

## English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Captivity: The case of Iranian prisoners of war in the Iraq-Iran war

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**Abstract:** *During the Persian Gulf War of Iraq-Iran (1980-1988), thousands of Iranians were taken captive by Iraqi troops. These prisoners of war (POWs) had to find ways to enrich and fill their time in prison camps. Learning English was one such activity. This study was carried out to appraise the motivations of the Iranian POWs for learning English, and to understand more about their textbooks, their classroom environment, the teaching methods and techniques employed, the skills emphasized, the teaching aids improvised, the types of exercises mobilized, as well as the test-taking techniques adopted. A relevant corpus of 21 memoirs and 7 interviews with Iranian ex-POWs were analyzed. The research draws upon Maslow's (1970) "self-actualization" and Frankl's (1984) "logotherapy" to shed light on the existential aspect of learning. Findings revealed that for these EFL learners learning English was an attempt to fulfill their potential and/or to make life more meaningful.*

**Keywords:** *Iraq-Iran War, POWs, POW Camps, English, EFL in Captivity, self-actualization, logotherapy.*

Language learning and, in particular, foreign language learning or acquisition, does not take place in a vacuum. In fact, a foreign language can be learned or acquired in a wide variety of contexts: social, cultural, political, institutional, and so forth. Foreign language learners' success or failure in mastering a foreign language depends on a number of variables: linguistic, cognitive, affective, as well as sociocultural, and each of these contextual factors contributes, it is argued, either positively or negatively to the process of foreign language learning (Brown, 2007a; Harmer, 2001; Horwitz, 2008; Nunan, 2003, among many others). Furthermore, learners of a foreign language have their own role to play in the vicissitudes of the same process. Of the learner-related variables, intelligence, age, aptitude, attitude, motivation, personality, learning styles/strategies and learner beliefs are, many argue, important factors. Indeed, the multitude of factors involved in learning a foreign language is so vast that no single theory in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) whether it be the behaviorist perspective or the innatist, the cognitive perspective or the sociocultural can fully explicate all aspects of this complex phenomenon (Brown, 2007b; Ellis, 1994; Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Tomlinson, 2005).

Available SLA literature reflects considerable variation in terms of these theoretical perspectives in respect of learning/acquiring a foreign language in those learning settings that are apparently normal and ordinary, if not favorable or voluntary (Bailey, Curtis & Nunan, 2001; Ellis, 1994; Hakuta, Butler & Witt, 2000; Harklau, 2005; Norton, 1997; Roberts et al., 2001; Van Lier, 2005). However, there is a particular case of foreign language learning which has yet to be addressed in SLA literature: learning a foreign language as a prisoner of war (POW) in an emotionally stressful and coercive situation of a prisoner of war camp.

On September 22, 1980, a year and a half after the victory of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 which was led by Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini (1902-1989), thousands of Iraqi troops of President Saddam Hussein (1937-2006), invaded Iranian territory. This marked the beginning of a full-scale war in the Persian Gulf sec



tor of the Middle East which lasted for eight years, resulting in millions of deaths in both Iran and Iraq, with many more injured or rendered homeless (Potter & Sick, 2006). Tens of thousands of both military and civilians were also taken captive by the two armies involved. The war, the third longest war in the 20th century after Vietnam War of 1959-1975 and Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989, led to thousands of Iranian civilians and military personnel being taken captive by the Iraqi troops; Iranian POWs were reportedly approximately 42,000 in number (Potter & Sick, 2006, p. 8). These prisoners had to spend their time in the unpleasant, and often unbearable, circumstances of POW camps, and to find ways to pass time. Learning English language, among several other hobbies, was an activity that engaged some Iranian POWs.

The experience of learning the English language and becoming proficient or fluent in it whilst in captivity is an untapped area of linguistic, educational research, that could serve as a topic of considerable interest to educators, SLA researchers, EFL teachers, prison authorities, human rights groups, UN subsidiary agencies, as well as the teachers and learners of the English language. To tell this story and to understand the motivation of the Iranian POWs for learning English, the textbooks they used, their classroom environment and procedures, the teaching methods and techniques employed, the skills they emphasized, the teaching aids used, the types of exercises and practices as well as the test-taking techniques, this study worked with and analysed a number of documents detailed in this article.

Given the present lacuna in the literature as to educational learning experiences of POWs in learning a foreign language, such as English, under adverse circumstances of POW camps, this essay is guided by the following research questions and seeks to offer some provisional understanding of the motivation and practices of Iranian prisoners of war in learning English:

1. Given the demotivating circumstances of POW camps, what factors motivated Iranian POWs to learn English while in captivity?
2. In what ways did Iranian POWs learn English while in captivity?
3. How proficient, or fluent, did Iranian POWs become in English while in captivity?

