



English Language Education Policy and Practice in Iran and Saudi Arabia: A Comparative Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Received: 28 July 2023 Revised: 30 September 2023 Accepted: 28 October 2023 Online: 28 February 2024</p>	<p>This study offers a comparative exploration of English language education policies and practices in two pivotal Middle Eastern nations: Iran and Saudi Arabia. Employing a documentary research method for data collection and a thematic analysis approach for data interpretation, this study examines the impact of policies on English language education practices in both Iran and Saudi Arabia through the lens of language policy and planning (LPP). The analysis is structured around four dimensions of Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) LPP evaluation framework, focusing on access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, and materials policy. The research findings underscore the diverse influences shaping English language education policy in these countries. In Iran, the anti-imperialist sentiment has notably shaped English language education policy and practice, while Saudi Arabia's approach has been considerably influenced by neoliberalism, serving as a major force in the country's language education policies. The study delineates distinct disparities: Iran exhibits limited exposure to English language education policy, delayed initiation of English learning, and a prevalence of localized teaching approaches. In contrast, Saudi Arabia demonstrates greater English integration in classrooms, an early introduction to English learning, and a stronger emphasis on communicative methodologies. By offering this comparative analysis of English language education policies in Iran and Saudi Arabia, this research contributes valuable insights with potential global relevance. It highlights the intricate interplay of political, cultural, and economic factors that significantly mold language education strategies in diverse contexts, emphasizing the complexity of policies and practices across different cultural and societal landscapes.</p>
<p>KEYWORDS</p> <p>Anti-imperialism Curriculum English Language Education Language Policy Neoliberalism</p>	

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1. Introduction

The global prominence of the English language has surged due to the growing necessity for cross-border communication and collaboration. Presently, it stands as the international language of commerce, education, technology, and diplomacy, being extensively taught as a second language or as a foreign language across numerous nations. The proliferation of technology and media has further cemented English as an indispensable tool for global knowledge exchange. This unprecedented situation has spurred extensive exploration into English language policy and practices worldwide. An examination of English language education in the Persian Gulf region underscores its pivotal role in the area's economic, social, and educational advancement. However, the approach toward English significantly differs between Iran, situated on the northern side of the Persian Gulf, and the six Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia, on the southern side (Kirkpatrick, 2017). While English holds a crucial position in the education system of these nations and is acknowledged in their educational doctrines, Iran and Saudi Arabia, significant anti-imperialist and neo-liberalist Muslim countries respectively, adopt distinct approaches to English policy and implementation (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Phan & Barnawi, 2015). This comparative study aims to delve into the causes, characteristics, and consequences of these differing English language policies and practices in Iran and Saudi Arabia. Notably, Saudi Arabia was chosen among the six Arab countries of the Persian Gulf due to its socio-political and cultural standing in comparison to its neighbors, and its historical rivalry with Iran, particularly in the realm of education (Mabon, 2015; Mohammad, 2022). As highlighted by Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017), understanding a country's English language education policy necessitates a comprehensive analysis of its political, socio-cultural, historical, and ideological underpinnings. Therefore, a brief overview of the study's contexts—namely Iran and Saudi Arabia—is imperative.

Iran, recognized officially as the Islamic Republic of Iran, stands as the second-largest country in the Middle East, boasting a rich historical legacy spanning over 4,000 years. Renowned for its Persian culture, art, and literature, Iran is a nation shaped by intricate social, political, and ideological dimensions. The ideology stemming from the Islamic Revolution in 1979 advocated for Islam's governance in all spheres of life, reflecting a deep-seated anti-imperialist stance rooted in history, religion, and culture. Iran's education system operates under a centralized and government-controlled structure, ensuring free primary, secondary, and higher education for all citizens. This system places significant emphasis on Islamic teachings and values, integrating these principles into the curriculum to instill cultural heritage and national pride in students. Compulsory education spans from six to seven years old up to the age of 18, constituting a 12-year basic

education (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). The Iranian education system incorporates a robust anti-imperialist orientation, considering it a fundamental concept crucial for students to comprehend their country's historical narrative and future direction. This orientation, evident in educational and development documents, advocates against various forms of imperialism, fostering independence, self-reliance, and national pride. Against this backdrop, English, in the view of Borjian (2013), is associated with the "enemies," particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, aligning with Iran's strong anti-imperialistic stance. Initially perceived as a language linked to these perceived adversaries, English faced widespread hostility, a sentiment underlined by Aliakbari (2002), paralleling English with the United States. Over time, influenced by global changes and national shifts, English was progressively seen as a language symbolizing progress (Riazi, 2005), prompting reforms in its education. Yet, due to the pervasive anti-imperialist sentiments in the Iranian education system, English is taught in a localized form (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Iranmehr & Davari, 2018).

