Assessing the Alignment among Learners' Language Needs, Course Objectives, and Classroom Practice in an EFL Communicative Course

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Abstract

A needs analysis (NA) study was carried out to determine how well course objectives and actual classroom activities aligned with the English language needs of learners enrolled in a communicative EFL course in Iran. Brown's (2016) NA framework was adapted with a focus on the democratic and discrepancy view of NA. A case study design utilizing triangulation of data collection was employed to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data. A questionnaire, classroom observations, and post-observation interviews were among the methods used to collect information from 143 learners and 10 teachers. The questionnaires were quantitatively analyzed using frequency counts, percentages, and one-way repeated measures ANOVA analyses to identify learners' language needs. The qualitative dimension of the study provided a complete picture of course objectives and classroom activities and tasks. The results of the questionnaire showed that the majority of learners agreed that all general English skills were fundamental to communicating in English and ranked speaking skill, followed by writing, as the most needed skills. Also, a review of course objectives indicated that the learning objectives of the English course aligned with learners' English language needs. However, according to classroom observations and post-observation interviews, classroom goals were not focused on attaining communicative tasks and activity objectives. In fact, teachers' teaching objectives did not meet the learners' communicative needs and were limited to teaching four skills at comprehension, grammatical, and lexical levels. Misalignment between assessment tasks and course objectives was reported as one of the contributing factors.

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In recent years, the demand for studying English in Iran has risen dramatically, as it has in other nations where English is recognized as a foreign language (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). There is a huge interest in EFL education in private language schools and institutes in Iran (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). These language institutes have endeavored to make their teaching context more communicative-oriented (Ganji et al., 2018; Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018). To this aim, in the private sector, globally utilized textbooks are used to identify course goals, design learning objectives, build and coordinate assessment plans, and establish a course timetable (Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018).

However, learners do not seem to be satisfied with improving their English communication at private institutes (Alizadeh & Hui, 2018). In fact, approaches to communicative teaching in Iran have often misrepresented the nature of communicative skills; as a result, learners actually struggle to communicate at a level comparable to the coursebooks' requirements and descriptions for the four language skills (Alizadeh & Hui, 2018; Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Therefore, to ensure that these courses cater to the English language needs of learners in a communicative course, it was important to conduct a needs analysis.

Previous research, such as Aslrasouli (2012), Eslami (2010), Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008), has looked into the communication difficulties, problems, and needs of Iranian English for Specific Purposes (ESP) students but has paid little attention to the alignment between student needs, course objectives, and teaching practices in communicative courses in Iran. To address this issue, the present study, using Brown's (2016) approach, aimed to explore learners' English language needs from a democratic and discrepancy viewpoint to determine the communicative language needs as perceived by learners themselves. Further, particular attention was paid to the alignment of learners' communicative language needs, course objectives and actual classroom practices. The goal was to produce an EFL communicative teaching context that meets the learners' needs and interests.

Iranian EFL Context

In Iran, opportunities to learn English are available in both the public (public schools and universities) and private educational systems (Gholami et al., 2016). In the public sector, English is intended to provide a suitable basis for understanding and communicating human knowledge and culture while English learners studying English in private institutes do so for various reasons but often to develop their ability to communicate effectively. (Alizadeh & Hui, 2018).

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In Iran's public school curriculum, learning English starts in Middle School (7th grade) and lasts for six years, and the English course is normally offered three hours a week in classes with an average of 30 students with different proficiency levels. The same nationwide textbooks are mandated by the Ministry of Education (Gholami et al., 2016). The teaching approach adopted by teachers is primarily grammar-translation with a focus on reading (Gholami et al., 2016; Rahimi, 2009). The curriculum objectives include limited vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and grammar, with little practice in de-contextualized sentence writing (Safari & Rashidi, 2015). Speaking is also restricted to drills to practice grammar and short dialogues to introduce language functions, and listening comprehension is mostly missing in the syllabus (Alizadeh & Hui, 2018).

In the public sector, exams are usually discrete-point tests that assess students' knowledge of language forms, not the ability to communicate in English (Riazi & Razavipour 2011). Only grammar and vocabulary are tested among language skills, only reading and among language components (Sardabi & Kusha, 2016). The teachers, who are the products of the same school system, generally have minimal productive skills (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015) and have limited or no access to resources such as computers, projectors, and flashcards (Gholami et al., 2016).

