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When to Start Teaching English? A Comparative Study of Language Policymaking in Iran and Asian Nations

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ABSTRACT

One key dimension of language-in-education policymaking is the onset age of foreign, essentially English, language education. Motivated by advantages associated with English knowledge, there is a growing trend worldwide to include English in primary school curricula and lower the age of its learning. The age at which Iranian students begin learning English formally has been contentious for post-Revolutionary Iran. The paper intends to examine Iranian English policymaking vis-à-vis its start age at de-jure level by macro-level stakeholders in Iran's Ministry of Education and similar state bodies and compare it with similar educational planning in several Asian nations (South Korea, Japan, China, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, and Vietnam). Interviews, official documents, and archived online data were used. To analyze data, content analysis was employed. Findings suggest that Asian nations make explicit policy statements pertaining to neoliberal globalization agendas, deem English communication skills as part of human capital and lower the age of English education to address the English needs of their respective nations. This policy has been accelerated by an explosive social demand for English. Results also indicate that despite similar yet implicit globalization goals in macro-level documents and a similar social demand, Iranian English policymaking is torn between politico-ideological imperatives and an expendable and unwarranted pressure dyed as professional advice with the former winning over the latter which, in turn, leads to delayed English education. The paper ends with an account of the consequences of late English education policy in Iran.

KEYWORDS

English Education
Language Policymaking
Onset Age of English
Second Language

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1. Introduction

Almost two decades ago, Holborow (1999) noted that "access to English parallels access to the fruits of society" (p. 58). One might argue that English nowadays plays a more pivotal role due to its increasing marketability as the commodified, technicized skill in the modernized global economy. It is described as the prized contact language the knowledge of which is both necessary and useful in domains as diverse as politics, education, science and technology, international trading, banking and economy, research publication, tourism, etc. (Gaynor, 2014). Due to its role and the perceived benefits associated with English, state polities and educational planners the world over formulate *language policies* to develop their citizens' English knowledge to address language needs of their respective nations. It should be noted that there are several other domains (e.g. medium of instruction, orthographic reform, family language, etc.) that are addressed in language policymaking and the field is not limited to English education decision-making. But what is language policy?

A language policy is "a policy mechanism that impacts the structure, function, use, or acquisition of language" (Cassels Johnson, 2013, p.9). Liddicoat (2004) defines it as "deliberate choices made by governments or other authorities with regard to the relationship between language and social life" (p. 154). Although some scholars (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997) make a distinction between language policy and language planning with the latter subsuming the former and pertaining to plans "…intended to influence language forms or functions" (Cassels Johnson, 2013, p.3), the two terms have coalesced into one and the term *language planning and policy* (LPP hereafter) is more popular nowadays (Hornberger, 2006a). Following this, language planning and language policy is used as a single notion and interchangeably throughout this paper.

Language policies are examined in terms of genesis, means and goals, documentation, and in law and in practice. At the genesis level, they might be developed at the top by official bodies such as ministries of education (top-down policies) or might be generated by micro-level stakeholders at the grassroots level by the community that they impact (bottom-up policies). As regards means and goals, some language policies are overt and some others covert: the first set is "overtly expressed in written or spoken policy texts" whilst the second group is "intentionally concealed at the macro-level (collusive) or at the micro-level (subversive)" (Cassels Johnson, 2013, p.10). Documentation of language policies asks if they are officially documented as written or oral texts (explicit policies) or practiced in a community despite official policy texts (implicit policies). Finally, in law language policies are officially documented in writing (de jure) whereas in practice policies refer to locally produced *policies* or local language *practices* (de facto).

One can take the four policy categories to different domains of LPP and examine each in detail. For example, official language(s) of a nation, the medium of instruction, family language, heritage language(s)—some domains of LPP—can be studied in terms of top-down vs. bottom-up, explicit vs. implicit, overt vs. covert, and de jure vs. de facto policymaking. Another example is language education about which governments, other state bodies or different stakeholders make deliberate choices (e.g. which foreign language to be taught or learned?). In LPP literature, policy decisions pertaining to language education in general (be it first, second, or foreign) are conventionally called *language-in-education* policymaking (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). One such decision in language-in-education policymaking is *when* or *at what age* students should begin learning a language. Iran's policymaking pertaining to when to teach English can also be investigated with regard to the same four categories: what is the policy at the top by official bodies such as Iran's Ministry of Education (top-down policies)? What is Iranian micro-level stakeholders' (Iranian parents, students…) policy (bottom-up policies)? Are there any overtly written or spoken documents (overt policies) addressing the age at which a language should be taught? Are there any concealed policymaking and practice (covert policies)? Do we have official documents explicitly speaking of the issue (explicit policies)? Does Iranian community follow a different practice despite policy texts (implicit policies)? And finally, what are written, in law *de jure* policies of when to begin teaching/learning a language and the local *de facto* practices of Iranian community?

