CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Introduction

Learning English in Iran proves to be difficult for most students. Many factors related to the teaching/learning process are to be considered in order to reach the problems that students come across and to orient the process towards a better curriculum.

The present research will consider biological, cognitive and socio-economic factors. These factors play a basic role in the language learning process. As will be discussed in later sections, Iranian students start learning English at the age of Twelve. Those who are highly motivated to learn it earlier have to attend private classes, which is not possible for all families.

This study will consider and study one of the main factors, that is, the differences between Iranian foreign language learners belonging to different age groups. The goal of this research is to shed light on the problem of the inadequacy of Iranian EFL students, especially in their reading comprehension ability. This work consists of five chapters as follows:

The first chapter, the Background and Purpose, will introduce the plan of the work and explain the significance of English in today’s world and Iran, present a statement of the problem, outline the important factors that play a basic role in the language learning process, analyze the objectives of the work and explore related second/foreign language theories.

The second chapter is titled Review of the Related Literature which will review the related theories and will take the present status of reading comprehension classes into account. The nature of the acquisition and development of the English vocabulary by Iranian children and adults in EFL classes will be considered too.
The third chapter, Methodology and Data Collection, will explain the nature of the present research and the place of the work. In this chapter, the process of choosing subjects and questionnaires and the process of data analysis will be discussed.

The fourth chapter will analyze the collected data and discuss the research findings and results, which will be converted to numerical figures as the statistical findings.

In the fifth chapter, there will be a summary of the work, conclusion and suggestions for educational planners and English language teachers. Then the implications of the results of this research in the present educational system in Iran will be discussed. Recommendations for further research follow it.

At the end the necessary appendices and the list of the works will be presented.

Significance of English in Today’s World

The recent decades have witnessed an increasing number of studies concerned with second language learning for many reasons. McLaughlin (1988: 1) has mentioned two reasons. The first one is practical; there are large numbers of immigrants, foreign students and workers in European Countries, United States and some other English speaking countries. The other reason is that due to advances in the area of general linguistics, psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology, knowledge of the first and second language learning process has increased enormously. English has become the most widely used language almost all over the world since the 1600s.

In many countries, English is used as a first or second language. It is possible to meet English-speaking people almost in all parts of the world. It is neither incorrect nor irrelevant to say that the number of English speaking countries is more than the others. In addition, the number of the people who speak English, or at least are able to communicate in English, is more than the number of the people who do not know English at all.

During the recent decades, the functions of English have become more obvious, as there has been fast growth in all fields in the world, such as science, economics, politics, business, etc. and it is present everywhere and in everything
related to people’s lives through mass media, books and internet, in schools, universities, markets and laboratories. English is taught all over the world as the language of international communication and research has been carried out to produce new and fruitful methods to teach it to people all around the world. Many theories and hypotheses have been presented that are adequate proofs of the importance of English language teaching (ELT) nowadays. David Crystal (1997) explains the significance of English in today’s world:

It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports, and air traffic control, international business and academic conferences, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, pop music and advertising. Over two-thirds of the world’s scientists write in English. Three-quarters of the world’s mail is written in English. Of all the information in the world’s electronic retrieval system, 80% is stored in English. English radio programs are received by over 150 million people in 120 countries; over 50 million children study English as an additional language at primary level; over 80 million study it at secondary level (these figures exclude China). In any one year, the British Council helps over a quarter of a million foreign students to learn English in various parts of the world. Half as many again learn English in the USA. (360)

Probably the importance of English as a necessary means of communication in all fields such as politics, science, economics, education, business, etc, has been felt in the third world countries more than the developed ones. In countries such as Iran where the major policy is to grow to an acceptable and reasonable international level, in order to be able to get along in the present fast growing world, encouraging fluency in foreign languages especially English, has been known as one of the major ways.

**Iranian Education System**

Article 30 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran states “The government is duty bound to prepare free education facilities for all people upon graduation from high school. Higher education should be made available to all
aspirants as the self-sufficiency of the country prescribes” (Chapter III, The Right of People: Article 30).

