%
11	3	1.3%	32	13.3%	44	18.3%	116	48.3%	45	18.8%
12	1	.4%	52	21.7%	54	22.5%	106	44.2%	27	11.3%
13	0	0%	11	4.6%	75	31.3%	110	45.8%	44	18.3%
14	15	6.3%	22	9.2%	58	24.2%	91	37.9%	54	22.5%
15	3	1.3%	30	12.5%	32	13.3%	133	55.4%	42	17.5%
16	1	.4%	49	20.4%	53	22.1%	129	53.8%	8	3.3%

Akin to what was done for learners' responses, the researchers again added up the percentages obtained for each statement, and in so doing, the sum of percentages for the last two columns entitled 'agree' and 'strongly agree' was calculated. As the results revealed, most teachers (72.9 percent) believed that *parents' lack of receptivity for LCE* is the most significant impediment on the way of applying LCE. Also, item 4, which dealt with *teachers' tendency toward applying the traditional practices*, was singled out as the least influential impediment (34.6 percent) on the way of LCE.

In addition to the questionnaire data, the data obtained through interviews were also consulted to come up with a more comprehensive and conclusive answer to the research question which dealt with impediments on the way of LCE.

After analyzing the interview data, the researchers came up with a number of overriding themes that arose regarding the role of teacher-induced, learner-related, or context-relevant factors. As regards the role of teacher-induced factors, most teachers (11 out of 30 participants) referred to *teachers' professional knowledge and qualification* as one of the prominent impeding factors for implementing LCE. The following extract from one of the teachers can be more illuminating in this regard.

Extract 1

*"Most of the teachers in Iran are not qualified or they don't have any qualification such as SELTA, DELTA, TESOL certificate or any kind of certificate which show them a perceptual or considered them as professional teachers or instructor in their own field."*

The same factor was also referred to by learner participants, yet with a lower frequency (8 out of 29). The other two themes emerging from teachers' responses were *the role of the teacher* and *the lack of training courses*. While the first was also mentioned by learners as an impeding factor, the second

theme was not reflected in learners' responses. Extract 2 reveals the viewpoint raised by one of the participating teachers regarding the role of the teacher. Furthermore, Extract 3 shows the concern raised by one of the participating teachers concerning the inadequacy of training courses.

#### Extract 2

*"Teacher should work as a facilitator, that provide feedback & answer the question you needed. I think EFL classes in Iran it is the teacher that play a role in the classroom. & provide the whole instruction & it is what she / he teach that is the most important thing to be taught. That is the teacher that decide what is best for the whole class. So that is why I still saying that they are not completely learner-oriented & still there are some features to consider to make it completely LC. Environment for teaching English as a foreign language."*

#### Extract 3

*"Teachers as I mentioned before of course are not well trained in Iran in order to implement this method. Most of the teacher have some speaking abilities and this speaking abilities of course have taken them let say draw them to the classrooms they are teaching in different institutes without knowing even the rudiments of teaching of EFL or ESL teaching principles."*

Concerning the role of learner-induced factors, four major themes came out from teachers' responses, *lack of learner familiarity and readiness, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, and learners' passivity*. It is worth noting that only the last theme was also reflected in learners' responses and with a high frequency (11 out of 29). Extract 4, taken from a learner's response, can be taken as an example of learners' tendency to remain passive and reticent. Moreover, Extract 5, selected from among teachers' responses, can be a good example of low confidence in learners, which can, in turn, impede the proper



implementation of LCE. Furthermore, Extract 6, which is stated by one of the participating teachers, can be regarded as an instance of lack of familiarity and readiness on the part of learners. Additionally, Extract 7 uttered by one of the teachers can be indicative of the other major learner-induced theme, that is, lack of motivation.

Extract 4

*“Some learners are shy and they don’t want to talk. Some of them are not in suitable level and they can’t talk about must be relevant about lesson.”*

Extract 5

*“Based on my personal experience in English learning classes one of the impediments is lower level of self-confidence of learners and this cause the teacher can’t continue to perform this method in the class.”*

Extract 6

*“Unfortunately Iranian learners are not very good most of them can say. Most of the learner have started learning when they have passed actually the ages of maturity I mean in adulthood & they have lost their flexibility in language learning which is the main cause of their problems in their accents I can say or other learning problem this is one reason.”*

Extract 7

*“Lack of motivation, learner think of has no goal to learn is with their participation they think as language teacher same as schools. So, they wait the teacher start teaching. The learners think that the only source of learning English is teacher.”*

In the last category of factors, that is, context-relevant factors, a variety of themes were identified in the teachers’ responses, including *lack of time*,

*insufficient facilities, inefficient textbooks, lack of proper teaching aids, inappropriate class size, role of policy makers, and cultural impediments.* Four of these themes (*lack of time, insufficient facilities, inappropriate class size, and cultural impediments*) also appeared in learners' responses. However, another additional theme arising from learners' utterances was the role of *improper classroom atmosphere*. Extract 8 taken from among learners' responses can be an illustrative example of a learner's concern with lack of time as one of the major impediments for implementing LCE. Extract 9 shows the concern voiced by one of the teachers concerning insufficient facilities. Moreover, Extract 10 can provide a decent example of a teacher's preoccupation with inappropriate class size, which can, in turn, restrict the implementation of LCE. Finally, as regards cultural impediments, an instance appears in Extract 11 taken from one of the teacher samples.

