



**INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
MARKETING MIX ELEMENTS (7PS) AND IRANIAN EFL
LEARNERS' CHOICE OF LANGUAGE INSTITUTIONS**

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Abstract:

The demand for learning English in Iran as an EFL context is high. So, running a language institute slowly is changing into a highly profitable and competitive market in recent years. In order to survive and to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, higher institutions' principals can employ marketing mix element (7Ps) in order to satisfy customer needs and influence demand for the services. Current study sought two purposes: applying of 7Ps to learners' choice model of language institutions and investigating the relationship between marketing mix and students' decision making for selecting language institutions. The data was collected quantitatively by a questionnaire drafted in Persian. Subjects were a total of 120 males and females English learners aged from 18 to 35. They were chosen randomly from two language institutions located in Shahrekord and Chabahar, Iran. The findings of the study revealed people element as the first important element (mean=17.8) followed by program (mean=17.3) and the least important element was price element (mean=8.9). Regarding the relationship of 7Ps and learners' choice of language institution, significance level of 0.596 ($p > 0.05$) showed that there are no significant correlations 7Ps and Iranian EFL Learners' Choice of Language Institution.

Keywords: marketing mix elements, programme, language institutions, Likert scale, survey study

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1. Introduction

Although there was a disconnection between Iran and some English-speaking countries, the teaching and learning of English in Iran is prospering. Demand for English is high, that is, widespread use of English in Iran as an EFL setting country causes not only university and high school students but also secondary and elementary students try to learn and make progress in English or even in other languages. In addition, finding language certificate as one of the conditions of employment, job applicants attempt to get their certificate and employees, on the other hand also seek to improve their English to get a job promotion.

Looking beyond the internal benefits of English, it is a bridge to other countries and communities, providing opportunities for individuals in education, work over the boundaries of the country. Hence, running a language institute may slowly be changing into a highly profitable and competitive market. Many people have some experience in English teaching at various levels, however, not everyone has the skills to open, organize and run an institution successfully. In order to survive and to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage, educational institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market (Hoyt & Brown, 2003).

Marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably. Applying a simple marketing framework is vital. It enables managers to plan their activities in advance, find out what works, then use them again when and where they are most effective (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Institution management needs to market their institution and establish a unique difference which highlights their strength and gives the learners a reason to choose that institution.

Since higher education institutions operate in a service environment, they need to understand the unique aspects of service marketing in order to accomplish their goals (Kusumawat et al. 2010). Current study sought two purposes: first, it focused on applying marketing mix elements (7Ps) as one of the core concepts of marketing theory (Al Muala & Al Qurneh, 2012) to learners' choice model of language institutions. Second, it examined the relationship between marketing mix and students' choice of language institutions. Marketing mix is blend of tools that educational institutions can employ in order to satisfy customer needs and thereby influence demand for the services that it offers (Palmer, 2001).

2. Literature review

Models of student enrolment behavior theory started to emerge in early 1980s. According to Hossler et al. (1999), most studies that have tried to understand the universities and institute choice process could be included in one of the following categories: economic models, status-attainment models and combined models. Kusumawati et al. (2010) found that reference groups such as siblings, friends, peers, relatives, teachers and other influential people influence a student's choice of an institution. But the positive influences of personal factor on the student choice of an institution should not be avoided (Kusumawat et al. 2010). There are five steps in students' choice of selecting a university or institution: there are needs and motives, information gathering, evaluating alternatives, decision making and post choice evaluation (Soedijati & Pratminingsih, 2011). Marketing mix element that its importance is lauded by Rafiq and Ahmed (1995) is considered as one of the core concepts by which students' choice model can be defined (Al Muala & Al Qurneh, 2012). Traditionally, McCarthy (1960) proposed the services marketing mix, which included 4Ps: Product, Price, Place and Promotion. As marketing became a more sophisticated discipline, a fifth 'P' was added People. More recently, two further 'P's were added, Process and Physical evidence. Originally formulated for the service industry, they are just as important in other sectors. As a service, higher education marketing is sufficiently different from the marketing of products and it needs different marketing mix. Kotler and Fox (1995) suggested seven elements within an educational institution's marketing: program, place, promotion, price, process, physical facilities and people that can be explained as follow:

A. Program is all the courses and services that the institution makes available. Kotler and fox (1995) claim that program is the most basic decision an educational institution makes as it establishes the institution's identity and positions the institution vis-à-vis other educational institutions in the minds of learners and determines how learners will respond (Kotler & fox, 1995). In higher education, there are three main activities as service offered: teaching, research and community service. Higher education should evaluate its academic program and service product mix periodically, and particularly when considering modifications (Soedijati & Pratminingsih, 2011).