The Iranian pre-university education system consists of three periods lasting for twelve years. The first period is primary which lasts for five years and provides the pupils with basic skills. They enter primary school at the age of six. The Primary School for children in age group of 6-11 is the first stage of formal education. Guidance or Secondary school (Junior High School) provides education in grades six through eight. The Guidance School takes three years for children from 12-14 years age.

Students begin to learn English when they enter the seventh grade, that is, the age of twelve. After finishing Guidance/secondary School successfully, students enter the high school. In the old education system, high school comprised four years of schooling and was divided into two branches of Theoretical and Technical Vocational. Each academic year consisted of 9 months with a three month summer vacation. The new system that began experimentally in 1992 in some parts of Iran covered the country in the academic year of 1996-97.

It comprises a 3-year schooling period for children of the age group 15-17. It offers three branches namely

A) Theoretical
B) Technical-Vocational
C) Skill-Knowledge (Kar-Danesh)

Each is divided into different fields. Each academic year is also divided into two semesters and the courses are offered in the form of the unit credit system. The required total number of credits leading to a Secondary School Diploma is 96. The offered courses in the first year are common and after successfully completing the first year, based on aptitude, interest and the grades of guidance school, the students are directed to the concerned branches and can continue their studies.

Centres of the one year pre-university course prepare students to enter universities and higher education. For entering this course, students should pass the concerned exam. After successfully passing the one-year period, the students are granted the Pre-University Certificate and are permitted to take part in the National Entrance Exam of universities and higher education centres. The qualified students entering the Technical-Vocational branch can continue their studies either leading to a Post-diploma degree (Technician) (170 credits) or take part in the Pre-University
Exam. Those who wish to acquire any skills before completing the secondary education period, can enter the Skill - Knowledge Branch and receive first (48 credits) or second (32 credits) class skill certificate or can take part in the Pre-University Exam as well. After studying for eleven years in the mentioned three schools, students would be exempted from the stiff competition of the qualifying examination to enter the university and get a post-diploma degree. But it seems that this program has not been successful maybe because of lack of seats in the universities. Each year, more than one million high school graduates attend the nationwide university entrance examination and only about a hundred thousand can get the opportunity to be a university student.

Although there are different minority groups in Iran, like Turk, Kurd, Lur, Balouch, Arab, Turkman and so on, the medium of instruction at all levels is Farsi (Persian). Farsi is the official language of the country and almost all people can communicate in this language. An Iranian who cannot read and write in Farsi is considered an illiterate person and the rate of the literacy in Iran is based on the reading and writing ability in Farsi.

English textbooks in Iran were basically designed to improve the students’ knowledge of grammar. Teachers were using the grammar translation method in English classes and some of them still use this method. Building up the students’ vocabulary and reading comprehension ability is the main purpose of the present English textbooks. Like the previous books, grammar is taught deductively and there is hardly any emphasis on listening and speaking skills. There is little attention to pronunciation and oral drills. Although word formation and writing exercises are available in new books, the students’ weakest skill is writing. Araghi (1997) explains the nature of Iranian English textbooks:

> It is regrettable that most of the English textbooks, which are taught in Iran, have not been designed and written especially for Iranian learners and have not put the stress on the student learners’ needs. These textbooks have been produced with a commercial point of interest and to a large extent, disregard specific Iranian needs. (72)

Appendix I is a copy of a lesson from a pre-university English textbook that the students study in the last year of their high school. The details of these books will be discussed in chapter III of this work.
It seems those students who are taught English through these books should at least be able to read and comprehend English texts. However, experience has shown that this is not true and they are not good even in reading comprehension. The present research will consider the Iranian children and adults’ ability in reading comprehension, as the emphasis of the present textbooks and the education system is on this field.

