

# A Comparative Study of Iranian EFL Students' Language Proficiency: Is University Type Influential?

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## Abstract

The aim of the study was to conduct a comparative study of Iranians EFL students' language proficiency at BA level in Isfahan Universities namely Islamic Azad University of Khorasgan, Sheikhabaee University, and Payam-e Noor university of Baharestan. To this aim, two English Tests were administered to 105 participants including Agricultural Engineering, Management, Law, and Psychology students who had already passed their General English courses. The data collected through the tests were analyzed using SPSS. The result of the data derived from the tests revealed that there was no significant difference between language proficiency of students' at different universities. Furthermore, the students mostly scored low on the English tests which revealed that the objectives of the General English programs were not fully achieved.

**Key words:** Language, Language proficiency, Language learning

Language proficiency has been defined as the ability to use a language accurately and appropriately in its oral and written forms in a variety of settings (Cloud et al., 2000, P. 60). This definition incorporates the four aspects of language namely listening, speaking, reading and writing. The first two aspects represent oral proficiency is in most cases developed outside the university environment without any exposure to written language.

It is possible to learn English as a foreign language in the home country without having much exposure to or practice with spoken English. While listening and reading represent

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receptive skills, speaking and writing represent expressive skills. Receptive skills develop ahead of expressive skills because receiving information is easier than giving it (Cummins, 2003). Most learners understand more than they can express. The essential aspect of academic language proficiency is the ability to make complex meanings explicit in either oral or written modalities of language itself, rather than by means of contextual or paralinguistic cues, for instance, gestures and intonations.

According to Llurda (2000), various adjectives can be associated with the term 'competence', like: strategic competence, pragmatic competence, sociolinguistic competence, transitional competence, linguistic competence, discursive competence and communicative competence.

For Ellis (1994, P.696), communicative competence is equivalent to "a language user's underlying knowledge of language" and "the knowledge that users of a language have internalized to enable them to understand and produce messages in the language". Edmonson (1981, P.88) considers communicative competence

"as being concerned with the encoding, decoding and sequencing of central communicative acts. This includes mastery of the linguistic code (phonology, morphology, syntax, lexicon) together with the function (speech act) expressed. The use of this communicative competence depends on the individual's social competence".

Edmonson's definition may be viewed as nearly equivalent as the constituents of communicative competence in Canale's (1983) framework, which considers four aspects: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competences.

Corder (1976) brings about the notion of transitional competence, according to which a learner has some knowledge about a language and this knowledge is under permanent development.

For Stern (1983), proficiency means the actual performance of a learner in a given language, and it involves the mastery of (a) the forms, (b) the linguistic, cognitive, affective and sociocultural meanings of those forms, (c) the capacity to use the language with focus

mainly on communication and minimum attention to form, and (d) the creativity in language use.

Muriel Saville-Troike (2006, P.2), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language. The additional language is called a second language (L2), even though it may actually be the third, fourth, or tenth to be acquired. It is also commonly called a target language (TL), which refers to any language that is the aim or goal of learning. The scope of SLA includes informal L2 learning that takes place in naturalistic contexts, formal L2 learning that takes place in classrooms, and L2 learning that involves a mixture of these settings and circumstances. For example, “informal learning” happens when a child from Japan is brought to the US and “picks up” English in the course of playing and attending school with native English-speaking children without any specialized language instruction, or when an adult Guatemalan immigrant in Canada learns English as a result of interacting with native English speakers or with co-workers who speak English as a second language. “Formal learning” that is focus of this study occurs when a high school student in England takes a class in French, when an undergraduate student in Russia takes a course in Arabic, or when an attorney in Colombia takes a night class in English.

### **Focus of This Study**

The present study was conducted among foreign language students. It makes a comparison between levels of language proficiency of students from different universities with different major. Two English Language Proficiency tests were administered and scores of students from different universities compared. The current study aims at answering the following question:

Is there any significant difference between university type and Iranian EFL students' general language proficiency?

### **Participants**

The study was concerned for students of Humanities and Agriculture. Based on the respondents to the questionnaire and Test 200 A (from Nelson English Language Tests book two intermediate) 105 Iranian students among the 150 students were selected for the present

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study. Participants of the study were 105 Iranian students (66 females, 39 males) in the age range of 19 to 26 who were studying General English as a second language in three university: State (Sheikhbahaee university), Azad (Khorasgan University), Payam-e Noor (Baharestan Center) Universities of Isfahan from different majors (Agricultural Engineering, Management, Law, and Psychology). Students took general English course in Winter semester of the 2012-2013 academic year. All three groups were taught by the same instructor. Although different books were used in three universities, there was the same level of difficulty in reading parts of three books. Also, the same grammar instructions were used in the classes for three groups. Moreover, there was the same corpus vocabulary for all three books.