In this essay, the first section provides a review of the literature. Thereafter, both the methodological approach and the conceptual framing are delineated. The subsequent section of the study is allocated to the presentation of the data and analysis, with a separate section devoted to discussion of the results. The final section of the paper highlights a number of the limitations of this provisional study and offers some suggestions for further research.

### **Learning English under Duress: Contextualising the Study**

To date, to the best knowledge of this author, no relevant research is available on the educational undertaking of learning a foreign language, such as English, in a POW camp; these camps are raucous, harsh settings that are arguably significantly different from ordinary prison environments in which noncombatant citizens are confined. Whilst there are several studies detailing teaching a foreign language to prisoners in correction centers or prisons, this is not equivalent to learning a foreign language as a prisoner of war, when one is considered a belligerent enemy force by one's captors.

Some examples of teaching foreign languages or English as a second language include Hutchinson's (2014) fascinating story of teaching English as a second language in a city jail, as well as Westheim and Manger's (2014) report on the lives of Iraqi prisoners in a Norwegian jail that gave special emphasis to their educational background, participation, preferences, and barriers to education, and Hopkins and Farley's (2014) rich description of teaching Australian incarcerated students in the digital age. In another study, Egbert (1989) addressed the problems that ESL (English as a Second Language) instructors face in a European correctional institute. This article focused on the problematic aspects of curriculum development and implementation in the unconventional setting of prison in order to finally arrive at several suggestions regarding how to overcome those obstacles in order to create an effective learning environment.

A further study by Olinger et al. (2012) involved establishing a learning community among "language partners" in a US prison in Illinois in which a number of prisoners taught ESL classes, supported by volunteer teacher-trainers. They claimed that the creation of this learning community had immense and sometimes unforeseen value to the participants. Irwin (2003) described prison education in Northern Ireland,

arguing that prison authorities should extend some of the exemplary educational practices that were developed throughout turbulent times, exploring ways in which learning about the past might inform developments within the custodial establishments. Scott's (2000) article elaborated on IRA prisoners (who call themselves POWs) learning experiences in the Maze prison in the south of Ireland. Describing the site as a "bleak compound", the IRA reportedly rejected the prison education services and set up its own educational structure (a remarkable library of hundreds of books on different topics). A large collection of the books which have found their way into its cells are shown to have had a lasting effect on the ex-prisoners even years after their release. One more source of relevance to this theme is O'Donnell's (2014) detailed account on education in prison, including descriptions of peer learning, by Irish Republican prisoners between 1987-2010. This is a comprehensive, in-depth report on an art programme (NCAD's art programme in Portlaoise prison) where for a significant duration of time there was little to no access to prison education.

Another important study by Emam Roodband (2016) examined learning practices in prisons by studying the lives and careers of fourteen contemporary political prisoners in Iran who had served long prison terms in Iranian jails under harsh physical as well as psychological circumstances during Pahlavi Dynasty (1926-1979). A number of these self-taught prisoners became, perhaps surprisingly, some of the leading translators of European languages in the years and decades which ensued, rendering works of both fiction and nonfiction into Persian. Taking up another line of enquiry, Gould (2017) examined the prison memoirs of three dissident writers of modern Iran in order to arrive at a better understanding of prison consciousness in Iranian modernity across both the Pahlavi and post-revolutionary period. He was particularly interested in understanding the relationships between prose and literary representation in modern Middle Eastern literatures, as reflected in the literary products of Iranian incarcerated political activists. Investigating three key variables of experience, motivation and learning strategies, and their inter-relationships, in a study encompassing 534 inmates in Norwegian prisons was the subject of a study conducted by Diseth et al. (2008). This study revealed some of the ways in which learners engaging in education in prisons could experience problems related to the learning environment and to the difficulties that arised in relation to their own learning difficulties.

Arguably, however, the lives of civil inmates in correctional centers and/or prisons is not the same as that of POWs who are typically considered as enemies rather than ordinary wards of the State. Under internationally recognized laws, a POW is a person, whether combatant or non-combatant, who is held in custody by a belligerent power. POWs are often at risk of deprivation of even their minimum human rights, including the right to receive proper educational services. This paper seeks to understand how prisoners of war respond to their situation, and condition, educationally and through their studies and learning, specifically here in respect of learning English.

