English Language Education in Iran: A Site of Struggle between Globalized and Localized Versions of English

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

K E Y W O R D S

A B S T R A C T

Reviewing the ups and downs of English in Iran indicates that especially in the last two decades it has been a site of growing struggle between two rival sectors. The first one is the private sector which has been the main contributor to the spread of English in its international version and the second one is the public sector which has been the representative of the localized version of English. Due to the low efficacy of the public sector, the private sector, as a booming market, is playing the main role of English education. Considering the fact, the authors first aim to introduce these two rival sectors. Then, based on the available literature on the topic, it is attempted to delve into the reasons of this growing struggle. The findings indicate that the future will be a scene of continuing presence of English in the private sector in its globalized version and English in the public sector in its localized version

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Introduction

The study of English language teaching (ELT) in Iran shows that it has experienced a host of ups and downs and gone to extremes (see Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). While the research on the topic reveals that this language has been mostly seen as an imperialistic one and the state has approached it conservatively (Borjian, 2013; Hayati & Mshhadi, 2010; Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015), findings also show that a growing resurgence of interest in learning this language is evident (Borjian, 2013; Hayati & Mshhadi, 2010). Delving into this situation in depth indicates that two leading sectors namely the public and private systems are active in this arena, mostly as two rival sectors. Studying this conflict, the researchers intend to comparatively study and analyze this situation, namely the growing rivalry between the public education system as a representative of localized English, and the private education system as a representative of globalized English.

Although there have been a few studies as to the comparability of the effectiveness of the two public and private sectors in different countries, the scarcity of such studies is evident in Iran. Filling the gap, in this paper the two systems can be compared according to teaching materials, teaching staff, textbooks, age and background knowledge of learners, and facilities based on a new perspective, namely a growing conflict between important dual dimensions of globalization and localization which have influenced the various aspects of Iranian society including education in general and English language teaching in specific.

English Language Education in Iran

Reviewing the works, such as Farhady et al. (2010), Atai & Mazlum (2103), Borjian (2013) and Aghagolzadeh & Davari (2017) which have documented the issue of ELT in Iran, shows that what these works have in common is the belief that English has ebbed and flowed in this society (see Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). As Hayati & Mashahdi (2010) write, while Iran's policy on English education stops short of nationwide dissemination of language, the growth of English is evident. Delving into its reasons, providing a vivid picture of English language education seems necessary. In the following, these two sectors, namely the public and private, are introduced. Then its reasons are discussed and analyzed.

English Education in Public Sector

Providing a vivid picture of English education in public sector in post-revolutionary Iran involves two phases:

The First Phase: The first phase which lasted for more than three decades comprised the following features:

- Textbooks: *The Graded English Series* were being taught until Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. These series were based on situational language teaching method of that time, and they were intended to make the students familiar with basic English knowledge and their future academic life (Ekstam & Sarvandy, 2017). These series were immediately replaced by *Right Path to English Series* which were taught until 2013. The main focus of this series in junior high school was on pronunciation, vocabulary, and alphabet recognition while the high school textbooks dealt with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar; the other skills of writing, listening and speaking did not have a clear place (see Farhady, et al., 2010; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015; 2016).

- Methodology: Influenced by the above-mentioned books, as Foroozandeh and Forouzani (2015) and Safari (2017) write, teaching methodology common in public sector was mostly grammar translation method (GTM) and the main skill was inevitably reading comprehension. Although, as Dolati and Soleimani (2011) point out, this methodology seemed to be successful mostly in teaching reading comprehension through teaching grammar formulas deductively and memorization of vocabulary, it didn't provide enough opportunities for the students to communicate because it was not based on real life dialogues. In Babai Shishavan & Melbourne's (2010) words, another aspect of the method was its emphasis on translating sentences from English into Persian. Though it was considered as a useful technique in making students aware of the both source and target languages through a form-focused approach, its extensive use was considered as a shortcoming of English language system in Iran.

- Teachers: Lack of qualified and unmotivated teachers in that long period of time has been known as one of the main shortcomings of the system. Influenced by the nature and function of the textbooks, the teachers had been trained through traditional methods. Not only they did not have the ability to communicate in English or teach English communicatively, but also there was no opportunity to teach it other way. Teachers were also pressed to cover the books

in the allotted time, ignoring the essential skills and strategies of learning English. In such boring classes, the students were not motivated enough to learn English in a pleasurable environment and they only thought about how to get a passing mark to finish the course (Akbari, 2015).

