

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

Edited by Chris Kennedy





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

Edited by Chris Kennedy

ISBN 978-0-86355-769-9

© **British Council 2015** Design/E555  
10 Spring Gardens  
London SW1A 2BN, UK

**[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)**

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b> .....	3
<b>Overview</b>	
<i>Chris Kennedy</i> .....	5
<b>1 To teach or not to teach? Still an open question for the Iranian education system</b>	
<i>Hossein Davari and Ferdows Aghagolzadeh</i> .....	13
<b>2 A glimpse of contrasting de jure–de facto ELT policies in Iran</b>	
<i>Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini and Sepideh Khodakarami</i> .....	23
<b>3 How have political and socio-economic issues impacted on the motivation of Iranian university students to learn English?</b>	
<i>Shahrzad Ardavani and Philip Durrant</i> .....	35
<b>4 Needs analysis for General English courses: a model for setting priorities</b>	
<i>Golnar Mazdayasna and Gholam Ali Molaei</i> .....	49
<b>5 Developing school English materials for the new Iranian educational system</b>	
<i>Elham Foroozandeh and Mohammad Forouzani</i> .....	59
<b>6 The impact of language games on the nature of interactions in the Iranian EFL primary classroom</b>	
<i>Mona Mohabbatsafa and Julia Hüttner</i> .....	73
<b>7 EFL learners’ and teachers’ perceptions versus performances of participatory structures</b>	
<i>Zohreh Seifoori and Farinaz Fartash</i> .....	83
<b>8 Peer collaboration in L2 writing: an Iranian experience</b>	
<i>Alireza Memari Hanjani and Li Li</i> .....	95
<b>9 Migrant literature and teaching English as an international language in Iran</b>	
<i>Samaneh Zandian</i> .....	113
<b>10 Candles lighting up the journey of learning: teachers of English in Iran</b>	
<i>Martin Cortazzi, Lixian Jin, Shiva Kaivanpanah and Majid Nemati</i> .....	123
<b>11 MA TEFL programmes in Iran: change in a globalised era</b>	
<i>Parvaneh Tavakoli and Mostafa Hasrati</i> .....	139
<b>12 Feedback type preferred by Iranian EFL teachers in post-observation meetings</b>	
<i>Sasan Baleghizadeh</i> .....	151
<b>13 Effecting methodological change through a trainer-training project: a tale of insider-outsider collaboration</b>	
<i>Sue Leather and Khalil Motallebzadeh</i> .....	161



# Foreword

The teaching and learning of foreign languages is one of the most powerful tools we have to build a better understanding of, and stronger connections with, other parts of the world; through this process, we build trust for and of ourselves, our communities, and our countries.

It is in the interests of both the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the UK to improve the bilateral relationship. The British Council believes that better teaching and learning of English in the IRI, and better teaching and learning of Farsi/Persian in the UK will lead to more interest in each other's peoples and societies, a greater understanding of each other's cultures, and a deeper trust.

This volume explores the innovations, trends, and challenges of English language teaching in the IRI (we hope that a future volume may explore the teaching of Farsi/Persian in the UK). Despite the disconnect between the IRI and the major English-speaking countries over the last 35 years, the teaching and learning of English in the IRI is thriving. Demand for English is high, and its benefits recognised at the most senior levels: IRI Ministry of Education officials have talked of the English language's 'direct impact on [Iran's] social, economic, and scientific growth' (quoted in Borjjan, 2013: 116). Looking beyond the internal benefits of English, IRI's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini recognised, in a quote which prefaces the IRI's new English language textbooks, *Prospects*, the way that English can be powerfully used to build a better understanding of the IRI internationally: '[T]oday, modern foreign languages should be included in the school curricula ... we can use foreign languages to promote ourselves abroad' (Curriculum Development Centre of IRI Ministry of Education, 2013: 5; British Council translation). English is a bridge to other countries and communities, providing opportunities for individuals in education, work, and mobility; it is an important part of the school curriculum, and we see this as clearly in the IRI as in the other countries with which we work.

We hope that this publication will provide a platform to demonstrate the best practices and research of teachers and teacher trainers in the IRI, which will be of interest and great use to English language teaching professionals in other countries. Through the chapters we see issues explored which will be familiar to educators in many countries: the tensions between traditional practice and more recent pedagogical thought, issues around the need to be sensitive to the promotion of English language teaching and potential effects on local culture and identity, and important questions concerning the importance of intercultural awareness and the protection of local values and principles in the face of increasing international communication. These subjects will be familiar to those working in language teaching around the globe, and we hope that the particular context of these questions in the IRI will spur the development of others' work in their own countries and contexts.

The British Council has been supporting the teaching and learning of English in the IRI since 1942, and we continue to support teachers and learners of English across the country. As we are in the process of building stronger relations with the IRI to better enable us to deliver a mutually beneficial cultural relations portfolio, we sincerely hope that this volume is seen as another step forward in developing more understanding, and rebuilding trust.

**Danny Whitehead**

*Director Iran, British Council*

*March 2015*





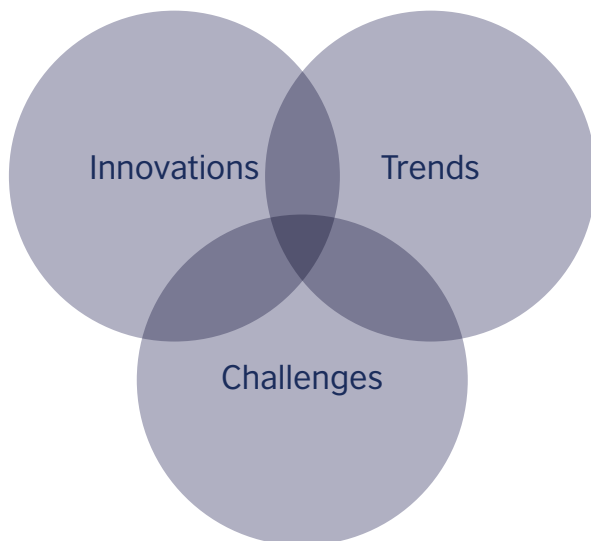
# Overview

Chris Kennedy

I have interpreted the design on this volume's front cover as an abstract representation of a mosaic. Such a design is appropriate and relevant since the purpose of this collection is to provide a mosaic, although inevitably incomplete, of English language teaching (ELT) developments in Iran, in order to give readers a picture of the variety of impressive professional activity in that nation. I hope this volume's content will provide a state-of-the-art baseline of interest and use to those outside Iran, and will encourage others working inside Iran to continue to explore local connections between ELT theory and practice. I hope too it will remind readers that their concerns, at first sight seemingly specific to their own local context, may have much in common with other situations, and that the global ELT profession shares unexpected similarities.

The organisation of this volume follows a standard systemic format, with 13 chapters on the Iranian situation, moving from cultural and socio-economic influences on language policy and practice, to syllabus and materials design (including needs analysis), to methodologies and, finally, to teacher and trainer training, involving primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, and public and private provision. However, in this brief overview, I would like to take a slightly different approach, and attempt to group the chapter topics around the three themes suggested by the title of the collection, namely *Innovations, trends and challenges*, while accepting that the themes interlink. Figure 1 below shows the three themes and their mutual linkage.

**Figure 1:** Interlocking themes



## Innovations

Foroozandeh and Forouzani (chapter 5) give a personal and informed history of ELT materials in Iran, culminating in the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach of the current *Prospect* secondary school series, which, in its early stages, highlights national culture and the importance to students of the local context. Both Leather and Motallebzadeh, and Davari and Aghagolzadeh (chapters 13 and 1 respectively) mention the importance of the materials for the future of ELT in Iran, but stress that the move towards CLT should not cause the abandonment of current more traditional practices. It is premature to see how well the courses will embed within the system, although student heterogeneity, variation in school resources, and the mismatch between traditional national university entrance examinations and *Prospect* pedagogy give a flavour of potential struggles ahead. However, it is encouraging that the materials and particularly teachers' reactions to them are being evaluated and hopefully evaluation will continue and be extended to feedback from students.

Other innovations relate to methodology and to examples of teacher-initiated classroom-based research. Zandian (chapter 9) reminds us of the importance of literature as an integral part of ELT classrooms. She suggests an effective procedure for promoting both intercultural awareness and exposure to different varieties of English in order to encourage student critical reflection on the nature of native-speaker English, in the Iranian context, standard American and British English. She achieves these aims by selecting literature written in English by migrants, including those from Iran, who are able to give insights through their writings into their bicultural lives. She draws on her experience in the secondary school sector, but her approach could as effectively be used with older students and adults. Mohabbatsafa and Hüttner (chapter 6) introduce language games into a primary school classroom, and demonstrate that the new methodology and materials change the nature of the communication from a teacher-dominated, passive class to one where pupils play more interactive roles with each other and the teacher. Seifoori and Fartash (chapter 7) investigate the attitudes of language institute teachers and students to different types of classroom organisation, whole-class work, group/pair work and individual work, and show that although teachers declare a preference for the more student-organised group/pair work, the class in reality remains teacher dominated. Memari Hanjani and Li Li (chapter 8) explore the use of collaboration and peer review in university writing classes, techniques according to the authors that are not common in the Iranian system, as they involve considerable changes in attitudes and beliefs on the part of teachers and students. The authors suggest a staged approach to the new methodology, using collaborative techniques initially where students work together on essay comments from the teacher, and then, depending on student motivation, introducing the more radical peer review in which students evaluate each other's essays. The interesting question these four studies raise is how to move from individual classroom innovation to its integration in the wider educational system, which takes commitment, time, resources, attitudinal change and training.

These studies are characterised by a move towards a learner-centred curriculum, something we shall see later in the Trends section below, and the article by Cortazzi et al. (chapter 10) is also part of this development. Using the techniques

of metaphor research on a large group of university students, the authors were able to collect an array of metaphorical comments from the students, revealing insights into student views of their teachers, and their cognitive and affective characteristics. This creative exercise was of benefit to students who could discuss their findings and reveal, through the mediation of metaphor, their attitudes towards their teachers and towards teacher opinions of them as students. Such identity research could also be a powerful awareness-raising tool for supervisors (Baleghizadeh, chapter 12) and teacher training programmes. Leather and Motallebzadeh (chapter 13) describe a project that has as its ultimate objectives the training of English teachers, but they start from the premise that in order to achieve successful teacher training, you need to train professional cohorts of teacher trainers who can themselves train additional trainers to, in turn, develop teachers. Such cascade models of trainer and teacher training are becoming widespread in many situations in which large numbers of teachers need to be trained nationally, although cascade projects are not easy to implement. The authors present a detailed account of the processes needed for successful implementation, and suggest that insider–outsider collaboration can work well if both parties work together constructively in negotiating a trainer programme content that is receptive to new ideas but can be adapted to fit local circumstances.

## Trends

The ELT trends described in this collection derive from higher-order socio-economic and political developments occurring in Iran and in the wider world. Tavakoli and Hasrati (chapter 11) see international trends such as globalisation impacting on higher education (HE) worldwide, leading to HE expansion, business-oriented HE institutions and transnational student mobility, developments which in turn have affected Iranian state and private universities in general and MA ELT programmes in particular. Intake in such programmes has increased, with some worries about quality. The MA curriculum content, according to the authors, has not radically changed, though younger staff introduce piecemeal changes to their own courses, an example of bottom-up change which eventually might lead to more widespread content change if a critical tipping point can be reached.

Iranian students, in common with students internationally, are concerned about getting qualified, and wish to achieve academically in Iran, but HE internationalisation has also led them to look outside the country for future higher qualifications and in some cases longer-term careers. Indeed Ardavani and Durrant (chapter 3) warn against an exodus of young professionals, though they also state, together with Davari and Aghagolzadeh (chapter 1), that students want to contribute to Iran's growth and many state they wish to return after qualification. One of the carriers of internationalisation and globalisation has of course been the English language and Iran has not been immune from the results of its expansion. Several authors in this collection (Ardavani and Durrant, chapter 3; Davari and Aghagolzadeh, chapter 1; Zandian, chapter 9) believe that English is now a necessity and is acting as a bridge between Iran and other communities internationally, and, as a consequence, emphasise the need for intercultural training. Mirhosseini and Khodakarami (chapter 2) examine the demand for private sector English language institute provision and institutional language policies resulting from the expansion of English as an International Language (EIL). It is

clear the institutes surveyed are less concerned with national language policies than with responding to student demands and satisfying client expectations in order to create conditions for a successful business operation. Private institutes in this sense may be regarded as more learner-centred than state organisations, and such commercial attitudes may account for the use in the institutes of international rather than local Ministry-endorsed textbooks, and a concern for international measures of language achievement. However, I have already indicated in the section on Innovations above that there is greater interest in learner-centeredness also in the public sector, reinforced by Mazdayasna and Molaei's work (chapter 4) on needs analysis at secondary level, who argue strongly that researching learner needs, wants and desires is a necessary first stage prior to designing syllabuses and materials.

The widespread use of EIL may slowly be changing current Iranian attitudes towards standard US and British varieties of English (Zandian, chapter 9). If students are exposed to varieties of English spoken by expert users who are not American or British, they may realise that the high prestige accorded to US and British standard varieties may be misplaced, or, at least, may be too narrow a focus. Indeed, the research conducted by Ardavani and Durrant (chapter 3) seems to indicate that a number of university students wish to identify with an international community outside Iran as well as with their local community, and that, although these communities are accessed through languages including English, a 'native-speaker' variety is no longer appropriate or relevant. This is likely over the longer term to lead to a situation of variety-switching or variety-mixing, in which individuals will tune into a communication and unconsciously select an appropriate variety for particular purposes.

## Challenges

Mirhosseini and Khodakarami (chapter 2) argue for a more explicit, less fragmented English in education policy and regret the lack of a fit between statements of policy from official bodies and their implementation at lower levels in the educational system. Such a loose linkage between policy and practice is common in many national educational systems since, even in highly centralised systems, it is difficult to control the variables and differing agendas existing between the various agents of planning, from Ministry officials to curriculum teams, materials writers, testers, inspectors, trainers, school directors, teachers, students and parents. Indeed, there may be an argument for welcoming loose linkages, since they give a degree of freedom to the various agents to innovate away from the constraints of policy, though the danger is, of course, one of fragmentation of purposes and objectives. An alternative is to replace a top-down process with a reverse planning approach, which begins with an assessment of classroom realities and subsequently plans upwards through the different layers of the policy-making process. As an example, Mazdayasna and Molaei (chapter 4), Foroozandeh and Forouzani (chapter 5) and Zandian (chapter 9) mention the small number of hours allocated to the English language school curriculum, which means that English proficiency targets are unlikely to be achieved. A reverse planning approach would either accept the lack of learning time and consequently produce realistic curriculum objectives or, alternatively, attempt to increase the number of hours to match desired proficiency outcomes.

One of the reasons for the hesitant Iranian language policy is an unresolved ambivalence towards English reported by several contributors. The ambivalence is expressed in different ways, as a tension between tradition and modernity (Cortazzi et al., chapter 10), or as a struggle between an enemy of local culture and a necessary tool for progress (Davari and Aghagolzadeh, chapter 1), and between local and international identities, resulting, at least at lower secondary level schooling, in an emphasis on local culture (Leather and Motallebzadeh, chapter 13).

Training and development appears to be a crucial area. Mazdayasna and Molaei (chapter 4) and Davari and Aghagolzadeh (chapter 1) appeal for language awareness and language development training for both students and teachers to ensure the success of the new school English coursebooks, and Baleghizadeh (chapter 12) supports targeted cognitive and affective approaches in the training of teacher supervisors to respond to the diverse needs and wants of supervisees. Seifoori and Fartash (chapter 7) caution against a technocratic view of training, preferring strategies that engage with teacher attitudes and beliefs to raise awareness of and reflection on different modes of thinking and acting.

So I return to the mosaic. I have tried to present here a number of the mosaic pieces and their size and significance to give readers an idea of the mosaic's composition. It is of course incomplete, as pieces remain to be added and some have been lost. A finished mosaic is unlikely in any case, as it will constantly change as pieces are replaced and renewed. But for a larger, more complete picture, I recommend readers to the individual chapters in this collection. You will enjoy them.

## **Acknowledgments**

I should like to thank all those working in and for the British Council, especially Ellen Berry, Leila Tehrani and Danny Whitehead, for their unstinting help and assistance in producing this volume. My thanks in particular must go to the many contributors who kept to tight deadlines, agreed without complaint to changes and amendments, and produced work of high quality.

**Chris Kennedy**  
*University of Birmingham*



# **To teach or not to teach? Still an open question for the Iranian education system**

Hossein Davari and Ferdows Aghagolzadeh





# 1

## To teach or not to teach? Still an open question for the Iranian education system

Hossein Davari and Ferdows Aghagolzadeh

### Introduction

The story of English language teaching (ELT) in Iran, as one of the most notable anti-imperialistic countries in the world, has experienced a host of extreme ups and downs. English is simultaneously known as the language of enemies (i.e. the United States and the United Kingdom) on the one hand (Borjian, 2013) and as a tool for progress (Riazi, 2005) on the other. While Hayati and Mashhadi (2010) believe that Iran's policy on English stops short of nationwide dissemination of the language, the last decade in particular has witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of Iranians learning English. Davari (2013) points out that the rapidly changing situation in Iranian society is transforming English language learning into a fashionable trend, with the result that ELT is not only a flourishing market in the private sector, but is also playing a major role in English language spread.

The undeniable shortcomings of English learning in centralised public sector English learning, leading to low efficacy and inefficiency with the growth of a new booming private sector ELT market, have been mainly rooted in policy makers' ambivalence towards English education. To prove this claim, instances of inconsistency between available policy documents and paradoxical practices are reviewed to show that the issue of ELT remains a sensitive and covert unsolved question.

### The ups and downs of English in Iran

In recent years ELT in Iranian society has been documented in several publications including Dahmardeh (2009), Farhady et al. (2010), Hayati and Mashhadi (2010), Ataee and Mazloom (2013), Borjian (2013), Davari (2013), and Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2014) among others. What these works have in common is the belief that under succeeding political and social changes, English has ebbed and flowed in this society. For example, before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, as a result of extensive collaboration with the West, especially the USA and UK, on economics, education, political and cultural affairs, English and English education received much attention such that French lost ground to English, which at that time became Iran's principal foreign language. Two prominent centres, namely the British Council

and the Iran-American Society (IAS), contributed to the development and expansion of English as their official mission. The list of their contributions in this field is extensive:

- offering general English courses and international English proficiency exams
- conducting teacher training summer workshops
- providing consultation to Iran's Ministry of Education
- promoting English for specific purposes (ESP) methodology and textbooks at university levels
- recruiting native-speaker English language instructors
- providing grants for English language teachers and professors to study English literature and teaching methodology in American and British universities
- holding teacher training seminars and setting up branches in major cities (see Yarmohannadi, 2005; Hayati and Mashhadi, 2010; Borjjan, 2013; Strain, 1971, cited in Khajavi and Abbasian, 2011).

Alongside such endeavours, with growing attention to English, private English language institutes came into existence. They established a growing number of large-city branches and shouldered the responsibility of English extension, especially among well-off families.

But such a heyday for English did not last long and with the advent of the Islamic Revolution, a change of scene took place. The newly established government opposed Western cultural, political, social and educational elements, and English language activity was no exception. Due to perceptions of parallelism between English language and the USA and UK, the language was faced with waves of hostility from some post-revolutionary officials. According to Aliakbari (2002), negative attitudes towards English led to a closure of the private English language institutes as well as a purge of ELT textbooks. According to Borjjan (2013), during these years, the questions as to what to do with English and whether it should stay on school and university curricula or be entirely banned were at the centre of heated debates among the new ruling powers. While such debates finally led to teaching English (Tollefson, 1991), the Revolution sought to nationalise its use. The first wave of localised ELT appeared. New localised ELT school and university textbooks were developed and the name of the Iran-American Society was changed to the Iran Language Institute (ILI) with new objectives and a curriculum in line with the ideological orientation of the newly established government.

In this situation, influenced by the conservative actions and beliefs of the government, the first educational plan with regard to foreign language learning was formulated in 1982. Due mostly to the sensitivities towards English language, despite a lack of human resources, five other foreign languages (German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian) were introduced as foreign language choices in the Iranian education system. As Farhady et al. (2010) note, following this amendment, the national curriculum committee prepared school textbooks for these languages. It was not surprising that, because of a lack of teachers as well as applicants for these languages, English remained the most dominant foreign language in the education system.

At the beginning of the second decade of the Revolution in 1989, accompanied by a wave of economic privatisation, private language institutes, formerly closed down, resumed their operations, and new private English language institutes were established. A perceived failure of the public education system, characterised by a traditional teacher-centered approach and a grammar-translation method, led to a flourishing private sector, despite some officials' sensitivity and resistance.

In the third decade onwards around the beginning of the 21st century, society paid more attention to English as the language of globalisation, communication, science and technology. Influences at this time were globalisation and the Internet, as well as social, cultural and educational transformations such as the expansion of higher education, the growth of mass media and the ease of communication with other societies and cultures. In the absence of any acceptable and defensible performance of public education in the field of English teaching, the private sector flourished. Despite changes and innovations in the private sector, there was no sign of change in the public education structure and an imposed top-down resistance was apparent. For example, while junior and senior high school textbooks in mathematics, literature and Arabic were revised, updated and developed in new formats, the content and aims of teaching English did not undergo any essential changes and English textbooks remained much the same.

Finally, after around three decades of stasis, resistance was partially overcome, due to increasing criticism of the status quo, the growing attention paid to English in educational and development documents, and also society's enthusiasm towards the language.

In the remainder of this chapter we shall consider some causes of this contradictory situation in which there is both a tendency towards 'more English' and a resistance leading to 'less English'.

## **Reflections on the state's ambivalent position**

While language-in-education policy is one of the key mechanisms for implementing educational language policies, until recently Iranian academic, political and cultural settings have not received much attention and no formal document in language policy, whether national or educational, has been developed or implemented.

In addition, reviewing available political and cultural documents also reveals that, in spite of the importance of English language as the main foreign language in this society as well as the long-standing sensitivities around it, there is no document specific to English language. As a result, understanding the state's orientation to English inevitably involves referring to documents that even fleetingly have dealt with English.

Our findings indicate that after more than two decades of inattention to English, it has been explicitly and implicitly mentioned in a few newly developed educational and development documents, especially during recent years. We scrutinised such documents and their connection with current practice.

The first document dealing with English language, *Comprehensive policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding globalization*, was approved in 2004. English and French are introduced as global languages that are necessary for Iran's active participation in the current world, though there does not appear to be any legal requirement for implementation. Officials '*must approach English as a necessary skill and not as an element against identity*,' (p. 18) revealing the state concern that English is a language threatening Iranian national and cultural identity. The mention of French along with English as global languages also indicates a sensitivity towards English.

Another publication entitled *The National Curriculum Document* was finalised in 2009. According to this document, besides computer literacy, knowing a foreign language is one of the two essential axes of literacy in the third millennium, but is also important in the development of tourism, business, technology, science and political awareness.

Regarding foreign language education, the document recommends a communicative approach and stresses learning all four language skills. Other tentative suggestions are:

- Due to lateralisation around the ages of 10 to 12, the age of language instruction should be lowered.
- As an optional subject, language should be taught at elementary level through games and poems.
- Local issues as well as Islamic and Iranian values should be included in textbooks.

Arabic is the language of religion, and the only taught foreign language in the formal education system is English, yet in this document instead of using 'English', the phrase 'foreign language' is still used. A sense of caution and hesitation also seems apparent behind the document's suggestions.

The third document that refers to English language is *The fundamental transformation of education* finalised and approved by the Ministry of Education in 2010. (The Ministry is responsible for all top-down decisions affecting primary and high schools, including the adoption of particular curricula, teaching methods and methodology, and the provision of resources and equipment.) This important document is the basis for any transformation and development in education during a 12-year period of primary and secondary schooling, and yet the status of English is obscure. Allocating only one sentence to foreign language teaching, the document introduces '*foreign language study as an optional (semi-prescriptive) course in the curriculum on condition that its teaching stabilises and strengthens the Islamic and Iranian identity*.' (p. 20)

Additional points are worthy of attention. Like the document described previously, the term 'foreign language' has been substituted for 'English'. The programme is designated as 'optional', and its description as 'semi-prescriptive' remains ambiguous. Its teaching is also subject to certain ideological conditions.

Reviewing these three documents discloses not only the inconsistency between them, but also shows the state's hesitation, conservatism and ambivalence towards English language. In the following section, we review some English language teaching practices in the education system.

## **From unformed policies to haphazard practices**

In the absence of any specific document on foreign language education policy (Kiany et al., 2010), together with the contradictory suggestions in the above-mentioned documents, the question that arises is: What has taken place in the field of English language teaching practices and performances during the recent decade?

As already pointed out, after three decades of an inflexible curriculum, resistance was partially broken and the first steps were taken to change the system. Influenced by the private sector's qualified success, the need for changes in the national curriculum arose. As an initial step, the first and the second volumes of a six-series English textbook for high schools were published, in 2013 and 2014 respectively, under the title of *Prospect*. In this new curriculum, mostly limited to textbooks' revision, English education has been reconceptualised not only to encourage students' active participation in the leaning process and use of the target language in communication, but also to encourage teachers to promote students' communicative skills and minimise mother tongue use. Although it is too soon to evaluate the performance of this curriculum, without any specific reform in other components, including those relating to personnel, resource and evaluation (Kaplan and Baldauf, 2005), the goals may not be attainable.

For example, English language teachers' language proficiency, content knowledge and pedagogical skills will need upgrading to meet the curriculum's requirements. Success cannot be guaranteed in the absence of appropriate in-service training for the teachers used to traditional methods and now presented with new books and content. One of the first requirements of implementing a communicative approach is the use of trained and fluent teachers, but because of a shortage of such teachers there is pressure to employ untrained teachers as an interim measure. Thus, due to an insufficient supply of qualified teachers, and a lack of in-service training to maintain and increase teachers' proficiency, the curriculum may not be able to fulfil its expectations.

The issue of time allocation also raises some important questions. Implementing a communicative approach, especially in those societies where English is a foreign rather than a second or additional language, involves substantial time allocation to increase students' proficiency. In this new curriculum the allocated time, instead of increasing, has decreased. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) suggest most foreign language education worldwide is delivered at the rate of three 50-minute periods each week. The average time in the Iranian education system is around 50 to 80 minutes per week.

Language proficiency assessment is another challenge in the education system. Preparing and administering end-of-year proficiency exams needs to be in tune with the communicative approach, yet the exams have remained much the same as before and no parallel reform has been made to the English examination system in Iranian schools.

## Concluding remarks

The chain of changes in English language instruction has some notable missing links mostly deriving from ambivalence towards the language. The main curriculum change has been limited to bringing about a methodological and cultural textbook change, and it is far from restructuring English education in terms of personnel and time.

We have seen that the last decade in particular has witnessed a remarkable increase in the numbers of Iranians learning English especially in the private sector and, at the same time, questions and criticisms have been raised about the effectiveness of the formal education system's performance. Attempting to play a more important role in this arena, the formal education system has hesitantly and conservatively begun to take some steps forward. However, our review of the gulf between inconsistent policies and questionable practices indicates that success is not guaranteed. The system has ignored important implementation factors, as noted above, casting further doubts on the Iranian education system's chance to succeed.

As long as no realistic unified English-in-education policy is developed, 'less or more English?' remains an open question.

## References

Aghagolzadeh, F and Davari, H (2014) Iranian critical ELT: A belated but growing intellectual shift in Iranian ELT community. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 12/1: 391–410.

Aliakbari, M (2002) *Culture in Language Teaching*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Isfahan, Iran.

Ataee, MR and Mazloom, F (2013) English language teaching curriculum in Iran: planning and practice. *The Curriculum Journal* 24/3: 389–411.

The National Center of Globalization Studies (2004) *Comprehensive policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding globalization* (siasathaye jame jomhuriy eslamiy iran dar ghebale jahanishodan).

Borjjan, M (2013) *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Dahmardeh, M (2009) *English Language Teaching in Iran*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr Muller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG.

Davari, H (2013) *English Language Teaching and Linguistic Imperialism*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

Farhady, H, Sajadi Hezaveh, F and Hedayati, H (2010) Reflections on *Foreign Language Education in Iran*. *TESL-EJ* 13/4. Available online at [www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume13/ej52/ej52a1](http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume13/ej52/ej52a1)

Hayati, M and Mashhadi, A (2010) Language planning and language-in-education policy in Iran. *Language Problems and Language Planning* 34/1: 24–42.

Kaplan, RB and Baldauf, RB (1997) *Language Planning: from Practice to Theory*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Kaplan, RB and Baldauf, RB (2005) 'Language-in-education policy and planning', in Hinkel E (ed) *Handbook of Research in Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Khajavi, Y and Abbasian, R (2011) English language in Iran: Why practice is more common than practise? *Canadian Social Science* 7/4: 89–94.

Kiany, GR, Mirhosseini, SA and Navidinia, H (2010) Foreign language education policies in Iran: Pivotal macro considerations. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning* 53/222: 49–70.

Riazi, A (2005) 'The four language stages in the history of Iran', in Lin, A and Martin, P (eds) *Decolonization, Globalisation: Language-in-education Policy and Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Strain, EJ (1971) English language instruction in Iran. *English Record* 21/4: 31–38.

Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2009) *The national curriculum document* (sanade barnameye darsie melli).

Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran (2010) *The fundamental transformation of education* (sanade tahavole bonyadin).

Tollefson, JW (1991) *Planning Language, Planning Inequality: Language Policy in the Community*. London: Longman.

Yarmohammadi, L (2005) 'ESP in Iran from a language planning perspective', in Kiany, G and Khayyamdar, M (eds) *Proceedings of the First National ESP/EAP Conference* (vol. II) (pp. 2–20). Tehran: SAMT.





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

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini  
and Sepideh Khodakarami



# 2

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

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini and Sepideh Khodakarami

### 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 practised 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 or 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 *servicing 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 *servicing 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

- Al-Issa, ASM (2007) The implications of implementing a flexible syllabus for ESL policy in the Sultanate of Oman. *RELC Journal* 38/1: 199–215.
- Borjian, M (2013) *English in post-revolutionary Iran: From indigenization to internationalization*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.
- Charmaz, K (2006) *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. London: Sage.
- Chowdhury, R and Kabir, AH (2014) *Language wars: English education policy and practice in Bangladesh*. Available online at [www.multilingual-education.com/content/4/1/21](http://www.multilingual-education.com/content/4/1/21)
- Comprehensive Roadmap (2009) *The Comprehensive Science Roadmap of the Country*. Tehran: The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution.
- Kiany, GR, Mirhosseini, SA and Navidinia, H (2011) Foreign language education policies in Iran: Pivotal macro considerations. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning* (Formerly Tabriz University Journal of Humanities) 53/222: 49–70.
- Kirkgoz, Y (2009) Globalization and English language policy in Turkey. *Educational Policy* 23/5: 663–684.
- Mirhosseini, SA (2008) English and a world of diversities: confrontation, appropriation, awareness. *Applied Linguistics* 29/2: 312–317.

Mirhosseini, SA (2015) Resisting magic waves: Ideologies of 'English language teaching' in Iranian newspaper advertisements. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36. (DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2014.918462) (Published online first, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2014.918462>).

National Curriculum (2009) *The National Curriculum Document*. Tehran: The Ministry of Education.

National Vision (2005) *The 20-year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: The Office of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Nero, SJ (2014) De facto language education policy through teachers' attitudes and practices: A critical ethnographic study in three Jamaican schools. *Language Policy* 13/3: 221–242.

Reform Document (2011) *The Fundamental Reform Document of Education*. Tehran: The Supreme Council of Education.

Riazi, AM (2005) 'The four language stages in the history of Iran', in Lin, AMY and Martin, PW (eds), *Decolonisation, globalisation: Language-in-education policy and practice* (pp. 100–116). Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Schiffman, HF (2006) 'Language policy and linguistic culture', in Ricento, T (ed), *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method* (pp. 111–125). Oxford: Blackwell.

Seargeant, P (2008) Ideologies of English in Japan: The perspective of policy and pedagogy. *Language Policy* 7/2: 121–142.

US Congress (1959) *The Fourteenth Report of the United States Advisory Commission on Information, The Congress of the United States*. Available online at [www.state.gov/documents/organization/175489.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/175489.pdf)

US Congress (1979) *The public diplomacy of other countries: Implications for the United States*. Report to The Congress of The United States by The Comptroller-General, July 23, 1979. Available online at [www.gao.gov/assets/130/127347.pdf](http://www.gao.gov/assets/130/127347.pdf)

US House (2001) The message is America: Rethinking US public diplomacy, Hearing before the Committee on International Relations, US House of Representatives, November 14 2001. Available online at <http://democrats.foreignaffairs.house.gov/archives/107/76189.pdf>

# **How have political and socio-economic issues impacted on the motivation of Iranian university students to learn English?**

Shahrzad Ardavani and Philip Durrant



# 3

## How have political and socio-economic issues impacted on the motivation of Iranian university students to learn English?