### **Framing the Study Methodologically and Conceptually**

Given the limited research in this area, and the difficulty in ascertaining both motive for and practice of learning English, the most appropriate initial approach to understanding the nature of English language learning in prisoner of war camps needs to be attuned to both history and ethnography. The voice of the person in the camp seemed most instructive here which is why diaries, memoirs, interviews and (auto)-biographies of the Iranian ex-POWs—now more than 30 years after the end of that war in 1988—were studied as the primary data source. The researcher had to rely solely on Persian publications available in Iran and sought to ensure representative sampling from among a large number of sources written by Iranian ex-POWs in the Persian language and published in Iran from 1990s to 2000s. Twenty-one published memory accounts or memoirs were studied and seven previously undertaken semi-structured interviews (by a number of historians of Iraq–Iran war) with Iranian ex-POWs were selected, studied and analyzed by the researcher. All the relevant sources (listed in the references below) were selected because they contained information about aspects of learning English as a foreign language in those Iraqi POW camps that were scattered across that country during Iran–Iraq war of 1980-1988. It ought to be noted that throughout this article, all quotations from such references were originally in Persian and have been translated into English by the author. In addition, because the sources of the data were all published in Iran with the Iranian national date of publication based on the Islamic calendar, all such references throughout are followed by two dates of publications; the first, an Iranian national Islamic date, and the second, a Christian one.

All of the Iranian POWs were males in their 20s to their 50s when they were taken captive. Once the literature was identified, an analysis was undertaken to locate those key themes that might be of potential value in answering the research questions. These themes (e.g. motives of learner, teachers, resources, classroom environment, practices, error correction, testing, etc.) comprise variables of significant importance in any educational setting, including learning English in an EFL context. It was thus decided to assign each of these ten areas located in the preliminary analysis a separate coding subtitle to be sequentially dealt with in the data analysis. The data contained a range of relevant material from areas as wide as the motives of Iranian POWs in learning English, the English teachers of Iranian POWs, the teaching/learning resources, their classroom environment, to EFL skills concentrated on in their classes, the teaching aids improvised, and so forth.

It is generally acknowledged among educators as well as ESL/EFL experts, that the most important factor involved in learning a foreign language is the motivation of the learner (Brown, 2007; Dornyei, 2014; Horwitz, 2008; Richards, 2015; Thornbury, 2006). Venturing to learn a foreign language as a POW in a POW camp would appear to be an educational endeavor which requires significant motivation. However, the findings and implications of the motivational studies such as those reported above are not adequate to the task of accounting for the learning of English in prisoner of war camps. Most research, including those of Gardner (2000, 2001, 2010) and Dornyei & Ushioda (2009, 2011) is concerned with learning a foreign/second language under ordinary, if not favorable, circumstances that are far from the realities of the hostile context of a typical POW camp. In trying to understand the underlying motivating factors in such settings, the conceptual framing adopted to support the analysis of the relevant data gathered relies, in part, on two theorists, Maslow and Frankl, whose existential concerns seemed to help to shed light on important aspects of the lives of human beings in times of distress. This is supplemented by rich descriptions of the practical ways in which POWs learned English and what it meant to them at the time and on reflection.

Maslow's theory of "self-actualization" (Maslow, 1970; William and Burden, 1997) is a component of the overarching theory known as the "hierarchy of human needs". The theory states that there are two sets of human needs: deficiency needs (basic physiological needs, need for safety and security, need for personal closeness, need for self-esteem) and being needs (cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and self-actualization). The theory assumes that if deficiency needs are not met, or their fulfillment is disrupted in some way, then it would be difficult, or even impossible for a person to fulfill those needs that are further up the hierarchy (William and Burden, 1997, p. 33). On the other hand, Frankl's "logotherapy" was originally offered to account for the behavior of human beings in times of severe physical pain and deprivation during the Holocaust and Frankl maintained that striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man (1984, p. 121).

### **The Learning Stories of Iranian Prisoners of War**

#### **Motivation**

The aim of this study is not to specify a single motive for those POWs who learned English amongst a population of over 42,000 POWs. POWs are human beings, each of whom has characteristic features which distinguishes them from their peers. Yet, one can identify several trends or tendencies when examining their stories, even if their motives and purposes were different.

To give an example, according to Karaki (1377/1998), an Iranian ex-POW in Iraqi POW camps:

Among Iranian EFL learners, there were different groups. The first group consisted of those who sought to learn English due to personal, internal motives which drive people to communicate, out of curiosity, with unknown others and to enjoy what they say. (p. 164)

Goodarzi (1380/2001), another Iranian ex-POW who used to be a colonel in the Iranian army recalled his own agonies of being imprisoned and his response of learning the English language at Iraqi POW camps, describing it as an attempt to entertain himself with a pastime or hobby, perhaps to avoid, or to counter, psychological stress and/or depression:

At Iraqi POW camps, days went by rather slowly, with no hopes for us of returning home. We had to improvise ways to minimize the agonies of time passing so stressfully round the clock. Thus, I started to devote my time to reading English simplified versions of novels

provided to us by International Committee of the Red Crescent Societies (ICRCS). I used the same method to learn some Russian and/or French as well. This way, I managed even to read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. (p. 117)