Given this situation, students' learning outcome from the public school system is unsatisfactory, resulting in their inability to use English in real-life communicative contexts (Safari & Rashidi, 2015). Consequently, school students tend to take private English courses, mostly in language institutes (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018). Private institutes provide service to a wide range of clientele belonging to different age groups and with different language proficiency levels (Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018). The number of learners in each class ranges from 10 to 16, and they are grouped based on their performances on placement tests.

The institutes do not follow a uniform instructional methodology and are granted permission to adopt or devise their own methodology and materials. As regards the instructional materials and textbooks published by international publishers (e.g., *Top Notch* and *Summit* series), which are typically based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) language levels, are adopted by private institutes' expert panels (Gholami et al., 2016). Language institutes normally recruit TEFL and TESOL graduates with an advanced level of proficiency and knowledge of different approaches to communicative language teaching (CLT) and Tasked-based Language Teaching (TBLT) (Sadeghi & Ghaderi, 2018). To help teachers contribute effectively to their mission,

private institutes often organize professional development pieces of training, workshops, and meetings (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015).

The Context of the Study

The specific context where the data for this study was collected was Navid English Institute (NEI), one of the largest and most popular language institutes in Iran, with several branches throughout the province. NEI offers English language courses for adults and school-aged language learners. At the time of the study, the institute offered 14 English Language Levels (ranging from CEFR level A1 to C1). The course objectives for young adult and adult learners at NEI were developed in keeping with *Top notch* (Saslow & Ascher, 2006) and *Summit* (Saslow & Ascher, 2012) learning objectives outlined by each coursebook for A1 to C1 levels. At NEI, students' progress was measured using in-house multiple-choice assessments that examined listening and reading comprehension and grammar and vocabulary knowledge.

Literature Review

Needs analysis (NA) is an approach to language teaching which surfaced during the 1970s in the field of language acquisition planning, and its use became widespread fairly quickly (Nunan, 1988). NA has been a key component in curriculum development and review models (Stoller et al., 2006). The importance of NA in arriving at informed and sound decisions about the goals of language courses and the materials used in the international setting is well documented (Cowling, 2007; Flowerdew, 2013; Graves, 2007; West, 1994; Iwai et al., 1999; Yassin et al., 2019). NA collects detailed information in order to develop or improve an existing curriculum in response to the needs of a specific group of students or an institution (Önder-Özdemir, 2018).

In the EFL context of Iran, there have been several NA studies on curriculum design; however, they are limited to ESP courses. These studies have carried out a formal needs analysis to introduce or design new teaching materials. For instance, Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008) used interviews and questionnaires to investigate the foreign language learning needs of Iranian nursing and midwifery students. They realized that ESP courses did not properly satisfy the learners' needs, and they concluded that most ESP courses in Iran were done without first assessing the learners' needs and consulting specialists, which led to failure in a variety of ways. In an attempt to modify the syllabi of ESP postgraduate courses in Iran's Ministry of Health, Dehnad et al. (2010) conducted a needs analysis. The findings revealed information on student needs as well as recommendations for content,

resources, and teaching technique adjustments. Mehrdad (2012) investigated students' perceptions of good English learning at an Iranian university. He concluded that the existing language course was not serving the students' language needs and that the course syllabus needed to be improved. As a result, it was suggested that the content and syllabi be revised. Similarly, Eslami (2010) emphasized the necessity of understanding the specific demands of students in various academic disciplines to match the tasks with learners' expectations and needs properly. Another study was conducted in the Iranian environment by Khany and Tarlani-Aliabadi (2016). They argued that there was a little study on whether input from students and teachers was used in textbook selection, teaching methods, assessment, and classroom participation patterns in EAP courses in Iran. They claimed that there was an unbalanced relationship between students, teachers, and curriculum developers and proposed that for making pedagogical decisions, students, teachers, and those involved in curriculum development should be included.

All of the preceding research were limited to exploring learners' needs in ESP courses at the postsecondary level and/or understanding the needs of students and other stakeholders in their educational program (Aslrasouli, 2012; Eslami, 2010; Mazdayasna & Tahririan, 2008; Mohammadi & Mousavi, 2013). Learners' language needs and other issues, including the alignment of the course objectives and classroom teaching tasks and activities with learners' language requirements, have not been addressed in English communicative courses offered in the private sector of Iran. Richards (2001) stated that learners' needs are required at the heart of learner-centered and communicative approaches. It is important for any communicative program to try to find common ground to cater to the needs of its stakeholders' population to increase learning opportunities (Ennis, 2020).

