

Banning English Language Teaching in Iranian Public Schools: Beneficial or Risky?

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Knowledge of English as a means of communication among nations of the world is regarded as a must have asset by everyone in today's world. However, many scholars and writers advocate the imperialist view arguing that the globalization of English results in an increasing intrusion of English into the lives of people exerting dominance, power, culture, ideology and language of English speaking countries over the periphery countries. Taking up an anti-imperialist stance, the author of this literature critically examines studies completed on EFL students' attitudes towards learning English language to date and determines how popular English is in Iran in comparison to other foreign languages. After having discovered the popularity of English in Iran, the author argues against the strict anti-intrusion policies of Iranian government which has so far led to proposed bans or tight restrictions on ELT in Iran. The objective is to call on political extremists to moderate their stance on their anti-intrusion policies. The author collected findings from dozens of studies published in post-revolutionary Iran between 1977 and 2019 and concluded that the participants found English learning beneficial and mostly favoured. Findings highlight highly positive attitudes towards learning English that do not fit the linguistic imperialism paradigm. The paper, therefore, argues against linguistic imperialism, its credibility and the many disadvantages that have been linked to it by highlighting a massive influx of respondents' high inclination towards learning English that show a dramatic increase over time and positive expressions on the positive effects of English on the country's social, economic, and scientific growth. Eventually, the paper prescribes negotiation rather than prohibition. Negotiation and respect are beneficial for both sides, for people and government. The views and opinions expressed in this article promise clear implications for government officials, educators, parents, EFL teachers and policy-makers.

Key words: linguistic imperialism, ban, English language teaching, attitude, anti-imperialist

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INTRODUCTION

We live at a time when English is widely viewed as a key to the social, economic, and political success of nations and the individual economic well-being in both developed and underdeveloped countries. Jenkins (2006) proposed that English has become a golden key to keep pace with technological, economic and social advances and has boosted unification with the rest of the world. The English language is viewed certainly as the most important language to learn and countries and individuals invest much to create a better future for themselves (Crystal, 1997; Krashen, 2003).

However, some researchers have proposed that English language teaching (ELT) has imperialistic influences. Phillipson (2012) argued that the global teaching of English was an act of linguistic imperialism. This is manifested as imposition of an outside language on a native language, or as a tool to spread the economic, cultural or religious values of dominant world powers. Imperialism is a form of linguicism:

Linguicism is defined as ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of language (Phillipson 1992, p. 47).

Cooke (1988) uses the metaphor of the Trojan horse to define the way English may be welcomed first but then dominates the native languages and cultures. Nevertheless, Isik (2008) argues that a language program prescribed by the superpowers is loaded with cultural values which can enhance students' cross-cultural understanding, mental ability and flexibility. These, in turn, bring social, economic, and political development. Furthermore, the dominant culture creates educational opportunities and raises social, cultural, and economic standards. In short, the imposed language and culture results in empowerment and equality among nations and leads to global understanding and peace.

However, in Isik's view, there are many points that are disregarded by any foreign model. It does not take into account the culture and values of local people. That is, individuals, who are exposed to such a value-laden approach may experience a kind of anomie and may have adaptation problems to their own culture just because this prescription is not based on the worldview and the needs analysis of people. Furthermore, Pennycook (1989) holds that this prescription, which is Anglo-oriented, can give rise to race and class discrimination because it may serve the interests of the elite by keeping the lower classes in their places.

Accordingly, Iran and North Korea have a preference for anti-monopoly, anti-imperialist policies in an attempt to prevent devaluation of local language and culture and to secede from the global community by banning English teaching in public learning centers. In their view, this language is seen as the undercover agent of Anglosphere countries infiltrating their people and thereby depriving them of their identity.

After the revolt against the government in the 79th year of the 20th century, this language was considered weird and loaded with cultural values spoken by the so-called foes, namely the United States and the United Kingdom. However, since Iran's late leader's opinion of foreign languages, Iranian students at all levels witnessed a change of attitude toward this language learning that English was required to help them disseminate Islamic values and thoughts across the world.

