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Research Paper

Exploring Resistance to Learning English among Iranian non-English-major PhD Students: A Mixed-methods Study

Mahsa Hedayatzade

Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Zohreh Nafissi¹

Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Leila Tajik

Associate Professor, Department of English, Faculty of Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Abstract

One crucial challenge in higher education is the resistance exhibited by Iranian PhD students, those not majoring in English, to learning the language. Using a collaborative mixed-methods approach, this study investigates the reasons for this resistance and proposes interventions to counter it. The research involved interviews with 263 PhD students and 29 EFL teachers and collecting essays, questionnaires, and focus group discussions. Thematic Analysis, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Correlation Coefficients, and MANOVA were employed for the analysis. The results, which reveal that resistance is rooted in demotivation, the absence of a research mindset, and negative past experiences, underscore the comprehensive nature of this study. However, the study's findings also offer a ray of hope. They underscore the transformative potential of English in unlocking career opportunities and advancing research, thereby boosting motivation. The implications are as follows: integrating English into academic tasks, fostering global

¹ Corresponding author: z.nafisi@alzahra.ac.ir

perspectives, and enhancing EAP pedagogy. Moreover, the study recommends in-service training for EAP educators, a step that could significantly empower university instructors, institutional policymakers, and educational planners in their efforts to address resistance in Iranian higher education.

Keywords: *Resistance; Resistance to learning English; English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Curriculum Innovation; Iranian EFL Context*

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1. Introduction

Due to English's status as a global lingua franca used widely for international communication and scholarly discourse (Deng et al., 2023), almost all students and educational centers worldwide strive to learn and teach English for purposes such as communication, translation, and accessing scholarly publications, either mandatorily or voluntarily (Huang, 2018).

This becomes increasingly important in graduate studies, where students must stay current with the latest international research and actively participate in scientific seminars. Despite this global necessity, in many countries where English is not the native language, the language may hold limited appeal for learners (Jenkins, 2013). Moreover, because English is typically offered through compulsory courses that students must pass to obtain certificates, many learners become demotivated, lose interest, and eventually exhibit resistance (Irwin et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Yazan, 2023). Consequently, the drop-out rates in such courses increase, and the student's level of

academic attainment decreases (Jing, 2006; Steils, 2013). The urgency of this issue necessitates the development of practical solutions to enhance engagement and reduce resistance.

The term "resistance" has been used in many different contexts and conditions. According to Hollander and Einwohner (2004), it describes actions and behaviors at various levels of human social life, from the individual to the collective and institutional, and in settings such as political systems, education, entertainment, literature, and the workplace. Pu and Xu (2022) described resistance as a common issue in academic discourse socialization, especially for learners who study in their second language. Tolman and Kremling (2017) pointed to resistance as a motivational state in which students reject learning opportunities. Similarly, Pu and Xu (2022) stated that "resistance refers to learners' refusal to accept or comply with certain norms of linguistic and cultural practice in a target community" (p. 2). In line with this, Soltanian et al. (2019) described resistance as a lack of engagement in classroom language practices, which can manifest as absenteeism, lack of participation, or disruptive behavior. Moreover, according to Norton (2013), students exhibit avoidance by distancing themselves and preferring to remain aloof and unengaged. Furthermore, Garcia (2022) treated resistance to language learning as a collection of attitudes or oppositions that arise throughout language learning, with a lack of sufficient progress in language proficiency often being a contributing factor. To conclude, Tao and Gao (2021)

argue that resistance to learning English reflects learners' passivity and encourages their unwillingness to learn English.

In educational contexts, learner resistance can be interpreted both negatively and positively. Negatively, resistance is perceived as a barrier hindering effective teaching and learning. However, it can also be viewed as an active response leading to transformation, autonomy, and meaningful action (Giroux, 2001; Illeris, 2007). Steils (2013) states that resistance can arise from various factors, including ambiguity, anxiety, miscommunication, or ineffective interaction among learners from diverse contexts, age groups, and academic disciplines. In the specific context of Iran, many doctoral students from non-English-major disciplines exhibit resistance toward learning English, often delaying engagement until required by standardized tests such as the ones conducted by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT), Ministry of Culture and Higher Education (MCHE), Test of Language by the Iranian Measurement Organization (TOLIMO), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The current study examines the underlying causes of Iranian non-English-major PhD students' resistance to learning English and proposes practical solutions to address this significant educational challenge at the national level, focusing on the transformative potential of resistance.

Investigating the underlying reasons for learner resistance necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its multidimensional nature.