Answers to such questions can build on to our knowledge of Iranian LPP in general. In other words, the age at which Iranian students learn English—formally in the public sector or informally in private English institutes—have been addressed less although several research studies have been conducted on Iran's English language policymaking (ELP) in general. For instance, Kiany, Mirhosseini & Navidinia (2011) refer to Iranian national level documents, examine them with regard to the criteria that foreign language policymaking should meet, and conclude that a separate unitary foreign language policy document is needed to address the existing shortcomings. Interestingly, one of the challenges they report is about the onset age of English education in Iran's official policymaking. Of course, the lack of such a document might be an indication of the state's ambivalence towards English as the nation recognizes English knowledge as one of the necessary assets in the new millennium and, at the same time, attempts to localize and indigenize it to offset its potential threats including propagation of Western ideology in Iranian society (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015). Borjian (2013) raises similar points regarding Iran's post-Revolutionary ELP and maintains that the tense Iran-America relationships has turned English as *the language of the enemy* against which Iranian officials follow different conservative strategies such as using in-house materials, monitoring textbooks used in the private sectors, and banning English education in primary schools. The current study appreciates the gap Tavakoli and Tavakoli (2023) raise concerning the lack of studies dealing with Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in Iran but follows a comparative approach. In other words, it is intended to examine Iran's ELP with regard to the age of formal English instruction and compare it with those of Asian nations.

2. Theoretical framework

ELP and decisions over the age of English education in national curricula are situated in historical, political, socio-cultural, and economic contexts. The combination of such contextual forces leads different nations to *lean toward*, not completely adopt, one of the two general approaches to ELP with attempts to address local realities and reflect contextual idiosyncrasies. The instrumental, utilitarian, and objectified pragmatism views English as one of the necessary skills or assets of the new millennium that facilitates international cooperation in various domains such as science, technology, commerce and business, industry, medicine, etc. English is described as the lingua franca of the globalized world that brings several benefits at individual, national, and global levels (Bisong, 1995). The objectified pragmatic conceptualization might seem to align more conveniently with economic globalization agendas since English propagation is deemed a primarily instrumental and functional enterprise that helps with international economic growth, competition, and partnership. The second perspective is generally harbored by critical applied linguists who maintain that English *is actively promoted* by inner circle countries (mainly US & UK) to serve their hegemonic, ideological, imperialistic, and colonial interests (Phillipson, 2013). In his Linguistic Imperialism conceptualization of the global spread of English, Phillipson (2013) argues that English can turn to a means of maintaining "an exploitative world order that can disenfranchise speakers of other languages" (p. 4). He further believes that nations and individuals might choose to resist English dominance since it threatens local cultures, languages, and interests. Piller and Cho (2013) believe that neoliberalism, NATO, and Western-dominated globalization have further strengthened the dominance of English.

The two theoretical polarizations make up an ELP *continuum* underpinning the current study. In other words, Iranian and Asian nations' ELP with respect to the age of English education is intended to be examined to see where on this continuum they sit. The study draws upon another equally important theoretical framework: Language-in-Education Policy Framework (Baldauf, Li, & Zhao, 2008). The framework consists of several components: Access Policy, Personnel Policy, Curriculum Policy, Methods & Materials Policy, Resourcing Policy, Community Policy, and

Evaluation Policy. This study focuses on one dimension (age of instruction) of Access Policy defined as who has access to which languages and *when*? (Baldauf, Li, & Zhao, 2008).

The study contributes to our understanding of contextual embeddedness of such policymaking. In other words, each component of Baldauf, Li, and Zhao's (2008) Framework is re-examined, re-interpreted, and appropriated differently in different contexts. Therefore, investigating how one dimension (age factor) of Access Policymaking is contextualized in Iran and how it is similar to or different from other Asian nations can deepen our view of where Iran's ELP stands, what she does, how, why, and with what effects. In this study, different nations in Asia (east as well as west) are intentionally included to make ELP comparisons in varying contexts more revealing. This is important since all nations in this study grapple with globalization and, subsequently, formulates educational plans to address the evolving language needs and challenges associated with globalization.

3. Research Method

The paper adopts a qualitative approach and employs document and interview content analysis to provide explanations regarding how Iran's ELP vis-à-vis age of English education is similar to or different from those of Asian nations. Qualitative inquiries help with an in-depth understanding of the issue at point and are primarily concerned with *why* rather than *what* (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). Such studies usually generate verbal data and use observations, interviews, documents, etc. To collect data, two instruments were used.