Shahrzad Ardavani and Philip Durrant

### Introduction

This chapter describes a study that aims to understand the socio-economic factors that motivate Iranian university students to learn English. Drawing on the notions of international posture, ideal self and imagined communities, we describe how the Iranian political context has increased students' desire to develop their English in order to enhance their career prospects, to be recognised as members of the international community and to contribute to the development of their country.

### Political and economic context

#### English education and policies at Iran's universities

In Iran, two types of university exist: state governed and private. The most prestigious universities in Iran are state governed. Entrance is highly competitive but the government pays for tuition and accommodation for those who succeed in the entrance exam. Students failing the entrance exam but still wishing to pursue their studies can join a group of private universities known as Islamic Azad University, which was established in 1982 as a solution to accommodate surplus students (Mohebati, 2004). Although it is difficult to obtain precise figures on student numbers, roughly 50 per cent of high school graduates choose a path to higher education.

Both private and public Iranian universities provide all students with the opportunity to study a core general English syllabus. Additional modules in English are available but subject to specific course requirements. The dominant method of teaching English within universities is Grammar-Translation, the main goal enabling students to read and understand English texts that may benefit their majors.

#### Iranian university students and migration

Iran, as a developing country, needs educated professionals to drive its economic development. However, it has lost a great number in the past few decades (Torbat, 2002). Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a large number of Iranians have emigrated to Western countries. They left their country between 1979 and 1988 (during the creation of the Islamic Republic and the end of the war between Iran and Iraq) and

are identified as the ‘Iranian diaspora’ (Elahi and Karim, 2011). There are significant Iranian populations living in the United States and the rest are scattered across Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia (Abbasi, 2003).

Today, many high-achieving students continue to leave Iran for the USA or other countries. According to UNESCO data (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014), 51,549 Iranian students are studying abroad. The most popular destinations are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Most common destinations for Iranian students**  
(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014)

Destination country	Number of students
Malaysia	9,311
United States	6,763
United Kingdom	3,372
United Arab Emirates	3,204
Italy	2,975
Canada	2,805
Germany	2,757
Australia	2,452
Sweden	2,440
India	2,131

Saba reports that 25 per cent of university graduates leave the country, resulting in an estimated annual loss of \$50 billion to the nation (Saba, 2011). The contributing factors towards the decision to leave the country are many, and include:

- avoiding military service
- lack of jobs in Iran (statistics show that the average unemployment rate for the year, ending on March 20 2014, reached 10.4 per cent) (*Tehran Times*, 2014)
- superior research facilities available elsewhere
- a degree from a top university in Iran does not guarantee a position that is commensurate with qualifications
- candidates for suitable jobs in government ministries and academia must conform to religious and political attitudes (Saba, 2011: para 9).

## Theoretical framework

To help understand the political and socio-economic factors that contribute to Iranian university students’ motivation, we will draw on three main theoretical ideas: *international posture*, *L2 motivational self-system theory* and *imagined communities*. This section will briefly outline each of these ideas.

### International posture

Gardner (1985) proposed the idea of *integrative motivation* – an individual’s level of desire to become part of an L2 community – as a way of understanding motivation among immigrants to an L2 context. This notion, however, does not fit well with the context of English as an international language, where an English learner may want



to be a global citizen rather than have an English, Australian or Canadian identity. Yashima (2009: 145) proposed the term *International Posture*. This term 'tries to capture a tendency to relate oneself to the international community, rather than any specific L2 group'.

It could be argued that international isolation has deprived Iranian students of such a sense of belonging to an international community. Iranian students who were brought up during the post-Revolution regime are discouraged from adopting the 'Western' values, which are often associated with internationalism, and have been encouraged to have Islamic beliefs and be united Muslims (Razavi and Juneau, 2001).

### **L2 motivational self-system theory**

L2 motivational self-system theory (Dörnyei, 2005) suggests that possible selves are underpinned by what learners might wish to become and what they are afraid to become. Learners' perceptions about their desired future self-states have an impact on their behaviour by accentuating the discrepancies between current and future desired states. For example, the ability of the general Iranian population to travel freely around the world is restricted, due to diplomatic and visa arrangements. However, many students have a strong desire to achieve internationally oriented future self-states and think that learning English can lead to many opportunities outside their native country.

*The ideal L2 self*, according to Dörnyei (2005: 106), is 'the L2-specific aspect of one's ideal self'. This is the ideal image of the L2 user that one likes or desires to be in the future, including wishes, hopes and dreams. If learners conceive of themselves as successful persons in their future career or education, this self-image will move them to reduce the discrepancy between their actual selves and the ideal image of themselves. Higgins (1987: 34) notes that this process is not always conscious: 'One's self-discrepancies can be used to assign meaning to events without one being aware of either the discrepancies or their impact on processing'. For instance, Iranian students might experience tension if they envision studying or working in an English-speaking country (an ideal self) but are not currently able to speak English (current self), so to overcome this tension they enrol on a language course.

*The ought-to L2 self* is the L2-specific aspect of one's ought-to self. This factor in the L2 motivational self-system refers to skills that one believes one ought to achieve as a result of perceived duties, obligations or responsibilities (Dörnyei, 2005). Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) comment that this image is noticeable in some Asian countries, where students are motivated to master a foreign language to fulfil their family expectations.

Research into the L2 motivational self-system reveals similarities with Higgins's (1998) distinction between two types of instrumentality, 'preventional and promotional', both of which are relevant to students' desire to learn a language. Preventional instrumentality is similar to the ought-to L2 self (for example, studying hard to pass an examination in order not to disappoint parents). Promotional instrumentality is similar to the ideal L2 self where motivation is formed by desirable self-images in the personal, social and professional context of the target language. Perhaps surprisingly, a comparative study conducted by Taguchi et al.

(2009) found a high correlation between the instrumentality-promotional construct and the ought-to L2 self. The first author of this chapter has observed that, on account of the political turbulence in Iran during the last 35 years, many Iranian parents who did not have a fulfilling youth themselves believe that if their children are successful then this reflects on their success as parents – their own parental form of success. So they nurture the thought in their children that learning English will open a new horizon for them in other countries. Studying English in order to go overseas may therefore be promotional for these students who were brought up to fulfil their parents' desires.

Apart from these two future self-guides, the L2 motivational self-system encompasses an L2 learning experience dimension. The L2 learning experience includes and puts more emphasis on '*learners' attitudes toward second language learning and can be affected by situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience*'. (for example, teacher, peers, materials) (Dörnyei, 2005: 469)

In conclusion, the L2 motivational self-system suggests that there are three primary sources of motivation to learn a foreign/second language: learners' visions of themselves as effective L2 speakers, the social pressure coming from the learners' environment, and positive learning experiences.

### **Imagined communities**

Learners are able to connect with imagined communities that are beyond the local, intangible, and not immediately accessible (Kanno and Norton, 2003). The images shape the ideal L2 self, and the learner is seen as a social being interacting with other members of the imagined community (Ryan, 2009).

The combination of Norton's idea of imagined community (2001) and Dörnyei's ideal L2 self model (2005) suggest a model of motivation in which learners build an ideal image of themselves as users of the language in the target community. Investment in an imagined community influences identity construction and engagement in learning (Wenger, 1998; Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001). The imagination of the Iranian people since the Revolution has been a political tool for compliance with promises of an ideal future. However, the capacity to create their own imagined future communities among young Iranians now seems well developed and, paradoxically, is a political area over which the government has less control, as shown, for example, in several Iranian student protests (Erdbrink, *Washington Post*, 2009). These images may affect learners' investment in the target language and achieving future aspirations is clearly a motivation for what learners do in the present. A student studying engineering at an Iranian university may start learning English because he imagines himself as a successful engineer in the USA, and English is an important means of gaining this future affiliation. According to Appadurai (1996), the imagination is mediated by communication technology and migration, with the internet and various media having a great impact on what it is possible to imagine. However, imagination should not be considered the same as fantasy. Simon (1992: 4) makes a distinction between 'wishes', which might not require action, and 'hopeful imagination', which requires action for a better future.

## Research methods

The study described here is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with eight students (four male, four female). Participants were studying in the departments of Mathematics, Software Engineering, Information Technology, Medical Sciences and Graphic Design at four state universities. Interviews were conducted in participants' native language (Farsi) and lasted between 20 and 30 minutes each. They were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Transcriptions were organised into comprehensible themes, according to the methodology described by Berg (2009). A mind-map of each participant's comments was created. The main branches were deductive categories while sub-branches were inductive categories that emerged from the data. Micro-categories were listed and given a number and the corresponding quotes from each interview were filed in the appropriate category. The quotes were cross-referenced with the name of the participants and quantitatively analysed. For a better overview, micro-categories were grouped into larger contextual groups. Finally, a report was compiled for each branch with sample quotes.

For the purposes of this chapter, participants' quotations were translated into English by the first author.

## Findings

The research identified Iranian students' desire to leave Iran as the main factor influencing their motivation to learn English. They believe they cannot fulfil their aspirations in their own country, and fear losing the opportunities and qualifications on offer in other communities. However, many intend to return to their host country to contribute to its development and success. The following sections discuss the key aspects of this motivation.

### **The significance of career aspirations with regard to language learning**

The main influence for the participants to learn English is the strong desire to go abroad to develop their careers. The younger generation looks for either better or different qualifications or career opportunities than those available in Iran.

Seven out of eight participants claimed that they are improving their English because it is directly linked to their views of personal enhancement in terms of education and career outside Iran. There is an anxiety that remaining in the country may inhibit future career prospects:

*I will use English to educate myself in my speciality ... using English towards a medical residency and fellowship in the USA. (Interviewee M)*

*I am planning to apply for higher education in Canada; I will study in English, without which I would definitely not have better success either in my education or later on in my profession. (Interviewee E)*

Responses varied depending on the interviewees' chosen career paths. For Interviewee M, English is fundamental to her ambition to become a medical doctor. Economic aspiration is not important to her, as she is more interested in how English can improve her ability to become a good doctor.

*As I am studying medicine, most textbooks are in English ... Medscape updates us with the top medical news in English. I need to know English to use these applications, interact with my patients and future colleagues. (Interviewee M)*

Interviewee E links her future career as a scientist to a strong engagement with the international scientific community:

*[...] even if I study my PhD in Iran, as a scientist I would like to go to international conferences and be in touch with other countries. (Interviewee E)*

Interviewee H suggests:

*If I want to work in a governmental organisation, where the salary is good with a lot of benefits, I need to have connections rather than qualifications, but in the US, there is a meritocracy and I would have job security and a reasonable salary based on my qualifications. (Interviewee H)*

While these participants were highly motivated from the start of their studies, they still want to achieve more, and to this end they feel the need to go beyond the borders of Iran. While one reason for wishing to leave Iran may be economic, another relates to the benefits that engaging in the international community can bring to professions, in particular those in academia.

The above quotations indicate that, while career goals are an important driver, the students are also driven by a desire to maintain social or intellectual status, to gain intellectual self-improvement and to stay connected with international citizens while remaining inside Iran. They view knowing English as a means to look beyond their borders and promote their own social, cultural and national identities, and as a tool for spreading their ideas.

### **Students' career aspirations in the imagined community**

The students' imagined future is crucial to motivation. Norton (2001) suggests that students have a tendency to construct their identity using English in different imagined communities and to regulate this by enhancing their English and taking examinations such as TOFEL and IELTS to reach beyond their existing environment and experience. The motivation to learn English, together with the ability to communicate in English, may indeed break down barriers to 'achievement' and extend their community beyond the borders of their country.

In some cases, the term 'imagined community' actually becomes something of a real community, which Appadurai (1996) claims is mediated by the internet and by migration, when students living inside Iran communicate with students outside it. This direct link to the imagined community heightens motivation to learn English (Appadurai, 1996), encouraging students in Iran to decrease the discrepancy between their current situation and their ideal self in their imagined community. As Interviewee B points out:

*[...] outside Iran we would have free access to scientific and academic information ... Although we can improve in our own society ... this improvement is easier in other countries ... we have asked our friends abroad, and they all confirmed that. (Interviewee B)*

The majority of participants mentioned a better social status based on meritocracy, freedom of expression and freedom at work as their aspirations in the imagined community.

These aspirations, which are components of Iranian students' desired future self (Dörnyei, 2009), heighten their motivation and enable them to surmount some of the barriers that would otherwise inhibit learning. Such an increase in motivation could be viewed as a focused *escapism* – an avoidance of reality by absorption of the mind in an imaginative situation (Dictionary.com, 2014) – which assists the students in overcoming some of the perceived barriers that otherwise inhibit learning within their home country. Idealised notions – of freedom of expression, quality of life, high standards of education, security and peace – aid participants to connect themselves to the imagined community and to distance themselves from less desirable elements of their present situation:

*I would have freedom of expression, and also I would have more freedom at work, therefore I can apply new ideas in my career and be more creative since I have greater freedom ... To achieve a high education and a better life in the USA requires applying for the visa as a first step. As an Iranian student I have to work hard and I have to travel to another country to apply for a visa. (Interviewee H)*

### **The significance of the political context with regard to language learning**

The political context is a recurring pivotal theme present in almost every participant's comments. In this section, two main themes will be discussed: firstly, the political implications of language and identity; secondly, the significance of language learning as a motivation to contribute to Iran's development and success.

#### **Language, internationalism and identity**

In response to the question, *Will you use English in order to be known as part of the world of native speakers of English, or would you like to be known as a person who is bilingual and belongs to an international community?*, one participant noted that there is a political stigma attached to her identity that could limit her aspirations. This motivates her towards international community membership in order to distance herself from her Iranian identity as a protection against discrimination on the basis of her nationality. She utilises an international identity by being fluent in English to prevent herself from being labelled.

*I prefer that when I speak nobody recognises my nationality ... when people find out my nationality, they start putting me in a category and start pre-judging me. I would like to be known as an international person without the restrictions that my nationality places on me, but this is impossible; therefore I am trying to learn to speak English as fluently as a native speaker. (Interviewee E)*

Conversely, Interviewee S is keen to emphasise that while she wishes to be part of the international community and enhance her English, her Persian heritage is valuable to her and is an inherent part of her knowledge and identity.

*As well as I know English, I have an even better knowledge of my native language, Persian, the language of my literature and culture. I have realised that every day of my life has contributed to my culture and thus I do not see how I can be native speaker of English. (Interviewee S)*

All participants are willing to go overseas to study or work, interact with intercultural partners and have an attitude of openness toward other cultures (Yashima, 2002), but this openness does not mean participants wish to be identified as a member of the target language community (Interviewee E is an exception).

### **Contribution to Iran's success and development**

Five of the participants noted their hope that learning English could contribute to the development of society politically through the understanding of their fundamental rights. They declare that interacting with people from other cultures and religions could improve their country, since people in Iran do not know much about their fundamental rights, and they consider it a distant goal, whereas such rights in European countries are often seen as norms. Learning more about these rights by learning English in Iran is a solution proposed by Interviewee H:

*Some Iranians are not aware of their basic human rights, including freedom of speech and beliefs, freedom of press, freedom of religion and social equality and meritocracy. When they can interact in English with other nations, they would understand these rights, which might contribute to society or themselves.*  
(Interviewee H)

Influences from the societal and political issues mentioned above cause students to value the target language and its communities, increasing their desire to improve themselves and leave the host country with the intention to return and disseminate knowledge and skills, contributing towards Iran's advancement. The L2 motivational self system indicates a strong mutual contribution of 'ideal self' and 'ought-to self'. Some of the participants desire to learn English for ideal visions of the future outside Iran (ideal-L2 self) in order to prevent themselves, and in some cases their home country, from lagging behind developed countries (ought-to self). The findings on these Iranian students' sources of motivation seem congruent with past research suggestions (cited in Dörnyei, 2009: 18) that harmony between the ideal- and ought-to selves can enhance the motivational impact of the ideal- and ought-to selves.

### **Conclusion**

Learning English as a foreign language may be seen as a metaphorical bridge between one life and the perceived opportunity of a better life (in an imagined community). The majority of the participants consider language learning as a path to achieving success in their chosen field. They describe factors affecting this including gaining a better social status, strengthening freedom of expression, accessing the benefits that engaging in the international community can provide for their professions, and contributing to Iran's development. Finally, they see language development as a path to distancing themselves from a socio-economic domestic environment with which they are unhappy. The common thread running through all of the participants' interview responses is the value of learning a language for its perceived future benefit rather than for its intrinsic value.

The current situation in Iran is leading students to want to go overseas for their career development in order to increase their socio-economic level and be more professional in their career. This is a sad loss of skills that Iran does not want. It is important for the government to take steps in countries like Iran to provide rich

educational opportunities with the hope of a prosperous career for its competent young generation. This generation can contribute to the development of their country if they are given the opportunities to gain from the achievements of other countries and are able to impart this knowledge gained internationally.

## References

Abbasi, D (2003) Association culturelle franco-perse, Shahr Farhang.

See: Persian Diaspora.png Wikimedia Commons.

Anderson, B (1991) *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev ed). London: Verso.

Appadurai, A (1996) *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Arksey, H and Knight, P (1999) *Interviewing for social scientists*. London: Sage.

Barbour, R (2008) *Introducing qualitative research: a student guide to the craft of doing qualitative research*. London: Sage.

Berg, BL (2009) *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*, Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Bogdan, RC and Biklen, SK (2007) *Qualitative research for education: an introduction to theory and methods*. 5th ed. London: Pearson.

Charmaz , K (2006) *Constructing grounded theory*. London: Sage.

Dörnyei, Z (2005) *The psychology of the language learner: individual differences in second language acquisition*. Oxford: Routledge.

Dörnyei, Z (2009) 'The L2 motivational self-system', in Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E (eds) *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E (2011) *Teaching and Researching Motivation*, Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Elahi, B and Karim, M (2011) Iranian Diaspora. *Comparative studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31/2: 381–387.

Escapism (n.d.) Dictionary.com Unabridged. Retrieved September 13 2014 from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/escapism>

Fraenkel, JR and Wallen, NE (2006) *How to design and evaluate research in education* (6th ed). New York: McGraw Hill.

Gardner, RC (1985) *Social psychology and second language learning*. London: Arnold.

Hadfield, J and Dörnyei, Z (2013) *Motivating learning*. Harlow: Longman.

- Higgins, ET, Klein, R and Strauman, T (1985) Self-concept discrepancy theory: A psychological model for distinguishing among different aspects of depression and anxiety. *Social Cognition* 3/1: 51–76.
- Higgins, E (1987) Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review* 94: 319–340.
- Higgins, E (1998) Promotion and prevention: regulatory focus as a motivational principle. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 30: 1–46.
- Kanno, Y and Norton, B (2003) Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction. *Journal of language, Identity and Education* 2/4: 241–249.
- Norton, B (2001) ‘Non-participation, imagined communities and the language classroom’, in Breen, M (ed) *Learner contributions to language learning*. Harlow: Pearson.
- Markus, H (2006) ‘Foreword’, in Dunkel, C and Kerpelman, J (eds) *Possible Selves: Theory, Research and Applications*. Nova Science.
- Macintyre, PD, Mackinnon, SP and Clement, R (2009) ‘Toward the development of a scale to assess possible selves as a source of language learning motivation’, in Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E (eds) *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Markus, H and Nurius, P (1986) Possible Selves. *American Psychologist* 41: 954–969.
- Merriam, SB (2009) *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementations*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass.
- Mohebati, M (2004) Islamic Azad University (translated). *Encyclopedia of Higher Education* (Vol. 1, pp. 386–394). Tehran: Great Persian Encyclopedia Foundation.
- Razavi, S and Juneau, T (2001) *Iranian Foreign Policy: Alone in the World*.
- Ryan, S (2009) ‘Self and identity in L2 motivation in Japan. The ideal L2 self and Japanese learners of English’, in Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E (eds) *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 120–143). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Saba, B (2011) Brain Drain: destroying Iran one university graduate at a time. Available online at: <http://newamericamedia.org>
- Simon, R (1992) *Teaching against the grain: Texts for a pedagogy of possibility*. New York: Bergin & Garvey.
- Taguchi, T, Magid, M and Papi, M (2009) ‘The L2 motivational self-system among Japanese, Chinese and Iranian learners of English’, in Dörnyei, Z and Ushioda, E (eds) *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 66–97). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.



*Tehran Times* (2014) Unemployment has reached a critical level in Iran. Available online at: [www.tehrantimes.com/economy-and-business/115225-unemployment-has-reached-a-critical-level-in-iran](http://www.tehrantimes.com/economy-and-business/115225-unemployment-has-reached-a-critical-level-in-iran)

Torbat, AE (2002) The brain drain from Iran to the United States. *Middle East Journal* 56/2: 272–295.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2014) *Global Flow of Tertiary-Level Students*. Available online at: [www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-student-flow-viz.aspx) on 22 December 2014.

Yashima, T (2002) Willingness to communicate in a second language: The Japanese EFL context. *The Modern Language Journal* 86/1: 54–66.

Yashima, T (2009) Orientations and motivations in foreign language learning: a study of Japanese college students. *JACET Bulletin* 31: 121–133.

Wenger, E (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.



# **Needs analysis for General English courses: a model for setting priorities**

Golnar Mazdayasna and Gholam Ali Molaei



# 4

## Needs analysis for General English courses: a model for setting priorities<sup>1</sup>

Golnar Mazdayasna and Gholam Ali Molaei

### Introduction

The impact of English as a lingua franca and the growing demand for English as a foreign language (EFL) courses has highlighted a need for language awareness among EFL instructors and curriculum designers. EFL teachers' awareness of their learners' needs is vital for the effective outcome of any EFL course. Although such learners' needs are theoretically of prime importance in current learner-centered approaches, a needs analysis is rarely conducted in the General English (GE) classroom. It is argued that it is not possible to specify the needs of GE learners. However, in this chapter we highlight an example of an objective and subjective needs analysis in Iran. We show that it is possible to specify GE needs of high school students (Grade 11) and that needs analysis can be useful in any GE classroom worldwide as a basis for designing aims, courses and materials.

### Needs analysis in learner-centered approaches

One of the most important principles underlying learner-centered approaches of language learning is that teaching/learning programmes should fulfil learners' needs. Needs analysis, according to Brindley (1989), is a vital prerequisite to the specification of language learning objectives. According to Richterich (1983), two types of needs analysis are necessary: one is aimed at establishing broad goals related to language content, while the other is aimed at collecting information about learners, which can be used to guide the learning process once it is under way. These two types of analysis can be referred to as objective and subjective needs analyses. Objective needs are obtained from different types of factual information about learners and their use of language in real-life communication situations, as well as their current language proficiency and language difficulties. Subjective needs refer to the cognitive factors of personality, confidence, attitudes, and learners' wants and expectations with regard to the learning of English and their individual cognitive style and learning strategies. In this chapter, we provide an example of how needs data was collected and interpreted, and provide the reader with a basis for judging whether it is possible to specify learners' needs in the GE classroom, and whether or not it is a potentially useful exercise.

---

<sup>1</sup> The research reported in this chapter refers to an earlier set of ELT coursebooks and not to the *Prospect* ELT materials described in this collection in the separate chapter by Foroozandeh and Forouzani.

The mixed-methods study involved a small-scale interview with different stakeholders including high school students and EFL instructors in the province of Yazd. The interview data provided input to the design of a large-scale questionnaire administered to 2,000 students and 20 instructors in 35 state and private high schools in the provinces of Yazd and Shiraz, to determine perceptions and attitudes of the students' foreign language needs.

## **Needs analysis questionnaire**

Preliminary interviews were conducted with 40 high school students and eight EFL instructors in the province of Yazd. The main goal of conducting interviews was to elicit information regarding the interviewees' perspectives on objective and subjective needs, problematic areas that students encounter, and their attitudes and expectations regarding the GE course. The interviewees' perspectives on the importance of language skills proficiency were elicited. They also expressed their beliefs and attitudes about class activities, pedagogy and their perceptions of communication in the foreign language. Based on the findings of the preliminary interview, two sets of needs analysis questionnaires were developed; one for students and the other for language instructors.

## **Students' needs analysis questionnaire**

The student questionnaire, using a five-point Likert scale, had seven sections. The first (items 1–6) was designed to explore the opinions of the students about their GE learning needs. The second, third, fourth and fifth sections (items 7–25) gathered students' beliefs about their needs for listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in English respectively. The sixth section (items 26–28) dealt with students' learning needs in respect of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and the seventh (items 29–33) language pedagogy. The questionnaire was translated into Persian and distributed in the high schools during the academic year 2011–12.

## **Analysis of the questionnaires**

The information from the questionnaires was coded and entered into a computer database. The responses of the three groups of participants were then cross-tabulated for each item. The questionnaire demonstrated adequate reliability (0.73). A considerable number (60 per cent) of private and state high school students and their instructors felt that learners 'greatly needed' to increase their knowledge of GE for the University Entrance Examination. A study by Khaniya (1990) revealed that a majority of EFL teachers teach their students on the basis of final examinations because they think that the students' high scores on their final exams preserve their reputation as good teachers. All formative and summative evaluation in schools and the University Entrance Examination are based on multiple choice questions.

A majority (63 per cent) of private and state high school students and 50 per cent of instructors agreed 'to a great extent' that students are interested in learning English. A majority (60 per cent) of private high school students, almost half (43 per cent) of the state high school students and a significant number of instructors (65 per cent) reported that the contents of the books were not interesting.

A majority of private high school students (75.4 per cent), state high school students (65 per cent) and instructors (75 per cent) considered it 'extremely important' that English should be taught as a foreign language from the primary school, similar to other countries such as Germany, Turkey and Japan. Nearly all instructors (90 per cent), a large majority of private high school students (78 per cent) and a substantial number of state high school students (68 per cent) agreed that there was an urgent need to design high-quality textbooks for foreign language education.

A majority of instructors (65 per cent), private high school students (54 per cent) and almost half of the state high school students (41 per cent) revealed their dissatisfaction by responding that the GE course did not help students to improve their listening skills. A majority of instructors (65 per cent) and private high school students (51.5 per cent), and almost half of the state high school students (42 per cent) felt that students needed to listen to a radio or television programme in English. Seventy-five per cent of instructors, 40 per cent of state high school students and 33 per cent of private high school students felt that students should listen to stories in English. Students are not always provided with audio-visual facilities, and listening skills in the past have not been taken seriously in the syllabuses for foreign language education.

Almost all instructors (95 per cent), and a majority of private (67.3 per cent) and state high (66.2 per cent) high school students agreed 'to a great extent' that students needed to improve their speaking ability. A majority of instructors (70 per cent) and private high school students (64 per cent), and almost half (44 per cent) of the state high school students reported that the GE course did not help students to improve their speaking skills. A majority of instructors (65 per cent) and private high school students (63.2 per cent), along with over half (52 per cent) of the state high school students, agreed 'to a great extent' that students needed to participate in class discussion. An overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of the instructors, and more than half of the private and state high school students (51 per cent) felt that students 'greatly' needed to improve their English to talk to their teachers and classmates. Nearly all instructors (85 per cent), and over half of the private (60.4 per cent) and state (52 per cent) high school students agreed 'to a great extent' that students needed to give a summary in English.

Nearly all (90 per cent) instructors, 60.4 per cent of private and 54 per cent of state high school students felt that students needed to improve their reading skill to 'a great extent' and that the GE course did not help students improve their reading skills.

Reading short simplified texts may not automatically transfer to longer and more dense academic texts. Moreover, students tend to employ a bottom-up strategy of translating sentence by sentence, common to language-oriented approaches. They are not sufficiently exposed to authentic texts and materials and are not familiar with the rhetorical patterns of paragraph organisation such as definition, description, cause-effect, and comparison and contrast (Filice and Sturino, 2002). Just over one-third of instructors (35 per cent) reported that students would benefit greatly from learning subjects such as science, geography and theology through the medium of English from primary school to the high school.

Almost all instructors (85 per cent) and a majority of private (65 per cent) and state (62 per cent) high school students agreed 'to a great extent' that students needed to develop their writing skills, which the GE course did not do. A majority (65 per cent) of instructors and private high school students (60 per cent), along with a considerable (57 per cent) number of state high school students, felt that students needed to write email messages to 'a great extent'. Nearly all instructors (95 per cent) and a number of private (59 per cent) and state (58 per cent) high school students believed students needed to provide short answers to reading comprehension questions to 'a great extent'. These results are in line with the study conducted by Kormos, Kontra and Csolle (2002), which showed that non-native students at the tertiary level in Hungary needed to develop their writing skills to write an email as well as provide explanations and instructions in the written form.

Interestingly, all instructors and a majority of private (66 per cent) and state (64.5 per cent) high school students reported that students 'greatly' needed to increase their knowledge of grammar. Similar views were expressed with regard to both vocabulary and pronunciation.

Fifty-four per cent of private high school students, 39 per cent of state high school students and 35 per cent of instructors were not satisfied with the teacher-centered approach. On the other hand, a substantial number of instructors (65 per cent), private high school students (64.4 per cent) and state high school students (56 per cent) responded positively and were in favour of using a learner-centered approach to teaching GE courses.

Fifty-three per cent of private high school students, 45 per cent of instructors and 40 per cent of state high school students were not satisfied with English courses, including the textbook, the time allocated and the methodology. These findings are in line with Allami et al. (2009) who concluded that English language teaching materials developed by the Ministry of Education did not conform to high school students' demands. Nearly all instructors (90 per cent) and a majority of private (65 per cent) and state (61 per cent) high school students reported that students were in favour of class activities such as role playing, pair and group work.

## **Results and interpretation of the data**

The in-depth needs analysis conducted across different public and private high schools in the two main provinces gave us an opportunity to examine students' objective and subjective needs from different perspectives. These perspectives both supported and complemented each other. The findings showed a high rate of agreement/consistency among the stakeholders concerning the use and importance of the four skills, learning needs, attitudes towards language instruction, content, methodology and length of the GE course.

Both groups were aware of students' difficulties. The instructors' assessment of students' proficiency revealed that they did not have satisfactory proficiency levels in English. According to them, the GE course emphasised micro-linguistic aspects of reading skills at the cost of writing, listening and speaking, and only prepared students to pass written examinations, not enabling them to use English effectively.



Students improved neither their grammatical or communicative competence, nor their ability to learn and use common core and academic vocabulary appropriately. Students reported that issues such as the limited number of credits allocated to GE courses, content, methodology and activities did not help them reach the level of proficiency needed to complete realistic tasks in their prospective careers. Results revealed that although students and instructors realised the importance of using English to be successful in their studies and future careers, and, in spite of the fact that students were strongly motivated to improve their English language skills, school foreign language education had failed to satisfy students' expectations and increase their level of English. Nunan (1989: 176) asserts that *'the effectiveness of a language programme will be dictated as much by the attitudes and expectations of the learners as by the specifications of the official curriculum'*. The results suggested that EFL instructors should reconsider their roles and widen their repertoires of language teaching strategies. There is a great need to raise the awareness of prospective EFL instructors concerning daily lesson planning. There is an urgent need to make policy makers, ELT educators and language instructors aware of the needs, wants and lacks of high school students. As English is the international language of research, science, technology and commerce, it has created a new generation of learners who are aware of their short- and long-term needs.

## Reflections on GE programmes

Several points can be highlighted from the results of our research regarding GE programmes. The initial stage before designing a GE course is to conduct a needs analysis in order to assess the students' needs, wants and lacks. Needs analysis, which is a prerequisite for establishing course objectives, materials selection and choosing appropriate tasks and activities, seems to have been neglected in GE programmes.

Second, the materials, methodology and activities in GE programmes do not apparently help students to increase their English language proficiency. Teaching materials should be flexible in terms of quantity and difficulty, and should range from simplified texts to authentic articles. The learner should be involved fully in both the content and the language topics using an inductive, problem-solving approach to grammar, a lively layout, highly interactive, enjoyable and manageable small-group activities, project work and a task-based unit structure. Students should think creatively. More extensive methodological guidance should be provided in a teacher's book.

Third, GE programmes are examination-oriented. In their English classes students carry out various tasks included in the examination papers (for example, multiple choice, true/false or gap-filling exercises for checking reading comprehension skills). They memorise vocabulary without using the items in innovative tasks. The emphasis is on learners' preparation for tests and examinations instead of developing the underlying competence to perform tasks related to their discipline-specific studies.

Fourth, the aims and activities of any GE textbook should be analysed and understood by investigating the input and interactional modifications necessary to promote desired learning outcomes in the class (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). For example, Crace and Acklam (2006) clearly defined the type of input presented to learners and the type of output expected. They used a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to teach grammatical points. The content was based on both the meaning and form of the language. Authentic texts were included in integrated reading, listening and writing tasks. Learners were meant to be active in class, discussing different issues and using tasks provided.

Brown (2001) suggests an integration of the four skills in course content. A lesson framework for a reading course might look as follows:

- A pre-reading *discussion* of the topic to activate schemata.
- *Listening* to a lecture or a series of information statements about the topic of a passage to be read.
- A focus on a certain *reading* strategy, say, scanning.
- *Writing* a paraphrase of a section of the reading passage.

Brown's framework requires students to discuss, listen, read and write about the topic.

Fifth, students need guidance in expanding their lexico-grammatical repertoire. Learners' difficulties in reading, translation and writing are often caused by either limited vocabulary or its inappropriate application.