Theoretical Model

NA is a cornerstone for curriculum development to identify learners' needs across disciplines, professions and workplaces (Brown, 2009, 2016; Önder-Özdemir, 2018). The significance of NA has led to the development of several approaches (Brown, 2016; Long, 2005; Mishan, 2005; Munby, 1978) for understanding, analyzing, and designing ways to investigate learners' needs. However, this study adopted Brown's (2016) systematic approach to NA to offer a foundation for the research questions and choice of research method (Table 1).

Brown (2016) defines the steps and processes for gathering information, setting goals, evaluating learning, developing materials, teaching and learning, and overall

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program evaluation. He related four different philosophies to (NA): the democratic, the discrepancy, the analytic, and the diagnostic philosophies, which are important since they will affect the types of information that must be gathered (West, 1994). He also listed different possible tools in six categories: questionnaires, interviews, existing information, tests, observations, and meetings. This framework also considers three essential characteristics when selecting or creating these tools: reliability, validity, and usability.

Table 1.

NA Approach: Stages and Steps

Stages	Steps
NA basic decisions	1. Define the purpose of the NA 2. Find the right level of specificity by delimiting the scale of student population 3. Decide upon approach(es) and syllabus(es) by adopting, adapting or designing. 4. Recognize constraints 5. Select data collection procedures
Gather NA data	6. Collect data 7. Analyze data 8. Interpret results
Use the NA results	9. Determine objectives (assessments, materials, teaching strategies) 10. Evaluate and report on the NA project

Thus, the methodological assumptions utilized in the study were derived primarily from Brown's (2016) work with the objective of understanding stakeholders' needs to improve English language teaching and learning in English communicative courses.

Despite the private sector's claims of meeting learners' needs to use English for communication in a variety of real-life contexts through CLT methods and materials (Ganji et al., 2018; Zhang & Rahimi, 2014), the learning outcomes based on the results of the existing studies showed little improvement of language skills at levels comparable to those of CEFR levels (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2015; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006a) at levels comparable to those of CEFR levels' descriptions. Thus, learners enrolled in private language institutes are in general, dissatisfied with their improvement in English communication abilities (Alizadeh & Hui, 2018).

Given that teaching and learning take place as part of a whole system, to identify the source of the problem, the present study aimed at examining students' language needs against the objectives of a communicative course, and more specifically, the study aimed to investigate if classroom teaching goals were aligned with learners' English language needs. To our knowledge, no studies were conducted in this context on considerations to satisfy the English language needs of the learners at private language schools.

Specifically, the present study addressed the following:

1. What are the English language needs of learners in EFL communicative courses at NEI in the Iranian private sector?
2. To what extent do the objectives of the communicative course to which learners are exposed align with learners' English language needs?
3. To what extent do the instructional activities offered by the EFL communicative course align with the learners' English language needs?

Method

Research Design

To further understand the research problem in this study, one major language institute was investigated using a case study methodology and triangulation of data gathering. Both qualitative and quantitative data from learner participants and teachers were collected. The aim was to increase the credibility of interpretations of data from different sources and to explore any discrepancies among learners' needs, course objectives and classroom teaching goals. The choice of quantitative data collection and its subsequent analysis provided a broad perspective of learners' English language needs and answered the first research question, which was a prerequisite for the second question. The qualitative dimension of the study was planned using document review methods, classroom observation and post-observation interviews. The data collection instruments were complementary to one another. They gave a clearer picture of learners' language needs, course objectives and classroom activities and tasks.