Rahmaniaan (1376/1999) also spoke of how "too much free time made some Iranian POWs devote themselves to learning English or other European languages" (p. 63). Karaki (1377/1998) in a similar way, referred to learning English as 'a type of constructive entertainment' in a situation where for want of valuable novels, POWs had no choice but to turn to studying English (p. 164). For still another group of POWs for whom "time was gold" in order to avoid wasting precious time in captivity, and in fact to enrich it, it seemed imperative to spend some time at least on learning English (Karaki, 1377/1998, p. 164; Yektaei, 1370/1991, p. 90). Among one further category of Iranian POWs "there were some who embarked on learning English for a potential future use after their likely freedom" (Karaki, 1377/1998, p. 165). Instrumental motivation was also an important motive for other POWs who sought to communicate either with International Red Crescent Societies (IRCS) personnel or the English-speaking Iraqi army personnel to let them know about their daily problems in the prison camps (Rahmaniaan, 1376/1997. p. 63; Yektaei, 1370/1991, p. 49; Sarafraaz, 1384/2005, p. 90).

### **The English Teachers of Iranian POWs**

For a POW EFL learner with little to no competency or proficiency in English, those who can act as teachers of English may be of particular value and importance, in contexts that are as stressful as a POW camp. Yet, it does not seem altogether reasonable to expect such teachers to be in the same position as those with professional qualifications in teaching English, given their working conditions and lack of resources. In fact, teachers of English were often fellow POWs who, for one reason or other, were just a few steps ahead of their peers, insofar as their competence or proficiency in English was concerned.

Shams (1375/1996) remembered how "in almost every field, whether academic or otherwise, there were both teachers and students among us. Teachers were typically fellow POWs, former university students, students of religious schools, and at times engineering and medical professionals" (p. 107). In another narrative account, it was mentioned "there were a few former employees of NIOC (National Iranian Oil Company) who were fairly fluent in English and taught us the English language" (Zibaafar, 1385/2006, p. 32). In another source (Hasanshaahi, 1373/1994,) two teachers of English are named and appreciated:

Hossein Lashakri too taught us English. Before being captured, he had served in the Iranian Air Force in Tabriz as an F5 fighter jet pilot. Also, had it not been for the dedications of our fellow POW, Ali Zardbaani, we would not have had any chance to learn English. (pp. 47-48)

Reports of self-taught POW English learners, as well as reports of POWs who were assisted by IRCS personnel in learning English vocabulary and grammar points are also of importance in understanding English language learning in camps (Mashreqi, 1379/2000, pp. 46-52; Ahmadvand, 1381/2002, p. 131).

### **Teaching and Learning Resources**

As military facilities, POW camps are by their nature hostile environments controlled by aggressive forces. POWs are often considered as enemy combatant forces who need to be punished without even the minimum of facilities available in ordinary life. Iranian POWs in Iraq were no exception to the rule. As far as the educational facilities and resources for learning and teaching of English were concerned, Iranian POWs were reportedly scarcely provided with essential tools and materials. According to Karaki (1377/1998):

In the first few months of our stay in the camp, books, pens or any other such pieces of stationery were strictly forbidden. Any written note found among one's possessions would bring dire consequences....For a couple of months, a pen was the only suitable item of stationery available with which to write down new English vocabulary on dirty sheets of paper or cigarette packages. (p. 158)

Baraati's (1378/2008) narrative agreed with this description:

Months have passed when IRCS provided each POW with one pen, a small 40-page notebook and a few English simplified readers. However, as soon as the IRCS personnel left the camp, all the souvenir stationery was confiscated by the Iraqi guards. (p. 59)

Baarati (1378/2008) listed a number of English study resources as follows:

1. Oxford University Press (OUP) simplified readers at different levels.
2. Two monolingual English-English copies of *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, and one bilingual English-Persian Asia Dictionary for around 300 POWs.
3. Iranian high school English language textbooks published by the Iranian Ministry of Education, imported from Iran quite infrequently by IRCS. (p. 183)

Unsurprisingly it was found that through the IRCS services “an educational English language series entitled *English Simple* was handed to the POWs for self-study” (Nayyeri, 1386/2007, p. 85). At other times, POWs had to improvise their own teaching facilities to help improve their English. One such case, reported by Lieutenant Colonel Mojtabaa Jafari (1386/2007) is graphically depicted in the following description:

To improvise the necessary equipment for teaching English, my fellow POWs once joined a metal panel onto two bars to manufacture a whiteboard. Besides, pieces of black smoke from the kitchen, mixed with leftover fats and meats, served as chalk to write with on the board! Still at other times, we had no choice but to scratch the crumbling black plaster of the walls to produce a couple of bars of chalk. (pp. 129-130)

### **The Classroom Environment**

EFL learners, like learners in any other learning context, are profoundly affected by what they see, hear and feel in the classroom. If the classroom is clean, the equipment is good, and seats are arranged to facilitate learning, this would support both the learning as well as the teaching. By the same token, if the learning-teaching environment is as free from external noises as possible, and if the heating and cooling systems are properly operating, this also has positive effect on the atmosphere and environment. And if the opposite is the case, then the learning environment will not support learning in the same way.