Sixth, a GE curriculum needs to integrate strategy training into the reading lessons so that students can use strategies effectively. Reading strategies should be introduced while reading passages and they should be integrated with writing instruction. Students need explicit teaching of different reading strategies in order to become better readers. ELT instructors should explain the strategies and their importance in improving reading comprehension. Teachers should model the strategies, and give feedback. In addition, students need to develop study skills. Study skills encompass a wide range of activities. They include listening and note-taking, reading skills such as skimming, scanning, guessing meanings from context and using the dictionary, discussion and oral presentation, and writing skills such as paraphrasing, and summarising.

Thus, it is important to design materials that focus on developing the students' underlying competence. Co-texts and such devices as graphs, diagrams and semantic maps were not included in the coursebooks consulted during our research. The materials did not follow principles of discourse analysis, genre analysis or reading skills and strategies. The textbooks were not accompanied by a teacher's manual. There were no teaching training workshops, nor any attempt to observe how the courses were being implemented.

## Conclusion

Most GE courses in schools have been conducted without assessing students' learning needs, the indispensable first step in curriculum development. This has resulted in the criticism that courses are unrealistic and unable to prepare the students to face the challenges and demands in their prospective careers. The relevant factors that policy makers and ELT teachers should consider will now be highlighted based on the findings of the present study.

There are many factors to take into account, including (1) students' learning needs, (2) learners' present knowledge and knowledge gaps, (3) course objectives, and (4) resources available, in terms of staff, materials, equipment, finances and time constraints.

Several procedures such as interviews, observations and questionnaires have to be employed to gain insights into students' objective and subjective needs. The needs analysis results will determine the necessities, lacks and wants to be incorporated into the syllabus and become the basis for specifying course objectives. The findings of this study indicated the importance of the students increasing their academic literacy in both productive and receptive skills, implying that all four skills should be integrated in course content.

Results revealed that students were dissatisfied with textbook content and teaching methodology. Findings also indicated students' preferred participation in class activities through pair work and group work, learning through discussion and reasoning. The methodology used should be learner-centered rather than teacher-centered. A GE programme would foreground work on lexis, grammar and discourse, with reading and listening texts used as input to activities.

Techniques such as role playing and problem-solving activities should be used to increase students' proficiency in the oral/aural skills. Students should be encouraged towards autonomy. As Waters and Waters (2001: 379) suggest, *'by posing study problems rather than simply providing ready-made answers right from the start of the learning-to-study process, the basic constituents of effective study become not only the object of the learning but also its means.'* They believe students should adopt a critical, questioning approach to studying, and should be given activities to encourage critical thinking and self-confidence, and to improve such skills as reading, note-taking and summarising.

Becoming an effective teacher of GE requires experience, training, effort and commitment. The training and education of ELT teachers in linguistic and pedagogic knowledge must be supported by all, including the Ministry of Education in conjunction with private and state high schools. It is the teacher who ultimately plays a crucial role in delivering desired course outcomes.

## References

- Allami, H, Jalilifar, AR, Hashemian, M and Shoostari, Z (2009) Are Iranian school students' language needs taken into consideration? *Iranian Journal of Language Studies* 3: 125–142.
- Brindley, GP (1989) 'The role of needs analysis in adult ESL program design', in Johnson, RK (ed) *The Second Language Curricula*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, HD (2001) *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Crace, A and Acklam, R (2006) *Total English*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Filice, SL and Sturino, D (2002) Integrating authentic materials and language skills in English for pharmacy instruction. *Pharmacy Education* 2/2: 59–62.
- Hutchinson, T and Waters, A (1987) *English for Specific Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khaniya, TR (1990) *The wash-back effect of a textbook-based test*. Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics, University of Edinburgh.
- Kormos, J, Kontra, EH and Csolle, A (2002) Language wants of English majors in a non-native context. *System* 30/4: 517–542.
- Kumaravadivelu, B (2008) *Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Post-method*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- O'Malley, JM and Chamot, AU (1990) *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richterich, R (1983) *Introduction to Case Studies in Identifying Language Needs*. Oxford: Pergamon (Council of Europe).
- Waters, A and Waters, M (2001) 'Designing tasks for developing study competence and study skills in English', in Flowerdew, J and Peacock, M (eds) *Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 375–389.

# **Developing school English materials for the new Iranian educational system**

Elham Foroozandeh and Mohammad Forouzani



# 5

## Developing school English materials for the new Iranian educational system

Elham Foroozandeh and Mohammad Forouzani

### Introduction

The history of high school English coursebooks in Iran dates back to 1938 when a committee of Iranian and American educationists and professors was formed to develop a series of English books exclusively for Iranian high schools. The pre-Revolution materials belong to the years 1939–79, while the post-revolution materials fall into three periods, namely 1982–90, 1991–2010 and the new English for School Series from 2012 to date. The focus of this chapter is mainly on the development, implementation and evaluation of the new series entitled *Prospect*, but prior to that a brief account of the approach and design of the old materials from 1939 to 2010 will be given.

### Part 1: Pre-Revolution Series: 1939–79

Prior to this period, a variety of English as a foreign language (EFL) materials produced in English-speaking countries were used in the Iranian schools, but the then Ministry of Culture sponsored a huge project to develop materials for schools with contributions from Iranian, American and English educators and language specialists.

**1939–mid-1960s** The first official English coursebooks for the Iranian high schools were designed and developed by a team of Iranian and English-speaking English language teaching (ELT) specialists and linguists in 1938 and were made available to schools in 1939. The six-volume series follows the Direct Method (DM) and Reading Method (RM) with a variety of topics, but no design format can be observed in the series. The topics range from Persian literature to world literature, history, science, biography and art. No teacher's guide accompanies the series, but each volume provides the teachers with a ten-page introduction with detailed guidelines on classroom management, adopting a humanitarian approach to the teaching–learning process, and emphasising the importance of spelling and handwriting using appropriate error-correction techniques.

As mentioned above, no fixed pattern governs the layout of the lessons, so Lesson 1 in Book One may start with a poem with no warm-up or follow-up activities, while another lesson would contain grammar points with relevant exercises. A bilingual (English–Persian) glossary is also provided at the end of the book to help students with text translations.

While the high school series was developed based on DM and RM principles, the general trend in the mid-1960s was Situational Language Teaching (SLT). As a result the school series was revised, and new materials developed based on SLT principles.

**1964–78** The six-volume Graded English Series that replaced the previous series has a clear layout with a fixed number of pages and new words in each lesson. The series follows SLT principles, includes more illustrations and is accompanied by a comprehensive teacher's guide for each volume. The teacher's guide provides step-by-step explanations for teaching the language components and skills in each lesson. Different methods of spelling practice and dictation are also introduced. New words are highlighted in red in contrast to the black and white version of the old series, and each lesson contains both dialogues and short reading passages followed by a grammar point and relevant exercises.

Besides following the current trends of the time, the Graded English Series is probably one of the best series developed between 1939 and 2003 in terms of the organisation of lesson components, layout and the teacher's guide.

## **Part 2: Post-Revolution Series: 1982–2010**

**1982–90** The first revision to the high school English curriculum and materials after the Islamic Revolution took place in 1982 and remained effective until 1990. English was removed from Grade 1 of junior high schools, and students started English in Grade 2. Coursebooks were revised based on RM principles, and conversational skills received little emphasis. The four coursebooks developed for the four years of senior high school had different layouts and designs, and Book 4 as the last in the series had the most emphasis on reading, vocabulary and grammar. No teacher's guide accompanied the series.

**1991–2010** In 1991 Grade 4 was removed from the high school programme and was replaced by a new level called Pre-University for students intending to continue to university. Others could graduate from high school as soon as they finished Grade 3. The English Coursebook for the Pre-University level was divided into Book One and Book Two in a single volume, and was developed based on RM and SLT principles. There were long reading passages together with several grammar points to prepare students for the English section of the National University Admission Examination.

The Pre-University coursebook underwent fundamental changes in 2003, and it is the first high school coursebook to incorporate Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) principles in the history of school English in Iran. Warm-up activities, role plays, context-based language and colourful illustrations are among important revisions. Other high school coursebooks in Grades 1, 2 and 3 remained the same with some minor revisions.

When the 6-3-3 System (see below) was made effective in 2011, the lower secondary and upper secondary levels required totally different materials, which are now being written at the Curriculum Development Center (CDC), Ministry of Education, Iran. Part 3, below, is an account of the planning, implementation and



evaluation of the first two packages of the English for School Series, which were published in 2013 and 2014 and are used in lower secondary schools in Iran.

### **Part 3: The 6-3-3 System: English for Schools**

**Birth** After the Iranian Ministry of Education reformed the educational curricula in 2010 and officially announced the 6-3-3 System, the revision of course syllabuses for all subjects including English was put to the top of the agenda in the Organisation of Educational Research and Planning (OERP) at the Ministry. 6-3-3 refers to six years of elementary school, three years of lower secondary school (formerly junior high school) and three years of upper secondary school (formerly senior high school).

Eleven subject matter books in different grades (for example, Grade 6 in elementary school and 7, 8 and 9 at lower secondary) underwent fundamental changes in their content and design. Coursebooks for Grades 1 and 6 were re-written. As for English, the policy makers officially announced Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as the main principle governing the materials. This approach was fundamentally different from the Reading Method on which the school English books had been based for 26 years despite minor revisions.

To respond to the Ministry's call for writing new school books for the 6-3-3 system, a group of six materials developers were invited to the English Department at the Ministry's Organisation of Research and Planning. The group consisted of two assistant professors of ELT, two MOE (Ministry of Education) experienced teachers and two linguists with doctoral degrees. The members of the materials development (MD) team had experience in different aspects of teacher education, syllabus design and materials development, coursebook evaluation, genre and discourse analysis, and psychology of language teaching.

The team met in August 2011, and it took members about four months to design the syllabus for the lower secondary Grades 7, 8 and 9. More than 100 EFL coursebooks available in Iranian and international markets as well as those available online were collected. The contents of the materials were analysed with a focus on the first 10,000 most frequent words as well as grammar for young 12-year-old adults. A variety of topics were selected and categorised into personal, public, vocational and educational domains, then the Iranian learners' needs and lacks in secondary school were considered, and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) targets for A2 and B2 users were established.

**Challenges** There were several challenges for the materials developers in implementing the CLT syllabus in the lower secondary English programme.

One was a lack of school teachers' experience, or, by the same token, their disbelief in the effectiveness of managing English classes based on CLT principles. This widespread disbelief might be rooted in the fact that to succeed in the National University Admission Examination, students are not tested on their communicative competence. There are no parts in the English section that require applicants to produce any spoken or written samples of their language proficiency. They are tested on their grammar knowledge and reading comprehension skills, covered

well by the former coursebooks and supplementary materials provided by schools or private language institutes.

A second source of the teachers' reluctance to use CLT principles could be the demanding nature of the CLT method. CLT requires a considerable amount of communication in the target language, and there are a large number of teachers who are not comfortable managing the class in English. Teachers had been used to teaching English using the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) for the past 30 years, and the radical shift from GTM to CLT was a shock.

Another challenge was the limited number of English hours in the curriculum: two hours a week in a total of 26 weeks in the academic year (from September to May), far below the minimum requirement for sufficient exposure to the target language in a CLT classroom. The limited time was a serious drawback in that it was neither possible to limit the scope of the book to less than the minimum content defined for eight lessons, nor sensible to expect the teachers to cover the content and achieve the objectives defined for Book 1 in only two hours a week. After research and reflection, the materials development team decided to define CEFR A2 and B2 levels at the end of lower secondary and upper secondary school respectively.

The third challenge was the heterogeneous population of Grade 7 pupils who had just finished the six-year elementary school. The materials had to accommodate more than 1,200,000 12-year-olds from different parts of the country including the underprivileged, semi-privileged and privileged. School contexts would range from a single plain room with around five students with no CD player or any other technology, in a remote rural area with mules as the only means of transport, to well-resourced schools with smartboards, individual computers, sophisticated digital communication and an internal network connecting students and teachers. Students in these well-provided schools would usually come from a strong English background, and were often bilingual as a result of one parent being an English speaker or their having studied English in private institutes. On the other hand, students in underprivileged areas had never experienced hearing a single sentence in English, had no idea of Western culture, would not need English in their daily life and would rarely get the chance to meet a foreigner in their neighbourhood except for those who lived in a tourist area. Families' negative attitudes toward learning English and Western culture was also a concern in both underprivileged and privileged families, attitudes sometimes complicated by religious concerns.

The packages in the English for Schools Series include a student's book, a workbook, a teacher's guide and an audio CD of the conversations. *Prospect 1* and 2, already written and used in schools since September 2013 and 2014 respectively, are described in the following sections.

## **English for Schools: Prospect 1**

### **Approach, design, methodology and assessment**

**Approach** With regard to Iran's specific national values and ideologies, the fundamental shift in approach in 2010 was likely to cause objections, resistance

or, at best, scepticism about the effectiveness of CLT in a school context where teachers had been teaching English with grammar translation methods for more than 26 years. However, in line with the argument for placing the context at the heart of the profession (Bax, 2003), the authors took into consideration the immediate Iranian context in selecting illustrations, topics, proper names and interactions that could be closest to the natural target setting while conforming to national values and ideologies.

**Design and methodology** The *Prospect* series for the lower secondary school was meant to teach both literacy, which continues into *Prospect 2* and *3*, and communication. *Prospect 1* was the hardest to design with regard to the already mentioned heterogeneous population of the Grade 7 students. The alphabet letters with their corresponding sounds are presented in a context that would sound natural and easy to follow for students both with a background in English and those with no such background.

Different letter/sound presentation methods were studied in commercial ESL/EFL coursebooks. Blended (synthetic) phonics was rejected as it best suits children more than young adults who already have the experience of first language acquisition. Instead, analytic phonics that encouraged whole-word reading could be a more suitable method for this age group. Selection of the letters was decided on the basis of the frequency of the letters in Persian words and names, and the similarity of the corresponding sounds to the Persian ones. For instance, Lesson 1 introduces M and K as two of the most frequent alphabet letters with sounds very close to English *k* and *m*, and A as the most frequent vowel sound that could be added to two consonants and make the pronunciation of a minimum three-letter word (for example, *ant*) possible.

The specific alphabet letters in each lesson are presented in dialogues with the themes and functions of introducing self, introducing others, age and date, family, appearance, actions in progress, address/phone numbers/time and favourite food/ giving suggestions.

Each of the eight lessons in *Prospect 1* is presented in four colourful pages and includes the following sections:

1. **Conversation**, which takes place between Iranian interlocutors (teacher–student, student–student).
2. **Practice 1, Practice 2** (and in some lessons Practice 3), which introduce language functions (for example, questions).
3. **Sounds and letters**, which includes one conversation with the purpose of teaching and learning the pronunciation of a given sound in a context that seems natural enough to require that interaction (for example, a student who mispronounces or asks for the correct pronunciation of a word, and a teacher who helps/corrects).
4. **Listening and reading** with the purpose of teaching the students to listen and ‘scan’ for required information, read the given tabular information and check the correct boxes.

5. **Speaking and writing**, encouraging students to use the expressions and functions of the lesson to communicate with each other and engage in pair and/or group work filling out forms and completing surveys. Limited written production is required in this section. What students are required to produce correctly is the letters they have learned; other parts of the word are written with the teacher's help. For instance, in Lesson 1 they complete a form about three classmates' first and last names. Teachers encourage the students to write down the letters they know and complete the name(s) together and/or with the teacher's help.
6. **Role play**, which students carry out to practise the language functions and expressions necessary for talking about the lesson's theme.

*Prospect 1* also includes a separate workbook and a step-by-step teacher's guide. Extra photocopiable activity sheets are included in the teacher's guide, which is also available online.

**Assessment** Students' overall performance is evaluated on the basis of their scores in the formative and summative assessments specified in Table 1, below. It should be mentioned that before the 6-3-3 curriculum, two final scores were recorded in the students' report sheets for their oral and written performance during the semester, but there were no benchmarks for the oral exams. The specification of scores on the language components and skills are based on the presentation of the same items in the lessons. This highlights the importance of listening–speaking activities in the syllabus of *Prospect 1* compared with that of the previous coursebook.

All the end-of-semester exams are developed by classroom teachers for Grades 7 and 8, but the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) is planning a national standard test when students finish Grade 9 – the end of the lower secondary school.

The sample tests posted on the CDC's website guide teachers to provide their own for further practice. The stems in the sample tests are given in Persian so that the students can easily follow the directions and undertake the activities in English. For instance, the Persian stem may state that: *'Ali's father wants Ali to create an email address for him. Help Ali enter the information on the website in English.'* Ali's father's particulars (First name, Last name, Age, Job, City, Country, Contact number and Mailing address) are given in Persian, but the website form is in English. As a result, students read the information in Persian and change it into English to complete the form.

**Table 1: Assessment**

End-of-semester final evaluation			
Oral exam		Written exam	
Formative Assessment (20 points)	Summative Assessment (20 points)	Formative Assessment (20 points)	Summative Assessment (20 points)
Listening: 5 points <sup>1</sup> - Conversation - Practice - Listening and writing	- Interview: 5 points - Monologue: 5 points - Role Play: 10 points	Workbook activities and literacy skills (spelling and pronunciation)	- Listening and writing: 10 points - Reading and writing: 10 points
Speaking: 5 points - Reading, speaking, writing - Practice (functions)	NOTE: The final oral assessment for Semester 1 will be based on lessons 1–4. For Semester 2, 5 points will be related to lessons 1–4 and 15 points for lessons 5–8		NOTE 1: Final score on Written Exam = (Formative + Summative) / 2 NOTE 2: Final written exam for Semester 1: Lessons 1–4 NOTE 3: Final written Exam for Semester 2: 5 points from Lessons
Listening and Speaking: 10 points - Talk to your Teacher (expressions) - Literacy (spelling and pronunciation) - Role play			
<sup>1</sup> Benchmark: Comprehension of questions and answering the teacher's/rater's questions in English or Persian			
<b>SEPTEMBER EXAM (Repeated for fail students)</b>			
Summative oral + Summative written = 20 points			
Summative Oral (20) / 5 = 4    Summative Written (8 points listening + 8 points reading/writing) = 16			

## Teacher training workshop

In August 2013, 200 senior teachers from all provinces of Iran were invited to the first *Prospect* Workshop held at a Teacher Education Centre in Tehran. For logistical purposes, they were divided into two groups each with 100 participants, and each group was in turn put into four classes of 25. The participants mostly held Master's degrees in English, and a few participants were undertaking their PhD at the time. They were all selected and invited by the Ministry of Education.

The workshop for each of the two groups was scheduled for six days from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Four members of the materials development team ran the workshops for the four sub-groups in each week. The workshop's timetable was scheduled in a way that each sub-group would attend the training sessions of all four trainers on each day.

The workshop materials included (1) handouts on the concept of CLT with clear explanation about its principles and classroom applications, (2) PDF files of the teacher's guide, (3) hard copies of Lesson 1 and (4) the audio files of the dialogues.

Two workshop trainers presented micro-teaching sessions of a 'Welcome' Lesson because it was new in terms of approach, design and methodology. Teachers were wondering how they could start the class in English with both students with a good background in English and those from underprivileged school contexts or rural areas with minimal encounters with English, if at all. Trainers emphasised that, especially for zero beginners, there should be a balance between the use of L1 (Persian) and English to overcome students' fears and prevent discouragement. The role of body language, gestures, mimicry and realia were highlighted during the micro-teaching with participants playing the role of the students.

On the first day of the workshops, teachers, especially the experienced ones, expressed their scepticism over the efficiency of the new coursebook, the possibility of handling classes using the CLT method and generally over the whole training programme. However, after no more than two days, most teachers, including the disapproving ones, began to like *Prospect 1* and could connect with it (personal communications to authors of this chapter during the workshops).

Much time and effort was put into the planning and implementation of the training programme, but the CDC's main concern was the cascading effect. The 200 trained senior teachers were to cascade the information to teachers in later workshops to be held in their provinces before the start of the academic year in late September 2013. The workshops' DVD shared with all participants included trainers' presentations, micro-teaching, classroom lectures on the CLT approach in general and the application of the method in Iranian schools in particular, dialogue audio files, a PDF file of the teacher's guide, and the *Prospect 1* coursebook and workbook that were just published and were about to be made available on the market.

## Teachers' feedback

During September and October, the materials development team monitored the implementation of the Grade 7 English programme and received feedback from teachers who were involved in the cascaded training in their provinces.

These school teachers did not feel well briefed about the methodology of *Prospect 1*, the cascading effect with which the CDC was most concerned. They claimed they felt more comfortable teaching all alphabet letters in the first two weeks of the academic year instead of keeping pace with the alphabet presentation in the coursebook. They expressed their distrust in using whole-word techniques and had decided to teach the alphabet letters in the traditional way from A to Z.

Teachers were also teaching dialogues line-by-line instead of exposing students to audio-visual inputs and eliciting the whole meaning of expressions, as well as locating the letters that were the focus of a given lesson. Based on the teachers' feedback, the major challenge that students faced when learning the English alphabet by the analytic phonics method was the presence of other unknown letters in a given word.

Surprisingly to the team, some teachers from the less privileged provinces or Tehran districts reported that students were following the materials and were eager to take part in group work and role plays in order to communicate in English.

In response to the above-mentioned comments, the CDC held immediate meetings with teachers in different educational districts in Tehran and other provinces to reinforce the purposes behind the new methodology. The materials development team suspected that the Ministry decision to train only 200 senior teachers to cascade the training to about 7,000 teachers across the country had not been as effective as expected.

From December 2013, two months after the beginning of the academic year, more positive feedback was received regarding students' improvement in oral communication. The feedback was collected through official phone calls and emails to the CDC English Department office. Teachers sounded satisfied with students' performance compared to their experiences with the previous English books in the same lower secondary grade.

The positive feedback for *Prospect 1* generally included:

1. Respect for students' identities by focusing on the personal domain (using 'My' in lesson topics).
2. Use of real pictures instead of cartoons.
3. Use of all language skills.
4. Addition of audio files as an integrated component of each lesson.
5. Addition of a separate workbook to the materials.
6. The step-by-step teacher's guide.
7. Group and pair work suggested in all lessons.
8. Relative reflection of real life.
9. Photo dictionary at the end of the book.
10. Lively classroom atmosphere.
11. Little need for commercial materials as extra practice.
12. Real-life contexts for conversations and interactions.
13. Use of familiar names and places in Iran.
14. Attention to meaning rather than form.
15. Inclusion of 'Review' sections after every two lessons.
16. Defining the teacher's role as facilitator not the sole input provider.
17. Engaging students in interactions.
18. Appropriate use of colours.

Suggestions for improvement were varied. Before publication, the student book and workbook were reviewed by a group of school teachers and university professors, and their comments regarding style, content and design were generally applied. Teachers also shared their concerns and suggestions for improvement a couple of months after the start of the academic year as follows:

1. *Inaccessibility of hard copies of the teacher's guide.* Copies were available from the Ministry's bookstore in Tehran and not all teachers from other provinces were able to collect the copies in person. However, the soft copy was already shared on the CDC's website for ease of access.
2. *Lack of teacher expertise to teach the new coursebook.* This is related to the cascading effect that the CDC had to support later through in-service workshops and briefing sessions.
3. *No sample tests in the coursebook.* Several sample tests were made available online in the second month of the academic year, but teachers felt more comfortable with hard copies.
4. *Mismatch between the volume of each lesson and the limited time (less than two hours) for the English course in the week.*
5. *Lack of audio-visual aids in many schools to carry out the lessons' activities.*
6. *No explicit grammar section in the coursebook.* This comment conflicts with the main purpose of the materials to 'use language to learn it' in the first two years of the lower secondary level, and be introduced to grammar explicitly in Grade 9, the last grade in lower secondary. The issue has frequently been discussed since the first *Prospect* Workshop in September 2013 and was re-emphasised in the later in-service training sessions.
7. *Difficult vocabulary in the dialogues that prevented students from writing and memorising them.* Teachers have been advised not to make students 'memorise' the dialogues or words that are not the focus of a given lesson. The dialogues are intended to provide auditory input for students to attune their ears to English sounds and words, and they need to 'scan' for specific information from the dialogues.
8. *Impossibility of shift from GTM to CLT in large classes.* In workshops, teachers were encouraged to use pair and group work to help them move from the GTM and teacher–student interaction to student–student interaction in a CLT classroom. Three months after the start of the academic year, more positive feedback was received about the success of the new coursebook and the teachers' own performance based on CLT principles.
9. *No Western culture in lessons; all names, characters, and places are Persian. Using a foreign language would be more successful if learners were aware of the cultural values of English-speaking communities.* *Prospect 1* was primarily intended to enable Iranian students to use English to talk about themselves and describe their immediate environment. The culture of other groups was not an immediate need at this basic level, and its presentation has been delayed to higher levels.



10. *No use of CD in class: lack of time and/or equipment.* The materials development team attended to this negative feedback by communicating with senior teachers, emphasising the necessity of the listening component in the programme and the efforts that had been put into producing the CD with professional sound managers, radio programme directors, and native and near-native speakers who recorded the conversations at Radio Tehran.

Based on teacher feedback, the materials development team conducted several in-service training programmes between October 2013 and March 2014. Necessary revisions to the coursebook and workbook were identified, and the second edition of *Prospect 1* was published and made available to schools in the summer of 2014 for the following academic year.

## English for Schools: Prospect 2

### Approach, design, methodology and assessment

The same approach, design and methodology are defined for *Prospect 2* with differences in content and the number of lessons. There are seven lessons with the topics of *My nationality*, *My week* (daily routines), *My abilities*, *My health*, *My city*, *My village* and *My hobbies*, with relevant language functions and expressions.

Each lesson is presented in five colourful pages and consists of the following sections:

1. Conversation
2. Practice
3. Spelling and Pronunciation (corresponding to Sounds and Letters in *Prospect 1*)
4. Listening and Writing (corresponding to Listening and Writing in *Prospect 1*)
5. Reading, Speaking and Writing (corresponding to Speaking and Writing in *Prospect 1*)
6. Role Play

While *Prospect 1* focuses on literacy at word level, the focus of *Prospect 2* is extended to phrase level, paving the way for grammar teaching in Grade 9 (*Prospect 3*).

The *Prospect 2* coursebook is supplemented with a workbook in which the activities are all set in a rich context so that language use and practice will sound as natural as possible. The workbook activities for each lesson in the student coursebook is divided into two sections (Reading and Writing), each with four tasks.

To facilitate students' understanding, all instructions are given in Persian. A scenario is given so that students can imagine the situation in which they need to perform specific language functions or tasks. These activities focus on both literacy and language use. For instance, the first activity for Lesson 1 in the workbook requires students to read a world map with Persian names of countries and provide the equivalent English names/spellings. In another activity, the

students find cities with 'ch' and 'sh' in their names on the map of China. In a further activity, the names of eight countries are given in Persian, and students check the list of their football teams on the FIFA website provided as a screenshot in their workbook, find the teams' English names and rankings, and give a report to the class. To use language to talk about abilities in Lesson 3, for example, pictures of people doing certain activities are given and students decide who is good at which activity, writing answers in English.

**Assessment** The same specifications and schedules presented in Table 1, above, are defined for *Prospect 2* formative and summative assessment.

## Teacher training workshop

Similar to the *Prospect 1* training workshop held for senior teachers in the summer of 2013, a more practice-based workshop for *Prospect 2* was held in August 2014.

## Teachers' feedback

*Prospect 2* was much easier to teach for teachers who had experienced *Prospect 1*, but there were complaints about dialogue difficulty and the numbers of lessons. Due to the nationwide student heterogeneity, feedback ranged from highly positive to negative, depending on the area and school contexts.

Interestingly, schools that were located in remote areas showed positive feedback on the lesson *My Village*, as it encouraged both teachers and students to talk more about natural scenery, towns and urban life, as well as jobs common in rural areas.

Feedback is still being sent by email and posted on the CDC English Department website. A full report on *Prospect 2* implementation is in progress, but teachers' feedback to date shows a more positive view than that received for *Prospect 1* in the early months of the implementation in 2013.

Based on this first-hand account of the planning, implementation and evaluation of the *English for School Series: Prospect 1–2*, it could be claimed that materials have initiated a revolution in the teaching of English in Iranian schools in the past three decades. The Curriculum Development Centre at the Ministry of Education in Iran is engaged in an ongoing process of writing, assessing and revising the latest materials, and teachers and students are playing a crucial role in the successful implementation of the series.

# The impact of language games on the nature of interactions in the Iranian EFL primary classroom

Mona Mohabbatsafa and Julia Hüttner



# 6

## The impact of language games on the nature of interactions in the Iranian EFL primary classroom

Mona Mohabbatsafa and Julia Hüttner

### Introduction

The importance of interaction for language learning has been established in research (Ellis, 1990; Mitchell and Myles, 2004; Storch, 2007) and can arguably be seen as the basis for several pedagogic practices, such as the use of communicative language teaching or interactive language games. In the context of Iranian primary schools, described here, it was found that EFL learners are deprived of interaction opportunities and do not actively participate in classroom activities. In Grade 5 classrooms, pupils are considered more as passive receivers of knowledge and most classroom talk is dominated by teacher talk.

In order to create interaction opportunities for these language learners, a curriculum comprising role play, matching games, card games and guessing games was introduced into an Iranian EFL primary classroom to establish whether or not the use of language games can encourage pupils to participate more fully in classroom activities compared to the traditional teacher-centred EFL classroom. Six traditional and six game-based lessons were video recorded to answer the following questions:

1. What is the nature of interactions between teachers and pupils and among pupils in an Iranian EFL primary classroom?
2. How are these interactions influenced by the introduction of language games in the classroom?

### Statement of the problem

The teacher's dominance in language teaching environments has been criticised as an oppressive educational practice (Giroux, 2004). Studies have shown that in language classrooms where the teaching and learning process is dominated by the teacher and language learners remain passive receivers of knowledge, an unequal student–teacher power relation is created. The teacher dominates the learning/teaching process to such an extent that the learners' active involvement becomes harmfully limited (Nunan, 1993). Such a limitation is usually imposed on the learners by restricting their contributions as discourse participants in terms of their rights about what to say, what not to say, when to talk and how much to get involved in the classroom. This practice in language classrooms impacts the outcomes of the language learning in a negative way (Bailey and Servero, 1998; Pace and Hemmings, 2007; Walsh, 2008).

While such studies have shown that the dominance of teachers in language classrooms does not help learners' language development, some language teachers in different parts of the world still continue to use such strategies to control classroom talk (Sawyer, 2004). Iran is one of those countries where a number of EFL teachers dominate the teaching/learning process (Kiany and Shayestefar, 2010). Iranian EFL teachers still practise traditional teaching methods such as grammar translation and audio-lingual methods, which fail to provide opportunities for pupils to use language communicatively (Kariminia and Salehi, 2007).

The teacher's dominance in Iranian EFL classrooms has created a formal learning environment that Gardner (2010) believes can have a negative effect on pupils' motivation and their attitude towards learning a foreign language. A strict and impersonal relationship fails to provide a pleasant and supportive classroom atmosphere. According to Gardner (2010), a friendly teacher–student relationship and a positive classroom facilitates pupils' language learning, as learners become motivated to participate in classroom activities. Pupils do not appear to have such opportunities in Iranian EFL classrooms. Iranian teachers do not appear to provide pupils with sufficient rewarding words and positive feedback in the classroom (Nahavandi and Mukundan, 2013), which, as Brophy (1981) reports, can increase students' self-esteem and build a closer teacher–pupil relationship.

In response to such difficulties, a method of teaching through language games was introduced into an Iranian EFL primary classroom. I wished to see whether the methodology would make a qualitative shift in interactions towards a more pupil-centred model and to what extent teachers and pupils would respond to these opportunities for learning. The study was conducted with 20 11-year-old pupils and one EFL teacher in an Iranian EFL state primary classroom.

## **Method of data collection**

### **Observation and procedures**

Classroom observation was conducted over a six-week period. Observation was an appropriate method for the purpose of the study as it allowed direct analysis of the teacher's and pupils' behaviours and their interactions occurring in the classroom (Merriam, 2009). Direct observation could also provide valid and authentic data compared to other methods such as questionnaires and interviews (Merriam, 2009). In Iran, as in many other countries, research can be a sensitive area and respondents may be reluctant to say or write what they really think (Akbari and Tajik, 2008). If the data was obtained from questionnaires and/or interviews, valid and authentic participant data might not be obtained.

To decide which observation type was more appropriate for the purpose of the study, observation methods were reviewed and their advantages and disadvantages considered. As Creswell (2007) notes, participant observation requires engaging in the activities and involvement with the subjects. This type of observation, as Breakwell et al. (2000) report, can provide a great amount of data not only about the participants' actions and behaviours but also about their feelings and attitudes. However, participant observation, as Simpson and Tuson (2003: 14) argue, is the most 'subtly intrusive' form of observation, requiring the researcher to become a member of a group and participate in the activities while still acting as a detached researcher.

In non-participant observation the observer watches events and activities from a distance (Seliger and Long, 1983). Non-participation saves observer time, which can be spent video-recording sessions and taking notes of observed incidents. Moreover, non-participant observation allows observers to be more objective and prevents their feelings affecting the results (Bryman, 2004). However, like participant observation, non-participant observation has some disadvantages; for example, the lack of involvement in classroom activities could prevent the observer from seeing or hearing classroom events. It could also be difficult to clarify what pupils do or say unless engaged in the activities with them (Creswell, 2003). In non-participant observations, the presence of the researcher can affect the participants' behaviour (Merriam, 2009).