Resistance is a complex phenomenon shaped not only by the content taught but also by the instructional methods and learning environments (Huang, 2018). When learners perceive instructional practices as overly demanding or disconnected from their abilities and expectations, they may exhibit resistance behaviors, such as avoidance, disengagement, or active opposition (Khairallah et al., 2020). Additionally, resistance can emerge in response to educational reforms or changes in instructional approaches that challenge learners' existing habits, comfort zones, or perceived competencies (Brodie, 2010). From a more global viewpoint, learner resistance includes sociocultural and sociopolitical layers of meaning and implication since cultural norms, institutional practices, topography of power, and social interaction shape learners' attitudes and actual conduct. For instance, cultural norms may dictate the value placed on English proficiency, institutional practices may influence the methods of English instruction, power dynamics may affect students' confidence in their ability to learn English, and social interaction may determine the level of support students receive in their language learning journey. This understanding of resistance does not entail a one-off event but is context-dependent, dynamic, and relational (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016). Therefore, a thorough understanding of resistance is necessary to study learners' sociocultural and socio-political contexts, which greatly influence their willingness and ability to engage in the learning process (Jing, 2006; Sakui & Cowie, 2008; Salimi & Rashidi, 2024; Xu et al., 2023). Understanding these complex factors can help

educators and politicians pinpoint the source of resistance to engaging learners in academic work and identify more targeted approaches to helping them succeed academically.

In general terms, many reasons hint at why some resistance to learning English exists. Tao and Gao (2021) note that learning avoidance is usually caused by student passiveness and unwillingness to participate in the learning process. They lack motivation because they feel that English is irrelevant to their personal lives and professional aspirations. Resistance can also be rooted in anxiety and worries about making errors in a foreign language (Horwitz, 2010). Furthermore, if the teaching methods and materials do not match the learners' preferences or cultural backgrounds, the learners can be further disengaged (Al-Issa, 2005, Wuntu et al., 2024). Lastly, negative past experiences in learning English can establish a fixed mindset for learners who perceive that they cannot succeed in learning the language (Dweck, 2006).

The multifaceted nature of learner resistance makes it challenging to understand. Various factors—including learners' age, gender, nationality, cultural background, and economic and social conditions—play a role. Different studies have focused on single or multiple aspects of this phenomenon. For instance, Hiemstra and Brockett (1994) identified self-concept and self-awareness as causes of learner resistance. Similarly, Joseph and Joy (2019) noted that signs of resistance include non-acceptance of new teaching formats and an

unwillingness to put in extra effort. In addition, Stover and Holland (2018) found that higher student satisfaction levels and fewer negative comments correlated with reduced resistance to learning. Huang (2018) indicated that resistance is more concerned with how English is taught than what is taught. Furthermore, Teng (2019) highlighted that a learner's identity influences their investment in learning English. Additionally, Wang and Pan (2022) demonstrated that cross-cultural communication problems, resistance to innovation, and low student interest are significantly associated with low motivation.

1.1 Research Questions

Considering the study's objectives, the researcher posed the following research questions:

1. What factors contribute to Iranian PhD students' resistance to learning EFL from the students' perspectives?
2. What factors contribute to Iranian PhD students' resistance to learning EFL from the instructors' perspectives?
3. What factors assist Iranian PhD students in overcoming resistance to learning EFL from the students' perspectives?
4. What factors assist Iranian PhD students in overcoming resistance to learning EFL from the instructors' perspectives?

2. Literature Review

With the globalization of English and its use as a lingua franca, education and business sectors have increasingly adopted English, and cross-cultural communication has emerged as a critical need (Fomenko et al., 2020; Gardner, 2020). Such communication necessitates cultural exchanges in which the most significant barrier is mastering English and the associated cultural norms (Apriyanti, 2018; Chien et al., 2021; Grujić & Krneta, 2018). Policymakers have made English compulsory in many parts of the world to help students become familiar with the language and overcome educational barriers. Despite these efforts, many students struggle to learn English and resist. In this regard, Donnery (2022) found that crowded classrooms and poor learning environments are responsible for student resistance. Badrkoohi (2018) attributed resistance to demotivation, and Indawati (2021) pointed to a lack of interest as a source of resistance. The literature also suggests that decreased motivation leads to lower student performance (Elsheikh Hago Elmahdi et al., 2024; Ghafournia & Farhadian, 2018; Pincay et al., 2019; Szabó et al., 2020). Moreover, resistance has been linked to socioeconomic status (Kormos & Kiddle, 2013). Another potential cause of resistance lies in personality traits (De Raad, 1996; Chamorro-Premuzic & Furnham, 2003; Diener & Lucas, 2021). Based on this background, the related literature is reviewed below.