#### Extract 8

*"It is the limitation of the class time that is one of the impediments, when we are engaging in discussion and eagerly busy talking the time is over."*

#### Extract 9

*"Regarded to context-related also we have none-updated facilities, hard chairs, unfortunately nowadays in every the classes we see some hard chairs, & this hard chairs refers to the context relevant in which language learners. Learn the language none decorative educational settings & also we have a very lack of facilities in our classroom no-decoration of classroom, only we have some hard chairs, a white-board, e.g. and very non practical, non activated situation for our students to reactive in that classes."*

## Extract 10

*“The impediments or the barriers are exits in all the institutes, the number of students in the class is nearly 30 or more in any class, how we can implement the LCE in such classes,”*

## Extract 11

*“For the context relevant is the culture, in Iran that is the teacher that is the only input for the learners, and there is no real situation for the learners to practice their language in authentic environment.”*

### Discussion

The study probed the potential impediments on the way of implementing LCE at Iranian language schools. Drawing on the findings relevant to students, the researchers found that from learners' viewpoint, *resource constraints* and *teachers' tendency toward applying traditional practices* were characterized as two major impediments on the way of LCE. Furthermore, consulting the obtained percentages, the researchers found that the most influential impediments from students' perspective were *lack of clear definition of LCE* and *lack of familiarity resulting from improper training*. As regards teachers, however, partially different results were obtained. The main impeding factor from teachers' perspective was *poor motivation on the part of teachers*. Moreover, *parents' lack of receptivity for LCE* was the other most influential impediment remarked by teachers.

Furthermore, in line with the interview results, three categories of impediments, namely teacher-induced factors (*teachers' professional knowledge and qualification, the role of the teacher and lack of training courses*), learner-induced factors (*lack of learner familiarity and readiness, lack of motivation, lack of confidence and learners' passivity*), and context-relevant factors (*lack of time, insufficient facilities, inefficient textbooks, lack of proper teaching aids, inappropriate class size, role of policy-makers,*

*cultural impediments*, and *improper classroom atmosphere*) were mentioned by participating teachers and learners as the main hurdles on the way of LCE implementation.

The findings provide some support for Safari and Rashidi's (2015) assertion that the ELT program in Iran has failed to promote learners' long-life communicative abilities and language use in authentic situations. Among the potentially impeding factors for LCE, they referred to the role of textbooks, the status of English in the educational system, and the lack of proper training. Thus, their findings seem to be partly in line with what learners have claimed in the current study, regarding the role of resource constraints and improper training. In like manner, Ghanbari and Ketabi (2011) listed some similar impediments on the way of implementing LCE, including lack of feasibility, trainability, and compatibility of the new method with existing values and practices, inadequate training and retraining courses, teachers' low confidence in the new approach, practical constraints, unsupportive school environment, and negative feedback from colleagues, school officials, students, state evaluation centers, etc.

One of the prominent impeding factors highlighted by the interview participants was inadequate professional knowledge and qualifications on the part of teachers who want to implement LCE in their classes. The dire need for further teacher training has been highlighted by so many researchers, including Schweisfurth (2013) and Kumaravadivelu (2012). The former refers to a lack of sufficient training as one of the obstacles hampering smooth materialization of learner-centered education, and the latter highlights the culture-specific differences and the need for approaching the concept of autonomy and hence LCE in different culture-sensitive ways. Thus, it seems, as Kumaravadivelu (2012) contends, proper implementation of LCE in a sustainable manner requires a kind of training that is directly tailored to the cultural characteristics of a specific community and addressing the needs of individuals in that community.

Another principal issue underscored by both teacher and learner participants was the role played by the teacher in fostering learner-centeredness. Most teachers seem to be reluctant to resign from their position of sole authority in the class. The teachers' tendency to keep their domineering role in the class has been referred to by several researchers, including Schweisfurth (2013). Teachers, as Brown and Lee (2015) state, can adopt multiple roles in the classroom, such as being "authority figure, leader, knower, director, manager, counselor, guide and even such roles as friends, confidante, and parent" (p. 304). Despite the dire need for shifting between these roles, most teachers are eager to stick to only the role of an authority figure in the class. However, the proper implementation of LCE and communicative methodologies in the class necessitates the adoption of such roles as facilitator, counselor, and guide on the part of the teacher. Moreover, as Brown and Lee (2015) continue to aver, the roles of teachers and the extent to which different roles are stereotyped and endorsed depend greatly on the community and culture in which they live. In this regard, they maintain, "Depending on the country you are in, on the institution in which you are teaching, on the type of course, on the makeup of your students, some of these roles will be more prominent than others" (p. 304).