After reviewing the advantages and disadvantages of participant and non-participant observation, non-participant observation was selected in order to save time and aid objectivity. In addition, I needed to demonstrate empirically what the patterns of interaction are in a 'typical' classroom and my involvement as a participant-observer would have influenced the results (Bell, 2005). Six sessions of traditional and six sessions of game-based lessons were observed over a period of six weeks, and both traditional and game lessons were video-recorded in sequence.

Each observation session lasted for 60 minutes. Traditional lessons were taught from the coursebook and the teacher applied the usual teaching methods (grammar translation and audio-lingual methods) to teach the language items. The teacher introduced the language items such as vocabulary and grammar rules by writing them on the whiteboard and pupils copied them in their notebooks. The teacher asked the pupils to repeat the language items that were modelled by the teacher chorally and then the coursebook activities were individually practised. Pupils filled in blanks to complete a sentence, wrote the missing letter/s of a word and corrected some mistakes. However, pupils were not able to practise language items communicatively, as the nature of the coursebook activities did not require communication and the teacher did not initiate pair or group work.

In the game lessons, lessons were taught through language games. Language items including vocabulary and grammar, some new and some already known to pupils, were introduced and then included in language games for pupils to practise communicatively. The activities in the coursebook were replaced by language games so that pupils could practise with their peers collaboratively rather than working individually as they did in traditional lessons.

## Findings

The findings obtained from the analysis of the 12 observation sessions (six traditional and six communicative lessons) were recorded, transcribed and coded based on Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) coding scheme. The frequency of the communicative acts were counted in order to find out how the teacher's and pupils' communicative acts were affected by the use of language games. The verbal interactions between the teacher and pupils and among pupils were selected from the transcripts of different video-recorded lessons at different stages and then described in detail.

The findings from the analysis revealed that in traditional lessons pupils' interactions were highly controlled by the teacher and pupils did not talk and practise the target language communicatively in the classroom. Due to the teacher's dominance in the classroom, the atmosphere of the classroom was formal, which created a distant relationship between teacher and pupils and among pupils. Even the classroom set-up represented the teacher's authority. The teacher was standing in front next to the whiteboard and pupils were sitting in rows facing the teacher and the board. Pupil talk was restricted to replying to the teacher's questions or repeating the language items in chorus. Pupils sat and listened to their teacher and they were not allowed to talk unless asked to do so. Pupils were also not permitted to leave their seats unless they wanted to leave the classroom, in which case they had to seek the teacher's permission. There was no pair or group work involved and pupils were not actively involved in the learning process through interacting with each other or their teacher.

The quantitative analysis of the data revealed that modelling language items was the most dominant communicative act performed by the teacher, representing 45 per cent (N=267) of 594 communicative acts. When the teacher modelled a language item, pupils were required to repeat the language item after the teacher in chorus, which did not create opportunity for pupils to use the target language in a communicative and meaningful way. The analysis further revealed that in traditional lessons, choral repetition of language items was the most dominant communicative act performed by pupils, representing 57 per cent (N=269) of 468 communicative acts. According to Hardman (2005), choral responses do not provide opportunity for meaningful communication in class and do not allow pupils to fully engage in the learning process.

The question-and-answer sequence was another feature of classroom interaction observed in these Iranian EFL classrooms. The analysis of the data showed that display questions to which answers are known to the teacher (Dalton-Puffer, 2007) were the most common type of teacher questions in traditional lessons, representing 81 per cent (N=114) of the total number of 141 questions. The questions required short answers such as a single word or a short phrase. The teacher asked these questions to practise new language and to check pupils' comprehension of taught language items. According to Handeda (2005), practising new language items and checking pupils' comprehension are two important functions of display questions. However, this type of question does not provide interaction opportunities for pupils.

On the other hand, the use of referential questions, answers to which are unknown to the teacher (Dalton-Puffer, 2007), significantly increased in game lessons from 13 per cent (N=18) of 141 questions in traditional lessons to 77 per cent (N=117) of 152 questions in game lessons. A motivating and enjoyable classroom atmosphere was created by the use of language games (Hansen, 1994) and made pupils eager to reply to referential questions. According to Cullen (1998), referential questions can create more interaction opportunities than display questions, as they allow learners to produce lengthier utterances and use the target language communicatively in a meaningful way.



The use of language games created a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere, pupils were more relaxed and bid more in game lessons, showing more interest in classroom activities. Calculations of the data showed that bidding to participate in classroom activities increased from three per cent (N=14) of 468 communicative acts in traditional lessons to 20 per cent (N=173) of 869 communicative acts in game lessons. Pupils' elicitation questions increased from three per cent (N=16) of 468 communicative acts in traditional lessons to 11 per cent (N=95) of 869 communicative acts in game lessons. One reason for this increase was due to the fact that pupil–pupil questioning was common in language game-based lessons as pupils had opportunities to interact with each other and work in pairs or groups to perform activities. However, in traditional lessons pupils were not able to interact with each other and were not provided with pair or group work opportunities.

Reacting to the teacher's instructions was another communicative act affected by the use of language games. Pupils reacting to the teacher's instructions significantly increased from seven per cent (N=35) of 468 pupils' communicative acts in traditional lessons compared to 31 per cent (N=269) of 869 pupils' communicative acts in game lessons.

## Conclusions

As indicated in the introduction section, there is evidence that some Iranian EFL learners are deprived of interaction opportunities and classroom talk is dominated by teachers (Kariminia and Salehi, 2007). The findings in my study showed that the introduction of language games in an Iranian EFL primary classroom changed the nature of interactions, which became more pupil centred. In game lessons, pupils were more actively involved in the learning process, elicited more information from the teacher and pupils, and reacted more to the teacher's instructions. The use of referential questions was more common in game lessons, and so pupils were able to talk more and produce longer utterances. The introduction of language games to an Iranian EFL primary classroom provided more opportunity for pupils to talk and interact in the target language compared to traditional lessons.

## References

- Akbari, R, Ghaffar Samar, R and Tajik, L (2008) Developing a classroom observation model based on Iranian EFL teachers' attitude. *Journal of Faculty of Letters and Humanities*, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran 198: 1–38.
- Bailey, JJ and Cervero, MR (1998) Power dynamics in teaching and learning practices: an examination of two adult education classrooms. *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 17/6: 389–399.
- Bell, J (2005) *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers in education, health and social sciences*, (4th edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Breakwell, G, Hammond, S and Fife-Schaw, C (2000) *Research Methods in Psychology* (2nd edition). London: Sage.

- Brophy, J (1981) Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research* 51: 5–32.
- Bryman, A (2004) *Social Research Methods* (2nd ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J (2003) *Research design. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed). London: Sage.
- Cullen, R (1998) Teacher talk and the classroom context. *ELT Journal* 52: 179–187.
- Dalton-Puffer, C (2007) *Discourse in CLIL classrooms*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Ellis, R (1990) *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Gardner, RC (2010) *Motivation and second language acquisition: The socio-educational model*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Giroux, HA (2004) Critical pedagogy and the post-modern/modern divide: Towards a pedagogy of democratization. *Teacher Education Quarterly* 31/1: 31–47.
- Handeda, M (2005) Functions of triadic dialogue in the classroom: Examples for L2 research. *The Canadian Modern Language Review* 62: 313–333.
- Hansen, M (1994) Grajmy w języku francuskum. *Jezyki Obce wszkole*, March–April, pp. 118–121.
- Hardman, J (2005) An exploratory case study of computer use in a primary school mathematics classroom: New technology, new pedagogy? *Perspectives in Education* 23/4: 99–111.
- Kariminia, A and Salehi, S (2007) Communication strategies: English Language departments in Iran. *Journal of Language Studies (JLS)* 1/4: 287–300.
- Kiany, G and Shayestefar, P (2010) High school students' perceptions of EFL teacher control orientations and their English academic achievement. *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 81/3: 491–508.
- Merriam, SB (2009) *Qualitative research: a guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mitchell, R and Myles, F (2004) *Second Language Learning Theories*. London: Arnold.
- Nahavandi, N and Mukundan, J (2013) Foreign Language Learning Anxiety Among Iranian EFL Learners Along Gender and Different Proficiency Levels. *Language in India* 13/1: 133–161.
- Nunan, D (1993) *Introducing discourse analysis*: London: Penguin English.
- Long, MH (1983) Native speaker/non-native speaker conversation and the negotiation of comprehensible input. *Applied Linguistics* 4: 126–141.

- Merriam, SB (2009) *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pace, JL and Hemmings, A (2007) Understanding authority in classrooms: a review of theory, ideology, and research. *Review of Educational Research* 77/1: 4–27.
- Sawyer, RK (2004) Creative Teaching: collaborative Discussion as Disciplined Improvisation. *Educational Researcher* 33/2: 12–20.
- Seliger, H and Long, M (1983) *Classroom Oriented Research in Second Languages*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Simpson, M and Tuson, J (2003) *Using observations in small-scale research – a beginner’s guide*. University of Glasgow: The SCORE Centre.
- Sinclair, J and Coulthard, M (1975) *Towards an analysis of discourse: the English used by teachers and pupils*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Storch, N (2007) Investigating the merits of pair work on a text editing task in ESL classes. *Language Teaching Research* 11/2: 143–159.
- Walsh, J (2008) The critical role of discourse in education for democracy. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 6/2: 54–76.



# **EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions versus performances of participatory structures**

Zohreh Seifoori and Farinaz Fartash



# 7

## EFL learners' and teachers' perceptions versus performances of participatory structures

Zohreh Seifoori and Farinaz Fartash

Language teachers' use of participatory structures (PSs) such as whole-class work (WCW), pair/group work (P/GW), and individual work (IW) is rooted in their beliefs about the language learning process on the one hand and their personal experiences as language learners on the other. This study sought to explore Iranian EFL teachers' and learners' perceptions and actual use of PSs. The participants were eight teachers recruited randomly from two popular English language institutes in Tabriz, a metropolitan city in the northwestern part of Iran, and 80 EFL learners attending the same teachers' classrooms. The research data was collected via two parallel researcher-designed questionnaires that were administered to elicit teachers' and learners' perceptions of PSs, and an observation form that recorded the teachers' actual use of such structures during a typical teaching session. The teachers' performances were quantified based on a 1–4 scale indicating the use of the PSs at all teaching stages. Statistical analyses of the questionnaire research data indicated that Iranian English teachers opted for P/GW, WCW and IW, respectively. Iranian learners' preferences were for WCW followed by P/GW, and IW did not reach significance level. As for actual practice, teachers used WCW most of the time, followed by IW and P/GW, the least frequently used participatory structure. Teachers' perceptions and their actual use of PSs showed significant differences only with regard to P/GW. The findings have practical implications for language teachers and educators.

### Introduction

Language pedagogy has been described with reference to a particular set of theoretical principles and corresponding classroom practices originating from assumptions concerning the nature of the learning process and the role of learners on the one hand, and the function of teaching and the part language teachers can play to facilitate the learning process on the other. Theoretically, learning in general and language learning in particular have been construed as multifaceted cognitive, affective and social processes that are governed by numerous factors pertinent to the learners' cognitive and affective variables as well as the socio-cultural and political context of education. The interplay among these already-complex sets of parameters escalates the intricacies of the learning process. Language pedagogy is now firmly based on the conviction that a multidimensional pedagogical system is required to take account of multiple and dynamic learning processes.

Similarly, language teaching methodology has evolved into a parallel multifaceted system to aid practising teachers with the delicacies of the teaching process. Kumaravadivelu (2006) has characterised a post-method pedagogy as a three-dimensional system comprising particularity (features typical of each specific teaching process), of practicality (what Freeman (1998) has referred to as pedagogical thoughtfulness fed by reflective teaching), enabling teachers to bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice, and of possibility (participants' experiences in the socio-political environment influencing their identity formation and shaping their belief systems).

Post-method teachers, according to Kumaravadivelu (2006 op. cit.) and Wallace (1991), possess the potential to know not only how to teach but also how to develop reflective approaches despite academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula and textbooks. Yet regardless of this potential and language teachers' adherence to post-method pedagogy, either ostensible or genuine, the major question is the extent to which they have extricated themselves from the influences of pedagogical practices they experienced as students and have succeeded in performing teaching and learning activities that are compatible with their stated beliefs. Moreover, the degree of congruence between teachers' and learners' beliefs about numerous features of language learning seems of crucial importance in judging the probability of achieving educational goals and objectives. Any attempt to respond to these questions has to be based on careful scrutiny of both teachers' and learners' beliefs about a specified set of variables and corresponding classroom activities.

## **Participatory structures**

One such variable dominating classroom practice is participatory structures (PSs), or the procedures that govern how teachers' and learners' participation in classroom activities is organised. Ellis (2003) identifies two types of participation in classroom activities: individual and social. The former represents instances of learners engaging in class work individually, whereas the latter involves interaction between the participants. PSs comprise four major types: individual work (IW), pair work (PW), group work (GW) and whole-class work (WCW).

### **Individual work (IW)**

IW has been described as self-dependent learner attempts (Prabhu, 1987) to reflect on and complete a given activity or task. This type of participation accommodates individual variation. Research findings support the lower rate of errors and higher levels of fluency as a result of individual planning compared to group planning (Ellis, 2003). However, IW provides little chance for interaction with the teacher and with students, and it is sometimes difficult to monitor individual learner activities.

### **Pair work (PW)**

With the advent of communicative language teaching (CLT), the shift of emphasis from language knowledge to language use led to a realignment of teaching methodology in favour of promoting learners' fluency and oral proficiency. PW was suggested as an alternative to IW to maximise learners' talking time by



engaging them in semi-communicative interactions. This kind of learners' participation is advocated by the proponents of both strong and weak versions of CLT or, more specifically, by advocates of task-based language teaching (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT). The former underscores the need for uncontrolled authentic meaning-focused tasks that prepare learners for genuine communication in real-life situations, while the latter accentuates the significant role of controlled pedagogic form-focused tasks that give the learners the opportunity to practise and automatise their knowledge of language.

To Ur (1981), PW represents a type of collaboration that can be carried out in fixed pairs, when students work with the same partner to complete a task/activity, or in flexible pairs, when students are allowed to undertake the activity while changing partners. PW activities can include controlled role plays, simple question-and-answer exercises, brainstorming, checking activities in pairs, and more genuine and interactive personalised activities. Although the ultimate purpose in PW activities is to involve learners in speaking, they can be employed at various stages of teaching skills and sub-skills.

### **Group work (GW)**

Despite the benefits attributed to PW, this kind of learner participation seems hard to control in large classes. GW has been suggested as a classroom procedure that can serve identical purposes. A distinct difference between PW and GW relates to the number of learners participating in the activity. Depending on the size of the class, more than two students participate in GW, which optimises collaborative work and is more compatible with the principles of co-operative learning. GW activities can be designed to engage students in interactive or quasi-interactive communication for a short period of time with a minimum of logistical problems (Brown, 2001). Games, role plays, simulations, brainstorming, tasks, group discussion and project work are examples of GW activities. The final decision about which to use is influenced primarily by the lesson objectives, the learners' proficiency level and their socio-cultural characteristics.

Johnson and Johnson (1994) delineated group interaction as 'promotive' in nature since it embodies individuals' attempts to encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to complete the assigned task and achieve the groups' objectives. It also promotes caring and committed relationships, psychological adjustment and social competence, enabling learners to learn how to give and receive assistance to exchange information, challenge each other's ideas, rely on each other and act in trustworthy ways. In addition, GW enhances motivation, enjoyment, autonomy and social integration. Brown (2001) believes GW generates interactive language, fosters an affective climate, promotes learner responsibility and autonomy, and, finally, individualises instruction. However, many language teachers feel apprehensive about the use of such activities. One criticism concerns the necessity of attention to form as an essential aspect of instruction, which, according to Ellis (2003) and Williams and Burden (1999), is at risk in P/GW. They suggest that such meaning-focused activities are not necessarily conducive to attention to form, particularly at elementary and pre-intermediate levels of proficiency.

P/GW activities have also been criticised for making large classes hard to control and a subsequent loss of teacher control over pair and group interaction. Persistent use of such PSs may be linked to fossilisation of the learners' inter-language system characterised by a relatively fluent but inaccurate command of the target language.

Finally, from the teachers' perspective, P/GW can represent a serious challenge requiring meticulous planning to select appropriate activities, monitor group performance and provide subsequent feedback. Some teachers may doubt whether such activities are worth the effort because students will be exposed to imperfect language models and incorrect feedback.

There may be a consensus that the advantages of GW outweigh the disadvantages, but many teachers, particularly in EFL contexts, feel daunted by the challenge and often revert back to their tried and trusted experience-bound methods. Such GW activities might also be in contrast with the cultural expectations of many learners, who are used to learning deductively and explicitly in teacher-fronted contexts. Practising teachers may enthusiastically or even grudgingly admit the benefits of P/GW yet continue to adhere to more traditional structures such as IW and WCW.

### **Whole-class work (WCW)**

The fourth participatory structure employed by language teachers is WCW, in which all class members are the addressees in teacher–student interaction. Ellis (2003) makes a distinction between reciprocal WCW, in which the teacher is an equal participant in the interaction, and non-reciprocal activities, where the teacher is the input provider who plays the main role in the interaction. The major threat in this kind of interaction is lack of negotiation and the subsequent high rate of teacher talk. Reciprocal WCW is a feature of classroom teaching confined to specific stages of teaching, aimed at lowering learners' stress and activating their relevant schemata (for example, initial warm-up questions, or engaging participants in a genuine exchange of ideas in the form of content-based or form-focused whole-class discussion). Reciprocal questions work well when they are used to activate/establish background knowledge or explain new ideas and concepts. Whole-class discussion might be considered as an effective semi-communicative activity that encourages fluency and a meaningful exchange of ideas among the participants, ensuring teachers' access to all students, as well as being a time-efficient strategy.

Non-reciprocal WCW is an inevitable characteristic of instructional contexts where the teacher has to play the role of input provider, typically at what has become known as the presentation stage of teaching in a grammar classroom, or the preview stage of teaching other language skills. Despite these benefits and the fact that WCW can serve introverted and reflective learners, an overemphasis on such traditional non-reciprocal activities may relegate some learners, particularly the shy ones, to passive recipients who receive the input and try to retain it through memorisation. Many teacher-fronted classrooms in EFL contexts are predominated by WCW and culminate in nothing more than rote learning.

## Teachers' and learners' beliefs

Based on the definitions proposed by experts in the field (Erkmen, 2010; Nespor, 1987), beliefs and perceptions are acquired sets of assumptions originating from personal experience or expert knowledge and are strongly influenced by socio-cultural milieu. Unlike knowledge, which is conscious and stable, beliefs, according to Nespor (1987), are unconsciously held, and often implicit and resistant to change. Such beliefs might be about general spheres of life or fall within more restricted areas such as learning and teaching, and may influence learners' and teachers' beliefs and perceptions of PSs.

Erkmen (2010) linked beliefs to general or scientific knowledge that can be implicit, factual or experiential and, thus, affective and evaluative in nature. From this perspective, learners' perceptions are more directly shaped by their classroom experience since they still lack the professional knowledge essential for shaping and reshaping beliefs. Since such experience is gained within the classroom context, teachers' practices can exert a profound and lasting influence. Graves (2000) underscored the significance of the learning experience by relating teachers' beliefs to their past experience as learners. Borg (2001) viewed beliefs as a guide for thought and behaviour. Brown and McGannon (2007) emphasised many incorrect beliefs teachers hold about foreign language learning that influence their teaching, and thereby their learners' beliefs.

All learners bring their beliefs to an educational programme, which influence what and how they learn (Breen, 1989). They evaluate the activities they perform during the learning process and interpret them from their own perspectives. The effectiveness of programmes can be increased if methods match learners' expectations and if teachers, by discovering students' attitudes towards various types of PSs, can eliminate erroneous student assumptions about language learning (Ludwig, 1983). Horwitz (1988) investigated learners' beliefs and Barkhuizen (1998) investigated learners' preferred activity types. Ellis (2003) highlighted the paramount role of PSs because they influence the learning process and outcomes, reflect learners' and teachers' beliefs about classroom participation, and shape the way teachers and learners behave.

## This study

The aim of this study, previously never undertaken as far as we are aware in the context of Iran, was to explore Iranian teachers' and learners' perceptions of participatory structures, and teachers' actual performances in EFL classrooms. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What are Iranian English teachers' perceptions of PSs in EFL classrooms?
2. What are Iranian English learners' perceptions of PSs in EFL classrooms?
3. Are there any differences between teachers' and learners' perceptions of PSs?
4. What are Iranian teachers' actual performances in terms of classroom PSs?
5. Do Iranian English teachers' perceptions of PSs match their actual performances?

## Method

### Participants

Eight teachers and their 80 intermediate Iranian EFL learners, 33 males and 47 females, at two popular English Institutes in Tabriz, a metropolitan city in the northwest of Iran, participated in this study. The research sample was recruited from a population of 100 learners within the age range 20 to 42. The research data was collected over a time span of 12 weeks.

### Instrumentation

To collect the research data, the researchers employed three different instruments: a Preliminary English Test (PET), administered to assess the learners' homogeneity; two questionnaires; and an observation form. Two internationally licensed teacher trainers designed the Teachers' Perception Questionnaire (TPQ) and a Learners' Perception Questionnaire (LPQ), with each questionnaire comprising 18 items with Likert-scale responses. They were organised into three sections dealing with WCW (items 1 to 6), IW (items 7 to 12) and P/GW (items 13 to 18). A total score of 24 would indicate total agreement with each section and a positive perception, whereas a total score of 6 would indicate teachers' disagreement and a negative perception.

A classroom observation form measured teachers' actual use of the three PSs in the classroom. This form was based on items from the questionnaire and the four stages of language skills teaching: warm-up, preview, view and post-view. Four teaching sessions of each teacher were audio-recorded and the data was used to check and validate the results of the structured non-participant observation.

## Results

### Teachers' perceptions

The first research question addressed Iranian English teachers' perceptions of PSs. Statistics revealed that teachers held highly positive perceptions of G/PW (18.50) followed by WCW (17.75) and IW (14.12). A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed the participant teachers perceived G/PW as the most important activity, followed by WCW and IW. The apparent difference between G/PW and WCW was not found significant.

### Learners' perceptions

Similar statistical analyses were performed on data obtained from the LPQ to find out learners' perceptions of PSs (the second research question). WCW, with a mean of 16.37, was perceived as the most welcome PS followed by P/GW (15.62) and IW (15.25), but no significant differences were observed.

### Teachers' and learners' perceptions of PSs

The results revealed a slight difference between the teachers' and the learners' perceptions of WCW (17.75 vs 16.37), of IW (14.12 vs 15.25) and of P/GW (18.5 vs 15.62). Further tests of significance showed that both teachers and learners valued WCW as the most important and IW as the least important type of PS. However, the difference between their perceptions of P/GW reached significant level ( $\text{Sig}=0.00<0.05$ ). The teachers regarded P/GW as the most beneficial, whereas IW and P/GW were the least favoured PSs by the learners.

### **Teachers' performances of PSs**

The descriptive statistics of the teachers' performances showed that WCW (15.12) was the most frequently performed activity, followed by IW (12.00) and P/GW (6.25). The significance of the observed differences was checked and supported by a one-way ANOVA test ( $\text{Sig}=0.00<0.05$ ).

### **Teachers' perceptions vs. their performances**

Statistics showed differences in the mean of teachers' perceptions (17.75) and performances (15.12) of WCW, of IW (14.12 and 12 respectively) and of P/GW (18.50 and 6.25 respectively). Comparison of means using a paired samples t-test did not support any significant differences between teachers' perceptions and performances of PSs with regard to WCW ( $t=-1.00$ ,  $p=.35$ ) and IW ( $t=1.81$ ,  $p=.11$ ). Their perception and performance of P/GW reached significance level ( $t=18.91$ ,  $p=.00$ ); that is, although teachers scored P/GW the highest on the TPQ with a mean of 18.50 compared to WCW (17.75) and IW (14.12), they made a minimum use of this participatory structure (6.25) while actually teaching.

## **Discussion**

The findings suggest that the advantages of P/GW are readily perceived by Iranian English teachers. This orientation can be attributed to various technical and socio-cultural variables that shape teachers' methodological preferences, such as the teachers' personal experiences as a language learner, the dominant educational system, availability of facilities and resources (Bercikova, 2007). The findings are compatible with those of Hawkey (2006) who investigated pre-service teachers' preferred activities and reported PW as the most positively perceived PS.

Despite apparent differences in their rating of the three PSs, Iranian English learners did not show significantly different views towards WCW, IW and P/GW. These findings are incompatible with the research findings of Green (1993) and Spratt (1999) who reported a marked tendency by teachers and higher-level learners towards communicative activities. Learners at lower proficiency levels in those studies were found to favour more 'traditional' activities. Iranian learners' views might be explained in terms of cognitive and affective factors. They may need metacognitive awareness raising to enable them to make critical decisions and assume greater responsibility for their own learning. Emotionally, their views reflect a reluctance to participate in class activities and a detachment from classroom procedures, which seems to have its roots in lack of interest and motivation.

With respect to teachers' and learners' perceptions of PSs, the results revealed significant differences only between P/GW activities that were construed as highly positive and as the least appealing by teachers and learners respectively. Learners' apparent reluctance towards P/GW may be attributed to their individual styles, language proficiency levels or belief systems shaped in an educational system focusing on lower levels of learning such as memorisation and retention of information transmitted from teacher to learner with a minimal amount of interaction. Likewise, the socio-cultural background in which Iranian learners have been brought up values silence on the part of learners and acceptance of teachers' views. Iranian learners feel nervous negotiating in the classroom and consequently fail to develop the self-confidence required to express their ideas freely.

The natural outcome of such a teacher-fronted methodology is learners' heavy reliance on teachers as the sole source of valid information and distrust in themselves and their peers' capacities.

The results of this study are in line with Nunan (1988) who asked 60 Australian ESL teachers to rate ten activities according to their usefulness, then compared the results with those of Willing (1988) who had polled 517 learners for their views on the usefulness of the same activities. Significant differences were observed between teachers who had highly rated communicative activities and learners who had opted for more traditional activities.

Our data analyses revealed a discrepancy between the participant teachers' positive perception of P/GW and their highly restricted use of pair and group activities. The findings, however, run counter to those of Bercikova (2007) who investigated the role of teachers in PW activities in primary school classrooms and found a match between teachers' perceptions and actual performances.

## Conclusion

The most outstanding characteristic of a learner-centered curriculum is the active role of learners in the learning process. The choice of what and how to teach should be made with reference to this crucial principle and attempts made to engage learners in various stages of teaching. Diverse participatory structures signify a multifaceted learning process and a balanced use of them can create the cognitive, emotional and social involvement necessary for meaningful learning. The findings from the present study reinforce the need to realign learners' and teachers' beliefs before we can expect any methodological reform in English classrooms. Although beliefs have been described as unconsciously formed implicit assumptions that are resistant to change (Nespor, 1987), an accountable progressive system is essential to promote teachers' performances through consistent needs-based teacher training courses, gradually altering classroom procedures to change learners' beliefs and experiences.

## References

- Bakhuizen, G (1998) Discovering learners' perceptions of ESL classroom teaching and learning activities in a South African context. *TESOL Quarterly* 32/1: 85–107.
- Berčikova, P (2007) *Teachers' roles in pairwork*. PhD thesis, Masaryk University, Czech Republic.
- Borg, M (2001) Teachers' beliefs. *ELT Journal* 55/2: 186–188.
- Breen, MP (1989) *The Evaluation Cycle for Language Learning Tasks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, HD (2001) *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Longman.

Brown, J and McGannon, J (2007) *What do I know about language learning?* Paper presented at the 23rd ALAA (Australian Linguistics Association of Australia) Congress, Griffith University, Australia.

Ellis, R (2003) *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Erkmen, B (2010) Non-native novice EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning. Unpublished Master's Thesis: University of Nottingham: UK.

Freeman, D (1998) *Doing Teacher Research*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Graves, K (2000) *Designing Language Courses*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Green, J (1993) Student attitudes towards communicative and non-communicative activities: Do enjoyment and effectiveness go together? *The Modern Language Journal* 77: 1–10.

Hawkey, R (2006) Teacher and learner perceptions of language learning activity. *English Language Teaching Journal* 60: 242–252.

Holec, H (1988) *Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning: Present Fields of Application*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Horwitz, EK (1988) Beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal* 72: 283–294.

Johnson, DW and Johnson, RT (1994) *Learning together and Alone: Co-operative, Competitive and Individualistic Learning*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Kumaravadivelu, B (2006) *Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Post-method*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Larsen-Freeman, D (1998) *Doing Teacher Research*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Ludwig, J (1983) Attitudes and expectations: A profile of female and male students of college French, German and Spanish. *Modern Language Journal* 67/3: 217–27.

Nespor, J (1987) The role of beliefs in the practice of teaching. *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 19/4: 317–328.

Nunan, D (1988) *The Learner-centered Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Prabhu, NS (1987) *Second Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shortall, T and Garrett, P (2002) Learners' evaluations of teacher-fronted and student-centred classroom activities. *Language Teaching Research* 6/1: 25–57.

Spratt, M (1999) How good are we at knowing what learners like? *System* 27/2: 141–55.

Ur, P (1981) *Discussions That Work*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace, MJ (1991) *Training Foreign Language Teachers: A Reflective Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Williams, M and Burden, R (1999) Students' developing conceptions of themselves as language learners. *Modern Language Journal* 83: 193–201.

Willing, K (1988) *Learning Styles in Adult Migrant Education*. Adelaide: National Curriculum Resource Centre.



# Peer collaboration in L2 writing: an Iranian experience

Alireza Memari Hanjani and Li Li



# 8

## Peer collaboration in L2 writing: an Iranian experience

Alireza Memari Hanjani and Li Li

### Introduction

While the value of peer collaboration has been widely acknowledged in composition courses around the world, many L2 practitioners, including a number of Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) instructors, still express concerns about its efficiency in their contexts where student-centred pedagogies are relatively neglected concepts. This case study described in this chapter addressed this issue by integrating two distinct peer collaboration tasks, peer review and collaborative revision, in an EFL essay writing course and exploring language learners' perceptions of this new approach. Three types of semi-structured interviews – individual, pair and group – were conducted with ten individual (five pairs) Iranian EFL university students after two writing cycles. The participants expressed positive attitudes towards collaborative tasks though they reported some reservations regarding the efficacy of the activities. The researchers conclude that in traditional teacher-centred contexts where learners are overly dependent on their teachers, EFL writing instructors can incorporate collaborative revision activity into their composition courses to prepare their students for more participatory forms of writing pedagogies (for example, peer reviewing) and to address some of the challenges associated with peer feedback.

### Peer collaboration

The significance of peer review has been increasingly acknowledged in English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) writing programmes (Hyland and Hyland, 2006). The activity is strongly supported by several theoretical arguments including process composition pedagogy and socio-cultural learning theory (Hansen and Liu, 2005). To date, a series of studies have been conducted to elicit L2 learners' views concerning peer evaluation activities by interviewing and/or surveying them. These studies have investigated L2 learners' reflections on the value of teacher and peer feedback and the relative appeal of each. In general, findings have been inconclusive. Some studies have reported learners' positive attitudes to pair work (for example, Morra and Romano, 2009; Sengupta, 2000; Saito and Fujita, 2004), as it helped them understand audience expectations (Mangelsdorf, 1992), develop their critical thinking skills (Keh, 1990), share the burden of tasks (Roskams, 1999) and boost collaborative learning (Tsui and Ng, 2000). However, other studies have indicated learners' preference for traditional teacher-centred pedagogy and their concerns about collaborative work (for example, Amores, 1997; Leki, 1991; Nelson and Carson, 1998) since they distrusted

their peers' comments (Amores, 1997) and regarded their teachers as the only valid source of feedback (Leki, 1991). As Carson and Nelson (1994, 1996) and Nelson and Carson (1998) argue, incorporation of peer evaluation may be counter-productive in some ESL/EFL educational settings due to its incompatibility with social norms, the learners' limited language proficiency and their inability to offer valid comments. Hence, course designers are advised to consider '*the student as an individual, socially, culturally and psychologically*'. (Hyde, 1993: 347)

Considering the absence of peer collaboration pedagogy in Iranian EFL composition courses (Memari Hanjani and Li, 2014a, 2014b) and the reservations expressed in the literature about the efficacy of peer evaluation integration (for example, Rollinson, 2005; Tsui and Ng, 2000; Yang et al., 2006), the investigators designed a student-centred essay writing programme during which L2 learners engaged in two peer collaboration activities: peer review and collaborative revision. The study aimed to elicit student reflections and to compare their attitudes about these two tasks at the end of the course. Peer review or peer evaluation is an activity used exclusively by student pairs as they exchange, review and evaluate each other's essays and provide their partners with written and oral feedback. Collaborative revision activity, on the other hand, is an activity during which students jointly revise their drafts using the feedback and comments provided by their instructor.

