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## Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Iranian 7<sup>th</sup> Graders with Intellectual Disabilities

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### Abstract

In this research, English was instructed to learners with mild intellectual disabilities (IDs) in Iran (2017-2018). In this single-group post-test study, 32 seventh-graders with IDs were selected using convenience sampling. The teaching material was a validated researcher-made pamphlet. Four teachers of special schools instructed the pamphlet for 14 sessions of 45 minutes for four months in the school setting and completed formative assessment forms for each student using descriptive terms. The students' achievements were compared using the chi-squared test. A significantly higher number of students had a successful performance on listening, reading, and writing compared to those with a relatively successful and unsuccessful performance ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), while no significant difference was observed in the case of speaking. Learners with IDs can successfully learn EFL with the aid of methods, techniques, and materials tailored to their needs. Learners with IDs can successfully learn English as a foreign language. Speaking is the most difficult language skill for learners with IDs. The difference in orthographic systems does not affect writing skill development considering the objectives designed in this project. The results encourage foreign learning by learners with IDs and, thereby promoting inclusion.

**Keywords:** intellectual disabilities, teaching English as a foreign language, formative assessment, Iran

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## 1. Introduction

For the past few years, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught to students with intellectual disabilities (IDs) as an optional course at special schools in Iran, only from grades seven to nine. Since the Iranian educational system is a centralized one, teaching is implemented on the basis of nation-wide uniform curricula, syllabi, and materials. Unfortunately, as for the academic year 2017-2018, the English textbook in use in Iranian special schools is far from educational standards and incompatible with the needs and capabilities of students with IDs (Ghanaat Pishch & Fahimniya, 2015; Ramezani et al., 2020). In most educational systems, the majority of teaching activities are performed within the framework of the textbook. Therefore, textbooks are of utmost importance due to their key role in students' socialization process as well as the formation of perceptions of their capabilities.

Reviewing the previous curriculum for teaching English to students with intellectual disability, we come to the following conclusions:

Firstly, the vital strong points of English course book for 7<sup>th</sup> graders and its workbook (Nikpoor KheshtMasjedi, 2016) were presenting frequent language functions and social routines, and color printing of the student book. The crucial weaknesses included the old-fashioned way of teaching English alphabets, the inappropriate method of introducing numbers, designing improper activities regarding the students' capabilities, and the low quality of the pictures both in student book and workbook. The strong points of the teachers' guide were providing clear teaching guidelines, considering learning procedures based on recent researches and modern theories, presenting the objective of the course, and providing appropriate guidelines for evaluation. Some of the weaknesses were ignoring students' different learning styles, not introducing appropriate way of error correction, and inappropriate bookbinding (Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018a; Nikpoor KheshtMasjedi et al., 2010).

Secondly, the strong points of English course book for 8<sup>th</sup> graders and its workbook could be pointed out as allocating a specific section to recap what students have learned in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, presenting language functions and social routines, and color printing of the student book. Apart from the old-fashioned way of teaching English alphabets, the inappropriate method of introducing numbers, developing improper and vague activities regarding the students' capabilities, and

the low quality of the pictures, the essential weakness of the book was the issue that there was not that much conformity between the title of each lesson and the content (Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018b)

Thirdly, the strong point of English course book for 9th graders and its workbook could be pointed out as the use of imperative forms to teach different concepts apart from presenting language functions and social routines. The weaknesses included stopping teaching numbers, and not allocating a specific section to recap what students have learned in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades (Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018c).

Although teaching foreign languages to learners with IDs is a challenging task, they should not be deprived of this golden opportunity. According to Sparks (2009), learning a second/foreign language (L2) also improves one's literacy in the first language (L1), allows for the exploration and comparison of one's native and the foreign language and culture, and thus enhances one's ability to accept others. As a result, like other groups, learners with IDs need to learn EFL.