Semi-structured interviews with key officials in Iran's Ministry of Education (MOE) were conducted. Each interview lasted for about 20-30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in Farsi and transcribed verbatim. Following Morse (1994), purposive primary selection was used in selecting samples. The criteria to interview the three officials in the Ministry included their involvement in Ministry-level decision making and educational planning, monitoring curriculum planning in different departments including English, and their mediatory role at different levels in the Ministry. Information on interviewees is given in table 1. Primary (national, macro-level official documents) and secondary (archived online data coming from state bodies) sources were employed. To collect data on Asian nations' ELP, official pages of the ministries of education, published research studies and reports, and online data were used. Table one gives more detailed information of documents.

Table 1. Information on interview participants and documents used in the study

Interview Participants	1. Deputy of the MOE and the Head of Organization of Research and Educational Planning (OREP); 2. Secretariat of the High Council of Education (HCE); 3. Deputy of Primary Education in the OREP
Documents	**Primary**: 1. The 20-year National Vision; The Comprehensive Science Roadmap; Iran's National Curriculum (NC) developed by the MOE
	Secondary: 1. Foreign Languages Curriculum Guidelines; 2. Five-year Program for English Education Development; 3.Self-believing; Active and Value-based Communicative Approach to English Education (SAVCA) developed by the OREP in the MOE; 4. Investigation of English Language Teaching (ELT) Quality in Iran by the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution (SCCR); 5. Comprehensive Science Roadmap in Literature, Linguistics and Languages by Iran's Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research; 5. Considerations in [English] Language Education Policy Planning in Iran by the Research Office of Iran's parliament (Majlis).

Interview questions *focused specifically on ELP with regard to age* in Iran and there were only three interviewees. Therefore, interview transcription analysis was limited to (a) highlighting key words, phrases, and sentences reflecting Iran's ELP, (2) summarizing them into larger categories (e.g. Critical Period Hypothesis, Politico-ideological Imperatives, Social Demand), (3) interpreting the categories and testing them by referring back to data, and (4) concluding and reporting (Patton, 2002).

Content analysis of primary and secondary documents were conducted for triangulation purposes. To do so, Bowen's (2009) three phases, iterative process of document analysis (Skimming, Reading, and Interpretation) was applied. First, the documents were skimmed to get an overall idea of them. Second, they were read and examined carefully and thoroughly to find any pieces, lines, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc. that related to not only the research focus but also interview data. Third, interpretation consisted of explaining the underlying meanings of the lines, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc. coming from stage two.

Following Dörnyei (2007), an expert in qualitative data analysis was asked to do an independent analysis of some of the data to help further with the credibility of findings and discussions. The same procedures were followed when analyzing different documents belonging to Asian nations. To address validity issues, the examination of the official pages of the ministries of education in Asian nations was followed by an investigation of published papers addressing the same policies.

4. Findings

Iran's National Curriculum (NC) is the only official document referring to the age issue, albeit briefly: "The education of foreign languages starts at the first year of the secondary school" (NC, Iran's Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 37). No other documents—be it primary or secondary—make a reference to the issue. Even in the NC, the exact numerical age is not explicated. Arfiandhani and Zein (2018) contend that when educational planners do not provide a numerical value of the onset age of English education it is probable that there have been controversies on the issue. Further examination of the documents as well as interview data suggests that such debates have been in place at different levels and by different stakeholders. In the following section (4.1), interview and document evidence is given to endorse the point that such controversies have, in fact, been going on in Iran's ELP. Section 4.2 provides document evidence that ELP with regard to the age issue is of different nature in Asian nations.

4.1. When to start English education: Policymaking in Iran

Findings suggest that the assumption *the earlier, the better* clusters around Iran's language-in-education policymaking and the age issue. Otherwise stated, in primary and secondary documents as well as interview data it is observed that such an assumption has been exerting pressure on English policymaking mechanism because it is viewed as a scientific and research-based fact. The following excerpts are policy documents supporting the argument.

> *The optimal age for language learning: Several research studies have indicated that learning a foreign language in childhood is more efficient because the brain is more flexible before lateralization is completed. For the same reason, many nations worldwide have taken English to primary/elementary schools. Unfortunately, English education was removed from Iran's*

> *first grade of secondary school curricula in 1987 leading to a later English education start (Investigation of ELT Quality in Iranian Education System, Iran's SCCR, 2002, p.8)*.

The above policy document also appears in the Five-Year Program for English Education Development (p. 5) by the OREP of the Ministry of Education.