## **Methodology**

### **Context and participants**

The study was conducted in four parallel English Academic Essay writing classes at a medium-sized private university in Iran. The pairs were selected by the instructor from a pool of 135 students according to two criteria: (1) L2 writing proficiency, and (2) gender. To assign the focus dyads, all students were required to compose an out-of-class piece of writing during the first week of the semester and submit it the following week. The scripts were believed to represent the participants' writing abilities in a natural and stress-free condition because they had one week to organise their thoughts and develop an out-of-class paper. This allowed us to not only use the data for organising writing dyads, but also to have a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the students' writing skills. The five target pairs remained constant over the study. Of the five dyads, three were composed of two females and two of a male and female. The age of the students ranged from 21 to 27 years, with the average age being 23. All participants shared Persian as their native language and were English language translation majors. They had studied English for an average of ten years and their English proficiency level ranged from lower intermediate to upper intermediate with the majority of them being novice English writers. None of the participants had experienced learner-centered composition instruction before, although they all had passed an advanced writing module as a prerequisite to enrol on this course. The course consisted of 15 90-minute periods of instruction and the students met once a week. The instructor was a non-native speaker of English who had been teaching L2 writing at the university for eight years.

## Data collection

The research was conducted within the natural setting of an L2 essay writing course with no changes to the schedule apart from the integration of peer review and collaborative revision activities into the course (see Table 1, below). The language for whole-class instructions and activities was English. However, the dyads were allowed to discuss their papers either in English or Persian. Apart from the induction week during which the course objectives, requirements and policies were discussed and sample papers were assigned, the course was generally composed of two main parts. The first part (six weeks) focused on writing generics such as writing processes and the structure of academic essays. The second part (eight weeks) concentrated on peer collaboration tasks. Consequently, two identical writing cycles (four weeks each) were designed during which the students participated in two peer review and two collaborative revision activities, based respectively on producing three drafts of process and argumentative genres (see Figure 1, below).

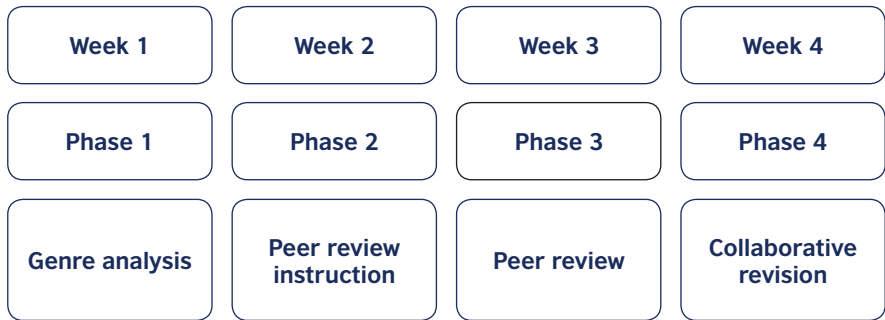
Table 1: Course overview

Essay Writing Module Timetable			
Session	Content	In-class activities	Assignments
1	- Course overview	Course induction	Sample papers assigned
2	- Writing stages; pre-writing	Brainstorming, outlining, methods of organisation	Assignments on clustering ideas, arranging scrambled sentences in chronological/emphatic order
3	- Writing stages; drafting	Essay structure (Introduction)	Assignments on introductory, body, and concluding paragraphs and their contents, e.g. motivator, thesis statement, main idea, supporting ideas, thesis re-statement, summarising, etc.
4	- Writing stages; drafting (continue)	Essay structure (body paragraphs)	
5	- Writing stages; drafting (continue)	Essay structure (conclusion)	
6	- Writing stages; revision	Transition, cohesion, coherence	Assignments on different types of transitions and their applications
7	- Writing stages; edition	Key grammatical points; sentence fragments, run-ons, parallelism, as well as punctuation	Tasks drawing students' attention to language and mechanics issues
8	- Process essay	Model essays discussed and examined	A 250-word essay assigned to be composed for week ten
9	- Peer review training	Using a peer review sheet, a sample essay was analysed in terms of both local and global issues	N/A
10	- Peer review activities	Papers exchanged, peer evaluation	2nd drafts to be developed and submitted in three days
11	- Collaborative revision	Joint revision	Final drafts to be produced and submitted in three days

Essay Writing Module Timetable			
Session	Content	In-class activities	Assignments
12	- Argumentative essay	Model essays discussed and examined	A 250-word essay assigned to be composed for week 14
13	- Peer review training	Using a peer review sheet, a sample essay was analysed in terms of both local and global issues	N/A
14	- Peer reviewing	Papers exchanged, peer evaluation	2nd drafts to be developed and submitted in three days
15	- Collaborative revision	Joint revision	Final drafts to be produced and submitted in three days

As Figure 1 demonstrates, each writing cycle lasted four weeks and consisted of four distinct phases. Phase one (week 1) mainly focused on genre analysis. During this session a particular genre (either process or argumentative) was introduced and model essays from the coursebook were discussed and analysed. Then, students were assigned a 250-word essay on the same genre and asked to submit it in week three. Phase two (week 2) involved peer evaluation training. All students received a copy of a sample student paper written by an anonymous student along with a peer review sheet and were trained to evaluate the paper in terms of content and organisation, as well as language and mechanics based on the guidelines provided by peer review sheets. Phase three (week 3) was then allocated to peer review activity during which students exchanged, reviewed and evaluated each other's essays and provided their peers with written and oral feedback using blank peer feedback sheets and employing the guidelines provided earlier in Phase two. Following the peer review session, students were asked to work at home revising their first drafts based on the comments they had received from their peers and to hand in their first and second drafts, along with the peer review sheets to their teacher in three days. The last stage (week 4) of each writing cycle concentrated on collaborative revision activity during which students were allocated the whole class time to read jointly through their essays in turn, act on the feedback and comments provided by the instructor, and produce the final drafts of their essays. Final drafts were due three days after the collaborative revision activity had taken place. Final drafts were reviewed by the instructor. However, the students did not receive any further feedback. While individual interviews were conducted within a week after the first writing cycle (end of week 4), pair and group interviews took place at the end of writing cycle 2 before the end of the course (the end of week 8).

Figure 1: Writing Cycle



### Data analysis

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions to provide more flexibility for researchers to ask follow-up questions and participants to offer more information. All interview sessions were recorded with high-quality digital recorders and interviews were in the students' native language (Persian) so the interviewees could clearly express their ideas. Table 2 shows the time spent interviewing the participants during each interview session.

Table 2: An overview of the interview data generated during the study

Type of Interview	Quantity	Amount
Individual	Ten interviews of up to 30 minutes at the end of Writing Cycle 1	Five hours
Pair	Five interviews of up to 60 minutes at the end of Writing Cycle 2	Five hours
Group	One interview of two hours at the end of the term	Two hours
<b>Total</b>		<b>12 hours</b>

Interview data analysis took place at three levels: managing the data, coding it, and providing descriptive as well as explanatory accounts for each code/sub-code. First, the 'raw' data was transcribed verbatim, and a thematic framework was constructed with reference to the interview prompts. Then materials with similar content were located together under relevant main themes. The final stage of data management involved summarising the original data and inspecting the meaning and the relevance of the original material to the theme under enquiry. Once all the meaningful portions of the original data had been extracted, the data was translated into English for categorisation.

Categorisation involved classification and generation of distinctive meaningful codes that represented the content. The codes were developed manually and instances in the data identified by colour highlighting. The same procedure was followed theme by theme. During the coding process, the recurrence of each code and sub-code was also recorded and tabulated. Once codes and sub-codes were generated, representative responses of the interviewees were used to support, illustrate and clarify the significant codes/sub-codes.

## Findings

The findings were generated from the three interviews – individual, pair and group – with ten EFL participants during the L2 essay writing course in which peer reviewing and collaborative revision activities were practised. The sub-headings convey the main themes (overall ideas) of the questions. Each table represents the original question(s) asked during the interview sessions as well as the codes and sub-codes that emerged from the interviews. The tables consist of four main columns: the first shows the general code or sub-code, the second depicts the number of participants whose responses fell into that special code or sub-code, the third indicates the interview stage in which that code or sub-code emerged, and the final column represents the frequency of each comment. While each table illustrates all response categories, only the most frequent codes/sub-codes will be discussed and analysed. In response to some questions, a number of interviewees provided multiple reasons/views at different stages. Hence, while the total number of participants remains constant (N=10), the number of responses for each category may be greater. To protect participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are employed.

### Peer review

Participants were asked to express their feelings about peer review activity. The most common responses were general descriptions such as ‘helpful’, ‘useful’, ‘perfect’ and ‘excellent’ or a combination of all four. However, they did express some reservations (Table 3).

**Table 3: Students’ reflections on peer reviewing**

What is your viewpoint about peer review activity? In other words, do you like it or not? Why? Why not?					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Unable to provide valid feedback	7	✓		✓	15
Improve essay writing quality	5	✓		✓	5
– Internalise the lessons better	1	✓			1
Express and share ideas	4			✓	6
Self-monitoring	4	✓		✓	5
Time constraints	2	✓		✓	5
Generate new ideas	4	✓			4
Multiple perspectives	3	✓			3
Retrieve knowledge	2	✓			2



What is your viewpoint about peer review activity? In other words, do you like it or not? Why? Why not?					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Evaluate the feedback before incorporation	1			✓	1
Frustrating	1	✓			1

As Table 3 reveals, a large number of students (seven) stressed that their limited English, language proficiency and lack of skills needed for peer reviewing made the activity less productive. Tina, for example, confessed openly about how she felt:

*My low level of proficiency didn't let me detect errors and provide my partner with valid feedback. Therefore, I wasn't that much help.*

However, half the cases (five) acknowledged the activity helped them improve the overall quality of their writing. They believed that the task enhanced their limited knowledge base and improved their lexis and grammar. Roya provided such a view:

*The activity was useful because another person's thoughts helped me improve the quality of my paper and writing performance.*

Maryam expressed an interesting comment about the efficiency of the activity. According to her, through peer reviewing, students discussed their ideas and exchanged knowledge, and main points were internalised in their minds:

*As the points are learnt through discussion, I think I will never forget them.*

Four participants considered it a technique through which they had an opportunity not only to share, but also express their ideas about their peers' drafts in a friendly atmosphere. For example, Mahdi said that:

*One advantage of this activity is that students learn how to articulate their opinions about a paper they read.*

A further four students said that reading their peers' papers was very useful because it allowed them to compare their own writing with that of their peers and avoid making the same errors as their peers. As Fariba noted:

*Reviewing my peer's paper helped me concentrate more on my own paper and get familiar with mistakes I may make and try to avoid them in my own essay.*

Four reflections focused on the effectiveness of peer review activity in generating new ideas. As Nasrin claimed:

*This activity was very useful and illuminating. My peer helped me develop new ideas.*

Finally, three interviewees indicated that receiving feedback from a person other than their instructor was a pleasant experience. As noted by Mahdi:

*We normally get feedback from our instructor. It was an opportunity to receive our peer's comments and also express our opinion about his/her writing.*

## Peer feedback incorporation

The participants' reactions to the feedback they received from their peers during peer review activity was another important issue the interviewers probed. Table 4 condenses the information extracted from the interviews.

**Table 4: Students' reflections on peer feedback**

What use did you make of your peer's comments? Did you use them in your revision? If so, what use were they? If no use, why?					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Critical and selective towards received feedback	7	✓	✓		19
Global feedback incorporation	5	✓	✓		8
Local feedback incorporation	3	✓	✓		5
Invalid and misleading advice	3	✓			4
Vague and general comments	3	✓	✓		4
Peers' disproportionate benefit	2	✓			3
Surface- and textual-level changes	2	✓	✓		3
Defensive towards peer's feedback	2	✓			3
Subjective and biased comments	1	✓			2
Audience awareness	1	✓			1

Based on this table, although most students (seven) claimed they made an effort to adopt their peers' suggestions in their revisions, they acknowledged they did not take up peer advice without careful consideration. Indeed, they expressed several reasons for their non-incorporation behaviour, including doubt about their peers' ability to judge their texts, double-checking the received comments against other sources such as textbooks, instructors and classmates, and being confident about the accuracy of their own choice. The following accounts give a flavour of students' attitudes:

*I was not convinced about feedback quality and validity she [her partner] gave me, so I didn't incorporate it in my drafts unless I double-checked with a dictionary or other reference books. I didn't trust her comments. (Afrouz)*

*I always checked the main points before writing them down. When my partner gave feedback which I found inconsistent with what I already knew, I couldn't trust it. I double checked it against other resources like a dictionary. If I wasn't convinced about the validity of her advice, I didn't incorporate it into my writing. (Mina)*

Nevertheless, half the students (five) maintained that they generally made use of their peers' comments focusing on global issues (content and organisation). They believed such feedback helped them improve the content of their texts from one draft to the next. For example, Azam noted that:

*I had no sense of audience in my writing but my partner helped me understand that myself as a writer and herself as a reviewer did not necessarily share the same background information. Hence, I used her ideas on content to present all the necessary details in my paper.*

Another group of participants (three) argued that they used their peers' feedback just to fix their local errors (language and mechanics) and ignored their partners' advice on global language issues. For example, Fariba asserted that:

*My partner's comments helped me improve the quality of the grammar and sentence structure of my paper.*

However, a few learners (three) maintained their peers' suggestions were invalid and at times misleading. Using the invalid advice in their texts changed accurate structures to inaccurate ones. For example, Afrouz stressed that:

*My peer's feedback sometimes misled me. In some cases what I had written in my first draft was correct but when I changed it in my consequent draft according to my partner's suggestion, it was inaccurate.*

Some learners (three) complained about the ambiguity, sketchiness and lack of explicitness in the feedback provided by their partners. They stressed that, had they understood the feedback, they would have incorporated it. This issue was voiced by Fariba:

*My peer's comments were general and vague. She didn't give specific comments so I couldn't make use of them, especially those which addressed the content and organisation of my essay.*

Nasrin shared a similar idea:

*I didn't incorporate many of my peer's comments in the first essay. They seemed ambiguous and I couldn't understand them. But I used them in my second essay when I realised her advice was much clearer and meaningful.*

### **Reviewing partners' papers**

We also aimed to explore the respondents' perceptions of reviewing their classmates' papers. Students were specifically asked if they felt reviewing their partners' papers had any advantage. Table 5 summarises the interviewees' responses.

**Table 5: Students' views on reviewing their peers' papers**

Did you benefit from reading your peer's paper and giving him/her feedback? If so, what were the benefits? If not, why not?					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Improve language and mechanics	8	✓	✓		17
Useless peer feedback	5	✓	✓		9
Improve content	1	✓			2

As demonstrated by Table 5, a significant number of respondents (eight) felt that reading and analysing their partners' texts exposed them to different writing styles and grammatical constructions. They added that the activity helped them notice the grammatical errors their partners had made in their papers and were thus more careful to avoid repeating the same errors in their own texts:

*I normally use simple language in my writing. My partner, however, uses compound and complex constructions in his papers. I like this style of writing and would like to learn to use such nice and error-free structures in my own texts. (Tina)*

However, half the participants (five) maintained that they learnt nothing from their classmates. A few (two) even claimed their level of English language was higher than their peers and reviewing their peers' papers was not insightful. This is reflected in Afrouze's response, as she argued:

*I did not learn any particular lesson from my classmate. I think my English is better than hers, at least in grammar.*

### **Collaborative revision**

Students were also invited to comment on their experience of collaborative revision activity. Specifically, they were asked if they felt the activity was of any use. Overall, all cases reported that they found collaborative revision activity beneficial. Table 6 presents a summary of the respondents' attitudes.

**Table 6: Students' reflections on collaborative revision**

What is your viewpoint about collaborative revision? In other words, do you like it or not? Why? Why not?					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Pooling of ideas and knowledge – Supportive	10	✓		✓	15
	5	✓		✓	5
Limited knowledge base	3	✓		✓	3
Complement to peer reviewing task	2	✓			3
Lengthy process	2	✓		✓	3
Access to immediate reference	1			✓	1
Providing double opportunity for students	1	✓			1
Novel, interesting activity	1	✓			1

All participating students reported that mutual sharing of ideas and knowledge contributed towards a more accurate and richer text. The comments below give a flavour of how these students reacted to the activity.

*It was an appropriate method since all our problematic areas were first spotted and then with the help of our partners we could easily fix them. Two heads worked collaboratively and two people shared their knowledge to understand and fix the errors. (Maryam)*

*I think sharing ideas and trying to solve problems collaboratively and removing them from our papers is better than working alone. (Roya)*

Half the students found this activity helpful, as it helped create a supportive environment for improving their papers. As Azam put it:

*Sometimes I myself didn't get the instructor's feedback and the reason behind it, but with the help and support I received from my peer I could understand what the source of problem was and how I could improve it.*

A number of students (three) claimed that, because of their lack of knowledge and skills to provide useful suggestions, they found great difficulty improving the quality of their texts and did not consider collaborative revision as effective. As Tina noted:

*Sometimes neither my partner nor I were able to correct the error. Our low level of language proficiency didn't enable us to improve some of the problematic areas in our papers.*

### **Instructor's comments**

The quality of the instructor's feedback and his comments were also discussed in the interviews. Although the majority of the interviewees (eight) acknowledged the clarity, accuracy and comprehensiveness of his advice, both on local and global issues, a few (two) expressed different ideas. Table 7 shows a synopsis of students' reflections.

**Table 7: Students' reflections on their instructor's comments**

Did you find your instructor's feedback useful? Why or why not? What problems, if any, did you have in understanding/applying it? Elaborate on your answer.					
Category	No. of students	Interview stage			Frequency
		1	2	3	
Clear and easy to follow	10	✓			12
Comprehensive, relevant and accurate	8	✓	✓		12
Confusing feedback and inattentive instructor	2		✓		2
Instructor's appropriate behaviour	1		✓		1

During the first individual interview stage all students were happy with the instructor's feedback, stating that they found it simple and straightforward:

*The comments were clear and easy to follow. I had no particular problem in understanding them. (Azam)*

In addition, a significant majority of the students (eight) felt that the comments were not only clear and simple, but also comprehensive, relevant and precise. Indeed, they maintained that the papers were carefully reviewed and commented on, and nothing was left unnoticed. As Fariba put it:

*The papers were carefully reviewed and comments and feedback were precise. I knew some parts of my essay needed revision even though my partner hadn't noticed them in her review. But when I received my instructor's feedback, I noticed that the problematic area had been spotted by him and was commented on precisely.*

## Discussion

In general, the findings of three interviewing rounds indicate that participants benefited from the collaborative activities and found the techniques novel and attractive, helping them generate new ideas, build on their knowledge and co-construct negotiated higher quality texts. However, the participants' limited language proficiency and their inability to identify and offer valid alternatives was one of the major challenges in peer review activity. This is evident in their responses, as they distrusted the validity of peer feedback and were selective and critical in incorporating the feedback into their subsequent drafts, revealing their scepticism about the quality of the advice provided by their partners. The learners also argued that identifying the mistakes, as well as justifying the comments, was impeded by their low level of writing proficiency. As these students were themselves in the early stages of developing English academic essay composition, they felt vulnerable and struggled to evaluate their partners' papers. They were also heavily teacher dependent, as their papers, normally composed in isolation, had previously been evaluated solely by their tutors. Being required to undertake peer evaluation for the first time made them feel psychologically unprepared.

Students showed a more positive reaction to collaborative revision activity than peer review tasks and they felt the instructor's responses were more comprehensive, relevant and accurate. That these learners preferred their instructor's comments over those of their peers may not only reflect the low quality of peers' comments during peer reviewing, but also the unfamiliarity of students with learner-centred writing pedagogy. All students came from a teacher-centred, examination-dominant educational system and had no experience of participating in student-fronted activities.

## Reflections and conclusion

The purpose of this research was to report L2 learners' perceptions of engaging in peer collaboration activities during an essay writing course. Students expressed positive attitudes towards the activities, calling them novel and interesting. They believed collaborative tasks encouraged them to formulate and pool their ideas and knowledge, make decisions in a co-operative manner, learn from each other and extend mutual support, improve the quality of their papers and their essay writing, and revise skills by sharing each other's expertise. They also raised their awareness of writing rules and conventions, repaired their ineffective writing strategies and developed their critical reading and self-monitoring skills by reading other students' drafts, reflecting on their own problems and seeking out solutions for themselves. On the other hand, they did express some reservations regarding the efficiency of the activities, especially peer reviewing. They found their poor writing skills an obstacle in providing valid feedback. They doubted their peers' feedback and incorporated it selectively, complaining about lack of clarity and specificity. Students showed more favourable attitudes towards collaborative revision than peer review.

Participants' scepticism about the accuracy of peer comments may originate from their socio-cultural and educational backgrounds. Peer evaluation generally originates from those countries where it is compatible with existing social and cultural norms. Its application without any adjustments to centralised countries with hierarchical socio-cultural and educational backgrounds may create problems. Traditionally, in such contexts, individual work is more valued and teamwork is generally unsuccessful, as group members are unaware of the mechanisms of collaborative work and may have different expectations concerning group work. Peer review is an important part of a shift from a whole-class, teacher-dominant instructional model towards more participatory forms of pedagogy. In a traditional teacher-centred environment, only the teacher is entitled to respond to student writing. Within this tradition, a particular status is ascribed to teachers and they are seen as the only sources of authority with the expertise and the right to critique the students' performance. Students value and appreciate teachers' feedback, incorporate suggestions unreflectively and rely passively on teachers' comments. It is not surprising then that students are reluctant to accept their peers' responses to their writing, distrust the evaluations made by their partners, challenge them, and ultimately ignore them when rewriting their subsequent drafts. There has been much discussion about the relationship between culture and peer evaluation in the literature. As several studies have explored, cultural issues may generate concerns regarding the efficiency of peer evaluation incorporation in L2 composition classes (for example, Allaei and Connor, 1990; Connor and Asenavage, 1994; Nelson and Carson, 1998; Nelson and Murphy, 1992, 1993). Shifting attitudes requires time and energy from the teacher's side, as students need to be convinced and mentally prepared to understand the beneficial aspects of peer reviewing and to trust the validity of their classmates' comments as a useful tool to help them improve their writing performance. Training can play an influential role in reducing this feeling of distrust among peers (Hu, 2005; McGroarty and Zhu, 1997; Min, 2006).

Collaborative revision, during which pairs jointly read, discuss and revise each other's drafts using their teacher's feedback, can be seen as an advantageous activity, and can address most of the concerns regarding the efficacy of the incorporation of peer evaluation in L2 contexts. Like peer review, this activity derives from a socio-cultural theory of learning and process-based writing instruction. However, there is a key difference. Whereas in peer evaluation students critique each other's texts, the teacher is still the main source of feedback in any collaborative revision activity. The challenges associated with the validity and specificity of peer feedback, distrust of peer comments, lack of experience in evaluation and poor writing skills can be overcome to a great extent, even though teachers' feedback load is not reduced. Collaborative revision can be viewed as an interim stage on a continuum from sole teacher feedback/evaluation to sole peer feedback/evaluation in EFL writing classrooms. Collaborative revision could therefore be an ideal option to help and prepare both teachers and students to move from a traditional, teacher-centred, product-based, exam-dominated pedagogy to a more student-centred, process-based approach to writing in which collaboration and group work is central. During such a transition, the teacher comments on students' written texts and students respond to feedback, working and interacting together as well as pooling their knowledge and strengths in a supportive and friendly atmosphere. Students learn evaluation techniques, become familiar with feedback strategies, understand what to check and gradually develop the required skills of peer evaluation. However, we should also warn that collaborative revision techniques might not yield their presumed benefits without careful group/pair work organisation, detailed planning and training, and adequate modelling and practice.

## References

- Allaei, SK and Connor, UM (1990) Exploring the dynamics of cross-cultural collaboration in writing classrooms. *The Writing Instructor* 10: 19–28.
- Amores, MJ (1997) A new perspective on peer-editing. *Foreign Language Annals* 30/4: 513–522.
- Carson, JG and Nelson, GL (1994) Writing groups: cross-cultural issues. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3/1: 17–30.
- Carson, JG and Nelson, GL (1996) Chinese students' perceptions of ESL peer response group interaction. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 5/1: 1–9.
- Connor, U and Asenavage, K (1994) Peer response groups in ESL writing classes: how much impact on revision? *Journal of Second Language Writing* 3/3: 257–276.
- Hansen, JG and Liu, J (2005) Guiding principles for effective peer response. *ELT Journal* 59/1: 31–38.
- Hu, G (2005) Using peer review with Chinese ESL student writers. *Language Teaching Research* 9/3: 321–342.



- Hyde, M (1993) Pair work – a blessing or a curse? An analysis of pair work from pedagogical, cultural, social and psychological perspectives. *System* 21/3: 343–348.
- Hyland, K and Hyland, F (2006) Feedback on second language students' writing. *Language Teaching* 39/2: 83–101.
- Keh, C (1990) Feedback in the writing process: a model and methods for implementation. *ELT Journal* 44/4: 294–304.
- Leki, I (1991) The preferences of ESL students for error correction in college-level writing classes. *Foreign Language Annals* 24/3: 203–218.
- Mangelsdorf, K (1992) Peer reviews in the ESL composition classroom: what do the students think? *ELT Journal* 46: 274–284.
- McGroarty, ME and Zhu, W (1997) Triangulation in classroom research: a study of peer revision. *Language Learning* 47/1: 1–43.
- Memari Hanjani, A and Li, L (2014a) Exploring L2 writers' collaborative revision interactions and their writing performance. *System* 44: 101–114.
- Memari Hanjani, A and Li, L (2014b) EFL learners' written reflections on their experience of attending a process genre-based, student-centred essay writing course. *Asian Journal of Applied Linguistics* 1/2: 149–166.
- Min, H (2006) The effects of trained peer review on EFL students' revision types and writing quality. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 15: 118–141.
- Morra, AM and Romano, ME (2009) University students' reactions to guided peer feedback and EAP compositions. *Journal of College Literacy & Learning* 35: 19–30.
- Nelson, GL and Carson, JG (1998) ESL students' perceptions of effectiveness in peer response groups. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 7/2: 113–131.
- Nelson, GL and Murphy, JM (1992) An L2 writing group: task and social dimensions. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 1/3: 171–193.
- Nelson, GL and Murphy, JM (1993) Peer response groups: do L2 writers use peer comments in revising their drafts? *TESOL Quarterly* 27/1: 135–141.
- Rollinson, P (2005) Using peer feedback in the ESL writing class. *ELT Journal* 59/1: 23–30.
- Roskams, T (1999) Chinese EFL students' attitudes to peer feedback and peer assessment in an extended pair work setting. *RELC Journal* 30: 79–123.
- Saito, H and Fujita, T (2004) Characteristics and user acceptance of peer rating in EFL writing classrooms. *Language Teaching Research* 8/1: 31–54.

Sengupta, S (2000) An investigation into the effects of revision strategy instruction on L2 secondary school learners. *System* 28: 97–113.

Tsui, ABM and Ng, M (2000) Do secondary L2 writers benefit from peer comments? *Journal of Second Language Writing* 9/2: 147–170.

Yang, M, Badger, R and Zhen, Y (2006) A comparative study of peer and teacher feedback in a Chinese EFL writing class. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 15: 179–200.

# **Migrant literature and teaching English as an international language in Iran**

Samaneh Zandian



# 9

## Migrant literature and teaching English as an international language in Iran

Samaneh Zandian

### Introduction

In this chapter English language education in Iran is briefly described, the concept of English as an international language (EIL) is explained, the importance of culture in EIL is discussed and the role of literature in language teaching from the aspect of cultural awareness is analysed. I then mention the advantages of including migrant literature in English language classes in Iran and focus on Iranian migrant literature, providing pedagogical examples of ‘authentic’ texts to illustrate my argument. Finally, I point out important factors in the selection of literary materials in order to develop intercultural competence in language learning classrooms.

### English language teaching in Iran

English is regarded as a foreign language in Iran, and is taught for three to four hours a week as a required course from Grade 7 (approximately age 13). Although the language is a compulsory subject in the Iranian national curriculum, it can be argued that it has been neglected within the Iranian educational system (Dahmardeh, 2009). In private schools, English is introduced at primary or even pre-primary level, and receives considerable attention. In some cases, the quality of the English programmes offered in each school influences the number of students who enrol in that school (Aliakbari, 2004). The majority of the books used in private schools and language institutes are mostly pirated American ELT textbooks. Private language institutes are popular in Iran, and despite the lack of attention to English in the national educational curriculum, *‘English seems to have found its way smoothly right to the heart of Iranian society, proving itself to be a necessity, rather than a mere school subject’*. (ibid.)

The close relationship between language and culture has made interpreting the state of ELT in Iran a controversial topic. Analyses of the role and impact of ELT range from English linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion to cultural neutrality. On the one hand, English is negatively addressed as a tool to represent and introduce Western culture to Iranian students; on the other hand, studies show that English taught as a school subject is nothing but a representation of Persian or Islamic ideology (Rashidi and Najafi, 2010). Many statements in English textbooks published under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and used nationally in

Iran either convey Islamic traditions (e.g. you can break your fast as soon as the sun sets; the 15th of Sha'ban is a religious celebration) or have no reference to a target group (Aliakbari, 2004).

English is used around the world and has become the global lingua franca that is not only used to communicate with native speakers but as an international language universally used (Jenkins, 2009). However, most people in Iran still associate English with America or Britain; what Wallace (2003) and Phillipson (2009) explain as the language of power, which belongs to the 'others'.

Regarding the cultural aspect of current ELT materials used in public schools, studies argue that textbooks in Iran do not aim to familiarise students with cultural matters of other countries (Aliakbari, 2004; Khajavi and Abbasian, 2011; SAIC, 2007). Aliakbari (2004) believes materials are superficial and do not provide sufficient content to broaden students' worldview, or develop their cultural understanding and intercultural competence. Khajavi and Abbasian (2011) investigated English language materials taught at Iranian public schools to explore to what extent these materials are appropriate in terms of developing national identity and globalisation issues. Activities and passages relating to national identity and international issues constitute less than seven per cent of the ELT textbook content, which is unacceptable for educating students in this age of globalisation (*ibid.*, 2011). In this regard, Aliakbari (2004: 13) points out that a '*shallow presentation of culture can reinforce inaccurate stereotypes,*' which can be problematic in the multicultural world of English.

## English as an international language

As the century proceeds there is a greater use of English in international contexts. According to Smith (1976), one of the characteristics of an international language is that it is 'de-nationalised'; in other words, it belongs to any country which uses it. People should be tolerant of the English used by others. Tolerance can be gained by exposure to varieties of English. Unfortunately, the high prestige given to the 'standard' variety of English as the ideal of 'native-speaker proficiency' has made 'non-standard' varieties invisible (Corbett, 2000). This is common in Iran. Teachers have a major role in developing tolerance toward varieties of English among learners:

*The advantages of considering language variety from a cultural perspective in second-language education are: (a) language variation can be viewed positively, rather than as a simple barrier to communication, and (b) we can promote the intercultural goals of ethnographic observation. (Corbett, 2000: 160)*

## The role of culture in teaching EIL

Since culture is embedded in language, it is impossible to teach a language without teaching cultural content. One of the goals of teaching culture in language education is establishing a '*sphere of interculturality*' (Kramersch 1993: 205). Learning a culture, which is beyond the simple transfer of information between cultures, requires that the learners observe their own culture through the eyes of another. Kramersch (1993) uses the term 'third place' for the stage of being able to move between the source and target cultures.

As an international language, English is no longer exclusively related to the culture of the regions where it is used as a first language, and so an important issue is to raise awareness about other cultures and not to expect learners to accept the beliefs and values of a particular culture (Mackay, 2002). According to Byram (1997), one of the goals of learning English is enabling learners to explain and discuss their own culture in another language. Previously students needed to accept and consequently adopt the standards and culture of a country whose primary language was English in order to use it effectively (Smith, 1976). Many Iranian students still make the same assumption, and believe that learners should behave in accordance with target culture conventions. Such attitudes raise concerns among certain groups in society, particularly those who think of English as the language of imperialism and see it as a threat of cultural invasion. Such expectations are far from the goals of learning English as an international language, and achieving biculturalism is difficult if not impossible in a context such as Iran where English is taught as a foreign language.

## **The role of literature in English language teaching**

The study of literature may enhance both national and international communication between English speakers and learners (Spack, 1987). The primary purpose of literary texts is not just to convey information, but also to involve the reader in direct experience. One of the important values of teaching literature in the English language classroom is *'to provide the occasion for genuine exploration of the cultural assumptions of the target culture'* (Gajdusek 1988: 232). It is of special value in creating cultural awareness. Texts from international target cultures can represent the variety of contexts in which English is acquired and learned as an international language, and can provide samples of the lexical, phonological and grammatical variation of English in context. Learners have the opportunity to compare their own culture with another, which may result in a better understanding of both cultures.

## **Migrant literature in language teaching**

Where learners share a similar culture (despite the existing intracultural differences in all societies), teachers can provide texts from writers who retell their experiences of living in multicultural environments in order to recreate a similar context for learners. Exploration of literary texts by writers originally sharing the same culture as the learners but who now live in an English-speaking country and write in English would be an excellent exercise in cultural relativity. 'Authentic' English literary texts created by migrant writers can be used in classrooms to illustrate a target culture through the wider cross-cultural perspectives of a migrant speaker. Such materials can highlight the similarities and differences between cultures in a more tangible way for English language learners.