**Private schools**

During the last two decades, there were some other changes and movements in the system. For the purpose of providing social justice, after the victory of the Islamic Revolution, all schools were made public, and until 1989 there were no private schools. But since 1990, according to the law ratified by the Islamic Consultative Assembly, the establishment of private schools has been allowed. At the beginning, the share of private enterprise in educational services was very limited and insignificant. But the increasing economic crisis demanded a rapid, organized and more active cooperation of the private sector in educational services. As a result, the number of private schools at the primary level increased from 92 in 1990 to 2175 in 1999 with an increase in the number of students enrolled in these schools from 6624 in 1990 to 262,867 in 1998. The number of the students enrolled in private schools has been increasingly high since 1990. That is, the percentage of these students within the total number of students in the period 1991-1997 was respectively: 0.33%, 0.57%, 1.03%, 1.61%, 2.61% and 3%. The remarkable characteristic of these schools is that most of them provide English classes for primary school children.

According to the law passed by the Islamic Parliament in May 1988, bona fide persons can establish Non-Profit Schools. The educational curriculum, textbooks, degrees and the rate of tuition are governed by the general regulation of the Ministry of Education. The students pay the tuition upon registration.
Non-formal Education (sub-division of formal education)

Literacy Movement Organization (LMO):

This began its activities after the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and educates illiterates in three stages namely, Elementary, Complementary and Final leading to degrees acceptable for continuing studies.

Adult education:

This provides for those who have not been able to finish their studies in proper periods. It is represented in the fifth year of elementary level evening classes and secondary education. It is implemented in semesters and the youngest age of the learner is 18. The subjects, except for physical education, are the same as in formal education.

Technical and vocational centres:

These are conducted by the Technical and Vocational Training Organization of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and also by some other ministries and the graduates are granted different certificates of skills based on world standards.

Teacher training centres:

Teacher Training affairs has been centralized in one unit called the Teacher Training Bureau, affiliated to the Ministry of Education.

Rural teacher training centres:

These centres select the students among the native graduates of guidance schools and they offer two kinds of programs: 4 year and 2 year programmes. The native graduates are selected to be trained for their own areas.

EFL in Iran

During World War II, Iran was under the influence of Britain and the United States of America. This influence continued until the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1978. Before that, the only foreign language that had been known in Iran was French. It was the medium of instruction in Daroul-fonoon, or the house of
techniques, in Tehran, the capital of the country. This school was founded by Mirza Taqui-Khan (Amir Kabir), the patriot prime minister. Perhaps it is the reason for the existence of many French words in Farsi. In spite of many efforts that have been done to replace the French words with their proper Farsi equivalents, they still exist in Farsi. Perhaps Amir’s greatest work was the building of Daroul-Fonoon, which was the first modern university in Iran. Amir ordered the school to be built on the edge of the city so it could be expanded when needed. He hired French and Russian instructors as well as Iranians to teach subjects as diverse as Language, Medicine, Law, Geography, History, Economics and Engineering. Unfortunately, Amir did not live long enough to see his greatest monument completed, but it still stands in Tehran as a sign of a great man’s ideas for the future of his country. Amir Kabir was the Prime Minister of Naaser-Al-Deen Shah Ghajar from the Ghajarian dynasty. He performed several basic and important services, that were useful for the country including, a decrease in the salaries of the Ghajarian royal princes and the prevention of the aliens’ interference in the domestic affairs of the country. As, the courtiers were jealous of Amir Kabir’s popularity among the people and also knew he was an obstacle to their aims, they conspired against him. Finally, Naser-al-din Shah deposed him from ministership and then, gave orders to murder him. Amir Kabir was a very patriotic person whose aim was to return Iran to its previous status as a major power, with prosperity and respect. One of the greatest achievements of Amir Kabir was vaccination. He brought the vaccine for small pox to the country and ordered all of the people to be vaccinated. This action reduced the death rate dramatically amounts and was a start for the new health system in the country. He also sent students to European countries to study medicine, engineering, law, politics and military sciences. This newly educated class provided the backbone for fundamental changes in the next half decade, changes that led to a greater understanding of the role of foreign languages, especially English.

