English language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Innovations, trends and challenges

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A glimpse of contrasting de jure–de facto ELT policies in Iran

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Introduction

The English language teaching (ELT) edifice tends to be known by its visible elements such as course materials, teaching practices and tests. Teachers, learners, administrators and many academics generally deal with aspects of these frontline matters, possibly at the expense of noticing subtle higher-order steering forces that direct the broad ELT enterprise. Such macro-level forces, which may be called policies, are sometimes officially dictated but may also remain unofficially embraced and practiced without being overtly stated. Policies, however, influence and orient almost the entire administrative and practical scene of any social institution in any social context, including language and education concerns and, more specifically, ELT in Iran and other countries (for example, Al-Issa, 2007; Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014; Kiany, et al., 2011; Kirkgoz, 2009; Seargeant, 2008).

In this chapter we explore aspects of ELT policies in Iran and the overarching orientations at which the practice of learning and teaching the English language is directed. Based on the distinction that has been made between overt and covert policies (Nero, 2014; Schiffman, 2006), language (education) policy should not only be seen as ‘the explicit, written, overt, de jure, official, and “top-down” decision-making... but also the implicit, unwritten, covert, de facto, grass-roots, and unofficial ideas and assumptions’. (Schiffman, 2006: 112) Carrying the same distinction to the specific area of ELT policies, we scrutinise officially stated policies as well as implicitly embraced policy orientations and the possible mismatch between them.

In depicting officially stated overt policy directions, we specifically explore four major national documents that set educational policies or bear policy messages applicable to educational endeavours such as ELT. To detect aspects of covert de facto policy assumptions, we rely on interviews with teachers of several private language teaching institutes in search of some underlying orientations that shape the real-life practice of ELT in Iran. An illustration of these two streams of overt and covert policies, and their comparison and contrast, shapes the main body of the chapter and we conclude with hints at some probable origins as well as consequences of the contrasting views that configure each one of these policy trends.
Overt directions

One broad aspect of the tumultuous ELT story in Iran has been historically shaped by the official influences of socio-cultural and political authorities (Borjian, 2013; Riazi, 2005). Official policies, though not regarded as the final say, do leave their own traces on actual ELT practice since the allocation of different types of state resources are determined by such overt policies. Therefore, in this section we explore four official documents that include general or specific policy direction pertaining to the teaching and learning of foreign languages, including English. The documents are: *The 20-year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (National Vision, 2005); *The Comprehensive Science Roadmap* (Comprehensive Roadmap, 2009); *The Fundamental Reform Document of Education* (Reform Document, 2011); and *The National Curriculum Document* (National Curriculum, 2009). The quotes from the documents are our translation of the original Farsi texts though *The Fundamental Reform Document* has an official English version from which we quote.

*The National Vision* is set to lead the country through 20 years of progress towards the aims of the nation in all aspects. The document, which is devised by the Supreme Leader and the Expediency Council, is a reference for all official involvements, including education. The broad vision set by this document can be viewed as bearing messages for the general direction of official educational practices, including ELT. The following are among the ideals of *The National Vision* to be reached by 2025:

- Iranian society, within the perspective of this vision, will have these features: developed in accordance with its own cultural, geographic and historical characteristics, and relying on the ethical principles and values of Islam ... loyal to the Revolution and the Islamic system and to the blossoming of Iran, and also proud of being Iranian.

*The Comprehensive Science Roadmap* sets national-level policies in science and technology. It includes broad policy lines as well as more specific plans and goals to be attained within science and technology, including educational developments, encompassing foreign language education. The following statements are excerpts from the Roadmap that bear messages as to the policies needing to be adopted regarding ELT at different levels:

- Values: The supremacy of the Islamic Tawhidi worldview in all aspects of science and technology; fundamental scientific reformation, especially revising humanities within the framework of the Islamic worldview. (p. 9)

- National strategy: Incorporating the Islamic perspective in educational syllabi and textbooks. (p. 36)

- National strategy: Increasing the level of Islamic awareness, belief and behaviour of those active in the area of science and technology. (p. 37)

- National action: Reform and transformation of language teaching methods, especially for Arabic and English in general education. (p. 51)

- National action: Localisation and development of foreign language education syllabi and contents based on Islamic culture. (p. 57)
The Fundamental Reform Document of Education sets educational reform ideals. Efforts are stated to have been made to ‘take note of the strategic objectives of the Islamic Republic ... [and] the perspective and goals of education in the country’s 2025 vision’. (p. 7) In stating its basic values, the document refers to the National Vision as well as the Science Roadmap and puts emphasis on ‘Islamic–Iranian and revolutionary characteristics’ (p. 17) and ‘joint Islamic–Iranian identity’ (p. 18) on the part of learners. Setting objectives and strategies, the document specifically refers to educating individuals who, among other characteristics: ‘... believe in Islam as a right path and a norm system and ... abide by religious ritual, and ethical principles ...’ (p. 29)