A total of 26 Agriculture Engineering students, 23 Management students, 39 Psychology students, 17 Law students) participated in the study.

## **Material and Procedure**

Three instruments were used in this study: 1) Persian background questionnaires (see appendix A); 2) English proficiency tests (see appendix B and C).

## **Procedure**

At first, the investigator of the present study prepared background Persian questionnaire for students and administered it at the beginning of the term. Background questionnaire was arranged in two parts. The first part included the participants' personal information (age, sex, university and major/discipline). The participants were asked to select the option in binary choices and fill in the blanks. The second part consisted six items and the participants were asked to select the options. Its aim was to make sure of the participant's homogeneity in terms of the educational level. The questionnaire was intended to investigate the students' attitudes toward English. It clarified whether the students had taken any trip to other countries or they had studied English in private institutes or whether they had used to watch movies in English language or had listened to English music or news. The aim was to minimize the effects of different factors on learning English at university.

After selection of the students based on the questionnaire results, a Nelson English Language Test was administered at the beginning of the term to determine the homogeneity of

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the participants in terms of language proficiency. The subjects who scored one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected and those who were out of this range were discarded from the study.

The participants from different universities took part in their natural General English classes at their own specific universities. However, they received the same instructor but no group knew this. After one semester of instruction, another English proficiency test was given to the participants. This test was designed by Cambridge University local Examinations Syndicate (see Appendix C).

## Results

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for statistical operations needed for data analysis. All 105 students took the English proficiency test. The following table shows the participants' test performance by their universities:

Table 1 illustrates the number of students who participated in this study from each university. It also illustrates the mean and standard deviation of tests total scores by universities. The total score of the tests was 50.

**Table 1.** Descriptive analysis of total scores by universities

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Islamic University of Khorasgan	33	24.1212	2.68977	.46823
Sheikhbahee University	34	23.7941	3.11185	.53368
Payam-e Noor University of Baharestan	38	24.0526	2.92193	.47400
Total	105	23.9905	2.89062	.28210

In order to investigate whether there was any relationship between university type and Iranian EFL students' language proficiency, the investigators made use of One-Way ANOVA for data analysis. Table 2 illustrates the differences of total scores by university.

**Table 2.** One-way ANOVA table

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.087	2	.044	.005	.995
Within Groups	871.303	102	8.542		
Total	871.390	104			

As depicted in table 2, there is no significant difference (.995) in the performance of the three groups on tests. This implies that there is no difference between university type and Iranian EFL students' general language proficiency.

### **Discussion**

English as a second language (ESL) is an umbrella term used to describe any one of a number of instructional approaches designed to help English learners acquire English fluency. The last quarter of a decade has seen the birth of second language acquisition (SLA) as a field of study within applied linguistics. Although there were a few studies of how people acquired a second language (L2) before this period (see, for instance, Leopold's, 1939 admirable study of the speech development of a bilingual child) it is certainly true that the growth in empirical work has been exponential since the late 1960s.

In this study the aim was to see whether any relationship exists between university type and Iranian's EFL students' language proficiency level. Results show that no significant difference existed between university type and level of students' language proficiency. So, all of them have equal chance to learn English. It means that despite the differences in students' attendance in the class (Payam-e Noor students attend in the class less than students of State and Azad universities) all of the students have equal chance to learn and improve their level of General Language Proficiency.

Low scores of the students showed the low level of language proficiency of the students. High levels of language proficiency facilitate the processing and acquisition of new information and allow the individual to derive meaning with less conscious effort. Therefore General English classes can not guarantee Iranians' students language proficiency

Low level of students' language proficiency has implication on both educational and learning. On the educational part, those who are in charge should aware of students' needs and interests. Moreover, the books should introduce target culture. So, students will be motivated to study and their aim is not only passing the course.

On the learners' part, teachers can raise the learner awareness of their low level of language proficiency and motivated them to be more active. Once the Iranian EFL learners are aware that only focusing on the books won't help them to raise their language skills they will be more active and will be more cautious to read different books, journals, watch English movies or listen to the news to improve their skills.

The result give raise the idea that, raising the students level of language proficiency can help them in reading, comprehending and writing different texts. With growing the number of the students at universities, it is imperative that theses important matters of writer attitude be made more conspicuous to learners.