Although some writers believe in the universality of literature (Spack, 1987), the existence of culture-specific elements can be seen as a hindrance to the understanding of a text (MacDonald, 2000). However, exposure to migrant literature written by writers sharing the same cultural background as the reader may facilitate the extension of the reader's schemata to reveal values and beliefs in a target culture. Migrant literature may therefore be suitable for enhancing

intercultural understanding in ELT. Through such materials we might be able to develop understanding of cultural differences, which may also help in establishing interculturality.

If we wish to develop learners' intercultural communicative competence, and increase cross-cultural awareness of English as an international language, extracts from migrant literature would be an excellent choice. Working with texts created by migrant writers draws learners' attention to the socio-cultural nature of this genre and can develop students' critical reading skills.

*Funny in Farsi*, a memoir by the Iranian migrant writer Firoozeh Dumas, is a good example of migrant literature that has been used as a classroom tool, particularly with reluctant English language learners and ESL readers in the United States. It was selected as a School Library Journal Adult Book for High School students (Cooper, n.d.), and the Persian translation became a bestseller in Iran in 2005. It has also been used in a required foreign language course with students from different non-English majors at Southern Chinese University in order to build their intercultural awareness (Personal communication Chastain, 2014). Chapters are short, which makes them ideal for language activities, and can assist the students to improve their comprehension (Milstead, n.d.: 138) by providing them with a specific framework to understand the text. In the following section sample activities are provided with the aim of enhancing secondary-level students' cultural awareness in Iranian English language classrooms. The activities can be designed and modified according to teachers' and students' preferences and needs.

## Sample activities

Gajdusek (1988: 233) pointed out four methodology steps with any literary text. In all four steps cultural issues can be discussed, particularly in the final step.

1. Pre-reading activities: essential background information and vocabulary
2. Factual in-class work: who, where, when and what (happens)
3. Analysis: aspects of structure, theme and style
4. Extending activities: in-class activities that extend the ideas or situations encountered in the text; written response

### Example 1

*Farid, the older of my two brothers, had been sent to Philadelphia the year before to attend high school. Like most Iranian youths, he had always dreamed of attending college abroad and, despite my mother's tears, had left us to live with my uncle ... (Dumas 2003: 3).*

**Listen:** (The girl speaks with a Persian accent)

#### Answer the questions in pairs:

- Why did Farid dream of going abroad?
- Would you like to live abroad? Why?



### Example 2

*The following Monday, my father drove my mother and me to school. He had decided that it would be a good idea for my mother to attend school with me for a few weeks. I could not understand why two people not speaking English would be better than one ... (Dumas 2003: 4).*

#### Writing:

- Write the rest of the story in two paragraphs. What will happen in Firoozeh's first day of school in the USA?

### Example 3

*After spending an entire day in America, surrounded by Americans, I realized that my father's description of America had been correct. The bathrooms were clean and the people were very, very kind. (Dumas 2003: 7)*

- How would do you describe America? Why?

### Example 4

*We wondered how my father had managed to spend several years attending school in America, yet remain so utterly befuddled by Americans. We soon discovered that his college years had been spent mainly in the library, where he had managed to avoid contact with all Americans except his engineering professors. (Dumas 2003: 9)*

#### Group discussion:

- Although Firoozeh's father studied in America, he was unable to communicate properly with Americans. Talk in groups about the possible reasons.

### Example 5

*My father's only other regular contact in college had been his roommate, a Pakistani who spent his days preparing curry. Since neither spoke English, but both liked curries, they got along splendidly. The person who had assigned them together had probably hoped they would either learn English or invent a common language for the occasion. Neither happened. (Dumas 2003: 9)*

#### Group discussion:

- If you were studying in America and could choose the nationality of your roommate, which one would you prefer? Why?
  - Iranian
  - American
  - European
  - Middle Eastern
  - East Asian

Teachers can also go beyond the text, introduce the students to the author's website (<http://firoozehdumas.com/educator-guide>) and encourage them to read about the author. Students can also read on the website a part of the conversation between Khaled Hosseini, a famous Afghan-born American novelist, and Firoozeh Dumas.

## The selection of materials and task design

The language objective in an intercultural approach to language learning is to develop learners' productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills in the target language, while the intercultural aims are to develop learners' 'socio-cultural competence' (Byram, 2003), train students to recognise the cultural differences and realise the different perspectives that may cause clashes of cultural expectation. In order to develop language learners' intercultural competence, course materials can blend intercultural communication and language learning (Byram et al., 1994, cited in Corbett, 2000). Including migrant literature as part of the course materials is one possible way to bring together the language learning and intercultural communication objectives in the English language classroom.

Before choosing a piece of literary text to work with in the classroom, teachers should have a specific goal that helps them create and structure activities for a given piece (Gajdusek, 1988). Selected texts should be contemporary, realistic, not too long, interesting, and with a comprehensible background (MacDonald, 2000). Since the main purpose of the study of the text is to enhance learners' intercultural understanding, extracts should be culturally significant. They should illustrate aspects of culture clash, particularly between an outsider and the target culture (*ibid.*). English teachers can invite students to bring materials into the classroom to supplement texts provided for the course. In this way, language learners become motivated and eager to participate in activities. Among the materials provided by students, teachers can select those which are both culturally and linguistically suitable for class activities and put them into text sets to enhance intertextuality. Supplementing 'authentic' listening materials can also train learners to recognise the cultural associations of different accents (Corbett, 2000). The learners' age level is another factor that should be considered. Because of the cognitive skills required for recognising the markers of the self and other's identity, an appropriate age level would be above 15 years (*ibid.*). During in-class activities the teacher should be more of a facilitator, and guide students in different sequences of the activities, supporting or challenging their ideas.

## Conclusion

For the following reasons I suggest the inclusion of migrant literature in teaching EIL:

- It may promote learners' respect for cultural differences.
- It can help learners use English for cross-cultural encounters.
- It can enhance learners' respect for their own cultural framework and increase their self-esteem.
- It can present ideas of multiculturalism, helpful in classes where students come from similar cultural backgrounds.

- It conveys a realistic image of migrant life.
- It may help learners attain the ‘third place’.
- In contexts where teachers are non-native speakers, texts written by other non-natives may seem more authentic and create more realistic models for learners.

For the particular context of Iran, I recommend the use of Iranian migrant literature, as well as other migrant literatures, in English classrooms. Finally, it should be mentioned that moving toward teaching English as an international language in Iran requires fundamental changes, from the development of appropriate language proficiency to training teachers and adaptation of materials.

## References

Aliakbari, M (2004) *The place of culture in Iranian ELT textbooks at high school level*. Paper presented at 9th Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics Conference. August 2004, Namseoul University, Korea.

Byram, M (1997) *Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Byram, M (2003) ‘Cultural studies and foreign language teaching’, in Bassnett, S (ed) *Studying British Cultures: An introduction* (Second Edition). London: Routledge.

Cooper, J (n.d.) *Teachers’ Guide*. Available online at [www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780812968378&view=tg](http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780812968378&view=tg)

Corbett, J (2000) ‘Teaching culture through language variety’, in McBride, N and Seago, K (eds) *Target Culture – Target Language?*. London: CILT publications.

Dahmardeh, M (2009) *English Language Teaching in Iran and Communicative Language Teaching*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, UK.

Dumas, F (2003) *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. New York: Random House.

Firoozeh Dumas. Available online at <http://firoozehdumas.com>

Gajdusek, L (1988) Toward wider use of literature in ESL: why and how? *TESOL Quarterly* 22/2: 227–257.

Jenkins, J (2009) *World Englishes: A Resource Book for Students* (Second edition). London: Routledge.

Khajavi, Y and Abbasian, R (2011) English language teaching, national identity and globalization in Iran: the case of public schools. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1/10: 182–186.

Kramsch, C (1993) *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacDonald, M (2000) 'Strangers in a strange land: fiction, culture, language', in McBride, N and Seago, K (eds) *Target Culture – Target Language?* London: CILT publications.

Mackay, L (1982) Literature in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 16/4: 529–536.

Mackay, L (2002) *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Milstead, PT (n.d.) 'Coming of age in a multicultural community', in Rodriguez, N (ed) *The New Houston: New Immigrants, New Ethnicities, and New Inter-Group Relations in America's Fourth Largest City*. Available online at [www.uh.edu/honors/Programs-Minors/honors-and-the-schools/houston-teachers-institute/curriculum-units/seminar-pages/2004/new-houston-04.php](http://www.uh.edu/honors/Programs-Minors/honors-and-the-schools/houston-teachers-institute/curriculum-units/seminar-pages/2004/new-houston-04.php)

Phillipson, R (2009) *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. London: Routledge.

Rashidi, N and Najafi, R (2010) The representation of culture in Iran language institute advanced-level textbooks. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 1/5: 624–631.

Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) (2007) *Iranian textbooks content and context*. Virginia: SAIC.

Smith, LE (1976) English as an international auxiliary language. *RELC Journal* 7/2: 38–42.

Spack, R (1985) Literature, reading, writing and ESL: bridging the gap. *TESOL Quarterly* 19/4: 703–25.

Wallace, C (2003) *Critical Reading in Language Education*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

# **Candles lighting up the journey of learning: teachers of English in Iran**

Martin Cortazzi, Lixian Jin, Shiva Kaivanpanah  
and Majid Nemati



# 10

## Candles lighting up the journey of learning: teachers of English in Iran

Martin Cortazzi, Lixian Jin, Shiva Kaivanpanah and Majid Nemati

### Introduction

The topics of a 'good teacher' and of what learning English is like for learners are important in English language teaching (ELT) since ideas of teaching and learning are central to language classrooms. Ideas about teaching and learning vary enormously around the world, so students can have quite different expectations of teachers. Moreover, engagement with learning English, compared to other subjects and disciplines, often exposes students to different methods or cultural ways of learning. The topics of good teachers and how learners think about learning English are therefore central to developing more learner- or learning-centred approaches. Any proposed developments of ELT need to relate to these learners' ideas since in many ways they mediate classroom change. This is particularly important in countries such as Iran where there is enormous interest in learning English and most learning takes place in classrooms.

Researching Iranian students' perceptions of good teachers is important in order to make explicit what are usually implicit notions and make them available for discussion between students and their teachers in Iran or, in fact, elsewhere. A centuries-old tradition of serious encouragement for learning and respect for teachers in Iran meets a modern education system that includes English as a foreign language (EFL) as an international element.

This study uses metaphor analysis. This is an innovative research method which we have been developing for some years. Culturally, metaphors resonate throughout Iranian civilisation: the Persian language is noted for wide uses of idioms and rich metaphors, while Persian poetry has many mystical or spiritual themes often expressed in metaphors. This poetry (e.g. works of Rumi or Hafiz) has been widely translated and is much appreciated in the West, especially in the UK, Germany and the USA.

This study investigates perceptions of good teachers largely from students' viewpoints in an effort to derive models of their beliefs. In reporting the results, we preserve the students' voices as much as possible and take care to give representative quotes to build up, as far as we can here, a representative picture

of teachers. This picture, we suggest, gives insights for ELT both inside and outside Iran: while EFL teachers and students in Iran undoubtedly learn from the wider ELT world, in this case, the wider world may gain thought-provoking insights from Iran.

## **Good teachers of English in Iran**

Teachers of English in Iran might be seen as bridges between local, national and international tendencies. There is currently a thirst for English. This is evident in the growth of private language institutes that teach English: students see the role of the language in global communication and are well aware that skills in English are useful for study and employment, and for personal and cultural development. However, English has had ups and downs in the national scene over recent years and this has meant that English teachers have been variously viewed in official circles at different times, negatively or positively relating to the outside world (Borjian, 2013). This article only looks at Iranian students' views of English teachers in Iran.

In general, it does not seem hard to draw up a list of the qualities of a good English teacher. A list is likely to include: having requisite knowledge and skill in English and pedagogy, demonstrating the ability to sustain learners' motivation and engage them productively in interaction, being able to introduce students into ways of thinking and cultural practices and helping them to reflect upon their own practices, plus some personal or professional characteristics, such as patience. However, as we would expect, there are contextual and cultural features which may be different: for example, in Iran the teacher is expected to be of a good character, open-minded, and friendly, flexible and caring towards learners, and these qualities are seen as part of teacher efficacy. While the gender of the teacher or student does not significantly affect general perceptions of good teachers, there are different orientations towards different aspects of teachers' roles from gender perspectives, which may reflect nuances of tensions between tradition and modernity (Nemati and Kaivanpanah, 2013).

## **Metaphor analysis**

Metaphor analysis can be applied to research in ELT when students' or teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching are investigated by collecting their metaphors and analysing them to seek underlying patterns. Given a sufficient number of examples as data, these patterns represent students' thinking and beliefs. This innovative approach has some advantages over using more traditional questionnaires and interviews. When students are asked to give their own metaphors this elicitation task often seems refreshing and creative. This cognitive and affective engagement may yield different levels of insights from participants. Further, given the international character of ELT, metaphor analysis lends itself to cross-cultural research into learning; for example, to compare metaphors of learning in Japan, China, Malaysia, Lebanon or Tunisia (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999; Berendt, 2008). We investigate the concepts of teachers and learning shown through students' metaphors to reveal their perceptions. By looking at networks of these underlying concepts we propose features of cognitive models, continuing our metaphor analyses in China and elsewhere (Cortazzi et al., 2009; Jin and Cortazzi, 2011).



The approach used here draws on the research in cognitive linguistics of Lakoff and others (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Lakoff, 1993). Metaphors are conceptual and there are systematic correspondences or ‘mappings’ between the language expressions of metaphors and underlying concepts. These underlying concepts cluster into belief systems. By examining students’ metaphors for learning, we find that many give expressions such as ‘learning is a journey’: the student is a ‘traveller’, learning is seen as ‘movement’ towards a ‘destination’ along different ‘paths’ with a teacher who is a ‘guide’. The detailed characterisations of each of these elements of a journey give a good idea of students’ perceptions of learning, in a way that teachers and students can readily understand. We examine students’ perceptions of their English teachers and their learning in their own words to see how the journey of learning is described and to see the characteristics or qualities of their teachers.

Simply collecting metaphors is not enough in itself, though, because as researchers we do not always know what the metaphors imply. We need the participants’ own explanations because we want to get insiders’ views of ELT in Iran. For example, groups of British and Chinese students said: ‘My teacher is an old cow’. But these show opposite ideas. For the British, this is a gender-based insult (the teacher is said to be unpleasant, stupid or ugly), while for the Chinese this is a compliment and high praise (the teacher is regarded as tireless, productive, self-sacrificing, suffering in silence). Even within a cultural community, what seems to be the same metaphor may have different meanings, so we need to ask participants for their reasons – these are the implications (or ‘entailments’) of the metaphor. Six Iranian students said, ‘Learning English is a ship on the ocean’ but in entailments one stressed improved communication (‘going through open water [seas] to better communication’), another emphasised enjoyment (‘a very pleasant voyage’), while others focused on the power of the language (‘you will reach the shore by the greatness of the ship’s power’) and culture (‘reaching and exploring different lands of cultures and traditions’) or a destination of wisdom (‘it takes you from ignorance to wisdom’).

For these reasons, and according to metaphor theory, we examine both students’ metaphors and the entailments which they give. We ask them to give their own metaphor to complete ‘*A good teacher is ...*’ and then to give their own reasons ‘... because...’ We obtained 650 metaphors for learning and 785 metaphors for teachers from 393 university students of English in two universities (179 undergraduates; 214 postgraduates; 105 male and 288 female students). The gender balance reflects enrolment in English, TEFL, literature and translation programmes. There is probably some gender influence on the results but most kinds of metaphors were given by both male and female participants and it needs further investigation to explore the gender angle in detail. Students all spoke Persian as their first language and they completed the metaphor tasks in English. This demonstrates students’ creative ability in English but, based on our research in China (Cortazzi et al., 2011), we anticipate that had the metaphors been given in Persian many would have been longer and more elaborate. In addition, 21 students wrote mini-essays in English on their Journeys of Learning and 12 language teachers working in language institutes wrote mini-essays about their work there. To maintain a distinction between metaphor and entailments, we present direct

quotes from participants' metaphors in italics, as given, and entailments are in normal font: these give the words of students, edited for conciseness, but preserve participants' voices (see Figures 1–5).

Since participants are asked a completely open-ended creative question, an unimaginably large range of responses is possible. If we find common metaphors, this is interesting; if we find common patterns of entailments, this is important; if we find networks of patterns of different metaphors and entailments, this shows a remarkable social trend in students' beliefs about EFL teachers. All these conditions are fulfilled below.

## Journeys of learning

Students' mini-essays provide broad characterisations of learning, framed in metaphors. Learning is '*an epic journey ... a journey without maps ... an adventure journey ... very joyful, very interesting ... a lifelong process not yet finished ...*' Many students stress how they must 'try hard' to reach a destination but they 'know' they will 'arrive happily'. The destination is to progress towards a level of proficiency in English: 'when you pass your exams and get your grades' or 'when I can proudly claim I have acquired adequate knowledge through the language learning process ... to communicate with people of other countries and cultures'. Yet for some this is 'a dream that cannot possibly come true' even if they were 'earlier obsessed with this finishing point' because 'there is no end to this journey.' Teachers are usually '*guides* who help us ... who care for us ... support us on our journey'; 'well-seasoned in the nature of the journey', 'delightful ... helpful ... compassionate ... strongly disciplined.' Teachers help, 'like a mother'. They made students 'comfortable about the process and nature' of the journey' and 'kindly and gently started to raise our consciousness toward the non-mechanical parts of the journey'. For some, the journey is more than simply a cognitive or skill-learning process: it 'put me on the path of self-discovery ... and on my journey I have experienced a metamorphosis which has had a profound effect on my English knowledge and personal self.'

Here we see a tone of excitement; recognition of how learning English is a long-term process to reach goals that are associated both with language and people, and with the learner's personal self; and warmth towards teachers as guides. The teachers' mini-essays show how teaching and learning are intertwined: 'I try to teach and help others but I need myself to be helped by others ... through teaching the whole complexity and burden of this journey became manageable ... through teaching I can learn more and more.' Difficulties are seen in aesthetic terms: 'by teaching, I take the difficulties of this journey as the beauty of this undertaking.'

## Metaphors for teachers

Importantly, these mini-essays confirm what students say more elaborately in freely elicited metaphors (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Metaphors for journeys of learning English (N=66 students in Iran) with characteristics from metaphor entailments**

Metaphors for journeys of learning	Characteristics of learning English
<p>Learning English is: the most precious and longest journey ... a never-ending path to knowledge ... a beautiful journey of discovery ...</p> <p>The journey is long, full of wrong turnings, yet delightful ...</p> <p>You can explore other people's cultures and beliefs ...</p> <p>It takes you to mysterious unknown worlds ... seeking a phoenix: you are looking for a mythical or mystical creature of majesty ...</p> <p>It's a journey down a dark tunnel, which ends in a beautiful landscape ... a passage from dark to light ...</p> <p>It's moving towards a distant picture, the nearer you get, the clearer it will be ...</p> <p>It's a bumpy road in a mountainous area ... it must be traversed step by step ... the more you tread upon it, the more you desire to go further ... there are many ups and downs in gaining knowledge, but when you reach the top, the taste is sweet ...</p>	<p>Learning English is difficult but if you work hard you will be successful ...</p> <p>It has lots of ups and downs ...</p> <p>It seems endless ... mysterious, but entertaining, enjoyable ...</p> <p>The more you make progress, the more you want to continue ...</p> <p>You achieve success gradually ... you may only value the success later.... You can realise your dreams, so it ends beautifully ...</p> <p>You need to mobilise your inner resources ... to explore, discover, increase your knowledge in all fields ...</p> <p>You advance in learning by observing, comparing, judging ...</p> <p>You develop your knowledge about life ... you examine and find out about how to live ...</p>

The students' journey of learning is presented as 'most beautiful ... most precious', an endless 'adventurous voyage of discovery' 'to unexplored lands' because 'it leads to success' and 'leads us to different areas of the city of language.' The path is difficult, 'it is an uneven way of living, with lots of ups and downs, but it is the best way' and 'by learning things you can step through the darkness and light up your way.' The end point and process of learning cannot really be envisaged in advance since 'the more you explore, the more you find' and 'until we travel along this way we do not understand the effect'. Teachers 'lead you to somewhere you weren't even aware of'.

Figure 2: Metaphors for the teacher as a guide (N=94 students)

Metaphors for the teacher as a guide, leader, prophet, angel	Characteristics of teachers
<p>A teacher is a good guide ... a reliable leader ... a prophet, a messenger of love, an angel with a candle ... a rescuing angel of another world ...</p> <p>They indicate the correct way of learning ... and do not allow us to go off the beaten track ...</p> <p>They show us new things and explain them ... show the beauties of a place and give knowledge of it ... reveal the unknown world of reality ...</p> <p>They lead us to the right way and help us to find out the way of life ... we need this help ...</p> <p>They guide us through the way towards prosperity ... and bring humane messages ...</p> <p>They devote themselves to others ... sacrifice to give us knowledge ... show the straight way ... rescue humans from the chains of ignorance ...</p>	<p>Teachers give information, knowledge, advice, guidance, inspiration ...</p> <p>They make plans, organise and monitor learning ...</p> <p>They indicate how to learn ...</p> <p>They show students how to solve problems ...</p> <p>They explain, lead, show the way ... help students reach their aims ...</p> <p>They show students moral truth and an example of moral behaviour ...</p> <p>They show love, care, patience, kindness, trustworthiness, humanity, devotion and self-sacrifice ...</p>

Teachers are *'guides'* but they are also *'leaders'*, *'prophets'* and *'angels'*. The entailments for these metaphors overlap significantly, showing how closely the underlying concepts are related. As *'guides to happiness'*, 'teachers guide people to be educated and lead them from darkness to light'; 'they show you the way for learning new things', 'conduct us towards the door of science' since 'without a guide we can't understand the map'. These *'leaders of our hearts'* 'can help us to solve problems and lead us to fortune'. Perhaps surprisingly, 24 students viewed the good teacher as *'a prophet'*: they 'show us the correct way of living in order to reach salvation'. 'With their beautiful example they lead you and make you go higher and higher', 'they only deliver the message and it is up to you to understand it and apply it'. 'They sacrifice to give us knowledge'; 'they bring you to a paradise, if you love them, and yet they can make your life like hell, if you hate them'. As *'angels'* they are 'a sign from heaven: they will raise you up there'; they 'guide learners to happiness', 'towards softness and peacefulness of knowledge.'

The closeness and warmth which many students feel for teachers is even more evident in metaphors of *'parents'* and *'friends'*. Here (see Figure 3) the entailments include a considerable range of humane qualities.

**Figure 3: Metaphors for the teacher as a parent or friend (N=80 students)**

Metaphors for the teacher as a parent, friend	Characteristics of teachers
<p>A teacher is a second mother ... a father of kindness ... an older, knowledgeable friend ... sometimes tough but has a kind heart ...</p> <p>They care for students' future life ... work hard in order to make us educated ... can inspire knowledge in others ...</p> <p>They guide us and solve all our problems ...</p> <p>They help us so that we can learn with interest ... they work hard; they help us and love their country ... they tolerate us in every situation patiently ...</p> <p>They care about the students more than themselves ...</p> <p>They can have a great influence on us</p>	<p>Teachers dedicate their time, energy and effort to help students ...</p> <p>They deliver knowledge and ideas ...</p> <p>They facilitate learning ... they are motivators, benefactors, donors ...</p> <p>They like students to communicate ... like them to be happy ... like students' improvement and help them to achieve what they wish to achieve ...</p> <p>They guide students towards success ...</p> <p>Teachers make students ready for life ...</p> <p>Teachers show patience, kindness, tolerance, care, sympathy, selflessness, warmth, love ...</p>

Clearly language teachers do more than teach English, in these students' views. As '*kindly parents*' and '*good friends*', teachers are caring, show concern and provide guidance. Further, they are seen to have moral qualities which they share with learners: 'they help us in education and direct our positive manners and moralities'; 'they share their knowledge, morality and whatever they believe is worth having'. Their 'behaviour has an impact on others – you may see your teacher more than your family.' Sometimes, though, this seems overdone or patronising: 'they treat us like children; they do everything for their students, like children.'

A striking metaphor, given by 84 students, is the teacher as '*a candle*' (see Figure 4). The central meaning is that teachers give 'light', 'warmth', 'knowledge' and 'enlightenment' but they sacrifice themselves in the process, thus showing devotion. 'They burn while they brighten our minds with the light of their own knowledge'; 'They burn to give light to others but slowly melt away themselves'; 'They melt to improve us and help us learn the way of living and thinking'; and 'Their life disappears in drops of wax as they give light to others'. This *candle* metaphor is clearly important in Iran, where it is well known. We notice it in Lebanon and Malaysia and, interestingly, in China but not in the UK. The theme of teacher devotion and sacrifice is immediately recognised, however, by teachers outside these contexts when they see the metaphors because it resonates among experienced practitioners. This theme appears unrecognised by policy makers and seems rarely discussed in ELT.

**Figure 4: Metaphors for the teacher as a candle (N=86 students)**

Metaphors for the teacher as a candle	Characteristics of teachers
A teacher is a burning candle, a shining candle ... Teachers burn for students ... The candle burns and gives light to students ... It burns to enlighten the environment ... Teachers lead us from darkness to light ... They brighten our lives ... give lessons of light ... They give us brightness and heart ... They enlighten our path in life ... show us the way in the dark ... devote their life to teach us ... The candle is sacrificing itself for us ...	Teachers give knowledge ... They enlighten our minds ... enlighten our ways of thinking ... our wellbeing ... They enlighten our development ... our lives ... and ways of living ... They enlighten the environment ... Teachers show warmth, affection, devotion and love ... Teachers sacrifice themselves ... Students learn with the guidance, encouragement, help and sacrifice of teachers ... Teachers 'burn' so students learn ...

The candle metaphor is one of a set of metaphors of *light*: the teacher is *light*, the *sun*, the *moon*, a *star*, a *lantern* or *beacon*.

**Figure 5: Metaphors for the teacher as light (N=111 students)**

Metaphors for the teacher as light, the sun, the moon, or a star	Characteristics of teachers
A teacher is a shining light ... an endless source of light ... the light in our eyes ... the sunrise ... the sun after a rainy day ... moonlight on a dark night ... a shining star ... They can show you the way through the darkness ... show us the road in the night ... They give us light for guidance ... and safety ... lighting the dark side of our thought ... They show us the right path ... light our learning way ... brighten and lighten up our way to knowledge ... give us a clear sight of the people's ways ... Teachers help us to choose the way of light ... They guide students through the valley of death ... their lights take us to paradise ...	Teachers are a main source of knowledge ... They give, show and add: knowledge, guidance, warmth, beauty, incentives and energy ... they enlighten students' minds ... and thinking ... They are merciful and generous in their teaching and happy to share knowledge ... They resolve uncertainties ... give students hope and help in the struggle to learn ... They guide and make learning easier ... They show students good ways of learning ... and of living to become a good person ... They teach about people and cultures ... and give students a wide vision ...

A teacher may be the '*sun*': 'they brighten up our knowledge world' and 'light up our entire life' and 'they make us believe that our struggle and oblivion will come to an end'.

These metaphors stress the teacher's guidance but the needed effort from students (acknowledged in the 'journey' metaphors) entails some independence: the teacher is 'a *beacon*, he shows you the way but you should pass it alone' and the teacher is 'a *dim light*: they just show us a general picture whose subtitles we students must notice'. There is a strong affective tone: '*the teacher is the most beautiful sunset*: they make the evening wonderful, they need us and we feel good when they are there.' Like the *candle* metaphor, there is an element of sacrifice: 'the teacher is a *sun*: they make everything look beautiful and warm up everything but they can burn in the long run'. For some students there is ambiguity between positive and negative characteristics: 'the teacher is a *sunrise*: if they want they can be awful and destructive or beautiful.'

The gender of the teacher evokes nuances of difference which need further research: the male teacher as *father* and the female teacher as *mother* are both kind, helpful and caring in giving guidance; however, *mothers* are described as warm, loving, selfless and tough. Still, the relative absence of such comments for *fathers* (male teachers) does not necessarily mean they do not have such characteristics.

EFL teachers are not always seen positively. Twenty-six students gave negative ideas. A few students were ‘puzzled’, ‘perplexed’ or ‘mystified’ when the class pace seemed too fast or teachers did not make learning easier. Some teachers seem ‘dictatorial’ or ‘over-dominant’; they ‘kill motivation’ and ‘control thinking’ rather than broadening students’ thinking. Some negative responses showed humour: a teacher is ... ‘a *seducer*: they encourage us to venture upon new ways and acquaint us with new worlds’; an ‘*extraterrestrial creature*: the things they say are alien to the students’; ‘an *undertaker*: he arranges funerals at the end of the term’ and ‘a *jellyfish in the knowledge sea*: they look amazing but if you get too close you may end up being paralysed.’

## Metaphor networks

A careful reading of the entailments in the right-hand columns of Figures 2–5 shows how these students give an extraordinarily broad range of characterisations of their teachers. This is a rich and on the whole remarkably positive picture and, for their English teachers, here is a rewarding recognition of teachers as practitioners. But how are we to make sense of these complex listings? One way is to identify salient items of entailments that relate to more than one metaphor – and to look for the range of entailments that each major metaphor involves. This process enables us to construct metaphor networks, first used for applied metaphor research by Cortazzi et al. (2009). The networks here are based on the present data analysis.

Figure 6: A metaphor network for teachers as ‘light’

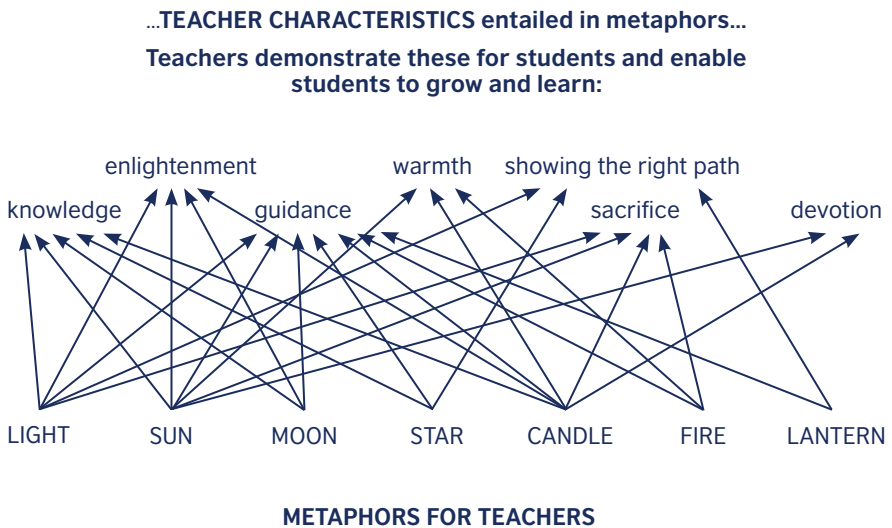
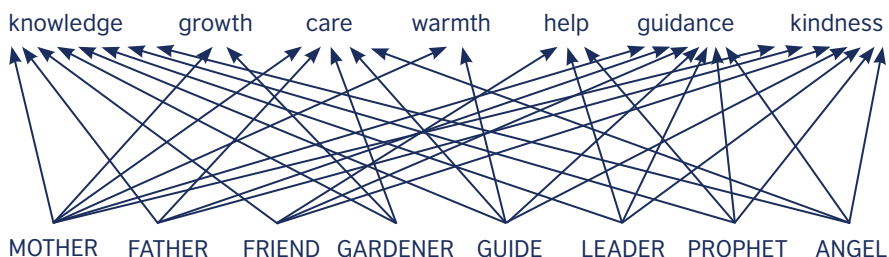


Figure 6 shows one of these metaphor networks for teachers as 'light': from this, the knowledge and guidance from teachers visibly emerge as prime characteristics. The teachers' enlightenment of students, teachers' warmth, sacrifice and devotion, and the ability to show students the right path are major characteristics.

Figure 7: A metaphor network for teachers as people with different roles

...TEACHER CHARACTERISTICS entailed in metaphors...

Teachers demonstrate these for students and enable students to grow and learn:



### METAPHORS FOR TEACHERS

Figure 7 shows a further network of the teacher represented as different kinds of people. Obviously, the teacher is him/herself a person, but these metaphors often compare teachers' roles with family and friends or with a variety of different occupations. The entailments shown in this network demonstrate again the centrality of knowledge and guidance from teachers as prime characteristics, clearly linked with kindness and care as major characteristics, with some prominence given to teachers' warmth and help and to fostering student growth. The way these networks are complementary is a striking demonstration of student beliefs.