B. Price is the key factor in the private sector of education where students pay tuition fees that may vary not only amongst the program offered but also between competing institutions (Ivy & Al-Fattal, 2010). The price needs to be competitive. But as it needs to

make a profit, this doesn't mean institution has to be the cheapest in the market. According to Kotler and Fox (1995) price for students, consists of a monetary cost as well as other cost, for example effort cost, psychological cost and time cost. However, it is contended that price is the most important factor from parents' point of view rather than a student's perception.

C. The place: where customers pay for a service must be appropriate and convenient. Regarding language institutes, the place element of marketing mix refers to the system of program delivery; that is, the making of education available and accessible in terms of time and physical- geographical distribution of the teaching and learning. The simple example of this component is providing student with choices such as full-time, part-time and distance learning tuition (Ivy & Al-Fattal, 2010). In terms of closeness, Paulsen (1990), Raposo and Alves (2007), and Dawes and Brown (2005) pointed out that proximity to home is one of the strong influences in the choice process of selecting a university (as cited in Kusumawati et al. 2010).

D. Promotion is the way a company (here an institute) communicates what it does and what it can offer customers (here learners). It includes branding, advertising, PR, corporate identity, social media outreach, sales management, special offers and exhibitions. Promotion must gain attention, be appealing, send a consistent message and above all give the learner a reason to choose the institute rather than another one (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). Marketing communication mix (Promotion mix) consists of the specific blend of advertising, personal selling, sales promotion, public relations and direct marketing tools that the company uses to pursue its advertising and marketing objective (Kotler et al, 2007). On the other side, sometimes promotion can ruin the institutional image to the public. That is when institutions promote unreal claims about themselves.

Everyone who comes into contact with the learners will make an impression. Many learners (customers) cannot separate the product or service from the staff member who provides it, so the staff will have a profound effect, both positive and negative, on customer satisfaction (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008). The importance of the people ensue from the fact that the staff of an institution to a great degree determine the institution performance capacity and consequently builds the institutional cultural capital, the ability to attract applications through reputation. Another people element which can be added here is the other students in the institution. The importance of this factor is clear in the fact that presence of the students of (dis)similar ethnic and socio-

economic backgrounds in the institution may affect the choice of prospective students (Kotler & Fox, 1995).

Many customers no longer simply buy a product or service. They invest in an entire experience that starts from the moment they find the institution and last through to service and beyond. That means the process of delivering the product or service, and the behavior of those who deliver it, are crucial to customer satisfaction. By process Kotler and Fox (1995) mean the management of the procedures within the institution; these would include enrolment, recording of marks, examining and assessment, and of teaching and learning.

Choosing an unfamiliar institution is risky for the consumer, because learners don't know how good it will be until they try it. This uncertainty can be reduced by helping learners 'see' where they are enrolling. It is where the institution physically located and what the institution looks like, for example the building appearance, décor, and furnishings, the teaching and learning equipment provided, and other student/staff facilities (Ivy & Al-Fattal, 2010).

2.1 Related studies

So far there has been conducted various studies regarding 7Ps marketing mix. These studies; however are not very similar as they were conducted in different setting and institution types, they have some principals in common. One of the studies conducted by Ivy and Al-Fattal (2010) which investigated marketing activities of private English as a Foreign Language Colleges in Damascus, Syria. A quantitative survey of students in four different EFL colleges in Damascus were interviewed, the results of which are reported. The results of the study revealed that much greater importance to students enrolled at private EFL institute is the marketing mix elements of programme and place. The aspects of physical facilities and pricing issues were also more highly rated than the people and promotions element of the marketing mix.

In the other study conducted by Soedijati and Pratminingsih (2011) which investigated the impact of 7P on students' choice of university in Indonesia, the authors employed the survey method with quantitative approach. The sample of the survey was taken randomly consists of 300 students majoring in accounting and business management, bachelor's degree programs at Widyatama University. The research findings indicate that marketing mix has significant and positive relationship with students' decision making for selecting a university.