The teaching of English as a modern foreign language was encouraged by the Pahlavi regime (1941-1979). It was taught by the western cultural centres, specially the Iran America Society and the British Council. Later, it became the medium of instruction for all subjects at some of the higher education institutions such as Shiraz University (previous Pahlavi University). Most of the professors and lecturers of English in higher institutes were English natives. English as a widely admired language was at its peak in the 1960s and early 1970s. It became the most popular
foreign language and the language of prestige because of many reasons. British political and military intervention in Iran, during the rule of the Qajar dynasty and the Pahlavi regime is one of the main reasons for the priority of English as a foreign language in this country. The occupation of Iran by Britain and the Soviet Union and using it as the strategic route to send supplies to the Soviet Union during the Second World War is a major reason. The discovery of petroleum in the early 1900s attracted other nations, especially USA and Britain, to invest their capital in Iran. Iranians were rich enough to travel to European countries and the United States of America continuously and so, got the necessary exposure to the native speakers of English.

As mentioned before, the language of instruction at the schools in all levels is Farsi. English is taught as the foreign language from the Seventh grade (second grade of junior high school) up to the Twelfth grade at the average rate of four hours a week. During the last decade, there is an extended and still growing private sector in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at the primary and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools functioning within the three levels of general education in Iran namely; primary, secondary and high, English receives extra attention and probably extra hours of practice. The reason behind this is the large demand for learning an international language among Iranians. Almost all educated families have realized the importance of the international communication for their children. As it is obvious, to live in a fast-growing world, one needs to obtain the necessary means. It is so crucial a factor that the quality of the English program and the skill of the teacher or teachers working in each school may determine the families’ choice to send their children to one or another school.

The multiple variations observed in the programs delivered signify a great demand for learning English in Iran on the one hand and a notable endeavour to fulfil the learners’ communicative needs on the other. The outcome of the large demand for learning English among Iranians has caused a fast increase in the establishment of new private language institutes. These institutes must gain their license for establishment from their local General Office of Education which is one branch of the Ministry of Education in every province. They have to consider those regulations that are assigned by the General Office of Education of the province. These institutes have their own educational policies, special books and timetables. Most of them try to augment their learners’ communicative competence rather than mere linguistic competence. The educational policy, the books and the teachers are chosen in these
institutes by the founders or by their educational manager. There is almost no age limit for those who are interested to attend the English classes.

So far, English seems to have smoothly found its way right to the heart of Iranian society, proving itself an undeniable necessity, rather than just a school subject. The relation with the outside world is mainly in English. The government's policy for promoting the export of non-oil products made companies and exporters take advantage of this medium to introduce their goods and products to the world market. The Iranian national TV has started broadcasting programs in English. The use of internet requires a proper English proficiency level and through this people enjoy global communication. The internet today has gained national recognition. Iran's cooperation with the UN, Islamic Conference Organization, ECO, OPEC and other regional and world organizations makes English quite practical for the involved nationals. International book fairs and the trade exhibitions held annually in the country demonstrate the country's readiness and its dependable capacity to maintain its world relationship in English.

Most of the above-mentioned private schools and institutes, unlike the government schools, have enough facilities to serve their learners who can afford their fees. Well-equipped laboratories, new books that have been designed based on new methods, experienced teachers, well built and well-furnished classrooms and many other things are of various facilities that language institutes offer to meet their learners' demands successfully. Overall, it is not irrelevant to say that there is a great enthusiasm for learning English among Iranians, and these institutes have become very influential in the Iranian ELT situation. It is a fact that has been successful in teaching the four skills to their learners rapidly. On the other hand, in comparison with these learners, students who cannot afford to attend these kinds of courses and study English only in government schools (for six years) cannot achieve sufficient fluency in English. Many efforts have been made to improve the quality of the English teaching process in the Iranian schooling system, such as improving teaching methods, reforming evaluation techniques, employing qualified teachers and designing new materials and textbooks. Monshi Toussi (1998) explains the difficulties of the Iranian ELT situation as follows:

