TESL-EJ Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language
The Electronic Journal for English as a Second Language
March 2010 – Volume 13, Number 4

Reflections on Foreign Language Education in Iran

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Abstract

This article reflects upon foreign-language education in Iran. Contrary to its political and historical reputation in the world, Iran has not been well presented regarding its educational system in general and its foreign-language education in particular. Of course, a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian education system requires an in-depth analysis of its structure that goes beyond the scope of this article. However, I will attempt to provide some basic information about the educational system in Iran before the 1979 Islamic revolution, in order to set the background for a description of the post-revolutionary system of foreign-language education in this country. The article ends with a discussion of the problems in EFL education in Iran, along with some suggested solutions.

Historical Overview

Education in the Persian Empire (present-day Iran) has a long history. The documents from ancient Persia and the Achaemenids Dynasty (550 BCE) indicate that people were urged to acquire knowledge to understand the power of God and abide by His rules in order to achieve prosperity in both this world and the next. Following such a religious orientation, the Iranian governments first established religious schools in specific areas within the government and for government affiliates. As the education expanded in the country, in addition to existing schools,

other schools were gradually founded in residential areas as well so that middle-class people could have access to education. Although the main purpose of schools was to teach religious principles, education in administrative skills, political affairs, technical skills, military training, sports, and arts was also included in the emerging school programs (Davari Ardekani, 2006). Further, the first higher education center, called Gundeshapur or Jondishapoor (presently a university with the same name in Ahwaz, a city in southwestern Iran), was founded in the third century. This university-like institute became a center for advanced medical and veterinary sciences, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, logic, and theology and remained so for a long time (UNESCO documents, 1995).

With the emergence of Islam in Saudi Arabia in the 7th century and its expansion to neighboring countries, education in Persia blended with Islamic values, and there was considerable progress in many scientific areas. Modern education began with the Safavid Dynasty (1502-1736) and continued during the subsequent governments. The first European-modeled school, Darolfonoon ("The Home of Vocational Skills") was established by Prime Minister Amir Kabir in 1850 (Britannica, 2008). This school became the source for the continuous progress and modernization of education in Iran (Akrami, 2004).

As this brief chronology illustrates, modern education in Iran is relatively young. Despite the educational system of centuries ago, the first modern school is no more than 150 years old. It should be noted that the modernization continued at a faster rate during the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), when a systematic educational program with elaborate policy statements was developed by the ministry of education and implemented at public schools (elementary and secondary) and some higher education centers and institutions.

Public Education after the Islamic Revolution

The Islamic Revolution in 1979 led to the implementation of Islamic values in the government's infrastructure, and a massive replacement of personnel was made at all levels of administration. Consequently, almost all pre-Revolution administrative staff was replaced by new and sometimes inexperienced individuals or teams whose main objective was to bring about Islamic values in the education system as quickly as they could. However, despite the early post revolution emphasis on reforming the educational system, soon after the Revolution, the political, economic, and social context of the country–especially the pressure exerted by the long-lasting war between Iran and Iraq–created serious obstacles to the achievement of reform. The highest priority for the authorities became defending the country rather than attending to educational reforms. Due to the allocation of resources to the operation of the war, the new government could not seriously attend to educational reform in the early post-Revolution years.

Nonetheless, some Islamic values related to the appearance of the students, textbooks, teachers, and the school environment were implemented. These changes dealt with

the Islamization of textbooks, segregation of males and females, and observation of Islamic laws in and outside the school environment. Religious ceremonies were mandated at the schools and students were required to adjust to and abide by Islamic values (Secretariat of Education, 2006).