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## Appendix A

هدف از این تحقیق بهبود و ارتقاء سطح و محتوای آموزشی کلاس های زبان عمومی بوده که برای رشته های علوم انسانی برگزار گشته است. به این امید که نتایج این تحقیق مفید و قابل استفاده باشد. پاسخ به سوالات زیر و ارائه ی نظرات سودمند شما کمک بزرگی در راستای پیشبرد این تحقیق خواهد بود.

جنسیت                      الف- مونث                      ب- مذکر

رشته تحصیلی ..... نام دانشگاه ..... سن .....

1. در کلاس های زبان آموزشگاه شرکت کرده اید؟  
الف- بلی                      ب- خیر
2. سفر به کشور های خارجی داشته اید ؟  
الف- بلی                      ب- خیر
3. دوران راهنمایی و دبیرستان را در مدرسه ی دولتی سپری کرده اید؟  
الف- بلی                      ب- خیر
4. نگرش شما به یادگیری زبان انگلیسی چیست ؟  
الف- علاقه مند به یادگیری                      ب- بی علاقه به یادگیری
5. فیلم های انگلیسی زبان را چگونه تماشا می کنید؟  
الف- به زبان اصلی                      ب- دوبله شده
6. آیا به اخبار را به زبان انگلیسی گوش می دهید؟  
الف- بلی                      ب- خیر

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## Appendix B

### Nelson English Language Test

Choose the correct answer. Only one answer is correct.

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Last June my brother..1.. a car. He had had an old scooter before, but it ..2.. several times during the spring. "what you want is a second-hand Mini," I suggested. "If you give me the money." He said," ..3.. one tomorrow." " I can't give the money." I replied, "but what about Aunt Myra. She must have enough. We ..4.. her since Christmas but she always hints that we ..5 .. go and see her more often."

We told our parents where we were going. They weren't very happy about it and asked us not to go. So ..6... But later that same day something strange ..7... A doctor ..8.. us that Aunt Myra ..9.. into hospital for an operation. "...10.. go and see her at the same time," said my mother. "you two go today, but don't mention the money."

When we ..11.. , Aunt Myra ..12... "I'm not seriously ill," she said," but the doctor insists that ..13.. to drive my car. You can have it if you promise ..14.. me to the seaside now and again." We agreed, and now we quite enjoy our monthly trips to the coast with Aunt Myra.

1. a. Wanted to buy            b. wanted buying  
c. liked to buy            d. liked buying
2. a. was breaking down    b. was breaking up  
c. had broken down       d. had broken up
3. a. I get            b. I'm getting            c. I'm going to get       d. I'll get
4. a. are not seeing    b. haven't seen       c. didn't see            d. don't see
5. a. should            b. shall            c. would            d. will
6. a. that we haven't    b. that we didn't    c. we haven't            d. we didn't
7. a. occurred            b. took the place    c. passed            d. was there
8. a. range for telling    b. range to tell       c. rung for telling       d. rung to tell
9. a. had gone            b. had been            c. has gone            d. has been
10. a. we may not all    b. we can't all       c. all we can't            d. all we may not
11. a. have come there    b. were arriving    c. got there            d. came to there
12. a. was seeming quite happily       b. was seeming quite happy  
c. seemed quite happily            d. seemed quite happy
13. a. I'm getting so old    b. I'm getting too old  
c. I get so old            d. I get too old

14. a. taking                      b. bringing                      c. to take                      d. to bring

**Choose the correct answer. Only one answer is correct**

15. Can this camera .... Good photos?  
a. Make                      b. to make                      c. take                      d. to take
16. Who was the first person .... Today?  
a. Spoke to you                      b. you spoke to                      c. you spoke                      d. whom you spoke
17. I can't find the book ....  
a. nowhere                      b. everywhere                      c. anywhere                      d. somewhere
18. There was a house at ...  
a. The mountain foot                      b. the foot of the mountain  
c. the feet of the mountain                      d. the mountain's foot
19. A person who talks to .... Is not necessarily mad.  
a. Himself                      b. oneself                      c. yourself                      d. itself
20. I'll be 13 tomorrow, .....?  
a. am I                      b. aren't I                      c. won't I                      d. will I
21. Did you hear .... Julie said?  
a. What                      b. that                      c. that what                      d. which
22. Spanish people usually speak .... Than English people.  
a. Quirkier                      b. more quirkier                      c. more quickly                      d. quicker
23. That old lady can't stop me ..... the tennis match on my radio.  
a. To listen                      b. listening                      c. listen to                      d. listening to
24. I haven't got a chair .....
- a. To sit                      b. for to sit on                      c. to sit on                      d. for sitting
25. .... At moment, I'll go to the shops.  
a. For it doesn't rain                      b. as it doesn't rain  
c. for it isn't raining                      d. as it isn't raining
26. Bill drinks ..... Whisky.  
a. Any                      b. none                      c. too many                      d. so much
27. .... are very intelligent.  
a. Both of them                      b. Both them                      c. Both they                      d. The both
28. In a shop .... Customers.