Interestingly, when one compares the current final draft of Iran's National Curriculum with its earlier pre-drafts it becomes evident that the relationship between brain lateralization and earlier English education has been debated with reflections in pre-final draft of the NC:

> *Since brain lateralization occurring at age 10 to 12 causes some problems to learning a second language (L2), the age of L2 education should be lowered as much as possible. Foreign language education as an optional course can start at elementary schools. Obviously, such a course will be limited to learning English sounds and some vocabulary. Songs and pedagogical games will be efficiently used to teach all four skills, though the primacy goes with listening and speaking. Foreign language education is compulsory at the beginning level of high schools (Iran's pre-final NC draft, 2009, p. 30)*.

In Comprehensive Science Roadmap in Literature, Linguistics and Languages by Iran's Academic Center for Education, Culture and Research, one suggested policy to address issues pertaining to literature, linguistics, and languages in general is to "*start language teaching at younger/lower ages*" (p.15), though no explicit rationale is proposed. Finally, in Considerations of [English] Language Education Policy Planning in Iran by the Research Office of Iran's parliament (Majlis), document developers refer to some Iranian experts' advice to start foreign language learning in childhood since "*it will be more efficient due to flexibility potential of the brain before lateralization*" and because "*the brain develops more quickly before puberty and, as a result, younger children are more capable than adults to learn a new language*" (p.20). Document developers, then, refer to local arguments against an earlier English education program but in Summary and Recommendations Section suggest "*starting [foreign] language education at grade five of primary schools to decrease the likely academic failure caused by the change from a six-year primary tier to a six-year secondary tier*" (p.29). It should be noted that the local arguments against an earlier English education in this document do not reflect those found in the latest professional literature, rather they reflect concerns over English turning to a conduit for Western/American values and paving the ground for McDonaldization of Iranian society.

Interview data, however, suggest that Iranian key officials in the Ministry of Education or other state bodies are torn between two polarized views: they refer to pro and anti-earlier English education stances. In other words, at the Ministerial level proponents of earlier English education refer to educational benefits of adding English to primary school curricula and endorse their views referring to rationales behind the CPH. Opponents of the initiative, nonetheless, express their concern over English education in Iranian primary schools and believe there are potential threats associated with beginning English education with younger learners. For example, the Secretariat of the HCE argued that while developing Iran's NC, two groups echoed two different views about the onset of English in Iran:

> *Due to the significance of and concerns about English, the age of English learning was a serious debate. English was not viewed as a pure objective course like other courses. While the development of NC was in progress, two groups had different views. The first group had a predominately educational, objectified, and pragmatic approach to English and believed that English should be taught at primary or even pre-primary levels. The second group, however, was concerned with the cultural effects of such an educational initiative. They argued that English language teaching programs at primary schools might have educationally negative results because the foundations of young children's personality, thinking, and epistemology are not formed yet. Additionally, English, unfortunately, has been an agent of foreign culture inculcating and indoctrinating a particular culture.*

Likewise, the head of the Organization of Research and Educational Planning (OREP) states that:

> *This is a macro-level cultural policy issue that should be addressed by higher-ranking officials in the SCCR. The MOE cannot decide about it independently. Educationally ...pedagogically ...yes...it might be the case...that younger students learn better... but there is a cultural side to it. Is it culturally appropriate too? This is the question they should address (The head of the OREP, 2012).*

Finally, the deputy of Primary Education in Iran's MOE notes that:

> *Teaching English at primary schools ...yes...might be advantageous to young children since younger children are said to be better learners ... and that their brains learns more*

> *efficiently… but this is not the only issue… it has cultural and identity damages… children whose religious and national identity has not been formed yet are vulnerable… and we are concerned with younger children attending private English schools… what should we do? Parents might be unaware [of the potential threats] (Deputy of Primary Education, Iran's MOE, 2012).*

As observed in Iranian official documents and interviewees' views, one key factor in Iran's ELP and age issue is the belief that younger children are better learners and this is taken as an established scientific fact while it will be argued that the rationale behind the belief (the Critical Period Hypothesis) is prone to theoretical and experimental controversies.

4.2. When to start English education: Policymaking in Asian nations

In Asian nations, the 'when' dimension of 'who learns what *when*'—termed *access policy* by Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) in language-in-education policymaking—has been a contentious issue. First, different documents suggest that there have been fluctuations regarding the onset of English education in different nations at different times. For example, while it is 12 years old for Japanese students in Nunan's work in 2003, it is 10 years old in Gaynor's (2014) report. Similar variations were found for other Asian nations numbered in table 2. Second, and as far as contextual idiosyncrasies are concerned, some Asian nations' ELP is tied to their past histories of European colonialism and more *English-friendly policies* of the start age are likely to be made. For instance, in Malaysia, a former colony of the UK, English education starts when children are 7 years old (Nunan, 2003). Table 2 summarizes information on the start age of compulsory English education in some Asian countries.