This opinion which was printed and bolded on the first pages of English books shows the importance of English language to Iranian people and government to date. However, we have witnessed a change of attitude recently since the United States imposed tough economic sanctions against Iran in 2018.

A large group of Iranian lawmakers attempted to deprive the young from studying this alleged potentially harmful language in public schools, citing remarks by the country's Supreme Leader. Three years ago, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei complained in a speech that teaching English should not be the only language students learn at schools and that other foreign languages must be taught as well.

Hence, as a consequence of this, as long as English teaching is connected to power and politics, as ELT practitioners, we cannot bury our heads in the sand about problems and pretend that everything is all right. Some Iranian lawmakers are trying to ignore the value of the West's best gratis gift to their people. Nevertheless, history says people are not frequently outwitted by any stratagems practiced by their rulers.

This study aims to evaluate studies completed on EFL students' feelings towards learning English language to date and to determine how popular English is in Iran in comparison to other foreign languages. After having discovered the popularity of English in Iran, the author argues against the strict anti-intrusion policies of Iranian government which has so far led to proposed bans or tight restrictions on ELT in Iran. The objective is to call on political extremists to moderate their stance on their anti-intrusion policies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to delve more deeply into the status of ELT in Iran and the students' legendary stand on learning English, this review divides evaluations into international research articles (outsiders' perspectives) and national research articles (insiders' perspectives).

Outsiders' Perspectives

There is a tsunami of research pouring into scientific journals examining the status of English language in Iran and the attitudes of Iranian English learners toward English. This study becomes more specific by focusing first on the international research investigating the question.

To the outsiders, English has had an active status since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Research indicates that Iranians have a positive attitude towards learning English and regard English language as a valuable asset and it has a much higher status in comparison to other foreign languages.

Reviewing the story of English over the past three decades in post-revolutionary Iran, Rassouli & Osam (2019) investigated the status of the English language from the point of view of Iranian people and the Islamic regime and found a big difference between regime's stand and the younger generation's stand. They examined what 472 graduates of the Iranian K-12 felt about English language and reported that they took a positive stand. In addition, they told of positive feelings of the majority. Hence, they concluded that unlike the regime's tough negative stand on ELT, EFL learners crave for learning it.

Examining how the Islamic regime of Iran approached the English language teaching in its education policies and the textbook design, they found that the regime is following an

anti-intrusion policy assuming that the West is plotting to overthrow the regime (Beeman, 2008, as quoted in Rassouli & Osam, 2019). Regarding textbooks, they reported that textbook designers imposed strict censorships to all ELT materials and textbooks and sought to indoctrinate Iranian students with Islamic thoughts.

Ekstam & Sarvandy (2017) discussed the difference between TEFL in the past and present in Iran. They recorded little progress in developing English teaching in Iran due to some reservations and reluctance to adopt new paradigms seen as posing a threat to tradition. They advocated an interface between tradition and modernity and argued that when English is viewed as a property rather than a proprietor and a natural means to communicate with others only then the ELT finds its way to embrace innovative approaches to new challenges.

Exploring the EFL context of Iran, Sadeghi & Richards (2016) focused on the social presence of English in Urmia (the capital of West Azerbaijan province, Iran) and found that English has an active status in Urmia and it is regarded as an important international language among Iranians living in Urmia.

Reynolds (2016) spoke about her experience of teaching English in Iran and showed the terrible condition of English teaching throughout much of Iran. Reynolds noted that despite the fact that Iranian students undergo several years of English in school, their quality of English is somewhat uncertain. She continued saying that the terrible state of English teaching in Iran is due to a lack of quality teaching and has nothing to do with the students.

Borjian (2013) maintained that the teaching and learning of English in Iran is developing despite the fact that there has been no connection between Iran and the Anglosphere countries over the last 35 years. Borjian also revealed the great demand for English and the acknowledgement of its advantages at the highest levels, like Iran Ministry of Education officials who had repeatedly mentioned the positive effects of English on the country's social, economic, and scientific growth.