Among the ideals mentioned in this document, cultivating commitment to ‘the culture of Islamic... manners’ (p. 32), to ‘the values of the Islamic Revolution’ (p. 32) and to ‘Hijab (Islamic dress code)’ (p. 34) is highlighted. The document, while emphasising the need to strengthen ‘Persian language and literature,’ (p. 18) sets a clear policy for foreign language teaching and states one of its strategies as: ‘Provision of foreign language education ... [based on] Islamic–Iranian identity.’ (p. 32)

The National Curriculum Document considers foreign language teaching and learning as a major educational area. Together with content specification and features of other educational areas such as Persian language and literature, arts and sciences, the document focuses on foreign language learning and teaching with the aim of developing ‘the skills of a foreign language’ and of ‘strengthening Islamic–Iranian identity’. (p. 18) The following are highlights of ELT-related specifications in this document:

- Foreign language education is a suitable ground for understanding, receiving ... and transferring human achievements in various oral, visual and written forms for different purposes and audiences within the framework of the Islamic system ... (p. 37)

- Foreign language teaching ... should be considered as a means of strengthening national culture and our own beliefs and values ... At elementary levels, educational content should be organised around local topics and learner needs like health and hygiene, daily life, the environment, and societal values and culture ... At higher levels, the selection and organisation of content will be based on cultural, scientific, economic and political functions ... (p. 38)

Covert trends

The realisation of these official policies in actual ELT practice is not easy to assess. However, even a sketch of general implementation in a few teaching contexts might illustrate some aspects of how overt policies are received in educational institutions. Aiming at such a sketch, we tried to focus on English language institutes with nationwide branches popular among language learners. Five institutes were approached and five participants including one deputy manager and four teachers were interviewed. To preserve anonymity, the institutes are referred to as institutes A, B, C, D and E.
Our semi-structured interview, conducted in English, included two sections. The first section focused on overall directions as well as the cultural and social concerns of the institute authorities towards various aspects of the institute’s practice of English teaching. In the second section a brief explanation of the official ELT policies discussed above was presented to the interview participants and they were asked to comment based on their institutes’ position and to compare those official policies with implicit institute policies. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and explored based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006). The institutes’ policy directions fall into three thematic patterns: general positions, socio-cultural stance and positions towards official policies. The following is a fairly detailed depiction, explanation and exemplification of these major themes and their minor thematic components.

**General positions**
The institutes’ general view of issues such as an ideal language learner and ideal teaching is depicted by this major theme. In many cases the teachers interviewed referred to the lack of consistency among institute branches. Different branches may act differently toward policy issues but the overall aims and directions of institutes’ decision makers as interpreted by these teachers comprise the two sub-themes of business success and addressing student demands.

**Business success**
Apart from policies on teaching and learning practices, language teaching institute authorities seem to have financial success as their overarching aim and main concern. Finance appears to be a major policy-setting force in their ELT practices. According to the teachers interviewed, in both state and private institutes, teaching and learning content and even the regulations are strongly connected to financial issues, branch expansion and attaining so-called international standards:

- As long as the student comes and pays for each term it’s OK ... The fact is that it’s more like a business than anything else ... (A)
- ... there are no ideals. There are no clear cut definitions of a good student ... based on what I can see in the institute, a good student is the one who comes and registers each and every term ... And a good teacher is a teacher who ... keeps the students happy ... No matter what you do in the class you got to keep the students happy, students and parents. I mean the person who pays ... (A)
- What they probably dream about is keeping in line with international standards ... so you see all these workshops ... CELTA, CELT, DELTA. (B)

**Student demands**
Translating the policy goal of business success into a more tangible version, the institute managers regard the satisfaction of client demands as their major overall aim. English language learners, despite diversity in age and social status, often share similar concerns when devoting time and money to learning English. The importance of what is labelled learning quality and gaining the supposedly best results dominates even learners’ minds and, in the case of younger learners, concerns parents. Fulfilling these ambitions is a major target of each English
language centre in order to retain learners as their clients. The ability to communicate, regardless of its exact meaning, is probably the most important stated student demand and is therefore a high priority in the overall policy of the institutes:

- The aim is to have students who are proficient in English ... who can communicate in the language. (B)
- Well, the ideal ... is to have a person who is competent in English who can speak the language ... But other than the test we have no means of measuring ... whether the student has been successful or not. (B)
- The main aim is being able to speak English perfectly. (C)
- ... the main goal is communication. (A)
- Mostly ideal ... are the people who are able to use the language. (D)
- ... they have to continue that for a long time in order to get to that ideal person, ideal English speaker. (E)