2.1 Resistance

Many scholars have attempted to clarify "resistance" within education theoretically. For example, Pu and Xu (2022) framed resistance as the learners' conscious refusal to conform to or align themselves with existing linguistic and cultural provisions in the target language community (p. 2). Doyle (2008) similarly noted that resistance is one of the more prominent forms of instructors' work and that its foothold in the teaching and learning dynamic is a heavy burden on the process (p. 17). Weimer (2013) wrote a chapter on resistance to learning in her influential text on learner-centered teaching. She suggested four broad underlying reasons for students' resistance: first, the collision of learner-centered approaches with students' prior experience of teaching (typically teacher-centered instruction) creates disconnect and discomfort that may contribute to resistance to learner-centered approaches; second, active learning may be regarded as more taxing and intense than traditional passive listening (lecturing) approaches to learning; third, students may perceive learner-centered activities and methods as irrelevant or untethered from the education that they are paying for; and fourth, learner-centered education places the burden of responsibility and accountability for learning squarely on the shoulders of students, which can be stress-inducing. Expanding on this model, Tolman and Kremling (2017) conceptualized student resistance as a motivational state that emerges from systemic problems within the educational context. They claimed that being aware of different forms of student resistance can be a valuable sign,

which can guide educators to look for systemic variables to improve the conditions for learning (p. 3).

Resistance is often equated with student misbehavior (Kearney & Plax, 1992); however, resistant behaviors may be termed both productive and unproductive, countering previous assumptions. Moreover, Tolman and Kremling (2017) postulated that resistance is a volitional state, not merely a stable trait of an individual student. McVeigh (2002) identified various types of resistance, including absenteeism, indifference, and silence. According to Escandon (2004), resistance could be categorized into patterns, for instance, absenteeism, absent-mindedness, no or limited responses, indifference or rude behaviors, (and) physical arrangement problems in the classroom.

2.2 Resistance in EFL Contexts

In EFL contexts, resistance can manifest in various ways and for various reasons. Huang (2018) reported that learner resistance to certain English teaching practices stems from unhelpful curricula, ineffective teaching methods, and unsupportive learning contexts. For instance, Huang's participants in Taiwan preferred dialogic instruction over a monologic lecture style; when instruction was purely monologic, students displayed resistant behaviors such as disengaging (spacing out), using smartphones, chatting, or being absent from class. In another study, Joseph and Joy (2019) examined Indian engineering

students and found signs of resistance, including fear and shyness in front of peers, rejection of new teaching methods, and unwillingness to exert extra effort; these behaviors were primarily attributed to negative attitudes toward language learning. Moreover, Stover and Holland (2018) observed that although students' final grades improved in a collaborative flipped classroom design, their resistance level initially increased. By applying Tolman and Kremling's (2017) Integrated Model of Student Resistance (IMSR) as a guideline, the instructor in that study was able to redesign the course to significantly reduce student resistance, as evidenced by higher community of inquiry scores, greater satisfaction, and fewer negative comments.

Khairallah et al. (2020) conducted qualitative research on Lebanese students' resistance to autonomous learning activities in an English course. They found that students resisted during collaborative learning, metacognitive activities, and assessment procedures and were reluctant to use available learning materials independently. Similarly, Wang and Pan (2022), using questionnaires in a Chinese context, showed that resistance to pedagogical innovation, cross-cultural communication problems, and low student interest were all positively associated with student demotivation.

Similarly, Steils (2013) listed counterproductive actions as avoiding effort, appeasing teachers, and concentrating just on passing tests. The complexity of learner resistance necessitates evaluations encompassing observable actions and underlying causes (Leo, 2021).

Even though these attitudinal and behavioral components help the researcher define and find resistant acts, learner resistance is complex.

Two significant factors behind resistance to learning are opposition and agency. According to Courpasson and Vallas (2016) and Trang and Baldauf (2007), emphasis on human capability shows that opposition is an empowering factor rather than a constrictive one. The agentive component of resistance further alters the macro-societal reproduction of the structuralists (Lan, 2020). Instead, the agency is emphasized in cultural resistance and appropriation because it generates and reproduces structure (Giddens, 1984).

As with other resistance markers, contextual and relational aspects of learner resistance emphasize the need to consider sociocultural and social factors when interpreting resistance behavior (Camangian & Cariaga, 2022; Huang, 2018). Jing (2006) attributes student resistance to metacognitive education in Chinese universities to an exam-oriented culture characterized by social and institutional pressures at the macro level and learning to pass exams at the micro level.

Relatedly, the increase in EFL learners' resistance to English instruction is complex and multifaceted, and it is affected by diverse behaviors derived from the overarching pedagogical methods, learners' attitudes, institutional structures, and sociocultural conditions. The studies reviewed here could, then, be seen to show consistently that resistance manifests not simply as an adverse or

opposite reaction to poor teaching practices, unreasonable demands, or useless curricula but also emerges as a form of student agency and empowerment. As both the obstacle to and instigator of change, this awareness of resistance emphasizes the need to move away from mainstream, Transnational Models of Education to teaching and curriculum relevant to students with diverse backgrounds and experiences. In doing so, it is hoped that more significant consideration of how learner resistance is formed about context, agency, and relationality may better inform educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers in developing more responsive, inclusive, and supportive learning environments and practices that may mitigate resistance and ultimately enhance learner engagement and achievement.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The current study employed a comprehensive, sequential exploratory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Creswell, 2021) with a qualitative and a quantitative phase. Data was meticulously collected from students' reflective essays and semi-structured interviews with PhD students and their EFL instructors. We systematically summarized each participant's responses, grouping common concepts and developing codes that encapsulated recurring themes around learner resistance. Thematic analysis revealed deeper descriptive

themes indicative of underlying causes and correlating factors as the data was iteratively coded and categorized. The second quantitative phase utilized a non-experimental correlational approach (Field, 2018) that found significant relationships among the described variables: resistance to learning English, socioeconomic status, and personality traits. This phase aimed to measure and quantify the kind and strength of an association between variables without any experimental manipulation of variables.