Participants

The participants consisted of 143 students and 10 teachers at NEI in 2018. Stratified random sampling was used to divide the learner population into three competency levels of beginning (n=26), intermediate/upper-intermediate (n=90), and advanced (n=27) learners participating in English classes. The strata were organized based on the learners' shared competency level, meaning the whole population was divided into homogenous groups to complete the sampling process. The learners' demographics are shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Learners' Demographics

Demographics		Valid percentages	Frequency Total 143
Gender	Female	55.2%	79
	Male	44.8%	64
Age distribution	under 20	48.3%	69
	20-29	25.2%	36
	30-39	20.3%	29
	more than 40	6.3%	9
Years of studying English at NEI	less than a year	14%	20
	1 to 3 year(s)	37.8%	54
	4 years or more	48.3%	69
Competency level	Beginning	18.2%	26
	Intermediate	27.3%	39
	Upper-intermediate	35.7%	51
	Advanced	18.9%	27

As for teachers, a randomly selected group of ten EFL teachers (4 males and 6 females) who had participated in the study. They ranged in age from 24 to 50, with 3 to 25 years of experience teaching at NEI. Six teachers had graduate degrees and four had undergraduate degrees in local universities teaching foreign languages. All teachers had participated in regular in-service programs offered by the institution and were aware of the course objectives.

Instruments

Learners' Questionnaire. The learner questionnaire was employed to identify learners' language needs and learning priorities. The questionnaire employed in the present study was Balint's (2004) L2 learners' need analysis inventory. The questionnaire contained 26 questions; the first six questions focused on the learner's demographic information, such as the student's English competency level, years of English learning experience, gender, and age; the remaining 20 questions focused on learners' English language needs. All the items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

Classroom Observations. Nonparticipant structured observation was utilized in this study which intended to find the gap between teachers' claimed view of teaching objectives and what occurred in reality in the classroom (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Two different observation forms were used. The first form used for observation was COLT observation form (Adapted from Spada & Fröhlich, 1995) to concentrate on the timespan

for different types of classroom activities. In addition, the CLT checklist (Adapted from Curtain & Dahlberg, 2004) was used to determine whether instructional activities in the classroom were in line with the CLT principles.

Post observation Interview Questions. A semi-structured interview was conducted with teachers. The interview questions were developed using Brown's (2016) model, which were then validated by two members of the educational board who had a Ph.D. in TEFL to ensure the appropriateness of the content, language and the amount of time required to answer the questions. The teachers' post-observation interviews focused on the alignment between their classroom teaching and lesson objectives.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection was done in the span of three consecutive 11-week-long terms. The following procedures were taken (see Table 3).

Questionnaire. In the first stage of data gathering, a learners' questionnaire was administered**.** It was administered to learners on one occasion via google docs at the end of the first semester. To complete the Google forms, all of the students had access to the internet. Students were also familiar with using Google Forms at NEI since they had used it to complete some exercises as part of a class activity.

Reviewing Literature on Coursebook Objectives. Different sources of literature on evaluation of *Top notch* (Saslow, Ascher, & Morsberger, 2006) and *Summit* (Saslow & Ascher, 2012) were studied to determine the alignment between course objectives and learners' English language needs. The search contained empirical journal articles and authors' claims about the learning objectives. Review of documents provided information about course objectives that was used to support or verify data obtained from the questionnaire and the subsequent classroom observations.

Classroom Observations. The next step was setting up classroom observations. Ten teachers signed a consent form beforehand that articulated the anonymity and voluntary nature of being observed and taking part in a follow-up interview. The participants' classes were observed for 3 successive sessions, and different aspect of classroom practice were documented. Observing three successive sessions gave a balanced view of the tasks and teaching objectives covered in the observed classes which helped to check intra-rater reliability. Intra-rater reliability determined the consistency of data collected by the observer throughout three sessions over a short period of time. Overall, 30 sessions of 105 minutes were observed and generated a total of 3150 minutes of classroom observation data. The two introduced forms (COLT & CLT) were used to record the

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amount of time for each task, the types of teaching tasks and activities, and different aspects of communicative teaching. The classes were audio-recorded. Field notes of the teaching tasks and activities, and notes from students' interactions and responses to the teachers' instructions were taken.

Post-Observation Teacher Interviews. Data from observations were supported by post-observation interviews conducted with teachers. Teachers' interviews were conducted to ensure teachers' practice in the classroom was aligned with learners' needs; in fact, they needed to discuss if they had executed the lesson objectives in the classroom, if not, why they thought their practices were different than the objectives. Each interview session lasted at least 40 minutes long. All the interviews were conducted in Persian and audio recorded.

Table 3.