Chaidacha and Roongrattanakool (2014) conducted a study on the factors affecting decisions of undergraduate students on taking extra English courses in tutorial schools in Muang District. The researcher adapted the factors based on the 8 Ps of

services marketing by Lovelock and Wirtz (2007) and collected data from 385 undergraduate students who were taking extra English classes in tutorial schools during the second semester of the academic year 2014. The result showed that the mean of *People* was the highest factor, followed by product elements, promotion, productivity and quality, place, process, physical environment and price, respectively.

This study also showed that the mean of *People* was the highest factor for first and second year level of undergraduate students while the mean of *Product* was the highest factor for third and fourth year or higher level of undergraduate students. The lowest factor for all year levels of undergraduate students was the mean of price.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design and method

Regarding the nature, this research is a quantitative and applied one and it is a descriptive-survey in terms of research type. As in a descriptive study the data was based on primary and original data for example a questionnaire. A questionnaire is a way of collecting information by engaging in a special kind of conversation. Having agreed to participate in the study, the respondent has the responsibility to answer questions truthfully (Olsen & George, 2004). This kind of study is survey study which typically focuses on a group's attitudes, opinions and characteristics (Brown, 1995). The current study also was cross-sectional, that is, the information about X and Y that is gathered represents what is going on at only one point in time (Olsen & George, 2004). The researcher collected and analyzed data quantitatively and interviewed some participant to know the reasons of their answer clearly.

3.2 Participants

To fulfill the objectives of this study, total 120 learners (N= 120), among them 50 learners were male and 70 learners were female were selected. They were chosen randomly from two language institutions located in different parts of Iran e.g., Shahrekord and Chababar. The age of students ranged from 18 to 35. Adult learners were specifically selected due to the fact that children were less likely to have chosen the institution for themselves; parents often were responsible for this decision. All the learners were native speakers of Persian majoring at different subjects.

3.3 Procedures

As mentioned before present study is a quantitative, descriptive-survey and applied one. To collect information on research background and theoretical framework, library

method and to collect needed information on learners' opinions, a questionnaire was used. After filling out the questionnaire, some of the learners were interviewed by the researcher in order to realize the reason of their selection. The questionnaire (which had been drafted in Persian) was developed to investigate the choice model of language institutions' learners by means of 7Ps. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts and its reliability was also measured by using Cronbach alpha. Total 29 marketing tool measured under the head of 7Ps (Product, Price, Place, Promotion, People, Process and Physical Evidence) and a question about the purposes of learning English are included in the survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to two institutions located in two cities of Iran, Shahrekord and Chabahar. The questionnaire was distributed by the English teacher to adult EFL learners. In total 120 completed questionnaires were returned from two institutions surveyed. The data then was prepared for analysis.

3.4 Data analysis

Data collection tool is questionnaire, which contains the spectrum of 5 items Likert. The response scale for each statement included: a) 1= strongly disagree, b) 2= disagree, c) 3= neither agree nor disagree, d) 4= agree, e) 5= strongly agree. The reliability of 5-point Likert scales was assessed using the Cronbach alpha test to determine the extent to which they produce consistent results, the overall score of 0.80 indicated satisfactory reliability. In this study, the Table 1 shows internal reliability of the questionnaire which was tested by using Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1: Internal reliability of the questionnaire

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
.96	29

4. Results and Discussion

The study will reveal the underlying framework that learners used in the choice of EFL institutes at which they are now enrolled. The mean score and standard deviations (SD) of 29 marketing tools was measured. Each of the items was gain rated by respondents using a 5- point Likert scale, where 1 was "strongly disagree" through to 5 which was "strongly agree". Table 2 shows importance ratings of marketing mix elements in choosing language institutions.

Table 2: Overall importance ratings of marketing mix elements

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program	120	21.00	6.00	27.00	17.3583	4.05383
Place	120	16.00	4.00	20.00	11.5917	2.68671
Promotion	120	18.00	5.00	23.00	14.1917	3.24179
Price	120	12.00	3.00	15.00	8.9000	2.84443
Process	120	16.00	4.00	20.00	11.8083	3.41104
Physical Facilities	120	12.00	3.00	15.00	9.3083	2.86326
People	120	22.00	6.00	28.00	17.8917	3.87146

As it is obvious in the table among the total of 120 learners, both male and female, (N=120), the people element of marketing mix with the mean score of 17.89 and SD of 3.87 was overall the most important element of marketing mix. After that program and promotion with the mean score of 17.35 (SD=4.05) and 14.19 (SD=3.2) respectively were the second and third important elements of marketing mix. The next places of the table were allocated to process (Mean=11.80), place (Mean=11.59) and physical facilities (Mean=9.3). The least important element was *price* with the mean score of 8.90 and SD of 2.8.