Consequently, the present study was to investigate whether students with IDs can successfully learn English as a foreign language by the support of some adaptations and modifications in teaching methods, techniques, and materials or not. Thus, the main research question was posed as follows: *Can Iranian students with IDs successfully learn EFL?*

## 2. Literature Review

Based on the definition put forward by the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (2010), IDs are a type of disability accompanied by significant restrictions in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. Extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of first language learning and/or performance in persons with IDs:

- Reading: Alberto et al., 2010; Channell et al., 2013; Dessemontet & de Chambrier, 2015; Hua et al., 2013; Ratz & Lenhard, 2013; Ruwe et al., 2011)
- Writing (Cannella-Malone et al., 2015; Rostambeik Tafreshi & Ramezani Vasookolae, 2010; Rostambeik Tafreshi & Ramezani Vasookolae, 2011a; Rostambeik Tafreshi & Ramezani Vasookolae, 2011b; Pennington et al.,

2012; Pennington et al., 2014; Varuzza et al., 2015)

- Listening (Hudson & Browder, 2014; Hudson et al., 2014)
- Speaking (Abbasi & Khodaverdi, 2018; Coppens-Hofman et al., 2013; Coppens-Hofman et al., 2016; Van der Schuit et al., 2010)
- Vocabulary (Cuskelly et al., 2016; McMahon et al., 2016; Wise et al., 2010)
- Grammar/Morphology (Gordon et al., 2015; Hicks et al., 2011; Hicks et al., 2015; Mechling & Hunnicutt, 2011; Yoder et al., 2006)

The literature on FL learning, however, is extremely limited. One of the few studies in the domain of teaching EFL to learners with IDs is the two-year project entitled *English without Frontiers* which began in 2005 in Pragma. The target group comprised individuals with IDs aged from 17 to 56 years and belonging to different ethnicities and nationalities. Results confirmed that these learners desire and are able to learn a foreign language despite their disability. According to Pyfers and Timmis (2007), the following nine language teaching techniques were implemented in the *English without Frontiers*: total communication, affective feedback, listening for gist, modeling, repeated exposure, communicative drilling, social routines, scaffolding, and personalization. In addition to these techniques, the communicative approach, lexical approach, and total physical response (TPR) were employed in this project:

**Communicative approach:** According to Pyfers and Timmis (2007), this is the best approach to teaching foreign languages to learners with IDs. In this approach, the language syllabus and method are based not on structure/grammar, but on meaning and communication. Students are involved with the language learning process by performing meaningful activities, and the syllabus is primarily designed with the aim of teaching linguistic functions, not grammatical structures. Since communication and fluency are prioritized over accuracy, learners' linguistic errors are often ignored. In this approach, the class is student-centered because students perform the activities in cooperation with one another, with the teacher playing the role of a mere supervisor. Although the strategy of immersion in the L2 is often used in the communicative approach, teachers must employ learners' L1 for communication and instruction if they teach learners with IDs.

**Lexical approach:** In this approach, introduced by Lewis (1993), lexical phrases and prefabricated chunks of language are instructed. Based on the principles of the lexical approach, lexical phrases have a stronger language-

generation power than grammatical structures. Therefore, proponents of this approach regard word as the center of the language syllabus. Statistical analysis of discourse also indicates that all speakers use prefabricated patterns and collocations.

**Total Physical Response (TPR):** Physical response to verbal stimuli is an effective method for teaching learners with IDs. Therefore, extensive TPR activities must be included in the syllabus designed for this group. In this method, learners perform physical activities in response to language input. Asher (1969), the founder of TPR, suggested that children start reacting to verbal stimuli by first listening and then performing physical activities in response. This method has the benefit of minimizing anxiety in the language classroom because learners no longer worry about language production.

As noted earlier, very few studies have examined the dimensions of L2 in students with IDs. For instance, Hoover and Patten (2005) discussed differentiating curriculum and instruction for English language learners with special needs. They addressed teaching and curricular principles, as well as practices necessary to effectively meet diverse needs in the classroom. Also, they included several checklists or guides to assist educators to become more competent in implementing and differentiating instruction.