Table 2. The start age of compulsory English education in some Asian countries

5 years	6 years	7 years	8 years	9 years	10 years	11 years	12 years
Thailand Myanmar	Bangladesh Hong Kong Taiwan[4] Kuwait	Malaysia Cambodia Laos	Korea[2] Taiwan[4] Vietnam China[3] Saudi Arabia	Indonesia China[3] Korea[2]	Japan[1]	Vietnam	Japan[1]

Note. Numbers above some countries refer to variations in start age policy

More important finding to this study is the motive behind early introduction of English in Asian nations. In almost all nations listed in Table 2, *economic imperatives associated with neoliberal globalization* (defined as the policy model emphasizing free market competition) are the main impetus to lower the age of English instruction and take it to elementary schools. In other words, the future economic, educational, scientific, socio-cultural, and employment success of nations is said to be tied to the linguistic capital of citizens since English is regarded as a “key component of the modernized global economy” (Gaynor, 2014, p. 66). Zein (2017a, 2017b) pushes the argument further and describes English as a *life* rather than a language skill for such Asian nations. In more extreme cases, English has been suggested to become a second *national* language (e.g. in Taiwan, Chang, 2008). Furthermore, intercultural communication and cultural internationalism are highlighted as another agenda in such policies. Below, some policy documents are presented to advocate the argument that the perceived global usefulness of English in bolstering global economic competitiveness has resulted in several *explicit* English policymaking one of which is introducing English to younger students in primary and even pre-primary schools in select Asian nations.

Korea

According to Hwang (2006), South Korea spends 1.9% of its Gross Domestic Product on ELP because for Korean educational policymakers English is one of the key tools to promote “international exchange, technological expertise and progress economically” in a global economy (Widyastuti, 2019). Since 1990s, Korea has launched different educational initiatives (e.g. *Reinforcing Foreign Language Education*, *Reinforcing Globalization Education, English Villages*) to ensure Korea can claim itself as a competent contender on the global stage and achieve global success in economy, international trading and business, internationalization of technology and science, etc. (Choi, 2006). The Korean Ministry of Education in 2013 formulated a more explicit policy stating that “To contribute to the nation and society, the use of English is essential. The ability to communicate in English will act as an important bridge connecting different countries, and will be the driving force in developing our country, forming trust among various countries and cultures” (Ministry of Education, S. Korea, 2013, in Widyastuti, 2019, p. 16). With educational reforms coming from Korea’s *Globalization Steering Committee*, English found its place in primary school curricula because it was deemed an indispensable medium to achieve globalization that can help Korea actively participate in global economy (Lee, 2013). Similar to Iran, there have been concerns over the spread of English in Korean primary or even pre-primary schools (Nunan, 2003).

Japan

Similar to Korea, Japanese educational policymakers have formulated different English policy initiatives (e.g. *The Action Plan*, *Foreign Language Activities*, *the Global 30*) to equip Japanese citizens with the linguistic capital needed for globalization intentions. But the most important one for this study is the one set by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT): *English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization*. It recommends "the introduction of English at Grade 3, an upgrade of foreign language activities for Grades 5 and 6 to a formal school subject" (Kubota, 2017, p. 293). According to Glasgow and Paller (2016, p. 158-159), "Japan's economic rise on the world stage prompted the government to further make decisions to upgrade the country's English skills and to improve its integration with the global community". In addition to economic agenda for a globalized Japan, intercultural exchange via English with world citizens is also enshrined in Japanese policy documents (Liddicoat, 2013). It is interesting to note that, similar to Iran, some neoconservative educationalists and political figures have expressed their concerns over the potential threat of English on Japanese national identity and nationalistic values such as *Love the Country* and *Respect our Traditions and Culture* appear in Fundamental Law of Education (Kubota, 2017). Despite this, the age of English education has been lowered, albeit implicitly, with policy initiatives such as the *Integrated Study Hour.* According to Yoshida (2012), the main impetus of English in Japanese primary schools is to expose Japanese students to some fun English and gradually prepare them for communication in the language.