Saudi Arabia, known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), is a conservative Islamic monarchy with a traditionalist and authoritarian political outlook, strongly governed by a strict interpretation of Islamic law. Despite these traditional roots, the country has undergone significant westernization, becoming a rapidly modernizing nation driven by a flourishing economy, largely propelled by the oil industry. Embracing neoliberal principles, emphasizing privatization, deregulation, and free-market ideals, Saudi Arabia is witnessing transitions across various sectors, including education (Quamar, 2021). The Saudi education system primarily grounds itself in Islamic teachings, using Arabic as the main language of instruction, while also mandating English as a compulsory subject in numerous schools. The government's substantial investment in education has resulted in commendable progress in literacy rates and access to education. Influenced by neoliberalism, particularly through the Vision 2030 plan, Saudi Arabia has introduced reforms geared towards enhancing education quality and accessibility (Rundell, 2021). However, critics argue that these reforms tend to overlook cultural and social dimensions, fostering a one-dimensional educational approach that inadequately prepares students for the challenges of the contemporary world. In the Saudi context, the evolution of English language education policy, as observed by Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017), underscores the government's endeavor to prioritize mass literacy in English, viewing it as pivotal to national development.

2. Theoretical Considerations

ELP This section begins by introducing the common classifications of language policy and planning, encompassing language-in-education policy and planning. It then proceeds to outline the chosen theoretical framework utilized by the researchers to compare English language policy and practice in Iran and Saudi Arabia.

- **Language Policy and Planning**

In this section, it is essential to delineate the concept of language policy and planning and its various typologies. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) propose a definition emphasizing the significance of regulations or measures implemented by either a collective or an individual to strategically influence societal change.

The exercise of language planning leads to, or is directed by, the promulgation of a language policy by government (or other authoritative body or person). A language policy is a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the societies, group or system. (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. xi)

As the definition suggests, the concept of language policy and planning encapsulates interventions in languages, encompassing decisions about language adoption, imposition, usage, and modification. It aims to articulate implicit decisions made in societies through explicit means. Language policy refers to a collection of rules or methods intended to prompt a shift in language usage (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). On the other hand, language planning, as per Baldauf (2006, p. 147), is “normally thought of in terms of large-scale, usually national planning, often undertaken by governments and meant to influence, if not change, ways of speaking or literacy practices within a society.” Ricento (2013) contributes a comprehensive definition of Language Policy and Planning (LPP), outlining both the nature of the activity and the decision-making entities involved.

Language policy and planning (LPP) as a purposeful activity carried out by elected officials, ministries of government, officially sanctioned bodies (such as school boards and language academies), community groups and organizations (such as churches), businesses, and families (who may, for example, wish to maintain the learning and use of a particular language which might not be taught in the schools), and the study of language policy and planning by academics. (Ricento, 2013, p. 1535)

LPP is relevant in the realm of language teaching and learning, as emphasized by Baldauf (2005). Firstly, language policies and their subsequent implementation planning establish the framework or policy landscape for language learning and teaching, significantly influencing what is

recognized as viable research. Secondly, at a smaller scale, decisions made by educational administrators and teachers, including choices regarding who instructs which language, how it is taught, the intended objectives, and the target audience, hold localized policy ramifications. Such decisions can either reinforce or diminish the overarching policy, potentially instigating the emergence of new policy directions. Therefore, delving into research on LPP processes enables comprehension of the impacts these practices have on language learning and teaching, contributing to a deeper understanding of these dynamics.

- **Language-in-education Policy and Planning**

Language-in-Education Planning (LEP), as delineated by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), stands apart from broader language planning efforts. While language planning operates across various sectors of society and is often a function of government, LEP specifically concerns the education sector. LEP concentrates on "those user-related learning decisions that need to be made to develop language education programs and teach a language(s) for various purposes" (Baldauf, 2005, p. 961). It represents a subset of national language policy or planning, focusing on addressing the language needs within the educational domain. Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) LEP framework elaborates on the critical dimensions or policy areas associated with language acquisition management (LAM). These dimensions encompass access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methods and materials policy, resourcing policy, and evaluation policy. Their framework analyzes the interconnection between policy and practice at macro, meso, and micro levels within an educational system.

The objectives of LEP, according to Kaplan and Baldauf (1997), are structured around specific questions and aims. The six primary objectives are delineated based on these questions:

Table 1. Language-in-Education Planning (LEP) Objectives

LEP Objectives	Related Questions
Target population	Who will receive language education? Which children? Where are they in terms of readiness? How many will there be? Over what duration? Is there a plan to keep a steady flow of children into the established language curricula over many years, or will new languages be introduced periodically to respond to popular demand as that demand changes in response to real-world political and economic situations?
Teacher supply	From what sector of the total pool of potential teachers will language teachers be drawn? What sort of education will they be provided to prepare them to teach? How is that training different from the training of any other teacher? How long will it take? Who will be the teacher trainers? What is it that the potential teachers need to know?