Anggraeni and Mertosono (2016) showed that teaching vocabulary to students with IDs using a *make-a-match* technique can make them more interested and active in the classroom. They also concluded that this technique can improve the students' vocabulary because it can motivate them to participate in the teaching and learning process.

Moreover, Zimmerman et al. (2015) highlighted some issues in teaching a foreign language to students with special needs. They suggested that schools of education must prepare teachers for working with this group of learners in an inclusive setting owing to the complex nature of the topic, the various types of special needs the learners may have, the laws and regulations of different countries about the education of these students, and the teachers' preparation for working with such students in the foreign language classroom. According to these authors, teachers must be able to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of each student by using various techniques and strategies, such as differentiated learning.

In Iran, students with IDs study in special schools, and English is an optional

course provided by some schools in sessions of 45 minutes once a week, from grade seven through nine. Only two relevant studies have been conducted in Iran. First, Mohammadian and Mohammadian Dolatabadi (2015) examined the effects of teacher's emotions and positive behavior on learning English by learners with IDs using TPR. A sample of 18 girls and boys (aged 6-14 years) with mild IDs formed the experimental and control groups in this study. Both groups were instructed 13 imperative sentences using TPR. Results demonstrated that the learning of students in the experimental group was enhanced three-fold.

Second, in a quasi-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design and a comparison group, Noori and Farvardin (2016) assessed the effect of audiovisual aides and pictures on the English vocabulary learning of learners with mild IDs. The participants were 16 men aged 20-30 years with mild IDs with the L1 of Persian and no prior knowledge of English. They were randomly assigned to two groups, one receiving instruction through audiovisual aides, and the other through pictures. The intervention lasted for four weeks (20 sessions), during which 60 English words were instructed. Following the intervention, the participants took a researcher-made posttest examining 40 out of the 60 instructed words. Based on the findings, the use of audiovisual aides was more effective than pictures for the target group.

The studies cited here were limited by some factors. For instance, in the *English without Frontiers* project, the participants were all from European countries and thus familiar with the Latin script. As a result, it could not make any claim as to effects of learning English on participants unfamiliar with this script. Moreover, in the study by Mohammadian and Mohammadian Dolatabadi (2016), only 13 imperative sentences were instructed using TPR, and the main focus of the study was on the effects of teacher's emotion and positive behavior. As a result, other language teaching approaches, techniques, or language skills (such as reading or writing) were neglected. Finally, the study by Noori and Farvardin (2016) only focused on teaching vocabulary, neglecting other language skills and sub-skills. The present study aimed to fill in these gaps.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design

This study had a single-group posttest-only design. As the students had never

studied English before, no pretest or control group was required.

### **3.2. Participants**

A sample of 32 female and male students with mild IDs studying in grade seven at special schools of two towns of Tehran, Iran (14 boys and 18 girls) was selected via convenience sampling. The mean age of the participants was 16.75 years (ranging from 14 to 20 years). Four teachers (three women and one man) who taught these students at school volunteered for participation in this research. The teachers' academic background included the psychology of exceptional children (BA), English language teaching (MA), clinical psychology (BA), or Persian language and literature (MA).

### **3.3. Ethical Considerations**

All the procedures were approved by the Department of Education of the mentioned cities and the deans of the respective schools, and the students and their parents gave consent for participation.

### **3.4. Materials**

To the best of our knowledge, there was no standard/validated EFL teaching material or test intended for students with IDs in Iran. Therefore, the material and the test had to be developed for the purpose of this research. To this end, first, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers and students to learn about their perceptions of and attitudes towards English, needs and interests, and the features of an effective textbook. To guarantee the trustworthiness of the qualitative part of the study (i.e., interviews), the researchers ensured the three criteria of credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The credibility of the interviews was ensured through long-term engagement with the students; its dependability was met through thematic analysis performed by the researchers and provision of thick description of all the stages of the research; and confirmability was guaranteed by note-taking during the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Subsequently, the results of the interviews were analyzed and the information

on teaching methods, organization of the materials, teacher's roles, educational facilities and equipment, and evaluation strategies was extracted from the *English without Frontiers* project. Then, the material was developed by experts in English language teaching (ELT), linguistics, and the psychology and education of exceptional children. The psychological and neurological characteristics, learning process, and principles of effective teaching for learners with IDs were taken into account throughout the material development process.