Kuwait

Due to its oil-producing industry and a large number of expatriate workforce, English knowledge plays a prominent role for Kuwaiti state and people (Dashti, 2015). According to Tryzna and Al Sharoufi (2017, p. 80), "in the government school system, English language is taught from first to twelfth grade, which gives each student 12 years of formal instruction". This policy was set in the early 1990s. Such explicit English-friendly policymaking is mainly motivated by Kuwait's bold globalization missions reflected in its extensive privatization and global trade and investment (Al-Yaseen, 2000). In addition to offering English at an earlier age, the Ministry of Education has set up several other initiatives (e.g. Bilingual Arabic-English Private Schools, Private English Language Schools…) to give "young Kuwaitis English skills valued in a global economy" (Alsafran, Al Ajmi, &

Al Azmi, 2020) as “proficiency in English would improve [Kuwaiti] learners’ chances of fitting well in a globalized world” (Mustafawi & Shaaban, 2019, p. 226).

Saudi Arabia

Since 2000, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has followed ambitious educational reform programs. Plans to reduce dependence on oil income, globalization and modernization policies, investment on knowledge-based economy, close contribution with foreign companies, and large numbers of expatriate workforce have had consequences on educational and ELP. Known as *Tatweer Project* and developed by the Ministry of Education, the 6th Plan for Educational Development in the KSA aims at taking “education to new horizons to cope with transformations around the world” (Elyas & Badawood, 2015) by fundamental educational reforms in science, technology, mathematics and *English education* (Mitchel & Alfuraih, 2018). Saudi educational policymakers regard English knowledge as one of the predictors of “national development and global social and economic participation” (ibid: 320). Following the heightened emphasis on English proficiency as the key asset, several ELP initiatives were adopted. Not only did the KSA government take English to primary schools but also lowered the grade at which it was offered; from grade 7 in 2003 to grade 4 in 2012 (Alshahrani, 2016). Of course, teaching English at grade one has been in practice since 1970s in private schools (Faruk, 2013).

Taiwan

In Taiwan, English education started at grade 5 in 2001 but in 2002 it was lowered to grade 1. One of the main motives was to “instill a basic communicative ability, to prepare students to take a global perspective, and to give individuals confidence in communicating in the global area thus *improving the nation’s competitiveness*” (Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2000, p.2, emphasis added). Likewise, Kung (2017, p.2) contends that “As the trend of globalization spreads to Taiwan for admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO), English has further been solidified as an essential language for educational and international purposes”. Eliaseen (2021) argues that “Taiwan looks for ways to compete economically with other countries in the region and hopes that higher levels of English will draw in both foreigners and foreign companies” (p. 26). Unlike Korea and Japan, lowering the age of English education did not result in concerns over national identity or L1 literacy acquisition.

Vietnam

For the Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), making English as the second language in Vietnam is the goal for the Ministry (Vietnam Global, 2016). The MoET has launched *Project 2020* to address English language needs of Vietnamese students as Vietnam seeks to integrate in the global labor market and flourish economically (Pham, 2022). Bui et al. (2019, p. 54) contend that “Since the 2000s, English has been emphasized as the vital skill set necessary for Vietnamese students to fully participate in the twenty first century, which will enable them in achieving success, privilege, and high status in regional and global employability”. Although English is officially offered to Vietnamese students when they are 10-11 years old, it is taught to many students as young as 5-6 in practice and private English institutions have grown in number due to the nations’ *open door* policy to English (Nunan, 2003).

China

The escalating demand for English knowledge is justified on national and global grounds in China. Similar to other nations surveyed above, English is described as an *asset* (Curriculum & Teaching Materials Research Institute, 2001) that brings personal opportunities and facilitates economic development and national modernization (Hu, 2002a). As an integral part of modernization and globalization drive, ELP received a high priority and, in 2001, China’s Ministry of Education issued a directive making English a compulsory subject in grade three in all primary schools (Ministry of Education, Guidelines for Promoting Primary English Language Teaching, 2001a). The directive was motivated by China’s plan to join World Trade Organization too (Jiang, 2003). In its 2011 version, the same rhetoric concerning the role of English and how to promote it in elementary schools is observed (English Language Curriculum Standard, Ministry of Education, 2011). Of course, it should be noted that prior to such policies, English was described as the language of the enemy but with leftist ideology in power and China’s increasing involvement in global economic activities, a more instrumental ELP was pursued and China promoted the status of English further by founding Bilingual Education Programs in which courses such as chemistry, math, and computer sciences are delivered in English (Hu, 2008).

5. Discussion

Findings suggest that whereas ELP vis-à-vis the onset age in several Asian nations is heavily affected by themes associated with *neoliberal globalization agendas* (e.g. global economic competitiveness, internationalization and modernization, linguistic capital of globalized citizens…), it is torn between several forces including politico-ideological imperatives, professional advice rooted in the CPH, and social demand in Iran. This can be discussed from several perspectives.