Syllabus/ Curriculum	When should language education begin—at what grade level? If the individual wishes to undertake a second educational language, when should that begin? What is the probable duration of such education? Is the time normally allocated to language study sufficient? Should all pupils be required to achieve the same proficiency? Is there any possibility of variable entry and exit?
Methods & Materials	What methodology(ies) will be used to teach language? How and when will teachers be trained in the recommended methodology? What will be the expected degree of fit between the methodology(ies) and the materials chosen? Who will prepare the materials? How long will it take to do so? What density of materials per pupil is necessary to maintain a viable programme? What sorts of audio-visual support will be required? What role, if any, will be played by native-speakers? What supplementary materials (movies, books, magazines, television) can be drawn from the community?
Available resources	What will it cost per pupil/ per year to provide the necessary classrooms, teachers, and materials (including supplementary materials) to operate a viable programme, and where will these resources come from? As the curriculum is not endlessly permeable, so too the budget is not endlessly permeable. If resources are to be committed to this range of activities, what other activities will have smaller resources? What are the implications on space? Will dedicated classrooms, complete with computer and audio-visual laboratories, be utilised? What is the life expectancy of the necessary equipment? Will it be possible to purchase, maintain, and replace such equipment on some reasonable schedule?
Assessment & Evaluation	What level of proficiency is a student expected to achieve at the end of each increment of study? How will it be determined whether the student has in fact achieved that level of proficiency? What will be the degree of fit between the assessment instrument and the sanctioned method(s) and materials? Who will prepare the assessment instruments? How long will it take to prepare such instruments? How will the instrument(s) be administered? How often? Who will score the instrument(s)? What will be done with the results? Will the assessment results become criteria for the evaluation of teachers?

The issues outlined above collectively form the framework for language-in-education planning, encompassing various dimensions and concerns related to language education.

Table 2. Language-in-Education Planning/Policy Dimensions (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003)

Policy area	Description of policy area
1) Access policy	– which languages are to be taught to whom, at what level, and for how long
2) Personnel policy	– requirements for teacher training, selection and employment
3) Curriculum policy	– what curriculum is mandated and by whom
4) Materials policy	– what teaching materials may be prescribed
5) Resourcing policy	– how language acquisition programs will be paid for
6) Evaluation policy	– how learning outcomes are measured and reported, what uses are made of exam results etc.

3. Research Method

The study employed a qualitative approach with a comparative design to analyze the diverse social systems and their respective educational outcomes in selected countries. A comprehensive review of approximately 40 scholarly publications, governmental documents, and official reports on English language education policy from 2001 to 2023 was conducted. These sources were gathered from reputable scientific repositories, libraries, and research databases. During the descriptive phase, meticulous notes were compiled. In the interpretative phase, the amassed information underwent rigorous checks and analysis. Subsequently, in the comparative stage, the information was organized based on a predetermined framework. A document analysis approach was applied to scrutinize and assess the national policy documents pertaining to English language education policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia, acknowledging the significance of document analysis as a valuable tool for comprehending policies across different levels of educational systems (Bowen, 2009). In line with this approach, a specific document analysis protocol was employed. The analysis involved a set of documents, such as national policy documents, which were examined within the educational development context of both countries. These documents and reports were considered objective reflections of social realities. In parallel, academic publications were subjected to in-depth thematic analyses to understand their goals and distinct study characteristics. The systematic review employed a thematic content analysis focusing on two primary themes: the policy and practice of English language education policy in the selected countries. Additionally, for ensuring data reliability, stability, and consistency, the perspectives of two comparativists knowledgeable about the subject matter were also sought.

4. Findings

This section examines and compares the policies and practices related to English language education policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia, analyzing them across two dimensions: policy and practice.

A) Policy

The exploration of policy documents is fundamental in comprehending the broader implications of language within societal, economic, and political contexts. These documents play a pivotal role in guiding policymakers and educators on the appropriate use of language in various settings, including educational institutions, public spaces, and workplaces. Therefore, this study delves into the content of primary policy documents directly or indirectly associated with English language education policy.