Apart from the broad and unspecified purpose of being able to speak English, a vast majority of adult Iranian learners start learning English with the motive of either applying abroad or qualifying in the national university entrance examinations for graduate or postgraduate studies, both requiring a language proficiency certificate. It is unsurprising, therefore, to see institutes advertising their teaching quality by promising learners high scores on international English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, which are regarded as the yardstick of measuring learners’ language proficiency and are in high demand from learners in language institutes:

- Actually the main aim ... is IELTS ... They want to learn many things and try to pass that level with actually about seven. Good mark is seven for them. (C)
- We have these classes ... the whole level is taught in one term, so in 40 days the whole elementary level is covered and it has been especially designed for people who want to emigrate ... That is how we serve the society [laughing] ... (B)
- In our institute we have also TOEFL and IELTS examination, again with the intention of emigration either for education of for life. (A)
- ... most of the times when we ask students why they are studying English they say that we want to go Europe or America. (D)

**Socio-cultural stance**

When specifically prompted to reflect on the institute directors’ perspectives regarding social and cultural concerns in English language education, three main patterns emerged: a purported adherence to *serving society*, an apparent commitment to *cultural values* and *avoiding contentious topics*. 
Social service
The teachers interviewed believe the institutes view the very provision of language teaching as serving society. Teachers highlight points as in the following interview excerpts:

- As far as I know the main aim of institute ... is just IELTS ... I've been teaching in this institute for about three years and I have not seen anything regarding society so far ... The main service is just IELTS examinations and how to prepare students for such [an] exam ... (C)

- ... they want to create proficient learners, and they don’t talk to us about the society or the values we have in Iran. The main goal is being able to speak English perfectly. (C)

- ... all the students are willing to work and study ... Because they are younger they can serve much better in the future ... In the future the students ... can use their language in the society in whatever they are working. (E)

Cultural values
Beyond the mere service provision of language education and at a deeper socio-cultural level, institute managers are committed to some sort of cultural values as well. The teachers confirm that their institutes do recognise the cultural and social relevance of their ELT practices and materials. The following examples, however, show that conceptions of value and the meaning of commitment are hardly unified. Nor is the nature of the values necessarily in line with overt official policies discussed earlier. Discrepant cases exist, like the third one below pointing to an entirely different direction and the last one that surprisingly views some culturally loaded issues as not very culture based:

- We all have to wear maghna‘e [headgear]. Girls and teachers ... male teachers are not allowed to wear jeans or t-shirts. They have to wear formal clothes ... They should not make a relationship with each other. (C)

- ... mostly it is the kind of religious cultural value because they already have to accept them ... have to wear special type of clothes, the teachers, the students, everybody. For example, the teacher is obliged to come with scarf only, and shawl or something like that is not accepted and for the students they have to come with scarf, they have to come with minimum amount of make-up ... (E)

- ... I have witnessed that even in TT [teacher training] courses nothing is mentioned about society, values, culture, beliefs, nothing. (C)

- We usually never talk about culture, whether it’s Iranian culture or British ... Even the British culture doesn’t come up ... because the topics are about shopping, holidays ... Even the topics are not very culture based ... (E)

Contentious topics
A further intriguing issue is the type of topics covert institute policies require to be avoided. They seem to be similar to content also avoided by commercial ELT textbooks used worldwide. Regardless of the reason why these two types of avoidance coincide, the important point is that the policies in the official documents require engaging with such issues with certain positions. Avoiding them may be interpreted as an attempt not to encourage different viewpoints
that might clash with official policies, and this may be seen as trying to avoid confronting state perspectives. However, avoiding topics such as religion and politics altogether hardly conforms to official policies:

- In our institute three topics are forbidden ... You do not touch them ... hijab, religion and politics ... (B)
- I know we had troubles, especially during the elections [2009] ... they say ... just avoid these topics and we avoid trouble. (B)
- ... two main topics are avoided in any range. One is religion, the other one is politics ... We’re not supposed to talk about that ... (D)

Position towards official policies

Interestingly, none of the interviewees had ever heard about the major official ELT policies described earlier in this chapter. They think their institute authorities are not aware of these policies either or, at least, the teachers were not told about such policies in teacher training courses or institute meetings. However, when asked to reflect on such policies, the teachers interviewed depicted two categories of institute attitudes: ‘unaware but sympathising’ and ‘unaware and non-sympathising,’ discussed below.