By 1990, however, three significant changes were made in Iran's high school education requirements. First, the existing annual academic system was replaced by an annual unit credit system. Accordingly, contrary to the old system where students who failed one or two subjects had to repeat the whole year, they could repeat only the failed courses. Second, the duration of mandatory high school education was reduced from four years to three, with an optional fourth year allotted for bridging the gap between high school and university. Third, many technical, vocational, and applied science branches were established to train skilled workers to meet the growing needs of the job market. These schools were well received by the students, and an increasing number of junior-high graduates preferred these technical and vocational branches over the theoretical ones. The figures in Table 1, retrieved from the official site of the ministry of education, illustrate the number of graduates in the different high school branches from 2001 to 2006.

Table 1. Number of Graduates from Various Branches of High School

Year	Theoretical Branch			Vocational Branch	Technical Branch
	Mathematics	*Biology*	*Humanities*		
2001-02	207,282	198,782	250,545	142,181	37,429
2002-03	157,564	163,661	204,330	131,545	82,133
2003-04	154,676	155,647	182,389	128,199	95,238
2004-05	146,825	162,445	177,297	129,270	103,711
2005-06	145,733	165,239	167,824	130,745	109,930

Source: *Ministry of Education* (http://amar.sci.org.ir/Detail.aspx?Ln=E&no=98884&S=TP)

As the table shows, despite the declining number of high school graduates due to a population pyramid, the number of graduates at technical schools almost tripled in five years. This might have been due to a) the emerging need of the country for trained and skilled workers for the job market, b) the need of the younger generation to have an income due to economic problems, and c) the fear and frustration felt by students at the higher levels of education due to competition.

The present educational system in Iran, implemented around 1950 and modified in 1990, includes two main cycles of public and university education, each with specified years of instruction. Public education includes one year of pre-elementary and five years of elementary school, three years of junior high school, three years of high school, and one year of pre-university school. University education is similar to many higher education systems around the world. It includes two years for associate degrees, two more years for BA/BS degrees, another two years for MA/MS/MD degrees, and three to four additional years for PhD degrees. This system has developed through several reforms and under the rulings of different governments during the last century.

Due to the stability of public education system at the primary and high school levels, no significant changes took place except for the ones mentioned before. Most of the changes happened at the higher education level discussed below.

Higher Education after the Islamic Revolution

Soon after the victory of the Revolution, all educational boards of trustees in charge of designing educational policy were officially dissolved (Naeeni, 2004a). The decision was made by the Council of Islamic Revolution (the council immediately formed after the victory of the Islamic Revolution to govern the country before an official government was in place). The council justified this decision by stating that due to the political unrest in the country during the last years of the preceding government (1977-78), these boards were literally inactive. Along the lines of change and during the same period, the following administrative reorganization also took place:

1. Two ministries of Culture and Art and Culture and Higher Education were merged to form the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. The main reason behind this merging was to centralize the decision-making processes (legal bill, 1979: Setting up the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education).

2. All medical schools were separated from the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education and merged in the Ministry of Health with a new name of the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education (Golpaygani, 1993).

3. The Supreme Council of Education was officially established in February 1980, (Davari Ardekani, 2004) under which a committee of selected experts was formed with two main responsibilities: to set educational policies for the Islamic Republic of Iran's higher education system and to set criteria for admitting students to universities in accordance with the Constitution and the country's Islamic ethics and regulations (Hashemnia, 2004).

In practice, however, neither the Supreme Council of Education nor the experts committee could achieve their goals. Active presence of political parties who were not in full agreement with the aims of Islamic Revolution triggered occasional cases

of unrest in the universities. Therefore, in June 1980, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, issued an order to close down all universities and establish a new center called "Cultural Revolution Secretariat". The main responsibility of this Secretariat was to examine, revise, and design, if necessary, a higher education system that would revive universities in accordance with Islamic values. To this end, five committees were formed to work on the curricula for the five major areas of medical sciences, humanities, basic sciences, technical and engineering sciences, and agricultural sciences (Akrami, 2004; Naeeni, 2004b). The members of these committees were selected from among experts in the related fields who were believed to have a strong commitment to the Islamic revolution and the Islamic government.