Overview of the Data Collection Procedures

Data Source	Term	Description
Questionnaire	Spring 2018	To identify learners' language needs
Reviewing the Documents	Summer 2018	To review NEI's coursebook objectives and available literature
Classroom observation & post-observation interview	Summer and Fall 2018	To explore the alignment between course objectives and actual classroom teaching

Data Analysis

In the data analysis stage, learners' submitted questionnaire data on their English language needs was analyzed using SPSS version 26 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY) program. The statistical procedures employed included descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) for the items on the questionnaire. In order to answer the first research question, one-way repeated measures ANOVA was used to compare learners' ratings for language needs. This statistical procedure determined whether group means for each language skill and subskills were different, where the participants were the same in each group. Document analysis provided insight into course objectives and was a means to triangulate data effectively (Bowen, 2009). The classroom observations were analyzed to consider aspects of communicative teaching in classrooms such as use of communicative teaching, lesson implementation, classroom activities and tasks as well as the amount of time spent on each activity, applying CLT checklist and COLT scheme simultaneously to record the relevant data. The post-observation interview data were

transcribed, after which content analysis (Bryman, 2012) was applied using NVivo11 qualitative analysis software to identify themes related to any alignment or discrepancy between classroom teaching and learners' language needs.

Results
Identifying Learners' English Language Needs

The questionnaire asked about learners' language needs; therefore, repeated measures were run to find any significant difference. Frequency and descriptive statistics were used to indicate how often a specific response option occurred in this population. The mean scores, SD and valid percentage or valid relative frequency in percentages are presented in descending order (see Table 4). Valid percentages provided an accurate picture of the distribution of valid cases. In Table 4, columns relating to valid percentages add up to 100 percent.

The speaking subskills and tasks were among the highest mean ratings ranging from 4.03 to 4.18. More than 79% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that using appropriate conversation strategies in real contexts and speaking to foreign visitors/colleagues/friends are very important. However, as perceived by the learners, the least speaking task needed was related to giving presentations, although the mean was above 4.00, which means the students still agreed (albeit not strongly) that they were needed. Then came the writing with the highest mean to expressing ideas adequately in writing at work or/and class (m=4.17). Next came listening, with the highest mean belonging to comprehending conversational and everyday topics in different contexts (m=4.14). Reading turned out to be less thought of among the needs, with mean ratings ranging from 3.67 to 3.92, which means more than 60% of students still agreed or strongly agreed that these tasks are important.

Table 4.
Learners' English Language Needs

English Language Needs	Mean	SD	Valid percentage of students' ratings				
			1	2	3	4	5
Use conversation strategies in real contexts	4.18	.893	.7	4.2	15.4	35.7	44.1
To Speak to foreigners	4.17	.813	-	2.8	17.5	39.9	39.9
Express ideas adequately in writing	4.17	1.007	2.1	6.3	11.9	32.2	47.6
Comprehend conversational & everyday topics	4.14	.961	2.8	2.8	14.7	37.1	42.7
Listen to music, TV and media	4.13	.973	1.4	7.0	11.9	36.4	43.4
Take part in meetings	4.13	.866	1.4	2.8	14.7	43.4	37.8

Talk with experts in real contexts	4.11	.950	1.4	4.9	16.8	35.0	42.0
Comprehend lectures and academic topics	4.06	.958	2.8	2.1	19.6	37.1	38.5
Participate in academic discussions	4.06	.940	1.4	5.6	16.1	39.9	37.1
Give presentations	4.03	1.084	2.8	9.1	12.6	32.9	42.7
Write letters/emails (formal/informal)	4.00	.964	1.4	4.9	23.1	33.6	37.1
Take notes	3.99	.982	2.8	3.5	21.0	37.1	35.7
Write daily notes, messages, & comments	3.99	.989	2.1	7.0	15.4	40.6	35.0
Write using correct spelling and punctuation	3.99	1.097	2.8	9.1	16.1	30.1	42.0
Understand instructional and learning tasks	3.986	1.0139	2.8	7.0	14.0	41.3	35.0
Comprehend academic articles and books	3.92	.931	3.5	3.5	16.1	51.7	25.2
Read non-fiction materials	3.83	1.048	4.2	6.3	20.3	40.6	28.7
Write text using correct grammar	3.80	1.059	2.1	10.5	23.8	32.9	30.8
Read fiction materials	3.76	1.043	4.2	8.4	18.9	44.8	23.8
Read maps & graphs	3.67	1.053	4.2	9.1	24.5	39.9	22.4

