

## **Current Trends and Issues in English Language Education in Iran**

**Sahereh Amirian, M.A.(TEFL)**

Razi University of Kermanshah

### ***Abstract***

*This study investigated current trends and issues in English language education in Iran through examining and analyzing a series of articles by several scholars and educators both inside and outside of the country. The paper brings two major issues under light: Political and economic context of the English language and teaching English as an international language in Iran. The first part of the paper aims to clarify the socio-economic agents that motivate Iranian university students to learn English. Elaborating on the concepts of international posture, ideal self and imagined communities, it describes how the Iranian political context has contributed to increasing students' desire to improve their English in order to develop their career prospects, to be recognized as members of the international community and to contribute to the development of their country. In the second part of the paper English language education in Iran is briefly and tacitly described, the concept of English as an international language (EIL) is elaborated, the importance of culture in EIL, and the role of literature in language teaching from the aspect of cultural awareness are analyzed. Then the advantages of including migrant literature in English language classes in Iran are mentioned with a focus on Iranian migrant literature, providing pedagogical examples of 'authentic' texts to illustrate the argument. Finally, important factors in the selection of literary materials in order to develop intercultural competence in language learning classrooms are pointed out.*

**Key words:** *Current trends and issues, EFL/ESL, Iran*

### **Introduction**

#### **Political and economic context**

English education and policies at Iran's universities In Iran, two types of university exist: state governed and private. The most prestigious universities in Iran are state governed. Entrance is highly competitive but the government pays for tuition and accommodation for those who succeed in the entrance exam. Students failing the entrance exam but still wishing to pursue their

studies can join a group of private universities known as Islamic Azad University, which was established in 1982 as a solution to accommodate surplus students (Mohebati, 2004). Although it is difficult to obtain precise figures on student numbers, roughly 50 per cent of high school graduates choose a path to higher education.

Both private and public Iranian universities provide all students with the opportunity to study a core general English syllabus. Additional modules in English are available but subject to specific course requirements. The dominant method of teaching English within universities is Grammar-Translation, the main goal enabling students to read and understand English texts that may benefit their majors.

### **Iranian university students and migration**

Iran, as a developing country, needs educated professionals to drive its economic development. However, it has lost a great number in the past few decades (Torbat, 2002). Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a large number of Iranians have emigrated to Western countries. They left their country between 1979 and 1988 (during the creation of the Islamic Republic and the end of the war between Iran and Iraq) and are identified as the 'Iranian diaspora' (Elahi and Karim, 2011). There are significant Iranian populations living in the United States and the rest are scattered across Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia (Abbasi, 2003).

Saba reports that 25 per cent of university graduates leave the country, resulting in an estimated annual loss of \$50 billion to the nation (Saba, 2011). The contributing factors towards the decision to leave the country are many, and include:

- . Avoiding military service
- . Lack of jobs in Iran (statistics show that the average unemployment rate for the year, ending on March 20 2014, reached 10.4 per cent) (Tehran Times, 2014)
- . Superior research facilities available elsewhere
- . A degree from a top university in Iran does not guarantee a position that is commensurate with qualifications
- . Candidates for suitable jobs in government ministries and academia must conform to religious and political attitudes (Saba, 2011: para 9).

To help understand the political and socio-economic factors that contribute to Iranian university students' motivation, we will draw on three main theoretical ideas: international posture, L2

motivational self-system theory and imagined communities. This section will briefly outline each of these ideas.

### **International posture**

Gardner (1985) proposed the idea of integrative motivation– an individual’s level of desire to become part of an L2 community – as a way of understanding motivation among immigrants to an L2 context. This notion, however, does not fit well with the context of English as an international language, where an English learner may want to be a global citizen rather than have an English, Australian or Canadian identity. Yashima (2009: 145) proposed the term International Posture. This term ‘tries to capture a tendency to relate oneself to the international community, rather than any specific L2 group’.

It could be argued that international isolation has deprived Iranian students of such a sense of belonging to an international community. Iranian students who were brought up during the post-Revolution regime are discouraged from adopting the ‘Western’ values, which are often associated with internationalism, and have been encouraged to have Islamic beliefs and be united Muslims (Razavi and Juneau, 2001).