Dahmardeh & Hunt (2012) did a thorough revision of literature, existing curriculum documentation, questionnaires and interviews completed by English language teachers in Iran and some of the authors of the curriculum and its related textbooks. One aspect of their study was the motivation for students to learn English in Iran and they found motivation has no place in the newly designed national curriculum in Iran, either the textbooks or the ELT program. They reported that both students and teachers were enthusiastic and devoted, however both groups attributed their failures to textbooks, the educational system and on top of that the governments of Iran.

Comparing English learning in Iran with china and Japan, Taguchi, Magid & Papi (2009) maintained that Iranian students learn English to enter prestigious universities, to study and live abroad, and to get access to information, and like in Japan and China, the urban youth in Iran are quite westernized and interested in English. They continued saying that Iran has fewer native speakers of English than Japan or China because political barriers have restrained the economic, professional and even academic relations between Iran and English-speaking countries.

Strain (1971) studied the factors leading to Iranian students' ELT inadequacies in Pre-revolutionary Iran and observed that instruction was weak but motivation was very high and more than 90% of the students preferred to take English than other foreign languages.

Overall, the outsiders' research findings confirm that Iranian students, despite all problems and inadequacies, have high motivation to learn English and look at this language as a valuable asset. Outsiders' Reports also attest to the fact that English is the most studied foreign language in Iran, and that English teaching is making little progress under the shadow of political restrictions. Now the question remains: in the EFL context of Iran, will students held under restrictions and strict censorship find what they lose under prohibition?

Insiders' Perspectives

Many highly cited researchers in Iran have also reported that Iranian students learning English in state schools and private institutions have strong motivation and interest for learning English, and that English is the preferred language over other foreign languages.

In the words of Yadollahi (2017), English is the most studied foreign language in Iran, though it is not widely spoken and a small percentage of the population actually speaks fluently. He also noted students technically do study Arabic in school, but rarely does anyone pursue the language outside the classroom. English and Arabic are compulsory school subjects in Iran. However, English is preferred to Arabic (Pishghadam & Naji, 2011).

Reviewing the history of English presence in Iran, Aghagolzadeh & Davari (2014) believed that English has a more recent history and it is considered to be part of the outmost expanding circle. They argued that the "teaching of English is thriving in Iran and an astonishing number of English schools are springing up all over this country." (p. 395) They maintained that the "English fever" is increasing especially among the youth.

Rahimi & Hassani (2012) surveyed two-hundred and forty-four students and investigated their viewpoints about EFL textbooks and their impact on their tendency to learn English. They concluded that that Iranian students roughly evaluated their English textbooks as valuable learning resources; but they had positive attitude towards learning English as a foreign language.

Chalak & Kassaian (2010) investigated the attitudes and motivation orientations of a group of 108 students majoring in English translation at Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch in Isfahan and reported that their attitudes towards the target language community and its members were generally highly positive.

Matin (2007) investigated the motivational characteristics of university students in Tehran. Matin showed that participants were almost equally motivated by instrumental and integrative reasons. They also stated that interest in the English language ranked the highest and interest in English culture ranked the lowest on the integrative scale.

According to Riazi (2005), there is a strong tendency to use English language. Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2003, as quoted in Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2014) believed that English seems to have smoothly found its way right to the heart of Iranian society, becoming an undeniable necessity, rather than a mere school subject. In Aliakbari's (2002) view, the dominant trend in Iran is toward more English language teaching.

Talebinezhad and SadeghiBeniss (2005) reported the inability of public schools and universities in meeting students' ever-growing need to learn English communicatively.

Arani (2004) examined language learning needs of EFL students at Kashan University of Medical Sciences to identify the students' attitudes towards learning English as a school

subject prior entering the university and reported that a majority of the participants had positive attitudes towards both learning English and the English language teacher.