Table 3: Males' importance ratings of marketing mix elements

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program	50	21.00	6.00	27.00	18.7000	4.43203
Place	50	12.00	4.00	16.00	11.3400	2.69247
Promotion	50	16.00	5.00	21.00	13.8800	3.36634
Price	50	12.00	3.00	15.00	9.2000	3.18799
Process	50	16.00	4.00	20.00	12.7400	3.58460
Physical Evidence	50	12.00	3.00	15.00	9.5600	2.96345
People	50	22.00	6.00	28.00	18.3200	4.18666

Table 3 shows males' importance ratings of marketing mix. Investigating the priority of marketing mix among male learners of institutions, revealed that *program* element with the mean score of 18.70 and SD of 4.43 was the most important element in institutions selection. People element (Mean=18.32, SD=4.1) followed by promotion element (Mean=13.88, SD=3.3) were in second and third rank of the table. Then process by the mean score of 12.7 and SD of 3.5 and place by the mean score of 11.34 and SD of 2.6 were found to be the fourth and fifth. While physical facilities element (Mean= 9.56, SD=) and price element (Mean=9.20, SD=3.1) were found to be the least important

elements. On the other hand, table. 5 shows the females' importance ratings of marketing mix elements. People and program, respectively with the mean score of 17.58 and SD of 3.6 and 16.40 and SD of 3.4 were the most important marketing mix elements for females. Followed by Promotion (Mean=14.41, SD=3.1) and place (Mean=11.77, SD=2.6) which appeared to be the third and fourth important elements. After that process (Mean=11.14, SD=3.1) and physical facilities (Mean=9.12, SD=2.7) ranked at the next places. Price by the mean score of 8.68 and SD of 2.5 were at the bottom of the table.

Table 4: Females' importance ratings of marketing mix elements

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Program	70	15.00	9.00	24.00	16.4000	3.48662
Place	70	15.00	5.00	20.00	11.7714	2.68744
Promotion	70	16.00	7.00	23.00	14.4143	3.15536
Price	70	12.00	3.00	15.00	8.6857	2.57380
Process	70	14.00	6.00	20.00	11.1429	3.14060
Physical Facilities	70	11.00	4.00	15.00	9.1286	2.79711
People	70	16.00	9.00	25.00	17.5857	3.62956

Regarding to investigating the relationship between 7Ps and learners' choice of language institution, linear regression was run (table 5). The significance level which was expressed on the value 0.596 ($p > 0.05$) means that there was not any significant relationship between marketing mix and students' decision making.

Table 5: The relationship between 7Ps and learners' choice of language institution

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1 Regression	17.257	7	2.465	.792	.596 ^a
Residual	348.709	112	3.113		
Total	365.967	119			

a. Predictors: (Constant), people, promotion, place, price, process, physical, program

4.1 Discussion

It is not surprising that the elements of the 7Ps vary in importance. Students use those 7Ps to make their decision making process easier and better match the EFL institute with their own needs. In discussion, the authors not only explained about the unique results obtained from this research, but also compared the results with those of related studies mentioned earlier in this story.

The findings of this study showed that the *people* element of marketing mix is the most important item for the learners (total of male and female) in selecting an institution. That is, teachers' reputation, native English language teaching staff, warmth, helpfulness and efficiency of administration staff, presence of friends and other students of 'similar socio-economic background' enrolled at the institution were the most important criteria for the learners. Some students state that they prefer to keep track their own teachers and teachers also tend to follow up each individual learner. In Chaidacha and Roongrattanakool (2014) study also the mean of people was the highest factor and in Soedijati and Pratminingsih (2011), people were the third important element which had positive correlation ($r = 0.604$) to the students' decision making. But in Ivy and Al-Fattal (2010) in Damascus, people element was the sixth important element which was not very effective.

Programme took the second rank of the table. It means that specific course for specific purpose, the institute reputation for teaches conversational English, the duration of the course, the certificate issued at the end of the course, the books taught in the institution. The problem with programme is that it does not exist until the service provider performs the service, usually in the presence of the learners. So the learners don't have any idea about what has been 'purchased' in terms of quality. For this reason, Gibbs and Knapp (2002) suggest that an institution is recommended to increase tangibility of the programme offered by increasing what they describe as the 'wrapping' it is offering. 'Wrapping' includes, for example, CD-ROMs, photocopied lecture material and handouts, course books, free access to the Internet, discounted materials. Programme in Ivy and Al-Fattal (2010) was the most important element. Their subject believed that certificate issued at the end of the course and the materials (or books) used in the institute are very important items. Programme with the correlation of 0.526 was one of the elements which had the strong correlation with students' selection in Soedijati and Pratminingsih's (2011) research.