- a. It is important pleasing      b. it is important to please  
c. there is important pleasing      d. there is important to please
29. Don't leave your shoes on the table.  
a. Put off them!    b. take them off!    c. pick them off!    d. pick up them
30. .... In my class likes the teacher.  
a. All persons      b. All pupils      c. Everyone      d. All people
31. We expected about 20 girls but there were ..... people there.  
a. another      b. others      c. some      d. more
32. Your bicycle shouldn't be in the house!  
a. Take it out!    b. Get out it!    c. Put it off!    d. Take away it
33. What time does the bus ..... Bradford?  
a. go away to    b. go away for    c. leave to    d. leave for
34. She ..... be Canadian because she's got a British passport.  
a. can't      b. isn't able to    c. mustn't    d. doesn't need
35. "our daughter .....", they said.  
a. Was born since three years      b. is born for three years ago  
c. was born three years ago      d. has been born since three years ago
36. When... .... English?  
a. Has he begun to study      b. has he begun study  
c. did he begin to study      d. did he begin study
37. Do you want some cheese? No, .....  
a. I've some still      b. I still have much  
c. I don't want      d. I've still got some
38. Brenda likes going to the theatre and .....  
a. so do I      b. so go I      c. so I like      d. so I am
39. .... from London to Edinburgh!  
a. How long there is      b. what a long way it is  
c. what distance is there      d. how long is
40. He's a good guitarist, but he plays the piano .....  
a. Quit well    b. too hardly    c. very good    d. much better
41. When you go to the shops, bring me .....

- a. a fruit tin      b. a fruits tin      c. a tin of fruit      d. a tin of fruits
42. Molly doesn't eat fish.
- a. So doesn't John.      b. Neither does John.  
c. John doesn't too.      d. John doesn't that either.
43. The airport is five miles .....
- a. away from here      b. from here away  
c. far from here      d. far away from here
44. Please ask ..... and see me.
- a. To Bill to come      b. Bill to come      c. to Bill come      d. Bill come
45. She always buys ..... my birthday.
- a. anything nice to      b. anything nice for  
c. something awful to      d. something awful for
46. Aren't they friends ..... ?
- a. Of yours      b. of you      c. to yours      d. to you
47. She hardly ever eats ..... potatoes.
- a. Or bread or      b. bread or      c. neither bread or      d. neither bread nor
48. This is the record we .....
- a. Like so much      b. are liking so much  
c. like it much      d. are liking it much
49. She's going to buy ..... new trousers.
- a. Some part of      b. some      c. a couple of      d. this
50. Is she going to school ? No, .....
- a. She doesn't      b. she's cycling      c. she gets by bus      d. to the shops

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## Appendix C

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University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate

Questions 1 – 5

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- Where can you see these notices?
- For questions 1 to 5, mark one letter A, B or C on your Answer Sheet.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Questions 6 – 10

- In this section you must choose the word which best fits each space in the text below.
- For questions 6 to 10, mark one letter A, B or C on your Answer Sheet.

- |    |   |      |   |      |   |       |
|----|---|------|---|------|---|-------|
| 6  | A | at   | B | up   | C | on    |
| 7  | A | very | B | too  | C | much  |
| 8  | A | is   | B | be   | C | are   |
| 9  | A | that | B | of   | C | than  |
| 10 | A | use  | B | used | C | using |

Questions 11 – 20

- In this section you must choose the word which best fits each space in the texts.
- For questions 11 to 20, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

- |    |   |         |   |     |   |      |   |        |
|----|---|---------|---|-----|---|------|---|--------|
| 11 | A | getting | B | got | C | have | D | having |
| 12 | A | their   | B | his | C | them | D | theirs |

13 A from B of C among D between

14 A mush B lot C many D deal

15 A person B people C children D family

16 A made B pointed C was D proved

17 A lied B told C cheated D asked

18 A find B know C think D expect

19 A Next B Secondly C Finally D Once

20 A as B but C because D if

Questions 21 – 40

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence.
- For questions 21 to 40, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