In summary, results of these studies, among others, suggest that English is, almost certainly, the most important subject that Iranian students can learn in schools and colleges. Results of attitudinal research in Iran also indicate that it has been a long time since Iranian students, despite imposed restrictions, have realized the importance of this foreign language and have a strong tendency to learn it to make their way toward the exit in an ordinary fashion.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

Reviewing the empirical studies focusing on EFL students' attitudes towards learning English language to date and on how popular English is in Iran in comparison to other foreign languages, provide evidence to support the view that contemporary Iranian students maintain positive attitudes towards learning English and that it is the most requested foreign language in Iran. Scientific evidence also suggest that Iranian students have fallen behind in their studies due to low ELT teaching quality in public and private schools which are under tough state restrictions.

On top of that, while turning off the only available light, some Iranian lawmakers recently intruded into education banning ELT to students in public schools, who have already been deprived of the right to good quality teaching and learning for years. First the teaching of English was banned in primary schools and postponed from ages 12 to 13. Now it was going to be postponed to 19. What is going to happen next is still unsure. Maybe a proposed ban should put an end to this fatal irresolution and procrastination.

While in other countries lawmakers are allocating a large budget for research to search for life beyond our solar system and to discover how to communicate with intelligent aliens, and whether "we" would be able to understand their language, some Iranian lawmakers are submitting a proposal in parliament to ban the teaching of a global language in public schools. To crown it all, these lawmakers do not abide by the laws they made: Article 30: "The government is obliged to provide free education to all the people by the end of high school, and to extend higher education to free self-sufficiency." (p. 11)

Once "the Shah of Iran spoke of the oil as a noble substance with multiple uses, too valuable to be wasted as a source of energy when other substances good only for producing energy were available" (Afkhami, 2009, p. 278). In parallel fashion, language in general and English language in particular is a uniquely human gift, too valuable to be downplayed or misused when world leaders rightly believe in its superiority. It makes no sense whatsoever to adopt a prohibition policy and ban the language of Anglosphere countries with a total of 983 million speakers around the world to protect yourself against their state policies. Once a monopoly of the British empire, English is now a monopoly of the whole nations. It is a tool of communication and as a tool requires technical skills to use it, i.e., knowing how to use it effectively helps the nation move past the difficulties that are sure to come their way. English language mastery moves the nation forward; English language deficiency holds the nation back.

To use an analogy, basketball players say the ball is not to blame for the fact that it did not succeed. The ball does not have a personality, nor does it cheat, or look at you funny, or talk back. Michael Jordan handled the ball like a point guard and rebounded like a power

forward simply because he played the ball, not the opponent. To play the ball is the strategy agreed upon. With this mindset, you can play your game without being adversely affected by worrying about your opponent.

In Pre-revolutionary Iran, Behrangi (as quoted in Hanson, 1983) highlighted the problem of American influence in Iranian education, and suggested that Iranians and not the "farang rafteh" (those who have gone to the West) should write the texts and devise the curriculum. He strongly believed that giving teachers more autonomy would require "a general loosening up of the rather authoritarian Iranian education system, which in turn would necessitate a redistribution of power in the total society." (p. 6) The lesson learned from this part of history of Iran suggests that in order to be efficient, teachers at any time in history of education have demanded for power to have a say in the materials of the curriculum they teach. Teacher empowerment would assuredly lead to more motivation and quality teaching in the classrooms. Forcing teachers into submission would change them into human-like robots, sustaining censorship rather than friendship.

Overall, banning policies make our students look like second class species, so they may never comply with government practices and policies. Neither restrictions nor eliminations can stop a young generation from learning a forbidden language. Psychologically speaking, we are all just human beings and attracted to what is banned or restricted. Experience tells us that what is forbidden becomes more attractive, and instead of serving to deter us, a ban generates an attraction to that which we are forbidden. Prohibition generates rejection of the person who imposes it. Therefore, we are strongly recommended to stop restriction and prohibition and try negotiation and respect instead, something beneficial for both sides, for people and government.

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