While universities were closed, as a centralization policy the Secretariat grouped pre-revolution private higher education institutes and merged them into several higher education complexes, such as a technical higher education complex, a human sciences higher education complex, etc. Therefore, many students had to be relocated from their previous universities and resume their education in the new complexes. More importantly, new admission requirements were set; students who wished to continue their education had to be readmitted and had to go through a new admission process established in the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. This process, called the "student selection committee", was assigned to investigate the students' records and make sure that they were qualified by the new laws to continue their education.

The case was more difficult for new applicants for higher education. High school graduates had been waiting for three years for the universities to resume so that they could continue their studies in the universities. Therefore, there were a large number of applicants who had to be admitted to the universities following the new policies. Admission for the incoming students had to be made on the basis of assessment of their knowledge (to ensure knowledge adequacy) as well as assessment of their ideological beliefs and deeds (to ensure ethical adequacy).

In 2000, with legislative approval under the law of the development of science and technology, the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education was renamed as the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT). As soon as its charter was approved in July 2001, a new council called the Higher Council of Science, Research, and Technology was formed to set short and long term policies for higher education (Naeeni, 2004a). In the same charter, the ministry was required to establish new councils in order to promote autonomy in the operation of universities and to move toward decentralization of the universities. As Riazi (2005) states:

The major problem after the Islamic Revolution, however, has been the lack of an official language-planning blueprint in the country to determine the status of available languages, as well as expectations from language teaching and learning curricula in the formal education system. (p.107)

In fact, the diversity of the councils and multiple sources of decision-making centers, which sometimes led to contradictory statements from different organizations, complicated the situation rather than simplified it. Therefore, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution and the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education needed certain new policies to increase the admission capacity of the universities on the one hand, and to increase the number of faculty members to cope with the influx of incoming students to the universities.

Increasing Admission Capacity

With universities closed down for three years, the number of applicants far exceeded the admission capacity and available space of the universities. Therefore, the first policy decision was made to increase the available space for incoming students by allowing government monitored private universities. The first such university, called Islamic Azad (open) University (IAU) was established in 1982. The establishment of such a higher education institute was a pragmatic solution to overcome some of the problems of accommodating a portion of new students (Mohabati, 2004).

To empower the IAU, in 1988 the Islamic Parliament passed legislation, according to which the MSRT was assigned to evaluate the quality of education at the IAU, so that the degrees earned form IAU would be accredited. Since then, this university has expanded rapidly; currently, it has more than 220 branches within the country and 7 branches abroad (Mohebati, 2004). Table 2 shows the number of students who have been studying at various programs at IAU during years 2001 and 2007.

Table 2: The Number of Students at Various Levels at IAU

Year	AA	BA/BS	MA/MS	Ph.D.
2001-02	200,207	568,934	24,974	12,524
2002-03	229,906	594,205	27,617	12,462
2003-04	291,953	634,191	27,486	14,576
2004-05	378,463	676,290	30,140	13,598
2005-06	417,262	731,155	35,216	13,888
2006-07	453,446	779,308	41,464	15,419

Source: Ministry of Education

As this table shows, the number of students at almost all levels has doubled in approximately five years. In fact, it is the largest university in the world, taking into account the number of campuses and students. The number of students in state-run and other higher education institutions, presented in Table 3, shows that the number of students at IAU exceeds that of all other higher education institutes, collectively.

Table 3: The Number of Students at Various Levels At Other Higher Education Organizations

Year	AA	BA/BS	MA/MS	M.D	Ph.D.
2001-02	146,389	532,525	35,481	34,093	11,382
2002-03	172,965	552,907	39,174	32,159	12,362
2003-04	195,369	641,718	42,719	30,749	13,358
2004-05	210,845	713,461	50,226	30,291	14,157
2005-06	293,422	793,955	57,775	29,689	16,207
2006-07	283,284	113,1538	76,406	29,455	18,191

Despite the large number of students accommodated by the state-governed universities and IAU, there was still a high demand for higher education. Therefore, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution took additional steps to accommodate students. Currently, there are five different but parallel opportunities for students who seek higher education: public universities, Islamic Azad University, Payame Noor University (Long Distance Education) , private universities, and evening sessions at the public universities. Except for the morning sessions of the public universities, which are tuition free, all other educational institutes have tuition fees.