3.2 Participants

Primarily, to develop the interview protocol and construct the Resistance to Learning English (RTLE) inventory, 20 key informants (10 non-English-major PhD candidates and 10 EFL instructors from different state universities in Tehran) were selected via random sampling. Random sampling was employed to avoid researcher bias, ensuring that each potential participant had an equal chance of being included, enhancing the representativeness and credibility of initial qualitative data. The perspectives of these informants were utilized to establish a preliminary understanding of resistance patterns among non-English-major students, aiding in the construction of the inventory for subsequent data collection and generating relevant prompts for focus group discussions.

Secondly, a systematic random sampling method was used to select potential participants from 300 PhD students at different universities

in Tehran. To ensure a diverse, representative population, 97 students from Engineering, 80 from Basic Sciences, and 86 from Humanities were included (n = 263; 143 male and 120 female; age 27–53). A systematic random sampling method was purposely used to select a sample based on academic disciplines to ensure that the respective disciplines were proportionately represented; this resulted in improved generalizability and reliability of the quantitative findings obtained from the constructed questionnaire.

Thirdly, purposeful sampling was used to identify EFL university instructors (all holding PhD degrees) experienced in teaching EAP and/or general English courses until no new information emerged, achieving data saturation. As a result, 20 EFL instructors, chosen for their specialized knowledge and direct pedagogical experience, participated in focus group discussions. Their insights, being expert-driven, provided rich, relevant, and credible information into the significant factors behind resistance to learning English among PhD students and feasible solutions, thereby further strengthening the depth and applicability of the study's findings.

3.3 Instrumentation

The research employed multiple instruments to ensure thorough exploration and robust findings regarding resistance to learning English among non-English-major PhD students. The semi-structured interviews provided rich qualitative data, enabling deep exploration of

individual perceptions and nuanced resistance factors from participants' perspectives. The three-part essay complemented the interviews by allowing PhD students to express personal narratives and reflect deeply on their experiences related to resistance to learning English. A researcher-developed and validated Resistance to Learning English (RTLE) Inventory facilitated quantitative data collection, assessing the extent and contributing factors of resistance across a broader population, thus strengthening generalizability. Moreover, focus group discussions (FGDs) with expert informants offered thick qualitative insights, expert validation, and actionable recommendations to reduce resistance. The Stanford Four Facet Socioeconomic Status Questionnaire (Adler et al., 2000) was used to collect representative demographic factors, providing an opportunity to analyze how limited socioeconomic status factors may play a role in resistance behaviors. This instrument was particularly useful in understanding the influence of socioeconomic status on resistance to learning English.

3.3.1 In-depth Interviews:

The researcher developed a seven-item interview guide based on a thorough literature review, preliminary interviews, and discussions with experts (10 EFL instructors who taught English to PhD students). Interviews were conducted with 10 PhD candidates and 10 EFL instructors at universities in Tehran, gathering their views on significant factors leading to resistance to learning English among

PhD students and likely solutions to address this issue. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, categorized, and analyzed for the researcher's study. The interview protocol included questions exploring the participants' demographic information (such as age, gender, academic background, and English proficiency level), their personal experiences with learning English, whether they had ever felt resistant to engaging in English language learning, and if so, the perceived reasons behind that resistance—such as cultural, institutional, or instructional factors. PhD students also wrote essays about their learning experiences concerning resistance to learning English. The essay had three sections: one on experiences of learning resistance and its sources, one addressing the possibility of overcoming or coping with resistance to learning English, and one describing the best ways to minimize resistance to learning English.

3.3.2 Resistance to Learning English (RTLE) Inventory:

The RTLE inventory was developed based on a comprehensive literature review, insights from the students' essays, and results from the initial interviews with EFL instructors and PhD candidates. The process of developing the inventory involved a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to generate items. The inventory had two parts: the first covered participant demographics, and the second presented 33 preliminary items. These items were refined based on the initial data collection and analysis, resulting in a final

inventory of 29 items across six components: demotivation, lack of research mindset, previous experiences, personal factors, investment in future jobs, and realizing learning needs.

During a pilot study, the construct validity of the RTLE inventory was examined through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

KMO and Bartlett's Test (Pilot Study)

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.780
	Approx. Chi-Square	23.13.879
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Df	406
	Sig.	.000

The results of KMO for each item further supported the adequacy of sample for each item. All item level KMO indices were higher than .50 (Field, 2018).