To answer the first study question, one-way repeated measures ANOVA were performed to compare the means of language needs for productive and receptive language skills. The one-way repeated measures ANOVA results indicated that the general differences were significant ($F=6.245$, $p= .000$, $\eta p^2= .042$). The effect measure eta-squared ($\eta 2$) was reported as 0.042, indicating a medium effect size. Therefore, a Bonferroni pairwise comparison was run to identify where the differences lie. The results showed that even though the participants expressed the need to learn all communicative tasks in the study, they showed a significantly lower desire to read maps/graphs and read fiction materials compared to using appropriate conversation strategies in real contexts ($p=.000$; $p=.000$), speaking to friends, visitors and colleagues ($p=.000$; $p=.000$) and expressing ideas adequately in writing ($p=.000$; $p=.001$), respectively.

Alignment between Course Objectives and Learners' Language Needs

Coursebooks were an important part of the language course in NEI classrooms. They were the most visible aspect of a teacher's teaching methodology, and they made a significant contribution to a course's teaching and learning objectives. A review of studies relating to *Top Notch* (Saslow & Ascher, 2006) and *Summit* (Saslow & Ascher, 2012) textbooks evaluation revealed that the coursebooks, which were used at NEI, provided a reliable context for communicative language teaching and learning (Alemi & Mesbah, 2013; Eslami et al., 2010; Rashidi & Bahrami, 2012). Similarly, Kelishadi and Sharifzade (2013), using Littlejohn's (1998) methodology, conducted a study on the evaluation of the Top-Notch Series. They showed how the learning objectives supported students'

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successful communication by providing opportunities for engagement.

Also, the authors of *Top Notch* and *Summit* ELT coursebooks claimed that these series reflect CLT and TBLT principles on A1 to C1 level descriptors (can-do statements). They have outlined the learning objectives involved in designing each unit and each lesson at the beginning of each book. The main communicative objective of each lesson was to achieve and complete a production skill task such as a speaking interaction, a speaking production or a writing task. The subsidiary goals, such as listening and reading subskills in the units, provided the needed input to generate ideas and provide context for the target grammar, phrases and words needed for the productive skills. In a nutshell, the skills and strategies taught in the NEI coursebooks provided opportunities for learners to construe meaning and develop all of their language skills in English communicatively. This meant that the course objectives aligned with students' language need based on questionnaire results in this study.

Exploring the Alignment Between Course Objectives and Actual Classroom Teaching

Findings from Classroom Observation. The data collected using COLT was analyzed mainly focusing on the tasks and activities carried out and the time spent on these activities in three sessions of classroom observation. At the same time, data gathered using the CLT checklist indicated if the manner in which teachers presented classroom activities was in alignment with CLT goals since all the lessons in coursebooks were based on CLT principles. Each class was observed three times for a total of 315 minutes.

The data revealed that efforts in classrooms to encourage students to practice and communicate in English were insufficient. Activities mostly reflected classroom use of language, focused on the formation of correct examples of language, practiced language out of context, and practiced small samples of language. Teachers, for instance, continued to teach speaking skills from an instrumental perspective, which meant repeating drills or memorizing dialogues, answering comprehension questions, and role-playing conversation under a predetermined model. The results of the questionnaire indicated that interaction is the main goal for language development, where learners get opportunities to express themselves, while activities did not improve learners' communicative speaking abilities. According to the COLT data, the communicative role of dialogues received only 6.35 percent (20 minutes) of the three-session teaching period. Similarly, teaching the writing task only took 6.35% (20 minutes) of three sessions of class time. Teaching the writing skill focused on developing learners' linguistic competence, such as grammar

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knowledge and vocabulary mastery across different proficiency levels, and ignoring, if not absolutely, to a great extent, the communicative and discourse elements which make up a meaningfully negotiable text. Table 6 presents the average time spans spent on each language task and activity in class in three sessions.

Table 6.