It is therefore surprising that classic sources on learning English as a foreign language, for example, Brown (2007) described teaching under adverse circumstances only in terms of teaching large classes; teaching multiple proficiency levels in the same class using ‘English Only’ in the classroom; dealing with the institution, including disciplinary procedures; and dealing with cheating (pp. 245-250). There is an opportunity for the SLA literature to further explore some of the factors negatively affecting the learning-teaching situation. Learning English in captivity is a response to adverse circumstances both physically and emotionally, and is compounded by the lack of adequate facilities, resources, and equipment.

The learning experiences of the Iranian POWs in Iraqi POW camps revealed how even under terribly harsh circumstances they still managed to learn English, with different degrees of proficiency. Zaaghiyaan (1390 /2011), an Iranian ex-POW who was captured as a clergyman fighting alongside his fellow Iranian military forces described how “English classes were secretly held, because Iraqi camp officials would not tolerate watching enemy soldiers being educated” (p. 44).

Saaleminezhaad (1386/2007) agrees with this account of the practice of learning English:

While English classes were in progress for about 20-30 minutes, a couple of our fellow-POWs were exclusively to look out for any Iraqi guards approaching. In case any Iraqi guard was seen approaching our way, they would signal the red light! Now, everybody in the classroom had to busy himself with something; one would hide under the blanket feigning asleep, another would show off being busy sewing a torn shirt, a third perhaps with making the bed, and still others with cleaning the floor. (pp. 158-159)

Given these extremely difficult learning circumstances, it is no surprise to learn that Iranian POWs’ requests for permission to buy English textbooks from their own money were reportedly immediately turned down (Jafari, 1386/2007, p. 130).

### **The Limitations of Learning and Skills Developed**

POW camps are typically environments populated by POWs predominantly speaking the same language. These are places only rarely frequented, or visited, by native speakers of a second language. As we have seen, Iranian POWs in Iraqi camps tended to have to rely on printed and written materials and resources

in learning or teaching English, if indeed they ever had any chance to do so. The English language skill focused on tended to be “reading” because of circumstance. At times, this meant being allowed to study a limited number of textbooks that were distributed by IRCS, or “by reading a state-run newspaper Baghdad Observer” (Baraati, 1387/2008, p. 109). At other times, if available, POWs invested in improving their speaking skills through conversations and dialogues with other fellow-POWs, either through in-class role-play practices or out-of-class follow-up exercises. Occasional talks and interviews with IRCS officials are also reported (Baraati, 1387/2008, p. 195). In very rare cases when Iranian POWs were allowed to watch Iraqi English TV series (either in original English, or with Arabic subtitles) this could also contribute to improving their listening skills in English (Zaaghiyaan, 1390/2011, p. 53).

### **Improvisation of Resources**

Authorities in POW will not generally care about the facilities necessary to be provided to enemy soldiers. The POWs themselves must do their best, where possible, to improvise what they need for both learning and teaching. As far as the Iranian POWs in Iraqi camps are concerned, they appear to be creative in improvising with scant resources in their English classes. Fathi (1388/2009), who spent seven years in Mosul POW camp, remembered that, “for around three years, in our English classes we had no boards to write on. All we had to do was to go outdoors, take a stick and write words or sentences on garden soil” (p. 46). Kalaantari (1382/2003) referred to “taking kitchen utensils and articles of clothing to the class to learn their English equivalents and practice using them” (p. 155). Sketch paintings, newspaper clippings, rough drawings of tools, and other self-made paper-based visual aids were also reportedly used by Iranian POWs in Iraqi camps (Haashemzaadegaan, 1382/2003, pp. 46-47; Miri, 1382/2003, p. 101; Mohammadzaadeh, 1382/2003, p. 78).

### **English Language Learning in Practice**

The literature reviewed in this study reveals that the EFL exercises and/or practices used by Iranian POWs in Iraqi POW camps, whether in EFL classes or outside, were limited in terms of variety. In ordinary settings for the teaching of English as a foreign language, this will involve some pedagogical knowledge and a good grounding in TEFL, on the part of the teachers. Clearly enough, such knowledge and expertise are not readily accessible to POWs. As a result, each individual or group of Iranian POWs had to rely on their own improvisation, innovation, and initiative to contribute to their own English language learning. The exercises used were sometimes designed to reinforce the learning of vocabulary or grammar to which students had already been exposed English classes.