Iran

In Iran, the analysis by Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) reveals that the review of available political and cultural documents does not yield a specific document dedicated solely to the English language, despite its significant societal importance and historical sensitivity. Understanding the state's approach to English necessitates referencing documents that incidentally touch upon this language. The Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) stands as the foremost document for realizing the educational goals of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Madandar Arani, Amani Tehrani & Sorkhabi, 2023). However, as noted by Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), within this crucial document governing primary and secondary schooling over a 12-year period, the status of English language education policy remains unclear. The document allocates only a single sentence to foreign language teaching, presenting it as an optional course conditionally tied to the stabilization and reinforcement of Islamic and Iranian identity.

The National Curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran (NCIRI) acts as a supplementary document to the FRDE, prepared by the Supreme Council of Education and the Iranian Ministry of Education in 2012 (Rassouli & Osam, 2019). Notably, while a mere two pages of this 69-page document discuss foreign language teaching, the content remains broad and includes vague statements that lack detailed instructions on foreign language education. The NCIRI defines the role of foreign language education as providing a foundation for comprehension, cultural exchange, and the transfer of human knowledge "within the frame of Islamic values." According to Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015), the only formally taught foreign language within the education system is English. However, the NCIRI avoids specific mention of 'English', opting instead for the generic term

'foreign language' (p.16). The review of these policy documents not only illustrates the government's uncertainty and ambiguity regarding the English language (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017) but also emphasizes that the primary aims of foreign language teaching are rooted in "cultural exchange" and the transmission of human knowledge within the scope of Islamic values (Rasouli & Osam, 2019). This stance is corroborated by the findings of Borjian (2013), Morady Moghaddam and Murray (2019), and Babaii (2022). According to Babaii (2022),

English language teaching has always been treated as a socio-cultural issue in post-revolutionary Iran. Fueled by anti-imperialist sentiment, the political authorities diagnosed Western influence as the major ailment of the society. Having to accommodate for the undeniable virtue of learning English for international communication, educationalists prescribed limited, censored doses of culture-free, localized English input to bring up a new generation immune to the Western values. The analysis of the educational goals in Iranian macro educational documents and their realization in teaching materials reveals an organized effort to resist and undo the influence of neoliberal education and provide an alternative rooted in national-religious heritage of the country. (p. 355)

Saudi Arabia

Three key policy documents hold particular significance. Vision 2030, a far-reaching economic plan aiming to transform and diversify the Saudi economy, has exerted a substantial influence on education and, specifically, English language teaching (Khan & Khan, 2022). Noted by Picard (2019), this policy document underscores the importance of English within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia due to its perceived significance in spreading Islam and its potential to boost trade, improve the economy, and enhance international political relationships. The National Transformation Program (NTP) 2020, launched in 2016, aims to set interim targets for 2020 and establish mechanisms for assessing their achievement. Key targets in education include a significant increase in vocational education enrollment and enhancing students' performance in international assessments (Picard, 2019). The third policy document, the Horizons initiative, introduced in 2009 as a 25-year plan, focuses on improving higher education opportunities, fostering scientific research output, and addressing the scarcity of scientists in crucial disciplines affecting economic prosperity (Al-Youbi, 2017 as cited in Picard, 2019). Regarding this policy document, Picard (2019) points out:

In its 'Vision and Mission', the Ministry notes that it pursues a 'globally competitive knowledge-based community' and aims to 'increase the effectiveness of Scientific Research, encourage creativity and innovation, develop community partnership and promote the skills, and capabilities of students' (Ministry of

Education 2017c, para. 1–2). As already noted above, accessing information in a knowledge-based economy, involvement in and access to scientific research, and building skills in an internationally competitive privatised economy all require English proficiency and hence the push towards more English teaching and English medium of instruction courses and programs in Saudi higher education and even vocational and school education. (p. 164)

Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017, p. 205) highlighted the intricate balance in Saudi Arabia's higher education language policies, torn between preserving the Arabic language and responding to the pressures of globalization for enhanced international communication, access to scientific information, trade, politics, and commerce. They observe that the forces of global change, particularly the influence of neoliberalism, have significantly transformed the status of English language education. As a result, English language education policy has emerged as a fundamental aspect within both public and higher education policies throughout the country. Responding to increasing Western pressures, particularly from the United States, the Saudi government, as Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) indicated, allocated a substantial budget by Royal Decree in 2004. This allocation aimed to introduce the English language curriculum as early as grade six in primary school. Subsequently, in 2011, another Royal Decree led to the launch of the English language education policy Development project. This initiative sought to establish English as a core subject in the fourth grade of primary school and enhance the quality of English language education policy at the secondary school level.

B) Practice

This section delves into the practical implementation of English language education policy within the education systems of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Emphasizing the LEP objectives, the associated questions and pertinent issues are addressed within the evaluation framework, covering four distinct dimensions for better manageability.