The purpose of this pilot study was to test the initial version of the inventory and make necessary adjustments before the main data collection. Two rounds of EFA were conducted. The first round (using Principal Axis Factoring with varimax rotation) identified items that did not load strongly on their intended factors. After removing poorly

loaded items, a second EFA (PAF with varimax or promax rotation as appropriate) was run to confirm the inventory's factor structure. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity showed that the factor analysis was appropriate. The KMO measure value was 0.780, greater than the minimum requirement of 0.60 (Field, 2018). Bartlett's test was significant ($\chi^2(406) = 2313.87, p < .05$), showing that the correlation matrix was factorable. This is evidenced by all reliability indices (e.g., Cronbach's alpha for individual items) being above 0.70, which implied that the RTLE inventory and its components reached acceptable reliability (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009; Fryer et al., 2018; George & Mallery, 2020; Tseng et al., 2006).

3.3.3 Focus Group Discussions

Twenty instructors teaching English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and General English to PhD candidates participated in the focus group discussions in the form of a semi-structured interview using the modified version of the initial interview guide used in the study. The informants were interviewed regarding their perceptions of significant factors (i.e., demotivation, needs or lack of needs, previous experiences, research mindset, future jobs, and personal interests) connected with resistance to learning sources or solutions. In addition, actions that the students and educational settings could take to enhance the EFL learning motivation of the PhD candidates were pursued through the FGDs.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data for the current study were collected using a three-phase sequential exploratory mixed-methods design consisting of an initial qualitative phase, followed by a quantitative phase, and concluding with a qualitative phase. Phase I: In-depth interviews. As the first qualitative phase, Ph.D. students of EFL from several universities in Tehran were selected to examine underlying factors influencing resistance to English learning and discuss possible solutions. Furthermore, retrospective data were collected using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) for deeper reflection on those critical moments presumed to influence the learners' resistance. The quantitative phase involved a sample of 300 randomly selected PhD students who were assessed on the Resistance to Learning English (RTLE) inventory, Socioeconomic Status (SES) questionnaire (Adler et al., 2000), and a Personality Trait questionnaire. In addition, 50 RTE inventories were collected from EAP instructors at a university. The last qualitative phase involved conducting Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with 20 experienced EFL instructors to triangulate earlier findings, furnishing additional understanding of some causes of learners' resistance and possible remedial strategies.

3.5 Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained through the initial interviews and reflective essays were analyzed through thematic analysis for the

factors of resistance to learning English among Iranian PhD research from both students' and instructors' perspectives. Interviews were transcribed and systematically summarized, coded, and thematically categorized into common themes, including negative prior experiences, demotivator perspectives, and a lack of research-oriented mindset. Multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) analyses were conducted quantitatively based on responses to the Resistance to Learning English (RTLE) inventory administered to students and instructors. These analyses validated and extended the qualitative findings, identifying major resistance determinants such as negative prior experiences, low motivation levels, and perceived limited relevance of English. Lastly, to identify factors that are helping the students overcome resistance, more MANOVAs and analysis of written focus group discussions with teachers were conducted to elicit motivation factors [such as] regarding the necessity of using English for future jobs, recognizing their own learning needs, and developing inner interest.

4. Results

The study examined the reasons for resistance to learning English among Iranian PhD students and the ways to deal with this resistance. It was a collaborative effort based on the perspectives of both the university instructors and the PhD candidates. Therefore, the analyzed data are structured from the perspective of the research

questions, highlighting the collective effort of both groups in addressing this issue.

RQ1: Which factors cause resistance to learning English in Iranian PhD students (from the student's perspective)?

The analysis of the PhD students' interview data and essays revealed six significant themes underlying their resistance. These themes, along with 33 specific notions (selective codes) identified through thematic analysis, provide a unique perspective on the resistance factors. In line with Maxwell (2008), themes were coded and analysed using frequency count. Hence, the category of the main themes of the ideas, open coding (generally related views), and axial coding (specific issues) based on the qualitative data were reported. This provided the researcher with some information regarding the components of the RTLE inventory and specified the factors contributing to resistance. Table 2 below shows the main themes and sample codes that formed the RTLE Inventory.

Table 2

Themes and Notions of RTLE Inventory based on Interviews and the Three-part Essay

Themes	(Selected excerpts)
	1. My English teachers in high school did not

	make me interested in English.
Previous Experiences	2.I could learn English as a continuous activity throughout my education.
	3.I did not find the English classes informative and exciting.
	4.The English course books used in high school and university could have been more interesting.
	5.I found learning English a challenging and time-consuming activity.
	6.I attended English classes very eagerly and could learn a lot at the university.
Personal Factors	7.I am interested in using English in my job

environment.

8.I am fond of learning my content courses in English.

9.I use the original textbooks written in English about my major.

I read articles written in English in my major.

I take part in seminars and webinars held in English in my major.