Even with all these accommodations, which considerably increased the admission capacity of the universities, admission to universities involved a highly competitive process because the number of applicants was still greater than what the universities could collectively accommodate. Therefore, a selection procedure had to be employed by administering the university entrance examination (UEE) to all applicants.

Admission to Universities

In January 1970, in the then Ministry of Science and Higher Education, a center for evaluating the educational system of the country was established. One of the missions of this center was to determine the most efficient methods of selecting talented high school graduates for higher education. In September 1971, this center was expanded and named the National Organization of Educational Testing (NOET). After the Revolution, as with many other organizations, NOET was closed down in 1982, but it was reinstated in 1989 to resume its function in the admission of incoming students to institutes of higher education (Hashemnia, 2004; Yadegarzadeh, et al., 2008).

The UEE is usually a test battery comprising approximately 200 multiple-choice items in many subject matter areas, including a foreign language. All tests are developed under strict security by experienced subject matter experts (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006). The foreign language section of the test includes 25 multiple-choice items, intended to assess the candidates' grammatical and lexical knowledge as well as their general reading comprehension within a 20-minute time allocation.

This process is repeated every year, and a few days after the exam, the test is published for public access with the keys to the test items. Although some statistical analyses are apparently performed on the test data after the administration, no pretesting data on the test quality is available to the public (Farhady1998; 2000).

The scoring of the test is based on a weighted system because it is believed that different subject matter areas play a disproportionate role in applicants' overall future educational accomplishments in different areas of study. There is no empirical evidence regarding the decisions made on the weights given to each subject matter area in the test. It seems that the decisions were made on the basis of the intuition and experience of the members of the committees in NOET, approved by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution. The applicants were then ranked on the basis of their total scores and admitted to the universities in one of the majors they had requested.

This admission system had many shortcomings that NOET attempted to overcome following a trial and error procedure rather than conducting solid research. The first problem was that despite the excessive length of the test, the content of the test was not well balanced with the diversity of the areas that the applicants needed to know to get into higher education. Therefore, beginning in 2000, some modifications were made in the content of the test to avoid lengthy testing time.

The second problem with the admission test was the depth of the language knowledge that the test could measure. A good number of universities in the country admit undergraduate students in foreign languages such as English, French, German, etc., translation, and teaching. The objection was that many applicants were admitted to these majors on the basis of their total scores on the UEE. That is, one could be admitted to a department of a foreign language without necessarily having a high proficiency in that language. Since instruction in foreign language departments is in the target language, these applicants would face serious problems with coping with the requirements of their field of study. To partially alleviate this problem, the NOET required the applicants, who wanted to pursue their education in one of the available foreign languages, to sit for an additional language proficiency test designed to measure applicants' ability in higher order language skills.

The third problem with the test was the fact that although the textbooks were distributed by the Ministry of Education across the nation and all students are exposed to the same materials, drastic differences exist in the quality of education at the high school level from province to province due to disproportionate allocation of educational facilities. The reason for such a criticism was a good number of students who had voluntarily participated in the war and spent a good deal of the time defending the country. With the arguments for such applicants and with high priorities given to Islamic values, many decision makers agreed that these applicants should be treated differently regarding the admission criteria to value their services to the country. One line of help was to provide special educational facilities such as free prep classes, tutoring, etc. so that they could be given a chance to compete with other applicants. In the meantime, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution approved a

set of new admission criteria for such students. According to one of these approved items, applicants who had certified documents from the war veteran organization would be admitted to the university if their total scores were at the 80% level of the last person who was admitted into a particular major at a particular university (Rahimi & Aghababa, 2006).