Evidence shows that besides problems experienced in other FL teaching environments, the Iranian ELT situation still suffers from a
number of difficulties unique to the Iranian setting. Among them are the following:

1 - Paying not enough attention to the learner-related factors.
2 - Learner's little or no understanding of aims.
3 - Low motivation and rather negative great distance between learners and the target group.
4 - Frequent changes in governmental policy towards the teaching of English at different educational levels.
5 - Little or no direct contact with language in real life situation.
6 - Lack of enthusiastic teachers at different educational levels.
7 - Unmanageable number of students in EFL classes.
8 - Lack of technological equipment such as tape recorders, television sets, playback units, etc. (22-23)

**Public School English Books**

The discussion of the quality of textbooks that are taught in the Iranian EFL classrooms needs a precise review of the contents of these books. The English book that is taught in the last year of high school has been chosen for consideration in this section. This book, which is divided into two parts (book one and book two), has eight lessons in about 150 pages. Lesson one of this textbook is presented in Appendix I. Each lesson includes the same sections as the others. The followings are the different sections that each lesson contains.

**A) Word Study:**

In this, new words of the lesson (passage) are presented and defined. Every word is used in one or two sentences to show its usage. Abbreviations are used to show the part of speech of the word.

*Example:* 

`architect (n), a person who draws plans for buildings:
"Is your brother a doctor?"
"No, he is not. He is an architect.
He has drawn plans for many famous buildings."`
B) Reading:

Passages on different topics are given in this section of the lesson. Each lesson has a reading passage of almost one and half pages that consists of about 450 words. The topics of the texts in the first part of this book are; *Leonard's Flying Machine*, *Freedom*, *Translating by Computer* and *Earthquakes*. The topics in the second part are; *Pollution: Warning of New Ice Age*, *Danger: Children at Work*, *Mountain Rescue* and *Your Personal Territory*.

C) Comprehension:

Immediately after the text, there are two or three comprehension exercises. These are of different types, usually an exercise with about 8 questions that demands complete sentences as answers, a True/False exercise with around 6 statements and after that about six multiple choice questions.

Example:

A – Answer the following questions.

1 – Where was Leonardo from?

...

B – True or False?

1 – According to the passage Leonardo died in the sixteenth century.

...

C – Complete the following sentences. Use a, b, c, or d.

1 – Leonardo lived .......

a) in the fourteenth century.

b) in the fifteenth century.

c) in Italy.

d) b and c.

...

D) Vocabulary Drill:

This drill contains about eight sentences with a blank space instead of one of its words. A list of words is given and students are asked to fill in the blanks with the given words. The remarkable characteristic of these sentences is that they are not related to each other.
E) Word Formation:

A table of words is given that illustrates the parts of speech of some words. Then, students are asked to use the correct form of the words to fill in the blanks in a few sentences.

Example: 1 - science

a) He plans to study applied .......... in college.
b) Many farmers use .......... methods to grow more wheat.
c) Our new physics teacher explained the experiment .......... 

F) Word Definitions:

The meaning of some words is given in this section and students write the appropriate words in front of the sentences.

Example: 1 - a person who creates or thinks of something new (p2)

 .......... 

G) Cloze Passage:

There is a short passage with some blank spaces instead of some of its words. A group of words is given at the end of the passage (four words for each blank). Students should choose the correct words to fill in the blanks.

H) Structure:

This section is the longest and the most complex part of the lesson. About five grammatical patterns are illustrated in separate boxes each followed by some example sentences. After that there are given a few sentences of which students change the forms according to the given patterns.

Example: 1 enough + noun + to + verb

A) He had experience. He could get the job.
   He had enough experience to get the job.
B) I didn’t have time. I couldn’t finish the exam.
   I didn’t have enough time to finish the exam.
I) Write It Down:

There are four or five different types of writing exercises in this section. In these exercises, the emphasis is again on the grammatical patterns illustrated in the previous section. Students are asked to rewrite some sentences using the given words or phrases, i.e. changing the sentences into another pattern or they are asked to fill in the blanks with the given words or phrases.