The developed material, designed in the form of a pamphlet, aimed to facilitate the English learning process while teaching common and frequent language functions with respect to the capabilities of the target group. The final pamphlet comprised an independent introductory lesson (to practice pencil control and writing from left to right) and six main lessons. Each lesson taught one language function, two letters of the alphabet, and provided different activities. Topics covered in this book included language functions (greetings, introducing oneself, and saying goodbye; naming classroom objects; describing the color of classroom objects; commanding; and counting) and skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Listening involved listening to and understanding words, language chunks, and commands; speaking comprised the production of words and chunks; reading involved the recognition of letters and numbers; and writing included pencil control, tracing, and writing letters and numbers. The traditional order of teaching letters is the alphabetical order; however, we introduced the letters based on the similarity of strokes/motor movements required for writing them (Groff, 1973). Moreover, the focus was on introducing short sounds first in order to help students read words with short closed syllables as soon as possible. Furthermore, pencil control and tracing were emphasized to facilitate writing. In the appendix of the pamphlet, a list of words and chunks as well as writing pads were provided for reference and further practice. The book also provided guidelines for the teachers on how to teach the materials and perform the activities. Table 1 present the table of contents of the pamphlet.

**Table 1**

*Table of Contents of the Developed Pamphlet*

Unit	Topic	Function	Skills	Letters
Preparatory Unit	Tracing and coloring		Pencil control	
1	Greetings	Introducing	Listening	C c, O



Unit	Topic	Function	Skills	Letters
		yourself	Speaking Reading Writing	o
2	Classroom Objects	Naming things	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	A a, D d
3	Colors	Describing the color of objects	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	G g, I i
4	Basic Commands (1)	Ordering	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	S s, E e
5	Numbers 1-10	Counting	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	R r, U u
6	Basic Commands (2)	Ordering	Listening Speaking Reading Writing	H h, B b

#### Appendices

After developing the material, six formative assessment forms (Appendix) were designed for the six lessons. These forms descriptively assess students' performance in the four language skills divided by the activities provided in each lesson. Students' performance was assessed on a three-point Likert-type scale: "successful", "relatively successful", "unsuccessful". Eventually, the material and formative assessment forms were examined and their validity was confirmed by two experts (one in the psychology of exceptional students, and the other in ELT).

### 3.5. Fidelity of Implementation

To ensure the fidelity of implementation, a 24-hour workshop entitled "The First Teacher Training Course for Teaching English to Students with IDs" was held. The instructors of the workshop were experts in ELT and linguistics, and the

participants were, among others, the four volunteer teachers who were to participate in the study. The workshop focused on the importance and necessity of teaching EFL to the target group; ELT approaches, methods, and techniques; describing the developed material, and teaching practice.

Next, teacher observation forms were developed by the researchers so that, during the course of the study, the accurate performance of the teachers would be ensured and the fidelity of implementation would be guaranteed. The validity of the forms was confirmed by the two experts. Two experts in ELT observed the classes and filled in the forms during the course of the study, and results confirmed the effective and accurate performance of the teachers.

### 3.6. Procedure & Data Analysis

The intervention comprised teaching the developed material in 14 sessions of 45 minutes for four months (2017-2018) in the school setting. Classes were held in the students' native language, i.e., Persian. During the course of the study, formative assessment forms were filled in for each student by their teachers. Finally, the data were extracted from these forms and analyzed using the chi-squared test.