Despite so many test scores, weighed scores, recalculations, and complex procedures, admission to universities would not be complete at this point because all these complications would lead to an evaluation of applicants' academic qualifications. For final admission, some additional criteria would be applied by the center for student selection to assure that the admitted applicants would have strong commitment to Islamic values and ethics.

Increasing the Number of Faculty Members

Years after the revolution, all foreign faculty members had already left the country and many local ones had failed the screening committees and were either dismissed, voluntarily retired, or simply immigrated to other countries. On the other hand, with the large number of students to be admitted to the universities, there was a strong need to increase the number of university instructors to accommodate the large number of students. To accomplish this, some of the eligible graduates were sent to foreign countries with high quality postgraduate programs. Of course, they had to assure the government that after completing their education, they would return and serve the country. Since there was language proficiency requirement for admission by host universities, for the first time after the revolution, the need for English language ability was strongly felt and became a significant factor in the implementation of the policies.

Therefore, the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education began organizing test preparation classes for eligible candidates. Since due to political reasons TOEFL was not administered in Iran, and due to the fact that the target countries preferred IELTS over TOEFL, the Ministry opened up a center to administer IELTS in collaboration with the Australian and British Embassies in Tehran. Furthermore, due to the infrequent administration of IELTS on the one hand and the high cost of sending students abroad for English instruction on the other, the Ministry developed a local TOEFL-type test called MCHE (an abbreviation after the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education). The MCHE was a test similar to the paper and pencil TOEFL. Applicants who obtained 50% of the score on this test would meet the language requirement and would be eligible for the scholarship.

Along with sending many students to foreign countries to pursue their graduate studies, another line of action was taken to increase the number of instructors by expanding the graduate schools in the country to train university instructors locally. There were two main reasons for such a movement. First, it would reduce the cost of training instructors to a great extent and ease off the government from the financial pressure. Second, and more important, graduate students would be trained at

home without being influenced by western culture in the target communities and the danger of their staying in host countries after they completed their studies would be kept to a minimum.

Further, due to the importance of the English language at the graduate level, students applying to local graduate schools were also required to demonstrate a reasonable command of English to be able to pursue their graduate courses which had reading assignments in English. Therefore, MCHE was set as the criterion for admission for local schools as well. As a matter of fact, MCHE continues to be a popular local test used by the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, and the Ministry of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education as the criterion for graduate school admission. However, along with the MCHE, another test of language proficiency was developed by NOET that was called TOLEMO-EA (Test of Language by the Iranian Measurement Organization: English-Advanced). Although TOLIMO did not replace the MCHE, as it was originally planned, it has gained a good reputation in the country as an equivalent to international standardized tests.

Foreign Language Education in Iran

Deciding on a language to be taught as a foreign language in a country is not a matter of pure academic choice but a matter of government policy often motivated by political, social, economic, and educational factors. For instance, in 1839 when the first modern school was established by a French priest in Iran, his main motive could have been religious, though he claimed that he intended to promote modern sciences and the French language within the Iranian community. Although this school was neither established nor managed by the government, the French language gained a social prestige in the society and influenced the choice of foreign language teaching later in the country (Mahboubi Ardekani, 1975).

After World War II, English began to spread around the world and was taught in most countries as either the sole foreign language or as one of the foreign languages. During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), close political, social, economic, and military relationship between Iran and the US speeded up the westernization in the country that had started some years back with the Qajar Dynasty (Riazi, 1995). English became an important requirement in the Iranian military because a good command of English was needed for the army personnel to go to the US for further specializations. In addition, teaching English became a social need and private language schools mushroomed in the capital and many large cities. Knowledge of English became an essential requirement for many job opportunities for the younger generation. It should be mentioned that, despite the fact that in some countries such as Japan, English was promoted to a high status of the vehicle of internationalization (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2008), it was kept as a vehicle to educational advancement in Iran. Thousands of Iranian students were sent to US universities to get higher educational degrees. Many Iranian universities created sister-ship relations with American universities, which facilitated the allocation of scholarships for students to complete their MA/MS and PhD degrees in American universities.