- Students: Students in public schools were not prepared to learn English for communication because they were going to pass the university entrance exam; the English part of this exam was not based on communicative aspects of language but on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, students were only learning some receptive skills and lacked the productive skills of listening and speaking (see Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014).

- Assessment: The English part of the university entrance exam was not based on communicative aspects of language but on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, students were only learning some receptive skills and lack the productive skills of listening and speaking. Since the students had to get ready for the standardized tests, the assessment in Iranian education system was mostly based on summative mode.

In short, in this phase, the curriculum of English as a main compulsory subject faced serious shortcomings on the basis of the above-mentioned criteria (see Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014).

The Second Phase: This phase which began in 2013 comprises the following features:

- Textbooks: The new series known as *English for Schools* comprises *Prospect* for three-year junior high school and *Vision* for three-year high school. According to Foroozandeh and Forouzani (2015), after around three decades that the teachers have taught English in Iran with grammar translation method, the 3 *Prospect* series that are taught to the lower secondary school was intended to teach both literacy and communication. Prospect 1 was the most difficult to design with respect to the 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. The main authors of the new textbook series *English for Schools* have tried to blend communicative language teaching with local topics and culture (Leather & Motallebzadeh, 2015) to enrich the learners' cultural attachment and local identity. These

series as Foroozandeh and Forouzani (2015) have many features of communicative language teaching such as use of real pictures instead of cartoons, use of all language skills, relative reflection of real life, real-life contexts for conversations and interactions, attention to meaning rather than form, and engaging students in interactions. *Vision Series* also comprise four language skills, various interesting communicative tasks and activities and enjoy proper face validity. It is worth noting that English presented in such books is devoid of western culture and a representation of Persian culture and ideology as well as Islamic values (Mohammadian-Haghighi & Norton, 2017).

- Methodology: Influenced by the shift from GTM to communicative approach, as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017, p. 55) write, with this ongoing reform process, which aims to restructure English education through the integration of language skills and language components, it is believed that Iranian students will be better equipped with an ability to communicate. In this new curriculum, English education has been reconceptualized to mainly not only encourage students' active participation in the leaning process and use of the target language in communication, but also encourage teachers to promote students' communicative skills and minimize the use of the mother tongue. Leather and Motallebzadeh (2015) call this reform "the revolutionary process".

- Teachers: Despite this revolutionary process, teachers are not prepared to deliver the course based on the new communicative standards. Observations show that the teachers do not feel pressed to teach communicative skills properly based on the syllabus they are given. Evident lack of sufficient pre-service and in-service training has led to ambiguous implementation of the new communicative approach.

- Students: Due to the social changes of the Iranian well-to-do families especially in major cities, a widening gap regarding English proficiency among students is shaping. Many students with lower levels of English proficiency are confused how to learn English and how to cope with other students who have considerable English proficiency. In some areas, the classes are overcrowded with students, which leads to lack of enough time for each student to have class participation, discussion, or group and pair work on the part of the students. In such classes, the students are not again motivated enough to learn English.

- Assessment: While the classroom assessment of the new books is based on the formative and integrative tests, the English section of the university entrance exam, which is to be held in 2019 for the first time, is still unknown to both teachers and students.

To sum up, as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017, p. 53) state, while it is too soon to evaluate and assess the quality and function of the new curriculum, especially the new textbook series, as part of the public curriculum reform process which is aided by the government, it is certain that due to the low availability of competent teachers, limited time, and ambiguous procedure of assessment, achieving the goals seems out of reach."

English Education in Private Sector

Private sector, as the main contributor of English contributor in its international version, has experienced ups and downs. According to Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017, p. 53), "while in the early years of the Islamic Revolution, private English institutes were forcibly closed down, in the second decade of the Revolution, the gradual appearance of such institutes was quite evident." In their words, their growing presence in the third decade has turned them into a lucrative industry and big business (see also Borjian, 2013). In the following the main components of this sector are introduced:

- Textbooks: The majority of institutes mushrooming all over the country adopt commercially Center-produced, but pirated textbooks. As Aliakbari (2004) writes, except for very few cases like Iran Language Institute, the private sector in Iran has not published local textbooks to meet their purposes. Nearly all of them use commercial foreign-published textbooks which are developed by experts in the field and are more appealing because they contain various tasks and activities, interesting topics, and materials based on graded levels of difficulty. They prepare the students to have communication in authentic situations, gain enough familiarity with the target language and culture, and a capable assessment system. Using prestigious textbooks with high face validity and global reputation representing western culture has lent these institutes great weight. Since these international textbooks are written and developed based on the real-life situations, they help students achieve the desired goals they perceive through learning English as an International language (Baleghizadeh & Motahed, 2010).