21 The children won't go to sleep.....we leave a light on outside their bedroom.

A except B otherwise C unless D but

- 22 I'll give you my spare keys incase you .....home before me.  
 A would get      B got                      C will get                      D get
- 23 My holiday in Paris gave me a great.....to improve my French accent.  
 A occasion      B chance                      C hope                      D possibility
- 24 The singer ended the concert.....her most popular song.  
 A by                      B with                      C in                      D as
- 25 Because it had not rained or several months, there was a..... of water.  
 A shortage      B drop                      C scarce                      D waste
- 26 I've always.....you as my best friend.  
 A regarded      B thought                      C meant                      D supposed
- 27 She came to live here.....a month ago.  
 A quite                      B beyond                      C already                      D almost
- 28 Don't make such a.....! The dentist is only going to look at your teeth.  
 A fuss                      B trouble                      C worry                      D reaction
- 29 He spent a long time looking for a tie which.....with his new shirt.  
 A fixed                      B made                      C went                      D wore
- 30 Fortunately, ..... from a bump on the head, she suffered no serious injuries from her fall.  
 A other                      B except                      C besides                      D apart
- 31 She had changed so much that.....anyone recognized her.  
 A almost                      B hardly                      C not                      D nearly
- 32 ..... teaching English, she also writes children's books.  
 A Moreover      B As well as                      C In addition                      D Apart
- 33 It was clear that the young couple were..... of taking charge of the restaurant.  
 A responsible      B reliable                      C capable                      D able
- 34 The book .....of ten chapters, each one covering a different topic.  
 A comprises      B includes                      C consists                      D contains
- 35 Mary was disappointed with her new shirt as the colour.....very quickly.  
 A bleached      B died                      C vanished                      D faded



- 36 National leaders from all over the world are expected to attend the ..... meeting.  
 A peak                    B summit                    C top                    D apex
- 37 Jane remained calm when she won the lottery and.....a bout her  
 business as if no thing had happened.  
 A came                    B brought                    C went                    D moved
- 38 I suggest we..... outsidethestadiumtomorrowat8.30.  
 A meeting                    B meet                    C met                    D will meet
- 39 My remarks were..... as a joke, but she was offended by them.  
 A pretended                    B thought                    C meant                    D supposed
- 40 You ought to take up swimming for the..... of your health.  
 A concern                    B relief                    C sake                    D cause

Part2

Questions41 – 50

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best fits each space in the texts.
- For questions41 to50, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

41 A despite                    B although                    C otherwise                    D average

42 A average                    B medium                    C general                    D common

- 43 A vast B large C wide D mass
- 44 A lasted B endured C kept D remained
- 45 A mostly B chiefly C greatly D widely

- 46 A introduce B present C move D show
- 47 A near B late C recent D close
- 48 A take place B occur C work D function
- 49 A paying B reserving C warning D booking
- 50 A funds B costs C fees D rates

Questions 51 – 60

- In this section you must choose the word or phrase which best completes each sentence.
- For questions 51 to 60, mark one letter A, B, C or D on your Answer Sheet.

- 51 If you're not too tired we could have a.....of tennis after lunch.  
A match                      B play                      C game                      D party
- 52 Don't you get tired.....watching TV every night?  
A with                      B by                      C of                      D at
- 53 Go on, finish the dessert. It needs.....up because it won't stay fresh until tomorrow.  
A eat                      B eating                      C to eat                      D eaten
- 54 We're not used to..... invited to very formal occasions.  
A be                      B have                      C being                      D having
- 55 I'd rather we.....meet this evening, because I'm very tired.  
A wouldn't                      B shouldn't                      C hadn't  
D didn't
- 56 She obviously didn't want to discuss the matter so I didn't.....the point.  
A maintain                      B chase                      C follow                      D pursue
- 57 Anyone..... after the start of the play is not allowed in until the interval.  
A arrives                      B has arrived                      C arriving                      D arrived
- 58 This new magazine is.....with interesting stories and useful information.  
A full                      B packed                      C thick                      D compiled
- 59 The restaurant was far too noisy to be.....to relaxed conversation.  
A conducive                      B suitable                      C practical                      D fruitful
- 60 In this branch of medicine, it is vital to..... open to new ideas.  
A stand                      B continue                      C hold                      D remain

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**Bahareh Karbalaee Asadolah**

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A Comparative Study of Iranian EFL Students' Language Proficiency: Is University Type Influential?

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