Furthermore, while most countries around the world have already responded to the issues of globalization, internationalization, and competition among multinationals by endorsing bilingual and multilingual educational systems, Iran has not been willing to move in this direction in order to keep national unity and identity among the young school generation. This in part can be accounted for by the fact that countries like Hong Kong, India, Japan, and China see English as the key to the international world of commerce; whereas, Iran is more conservative when it comes to foreign language policy. The main reason for this is the politicization of the language issue after the Islamic Revolution and the fear that English presents a threat to the Persian language and Islamic culture (Khubchandani, 2008).

In addition to this conservatism regarding the English language and due to the ties between Iran and European countries in the absence of political relations with the US, the educational policy makers formulated a plan to promote learning and teaching of five foreign other languages including German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian. These were. Following this amendment, the national curriculum committee prepared textbooks for all these languages to be used at schools. However, due to insufficient number of teachers and a low number of applicants for these languages, English has been the most dominant foreign language taught at the high schools.

Another movement was the expansion of private schools and language institutes, which were all closed down after the revolution. They resumed their operation under the labels of non-profit institutions, and contributed to the promotion of teaching English to a sizable number of students. For instance, since English was not offered at the elementary public schools, almost all non-profit schools allocated some hours to teaching English to attract more students. Non profit schools at the junior and senior high levels also allocated some additional teaching hours to English as a major advantage of their curriculum.

Teaching Assessing English at Public Schools

With many ups and downs, however, at present teaching English in public schools is stabilized with four hours a week at junior high school, a 6 unit credit course at high school, and an additional four unit credit course at the one year pre-university level (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). An interesting point is that while teaching English was almost banned early after the revolution, it has been given the same number of credit units as other main subject matter areas such as biology and chemistry.

All assessment tools are of achievement type with the content matching the content of the textbooks. At the junior high school level, oral and written skills are treated as different subjects and two separate scores are reported on a scale of 20. The oral exam includes memorization of dialogs presented in the book, reading aloud of the text to assess pronunciation and intonation, and short conversations in the form of question and answer based on the grammatical and functional points taught in class. The

written exam consists of sections on spelling, vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. Recently however, teachers have been required to conduct continuous formative assessment on students' performance and progress on language components and skills and record the outcome their assessment in students' educational files. Teachers are also required to take into account the results of both formative assessments and those of summative assessments.

While at grades 6 and 7 local teachers prepare, administer, and grade the exams following the rubrics provided by the Center of Educational Measurement and Evaluation, the final written summative assessment at grade 8, the final year of the junior high school, is designed, administered, and scored by the Central Office of Education at each province (Secretariat of Higher Council of education, 2006).

The assessment system of English at the high school follows a trend similar to that of junior high school. However, with the advent of the unit credit system, some modifications were accordingly made to the assessment procedures. One such change was requiring teachers to give a diagnostic test at the beginning of each grade and several formative tests during the course. The purpose of diagnostic assessment is to identify the weak points of the students so that teachers can take the necessary measures to help their students. On the other hand, formative assessment is intended to take into account active class participation, quality of student performance on assignments and classroom informal assessments. At least 5 out of 20 points of the formative assessment has to be devoted to activities such as peer work, team work, and projects performed outside the classroom. The scores on classroom formative assessments should be reported to the school officials at least a week prior to the date of the summative exam. Total scores are calculated using the average results of formative and summative assessments. The summative exam which is a written exam contains sections on vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and reading comprehension. Speaking skill is very narrowly and indirectly tested via written pronunciation items. Although the Ministry of Education mandates utilization of diagnostic and formative assessments during the school years at grades 9-11, teachers rarely use them in reality because they are not controlled by the ministry officials.