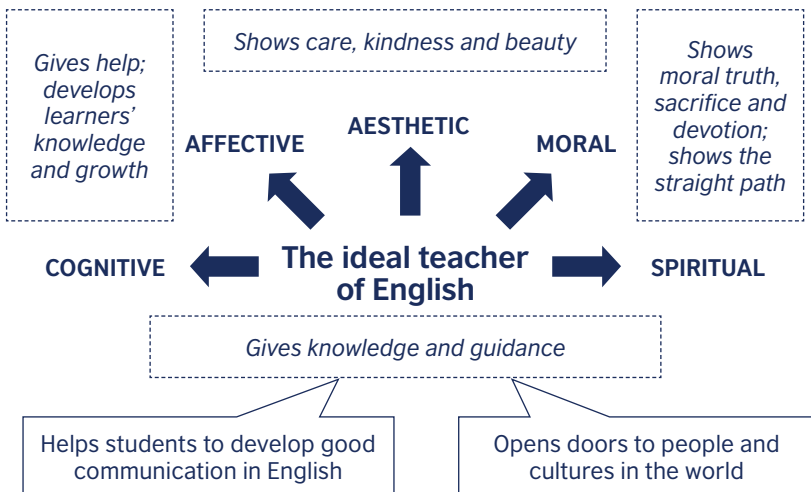
The analysis of the *candle* metaphor (Figure 4) drew attention to the view that teachers sacrifice so that students learn. In fact, the entailment of 'sacrifice' appears in some learners' metaphors for the teacher as: *light*, the *sun*, *fire*, *a mother*, *rain*, and *a mountain*. While these are not the main metaphoric meaning in each case except the *candle*, they are systematic images of sacrifice and therefore in several networks (for example, Figure 6). One student saw the teacher as 'a *moth* which flies round the light for learners until his or her wings are burned'. This is an image of love for the flame and of sacrifice, well known in Persian poems, where the 'light' is 'a *candle*'. The *candle* image is clearly deeply emblematic for students' conceptions of teachers.



The entailments that ‘teachers show us the right path’; ‘show the right way’; ‘they guide students to the way of right’; or ‘guide us on the straight path’ (Figure 6) clearly relate to the teachers’ roles in guidance. Notably, this has strong religious or spiritual overtones of correctness, uprightness, right living and morality. This is obvious in such phrases as the teacher is ‘a leader who guides us and shows us a way of reaching God’. The particular phrasing of ‘the straight path’ and ‘right path’ appears in entailments of the teacher as: a *light*, a *star*, a *lantern*, a *father*, a *guide*, a *leader*, a *path*, a *road*, a *signpost*, and, of course, ‘a *prophet*’. In an Islamic perspective, this phrasing cannot be read without thinking of the opening chapter of the Qu’rân, recited in daily prayer, where the English versions of the Arabic scripture are generally ‘Guide us to the straight path’, ‘Guide us in the right way’ or ‘Show us the straight way’. Since this phrasing is so widespread in this data, it gives evidence of a spiritual or religious perspective to students’ conceptions of teachers.

On the basis of these analyses, we tentatively propose a model of the ideal EFL teacher (Figure 8). This shows different dimensions that have emerged from these students’ words with the prime and major characteristics evident in the metaphor entailments (Figures 6 and 7). The model is holistic in the sense that it demonstrates how EFL teachers teach English as their major professional role but clearly, in this vision, they do much more along several dimensions. The model reflects a large proportion of the 393 students’ voices.

**Figure 8: A metaphor analysis model of the ideal EFL teacher in Iran (N=393 students)**



**FIVE DIMENSIONS OF A HOLISTIC MODEL OF THE IDEAL TEACHER**

## Reflection

These students' metaphors are written in English: the quality of expression is a credit to their teachers. The metaphors demonstrate not only competence for a task – which to them is unfamiliar and was unexpected – but also illustrate creative responses that are thoughtful and sometimes humorous. Some show EFL teachers in a negative view but the vast majority are positive, showing respect, warmth and gratitude for teachers' professionalism. The metaphors give a strong sense of high regard for teachers' roles in students' English-learning journeys, which the learners know is a difficult and long-term enterprise. Students clearly value the opportunities to advance on this path because of the international and local roles that English provides for students' likely futures, besides the clearly expressed desire for self-development and growth.

Metaphors and metaphor networks such as those presented here are important material to focus discussions of learning and teaching with students and for staff development, in Iran or, in fact, anywhere. In particular, a given metaphor allows creative extension and personal interpretation. For example, the 'teacher is light' can be extended, via quantum physics, to consider different views of light as 'waves of light', 'bursts of energy', or 'streams of particles with uncertain and unpredictable paths before they reach an identifiable target point'. Similarly, metaphors can be adjusted to explore implications: the teacher as '*an energy-saving light bulb*', '*a chandelier*' or '*a light show*'. Asking students to compose their own metaphors for learning, with reasoned entailments, has proved fruitful for classroom discussions in English and for teacher workshops. The tentative ideal model (Figure 8), provisional as it is, could be a focus for productive reflection with EFL trainee teachers.

## Conclusions

These metaphors from Iran give insights into teachers and learning that are seldom featured in ELT research and discussions of practice. English teachers are seen here as skilled professionals. Of course, this is in cognitive terms (they share knowledge and guidance to develop students' skills in English). But more broadly we see their work in affective terms (showing care and kindness), aesthetic terms (showing beauty) and with moral and spiritual dimensions (they show a moral example, show students the straight path and the right way). They reveal teachers' devotion and self-sacrifice (as candles, teachers burn so that students learn). An implication is that good EFL teachers embody all of these dimensions, simultaneously. Here are aspects, perhaps idealised, which are clearly significant for language learners in Iran and surely highly suggestive in the ELT world beyond: they indicate how we might consider ELT in more holistic terms. An Arabic saying, familiar in Iran, suggests 'a metaphor is a bridge to reality' (Schimmel, 1975: 292): these metaphors enable us to see a different reality of teachers and of how they help learners make their journey of learning. We can cross this bridge and see teachers as candles lighting up the journey of learning – and much more.

## References

Berendt, E (ed) (2008) *Metaphors for learning, cross-cultural perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Borjian, M (2013) *English in post-revolutionary Iran, from indigenization to internationalization*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Cortazzi, M and Jin, L (1999) 'Bridges to Learning: metaphors of teaching, learning and language', in Cameron, L and Low, G (eds) *Researching and applying metaphor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cortazzi, M, Jin, L and Wang, Z (2009) 'Cultivators, cows and computers: Chinese learners' metaphors of teachers', in Coverdale-Jones, T and Rastall, P (eds) *Internationalizing the university, the Chinese context*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jin, L and Cortazzi, M (2011) 'More than a journey: "learning" in the metaphors of Chinese students and teachers', in Jin, L and Cortazzi, M (eds) *Researching Chinese learners*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lakoff, G and Johnson, M (1980) *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G (1993) 'The contemporary theory of metaphor', in Ortony, A (ed) *Metaphor and thought* (2nd ed), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nemati, M and Kaivanpanah, S (2013) 'He or she? Examining cultural Influences on Iranian language learners' perceptions of teacher efficacy', in Cortazzi, M and Jin, L (eds) *Researching cultures of learning, international perspectives on language learning and education*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schimmel, A (1975) *Mystical dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



# **MA TEFL programmes in Iran: change in a globalised era**

Parvaneh Tavakoli and Mostafa Hasrati



# 11

## MA TEFL programmes in Iran: change in a globalised era

Parvaneh Tavakoli and Mostafa Hasrati

### Introduction

This chapter is a modest attempt to investigate how MA Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) programmes in Iran are changing in a globalised world. Our previous research in this area (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2015; Tavakoli and Hasrati, in preparation) has shown how MAs in English language teaching programmes are developing in Anglophone countries, but little or no research has been conducted to study changes in MA TEFL programmes in Iran. In what follows, we will first introduce MA TEFL programmes in Iran, before presenting and discussing different definitions of globalisation. We will then explain how we collected the data for this study and report our findings, making comparisons with the other contexts when appropriate. We will conclude by elaborating on possible extensions of this study in similar contexts.

MA programmes in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) in Iran are among the most popular postgraduate programmes in the country. This popularity can be defined in light of the international value of English as a lingua franca and Iranians' in-depth understanding of the importance of teaching and learning English in the current times. The number of students in these programmes has exponentially increased in the past two decades from around 50 in 1994, when one of the authors had just started their MA TEFL studies, to more than 1,200 in 2014 in public universities, as indicated by the *Postgraduate Admission Guideline* published by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (2014). A similar pattern of growth for such programmes is also witnessed in the private sector. In line with what is happening in other countries, this trend can be observed in other postgraduate programmes, indicating a 'massification' (Tight, 2004; Morely et al., 2002) in higher education (HE) in Iran. We argue that although the 'massification' in Iranian HE is potentially influenced by the challenges associated with globalisation and the responses to those challenges, it has characteristics that are specific to the local context of HE in Iran. In the next section, we will provide an overview of globalisation theories by drawing on the relevant literature in this area.

### Defining globalisation

While there is common consent among scholars that globalisation is a complex and multifaceted concept, there is little agreement about which definition is most encompassing. One of the most cited definitions of globalisation was proposed by Giddens (1990: 64): *'the intensification of worldwide social relations which link*

*distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.* This definition, however, does not capture the multifaceted and dynamic nature of globalisation. Other scholars have broken down globalisation into its various aspects. Porter and Vidovich (2000) argue that globalisation comprises economic, cultural and political aspects. Beck (2012: 135) argues that: *'While we commonly attribute a singular, unitary status to globalisation, mostly the economic, it is complex, multidimensional, and fluid, leading us to consider globalisation/s in its plurality'*. Holtman (2005: 14) suggests that globalisation should be considered in all its dimensions including economic, technological and cultural aspects. We would like to highlight the inevitability of the need to reformulate these definitions. Given its dynamic and interactive nature, any synchronic and static definition of globalisation would seem limited and insufficient to capture the evolving nature of globalisation, particularly its interaction with a range of other factors, including the characteristics and needs of the local contexts.

Our reading of the literature suggests that the economic aspect of globalisation is the leading factor in this process, creating a context for a 'commercial turn' (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2015) in HE. This is characterised by redefining the role of universities, from social institutions in which academics pursue and produce knowledge to centres that train professionals 'to join labour markets' (Mazzarol and Soutar, 2012: 720) and to act as 'major agents of economic growth' (Tarar, 2006: 5,080). This 'commercial turn' is rooted in neoliberalist ideas that *'call for an opening of national borders for the purpose of increased commodity and capital exchange [and privatising] virtually every process or service that can possibly be turned over to private capital.'* (Torres and Rhoads, 2006: 8)

We assume that neoliberalist ideas and globalisation may take on new shapes in the HE of different countries as they interact with differing local and contextual factors. In Western, mostly Anglophone, countries several provisions have been made to establish offshore university campuses in developing countries (Wilkins and Huisman, 2012), a process referred to as multinationalisation (Altbach, 2004: 6). In addition, a great majority of Anglophone universities have expanded their programmes to attract more overseas students, not only as a source of income but to promote an international academic and research environment. Although based on a different rationale, similar initiatives have been adopted in the Iranian context. For instance, HE in Iran has expanded in the past two decades to accommodate a larger number of students at home, which we assume is partly due to a policy to keep students at home. In addition, similar to the establishment of offshore campuses of Anglophone universities, some Iranian universities have opened new campuses that admit fee-paying students without having to take the National University Entrance Examination. The Kish Island Campus of the University of Tehran was one of the first such universities in Iran. Nevertheless, it seems that this trend has been affected by wider political issues. For instance, the few offshore campuses of Iranian universities established in the 2000s in a number of foreign countries (for example, Azad University Oxford Branch) were forced to close or minimise activity when the new waves of US-led sanctions (Resolution 1803 in March 2008) came into effect.



## Iranian context

The rapid growth in the number of universities and colleges in Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, although strongly motivated by the Islamic Revolution and the desire to spread knowledge among the nation, should to some extent be attributed to globalisation processes that foresaw education as an essential requirement for the economic growth of the nation. The growth in HE since the 1980s around the world has been associated with a number of key shifts in HE policy and strategy setting, including privatisation of education, introduction of tuition fees as a source of revenue in certain institutions, preoccupation with an efficiency model of education, and the reduction of education products to the concept of commodities (Hayes and Wynyard, 2002; Manicas, 2007). While a careful examination of the recent history of HE in Iran is an undeniably interesting and a necessary research focus, it goes beyond the scope of the current chapter. Our analysis of the existing evidence suggests that the Iranian context of HE shares many of the above-mentioned shifts with its global counterparts.

To provide a brief history of the first MA TEFL programmes in Iran, it is necessary to look at the earliest formal teaching qualifications that were available to English language teachers in Iran. While teacher training universities and colleges had been offering general teaching qualifications for a number of years, it was the Teachers' Training University in Tehran that first offered a course entitled 'Teaching English as a Foreign Language' in the 1960s. This was an intensive one-year programme with an embedded practicum component, which upon successful completion allowed graduates to teach at high schools. The course entry requirements included having a BA in English language and/or literature and passing the entrance exam<sup>2</sup>. The graduates from this course then received a one-month summer course training from the British Council in Iran to enhance their teaching methodology knowledge and skills. In 1973, the University of Tehran was the first university to offer an MA in TEFL in Iran. The course was designed for teachers who were planning to move to HE or seeking promotion in their existing jobs. The candidates, fewer than ten in the first intakes, were selected through a university entrance exam, which included a test of vocabulary, language use and reading comprehension, as well as an oral interview. The programme was a two-year course (four semesters in total) that included modules on linguistics, phonology, education, vocabulary building, methodology and French (as a foreign language). It also included a practicum that required students to teach and/or observe English classes at state high schools. The course was predominantly taught by Iranian linguists and applied linguists. Interestingly, the first graduates of this course became outstanding scholars and leading academics in TEFL and/or applied linguistics in Iran in the decades to come. After the Islamic Revolution, the Supreme Cultural Revolution made efforts to develop the existing MA programmes to be comparable to their global counterparts. The MA in TEFL was not an exception. The course structure and credit system offered on these MAs in 2014 still follow, to a great extent, the model established in 1973.

---

<sup>2</sup> In the absence of any published research on the history of MA TEFL programmes in Iran, we are referring to our personal communication with some of the founders of such programmes.

## Methodology

The data reported in this chapter is part of a larger-scale project on the MA TEFL in Iran, coming from 23 completed questionnaires and two interviews collected in September and October 2014 from academic members of staff teaching MA TEFL in different universities in Iran. The questionnaire data was initially collected through convenience sampling, but it then turned into a snowball sampling when some of the participants distributed the questionnaire among their colleagues. Although we sent the questionnaire to more than 30 participants from 18 different universities we received a low response rate of 35 per cent. With the effects of snowball sampling, it is difficult to say how many universities are represented in this data. To respect the participants' privacy and anonymity, we did not ask for any personal information, including the name or type of the institutions they worked at. The interviews were conducted over the phone with two very experienced professors who had been identified as key founders of MA TEFL programmes in Iran.

The questionnaire, which is a modification from our previous research (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2015; Tavakoli and Hasrati, in preparation), consisted of both quantitative Likert-scale questions and qualitative open-ended questions. In this article, we will draw only on qualitative data collected in the study, as it would provide a more in-depth insight into our colleagues' understanding of globalisation and of their views about how globalisation has impacted MA TEFL programmes in Iran.

We put the following four open-ended questions to the participants:

1. In your opinion, do you think MA TEFL programmes are changing or have changed over the past 10–15 years? If yes, how?
2. What do you think are the causes of these changes, if any?
3. How do you define globalisation?
4. How has globalisation affected TEFL programmes in Iran?

These questions generated a range of various responses, which we then categorised based on open thematic coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000, 2005). This means that we assigned a code to each section of the responses based on their content. For instance, a recurring theme in the responses was reference to turning MA dissertations into publications, which we categorised as 'publishing issues'. In further analysis of the data, we developed sub-categories. For instance, replies earlier categorised as 'publishing issues' were further sub-categorised into themes including 'push from supervisors on MA students to publish' and 'credentialing incentives for supervisors to publish'.

In total, we identified nine core categories in the qualitative data in the procedure outlined above, indicating a range of assumptions about changes in TEFL programmes in the country. In what follows, we will describe these changes as perceived by the participants. We will refer to the participants by a capital P followed by a number (for example, P.23).

## Results

In this section, we will pull together the nine core categories under three headings:

- Changes from below
- Quality or quantity: which to promote in HE?
- Publish or perish

We would like to emphasise that we align ourselves with a constructivist qualitative paradigm (Charmaz, 2000, 2005; Schwandt, 2000), which argues that realities are constructed as a result of the interaction between the researcher and data. In other words, we do not claim that our findings reflect objective realities, but they are our interpretations of the data we have collected.

### Changes from below

In order to maintain standards and assure quality, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) has assigned special committees to discuss and set curricula for all programmes offered in universities across the country, called the Supreme Council of Curriculum Planning (SCCP)<sup>3</sup>. The MA TEFL programmes offered in public and private universities are no exception, and a curriculum has been in force that has not changed greatly in the past three decades. This curriculum includes the title of various courses and their contents that should be delivered in MA TEFL programmes, but no specific textbooks are suggested. The curriculum includes mandatory and optional courses, and universities can choose from optional courses based on the expertise of their academic staff. The curriculum includes 28 unit credits, each comprising 17 hours of instruction, and the writing of a dissertation worth four unit credits.

Though change has not come from the MSRT to revise this curriculum, the younger generation of academic staff joining TEFL departments have been implementing changes such as introducing new approaches, tasks and projects. For instance, the formal curriculum for the course entitled 'Research Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages' specifically recommends the scientific method and quantitative analysis as the methodological techniques to be covered in the course, as stated in the curriculum approved by the SCCP. However, some staff, often the younger generation of academics, have been introducing new perspectives (for example, qualitative methodology) as an equally legitimate approach to enquiry:

*The books and papers we introduce as part of the course requirements are quite new, not because of the TEFL programmes, but due to the teachers' self-devised MA programme. Once I taught quantitative research paradigms, and now I am teaching the qualitative and mixed method paradigms in response to the Western tendencies and currents coming into Iran. All the tendencies are not native born. They are Western. (P.16)*

---

<sup>3</sup> In Iran the Council is known as 'Showraye Alie Barnameh Rizi'.

As the above quotation indicated, these changes are not often in response to local issues, but they may reflect the ‘winds ... blowing in the intellectual zeitgeist’ (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995: 3) of Western countries. Although this seems to indicate a one-way direction of change from centre to periphery (Canagarajah, 1996, 2002), other qualitative data in our study suggests that some participants were tailoring these changes to fit their local context. For instance, the global drive for production of knowledge has led to institutional policies forcing academics to produce more publications, which in turn has resulted in a redefinition of the MA dissertation as a piece of research with publishable outcomes. We will further discuss this in the section entitled *Publish or Perish*.

## Quantity or quality: which to promote in HE?

Another important change is a sharp increase in the number of students in MA TEFL programmes. As mentioned before, admission into these programmes has significantly hiked in the past 25 years from around 50 in 1990 to more than 1,200 in 2014 in public universities. This expansion, we argue, is triggered by two factors. The first is the general international trend in expansion of HE, a process we referred to above as ‘massification of higher education’ (Tight, 2004). This process is most probably caused by the privatisation of HE and budget cuts that have led universities across the globe to rely on students as a major source of revenue (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2015). The other factor seems to be the increasing possibility for Iranian students to go to foreign countries to pursue a higher degree, a direct consequence of globalisation. While this is not the most pragmatic choice for the majority of the students, the MSRT has made provisions for Iranian students to be admitted to equivalent programmes offered in Iranian universities, a process that has led to an increase in intakes.

The participants’ views were divided on the quality of these programmes, with some suggesting that quality has improved while others claim it seems to be lagging behind the increase in admissions to some departments. For instance, some participants suggested that the need for student-generated revenues has resulted in universities lowering admission requirements:

*Things have definitely changed a lot over the past years since there is now a lot of MA admissions in Iran under different names like PARDISE POOL and SHABANE<sup>4</sup> in state universities, which has resulted in Azad University getting into a competition with state universities to admit as many students as possible at any cost without considering their qualifications. The final corollary of this competition is that you can see too many unqualified students studying at MA. (P.15)*

From the limited data and documents available to us, it is difficult to draw any certain conclusions about the process of massification of HE in Iran. However, we assume that the rapid growth of recruitment on such programmes might have been associated with a less strict quality control process and a limited infrastructure

---

<sup>4</sup> These are two examples of private or fee-paying higher education institutions in Iran. Admissions to such programmes are easier as the payment of high tuition fees makes them less competitive.

capacity for accommodating this growth. Our data suggests that the insensitivity to quality control is seen by the participants in the light of two outcomes: a) an increase in plagiarism in dissertation writing, and b) a push for an expedited graduation process:

*The motto is finish the job on time no matter what the content is. I have heard that those who cannot finish the job soon, they lose points on their thesis. That's why the students are in a hurry to finish the job as soon as possible. As far as I remember, writing a thesis was not a big deal. Reports say that it is worse than what it was years ago. (P.11)*

## **Publish or perish**

An important change in MA TEFL programmes has been a redefinition of the role of MA TEFL dissertations. While the MA dissertation is often regarded as a first practice in conducting a small-scale study and improving academic writing, it seems that most MA TEFL departments aim for MA dissertations with publishable outcomes:

*There is less focus on learning and more focus on the outcome, which usually gets defined in terms of scores and the number of publications. Publishing has become such a priority for illegitimate reasons that it is mostly considered a necessary evil or a tool for promotion rather than a means of contribution to knowledge and personal and social development. (P.13)*

The reasons for such expectations have been extensively outlined elsewhere (Hasrati, 2013), but we need to mention that the MSRT has set guidelines for credentialing and enumeration for publication by university professors. These guidelines suggest that universities provide financial incentives to university professors for publication. In addition, the points-based system for credentialing asserts publications as a requirement for promotion. These factors have created a culture in which MA dissertations are not merely regarded as learning practices but as professional enterprises that should lead to publications bearing the names of the dissertation supervisor and the student as joint authors. Many departments have agreed on a benchmark for the inclusion of published papers in the overall assessment of the dissertation, e.g. capping the top mark if a publication is not emerging from the dissertation. This means that an MA dissertation's maximum score would be, for instance, 18/20, but if the student has published a paper, usually jointly with the supervisor, the maximum mark would be awarded. This is different from most Western educational cultures where there is no formal pressure or bureaucratic requirements on MA or even PhD students to publish their work until after graduation. It is also in sharp contrast with results from our previous research in the UK, where publishing results of MA dissertations was ranked as the least important aspect of writing an MA dissertation (Hasrati and Tavakoli, 2015).

## Evaluation, reflection and conclusion

In this chapter we have identified and elaborated on three key aspects of change in MA TEFL programmes in Iran. This list, however, is by no means exhaustive and should best be regarded as a sample of changes in these programmes. Such changes should not be regarded as isolated and independent of each other. On the contrary, we argue that we can only fully appreciate the complexity of the changes in these programmes by looking at interaction among them.

The creation and possibility of rapid, easy connections has enabled academics to access recent publications and programmes across the globe, which in turn has made it possible to incorporate new approaches and theories in these programmes in the absence of curricular changes at the ministerial level. In addition, increased mobility has led to more conference participation by university professors who can keep abreast with new developments in applied linguistics and language teaching. A corollary has been to reduce the gap between some Iranian TEFL departments and their Anglophone counterparts. These, as argued before, are most notably personal variations and changes that are being implemented from below.

Rapid interconnections and mobility have also enabled Iranian students to continue their studies in Anglophone countries and more recently in Malaysia and India<sup>5</sup>. This has led to new policies to increase admission to postgraduate programmes in general and MA TEFL programmes in particular to encourage students to stay in the country. In addition, Iranian students in foreign countries can also transfer to Iranian universities (MSRT Student Services, 2014). This may be a strategy to channel money spent in other countries into the Iranian HE system.

Similarly, new global technologies have made it possible for fee-based journals to reach academics, most notably in developing countries including Iran with a context of credentialing and material incentives for publication, tempting them into speedy publications. This has affected Iranian MA programmes in general and MA TEFL programmes in particular by redefining the role and purpose of writing a Masters dissertation.

It is clear that the three changes in MA TEFL programmes reported in this chapter (i.e. *changes from below*; *quality or quantity*; and *publish or perish*) interact in complex ways, forming a constellation of global and local phenomena, an area that merits further investigation. The changes we have identified in this chapter will most probably be common to other MA programmes in Iran and even in other developing countries, but more research is needed to investigate this topic and to compare results from studies in similar contexts.

---

<sup>5</sup> This statement is based on our local knowledge of the Iranian context.

## References

- Altbach, PG (2004) Globalisation and the university: Myths and realities in an unequal world. *Tertiary Education and Management* 10/1: 3–25.
- Atta-ur-Rahman and Nasim, A (2004) Time for enlightened moderation: A call for Islamic nations to renew and reaffirm their commitment to science. *Nature* 432: 273–274.
- Beck, K (2012) Globalization/s: Reproduction and resistance in the internationalization of Higher Education. *Canadian Journal Of Education* 35/3: 133–148.
- Berkenkotter, C and Huckin, TN (1995) *Genre Knowledge in Disciplinary Communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- Canagarajah, AS (1996) 'Non-discursive' requirements in academic publishing, material resources of periphery scholars, and the politics of knowledge production. *Written Communication* 13: 435–472.
- Canagarajah, AS (2002) *A Geopolitics of Academic Writing*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Charmaz, K (2000) 'Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods', in Denzin, NK and Lincoln, NK (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Charmaz, K (2005) 'Grounded theory in the 21st century: Applications for advancing social justice studies', in Denzin, NK and Lincoln, YS (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3rd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Giddens, A (1990) *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Glaser, B and Strauss, AL (1967) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Hasrati, M (2013) Material and credentialing incentives as symbolic violence: Local engagement and global participation through joint publication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 27/2: 154–179.
- Hasrati, M and Tavakoli, P (2015) Globalisation and MA TESOL programmes in the UK. *Higher Education*. 69/4: 547–565.
- Hayes, D and Wynyrd, R (2002) *The McDonaldisation of Higher Education*. London: Bergin and Garvey.
- Holtman, RJ (2005) *Making Globalisation*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

- Manicas, P (2007) Globalisation and higher education. In Ritzer, G (ed) *The Blackwell companion to globalisation*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mazzarol, T and Soutar, GN (2012) Revisiting the global market for higher education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics* 24/5: 717–737.
- Iran Ministry of Science, Research and Technology: Postgraduate studies (2014). Available online at: [www.phdazmoon.net/wp-content/uploads/Arshad\\_1392\\_1\\_Ensani.pdf](http://www.phdazmoon.net/wp-content/uploads/Arshad_1392_1_Ensani.pdf)
- Iran Ministry of Science, Research and Technology: Student Services (2014). Available online at: <http://mad.saorg.ir/EDUS/TOI/TOIAgreement.aspx>
- Morley, L, Leonard, D and David, M (2002) Variations in vivas: Quality and equality in British PhD assessment. *Studies in Higher Education* 27/3: 263–273.
- Porter, P and Vidovich, L (2000) Globalisation and higher education policy. *Educational Theory* 50/4: 449–465.
- Schwandt, TA (2000) 'Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism', in Denzin, NK and Lincoln, YS (eds) *Handbook of qualitative research* (second ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tarar, ON (2006) Globalisation and higher education in Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly* 41/40: 5,080–5,085.
- Tavakoli, P and Hasrati, M (in preparation) Globalisation and MAs in Applied Linguistics: A comparative study of five Anglophone countries.
- Tight, M (2004) Research into higher education: An a-theoretical community of practice? *Higher Education Research and Development* 23: 395–411.
- Torres, CA and Rhoads RA (2006) 'Introduction: Globalisation and higher education in Americas', in Rhoads, RA and Torres, CA (eds) *The University, State and Market: The Political Economy of Globalisation in Americas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Wilkins, S and Huisman, J (2012) The international branch campus as transnational strategy in higher education. *Higher Education* 64/5: 627–645.



# **Feedback type preferred by Iranian EFL teachers in post- observation meetings**

Sasan Baleghizadeh



# 12

## Feedback type preferred by Iranian EFL teachers in post-observation meetings

Sasan Baleghizadeh

### Introduction

Teacher supervision is an important issue in English language teaching (ELT) because novice teachers need a mentor to help them with problems they are likely to encounter (for example, classroom and behaviour management). Mentoring teachers through classroom observation is both a rewarding and challenging experience: rewarding in the sense that it involves helping younger colleagues grow professionally and be better teachers; challenging in that it sometimes requires delivering negative feedback.

Classroom observation often has two goals: teacher evaluation and teacher development (Sheal, 1989). Traditionally, teachers are observed for evaluative purposes to ensure uniform practices, check for standard classroom procedures and prescribe needed changes (Bailey, 2006; Goldsberry, 1988). Classroom observation, however, can be undertaken for teacher development not focusing on strengths and weaknesses, but promoting reflective practice, providing opportunities for teachers to explore new teaching possibilities, and helping teachers acquire knowledge about teaching and developing their own teaching theory (Gebhard, 1990: 1).

Almost all teachers like to be told what they need to do to become effective teachers, yet they feel nervous in the presence of an observer using a checklist to judge their performance as satisfactory or unsatisfactory during a post-observation meeting. According to Williams (1989), most teachers do not favour this form of observation because it is potentially threatening, prescriptive and strictly observer centered. This traditional form of observation is known as the directive or supervisory approach (Freeman, 1982), the primary goal of which is to evaluate the teacher's mastery of a prescribed methodology. 'Good' teaching is defined in terms of a teacher's adherence to a pre-planned set of classroom procedures. The directive approach is also characterised by an unequal power relationship between teacher and supervisor. The teacher is expected to follow supervisors' advice because they know what 'good' teaching means.

Apart from these two main shortcomings, namely prescriptiveness and authoritativeness, the directive approach enjoys the advantage of clarity. Teachers know what they are expected to do in class and supervisors know areas on which to concentrate and comment. Additionally, this approach has been proven useful for novice teachers in contexts where teachers need to be given clear direction (Copeland, 1982).

## The post-observation meeting

The observation cycle consists of three distinct phases: the pre-observation meeting, where supervisors establish rapport with teachers and assure them that they are there to offer help; the observation period, during which supervisors carefully capture classroom events, making field notes or using checklists; and the post-observation meeting, where supervisors indicate teachers' strengths and weaknesses. The post-observation meeting is a critical phase since it requires supervisors to comment on and, at times, challenge teachers' planning or teaching behaviour. Supervisors need to be adequately trained and prepared for this phase. They need to know how to praise, and how to deliver criticism, in a face-saving manner and with evidence. They need to create an anxiety-free atmosphere and know how to give effective advice.

According to Wallace and Woolger (1991: 322), a typical post-observation meeting should include the following stages:

**Stage 1: Establishing the facts: What happened?** At this stage, supervisors and teachers review the lesson, agreeing on the facts of what happened (i.e. the main stages of the lesson) and critical incidents during the lesson. The main question at this stage could be sub-divided into: a) What did the teacher do? and b) What did the students do?

**Stage 2: Objectives and achievements.** At this stage, supervisors guide teachers to talk about what was learned in the class. Again, the main question could be sub-divided into: a) What was achieved? and b) What did the students learn?

**Stage 3: Generating alternatives: What else could have been done?** Here, there is discussion of alternative strategies for a similar future lesson. This should not be seen as criticism, but as an essential step towards ongoing professional development.

**Stage 4: Self-evaluation: What have you learned?** This last question is of importance in that teachers have to articulate what they have learned from the observed teaching experience. The way they answer this question is significant too, as an indicator of their powers of self-evaluation and self-improvement.

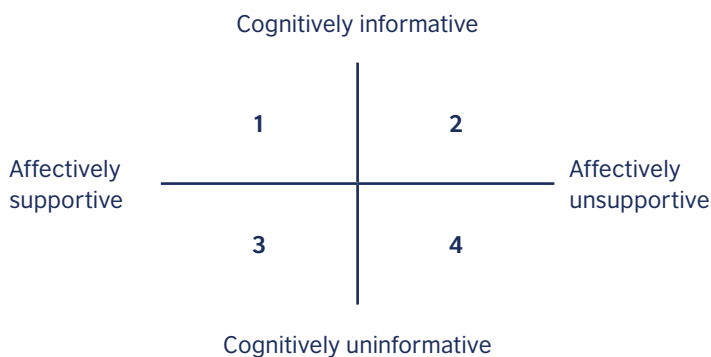
An effective post-observation meeting has a number of features. It should occur immediately after the lesson when both teachers and supervisors have a fresh memory of the lesson, and it should be data based. As Salas and Mercado (2010) rightly argue, an effective supervisory dialogue is one that is based on empirical data such as hand-written notes or recorded observations (either audio or video).

Telling a teacher that *'I did not observe enough corrective feedback,'* or *'You did not seem to correct your students sufficiently,'* does not work. Instead, by referring to the number of opportunities in which the teacher could have applied corrective feedback strategies and comparing them to the actual number of attempts during the lesson, both supervisor and teacher can arrive at a more mutual and objective understanding. The third important feature of an effective post-observation meeting is that it should be goal directed. Both teachers and supervisors should set clear future goals to improve problematic areas. A post-observation meeting that does not result in improved action is nothing but empty words.

An effective post-observation meeting is one that takes both cognitive and affective factors into consideration. The cognitive dimension refers to the new information load conveyed to the teacher during the post-observation meeting, while the affective dimension refers to positive support and face-saving strategies. Some supervisors spend time commenting in detail on the lesson's weak points and give a full description of possible alternative courses of action, making the post-observation meeting cognitively rich. Other supervisors are more conservative in delivering criticism and dwell on positive points without commenting on those aspects the teacher could have handled better, thereby making the meeting more affectively supportive.