Jabbaari (1373/1994), a POW army officer, remembered every day copying down the spellings of a large number of new English words at intervals in a copybook (p. 71). Rabiee (1385/2006) too refers to his own innovation in compiling paper clippings in which each strip was divided into two parallel columns containing English words and their Persian equivalents (p. 200). The paper strips contained, at times, as many as 150 words. These strips were humorously referred to as EKGs (electrocardiograms) because of their apparent resemblance to EKG rhythm strips. POW EFL learners had to memorize the spelling and Persian equivalents of the English vocabulary in order to be able later to pass the relevant exams. “Sometimes, too much free time made us turn to translating English simplified readers into Persian to avoid forgetting their Persian equivalents. POWs with such translation collections were not few in number” (Nayyeri, 1386/2007, p.85). Role-play dialogues were also reported as being among the favorite practices for the POWs, during breaks, to fill up long days (Nayyeri, 1386/2007, p. 93; Zaaghiyaan, 1390/2011, pp.112-114).

### **EFL Testing for Proficiency**

The Iranian POWs whose EFL learning experiences are surveyed herein reported being tested on their English proficiency in two ways: systematic and unsystematic. Systematic testing is meant by testing measures taken by IRCS personnel who are knowledgeable in designing and administering English test items. According to Saaleminezhaad (1386/2007), IRCS English tests/quizzes included written multiple-choice tests of vocabulary or grammar based on an educational series entitled *Present Day English* (p. 57). Unsystematic testing measures refer to those cases in which POWs themselves improvised local tests (oral or written) to evaluate whether they had made any progress in learning English. These were developed through extracurricular practices and interpersonal relationships and aimed to both enrich their abundant free time and to reinforce learning the points to which they had been exposed in English classes. This included dialogue rehears-

ing or interviews (Abdullahi, 1384/2005, p. 89; Monsef, 1388/2009, p. 195; Moraadi, 1385/2006, p. 19).

### **Errors and Correction**

In normal, if not favorable, learning-teaching situations, mistakes or errors of EFL learners were corrected either directly (explicitly) or indirectly (implicitly) by an experienced instructor. Errors in listening, speaking, reading or writing can be readily tracked, noted and corrected. In adverse learning-teaching situations, such as our case of Iranian POWs, however, things are different. There were very few, if any, well-qualified English language teachers who were able to provide appropriate feedback to the learners' performance as far as phonological, lexical, pragmatic, developmental, or global errors were concerned. The scarcity of skilled teachers in Iraqi POW camps meant that Iranian POWs had to find their own ways to help themselves in correcting faulty items.

Self-correction was among the first solutions. Pourzahmat (1386/2007) explained:

In my daily encounters with IRCS personnel, in case I felt any miscommunication and/or misinterpretation caused by my own broken English (signaled by a mischievous smile, or a grin of an addressee!), I turned to my Hayyem English-Persian dictionary to know about the correct pronunciation or meaning/equivalent of a vocabulary item. In such cases, to help myself avoid getting stuck in further problems, I would start writing the correct items as many times as possible, in an attempt not to forget its meaning anymore. (p. 115)

As for the other category of mistakes and errors by Iranian POWs in the English classes taught by either Iranian POWs or by IRCS personnel, teacher correction was a normal routine (Baraati, 1387/2008, p. 332; Nayyeri, 1386/2007, p. 18;). Peer-correction too was a practice not infrequent among Iranian POWs (Jabbaari, 1373/1994, p. 72; Rajaei, 1385/2006, pp. 920–925). Nonetheless, an anecdotal narrative accounting for a peer-induced error may also deserve attention:

Whenever IRCS personnel visited our POW camps, there was always a Mrs. Nightingale with them. She was in charge of delivering letters to and from our families. Any time she met us, she would give two sheets of paper to each POW on which one could write a letter to his family. I remember once I decided to get more sheets of paper from Mrs. Nightingale, but didn't know how to express myself in English. A fellow POW instructed me as to what and how to say it in English. I memorized the sentence and on Mrs. Nightingale arrival, went to her and based on my friend's instruction asked her "please, give me a kiss?" "Oh, God, no, no, no!" she replied nervously with a pale face. This left me dumfounded! It took me only minutes to understand that I had made a grave error, intentionally induced by a mischievous fellow POW. (Baraati, 1387/2008, p. 340).