Test development, administration, and scoring of written exams at grades 9-10 are handled by local teachers at individual schools. The final exam of grade 11, however, is prepared by language testing experts of the Central Office of Educational Measurement and Evaluation and administered under the supervision of Central Offices of Education across the nation. This final exam is a very high stakes test and leads to the high school diploma. Therefore, the Central Office of Educational Measurement and Evaluation takes all necessary measures to ensure test security, similar administration across the country, and fair scoring of the test papers. Unfortunately there is no public documentation available on the psychometric properties of the tests. The officials are reluctant to allow independent researchers from outside the ministry to investigate properties of the tests.

Teaching and Assessing English at Universities

In contrast with the complexities of entering the universities, teaching English or other foreign languages at the university level follows a simple and straightforward policy. Usually, there is a 3-unit credit requirement for all university students regardless of their major. Beyond this general requirement, depending on the needs of the students and the approval of the school, students might take up to 4 units of ESP courses. The way English is taught at the universities is often translation oriented because the main objective is to enable students in different majors to read and understand materials written in English in their own majors.

The instructional materials for English courses at the universities are prepared by an organization called "Center for research and development of textbooks for university students" was established in 1981. One section of this organization is assigned to develop English textbooks for non-English majors. There is almost one specific textbook for every major in the university and in most cases another one for graduate level courses. The content of these books is progressively closer to the original materials that students will face in studying the original materials in their major fields of study. Each book often includes several lessons (ranging from 16 to 20), and each lesson includes a couple of passages followed by some true-false, multiple-choice, comprehension, and translation exercises.

Persistent Problems and Suggested Solutions

After three decades of efforts in designing and redesigning the EFL policy in the country, some problems with the teaching of English at public schools and universities still persist. A major problem seems to be the movement from a positivistic framework, with a set of rigid and predetermined procedures, to a more constructivist process oriented framework. This paradigm shift has opened an array for fundamental changes in the perception of educators regarding the whole process teaching, learning, and assessing a language. Implementation of all these changes requires cultivation of the principles in educational environment, which is not a task to be accomplished in a short time or without much resistance. In fact, the change has led to a certain number of dilemmas in the educational context in many communities including Iran. A brief account of some of the major dilemmas follows.

Application of the Principles of New Theoretical Frameworks

Theoretical advancements are necessary to provide insights to our understanding of the concepts we are dealing with. However, theoretical arguments are not often directly translatable into practice. Most theoretical principles require changes in the beliefs of learners, teachers, community members, and administrators. Such a transitional process could be tedious, and costly. So, we should not expect a quick jump in the process of moving from one paradigm to another. Furthermore, it may not be safe to assume that all the principles of a given paradigm enjoy an absolute accuracy. In many cases, the principles of a particular theory have been seriously, and

rightly, questioned after some years. Therefore, practitioners should exercise caution not to advocate a particular theoretical perspective without having ample evidence for its appropriacy. It is also important to note that a theoretical change entails many modifications in different dimensions of instruction. For instance, teacher training, materials development, assessment procedures, and administration are just a few areas that should be modified in order to meet the requirements of a new theoretical perspective. Thus, it seems essential to have a comprehensive survey of the availability of the facilities to implement a particular theory of teaching. Otherwise, the values of the present practice would be jeopardized without having a suitable replacement.

Sufficiency of Resources

A theory usually takes place in the minds of theoreticians which is often established in an ideal context. There is usually a large gap between the assumptions of the theory and the realities of practice. For instance, if the theory requires a change in the instructional materials, it would be easily said than done. Developing a new set of instructional materials requires ample planning and time, especially when it is on a nationwide scale. Therefore, authorities should again exercise caution not to trade the existing facilities for an unclear future change.

More often than not, during the time that the administrators attempt to accommodate the requirements of a particular theory, many modifications occur on the principles of the same theory. Therefore, we should not go through the old and unsuccessful practice of pendulum swing of the past. The field has the bitter experience of jumping from one method to another without sufficient accommodation, which has led to the failure of that method. Facilities do not just refer to instructional materials but entails teachers, learners, educational contexts, cultural values of the community, financial resources available to the authorities, and technological facilities.