I am not satisfied with the quality of English courses provided by my university.

I am not satisfied with how English is taught to the students in the EAP courses.

**Demotivatio
n**

I am not satisfied with the English classroom atmosphere provided by the university.

I am not satisfied with how English is taught to the students in the general English courses.

I do not like mechanical

	<p>English provided by institutions or universities.</p>
	<p>I will not recommend my friends to learn English as it is not helpful in my job.</p>
	<p>I think I can use English to find job opportunities in promising companies in the future.</p>
<p>Investment in Future Jobs</p>	<p>I think mastery of English will help me develop a high-quality dissertation.</p>
	<p>I think my English language ability will help me publish articles in English and become famous.</p>
	<p>If I know English well, I can find a teaching job at a good university overseas.</p>
	<p>Learning English is a lifelong learning activity and provides me with many social values.</p>
<p>Realizing Needs for Learning</p>	<p>I need English to read new articles in my major and learn from them.</p>
	<p>I need English to read the latest textbooks in my major.</p>

	<p>I need English to translate new findings in my major into Farsi.</p>
	<p>I need English to communicate with other people working on my major at the international level.</p>
	<p>I need to learn English to watch films and clips about scientific issues.</p>
Research Mindset	<p>I use English to write articles and publish them in accredited journals.</p>
	<p>I use English to take part in seminars and conferences held overseas.</p>
	<p>I use English in distance learning classes, which are held virtually.</p>
	<p>I take part in joint venture research activities and projects with foreign students.</p>
	<p>I use English to exchange emails with international scientists.</p>
	<p>I use English to connect with foreign companies and universities.</p>

Based on the analysis summarized in Table 2, the six themes identified were previous experiences, personal factors (mainly a lack of perceived need for English), demotivation, investment in future jobs, realizing the need for learning, and a robust research mindset, which is crucial in the field of English language education.

Additionally, to back up the data from the qualitative section of the study, it should be added that data collected through the RTLE inventory and analyzed using MANOVA and quantitative results showed similar patterns. Previous experiences ($M = 8.80$) were again identified as the most potent resistance factor, followed by lack of research mindset ($M = 7.87$) and demotivation ($M = 6.70$). Students significantly rated previous experiences higher than lack of research mindset and demotivation ($p < .05$). They also indicated that lack of research mindset was significantly more potent than demotivation ($p < .05$).

RQ2: What factors contribute to Iranian PhD students' resistance to learning EFL from the instructors' perspectives?

The instructors' views (collected via FGDs) were crucial in identifying the resistance factors. The discussion prompts (FGD items 1 to 3) addressed the compulsory English proficiency test for PhD students, the presence of conscious resistance among these students, and the instructors' perceptions of the reasons behind this resistance.

Item 1 (About the compulsory English proficiency test for PhD candidates): Most instructors felt that the test, in its current form, is not an accurate measure of the students' true language proficiency. For example:

Instructor 1: "This test does not measure the real language proficiency of PhD candidates."

Instructor 2: "If a comprehensive standard test like IELTS or TOEFL were administered before students start the PhD, it could indicate their EFL knowledge and help improve their scientific abilities. However, the current test is not fulfilling that role."

Instructor 3: "This exam has become a compulsory hurdle and does not help PhD candidates' scientific development."

Instructor 4: "Passing the test does not mean my PhD students can use English — they still struggle with speaking, writing an article, or even reading a book without help."

The instructors implied that focusing on passing a compulsory test might contribute to resistance, as students see English as a requirement rather than a valuable skill.

Item 2 (On the existence of conscious resistance among non-English-major PhD students): Instructors unanimously agreed that such resistance is prevalent. They observed that:

Instructor 1: "Students are unsatisfied with how English is taught in the EAP and general English courses."

Instructor 2: "Students are not satisfied with the atmosphere of the English classroom provided by the university."

Instructor 3: "Most PhD students do not attend English classes eagerly and cannot learn much at the university."

These comments suggest that students' dissatisfaction with teaching methods and classroom environment contributes to an intentional disengagement from English learning.

Item 3 (Reasons for the resistance, as perceived by instructors):
Instructors identified a range of causes, providing a comprehensive view of the issue:

Instructor 1: "They do not have good memories of their English classes in high school or their undergraduate EFL classes." (Pointing to negative past experiences)

Instructor 2: "Only a few of my PhD students are interested in writing academic papers or improving their English—most just want to get by." (Indicating lack of intrinsic motivation or interest)

Instructor 3: "Many students feel that English is not directly relevant to their research or career in our local context, so they do not invest time in it." (Perceived irrelevance)

Instructor 4: "They often fear making mistakes and being judged, so they avoid participating in English." (Anxiety and fear as barriers)

From the instructors' perspective, previous negative experiences, lack of motivation, perceived irrelevance of English, and language anxiety are significant factors contributing to student resistance.