## 4. Results

This section provides the results of analyzing formative assessment forms for 32 students. Initially, all the activities noted in the forms were divided into the four language skills. Then, the number of students who were *successful*, *relatively successful*, or *unsuccessful* in performing each activity was counted. Then, the difference among the three groups per skill was analyzed using chi-squared test (Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Students' Performance on the Four Language Skills*

	Successful	Relatively successful	Unsuccessful	$\chi^2$
Listening	18 (56.25%)	10 (31.25%)	4 (12.5%)	9.250*
Speaking	14 (43.75%)	10 (31.25%)	8 (25%)	1.750
Reading	18 (56.25%)	8 (25%)	6 (18.75%)	7.750*

Writing	18 (56.25%)	9 (28.12%)	5 (15.63%)	8.313*
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\*. Significant at the  $p < 0.05$

For a more precise comparison among the groups, the adjusted standardized residual for each group per each skill is presented in Table 3 (Agresti, 2007; Sharpe, 2015).

**Table 3**

*Adjusted Standardized Residual for Each Group*

	Successful	Relatively successful	Unsuccessful
Listening	2.23	-0.21	-2.05
Speaking	1.01	-0.21	-0.83
Reading	2.23	-0.83	-1.44
Writing	2.23	-0.52	-1.74

The results revealed that the groups significantly differed in listening ( $p = 0.01$ ), reading ( $p = 0.021$ ), and writing ( $p = 0.016$ ). In other words, the number of learners who were *successful* was significantly higher than those who were *relatively successful* or *unsuccessful* in terms of listening, reading, and writing ( $p < 0.05$ ). On the other hand, no significant difference was observed between the groups ( $p = 0.417$ ) in terms of speaking. In other words, the number of learners who were *successful*, *relatively successful*, or *unsuccessful* did not significantly differ when it came to speaking.

## 5. Discussion

Based on these results, learners with IDs can make a considerable achievement in learning EFL if they have access to appropriate materials, methods, and techniques. These results approve the previous findings (Pyfers & Timmis, 2007; Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018a; Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018b; Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018c; Ramezani & Mihandoust, 2018d.)

The only skill in which students with IDs showed poorer achievement in speaking. Based on the literature, speaking a foreign language is the most difficult language skills (Bailey & Savage, 1994), and students often make little achievement when it comes to speaking a second/foreign language (Green et al., 2002). This difficulty is because, to speak fluently, the learner needs not only

linguistic knowledge, but also the ability to process information and language on the spot (Harmer, 2001).

Students with IDs have a poor working memory (Mähler & Schuchardt, 2009; Schuchardt et al., 2010; Van der Molen et al., 2007). According to Ellis (1980), there is a positive correlation between errors on working verbal memory and errors on language production. This is why working memory plays a key role in speaking (Daneman, 1991).

There is also evidence suggesting that persons with IDs have communication problems, including problems with speech production and expressive language (Belva et al., 2012; Purcell et al., 1999; Van der Schuit et al., 2010). As a result, the poor performance of students with IDs in speaking is not unexpected. Since this group has a poor working memory and their speaking skill strongly depends on one's working memory, it proves more challenging than other skills to learners with IDs.

It was also expected that the learners would find writing English letters troublesome because contrary to English, Persian is written from right to left. Yet the results proved that this was not the case. Still, an examination of students' formative assessment forms revealed that the small and capital forms of letters S and G were the most difficult letters to write. Therefore, it is suggested that writing these letters be postponed or be accompanied by ample practice.

## **6. Conclusion**

To teach English effectively to students with special needs, the following items should be considered (Ramezani et al., 2018d; Ramezani et al., 2019; Ramezani et al., 2020):

a. Approaches and Methods: According to Pyfers and Timmis (2007) Communicative approach, Total Physical Response and Lexical approach are among the most suggested.

b. Techniques: Modelling, Repeated Exposure, Scaffolding, Multisensory Approach, Social Routines, Total Communication, Communicative Drilling, Listening for the gist, Personalization, Affective feedback and Concept Building should be applied.