Uniformity of Practice around the World

Due to the determining effect of the context of instruction, no two environments would share exactly the same features. Every community is managed by culturally, mentally, and educationally different people. Administrators in one community do not share the same beliefs and ideologies as those of others. Nor do teachers or learners have the same conception of the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, implementing even a single theory in two different contexts would lead to different procedures and outcomes. This does not mean that communities would act independently from one another and would come up with entirely different outcomes. Along with differences in the societies, there are similarities as well. Therefore, sharing the experiences among the members of the communities would help them avoid making the same mistakes in different contexts. Furthermore, exchange of ideas among the communities would help them utilize the successful strategies and avoid unsuitable ones.

Movement along the Theory-Practice Continuum

In the absence of empirical data to compare and contrast the educational system and its output with that of other countries, it is difficult to determine where Iran stands along this continuum. However, reflecting on the present status of TEFL in Iran, it can be concluded that educating teachers and instructors on the theoretical dimension in the field has been fairly satisfactory. This means that the knowledge base of the teachers regarding methodology, linguistics, testing, and assessment is at an acceptable level. However, there seems to be a large gap between theory and practice. In comparison, language instruction in Iran is relatively more successful than that of many countries where a huge amount of investment is made on language teaching. Research has demonstrated that at junior high school level, given the right instruments for evaluating learners' language ability, the learners perform well above the ideal mean of a sound educational system (Farhady, 2000). The same research has also demonstrated that our teachers enjoy an acceptable range of language proficiency and language knowledge.

However, moving from theory to practice, many problems need to be attended. The most important of all is the quality of teacher training programs in the country. Assuming that a teacher is the most significant factor in the whole educational program, we need to invest as much as we can in providing pragmatic knowledge to our teachers. Sometimes, it seems that as Akbari (2005) mentions, within the world of learner significance, almost all facilities are directed toward learners at the cost of ignoring teachers. It should be clearly and unambiguously stated that fixing one aspect of the multidimensional process of education will not cure all the ills. The factors influencing language instruction are in close interaction and any reform should encompass as many factors involved in TEFL as possible. For example, training good teachers without providing them with good instructional materials along with technological facilities would not do much of good for language instruction. Nor would having acceptable materials within the access of unqualified teachers help improve the process. Therefore, the variables involved in language education should be taken into account within the context of a particular educational community. In this direction many parties should assume responsibility some of which are mentioned below.

First, the community should assume responsibility towards a change from quantity oriented to quality-oriented perception of language education. This requires cultivating the culture of new trends in the learners, teachers, parents, authorities, and administrators. That is, all parties involved in education should be convinced, in both theory and practice, that a reform is needed so that they coordinate their efforts in achieving the objectives of the instruction.

Second, the government should assume responsibility toward providing clear, practicable, and reasonable educational policies, and should subsequently support the implementation of the policy. In this regard, fund, personnel, and other requirements

should be made available to the people involved in moving the educational system forward.

Third, the teacher education centers as the main sources of training teachers should assume responsibility toward training teachers with pragmatic ability to implement the new approaches in different contexts. Giving teachers theoretical knowledge alone would not be very helpful in practicing the new methods. Teachers' beliefs, understanding, attitude, motivation, and, most important of all, their needs should be given due attention. An unhappy, uneasy, unsatisfied, unmotivated, and financially needy teacher would never succeed in implementing any instructional program, including language programs.

Last but not least, universities as one of the major sources of education in the community should assume responsibility toward providing the students, and apparently, future educators with the context in which they develop deep feeling of dedication and commitment toward flourishing the nation. Just studying and getting degrees without intending to utilize their capacity in the direction of constructing the educational system would harm the whole nation. Educators at the university should help students realize that without such commitments, a university degree does not suffice to improve the quality of education. Of course, this requires a reform in the concept of education in the country.

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