- Access Policy

In Iran, following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iranian officials demonstrated a conservative approach towards English, coupled with a lack of political ties with the United States. Consequently, educational policymakers devised a plan to foster the learning and teaching of five additional foreign languages in schools—German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian, alongside English (Farhady et al., 2010). Textbooks were prepared for all these languages; however, due to a scarcity of teachers and a low number of student applicants for these languages, English remained the

predominant foreign language taught in schools (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). After the approval and implementation of the policy documents in 2011, significant reforms were witnessed in Iran's education system. Under this reform, the teaching of foreign languages, specifically English, became integrated into the 6-year span of junior and senior high school curriculum, spanning from the age of 13 to 18. This change reduced the years of exposure to English language education policy from 12 to 18 as it was in the former curriculum. Notably, the number of hours dedicated to English language instruction per week varies between 2 and 3 at every grade, constituting a reduction from the previous curriculum.

In Saudi Arabia, English is introduced in public elementary schools in the fourth grade, starting at the age of nine (Alrabai, 2020). As per Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017), the introduction of the English language at this early stage was part of a series of policy reforms in English language education policy initiated by the government in the early years of the new millennium. They note:

The “past two decades [have] witnessed several major government initiatives to promote mass literacy in English” (Barnawi and Phan 2014, p. 6) across the country. Among other major acts, in 2004, the Saudi MoE allocated a budget worth millions of dollars, with Royal Decree No. 171 dated 14/08/2004 (corresponding to 27/6/1425 H), for the introduction of the English language as early as grade 6 of primary school. With Royal Decree No. 160 dated 02/05/2011 (corresponding to 28/5/1432 H), the MoE launched another project called English Education Development (i) to introduce English as a core subject in the 4th grade of primary school, and (ii) to enhance the quality of English education at secondary school level (p. 205).

Before the reforms, Saudi students had limited exposure to English language instruction, with only four 45-minute sessions per week allocated for English classes in both the 3-year intermediate and 3-year secondary school levels. However, in the current educational landscape following the reforms, students now engage in English language studies for a total of nine years. This expansion means that there are now four 45-minute periods of English instruction per week, marking a substantial increase in the intensity and duration of English language learning for Saudi students. The main features of English language education policies in Iran and Saudi Arabia can be summarized and compared as presented in the table below:

Table 3. Access Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran	Saudi Arabia
– Teaching 5 additional languages alongside English	– Sole focus on teaching English
– Inclusion of English in the 6-year junior and senior high school curriculum	– Introduction to English from Grade 4 in primary school
– Introduction of English at age 12	– Introduction of English at age 9
– English instruction between 2 and 3 hours per week at every grade level	– Four one-hour sessions per week for English instruction

- Personnel Policy

The existing literature on the subject reveals a critical oversight in the reforms within the Iranian English language education program, particularly concerning the inadequate focus on teacher training—an indispensable component of any effective English language education program. Addressing this concern, Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) assert:

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. (p. 17)

Yaghobinejad et al. (2016) highlight that teachers in Iran frequently voice concerns about the lack of both pre-service and in-service training during the implementation of the new program, pointing to a substantial gap in the process. Moreover, findings from Shareghi et al. (2021) suggest a clear necessity for most Iranian high school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers to acquire adequate pre-service and in-service courses specifically focusing on teaching communicative skills. Shareghi et al. (2021) underscore that there is a significant need for modernization, emphasizing the requirement for valuable pre-service and in-service training courses equipped with communicative frameworks that teachers can effectively apply in their classrooms. Echoing this sentiment, Rasti (2018) observes a prevailing belief among high school

EFL teachers in Iran that they've been largely left to their own devices when it comes to translating policy into practical implementation. However, the scenario in Saudi Arabia differs significantly. Over the past decade, the Saudi Arabian government has allocated substantial financial resources, investing in English teacher recruitment, language labs, curriculum development, and teacher training, as highlighted by Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013). Piccard (2019) notes that teacher training is considered a top priority by the Ministry of Education, which is supported by various studies. Moskovsky (2018) identifies "EFL teachers and teaching culture (including pre-service and in-service teacher training)" as the second key target of the Saudi government. Notably, international organizations also play a role in training language teachers in Saudi Arabia, as indicated by Al-Qahtani (2019), who mentions that approximately 35,000 English language teachers across Saudi Arabia are undergoing training within the context of new reforms.

These contrasting perspectives highlight a substantial disparity between the approaches in Iran and Saudi Arabia regarding the attention and investment in teacher training within their English language education programs. Table 4 categorizes the primary features of these policies.