Additionally, according to the quantitative data collected through the RTLE inventory and analyzed using MANOVA, instructors considered previous negative experiences ($M = 7.76$) as the most decisive factor contributing to PhD students' resistance to learning English. This was significantly stronger than lack of research mindset ($M = 6.66$) and demotivation ($M = 5.82$) ($p < .05$).

RQ3: What factors contribute to PhD students' resistance to learning EFL from the students' perspectives?

This question was addressed by examining the PhD students' direct accounts (from interviews and essays) of why they resist learning English. The following quotes illustrate their perspectives, which are invaluable in understanding the resistance factors.

Student 1: "When an unfamiliar language, which already causes stress, is combined with exams and pressure, all we get from this education is fear and anxiety. Our only goal becomes just passing the course." (Emphasizing that the way English is taught and tested creates fear rather than learning)

Student 2: "I know English is important, but I am so busy with my research and courses that learning English feels like an extra burden."
(Highlighting time constraints and competing priorities)

Student 3: "We are told English is crucial, but apart from passing an exam, I do not see immediate benefits, so I keep postponing it."
(Perceived lack of immediate reward or relevance)

Student 4: "My experiences learning English before PhD were not good. I still remember feeling lost in class. So now I avoid it unless I absolutely must do it." (Long-lasting impact of negative experiences)

Students' perspectives align with several concerns previously identified by the instructors, including test-related anxiety and apprehension, competing academic demands, lack of perceived immediate benefits, and negative prior experiences—all of which contribute to their resistance toward engaging with English language learning.

RQ4: What factors assist Iranian PhD students in overcoming resistance to learning EFL from the instructors' perspectives?

The instructors, in the focus groups (FGD items 4 and 5), also discussed strategies and factors that could help students overcome their resistance:

Instructor 1: "Connecting English to their field of study helps. When I show how a paper in English is directly useful for their thesis, they become more interested." (Relevance to research)

Instructor 2: "If we improve how we teach — make classes more interactive and address their needs — students respond better. Some resistance comes from boring classes." (Improving teaching methodology and relevance)

Instructor 3: "Providing small successes, like helping them speak in a low-stakes environment, reduces their fear." (Building confidence through low-pressure practice)

Instructor 4: "When students realize that good English could help them get published or find a job, they start trying harder. We need to make that connection clear." (Motivation through career/academic incentives)

Instructors emphasized that reducing resistance requires a multi-faceted approach by linking making English learning to students' academic disciplines, work and future careers, improving teaching approaches (e.g., interactive, needs-based instruction), and building students' confidence with incremental achievements.

5. Discussion

5.1 Findings for Research Question 1 (Student Perspective on Causes and Solutions)

This study aimed to explore factors influencing resistance to learning English among PhD candidates and identify factors that help them overcome such resistance. The thematic analysis of interviews with PhD students and EFL instructors and the students' three-part essays revealed several key factors. It was found that previous experiences, demotivation, and lack of a research mindset in using English are significant sources of resistance among PhD candidates. On the other hand, personal interest, investment in future jobs, and realizing the need to learn English were identified as factors that help students overcome this resistance. These findings align with existing literature, highlighting that negative past experiences and lack of motivation can drive language learning resistance. However, our results extend prior research by emphasizing the importance of future-oriented goals and personal interests in mitigating resistance—an area that earlier studies have not fully explored.

Our findings are consistent with those of several previous studies. For instance, Al-Takhayneh et al. (2022) in Jordan, Wang and Pan (2022) in China, and Huang (2018) in Taiwan all suggest that insufficient development of EFL skills among students or teachers can hinder a nation's educational progress. Wang and Pan (2022) argued that a lack of English proficiency exacerbates resistance to innovation in educational settings. Maftoon and Amiri (2012) noted that limited English ability contributes to isolation in the global academic community. Supporting our results, Afthanorhan et al. (2019) observed that when learners are dissatisfied with the quality of

educational services and face disappointing employment prospects after graduation, they lose motivation to learn. In line with Ghafournia and Farhadian (2018), we found that unsuccessful experiences in learning English can have lasting adverse effects on students' educational outcomes, even at the PhD level. Regarding students' lack of a research mindset, Teng (2019) indicated that focusing only on local perspectives (and not engaging globally) can limit a student's expertise. This supports Zhoc et al.'s (2019) finding that a lack of interest in second-language development contributes to an unproductive and tiresome academic atmosphere. Regarding solutions, Huang (2018) found that students' resistance to English-medium instruction prompted curricular changes, highlighting the need to tailor EFL instruction to learners' needs.