### **L2 motivational self-system theory**

L2 motivational self-system theory (Dörnyei, 2005) suggests that possible selves are underpinned by what learners might wish to become and what they are afraid to become. Learners’ perceptions about their desired future selfstates have an impact on their behaviour by accentuating the discrepancies between current and future desired states. For example, the ability of the general Iranian population to travel freely around the world is restricted, due to diplomatic and visa arrangements. However, many students have a strong desire to achieve internationally oriented future self-states and think that learning English can lead to many opportunities outside their native country.

The ideal L2 self, according to Dörnyei (2005: 106), is ‘the L2-specific aspect of one’s ideal self’. This is the ideal image of the L2 user that one likes or desires to be in the future, including wishes, hopes and dreams. If learners conceive of themselves as successful persons in their future career or education, this self-image will move them to reduce the discrepancy between their actual selves and the ideal image of themselves. Higgins (1987: 34) notes that this process is not always conscious: ‘One’s self-discrepancies can be used to assign meaning to events without one being aware of either the discrepancies or their impact on processing’ .For instance, Iranian students might experience tension if they envision studying or working in an English-speaking country (an ideal self) but are not currently able to speak English (current self), so to overcome this tension they enroll on a language course.

The ought-to L2 self is the L2-specific aspect of one’s ought-to self. This factor in the L2 motivational self-system refers to skills that one believes one ought to achieve as a result of

perceived duties, obligations or responsibilities (Dörnyei, 2005). Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013) comment that this image is noticeable in some Asian countries, where students are motivated to master a foreign language to fulfil their family expectations.

Research into the L2 motivational self-system reveals similarities with Higgins's (1998) distinction between two types of instrumentality, 'preventional and promotional', both of which are relevant to students' desire to learn a language. Preventional instrumentality is similar to the ought-to L2 self (for example, studying hard to pass an examination in order not to disappoint parents). Promotional instrumentality is similar to the ideal L2 self where motivation is formed by desirable self-images in the personal, social and professional context of the target language. Perhaps surprisingly, a comparative study conducted by Taguchi et al. (2009) found a high correlation between the instrumentality-promotional construct and the ought-to L2 self. The first author of this chapter has observed that, on account of the political turbulence in Iran during the last 35 years, many Iranian parents who did not have a fulfilling youth themselves believe that if their children are successful then this reflects on their success as parents – their own parental form of success. So they nurture the thought in their children that learning English will open a new horizon for them in other countries. Studying English in order to go overseas may therefore be promotional for these students who were brought up to fulfill their parents' desires.

Apart from these two future self-guides, the L2 motivational self-system encompasses an L2 learning experience dimension. The L2 learning experience includes and puts more emphasis on 'learners' attitudes toward second language learning and can be affected by situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience'. (for example, teacher, peers, materials) (Dörnyei, 2005: 469)

In conclusion, the L2 motivational self-system suggests that there are three primary sources of motivation to learn a foreign/second language: learners' visions of themselves as effective L2 speakers, the social pressure coming from the learners' environment, and positive learning experiences.

### **Imagined communities**

Learners are able to connect with imagined communities that are beyond the local, intangible, and not immediately accessible (Kanno and Norton, 2003). The images shape the ideal L2 self, and the learner is seen as a social being interacting with other members of the imagined community (Ryan, 2009).

The combination of Norton's idea of imagined community (2001) and Dörnyei's ideal L2 self model (2005) suggest a model of motivation in which learners build an ideal image of themselves as users of the language in the target community. Investment in an imagined community influences identity construction and engagement in learning (Wenger, 1998;

Anderson, 1991; Norton, 2001). The imagination of the Iranian people since the Revolution has been a political tool for compliance with promises of an ideal future. However, the capacity to create their own imagined future communities among young Iranians now seems well developed and, paradoxically, is a political area over which the government has less control, as shown, for example, in several Iranian student protests (Erdbrink, Washington Post, 2009). These images may affect learners' investment in the target language and achieving future aspirations is clearly a motivation for what learners do in the present. A student studying engineering at an Iranian university may start learning English because he imagines himself as a successful engineer in the USA, and English is an important means of gaining this future affiliation. According to Appadurai (1996), the imagination is mediated by communication technology and migration, with the internet and various media having a great impact on what it is possible to imagine. However, imagination should not be considered the same as fantasy. Simon (1992: 4) makes a distinction between 'wishes', which might not require action, and 'hopeful imagination', which requires action for a better future.