Table 4. Personnel Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran	Saudi Arabia
– lack of qualified language teachers	– teacher training as a Ministry of Education priority
– lack of pre-service and in-service training in the process of the implementation of the new program in Iran	– holding pre-service and in-service training for teachers by professional native instructors

- Curriculum Policy

In Iran, the present curriculum mandates the inclusion of English as a compulsory subject throughout the 6-year span of junior and senior high school education. The curriculum is centrally controlled by the Ministry of Education, where decisions concerning textbooks, syllabi, and exams are dictated (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). However, the significant deficiencies in the centralized public sector's English language education policy system have led to its inefficacy and prompted the emergence of a thriving private sector in the ELT market (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015; Iranmehr & Davari, 2018). Consequently, there has been a push for reform based on the implementation of macro-level educational directives. Previously, the curriculum predominantly focused on grammar and reading (Goodrich, 2020). However, a review of the new curriculum demonstrates a marked shift towards emphasizing Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). This approach aims not only

to encourage active student participation in the language learning process but also to urge teachers to foster students' communicative skills (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). Kheirabadi and Alavi-moghaddam (2014) describe the new reform as an inductive approach that aims to enhance learner collaboration, provide appropriate feedback on mistakes, and take careful consideration of the learners' psychological and emotional aspects during learning. The emphasis on classroom interaction is another noteworthy feature of the new ELT curriculum, termed the "interactive self-reliant communicative approach," a localized variation of CLT (ibid.).

This updated curriculum, derived from the National Curriculum of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as highlighted by Babbaii (2022), advocates a communicative approach to teaching the four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. It openly encourages the selection of topics related to the domestic lives of Iranian learners, aiming to strengthen values rooted in their home culture (Babbaii, 2022, p. 362). Iranmehr and Davari (2018) refer to this curriculum as a localized adaptation that endorses indigenization in the realm of English language education policy in Iran. However, as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) note, it is premature to evaluate the quality and efficacy of the new curriculum. They express concern that due to the scarcity of qualified teachers, particularly within limited time constraints, achieving the curriculum's objectives appears challenging. Regarding this time limitation in the new curriculum, the observations of Davari and Aghagolzadeh (2015) might shed light:

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. (p.17)

Riahipour et al. (2019) concur with the sentiments expressed above:

On the one hand, the content of the newly-published English textbooks has become of a variety of tasks which need enough time to cover. On the other hand, the number of class sessions has been reduced. This seems to have negatively affected teachers' motivation. (p. 315)

In Saudi Arabia, the initiation of the new curriculum, as pointed out earlier, commenced in 2013. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) assert that the government, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education, has set up numerous committees and entities to devise and construct a curriculum tailored to local intellectual conditions (p. 204). This new curriculum, founded on CLT, is an ongoing endeavor with the primary goal of enhancing the quality of English language instruction. As highlighted by Al-Qahtani (2019):

In 2013 MOE released the English Language Curriculum for Elementary, Intermediate, and Secondary Schools in Saudi Arabia (2014–2020) for grades 4 to 12. The new framework elaborates on the principles and guidelines first described in Article 50 of the Educational Policy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.... The curriculum specifies what Saudi students should learn by the end of each grade – from grade 4 to grade 12 – and also aims to help schools to plan their curriculum, to design their tests and examinations, and to guide material writers. (p. 124)

The evolution of the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia has undergone substantial transformations. The Saudi government has prioritized the English language as a tool for enhancing global communication and commerce. Managed by the Ministry of Education, the current curriculum introduces English language instruction from grade 4, continuing through secondary school, with a duration of four hours per week. As articulated by Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017), the government has recently engaged various international publishers (such as Macmillan, McGraw Hill, Oxford, and Pearson Education, among others) to develop English syllabi and curricula grounded in the communicative approach for public education (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017, p. 204). The restructured framework of the English Language Curriculum in Saudi Arabia, with a key objective of enhancing students' communicative competence in English, as highlighted by Al-Qahtani (2019), now emphasizes 'mutual cultural understanding and respect,' 'international communication,' and fostering a 'positive attitude towards learning English.' This emphasis suggests a shift towards a more moderate or 'weaker Islamization' stance. The principal characteristics of this policy in both countries are classified as follows:

Table 5. Curriculum Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran	Saudi Arabia
– English as compulsory in the 6-year span of junior and senior high school curriculum	– English language instruction from grade 4 through secondary school for four hours every week
– a top-down curriculum, centrally administered by the Ministry of Education	– cooperation of the Ministry of Education and a variety of international publishers
– the low efficacy and inefficiency of the public sector and the growth of a new booming private sector ELT market	– a means of promoting international communication and business
– a localized communicative approach towards teaching the four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing	– based on CLT: explicit emphasis on 'mutual cultural understanding and respect', 'international communication', and a 'positive attitude towards learning English'
– anti-imperialist sentiment: a localized version that publicizes indigenization	– a neoliberalist orientation: a more moderate or 'weaker Islamization' position