First, globalization drives in Asian nations have resulted in several educational initiatives one of which is offering English in primary schools and lowering the age of its education. Iranian policymakers, however, postpone English education to secondary schooling due to concerns associated with English. This winning over of politico-ideological imperatives should be examined with regard to Iran's *similar globalization aspirations* reflected in several documents. For instance, missions such as *ranking first in economy, science, and technology in South West Asia* (The 20-year National Vision, p. 1) and *international knowledge production* and *cooperation with high-ranking research centers of the world* (The Comprehensive Science Roadmap, p. 7) are policy statements resembling those found in Asian nations' macro-level national documents. In other words, there are several policy statements *implicitly* hinting at Iran's globalization goals the implementation of which requires comprehensive educational measures in general and ELP in particular. Unlike Asian nations where several initiatives (e.g. bilingual schools, content-based instruction, offering English education in primary schools, employing native English speaking teachers…) have been adopted to meet such goals, Iran has followed a *passive, inoperative* ELP at the official, explicit and de-jure level. Such policymaking has resulted in exponential growth of private English schools where children as young as five begin learning English (Mazlum, 2022); a de-facto policy endorsed and practiced by micro-level stakeholders (e.g. parents).

Second, Iranian ELP still agonizes over an already contested hypothesis: the CPH. Proposed by Lenneberg (1967) to account for *first* language acquisition, the CPH holds that there is a critical time period to learn a new language starting at age 2 and ending before puberty. It also states that when this critical period is over, learning the language will be more challenging and less successful. Lenneberg believed that after puberty learning the language will be more difficult because of hemispheric lateralization in the brain: after puberty and maturation, the left hemisphere is assigned as responsible for language functions while before puberty both hemispheres are engaged. As a result, there is a golden time for language learning before brain plasticity is gone. Although the CPH was intended to account for *first* language acquisition, it was later extended to *second* and *foreign* language learning (Vanhove, 2013) leading, in some cases, to the assumption that children are better language learners than adults. Despite serious criticisms leveled at the CPH in general (Butler, 2014; Singleton, 2005) and its applicability to second or foreign language learning in particular (Brown, 2014) 'the younger, the better' continued to enjoy popularity and affected educational policymaking in different contexts (Nunan, 2003). More specifically, educational policymakers lowered the age of foreign (English) language education in several contexts due to several factors one of which was the *assumption* that an earlier start is supported by the rationale similar to that behind the CPH.

The CPH is no longer a theoretically tenable argument (Brown, 2014; Butler, 2014) and Iranian educational policymakers' insistence to compare the advantages of an earlier start promised by the CPH with the potential threats of such an initiative and conclude that threats exceed opportunities is unwarranted. Nowadays, the CPH is not taken as the theoretical basis for ELP worldwide (Rich, 2014) and what is dyed as professional, research-based argument for an earlier English education in Iran is, at best, contentious. Otherwise stated, Iranian ELP is under an undue and theoretically unjustified pressure with regard to the CPH. Interestingly, Asian nations' ELP documents have been responsive to theoretical upgrades to incorporate the latest arguments in their decision-making (see Glasgow & Paller, 2016). Respecting the CPH in Iranian ELP, the criticisms against it have been largely disregarded. After its heydays in 1970s and 1980s, neurological findings against brain lateralization (Singleton, 2006), research studies indicating the limitation of the CPH to explain second language acquisition, and the controversies over the applicability of the CPH to adult language learning (Brown, 2014) led to its credibility erosion. Iran's ELP with regard to age of English education can be re-examined by incorporating such criticisms into policymaking process and decrease its driving leverage.

Third, concerns over the spread of English are not limited to Iran and are common in some Asian nations too. However, there is a key difference. While for Asian nations the concern is primarily about the potential side effects of earlier English programs on children's first language literacy acquisition and national identity, it goes beyond this for Iranian educational policymakers: it has a religious and ideological dimension too. More specifically, what is raised in Asian nations under 'concerns over national identity' becomes 'concerns over religious/ideological and national identities' in Iran as reflected in interview and document data. Nunan (2003) reports that in Korea concerns have been echoed "about the negative effects that early introduction of English is having on national identity" (p.601). Kirkpatrick and Barnawi (2017) also refer to sporadic concerns over the spread of English and its effect on Arabic in Asia and Africa but add that more positive attitudes are observed nowadays. A similar argument has been made for some European nations too (e.g. Chvala, 2020) but it is less to do with concerns over religious and revolutionary ideals but national language and values. Therefore, it can be argued that the notion of zero-game (that learning English at an early age might hinder the acquisition of L1) in Iran's ELP is given an additional dimension which is not observed in ELP of Asian nations.