The third element which was important for selecting an institution was *promotion* e.g., the institute's prospectus/brochure, outdoor advertising in city streets, advertising of the institute in the local press, radio or TV advertising, institute staff have visited school or place of work, premiums for example; course books, bags, pens, diaries etc. The use of slogans can also have an effective influence, as Such slogans are mentioned and repeated frequently, and this convey to the public a summary of what the institution is about. Chaidacha and Roongrattanakool (2014) also found promotion as the third important element. While in Ivy and Al-Fattal's (2010) study the promotion element appeared to be the least important factor in influencing student selection, when compared to other items on the education marketing mix. They found out that the most

important promotional tool was 'press advertising'. Promotion by the $r=0.428$ showed a weak correlation to students decision making.

The fourth important element in ratings of marketing mix elements was *process* that included social events and teaching methods. Social events are those events organized by institution (exhibitions, plays etc). In Soedijati and Pratminingsih (2011) research, process ($r = 0.650$), was the first element which had stronger correlation to students' selection compare to other components. Process in Ivy and Al-Fattal's (2010) was the fourth important element.

Place and *physical facilities* took the fifth and sixth rank of the table respectively. Easy access to the institute via public transport, where the institute is geographically located, convenient time (e.g., the course is offered at times convenient to the learners), suitable day (the course is on suitable days of the week) were the place items that were asked about. It means that the concept of the "place" is not restricted to the physical and geographical location of an institution. And physical facilities items were teaching and learning equipment at the institute, Student facilities (library, computer room, lunch room) and the institute's physical appearance (Décor and furnishing). Place was the second important element in Ivy and Al-Fattal's (2010) study. But in the study of Soedijati and Pratminingsih (2010) it was among the elements that had the weak correlation ($r = 0.351$) to students' decision making. Physical facilities took the second place in Ivy and Al-Fattal's (2010) study.

Despite the presupposition that Pricing has major influence on marketing strategy and this is a major issue that could affect the overall image of an institution, the *price* element (The tuition fees, the flexibility of payment arrangements of tuition fees and the discounts offered by the institute) was appeared to be the least important element of the list. It also had the weakest correlation with student choice of university in Soedijati and Pratminingsih's (2010) study and in Ivy and Al-Fattal's (2010) study it took the fifth rank of the table. In Chaidacha and Roongrattanakool (2014) study, the lowest factor for all year levels of undergraduate students was the mean of price. The reason why people choose this element as the least important one is that some of them perceive more expensive offers to be of greater value and vice versa. So paying a higher price for a more prestigious well-known institution is not denied.

Comparing males' and females' attitude in ratings of marketing mix elements revealed that while the most important element for female was people, the most significant element for men is program. The other elements for females respectively were program, promotion, place, process and physical facilities and for males are people, promotion, process, place and physical facilities. The least important element for both of male and female was price. As the males' and females' institution are

running separately in Iran, by the compare of women's and men's opinion in ratings of marketing mix, the managers of these institutions can plan some strategies accordingly.

5. Conclusion

The general framework of this study suggested that institution principals need to market their language institution and provide a unique tool to highlight their strengths and to give the learners reasons to choose their institute. The findings of the study showed what aspects of 7Ps were important to students when selecting an EFL institute. In this study selecting *people* element as the first important element emphasized that staff's and teachers' reputation were considered to be vital for attracting the learners attention successfully. Quality of higher education institutions programme was the next trigger for learners' satisfaction. Despite it was thought *price* element, the tuition that learners pay for their education, as one of the effective elements that will drive customers (learners) to buy the service (programme) of an institution, it had the lesser importance for learners. It was because of the fact that learners found teachers' reputation, institute staff, the material taught in the institution, teaching methods, easy access to the institute and teaching and learning equipment to get the most priority in choosing an institution. This study is applied one for those managers of language institutions who has the responsibility to provide facilities and teaching staff sufficiently and need guidance and practical contributions to improve their educational service. In result of inability to manage such teaching and learning facilities and teaching staff may decrease learners' satisfaction.

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