- Materials Policy

In societies where English is taught as a foreign language, such as Iran, the role of the textbook as the primary language input in educational programs is of paramount importance. According to Foroozandeh (2011), the development of English textbooks in post-revolutionary Iran unfolded across three distinct phases: a) 1982-1990; b) 1991-2003; c) 2004-2012. Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017) note that a quick examination of the textbooks used during these periods revealed a lack of substantial changes in the methods, content, and objectives of English teaching. The focus primarily centered on reading, grammar, and vocabulary, often resulting in repetitive, monotonous materials those students found unengaging, ineffective, and time-consuming. Consequently, in response to these limitations, the introduction of the new English teaching program led to the development and publication of two distinct series for junior and senior high schools: the Prospect series and the Vision series. These two series, as elucidated by Babaii (2022), have undergone structural and content changes, distinguishing themselves from each other. The Prospect series (1, 2, 3) is built on a functional syllabus that revolves around themes related to personal and domestic aspects, like self-introduction, favorite food, and hobbies, enabling students to engage in daily language functions. On the other hand, the Vision series (1, 2, 3) delves into more advanced themes such as environmental conservation, energy sources, technology, science, and dictionary usage, surpassing the realm of personal and everyday communication.

In analyzing the content of the new materials, particularly the Vision series, it is suggested that a transition from mainstream English Language Teaching (ELT) to critical ELT has been apparent. Through the application of critical pedagogy in the development of these new textbooks, the focus has shifted from neutral and sanitized topics to topics that provoke critical thinking and discussion, to nurture both language skills and social development among learners (Davari & Iranmehr, 2019). Furthermore, Babaii (2022) mentions a deeper emphasis on Islamic and revolutionary values in both text and visuals within these materials. In the analysis of the English teaching books in Iran, Babaii (2022) appreciates the bold attempt of textbook producers to present an alternative series of English teaching books. However, she highlights some features, such as the explicit emphasis on promoting identity in texts and visuals, the absence of Western (especially Anglo-Saxon) cultural values and symbols, and the deliberate avoidance of neoliberal and market-oriented discourse. Babaii (2022) also criticizes the strict segregationist treatment of gender, the lack of engaging and entertaining themes, and an excessive focus on domestication and self-promotion, labeling it as "hyper-nationalism."

Similarly, other studies like Gheitasi et al. (2020), Mehri et al. (2020), Soodmand Afshar and Sohrabi (2021), and Barzan and Sayyadi (2023) have presented analogous criticisms concerning the predominance of this particular orientation in the textbooks, suggesting concerns about their restrictive nature and the lack of diverse perspectives. Conversely, in Saudi Arabia, following the reforms, new English textbooks were developed under the oversight of the Ministry of Education. The process involves a rigorous evaluation to ensure alignment with students' needs and the country's cultural values. Recent efforts have concentrated on emphasizing authenticity, steering clear of stereotypes, and incorporating more modern teaching methods and innovative learning materials. These textbooks were crafted through collaboration with international publishing companies, including Macmillan English, as highlighted by Al-Qahtani (2019):

The Macmillan Education series provides teachers with a prescribed curriculum for teaching English at all different stages in Saudi public schools. Each stage has its own course. The primary stage is called *Get Ready*, the intermediate stage is called *Lift Off*, and the secondary stage is called *Flying High*. For the primary and intermediate stages the course includes a Student's Book and Workbook for the students, as well as a teaching manual, flash cards, and posters for the teachers. For the secondary stage the course includes a Student's Book, a Teacher's Book, a Workbook, Audio material, and a CD-ROM. The teacher's book for each stage contains sets of objectives for each lesson, as well as detailed instructions to teachers on how to present the lesson content. These instructions prescribe communicative teaching methods and provide explicit notes and directions for teachers on how to use teaching materials appropriately. (p. 129)

According to Picard (2019), the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has collaborated with various software companies to provide resources, lesson plans, and tools for structuring lessons. This collaboration aims to enhance the quality of educational materials. There's been a concerted effort to produce textbooks that are culturally relevant to Saudi Arabian students while fostering a deeper understanding of other cultures and perspectives, essentially promoting intercultural competence. As Sulaiman Hawiti, Saif & Badawi (2019) assert, the cultural content in these books is being reworked to align with prevalent Saudi Arabian values, indicating a conscious effort toward cultural adaptation and representation. Table 6 outlines the primary features of this policy.