5.2 Findings for Research Question 2 (Instructor Perspective on Causes)

The second research question examined factors contributing to PhD students' resistance from the instructors' point of view. According to our results, the instructors emphasized that students' previous experiences (predominantly negative ones) were a powerful source of resistance, even more so than a lack of a research mindset or demotivation. This emphasis on past experiences aligns with Byun and Jung's (2019) study of engineering graduate students, which found that past learning experiences shape current attitudes toward learning. It also resonates with Skerrett's (2012) work on transnational youth,

which reported that prior experiences and perceptions significantly influence learners' engagement. Furthermore, our findings conform to Wang and Pan's (2022) study on resistance to innovation in EFL learning, which warned that such resistance could pose threats not only to educational progress but even to broader economic contexts if students do not develop the needed language skills. Instructors in our study noted that students with poor instruction or outcomes in earlier English courses often approach current English requirements with skepticism or apathy, reinforcing that early interventions and positive experiences in language learning are crucial.

5.3 Findings for Research Question 3 (Student Perspective on Causes)

The third research question revisited the causes of resistance from the student's perspective. Our qualitative data (students' interviews and essays) revealed that students' self-reported reasons for resistance closely mirror what instructors perceived, with some nuanced differences in emphasis. Students strongly highlighted test anxiety and the pressure of the compulsory exam as triggering fear and disengagement, a theme also noted by Trang and Baldauf (2007) in the context of Vietnamese students resisting English due to test pressures. Additionally, students pointed out time constraints and competing priorities (unique to their personal experience) as reasons for not dedicating effort to English, which complements the instructors' observations of a lack of motivation. This suggests that

even motivated students can be overwhelmed by other responsibilities, causing resistance by necessity rather than attitude. The convergence of instructor and student views on causes strengthens the validity of these findings—factors like prior negative experiences, perceived irrelevance, and anxiety are transparently important to both groups and should be key targets for interventions.

5.4 Findings for Research Question 4 (Instructor Perspective on Solutions)

The fourth research question examined instructors' views about what can help students overcome resistance. The instructors from our study indicated that as the relevance and practical use of the English language were clear to the students, resistance was minimal, which agrees with Vandrick (2014), who suggested that attendance in English classes should relate to students' real-life necessities and social contexts to minimize resistance. They also proposed different pedagogies, such as more interactive and student-centered approaches, in line with Huang (2018), who found that dialogic teaching could reduce resistance more than monologic methods. Instructors believe their role is to help build confidence in students through gradual success, which aligns with Dörnyei's (1994) description of the importance of small victories and positive experiences in maintaining motivation. To put it succinctly, from instructors' perspectives, students participate more in English learning when they perceive value in what they will learn for their lives and careers, enjoy the

learning process, and feel confident that motivation theories and previous research on language acquisition corroborate these factors.

6. Conclusion

Inspired by the results of this study, Iranian EAP and general English instructors can take steps to encourage their PhD students to view English language proficiency as a beneficial component of their doctoral training rather than a peripheral requirement. Since the current form of testing PhD students' English language knowledge is compulsory but not necessarily effective, policymakers might consider implementing new programs or alternative assessments for developing PhD candidates' English proficiency throughout their studies (rather than relying on a single high-stakes exam). Moreover, the higher education system could revise its medium of instruction and PhD admission framework—potentially incorporating more English-medium tasks such as writing reports or articles related to the student's field before or during the doctoral study—to better integrate English use in the academic routine. Such changes would institutionalize English in PhD programs and have shown its worth for academic achievement. To improve the quality of PhD classes and inspire students to learn academic English, colleges may also begin PhD academic exchange programs with English-speaking countries or university partnerships, creating experiential learning opportunities where students use precision English in demanding contexts.

These findings pave the way for new research and can be implemented in practice. Future studies may address reasons for resistance to learning English linked to individual characteristics, such as personality traits and socioeconomic background. Contemporary research would enhance our theoretical understanding of how individual differences lead to various types of resistance behaviors, thereby contributing significantly to the literature on resistance to language learning. Our findings are scalable and can assist students and instructors from various disciplines to determine sources and solutions that work against English learning.

By doing so, educators can ensure that all students benefit from English proficiency opportunities in academia and beyond.

This study also contributes a new measurement tool (the RTLE Inventory) for assessing resistance to learning English among PhD students. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. This sample might not fully represent the larger population of non-English-major PhD students in Iran, given that data collection was limited to state universities in Tehran. Individual differences, including age, gender, personal beliefs, and the relatively small number of instructors involved, might influence the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, due to the nature of self-reported data (via essays, interviews, questionnaires), a response bias could exist, and the qualitative manner of the study precludes firm causation.

To overcome these constraints, we recommend future studies with a larger and more heterogeneous group of PhD graduates from different geographical areas and types of university systems (like Islamic Azad universities or universities outside of Tehran). A mixed-methods or longitudinal design might provide a deeper understanding of resistance to learning English. Researchers may also consider interventions (e.g., workshops or mentoring programs) to decrease resistance and investigate their efficacy. Additionally, examining resistance to learning English in other contexts (e.g., Master's students or doctoral programs in other countries) would help clarify the universality of the identified factors and what contextual factors might be involved.

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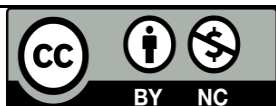
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