### **English Proficiency on Release**

Not all Iranian POWs in Iraqi prison camps spent the same period in the camps. Some were there only for a period of months, however the majority others had to stay for as many as eight years. Given their differing prior English proficiency (if any) on captivity, it is interesting to learn of their English proficiency on release, in particular, since the learning environments in which they were exposed to English were typically non-professional and informal. Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive evaluation study available to allow us to gauge proficiency, the literature suggests that Iranian POWs, by and large, improved in their English proficiency. As a result of their personal endeavors in learning English, some Iranian POWs attained sufficient proficiency to read English texts at their disposal fluently, some managed to improve in oral fluency (in particular in English for survival purposes in a prison camp), and still a third category is claimed to have accomplished capabilities multi-lingually therein (Miri, 1382/2002; Mohammadzaadeh, 1382/2002; Saalempour, 1385/2005). Among these, a few proved so fluent in English (as well as in French and/or Italian) that they were requested by IRCS authorities in camps to function as their intermediary interpreters. "There were a few guys among us who on their release from Iraqi camps spoke foreign (European?) languages as fluently as the native speakers" (Monsef, 1388/2009, p. 195). Rajaei added (1385/2005) that "Some of our fellow-POWs were illiterate when taken captive but turned out to be so fluent in English later that they appeared on the stage performing English plays" (p. 926). Zibaafar (1385/2006) claimed:



During years of captivity, most of us learned English with no need to return to anybody for translating. Many could independently go to the IRCS personnel communicative in English, French or other languages. In fact, for some of our more fluent POWs, talking to Red Cross personnel was similar to taking part in a dialogue rehearsal practice. (p. 77)

Haashemzaadegaan (1382/2003) made a similar claim to the effect that “I myself learned English in Iraqi POW camps and had just started learning Italian when the tiring years of captivity came to an end” (p. 96).

### **Understanding the Stories: Reflecting on Key Themes**

To find a convincing answer to our first research question in respect of the motives of the Iranian ex-POWs in learning English, it is clear from the analysis of the literature above that they learned English as a foreign language for a variety of purposes, including instrumental motives. One former POW referred to the “internal motives which drive people to communicate, out of curiosity, with unknown others” (Karaki, 1377/1998, p. 164). Another considered learning English as an attempt to entertain himself, perhaps to avoid, or counter psychological stress and/or depression (Goodarzi, 1380/2001, p. 117). For still another, Yektaaei, (1370/1991, p. 90), the motive to learn English was to enrich those long hours of time which might otherwise be spent in vain. Yet, another POW spoke of the importance of EFL due to its “potential future use after the likely freedom” (Rahmaaniaan, 1376/1990, p. 63).

As to our second research question which sought to understand the ways in which Iranians ex-POWs learned EFL, the literature revealed that their EFL teachers were non-professionals, none being identified as a former teacher before being taken captive. The teaching/learning resources for the Iranian POWs were minimally provided, and no specific administrative office, or military unit, is named as having been responsible for education. Their classroom environments were typically far from desirable. In addition, the EFL skill, that was primarily cultivated was, unsurprisingly, that of reading; very few, if any, wrote of the other EFL skills such as listening, speaking, and/or writing. Furthermore, the teaching aids with which they were provided were non-existent not even a blackboard to write on. The exercises and practices in which they therefore engaged were mostly the results of their own improvisation and/or innovations and the EFL testing techniques for Iranian POWs to which they were exposed were understandably a limited number of unsystematic ones. Finally, their errors in EFL classes did not typically receive professional feedback from qualified instructors to help improve learning English but were ad hoc, self-correction, from peers, and occasionally from professionals.

As far as the answer to the third research question is concerned, the literature indicates that Iranian POWs, by and large, improved in their English proficiency. Indeed, some of these POWs managed to improve their EFL skills sufficiently to be successfully used for social as well as higher education purposes after release from POW camps. Nevertheless, there is no comprehensive data or evaluation study available to justify further generalization about the English proficiency, or fluency, of all, or even the majority, of the Iranian POWs. This next section seeks to further understand the context of learning and what it means to learn in a prisoner of war camp in light of the writings of Maslow and Frankl.

### **Further Reflections and Speculations**

“Becoming a bilingual is a way of life. Every bone and fiber of your being is affected in some way” (Brown, 1980, p. 4). This is particularly so when one is learning a second language as a POW, technically defined as “any person captured or interned by a belligerent power during war” (Joey, 2017), and still more so when one is captured by the military forces of a ruler as aggressive as Iraqi, Saddam Hussein (1937-2006). The learning environment for a POW as described throughout the analysis of the literature above is characterized by deprivation, suffering, hardships, as well as continuous threats and sadness. These are, by themselves, significant impediments to positive change in an individual, as well as stymying social growth and development. These negative, demotivating experiences might seem to render life, including any effort for survival let alone flourishing, meaningless, given the frustrations and misery faced by these prisoners of war. It is difficult to imagine how individuals living under such harsh conditions could act dynamically, optimistically, and even with sanguinity in matters as complex and time-consuming as foreign language learning. However, these particular Iranian POWs seem to have changed, in one way or another, threats into opportunities through both their own positive attitudes and/or motivations. They might be said to be what Maslow (1970) referred

to as “self-actualizers” (p. 150), because their most conspicuous characteristic was full use and exploitation of all their talents, capabilities, and potentials to accomplish a task as demanding as foreign language learning. But so too Frankl’s (1984) quest to find meaning in suffering help us to understand how and why people turned to such pursuits:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the unique human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one’s predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation—just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer—we are to change ourselves. (p. 135)