As regards the effect of learner-induced factors, the role of learner motivation and confidence, among other cited factors, seems to be more prominent. Part of this demotivation is likely to emanate from uninteresting course books and instructional material. As Tomlinson (2011) maintains, materials can play a significant part in making learners feel more at ease. This, according to him, can be achieved if materials are designed in a way that caters for novelty, and when they are relevant to learners' real needs and interests. Consequently, it may lead to better involvement on the part of learners and can foster confidence in learners. Tailoring materials to learners' needs and interests is also highlighted by Richards (2017). In addition to inefficiency of course books and materials to spark interest and involve learners, another

factor that allegedly lowers learners' motivation is thought to be their blurred and gloomy future prospects.

Finally, among the context-relevant constraints, the participants referred to the impeding role of time constraints, the high number of students in each class, and the lack of suitable facilities. Among the factors highlighted under the category of context-related obstacles, the role of time constraints and inappropriate class size seems to be more prominent. LCE can be conducted in a more influential manner in small classes with fewer students and with ample time available for attending to individual learning needs. Another major impediment referred to by the participants was the role of policy-makers. Needless to say, our classroom culture is mainly driven and controlled by the more general socio-cultural context in which learning takes place, and the corporate policy and code of practice stipulated on schools on the part of policymakers and ministry of education. Thus, even when the teachers are well-trained to apply LCE in a proper way, and students are willing to learn through this novel approach to education if the larger context of education does not welcome such a policy and does not provide the prerequisites for this reform to occur, all teachers' attempts will be in vain. These issues are discussed in sufficient depth by Schweisfurth (2013).

To sum up, though LCE potential to bring about better educational outcomes has been corroborated by different research findings (e.g., Lambert & Minn, 2007; Lambert, Philp & Nakamura, 2016; Morimoto & Loewen, 2007; Yamagata, 2016), part of the reluctance on the part of teachers to implement this approach seems to originate from their disbelief in its efficacy or possibly their fear of losing their position as the dominant authority in class, or as Bordie, Lelliott, and Davis (2002) put it, their resistance to change. In this regard, Dunn and Rakes (2010) believe that the implementation and practice of LCE requires a change of mentality for teachers. In other words, as they state, "if a teacher does not believe that learner-centered practices facilitate student learning, he or she will probably not integrate learner-

centered practices in the classroom” (p. 516). Furthermore, as Nunan (2013, p. 52) puts it, “Some teachers react negatively to the concept, because they feel that implicit in the notion is a devaluing of their own professional roles.”

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The study at hand strove to make a more in-depth probe into the status of LCE implementation in the Iranian EFL context. In so doing, the researchers mainly centered on the impediments hobbling the process of running learner-centered instruction. The findings revealed the hindering role of three categories of impediments (teacher-induced, learner-induced, and context-relevant), to varying degrees. Furthermore, as the results indicated, there were some discrepancies in the way teachers and learners viewed barriers on the way of proper LCE practice.

The findings thus obtained can offer fruitful insights for the decent implementation of LCE in different learning environments. However, as the current study was carried out in the context of language schools, the findings are thought to be more directly applicable to language school learners. The primary requirement for facilitating the implementation of LCE, based on the obtained results, is working toward removing or diminishing the potential obstacles plaguing the process.

One further point worth noting is that teachers and learners may hold different, and at times opposing, perspectives regarding LCE impediments, as was the case in the current study. Thus, prior to moving in the direction of paving the way for proper LCE implementation, sufficient account must be taken of all these diverse points of view to reach a compromise position.

The range of factors referred to by both teacher and learner participants in the current study was quite varied, including a variety of teacher-induced, learner-induced, and context-relevant factors. Thus, to come up with a more conclusive claim about the barriers on the way of LCE, further replicating and complementing studies are called for in the future, mainly owing to the fact

that the current investigation only addressed language school learners. Among the other limitations that might be taken into consideration by the future researchers is the inclusion of a larger, more representative sample to reflect a more accurate picture of the prevailing impediments.

Altogether, though the findings of the current study may look promising, taking real action toward diminution or elimination of barriers necessitates genuine involvement of educational authorities and policy-makers, and this, in turn, requires plenteous negotiations with educational decision-makers in an attempt to sensitize and persuade these leading figures to move in the direction of tackling challenges and obstacles restricting LCE implementation. Finally, through the removal of barriers and proper application of LCE, it is hoped that attempts targeted toward instigation of better-quality education will gain further momentum.

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