### **English language teaching in Iran**

English is regarded as a foreign language in Iran, and is taught for three to four hours a week as a required course from Grade 7 (approximately age 13). Although the language is a compulsory subject in the Iranian national curriculum, it can be argued that it has been neglected within the Iranian educational system (Dahmardeh, 2009). In private schools, English is introduced at primary or even pre-primary level, and receives considerable attention. In some cases, the quality of the English programmes offered in each school influences the number of students who enrol in that school (Aliakbari, 2004). The majority of the books used in private schools and language institutes are mostly pirated American ELT textbooks. Private language institutes are popular in Iran, and despite the lack of attention to English in the national educational curriculum, 'English seems to have found its way smoothly right to the heart of Iranian society, proving itself to be a necessity, rather than a mere school subject'. (ibid.)

The close relationship between language and culture has made interpreting the state of ELT in Iran a controversial topic. Analyses of the role and impact of ELT range from English linguistic imperialism and cultural invasion to cultural neutrality. On the one hand, English is negatively addressed as a tool to represent and introduce Western culture to Iranian students; on the other hand, studies show that English taught as a school subject is nothing but a representation of Persian or Islamic ideology (Rashidi and Najafi, 2010). Many statements in English textbooks published under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and used nationally in Migrant literature and teaching English as an international language in Iran either convey Islamic traditions (e.g. you can break your fast as soon as the sun sets; the 15th of Sha'ban is a religious celebration) or have no reference to a target group (Aliakbari, 2004).

English is used around the world and has become the global lingua franca that is not only used to communicate with native speakers but as an international language universally used (Jenkins,

2009). However, most people in Iran still associate English with America or Britain; what Wallace (2003) and Phillipson (2009) explain as the language of power, which belongs to the 'others'.

Regarding the cultural aspect of current ELT materials used in public schools, studies argue that textbooks in Iran do not aim to familiarise students with cultural matters of other countries (Aliakbari, 2004; Khajavi and Abbasian, 2011; SAIC, 2007). Aliakbari (2004) believes materials are superficial and do not provide sufficient content to broaden students' worldview, or develop their cultural understanding and intercultural competence. Khajavi and Abbasian (2011) investigated English language materials taught at Iranian public schools to explore to what extent these materials are appropriate in terms of developing national identity and globalisation issues. Activities and passages relating to national identity and international issues constitute less than seven per cent of the ELT textbook content, which is unacceptable for educating students in this age of globalisation (ibid, 2011). In this regard, Aliakbari (2004: 13) points out that a 'shallow presentation of culture can reinforce inaccurate stereotypes,' which can be problematic in the multicultural world of English.

### **English as an international language**

As the century proceeds there is a greater use of English in international contexts. According to Smith (1976), one of the characteristics of an international language is that it is 'de-nationalised'; in other words, it belongs to any country which uses it. People should be tolerant of the English used by others. Tolerance can be gained by exposure to varieties of English. Unfortunately, the high prestige given to the 'standard' variety of English as the ideal of 'native-speaker proficiency' has made 'non-standard' varieties invisible (Corbett, 2000). This is common in Iran. Teachers have a major role in developing tolerance toward varieties of English among learners:

*The advantages of considering language variety from a cultural perspective in second-language education are: (a) language variation can be viewed positively, rather than as a simple barrier to communication, and (b) we can promote the intercultural goals of ethnographic observation. (Corbett, 2000: 160)*

### **The role of culture in teaching EIL**

Since culture is embedded in language, it is impossible to teach a language without teaching cultural content. One of the goals of teaching culture in language education is establishing a 'sphere of interculturality' (Kramsch 1993: 205). Learning a culture, which is beyond the simple transfer of information between cultures, requires that the learners observe their own culture through the eyes of another. Kramsch (1993) uses the term 'third place' for the stage of being able to move between the source and target cultures.