- Methodology: Inspired by the essence of this sector which follows the latest standards and norms of teaching English communicatively, the methodology used in private language institutes is inevitably communicative approach. Paying attention to four language skills integratively, this sector aims at meeting the learners' needs and interests.

- Teachers: The teachers recruited in private sector are usually more proficient. Taking part in pre-service and in-service courses has made them communicatively competent enough interact with the students (Ganji, Ketabi, & Shahnazari, 2018; Baniasad-Azad, Tavakoli, & Ketabi, 2016). They are also more aware of the students' needs and especially their interests and are more motivated to teach. While public school teachers focus their pedagogy on the explicit teaching of grammar rather than English communication skills (Baleghizadeh & Farshchi, 2009), the main focus of language teachers in private institutes is on communication in real-life contexts.

- Students: Since participation in private language institutes is not obligatory, the students taking part in such classes are more motivated. In their views, English is mostly the language of progress, science and technology. It also provides them with a better job and successful future.

- Assessment: Contrary to the assessment procedure of public sector, the assessment techniques in private sector are in consistency with the communicative principles and the assessment activities are more interactive-communicative, aiming to assess students' ability to use the language in real world contexts.

Considering these facts, we can conclude that as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) write, essentially due to the significant deficiency of the public education system, which cannot meet the learners' needs, the private sector has attracted an increasing number of learners throughout the country.

A Site of Struggle: Why?

In the absence of any formal document in language policy, whether national or educational, understanding the Iranian state's predisposition towards English involves reviewing available political and cultural documents which are explicitly or implicitly related to this language. As a

result, in order to conceive the state's orientation to English, in the following, at first the available documents which have touched English language are dealt with.

In fact, after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, and consequently due to the increasing opposition of the newly-established government towards the West, English language as one of the main manifestations of the Western society, was encountered with waves of hostility (see Davari and Aghagolzadeh, 2015). Thus, influenced by this atmosphere, as Farhady et al. (2010) point out, besides English five other languages including German, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian were introduced as foreign language choices in the Iranian education system. As they point out, following this orientation which was known as the first educational plan with respect to foreign languages in Iran, the national curriculum committee developed school textbooks for these languages despite the lack of enough qualified teachers as well as enough applicants. As a result, English again remained the dominant foreign language in Iranian education system.

Onwards, two decades of inattention to this language was evident. But, in last two decades and mostly influenced by the cultural, social and economic changes in various aspects of Iranian life, an increasing attention and interest toward this language has been clearly obvious. As Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) write, accompanied by a wave of economic privatization, private sector formerly closed down, resumed their operations and an increasing number of new institutions were established. The increasing number of private institutes mushrooming nationwide as well as with the growing pressure by parents to start teaching English at an early age has made the state play an active role in English education. Thus, it was no surprising to see that in such a condition, in a few educational documents, paying attention to this language has become evident.

Toward a Localized English

Reviewing the available documents reveals that the state intends to form a type of localized English which is devoid of western culture and ideology. Proving the claim, in the following, three educational and developmental documents are introduced and analyzed.

The first document is known as *Comprehensive policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran regarding globalization*, was approved in 2004. According to Ahmadipour (2008), in this document, English and French are introduced as global languages that are necessary for Iran's active participation in the current world. According to this document, officials 'must approach

English as a necessary skill and not as an element against identity,' (p. 18). As Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015, p. 16) mention, this phrase reveals 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 document referring to English language is *The fundamental transformation of education* finalized and approved by the Ministry of Education in 2010. Allocating only one sentence to foreign language teaching in this important document, it introduces 'foreign language study as an optional (semi-prescriptive) course in the curriculum on condition that its teaching stabilizes and strengthens the Islamic and Iranian identity' (p. 20). Like the document described previously, the term 'foreign language' has been substituted for 'English'. The program is designated as 'optional', and its description as 'semi-prescriptive' remains ambiguous (see Aghagolzadeh and Davari, 2017; Davari and Aghagolzadeh, 2015).

The third publication is *The National Curriculum Document* which was finalized in 2009. As Kiany et al. (2010) and Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) write, 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. According to the publication, local issues as well as Islamic and Iranian values should be included in textbooks. A significant point regarding this document is related to the fact that while English is the only taught foreign language in Iranian education system, as Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) write, '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.'