J) Language Function:

This section introduces two or three functional patterns followed by very short dialogues and only one or two very short questions.

Example: Could you tell me the way?

1 – Driver: Excuse me, please. I’m looking for Main Street.
Pedestrian: Yes. Turn right into Ford Road and take the first street on your left.

K) Pronunciation:

This section of the lesson includes a very short explanation about the pronunciation of English words, such as stress.

L) New Words and Expressions:

The complete list of new words and expressions are given in this section that is the last part of the lesson.

Taking a quick look at the above contents, one can recognize some major shortages in the content of these textbooks immediately. Emphasis on substitution drills and the excessive use of repetition exercises illuminates the reality that the syllabuses are based upon grammatical and structural orientation. The result of the research by Memar, which has been conducted in 1997, shows that the nature of Iranian syllabuses is synthetic rather than analytic.

The discussion reveals the fact that our syllabuses follow a product-oriented approach. The activities seek to teach students the grammatical forms and the way a well-formed sentences pattern can be produced. They try to highlight the usage of language and every other
activities centre around this approach – no reference to meaning as a pragmatic value, i.e., the way language can be used properly and effectively in discourse. (75)

It is clear that many problems in the present EFL system of Iranian schools are related to the textbooks. Memar’s study represents the Iranian schoolteachers’ belief about the root of the present problems. They believe that “a meaningful learning with emphasis on the use of the language cannot be achieved through the implementation of the exercises and activities embodied in the books” (94). They also assert the non-existence of compatibility between students’ needs and the content of the materials. Because of this fact, students are not engaged in fulfilling exercises. This incompatibility blocks the way to meaningful learning. In this study, the students’ responses showed their great weakness in all the four macro-skills of language, that is English. Memar’s work proves the fact that there is a relationship between the content of the materials and the failure of the students in achieving a proper amount of competence in English language (94). Memar’s research through an analysis of Iranian high school English textbooks with reference to use and usage, demonstrates that:

... one can say that the usage aspect is well-developed in Iranian students which is a need for proper language learning. It is not to say that aspects of usage are not of any significance, it is not sufficient, however. To learn how to use the linguistic abilities is the aim of any language pedagogy and the neglect of this part will defer learners’ success. (75)

The existence of many problems such as inadequate educational settings and crowded classrooms, lack of facilities for teaching the English language properly, scarcity of expert teachers in schools, and so on, are inevitable. But, apart from these disadvantages and weaknesses that are conspicuous in this curriculum and the present education system of Iran, the basic and major problem is related to the foundation of the curriculum. That is, its base and root are the obsolete and outdated beliefs of behaviourism and structuralism. Overall, the critical review of the English textbooks of Iranian schools reveals that the present curriculum for teaching English is still based on a structuralist approach. It seems that the mentalist view of language learning and the nature of the human cognitive process have been ignored or less
emphasized. These theories and perspectives on language learning will be discussed in detail in the next chapter of this work.

**Statement of the Problem**

After the Islamic Revolution in 1978, less attention has been paid to the importance of English, the most widely used language in the world, for the revolution was against westernization and English was the medium, for the transfer of western culture into the country. Later, specialized commissions and the High Cultural Revolution Council, which was set up in 1981, decided to find ways for the reconstruction and remodelling of the curricula and syllabuses for the education system. A new syllabus was introduced. Textbooks, which were grammar translation oriented, nowadays emphasis the teaching of reading skills and vocabulary.