Average Activity Timespan for Three Observation Sessions for Each Class

Classroom activities in three sessions	Time span in minutes out of 315	Percentages
Reading tasks and activities	65	20.64
Teaching grammar	55	17.46
Listening tasks and activities	50	15.87
Speaking production	30	9.52
Teaching new words	30	9.52
Brainstorming and introductory activities	25	7.94
Speaking interaction	20	6.35
Writing tasks and activities	20	6.35
Other (drills, repetitions)	20	6.35

The observation findings indicated that the classes basically focused on reading comprehension, taking a maximum of 20.64% (65 minutes) of three sessions class time to ensure learners comprehend every word and phrase in the reading. Grammar presentation took 17.46% (55 minutes) of 315-minute class time (three sessions). Teachers seemed to give more importance to accuracy by giving a long presentation of the grammatical items without contextualizing the structures in meaning-based activities. In most cases, examples of new teaching points were given in different contexts without focusing on the communicative goal of the lesson.

In a nutshell, the least often performed activities in the course were productive and communicative tasks indicating that class time was not successfully allocated to foster students' communicative language proficiency. Teachers provided opportunities for learners to practice the learning points, but at comprehension, grammar and vocabulary levels. A wide variety of teaching techniques and activities were used to clarify comprehension questions, grammar, and new words to make sure students comprehended all the new expressions and grammatical structures. The seldom use of communicative activities was at odds with the course objectives as set forth by coursebooks, which were based on the principles of CLT.

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Findings from Post-Observation Interviews with Teachers. The majority of teachers acknowledged the misalignment between the lesson goals and their instruction in response to questions that prompted explanations for alignment and discrepancies between what the objectives were and how the teachers actually taught. This discrepancy was attributed to a variety of reasons, including learner levels, language requirements, learning styles and attitudes, and classroom atmosphere. The following excerpts were taken from teachers' comments.

> T1: "I believe that my class should emphasize productive skills, since the goal of our teaching is to enhance students' communicative competence. But frankly, engaging in communication activities takes too much time."

> T4: "Although helping students acquire communicative competence is our goal, it seems unattainable. There are a lot of students in class and the class time is limited."

> T7: "I have tried using group work, but I realized that such kinds of activities are ineffective since student have different learning styles. My students complained about group work instruction saying that they had not learned anything to help them move on to the next level."

> T10. "I usually have crowded classes of 16 students which make speaking exercises impossible and because of lack time, I cannot have speaking activities a lot."

More importantly, teachers' general consensus on the way English was taught in their class was that they had to prepare students to pass their final exam. They mentioned that teachers' performance was measured based on students' performance on final tests and grade retention. All ten teachers agreed that the administrator, learners and parents were more concerned with learners' test performance than with how well they used the language. Students would accuse teachers of failing to help them achieve higher marks. Parents put additional pressure on the teachers by expecting great grades on the final exam. Therefore, rather than teaching students how to use English, teachers had to prepare learners for the final exam. The following excerpts were taken from teachers' comments.

> T2: "… and students only need to make choices on MC tests to pass the course without completing skill-oriented tasks. So, it did not matter much whether or not I placed great emphasis on students' spoken and written English."

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T5: Above all, students need to lay a solid foundation in grammar in order to past the final test. So, I simply teach according to the needs of my students to pass the course."

T8: I had to concentrate more of my class time on teaching vocabulary and grammar for the majority of test tasks are on those components in the form of MC."

Teachers thought tests produced for classroom achievement did not necessarily promote students' communicative skills. Nine out of ten teachers expressed that final MC tests were poorly designed and carried out properly and negatively impacted their teaching and learning. The examinations distorted the course objectives since the teachers concentrated on teaching and honing abilities tested in the final exam rather than practicing and enhancing conversational and communicative language skills. Teachers believed that while assessments evaluated one thing, the course objectives were another and were unable to establish a link between learning objectives and assessment. Evidently, the course objectives and the tests at NEI did not align.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide data through Brown's (2016) NA approach to explore the democratic and discrepancy view of the needs of EFL learners at NEI in the Iranian private sector. The democratic view of needs involved determining the learners' English language needs that were desired to be addressed in the language course. In order to ascertain whether the linguistic needs of the learners were being addressed, the discrepancy view of needs analysis looked at how well the course objectives and the actual classroom teaching aligned learners' language needs. Of the many findings of this study, a few that might be worth further elaboration are addressed here.

With regard to the first and second questions, after making basic decisions about the NA investigation, which was Brown's (2016) first stage in his NA approach, the second stage of NA, gathering NA data, was carried out. Information on learners' language needs and coursebook objectives was collected. The questionnaire results suggested that most learners viewed all language skills as important to communicate in English. Most notably, speaking production and interaction, along with writing skill received the highest ratings among the learners. At the same time, coursebook objectives were identified. The learning objectives were organized around meaning, functions and tasks instead of being organized around language structures. The results support the studies of Cowling, 2007

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and Flowerdew, 2013 on the necessity of learners' language needs and course alignment. When the results from question one was examined alongside the results of research question 2, they indicated learners' language needs were well aligned with communicative English course objectives at NEI.