c. Teaching materials: The input should be chosen and fed according to the

cognitive characteristics of the individuals with special needs. Moreover, it should be practiced both individually and in group. It is suggested to focus on using core vocabularies for preparing teaching materials and interventional programs for students with intellectual disabilities (Ramezani, 2017; Ramezani & Asadpour, 2016). In newly developed coursebooks for Junior secondary prevocational programs called Prospect 1, 2 & 3, this issue has been considered (Ramezani et al., 2020; Ramezani et al., 2022a; Ramezani et al., 2022b; Ramezani et al., 2022c).

d. Time of instruction: considering the attention span of the students with intellectual disability, the appropriate time of instruction should be at least 2 – 5 hours per week. In Germany, it is around 2-3 hours for 6 years (Wöske, 2016). In South Korea, time of instruction is about 102 hours (5 hours per week) for 8 years (Chung, 2011). In Iran, it is about 18 hours (45 minutes per week) for 3 years (Ramezani et al., 2020). In Slovakia, a foreign language is taught to students with special needs for nine years (Pokrivcakova et al., 2015).

The results of this study bear important messages on the importance and necessity of teaching EFL to students with IDs. These learners can indeed learn English successfully if appropriate materials, methods, and techniques are provided to them. Thus, considering the positive effects of learning a second language on learners' L1 literacy, improvement of their self-confidence, and enhancement of their academic achievements, it is recommended that parents provide opportunities for their children with IDs to learn EFL. Moreover, it is strongly suggested that teachers adopt the approaches and techniques described in *English without Frontiers* project as well as the present study in order to facilitate teaching EFL to learners with IDs. Results of this study may also encourage policy-makers to include English as a mandatory subject in the curriculum of Iranian students with IDs.

Like any other study, this study was not free from limitations. The first limitation was that three out of four teachers who participated in the study were graduates of majors unrelated to ELT, which mirrors the normal practice in Iran; since English is not a mandatory subject for students with IDs, the majority of teachers who teach this subject are not ELT graduates. Still, had all the teachers been ELT graduates, the learners might have progressed even more remarkably. Moreover, the assessment performed by the teachers was subjective to some

extent. Of course, attempts were made to provide detailed explanations of the descriptive terms used in the assessment, thereby enhancing its objectivity as much as possible (Appendix). Also, since this study was conducted in two Iranian towns, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results to other settings.

The present study focused on teaching English based on lexical approach, communicative approach, and TPR. In the future, researchers can examine the effectiveness of other approaches, methods, and techniques for teaching the learners with IDs. Furthermore, the target group in this study comprised 7<sup>th</sup> graders. Therefore, it is suggested that this study be replicated on students studying at other grades as well.

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## Appendix: Formative Assessment Form for Lesson 6

## Student Progress Sheet: Lesson 6

Student's Name:

Teacher's Name:

School:

Date: From ...

To ...

Skill	Descriptive Assessment	Successful	Relatively Successful	Unsuccessful
Listening	Open the book!			
	Close the book!			
	Wipe the board!			
	Knock the door!			
Reading	Recognizing H			
	Recognizing h			
	Recognizing B			
Writing	Tracing H			
	Tracing h			
	Writing H			
	Writing h			
	Tracing B			
	Tracing b			
	Writing B			

Writing b

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**Notes to the teacher:**

In “listening”, “successful” means that the student can accurately understand and perform the commands; “relatively successful” means that the student sometimes understands and performs the commands accurately; and “unsuccessful” means that the student cannot understand or perform the commands at all.

In “writing”, “successful” means that the student can accurately trace the letter based on the arrows; can recognize the letter and differentiate it from other letters upon seeing it; and can also write the letter accurately; “relatively successful” means that the student can occasionally trace, recognize, and write the letters; and “unsuccessful” means that the student cannot trace, recognize, or write the letters at all.

**About the Authors**

**Ahmad Ramezani** is an Assistant Professor in the institute for humanities and cultural studies. His works are mostly about language development in students with special needs especially students with intellectual disabilities. Core vocabulary, language syllabus development and language syllabus evaluation are some of the areas he is more interested in. He also is one of the authors of Prospect 1, 2 and 3 developed to be taught for prevocational students.

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