Having gained experience for a few years in teaching English in different classes to children and adults, this researcher observed that most of the Iranian foreign language learners still have difficulties in learning English. In spite of learning English as a compulsory subject in the middle and high school for almost four hours per week and instructional improvements concerning the syllabus and textbooks, students' proficiency is unsatisfactorily low. Keeping in mind the different factors that can affect the second/foreign language acquisition process, this study will consider the biological and psychological factors such as age that play a basic role in learning a second/foreign language. Noam Chomsky’s *Transformational Generative Grammar*, *Language Acquisition Device* (LAD) and other developments, that will be discussed later, make the importance of the relationship between a child’s psychological development and his language acquisition clear. In any country like Iran where there is less language input for children to receive, starting to learn another language (English) after puberty has not any conformity with the ideas and theories of second/foreign language acquisition, such as those proposed by E.H. Lenneberge, Stephen D. Krashen and others (see the next chapter).

Some research has shown that adults are better language learners than children. It means that they learn easier and faster than children. This will be discussed in Chapter II in detail. On the other hand, according to experience in teaching English to Iranian children and adults, especially to university students, it
seems that those who have started learning English as children, i.e. when they were under twelve years of age, can learn better than those who have begun this job after puberty. So, by considering the theories and ideas related to language acquisition and also research findings that will be discussed in the next sections, this investigation will study and examine the present English language teaching curriculum in Iran. Suggestions will be given in the hope of being profitable to the development of this curriculum, and to shed light on the subtle and fundamental points in the second/foreign language teaching/learning process that may have been ignored or may have been paid less attention in Iran.

The majority of university English students have difficulties in reading comprehension classes. They have to pass fourteen units of this subject and their weakness in comprehending the given texts makes it difficult to continue the process to achieve acceptable results. The present study will explore the origin of and solutions to this problem, in the hope of reaching useful conclusions.

**Significance of the Study**

English as a foreign language in countries such as Iran has always been the focus of attention in the pedagogical curriculum. Many experiences show that children display different characteristics from adults. In spite of great reformations in the education system, the English teaching process in Iran has a long way to go, yet. There have been radical changes in the materials and methodology and also in the whole Iranian education system in comparison with what has been accomplished in the past, but the present condition is still too *sophomoric* to catch-up with the latest trends in language learning. This study, focusing on and emphasizing the age difference between Iranian foreign (English) language learners, is an attempt to overhaul the present English language-teaching program in Iran. The results of this research will be of great practical and pedagogical importance for the English language teachers and material designers and especially for policy makers of the curriculum.

To start learning a foreign language at 12 or 13 years of age seems to be somehow late and inconsequent, this stimulated the present research. While the age of the language learner is a major factor in the second/foreign language learning process,
it must be considered in the preparation of a suitable base for learning a foreign language. In order to gain competent and useful results, this work will examine only the reading comprehension ability of the subjects.

**Objectives of the Study**

One of the problems in the English teaching procedure of Iran is the unsatisfactory nature of its students’ proficiency in this language after studying it for a considerable period in secondary, high school and the university. Designing a suitable syllabus, writing appropriate books and many other efforts seem to be sufficient to teach English appropriately in the present Iranian education system. But with reference to the importance of English in today’s world and according to the research that has been done in the field of language teaching, it is not sufficient and one must pay attention to the biological, psychological and social factors as well.

Therefore, this study will deal with the biological and psychological factors that can be summarized in the differences between Iranian children and adults and the impact of socioeconomic factors upon learning English as a foreign language. This research is looking for answer to the following question:

- Is there any difference between Iranian children and adults in learning English as a foreign language?

It is assumed that the age of the language learner plays a significant role in learning English as a foreign language. The subjects, the English language learners, are living in a society that has its own characteristics. Attending private language institutes depends on the students’ economic status, that is, whether they can afford the fees or not. It is believed that learning a foreign language by itself is not seriously affected by socioeconomic factors. But this factor will be considered because the subjects of this research will be selected from private institutes that are profit-making foundations. The importance of these factors in this process is not analogous and comparable with the other factors such as age.

To be on the safe side, the following null hypothesis was proposed on the basis of the above-mentioned research question.
There is no difference between Iranian children and adults in learning English as a foreign language.