As an international language, English is no longer exclusively related to the culture of the regions where it is used as a first language, and so an important issue is to raise awareness about other cultures and not to expect learners to accept the beliefs and values of a particular culture (Mackay, 2002). According to Byram (1997), one of the goals of learning English is enabling learners to explain and discuss their own culture in another language. Previously students needed to accept and consequently adopt the standards and culture of a country whose primary language was English in order to use it effectively (Smith, 1976). Many Iranian students still make the same assumption, and believe that learners should behave in accordance with target culture conventions. Such attitudes raise concerns among certain groups in society, particularly those who think of English as the language of imperialism and see it as a threat of cultural invasion. Such expectations are far from the goals of learning English as an international language, and achieving biculturalism is difficult if not impossible in a context such as Iran where English is taught as a foreign language.

### **The selection of materials and task design**

The language objective in an intercultural approach to language learning is to develop learners' productive (speaking and writing) and receptive (listening and reading) skills in the target language, while the intercultural aims are to develop learners' 'socio-cultural competence' (Byram, 2003), train students to recognize the cultural differences and realize the different perspectives that may cause clashes of cultural expectation. In order to develop language learners' intercultural competence, course materials can blend intercultural communication and language learning (Byram et al., 1994, cited in Corbett, 2000). Including migrant literature as part of the course materials is one possible way to bring together the language learning and intercultural communication objectives in the English language classroom.

Before choosing a piece of literary text to work with in the classroom, teachers should have a specific goal that helps them create and structure activities for a given piece (Gajdusek, 1988). Selected texts should be contemporary, realistic, not too long, interesting, and with a comprehensible background (MacDonald, 2000). Since the main purpose of the study of the text is to enhance learners' intercultural understanding, extracts should be culturally significant. They should illustrate aspects of culture clash, particularly between an outsider and the target culture (ibid.). English teachers can invite students to bring materials into the classroom to supplement texts provided for the course. In this way, language learners become motivated and eager to participate in activities. Among the materials provided by students, teachers can select those which are both culturally and linguistically suitable for class activities and put them into text sets to enhance intertextuality. Supplementing 'authentic' listening materials can also train learners to recognize the cultural associations of different accents (Corbett, 2000). The learners' age level is another factor that should be considered. Because of the cognitive skills required for recognizing the markers of the self and other's identity, an appropriate age level would be above 15 years

(ibid.). During in-class activities the teacher should be more of a facilitator, and guide students in different sequences of the activities, supporting or challenging their ideas.

### **Findings**

The research identified Iranian students' desire to leave Iran as the main factor influencing their motivation to learn English. They believe they cannot fulfill their aspirations in their own country, and fear losing the opportunities and qualifications on offer in other communities. However, many intend to return to their host country to contribute to its development and success. The following sections discuss the key aspects of this motivation.

#### **The significance of career aspirations with regard to language learning**

The main influence for the participants to learn English is the strong desire to go abroad to develop their careers. The younger generation looks for either better or different qualifications or career opportunities than those available in Iran.

#### **Students' career aspirations in the imagined community**

The students' imagined future is crucial to motivation. Norton (2001) suggests that students have a tendency to construct their identity using English in different imagined communities and to regulate this by enhancing their English and taking examinations such as TOFEL and IELTS to reach beyond their existing environment and experience. The motivation to learn English, together with the ability to communicate in English, may indeed break down barriers to 'achievement' and extend their community beyond the borders of their country.

In some cases, the term 'imagined community' actually becomes something of a real community, which Appadurai (1996) claims is mediated by the internet and by migration, when students living inside Iran communicate with students outside it. This direct link to the imagined community heightens motivation to learn English (Appadurai, 1996), encouraging students in Iran to decrease the discrepancy between their current situation and their ideal self in their imagined community.

#### **The significance of the political context with regard to language learning**

The political context is a recurring pivotal theme present in almost every participant's comments. In this section, two main themes will be discussed: firstly, the political implications of language and identity; secondly, the significance of language learning as a motivation to contribute to Iran's development and success.

All participants of the studies regarding this issue said that they are willing to go overseas to study or work, interact with intercultural partners and have an attitude of openness toward other cultures (Yashima, 2002), but this openness does not mean participants wish to be identified as a member of the target language community



Influences from the societal and political issues mentioned above cause students to value the target language and its communities, increasing their desire to improve themselves and leave the host country with the intention to return and disseminate knowledge and skills, contributing towards Iran's advancement. The L2 motivational self system indicates a strong mutual contribution of 'ideal self' and 'ought-to self'. Some of the participants desire to learn English for ideal visions of the future outside Iran (ideal-L2 self) in order to prevent themselves, and in some cases their home country, from lagging behind developed countries (ought-to self). The findings on these Iranian students' sources of motivation seem congruent with past research suggestions (cited in Dörnyei, 2009: 18) that harmony between the ideal- and ought-to selves can enhance the motivational impact of the ideal- and ought-to selves.