The above argument can also be discussed with regard to Phillipson's (2013) Linguistic Imperialism raised above. In other words, the concerns (cultural and religious side-effects of English, English as a means of dominance, English hegemony in Iran, etc.) raised by the interviewees reflect some of the major tenets of Phillipson's conceptualization of the global spread of English. It seems Phillipson's accounts are reflected in Iranian ELP in relation to the age issue more as Iranian officials tend to use a more or less similar rhetoric when echoing concerns over the spread of English and earlier English education. Asian nations surveyed in the study, however, seem to align with the objectified pragmatic grounds more as they explicitly opt for economic globalization and formulate more open and friendly English language policies.

Finally, social demand as a factor affecting ELP is observed in Asian nations as well as Iran. However, while such bottom-up citizenry pressure has been a secondary force leading to earlier English education in Asian nations (Xia & Shen, 2018), it has been resisted at Iran's state-level official ELP. The resistance is observed in interviews rather than policy documents. Put differently, parental and social demand is not explicitly mentioned in Iranian primary or secondary documents; it is revealed in key stakeholders' words when they refer to parents sending their children to private language schools and express concerns over the negative consequences of such parental policymaking. In LPP, this bottom-up agency is typically referred to *unplanned language planning* (Baldauf, 2012) since it poses a challenge to official, explicit, and de-jure level policymaking. Similar cases have been reported in several Asian nations (e.g. Korea & Saudi Arabia) where parental agency is at work and ELP is formulated differently at implementation level. Kirkpatrick and Barnawi (2017) believe that parental push is accelerated further by several other factors such as the Internet, Hollywood movies, multinational companies, etc. in Asian and African nations. The significance of the role micro-level stakeholders (i.e. parents, teachers, students…) play is highly appreciated nowadays and terms such as agents of implementation (Menken & Garcia, 2010), policymakers in practice (Johnson, 2013) or invisible planners (Pakir, 1994) are used to underscore their agency.

6. Conclusion

The paper aimed, firstly, at examining educational policymaking with regard to the onset of English education in Iran's MOE. Secondly, it intended to compare the process of such policymaking to those in Asian nations. Based on interview data with Iranian officials in the MOE, Iran's primary and secondary educational and ELP documents, and some Asian nations' official educational documents, it was argued that ELP in Iran and Asian nations shares differences and similarities. Motivated by globalization drives, Asian nations frame English proficiency in a *global human resources* discourse since communication competence in English is deemed as a component of neoliberal human capital. Following this, they have launched several English language policies (offering English in primary schools, in this study) to fulfill such goals. This has been accelerated by bottom-up pressure in such contexts since parents worldwide nowadays view English as "one of the most important forms of linguistic capital a child can attain" (Linse & Gamboa, 2014, p. 124). Such ELP in Asian nations, it was maintained, is no longer justified on CPH-based grounds. In Iran, however, such policymaking is still entangled in arguments rooted in the CPH, a theoretically contentious and debatable postulation. Moreover, concerns over earlier English programs in Asian nations usually pertain to L1 literacy and national identity while concerns over the spread of English are more complicated and move beyond L1 literacy or identity issues in Iran. According to the officials, Iranian children need protection against cultural, religious, and ideological alienation that earlier English programs might cause.

It was also maintained that despite *implicit* globalization agendas in Iranian policy documents and a similar social demand for English, formal English education is postponed the result of which is the increasing number of private English institutes where de-facto level stakeholders start learning English earlier. The quality of English education offered in such private institutes is a potential topic for further investigation. From 7800 in 2015 to 11,500 in 2019 (Zarrabi & Brown, 2015) shows a growing increase in the number of such institutes but little is known of the quality of education offered. Some local studies (Pishghadam & Tabatabaian, 2009) express concerns about the low education quality in such centers. The second challenge is whether all Iranian families have access to educational services of private institutes or can afford the fees (Mazlum, 2022). Further studies are needed to examine how educational justice, on the one hand, and availability of private English education or affordability of the fees, on the other, relate to each other. This is important since with globalization, English turns to a *language of opportunity* (Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2017) to which a growing elite class will have more access. Given that globalized English is offered in private institutes (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018) and the need for such English has been growing continuously, it is likely that families who can afford the fees will derive benefit from educational services offered in private sectors resulting in more complexities pertaining to educational justice. It should be noted that such a social disparity challenge is not limited to Iran and has been reported in several other Asian and African nations (Kirkpatrick & Barnawi, 2017).

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