What was it that pushed Iranian POWs to turn the meagre resources at their disposal in Iraqi POW camps into fruitful learning contexts for their own benefits and personality growth? In some ways, their approach expresses Freire’s desire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) in which he is said to have “wanted all students to become instruments of their own empowerment” (Brown, 2014, p. 90).

It is in fact in an environment as frustrating, stressful and disturbing as the POW camps of an authoritarian regime as that of Saddam Hussein where the performance of the Iranian POWs (or any other similar group across the world) in learning a second language gains particular significance. During those years in captivity characterized by widespread hostilities and atrocities, it was only the few who turned to EFL as a cross-cultural activity, perhaps as an attempt to survive and overcome their appalling conditions there. Such individuals might be seen as reminiscent of those referred to as “self-actualizers” by Maslow (1970), as mentioned above. Maslow had argued for two distinct categories of needs; *deficiency* needs and *being* needs. The first category of needs is directly related to an individual’s psychological and/or biological needs, e.g. food, water, sleep, the absence of pain, the need for security, belonging, and self-esteem. However, by the *being* needs, Maslow meant cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, as well as self-actualization. For him, self-actualizing individuals are those who realize their full potentials, or to be exact “they are ruled by the laws of their own character rather than the rules by the society” (Maslow, 1970, p. 174). These POWs were of the few whose enthusiasm for achieving higher goals helped them achieve considerable educational ends, despite their routine everyday hardships, and their own deficiency needs.

A review of the literature intimated that these Iranian POWs did everything possible to learn English or improve their proficiency in it, i.e., attempts to realize or actualize their full potentials or capabilities in that regard, and were, in many ways, prime examples of autodidacts, self-tutors, and/or self-taught POW language learners. However, significant difference from Maslow’s theory is that where he postulated that realization of higher level needs was contingent upon meeting the needs at the lower levels of hierarchy of needs, these EFLs (English as a Foreign Language Learners) demonstrated that they could both learn and improve their English, despite being deprived of their basic deficiency needs due to living in the harsh conditions of living in POW camps. This follows Engler (2009) and Burger (1986) who have called for a modification, or reformulation in Maslow’s theory, as far as human personality growth and development are concerned. This is where Maslow’s framework might also be supplemented by Frankl’s conception of logotherapy.

### **Iranian POWs as Self-Logotherapists**

A survivor of Auschwitz, a concentration and extermination camp during World War II, internationally known psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1905-1997) was most impressed with the meaningfulness that could be found in suffering itself (Engler, 2009, p. 399). Frankl developed a revolutionary approach to psychiatry called logotherapy. The central tenet in Frankl’s logotherapy is the belief that man’s primary motivational force is his search for meaning. As a theory, as well as a therapeutic technique, “logotherapy” regards its purpose as helping the patient to find meaning in his life (Frankl, 1984, p. 125).

Through this lens we can come to understand what life in a camp involves. This is important because logotherapy arose from Frankl’s own experiences of being in a concentration camp. The detailed accounts in the data above testify to the hardships and agonies experienced by such POWs, concomitant with a strong desire to have a cause/causes to survive for. However, one difference, amongst many, is that nobody in the Iraqi POW camps was there to tell them what to do to make the most of time. It appears that as time passed,

these Iranian POWs gradually tried to find ways to help themselves feel less depressed and more dynamic in captivity. This we may refer to as attempts at self-logotherapy. In this, these POWs were similar to those translators in Iranian jails described by Emam Roodband (2016), as they were being self-taught. In another respect, their educational relationships in POW camps parallels those American prisoners in Illinois represented by Olinger, Bishop, and Cabrales et al. (2012) where they describe collaborations between the prisoner teachers and prisoner English language learners. Iranian POWs appear to have left no stones unturned in order to enrich their long hours of idleness, by learning a foreign language such as English. Why? A range of reasons are vividly mentioned in the literature from desiring to communicate with unknown others, to entertain oneself with a pastime or hobby, to avoid psychological stress and/or depression, to enrich time otherwise wasted, to read English newspapers, and also to foster any potential future use, and so forth. All of these ways of engaging with the language helped to create meaning for life and supported survival in agonizing circumstances. We might suggest that these POWs functionally turned out to be clients and logotherapists for themselves, even if they don't name this themselves.

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