### **Conclusion**

Learning English as a foreign language may be seen as a metaphorical bridge between one life and the perceived opportunity of a better life (in an imagined community). The majority of the participants consider language learning as a path to achieving success in their chosen field. They describe factors affecting this including gaining a better social status, strengthening freedom of expression, accessing the benefits that engaging in the international community can provide for their professions, and contributing to Iran's development. Finally, they see language development as a path to distancing themselves from a socio-economic domestic environment with which they are unhappy. The common thread running through all of the participants' interview responses is the value of learning a language for its perceived future benefit rather than for its intrinsic value.

The current situation in Iran is leading students to want to go overseas for their career development in order to increase their socio-economic level and be more professional in their career. This is a sad loss of skills that Iran does not want. It is important for the government to take steps in countries like Iran to provide rich educational opportunities with the hope of a prosperous career for its competent young generation. This generation can contribute to the development of their country if they are given the opportunities to gain from the achievements of other countries and are able to impart this knowledge gained internationally.

### **References**

- Aliakbari, M (2004) The place of culture in Iranian ELT textbooks at high school level. Paper presented at 9th Pan-Pacific Association of Applied Linguistics Conference. August 2004, Namseoul University, Korea.
- Byram, M (1997) Teaching and Assessing Intercultural Communicative Competence. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Byram, M (2003) 'Cultural studies and foreign language teaching', in Bassnett, S (ed) Studying British Cultures: An introduction(Second Edition). London: Routledge.

- Cooper, J (n.d.) Teachers' Guide. Available online at [www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780812968378&view=tg](http://www.randomhouse.com/acmart/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780812968378&view=tg)
- Corbett, J (2000) 'Teaching culture through language variety', in McBride, N and Seago, K (eds) *Target Culture – Target Language?*. London: CILT publications.
- Dahmardeh, M (2009) *English Language Teaching in Iran and Communicative Language Teaching*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Warwick, UK.
- Dumas, F (2003) *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America*. New York: Random House.
- Firoozeh Dumas. Available online at <http://firoozehdumas.com>
- Gajdusek, L (1988) Toward wider use of literature in ESL: why and how? *TESOL Quarterly* 22/2: 227–257.
- Jenkins, J (2009) *World Englishes: A Resource Book for Students* (Second edition). London: Routledge.
- Khajavi, Y and Abbasian, R (2011) English language teaching, national identity and globalization in Iran: the case of public schools. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 1/10: 182–186.
- Kramsch, C (1993) *Context and Culture in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- MacDonald, M (2000) 'Strangers in a strange land: fiction, culture, language', in McBride, N and Seago, K (eds) *Target Culture – Target Language?* London: CILT publications.
- Mackay, L (1982) Literature in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly* 16/4: 529–536.
- Mackay, L (2002) *Teaching English as an International Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milstead, PT (n.d.) 'Coming of age in a multicultural community', in Rodriguez, N (ed) *The New Houston: New Immigrants, New Ethnicities, and New Inter-Group Relations in America's Fourth Largest City*. Available online at [www.uh.edu/honors/Programs-Minors/honors-and-the-schools/houston-teachers-institute/curriculum-units/seminar-pages/2004/new-houston-04.php](http://www.uh.edu/honors/Programs-Minors/honors-and-the-schools/houston-teachers-institute/curriculum-units/seminar-pages/2004/new-houston-04.php)
- Phillipson, R (2009) *Linguistic Imperialism Continued*. London: Routledge.
- Rashidi, N and Najafi, R (2010) The representation of culture in Iran language institute advanced-level textbooks. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research* 1/5: 624–631.
- Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) (2007) *Iranian textbooks content and context*. Virginia: SAIC.
- Smith, LE (1976) English as an international auxiliary language. *RELC Journal* 7/2: 38–42.
- Spack, R (1985) Literature, reading, writing and ESL: bridging the gap. *TESOL Quarterly* 19/4: 703–25.
- Wallace, C (2003) *Critical Reading in Language Education*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.