Unaware but sympathising

The first group of institutes is one whose personnel are not aware of or do not explicitly consider the officially stated overt ELT policies but to some extent seem to be in agreement with such concerns. Such policies may be seen as implicitly and partially enacted in the institutes’ ELT practice. This covert implementation might be apparent in textbook content or in institute regulations:

- I think Islamic ... [perspectives] exist a lot ... and to be honest ... I think they exist and to a very big degree, very strongly. (A)
- ... the fact that teachers are discriminated by ... [gender] and students are divided and there is no co-education and sometimes the topics that you bring up in the classes for ladies are different ... I mean if my supervisor comes into my class I may shift the topic, because I’m not looking for trouble. (A)
- ... these types of policies are not given to the teachers ... but still I think ... is more in line with those goals. (E)
- ... in the very first session that I went for my demo, after the test, I was said that ... if you want to bring any example please bring in local ones; for example, if you want to talk about the Christmas Eve ... talk about the Norouz too, you have to localise everything for students ... (E)

Unaware and not sympathising

Institutes in this second category, according to teachers interviewed, would shrug off the official statements or even dismiss them if they are told about them. These institutes do not consider implementing official policies even implicitly because such perspectives are not in accord with their own policies and beliefs. The only exception might be in the event of a student or parent complaint regarding a book’s content or the institute’s environment. In such a case the institute owners’ own policy might be altered to avoid trouble:
I see no trace of such policies even Islamic ones … I’m observing teachers. What they say and what they actually do in their classroom is exactly the opposite of what we believe as Iranian people, let alone Muslims ... (C)

I haven’t heard any of these [policies] being mentioned by our [institute] authorities, I don’t think they know any of these, I don’t think they consider ... any of these ... (A)

What they [institute authorities] probably dream about is keeping in line with international standards of what teaching English language is ... They are not Iranian. They are not Islamic. They make you a better teacher based on British or American English-speaking standards. So, they do not consider these policies ... and I think for them it’s senseless. (B)

... you’re teaching the language ... You may bring [in] a lot of music, a lot of movies. You’re actually teaching the culture. Teaching those [cultural] norms is a little bit part of the language ... It’s part of your job because they [students] ask you for that, because they want to emigrate most of them ... (D)

Reflections and conclusion

The discrepancy between officially stated ELT policies in Iran and those implicitly practised seems to be evident, at least within the limited scope of the data in this chapter. However, what remains to be discussed is the interpretation of such a landscape. One way to interpret it may be represented by an awkward quotation from an academic in New York, which appeared on the back cover of a recent book on ELT in Iran: ‘There can be no clearer indication of the desire of the Iranian people and civil society to belong to the global culture and community, despite continued government ambivalence in educational policy and its outright hostility to the transfer of foreign ideas.’ (Said Amir Arjomand, in Borjian, 2013, back cover)

Such a statement may not be surprising coming from an observer far removed from the current socio-cultural and political context of Iran and probably with a mentality of the need to inject democracy from the so-called global community into non-democratic hostile states. However, such positions might appear to be too naïve and simplistic to capture the reality. A more profound understanding may require a broader view of the spread of English within the past century and how British international policy after World War II, combined with the emergence of the American presence in international media and academia, fostered ELT in countries such as Iran.

Such a view may crucially include pointers such as these quotes from a 1959 United States Congress report (US Congress, 1959): ‘... worldwide interest in the English language is one of our greatest assets’ (p. 31); ‘Even in the Communist world American influence can be extended through the medium of the English language’ (p. 22) The not-so-neutral transfer of foreign ideas can be seen in later similar documents as well (US Congress, 1979): ‘The international teaching of English can give the United States many important advantages ... It offers an entering wedge into closed societies’ (p. 45) More recently, similar positions can be found in other official documents: ‘... it would be wise to invest in ... developing ways to engage the next generation of Middle Easterners, especially through English education ... After all, the battle for hearts and minds ... is a long-term project’ (US House, 2001: 35)
Therefore, while ‘understanding, receiving ... and transferring human achievements’ (National Curriculum, 2009: 37) is clearly espoused by state documents touching upon official ELT policies in Iran, the official aim of incorporating local perspectives into ELT syllabi (Comprehensive Roadmap, 2009: 36), considering ELT as a means for strengthening the national culture and our own beliefs (National Curriculum, 2009: 38) and strengthening the Islamic–Iranian identity (National Curriculum, 2009: 18) through foreign language education, may be easily judged as wise policies. What might be argued to be lacking is twofold. First, the officially stated positions regarding ELT in Iran are mostly policy segments rather than coherently structured policies. This may make it difficult to depict a clear image of what is to be achieved by the policy and, for example, what Islamic–Iranian identity means.

Secondly, even within this tentatively stated policy, there seems to be a lack of concerted effort to create awareness of the cultural, social and political functioning of English in ‘a world of diversities’. (Mirhosseini, 2008) One can hardly assume that the language institutes’ policy makers are totally unaware of official socio-cultural policies. The issue is that, to them, these official ELT policy statements may sound like ‘just big words,’ as one of the interviewees describes them. Constructing coherent ELT policies, creating awareness regarding the ideological nature of ELT (Mirhosseini, 2015) and communicating the logic of official policies to frontline practice contexts may therefore be the missing links in contrasting de jure–de facto ELT policies in Iran.

References