Table 6. Materials Policy in Iran and Saudi Arabia

Iran	Saudi Arabia
– development of home-grown English textbooks as the main language input in the curriculum	– developing the textbooks with the collaboration of international publishing companies including Macmillan English
– <i>Prospect</i> series for junior high school and <i>Vision</i> series for senior high school stages.	– The primary stage textbook is called <i>Get Ready</i> , the intermediate stage <i>Lift Off</i> , and the secondary stage <i>Flying High</i> .
– the methods, contents, and aims of teaching English in the three phases did not undergo essential changes, and their main focus was reading, grammar, and vocabulary	– a growing focus on promoting authenticity and avoiding stereotypes in English language textbooks. Efforts to incorporate more modern teaching approaches and innovative learning materials
– strict segregationist treatment of gender, presence of no-fun and non-entertaining themes and interactions, too much domestication and self-promotion	– a push toward developing textbooks more culturally relevant to Saudi Arabian students while promoting a greater understanding of other cultures and perspectives (intercultural competence)

5. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study underscores the significant impact of political, socio-cultural, and economic factors on English language education policies in both Iran and Saudi Arabia. In Iran, Riazi (2005) points out that while the country's policy on English falls short of a nationwide promotion, the escalating influence of globalization has led to an increased emphasis on English in recent years. There exists a prevailing perception among the country's policymakers that associates English with a form of political, economic, cultural, and linguistic imperialism, leading to a reluctance by the state to fully embrace the language. Several experts, including Riazi (2005), Farhady et al. (2010), Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017), Zarrinabadi and Mahmoudi-Gahrouei (2017), Babaii (2022), and Mirhosseini and Miryouness Haghi (2023), share a similar view. Riazi (2005) strongly argues that the state's ideological stance aims to limit English and resist its widespread dissemination, but the pressures of globalization have pushed for its increased learning as an implicit curriculum. Farhady et al. (2010) also assert that Iran takes a more conservative stance in its foreign language policy, particularly concerning English.

Despite acknowledging the importance of English, primarily due to anti-imperialistic sentiments, the country seems to adopt an alternative approach to the neoliberalist perspective. This critical stance, rooted in national and religious identity, is evidently reflected in the overarching educational and developmental directives. Consequently, not only is English language education policy subject to ideological conditions (Babaii, 2022; Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015), but

a clear discrepancy between policy and practice emerges due to policymakers' ambivalence toward English (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). This conflict results in occasional inexplicable decisions, such as the insistence on English as the sole choice for students, despite official proclamations allowing for alternative foreign language selections (Babaii, 2022). This anti-imperialistic sentiment has also shaped the recent reform in the English language education program in Iran. This conservative orientation has led to the development of a localized curriculum, which Babaii (2022) describes as an alternative to the neoliberal approach in English Language Teaching (ELT).

In stark contrast to Iran, Saudi Arabia's English language education policy system has been significantly shaped by the tenets of neoliberalism. The country has undergone considerable reforms, primarily focused on fostering market-oriented strategies to drive economic growth, and this has led to a profound emphasis on English language education policy as a pivotal element in this transition (Alharbi, 2019). Over the years, the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia has undergone substantial revisions, positioning English as a cornerstone for international communication and business promotion. English language instruction begins as early as grade four and extends throughout secondary school in Saudi Arabia's current curriculum. The government has made deliberate efforts to modernize teaching and learning methodologies within this curriculum, incorporating themes centered on cultural awareness. Additionally, plans are in place to enhance access to quality English language instruction and bolster teacher training programs to elevate the overall standard of English language education policy in the country.

These transformative changes, influenced by policy directives, have been a result of a series of interconnected global and domestic factors, as noted by Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) and Barnawi and Phan (2014). Events such as the geopolitical impacts of English globalization, 9/11, the 'Arab Spring,' and the global financial crisis of 2008 have played pivotal roles in expediting English language education policy reforms in Saudi Arabia. International pressures, particularly from the USA, have urged major overhauls in Saudi educational policies to counter extremist ideologies and foster more liberal educational practices (Habbash, 2011, as cited in Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Increasing English language education policy across the country has been viewed as a strategic response to achieving more robust educational reforms.

Comparing the English language education policies and practices in Iran and Saudi Arabia unveils a significant divergence, primarily influenced by their respective governments' policies and ideologies. In Iran, English is taught in a localized manner, reflecting an alternative approach rooted in an anti-imperialist sentiment. Despite recognizing the importance of English as a global communication tool, the challenge persists in balancing its practical advantages with preserving

Iranian cultural and linguistic heritage. In contrast, Saudi Arabia, pressured by neoliberalism, has integrated English language education policy significantly into its system, with a focus on improving language proficiency and the quality of instruction. The emphasis on English proficiency aligns with global economic competitiveness and serves as a testament to the neoliberal influence, commodifying education in pursuit of economic and political goals. The incorporation of English language education policy in the Saudi curriculum symbolizes a market-driven reform, reflecting the commodification of education to serve economic and political interests.

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