With regard to our third research question, however, a discrepancy view of the observational data revealed a surprising result. It seemed that teachers were not organizing instruction focused on communicative language learning even though they were aware of the teaching objectives. This finding is quite consistent with the findings of the studies in the relevant literature in that despite the alignment between the lessons' objectives and teachers' perception of the objectives outlined; lesson goals were not frequently applied in the classroom (Basturkmen et al., 2004; Bax, 2003; Powers & Butler, 2006; Walsh, 2002). The observation results from the COLT form and CLT checklist showed that EFL learners at NEI were provided with instruction that did not target their language development needs and only familiarized learners to English by giving instructions delivered in English. Even though speaking received the highest rating of language needs and writing, these skills were the least practiced in this study. These results support the studies of Alizadeh (2018), Razmjoo & Riazi (2006b), Sadeghi & Richards (2015), and Watanabe (2013), who suggested that few activities executed in classrooms were effective in enhancing English communicative ability. This incongruity between learners' needs and their account of classroom teaching and learning experience at NEI is similar to the results of data analysis implied in previous studies carried out by Graham et al. (2014), Tavakoli (2015), and Tomlinson (2016).

Further investigation was carried out through post-observation interviews to understand the reasons for this substantial discrepancy between learners' needs and classroom practice. Teachers explained multilevel contextual factors, including learners' attributes, environmental factors, and tests, had contributed to the gap. These results were in line with those of Biggs (2003), Busch (2010), and Sato & Kleinsasser (2004), who suggested that the existing gap was due to institutional factors, including class size, time, learners' attributes, and tests. However, in this situation, the broad consensus among teachers' perspectives on how English was taught in their classrooms was that the established teaching technique complied with the NEI exam goals.

One key problem was that tests used at NEI did not take learners' needs into account and differed in their goals; as a result, the efficacy of teaching and learning was undermined. This finding is quite consistent with the findings of the studies in the relevant literature in that tests can negatively impact the way teachers teach, specifically teachers

deploy techniques that relate to exam skills, as opposed to using those recommended by the curriculum and/or in the teachers' guide (Biggs, 2003; Cane 2005; Maniruzzaman & Hoque, 2010). The findings also echo Foster & Hunter (2016) results that the examination washback effect is one of contributing causes of producing incompetent users of English language; thus, it is necessary that the test tasks reflect learners' desired learning outcome to create educational improvement (Biggs, 2003; Saif, 2006).

Conclusion and Implications

The purpose was to investigate learners' communicative language needs to determine the extent to which course objectives and the actual classroom practice align with them. Results showed that learners' perceptions were well aligned with course objectives, suggesting all skills to be equally valued, with speaking being the most important. Thus, classroom teaching was expected to be aligned with learners' language needs. However, as a result of negative test washback, teachers' classroom teaching differed substantially from the defined goals. These discrepancies undermined the efficacy of teaching and learning and left the learners less prepared to succeed in learning English communicatively.

An important implication of the study is that the negative impact of tests on instruction can be mitigated by minimizing and changing the characteristics of the test and test tasks to correspond to the characteristics of learners' needs and teachers' teaching in the instructional program (McKay & Brown, 2016). This way, teaching to the test may impact instruction positively only if test tasks are aligned with the objectives and goals of instructional activities (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Therefore, the investigation of language needs is a prerequisite to creating positive washback at the test design stage (Saif, 2006). Therefore, language programs must revisit their tests to accommodate students' needs. This calls for future studies to explore ways in which language tests address different communicative needs of language learners and investigate whether these tests can positively affect teaching and learning activities and, if so, what is the impact of the tests on classroom practice and learning outcomes.

Despite the useful insight, this study provides to the TEFL field, its limitations should be considered. First, this study was carried out at a single language institution. It would be helpful to include a variety of institutions and combine responses from more learners and teachers in future research. Moreover, subsequent quantitative research could provide insights regarding learners' scores on existing tests and whether they are valid correspondence of learners' language ability at a specific level.

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