The following model, adapted from Bailey (2006), shows how these two factors interact to form the following quadrant:

**Figure 1: Interaction of cognitive and affective factors**



The above model offers four options. The most favourable situation is both cognitively informative and affectively supportive (Cell 1). Not surprisingly, Cell 4 is the least favourable condition, which no observed teacher would ever wish to experience. My experience of interviewing teachers shows that the majority of feedback sessions fall into the two broad categories represented by Cells 2 and 3 in the above quadrant. The purpose of the study reported in this chapter is an investigation of Iranian EFL teachers' preference for either of these two feedback types.

## The study

The participants were 200 Iranian EFL teachers, both female (N=112) and male (N=88) with an average age of 27. The selected sample included 100 novice teachers (below two years of teaching experience) and 100 experienced teachers (with an average of five years' teaching experience). Some of the participants were MA students of TEFL (N=69) who were taking a Teaching Practice course in which I introduced the elements of an effective post-observation meeting. The rest were BA students (N=131) majoring in English Language and Literature who attended workshops I ran on principles of classroom observation, where I introduced the feedback types represented in Figure 1. The participants were EFL teachers at several well-known English language schools in Tehran, Iran. Table 1 shows the number of the participants based on their gender and teaching experience.

**Table 1: Distribution of the participants based on gender and teaching experience**

Gender \ Experience	Experience		Total
	Novice	Experienced	
Female	58	54	112
Male	42	46	88
Total	100	100	200

All participants were asked to reflect on the four options – particularly Cells 2 and 3 – and send their comments and specific preference to me through an email attachment no more than two days after they were introduced to the Cells in Figure 1. The data was collected over a period of three years. The results revealed that there was no significant difference between male and female teachers regarding their preference for Cells 2 and 3. Table 2 shows that 49 per cent of both male and female teacher groups preferred cognitively informative but affectively unsupportive feedback, and likewise 51 per cent of the participants from both groups preferred affectively supportive yet cognitively uninformative feedback.

**Table 2: Frequency and percentage of teachers' preferences**

Feedback type \ Teachers	Teachers			
	Female	Male	Novice	Experienced
Cognitively informative/ affectively unsupportive	55 (49%)	43 (49%)	67 (67%)	39 (39%)
Affectively supportive/ cognitively uninformative	57 (51%)	45 (51%)	33 (33%)	61 (61%)

However, regarding teaching experience, there was a significant difference between novice and experienced teachers. While the majority of the novice teachers (67 per cent) preferred supervisory feedback that was cognitively informative, even if it was affectively unsupportive, most experienced teachers (61 per cent) preferred the opposite type of feedback, namely one that is affectively supportive yet cognitively uninformative.

## Evaluation

Before data analysis I had assumed the results would emerge in another direction. My hypothesis was that novice teachers would welcome more affectively supportive feedback, which would boost their confidence at the beginning of their career. The results revealed that most of them favoured more cognitive-oriented feedback. Even more surprising is the experienced teachers' preference for more affective-oriented feedback despite the fact that they should supposedly be more confident in receiving criticism.

The comments made by participating teachers were informative. Below, I cite a number of extracts that show how both novice and experienced teachers think and feel about the feedback they receive in post-observation meetings (all names are pseudonyms).

Although the majority of novice teachers (67 per cent) were in favour of Cell 2, namely feedback that is cognitively informative but affectively unsupportive, there were some who preferred emotional support from the supervisor because they thought they would leave the job in its absence. A female novice teacher comments:

*Actually, I am in favour of Cell 3, which is affectively supportive. While the main concern for a teacher is to learn something new and grow professionally, affective support is much more important to me, because I am kind of fragile and unfortunately every negative feedback in my career would break me easily and causes me to quit teaching! (Aida, novice teacher, age 24)*

This is a typical example of how a novice teacher, while admitting the need for professional growth, expresses her preference for affective support because she thinks negative criticism would completely demotivate her.

Similarly, another novice teacher notes that:

*I would prefer cognitively uninformative and affectively supportive feedback from the supervisor because I have a very low self-esteem. If somebody criticises me that will not be of any help to me for improvement; I would give up on that issue and call myself an incompetent teacher thereafter. I need to be praised in order to continue. (Hamid, novice male teacher, age 25)*

As mentioned before, despite these two comments from novice teachers, the majority of them opted for Cell 2, which is feedback intended to add something to their knowledge and hence is more cognitively oriented in nature. As one of these teachers comments:

*I prefer the second cell. It is really important for me that the observer gives feedback on my various ways of teaching. The matter of being emotionally supported is not the case for me. I had such an experience. An observer came to my class and said my way of teaching was not appropriate for that level. He criticised me harshly, yet provided me with a new alternative. Although at first his way of criticising shook my confidence, shortly after that I thought of applying*

*his suggestion and it really worked. So I really expect an observer to offer his/her suggestions for improvement, no matter whether it is affectively supportive or not.* (Parisa, novice female teacher, age 25)

Parisa admits that harsh criticism might hurt, yet could prove useful provided it is accompanied by information helpful to the teacher (in this case, 'a new alternative').

Another female teacher makes a similar comment:

*I prefer cognitively informative and affectively unsupportive comments of a supervisor. For me, the most important thing is to improve the quality of my teaching, so I do not care about those affectively unsupportive comments even if they may be offensive. If I find my supervisor's comment informative, I will try to overlook and forget the annoying part of it. I believe it is better to be aware of my problems in teaching and their solutions rather than remain unaware but happy.* (Maryam, novice teacher, age 23)

As for the experienced teachers, the majority of them (61 per cent) preferred feedback that was affectively supportive with little cognitive load. Two typical comments are as follows:

*I do think affectively supportive condition that considers the emotional status of a teacher will be the most efficacious. As a result, the third option is the safest for me as an experienced teacher because I have almost enough information related to my profession. However, I think that for novice teachers, cognitively informative feedback will be more useful.* (Ramin, experienced male teacher, age 28)

Another experienced male teacher put it as follows:

*Experienced teachers have gone through years of experiences and have got fixed in their techniques and methods, so they do believe what they are doing is based on long experiences and is absolutely correct. Therefore, it is hard to add new information to them, so Cell 3 is better for these teachers.* (Sheida, experienced female teacher, age 29)

The majority of experienced teachers both implicitly and explicitly pointed out that when teachers gain competence and confidence after several years of teaching, it is hard to change their attitudes towards certain practices, particularly when they become a fixed part of their cognition or belief systems. It might be possible to change teachers' peripheral beliefs after some time, but changing their core beliefs seems extremely difficult (Phipps and Borg, 2009). Supervisors should therefore exercise caution when delivering feedback to experienced teachers, because many have developed and established their own style and philosophy of teaching, which they hold to be true. The post-observation meeting for experienced teachers is likely to foster tension if supervisors do not provide any affectively supportive feedback. As a senior experienced teacher told me:

*What I need from a younger supervisor is nothing but respecting what I'm doing in my classes.*



Comments of this sort mean that the long-held beliefs of senior teachers are the red lines that supervisors should approach tactfully.

## Conclusion

This study was an attempt to explore Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards the type of feedback they would prefer to receive in post-observation meetings following the four-cell grid proposed earlier. The results showed that while there was no difference between male and female teachers' attitudes, there was a significant difference between novice and experienced teachers in that novice teachers were mainly in favour of cognitively informative feedback whereas experienced teachers mostly favoured the affectively supportive type. Novice teachers may be more motivated to learn new things to improve their practice, even at the cost of receiving negative feedback. Experienced teachers may be more concerned about 'face' and hence prefer supervisors' approval. The implication is that the approach to observing novice and experienced teachers' classes should be different. The directive approach, though traditional, appears to work with novice teachers, particularly in settings where there is a prescribed methodology. However, this approach may not work with experienced teachers who believe in what they have been doing for some years. A better approach to adopt for these teachers would be the non-directive approach, which is more humanistic in nature and affectively supportive. Supervisors who advise teachers through this approach do not prescribe what is best to do and nor do they make judgmental comments, but they may '*try to rectify the erroneous beliefs of the teacher*'. (Baleghizadeh, 2010: 10) This, however, requires expertise on the part of supervisors to convince experienced teachers to change their beliefs at the same time as saving their 'face'. Such supervision is recommended only if sufficiently trained supervisors are available.

## References

- Baleghizadeh, S (2010) Observation and feedback: Some theoretical essentials for an effective observer training course. *The Teacher Trainer* 24/3: 8–12.
- Bailey, KM (2006) *Language Teacher Supervision: A Case-Based Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Copeland, W (1982) Student teachers' preference for supervisory approach. *Journal of Teacher Education* 33/1: 32–36.
- Freeman, D (1982) Observing teachers: three approaches to in-service training and development. *TESOL Quarterly* 16/1: 21–28.
- Gebhard, J (1990) *The supervision of second and foreign language teachers*. ERIC Digest, ERIC Clearinghouse on language and linguistics (EDOF-90-06). Washington DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Goldsberry, L (1988) Three functional methods of supervision. *Action in Teacher Education* 10/1: 1–10.

Phipps, S and Borg, S (2009) Exploring tensions between teachers' grammar teaching beliefs and practices. *System* 37/3: 380–390.

Salas, S and Mercado, L (2010) Looking for the big picture: Macro-strategies for L2 teacher observation feedback. *English Teaching Forum* 48/4: 18–23.

Sheal, P (1989) Classroom observation: Training the observers. *ELT Journal* 43/2: 92–103.

Wallace, M and Woolger, D (1991) Improving the ELT supervisory dialogue: the Sri Lankan experience. *ELT Journal* 45/4: 320–327.

Williams, M (1989) A developmental view of classroom observations. *ELT Journal* 43/2: 85–91.

# **Effecting methodological change through a trainer-training project: a tale of insider-outsider collaboration**

Sue Leather and Khalil Motallebzadeh



# 13

## Effecting methodological change through a trainer-training project: a tale of insider-outsider collaboration

Sue Leather and Khalil Motallebzadeh

### Introduction

In Iran there is a need to train teachers of English in the oral-communicative approach, to keep pace with both Iranian students' desire to speak English and with the needs of Iranian society as a whole.

In this chapter we reflect on the Iran Trainer Training Project (ITTP), for Iranian ELT professionals, which aims to address this need. We explain how we have gone about introducing practical, interactive training methods to Iranian Master Trainers in an attempt to introduce a cascade of practice-focused methodology to teacher trainers and teachers. We make reference to our own collaboration as 'insider' and 'outsider' on the project, and the benefits of these two perspectives in developing an effective intervention.

### Context

Understanding the context of teaching and learning, as Wedell and Malderez (2013) have pointed out, is important before initiating any educational change. Indeed, they call it '*the starting point for change*' (p. 228). It is for this reason that we start with a brief overview of the current context of ELT in Iran.

English is the foreign language most widely taught in Iran. All students have to take English in secondary schools and universities. There are also many private language institutions teaching English across the country. Despite this popularity, as Talebinezhad and SadeghiBeniss (2005) argue, few public schools and universities have been successful in meeting Iranian students' ever-increasing desire to learn English communicatively (cited in Aghagolzadeh and Davari, 2014). This has resulted in, as Riazi (2005) says, a high number of private schools and language institutions offering English language at different levels in their curriculum.

Looking back on recent history, as Farhady et al. (2010) and Tollefson (1991) note, the Islamic Revolution (1979) had a great impact on ELT in Iran. Tollefson believes that the end of English domination was associated with the changing structure of power in Iranian society. Beeman (1986) claims that after the Revolution, English

was mostly associated with Western subjugation of the Iranian people. It seems that after the Islamic Revolution, English was, to a great extent, restricted to areas such as diplomacy and science (Farhady et al., 2010).

In the past two decades there has been a rapid growth in science and technology in the Iranian context. This has meant that the role of foreign languages, especially English, is now a key factor in educational development. Meanwhile, the anxiety over the spread of Western values in Iran through ELT has attracted many Iranian authors to consider ELT as the silent hegemony of the West and call for a movement towards localisation (Akbari, 2003; Davari, 2011; Pishghadam and Naji, 2011). For example, Pishghadam and Zabihi (2012: 67) claim that the '*West has made every effort to ensure that the English language in its pure British and American forms, along with their specific ideological, cultural, and attitudinal views, are kept as uncontaminated as possible by other localities*'. Failing to support their claims with empirical data, they also accuse Iranian ELT professionals as responsible for the marginalisation of Iran by showing positive attitudes towards American culture (*ibid.*).

## Objectives of teaching foreign languages in Iran

Teaching English as a foreign language has been approved as part of the educational curriculum by the Iranian government. It is also reiterated by the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE), ratified by the Iran Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution in December 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011). The document sets out various operational objectives and corresponding strategies for Iranian individuals to achieve. Teaching foreign languages is seen as a strategy to achieve the objectives: '*provision of foreign language education within the optional (core-elective) section of the curriculum framework by observing the principle of stabilisation and enforcement of the Islamic–Iranian identity*.' (strategy 1–5)

## Status of English Language teaching in Iran

According to a report released by the Statistical Center of Iran (2014), there were more than 12 million Iranian students studying at various levels in 2012. Out of this number, more than five million are at the junior and senior high schools. Based on the same report, more than four million students enrolled at both state and non-governmental universities for the same period. To meet these students' needs for English language at secondary and tertiary levels, two main models of TEFL are employed by public schools, universities and private institutions: traditional grammar and the reading-based method, and the oral-communicative approach or communicative language teaching (CLT). The former is mostly practised at public schools and universities while the latter is the core methodology in private language institutions.

Although the principal objectives of teaching English at senior high schools are helping students learn new words, reading comprehension, structures, pronunciation and practising short conversation, as clearly stated in the second-grade book *English II*, most teachers practise reading, grammar and vocabulary (Hosseinikhah et al., 2014). The new educational system in Iran has started a shift from traditional to communicative methods in junior high schools. Kheirabadi and Alavi Moghaddam (2014: 231) call this reform '*the revolutionary process*'. They, as

the main authors of the new textbook series *English for Schools* (Prospect 1 & 2), have tried to blend communicative language teaching with local topics and culture to enrich the learners' cultural attachment and local identity. They add that the objective of the new series, based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) themes and functions, is to help learners achieve B1 level. This series is welcomed by Iranian EFL teachers, although no official report has been released. During the past two years several workshops and seminars have been held by the Ministry of Education to orient and empower teachers to use CLT.

English is mainly used as a vehicle to improve reading ability at universities. English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is practised by English departments at universities across Iran. Farhady et al. (2010) argue that a three-hour ESP course is taught at universities through the translation method to enable students to read and understand professional materials in English. This indicates that oral communication is a neglected skill at tertiary level.

At private language institutes the core methodology follows CLT approaches. Textbooks such as *American File*, *Top Notch* and *New Interchange Series* are used. For most Iranian learners and teachers, the focus on oral skills in CLT in such private institutions is considered advantageous and effective (Razmjoo and Riazi, 2006). These institutions provide both their novice and experienced teachers with obligatory training courses, which include theoretical and practical issues in CLT. However, in a study examining the current teacher training programmes at private schools in Iran, Motallebzadeh (2012: 90) argues that the '*major principles underlying such programmes are based on the EFL teachers' and teacher trainers' preferences.*' He concludes that teacher training programmes follow a trainer-centered mode and have little room for students' or trainees' needs. He also maintains that such programmes emphasise the development of good EFL teachers rather than good EFL learners.

Our brief overview, then, shows a complex and shifting context, in which oral communication is of increasing importance.

## **Current models of teacher training/education**

According to Wallace (1991), there are three popular models of teacher training or education: the Craft Model, the Applied Science Model and the Reflective Model. In the traditional Craft Model, trainees work closely with experienced or master teachers and learn from them by observation, instruction and practice. This model, as Christodoulou (2010) claims, lacks reflection on progress and professional development. The Applied Science Model focuses on knowledge and skill transferred from trainer to trainees and gives rise to the metaphor of teacher educator as transmitter of knowledge (Swan 1993: 242). The Reflective Model helps trainees add experience to their process of self-development. This model looks at the teacher educator as '*catalyst, collaborator and facilitator*'. (*ibid.*)

Recently, Kumaravadivelu (2012) has proposed the Modular Model, consisting of five modules: knowing, analysing, recognising, doing and seeing (KARDS). According to this model, local contextual factors should determine both the goal and content of teacher education programmes. He argues that local practitioners should '*take up the challenge, build a suitable model, and change the current ways*

of doing language teacher education'. (p. 129) He sees sustained conversation and constructive criticism carried out in a collaborative spirit as the principal components of professional development.

Analysing teacher training programmes in Iran, the Craft and Applied Science models are the most prominent (Motallebzadeh, 2012). The type of training courses currently offered in universities, teacher training centres and language institutes emphasise ELT knowledge transmission and shaping EFL teachers through imitation of a master trainer (*ibid.*). Due to the rapid changes brought about by new technology and new textbooks in public schools, teacher training programmes in both public and private sectors require a shift from the Craft model to more Reflective and Modular modes.

## The ITTP project

### Project aims, activities and structure

The ITTP project began in late 2011, so, at the time of writing, the project is just over three years old. The aims of the project are to train cohorts of teacher trainers to deal with the changing context of ELT in Iran, and deliver effective teacher-training courses. The ultimate aim is to enable public sector teachers to teach students to communicate in English.

The project has a number of strands. It is a cascade-training project, involving the training of a number of cohorts of Iranian Master Trainers (MTs) and of Iranian teacher trainers (TTs). The first cohort of MTs is now involved in training the next cohort, with the support of international consultants. MTs are trained for 55 hours face to face. Once trained, the MTs then select and train their own cohorts of teacher trainers in Iran. These teacher trainers are then assessed, both by MTs and by international consultants, using a set of criteria specifically devised for the ITTP project. Once teacher trainers pass the assessment, they are able to deliver their own teacher-training courses to teachers in Iran. The teacher-training course they deliver has been written by a group of ten Iranian materials writers who have been trained as part of the project.

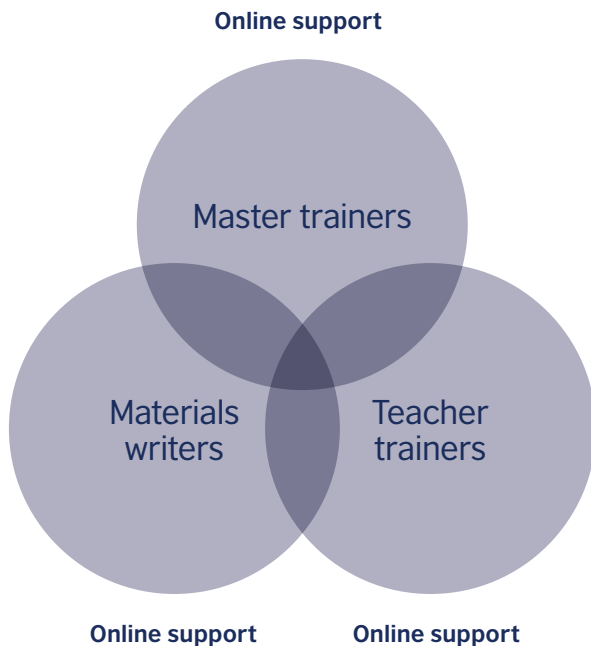
In addition, there is online support for MTs and TTs via a VLE (virtual learning environment). The platform is used to deliver continuous professional development (CPD) to participants, in the form of professional development topics. These topics are sometimes chosen by the international consultants and sometimes by the trainers. Each topic runs for two or three weeks. They are usually training topics such as How to design and plan an in-service training course, or How to evaluate an in-service training course. The discussions are facilitated by the Iranian MTs with some support from the consultants. The participants (all teacher trainers) take part in the discussions and tasks on a voluntary basis and are assessed through participation. At the time of writing, over 100 trainers from all over the country are signed up for the VLE.

To sum up this description, the project structure is multi-layered. These layers overlap. There are MTs, materials writers and teacher trainers. The MTs train teachers to become teacher trainers. The teacher trainers deliver the workshops



designed by the materials writers. Some materials writers are also teacher trainers or MTs. All are supported online by structured continuing professional development discussions. See Figure 1, below.

Figure 1: The ITTP project



## Project strategies

In the 'Context' section above, we mentioned that the practice of ELT in Iran falls into two main categories: the traditional grammar and reading-based method, and the oral-communicative approach, sometimes known as communicative language teaching (CLT).

In strategising the ITTP project, we were mindful of the need not only to fully understand the context, but also to find a methodological way forward that did not totally sideline the knowledge and skills of the Iranian context. Holliday (1994), writing about international projects such as ITTP, explores the BANA–TESEP dichotomy. BANA is '*that which is oriented towards the private sector in Britain, North America and Australasia*'. TESEP is an acronym that comes from Tertiary, Secondary, Primary, as '*state education in the rest of the world*'. (Holliday 1994: 12–13) Holliday argues convincingly that methodologies created in BANA contexts do not readily transfer to TESEP contexts, and that there is a power differential between the two, with TESEP becoming second class as it is forced to make unsuitable adaptations. The widespread attempt to introduce the communicative approach in TESEP contexts is one example of this. His discussion of 'tissue-rejection,' where project innovations do not 'take' because of deep-seated cultural and contextual differences, is a familiar scenario.

The international consultants' background in BANA, with CLT as their main frame of reference, clearly gives them a certain cultural perspective on teaching and learning, and on the roles of teachers. It predisposes them towards what Holliday (1994: 53–54) calls the *'learning group ideal'*, the *'notion of the optimum interactional parameters within which classroom language learning can take place'*. From their cultural perspective, the 'learning group' is the best way to achieve what Holliday calls *'process-oriented, task-based, inductive, collaborative communicative ... methodology.'*

Whereas the BANA context tends to start from practice, and holds process in high regard, in the Iranian context, theory and content have a high status. One danger, then, particularly in training situations, is what Maingay (1997: 120) has called *'a lack of awareness of underlying assumptions'*. For this reason, it has been our intention in ITTP to create sustained conversation and collaboration between the 'insiders', or Iranian trainers, and the 'outsiders', the international consultants. It is our belief that a *'learning conversation'* (Argyris 1992: 53) between insiders and outsiders can create a positive and fruitful atmosphere for a teacher training or education model to support development. This insider-outsider dialogue and collaboration is the lynchpin of our overall project strategy.

With all this in mind, we have put some strategies into place in the ITTP project to try to avoid the imposition of one set of methodological assumptions, deriving from a specific context, on to a totally different context. We now outline some of these strategies.

## Overall

We have had to work within the limitations of a classical cascade project, since the 'outsiders', or international consultants, in this project have not had access to participants within Iran itself. Within these limitations, we have tried to find ways of co-creating project outputs as much as possible.

### Training and methodology

1. We have included theory in the MT training courses, often in the form of short pieces of input or readings.
2. We have included sessions that attempt to raise awareness of participants' understandings of content and process.
3. We have included daily reflection in the training courses as a way of observing how participants are processing the methodology they are experiencing.
4. Micro-training and preparation for micro-training makes up to 50 per cent of training courses. This is another way of observing how participants are processing methodological input.
5. From the very first level of the cascade, Iranian MTs have worked alongside international trainers. This has enabled better transference, as Iranian trainers have been able to communicate needs, interpret, and localise the ideas and methodologies of the international trainers/consultants.

6. Supervision has decreased over time, so that we are now at the point where Iranian MTs are in charge of Master Training courses, with minimal 'outside' input.
7. Though working from a timetable drawn up in advance, we have often changed the timetable as we go through the courses, as both 'sides' perceive emerging needs.

### **Materials development**

1. Materials development was led by Iranian trainers/materials developers and supported by the international consultants. The resulting course is something which Iranian trainers are comfortable delivering.

### **Assessment**

1. Assessment of teacher trainers is always done by a team of Iranian and international assessors co-operatively.
2. Teacher trainers are assessed by practical examination and by feedback from the MTs who have trained them in-country.

### **Online support**

1. MTs facilitate most of the discussions on the VLE.
2. The discussions are mainly about applying ideas, methods and techniques within the specific, individual Iranian contexts of the participants.

### **Reflection**

ITTP, as a context-sensitive project, is revealing how successful a blended model of trainer and teacher development can be in the Iranian context. The project has benefited from various features of the Applied Science Model, the Reflective Model and the Modular Model. Moving from feeding to leading and showing to throwing (McGrath, 1997) is one the major highlights of the training model.

In addition, the collaborative role of insiders and outsiders has significantly affected the success of the project by developing learning or dialogic conversation between Iranian Master Trainers and the international consultants. The VLE, as the main platform for online communication among trainers and consultants, has been shown to be an effective mode for CPD.

Meanwhile, the focus on loop input throughout the whole project is a strength. Loop input, coined by Woodward (1986) is a '*specific type of experiential teacher training process that involves an alignment of the process and content of learning*'. (Woodward 2003: 301) Through successive training courses, Iranian trainers have become more aware of process and its relationship to content, and of the process options involved in training sessions. This has also encouraged reflection on the balance between content and process among teacher trainers at all levels of the cascade.

## Conclusion

The ITTP project is still in progress, but we have already seen significant successes in the way that Master Trainers and teacher trainers are engaged and empowered through the project. Twelve Master Trainers are running their own face-to-face courses in-country. The number of courses being run varies, but on average the teacher trainers deliver courses to 30–50 teachers a year. The average length of their course is five days (c. 30 hours), but some have run longer part-time versions to suit their participants' schedules.

MTs are also providing online CPD for groups of teacher trainers through the VLE. At this time there are some 100 participants logged on to the VLE. Ninety-two Iranian teacher trainers have passed the assessment process and are able to deliver the teacher training course in Iran. Two Iranian Master Trainers from the initial Master Training cohort of 12 are about to deliver the next 55-hour face-to-face Master Training. Capacity building is happening in a real and measurable way.

We have been able to assess the impact of the training undertaken by MTs in-country by the performance of teacher trainers at assessments. We can then give feedback to Master Trainers in order to modify training on an ongoing basis. Impacts on teachers have not yet been meaningfully assessed, and clearly this will be of paramount importance in the final assessment of the success of ITTP. As the final users of the project are the teachers and their target students, it seems necessary to design a quasi-experimental or a correlational research project.

We hope that there are a number of strategies and outcomes in this project that will aid sustainability. Surely the most important achievement so far is the development of a large group of professionals who have become engaged in the project and have shown a willingness to contribute to ELT in their home context.

## References

- Aghagolzadeh, F and Davari, H (2014) Iranian Critical ELT: A Belated but Growing Intellectual Shift in Iranian ELT Community. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* (JCEPS) 12/1.
- Argyris, C (1992) *On organizational Learning*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Akbari, R (2003) *Silent hegemony: ELT as linguistic imperialism in Iran*. Paper presented at the second conference on issues in English Teaching in Iran.
- Beeman, WO (1986) *Language, Status and Power in Iran*, Bloomington: Indian University Press.
- Christodoulou, BI (2010) *Teacher Self-Reflection*. An unpublished PhD Dissertation. Masaryk University, Czech Republic.
- Davari, H (2011) *Linguistic Imperialism or Global Understanding: ELT in Globalization from an Iranian Perspective*. Unpublished MA thesis, PayamNour University.

Farhady, H, Hezaveh, FS and Hedayati, H (2010) Reflections on Foreign Language Education in Iran. *TESL-EJ* 13/4.

Holliday, A (1994) *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: CUP.

Hosseinihah, A, Mehrmohammadi, M, Fardanesh, H and Akbari, R (2014) A Comparative Study of Iranian and Swedish English Curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies (JCS)* 8/31: 7–46.

Kheirabadi, R and Alavi Moghaddam, SB (2014) New Horizons in Teaching English in Iran: A Transition From Reading-Based Methods To Communicative Ones By English For Schools Series. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World (IJLLALW)* 5/4: 225–232.

Kumaravadivelu, B (2012) *Language teacher education for a global society: A modular model for knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing*. London: Routledge.

Maingay, P (1997) 'Raising Awareness of Awareness', in McGrath, I (ed) *Learning to train: Perspectives on the development of language teacher trainers*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

McGrath, I (1997) 'Feeding, Leading, Showing, Throwing: Process Choices in Teacher Training and Trainer Training', in McGrath, I (ed) *Learning to train: Perspectives on the development of language teacher trainers*. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Ministry of Education (2011) *Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran. Iran. Available online at: <http://dca.razaviedu.ir/files/posts/24364.pdf>

Motallebzadeh, K (2012) 'Can We Make Good EFL Teachers? A Reflection on the Current Teacher Training Programmes in Iran', in the *1st Conference on Language Learning and Teaching: an Interdisciplinary Approach*. In-conference Proceeding.

Pishghadam, R and Naji, E (2011) Applied ELT as a panacea for linguistic imperialism. *Iranian EFL Journal* 8/1: 35–58.

Pishghadam, R and Zabihi (2012) Crossing the threshold of Iranian TEFL. *Applied Research in English* 1/1: 57–71.

Razmjoo, SA and Riazi, AM (2006) On the Teaching Methodology of Shiraz EFL Institutes. *Journal Of Social Sciences and Humanities of Shiraz University* 23/1: 58–70.

Riazi, A (2005) 'The four language stages in the history of Iran', in Lin, A and Martin, P (eds) *Decolonization, Globalization: Language-in-education Policy and Practice*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Statistical Center of Iran (2014) *Annual Report on Education and Research in Iran in 2012*. Available online at: [www.amar.org.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=99](http://www.amar.org.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=99)

Swan, J (1993) Metaphor in action: the observation schedule in a reflective approach to teacher education. *ELT Journal* 47/3: 242–249.

Talebinezhad, MR and SadeghiBeniss, AR (2005) Non-academic L2 users: a neglected research pool in ELT in Iran. *Linguistikonline* 25/4: 85–96.

Tollefson, JW (1991) Planning Language, *Planning Inequality: language Policy in the Community*. London: Longman.

Wallace, M (1991) *Training Foreign Language Teachers: a reflective approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wedell, M and Malderez, A (2013) *Understanding language classroom contexts: The starting point for change*. London: Bloomsbury.

Woodward, T (1986) Loop input – a process idea. *The Teacher Trainer* 1: 6–7.

Woodward, T (2003) Key Concepts in ELT: Loop Input. *ELT Journal* 57/3: 301–304.

## Contributors

Ferdows Aghagolzadeh, Associate Professor of Linguistics, Tarbiat Modares University, Iran

Shahrzad Ardavani, Teacher of English, Tehran, Iran

Sasan Baleghizadeh, Associate Professor of TEFL, Department of English Language and Literature, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran, Iran

Martin Cortazzi, Visiting Professor of Applied Linguistics, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK

Hossein Davari, Assistant Professor of English, Damghan University, Iran

Philip Durrant, Lecturer in Language Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, UK

Farinaz Fartash, MA graduate, Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran

Elham Foroozandeh, Assistant Professor of ELT and Literature, Department of English, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literature, University of Tehran, Iran

Mohammad Forouzani, Assistant Professor of ELT and Literature, Department of English, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran

Mostafa Hasrati, Lecturer in TESOL and Applied Linguistics, University of Bath, UK

Julia Hüttner, Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Southampton, UK

Lixian Jin, Professor of Linguistics and Intercultural Learning, Director, Centre for Intercultural Research in Communication and Learning (CIRCL), De Montfort University, UK

Shiva Kaivanpanah, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Tehran, Iran

Sepideh Khodakarami, MA graduate, English Language Education, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Sue Leather, Director, Sue Leather Associates, ELT Consultancy and Training, Vancouver, Canada

Li Li, Senior Lecturer and Director, MEd in TESOL, Graduate School of Education, University of Exeter, UK

Golnar Mazdayasna, Assistant Professor of Applied Linguistics, Yazd University, Iran

Alireza Memari Hanjani, Lecturer, Department of English, Eslamshahr Islamic Azad University, Iran

Seyyed-Abdolhamid Mirhosseini, Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran

Mona Mohabbatsafa, Postgraduate Researcher, School of Education, University of Southampton, UK

Gholam Ali Molaei, High School Teacher of English, Yazd, Iran

Khalil Motallebzadeh, Associate Professor, Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e-Heydarieh and Mashhad Branches, Iran

Majid Nemati, Associate Professor, Head, English Language and Literature Department, University of Tehran, Iran

Zohreh Seifoori, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tabriz Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tabriz, Iran

Parvaneh Tavakoli, Lecturer in Applied Linguistics, University of Reading, UK

Samaneh Zandian, Postgraduate Researcher, Centre for Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK





The British Council's objective in producing this publication is to provide an informed overview of the current situation in English language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran from the viewpoint of local practitioners and researchers for the enrichment of ELT professionals worldwide. The volume, highlighting the themes of *Innovations, Trends and Challenges*, consists of 13 chapters, covering language policy, syllabus and materials design, methodology, and teacher and trainer training, with examples drawn from the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, and from public and private sectors. The linkage between topics, levels and sectors provides a fascinating mosaic of ELT developments in Iran.

The editor of this publication, Professor Chris Kennedy, has had a long and varied career in ELT and Applied Linguistics as teacher, trainer, manager, researcher and consultant in Africa, Asia, Europe and South America. His research interests include language policy, innovation, project evaluation and investigation of linguistic landscapes. He is a Past President of IATEFL and was for many years Chair of the British Council's English Language Advisory Committee. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Birmingham, and an Honorary Fellow at the University of Warwick, UK.

ISBN 978-0-86355-769-9

© British Council 2015/E555

The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.