**Definition of Key Terms**

**Acquisition:** This term is used for the learning and development of one’s native language. It is mostly used for the process of learning a first language but sometimes it is used for the process of learning a second language too.

**Brainstorming:** It refers to a group activity in which language learners have a free discussion. This activity is on an assigned topic and is almost unstructured. These kinds of discussion can be a preparation for other activities.

**Competence:** It is one’s knowledge of language by which a person is able to understand and create sentences even those sentences never heard before. Competence is also defined as a person’s internalized grammar of language.

**Egocentric Speech:** This kind of speech is observed in children’s first language learning by Piaget for the first time. Through this speech, the child expresses thoughts pleasurably. In other words, he plays with speech through this experiment.

**Fossilization:** It refers to a process in second and foreign language learning in which incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of a person’s performance, that is, the way he speaks or writes a language.

**Input:** This term is used in applied linguistics, psychology and cognitive psychology to refer to information that a person receives. It is the language which a learner hears. There is a distinction *input* and *intake*. Input is the whole (language) that a learner receives but intake is the certain amount of that language which a learner learns. Some of the input may be too difficult or rapid for the learner to understand and therefore cannot serve as intake.

**Language Proficiency:** It is the skill that a person has in using a language. How well a person uses the language, i.e. reads, writes, speaks, or understands it, is the degree of proficiency.
**Lateralization (Cerebral Dominance):** As the brain develops, each part of the brain (left and right hemisphere) takes control of different bodily functions such as speech, hearing, actions, etc. Lateralization or cerebral dominance refers to the development of control of different functions in different parts of the brain.

**Learning:** This term refers to the development of a second or foreign language (and not a first language). The term *acquisition* is often preferred to *learning*. The reason is that this term (learning) is sometimes linked to a behaviourist theory of learning.

**Natural Approach:** This term refers to a number of language-teaching methods. These methods developed as a placement for *grammar translation method* which was dominant until 19th century. In these methods spoken language, following the natural principles of first language acquisition, and the objective way of teaching were emphasized. The natural approach resulted in the development of the *direct method*.

**Neurolinguistics:** This branch of linguistics focuses on the function of the brain in language learning and its use. It is the study of the structure of the brain, the area in which language is stored, and its influence on language learning.

**Output:** The language a learner produces is called output (see *input*).

**Performance:** It refers to how a person uses his knowledge of language (competence). It is the actual use of the language that a person has acquired.

**Reading Comprehension:** Perceiving a written text, understanding its content, and realizing the writer's intention. It is the process of relating the new information which is cited in the text to one's background knowledge, i.e. schema.

**Schemata:** Stored knowledge in the reader's mind is called schemata. Schemata are the dynamic, interrelated mental structures that are essential for the extraction of meaning. The organization of information in long-term memory is allowed by cognitive constructs, that is schemata. The schemata of readers are different from each other and these are also often culture-specific.
Skimming: This term refers to a type of rapid reading in order to get the main idea of a text. The difference between skimming and scanning is that scanning refers to a type of rapid reading to locate a certain piece of information in the passage.

**Limitation of the Study**

Any research in the field of second/foreign language learning comes across a great number of factors that will affect the research work and its results. In the present work, the following limitations will be imposed.

While this study focuses on the age differences of the subjects, there will be paid no attention to the other factors and the attempt is to make their effects zero in the process. This study is only concerned with the reading comprehension ability of the subjects. The effect of age differences on other language skills and areas remains unanswered. Although the socioeconomic factors do not seem to have an active effect on the process of language learning, they will be considered only due to the selection of subjects from private language institutes. In order to make sure of the effect of the sex or gender factor, subjects will be selected from both sexes that are half male and half female. All subjects will be bilingual Azerbaijanians; all of them are Moslems; and they are living in the same city with the same cultural and geographical conditions. It is not apparent whether the achieved results would work with the other Iranian language learners or not. Furthermore, because of the sample size of “80”, it won’t be possible to generalize the gained results to a much larger population. It can be true about and work for similar groups of people.