Reviewing the above-mentioned documents indicates that teaching the language is subject to certain ideological conditions. As Kennedy (2015) concludes, one of the reasons for the hesitant Iranian language policy in public sector 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., 2015) or as a struggle between an enemy of local culture and a necessary tool for progress, and between local and international identities ((Leather and Motallebzadeh, 2015).

Toward a Globalized English

In the process of globalization, as Iranian society has become part of the globalizing and globalized world, on the one hand, with the changing role of English and ELT and with the increasing presence of English in different aspects of the society and on the other hand, with showing huge enthusiasm for learning English (Ghaffar Samar and Davari, 2012), certainly, the study of the current state of English and ELT shows that a new version of English is available alongside the localized English. Despite the state's tendency to control and teach English in its localized version which is devoid of western culture and is filled with Islamic and Iranian values and culture, it can be seen that influenced by the growing presence and influence of globalization phenomenon, English is its globalized or international version is going to attract increasing number of learners. Teaching this version as a means of providing progress, the learners are mostly inclined to trend of globalization. As a result, the English in its globalized version is known as the prestigious and authentic English from the Iranian learners' attitude. In such a situation, as Borjian (2013) and Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) assert, English in its globalized version is treated as the language of opportunity, power and prestige. Regarding the features of this globalized version which is going to be prevalent throughout the world, Wilson (2005) maintains that it involves the spread of similar Center-created teaching methods and materials and the imposition of native speaker linguistic and cultural norms across the world. The proponents of such a globalization believe that the best teaching materials, methods and expertise come from countries in the Inner Circle (Yildrim and Okan, 2005), thus the transfer of pedagogical expertise and personnel from the developed English-speaking countries to other contexts is followed. In this perspective, native or near-native oral competence is a goal and the mainstream pedagogy provided by the Center should be the only source. In this version, English and its culture is conceived as two indispensable components. As Anderson (2003) writes, in the mainstream professional-academic discourse of such a version of English, there are certain unquestioned givens which have been produced and reproduced by academics, institutions, publishing companies as well as teachers. In his words, according to these givens the best teaching methods, materials and expertise originate from institutions in Inner-Circle and these institutions and their personnel should therefore help the development and running of English language curricula and programs globally. Moreover, the ideal teacher is the English native speaker from English speaking countries (see Ghaffar Samar and Davari, 2012).

There is no doubt that the main burden of developing this version is on the shoulders of the Iranian booming private sector. In Borjian (2012, p. 102)'s terms, One of the most distinctive characteristics of English education in post-1990 Iran was the empowerment of subnational forces: forces below the nation-state who have been, in turn, responsible for the importation of the 'international' model of English education into the country. In her words, the youth's interest in attending in private language institutes has two reasons. The first reason was the failure of the country's state-run education establishments in offering proper English education. Since high school and university curricula and textbooks did not prepare students to use the language to communicate. This shortcoming is particularly concerning to well-off families who wish to send their children abroad for higher education. Regarding the second reason, Borjian (2013. p, 104) writes, 'the second reason why the young people were attracted to private language institutions was the better services the private sector could offer them. This included an updated curriculum, international textbooks accompanied by audiovisual products, and proper teaching methods…. the private language institutes are allowed to design their own curricula and textbooks as long as they did not contravene the rules and regulations prescribed by the government. The private sector looked abroad for promising textbooks, curricula and teaching methodology. The result was the importation of English-teaching methodologies, including CLT, English textbooks, … together with many audiovisual products from various English-speaking nations, the United Kingdom, in particular.'

Concluding Remarks

The present study aimed to provide a vivid picture of English language teaching in public and private sectors as two rivals in Iran. Presenting this increasing struggle, the authors attempted to comparatively describe and analyze the main components of these two sectors which each of them is a representative of its own version of English, namely localized and globalized Englishes. We understood that alongside the growing spread of globalized English in the private sector, the need for changes in national curriculum arose. As a result, because of the rising criticism of the low efficacy of public sector, in spite of the officials' ambivalence and conservation, finally the picture began to change.

While it is soon to evaluate such changes, it is certain that in the globalizing world, English as a tool of globalization is receiving much more attention. But in Iran as a country with specific

social, political and educational context which seeks for forming a new version of English on the basis of its wishes and needs which is in sharp contrast with the globalized English, it seems that the scene of English language education would be a site of struggle or in Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017, p. 60) write, 'the future will be a scene of an inevitable challenge and growing tension between the globalization and domestication of English' which is represented in two versions of English, namely globalized and localized versions of English.

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