

# Some Insights into Iran's English Curriculum Based on Iran's Major Policies

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**Abstract**—The study aimed to investigate Iran national curriculum, foreign language part. The curriculum analyzed according to major documents of Iran; 20-year Iran's vision plan and Comprehensive map of science. Moreover, it was analyzed based on current issues in language teaching. The qualitative study reached at some setback in curriculum. Curriculum centered on language teaching without appropriate culture, while aim of major documents was non-stop communication with world. As a result, there were some weak points toward national curriculum.

**Index Terms**—curriculum, national curriculum, Iran's vision plan, foreign language curriculum, educational system

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education is significant feature in achievement of country as it is the major criteria in the future success and improvement. Each educational system has its own duty to reach to this goal, which should be considered as the core, because they trained future leaders. Leaders are responsible for social and economical developments of a country, transferring cultural values, introducing new findings to society for the sake of the humanity (Blackburn & Lawrence, 1995).

Moreover, it is educational system responsibility to upper the standards of the society. When they influence the individuals as students, this situation effects the social upheaval (Bowen, 1980). As English is the lingua franca of the world, learning and teaching English keep its importance as one of the significant issues for the governments.

This responsibility was emphasized in major policies of each country. Iran as a strategic country in its region needs to be in contact with world. Therefore, it works based on *Iran's 20-year vision plan*. This plan was administered from ten years ago; therefore, Iran is in the middle of its strategic way. The plan is made of distinct parts and education is one of its main issues.

Importance of language learning, especially English language was not mentioned exactly in a separate part, but it was mentioned covertly as a prerequisite to reach its purposes in the world. Based on this plan, national curriculum was revised. Therefore, analyzing new curriculum based on major documents specially *Iran's 20-year vision plan* is necessary to find if it was revised in the line of major plans or not.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Theoretical Foundations

#### 1 What is curriculum?

What is a curriculum as we now understand the word? It has changed its meaning as a result of the curriculum movement. It is not a syllabus – a mere list of content to be covered – nor is it even what German speakers would call a *Lehrplan* – a prescription of aims and methods and content. Nor is it our understanding a list of objectives. ...Let me claim that it is a symbolic or meaningful object, like Shakespeare's first folio, not like a lawnmower; like the pieces and board of chess, not like an apple tree. It has physical existence but also a meaning incarnate in words or pictures or sound or games or whatever. [...] Who made it? (Stenhouse, as cited in Moore, 2015, p.43)

Defining curriculum is not an easy subject. Possibly the most frequent definition draw from the word's Latin root, which means 'racecourse'. Definitely, for many students, the curriculum is a race to run which contains a series of obstacles or difficulties (subjects) to be passed. (Marsh, 2004)

"Curriculum in the postmodern era becomes an aesthetic engagement and a search for deeper understanding that will lead to justice, compassion, and ecologically sustainability where the boundaries between the center and the margin are blurred, and all students have access to the text." (Slattery, 2006, p. 281)

Evidently, the obvious point is that the meaning of curriculum differs depending on the perspective, which is viewed. Therefore, standpoints of scholars in defining curriculum determine the importance of characteristics of curriculum for them and based on those significances they establish a new curriculum.

In Acedo & Hughes' (2014) ideas, curriculum consisted of "at least four facets of learning: the written curriculum (how these intentions are laid out), the taught curriculum (what happens in the classroom), and the hidden curriculum (subconscious, institutional intentionality), and the intended curriculum (what we intend students to learn)." (p. 504) The intended curriculum necessitates an educational institution capable of implementing it and benefits the organization of learning opportunities and procedures adapted to the diversity of students. (Tedesco, Operti, & Amadio, 2013)

### 2 Curriculum Evaluation.

"The process of measuring and judging the extent to which the planned courses, programs, learning activities and opportunities as expressed in the formal curriculum actually produce the expected results. If carried out effectively, this process can enable decisions to be made about improvements and future progress." (UNESCO IBE, 2013, p. 10)

Curriculum evaluation is "looks at all aspects of curriculum design to see if the course is the best possible. Evaluation requires looking both at the results of the course, and the planning and running of the course." (Nation & Macalister, 2010, p. 123) Therefore, curriculum evaluation is the last phase of founding a new curriculum. The process of curriculum analysis is about collecting verification for the decision makers and providing rationales behind the selection of specific program. (Altaieb, 2013)

Therefore, curriculum evaluation "become little more than an assessment of the teachers' effectiveness in 'delivering' it; and, as we have already seen, evaluation has degenerated into school inspections." (Kelly, 2004, p.154) Curriculum evaluation is a process which gauges the effectiveness of each part of curriculum in educational context and search for whether it needs minor adjustment or major revision.

### B. Related Studies

Language policy in major part is significant in different countries. Japan as an eastern country tries to develop English teaching and learning at the educational system both for students and teachers. "Japanese with English Abilities" centered on teaching English at primary school, sending teachers abroad, and appointing specific level for each grade at school. (Honna & Takeshita, 2005)

Ó Laoire (2011) in a study explored the trajectory of languages in education policy (LED) in Ireland. He suggested, "a new understanding of the policy process because they epitomize the kinds of local contexts and specific circumstances that implementers confront not only in Ireland but also in regions and areas where societal bilingualism is beginning to change into or compete with multilingualism in an LEP." (Ó Laoire, 2011, p.17)

Kinsiz, Ozenici, and Demir (2012) believed the barrier to Turkey's foreign language teaching is foreign language policy. They analyzed foreign language policy from macro- and micro-level planning in Turkey. It was obvious that language played an important role in each country. In Pakistan, "language played a significant role in the movement to make Bangladesh a nation separate from Pakistan." (Kachru, 2006, p.427)

In Iran, there were few studies which centered on national curriculum. Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) studied the national curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran in field of teaching foreign languages (especially English). According to their critical analysis, "national curriculum of Iran holds some considerable advantages, the successful application of its elements in area of teaching foreign languages requires preparation of some prerequisites." (p. 27)

Some of scholars in Iran focused their studies on importance of major revision to national curriculum. Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) analyzed Iran national curriculum based on major documents such as *Iran's 20-year vision plan* and its comparison with world's knowledge in teaching English as a foreign language. Kiany, Navidinia, and Momenian (2011) searched for unity of Iran's national curriculum and compared it with *Iran's 20-year vision plan*. They believed that national curriculum was not in the line of *Iran's 20-year vision plan*.

As the place and nature of language planning in education is one of the main dimensions of the relationship between language and social life, governments make deliberate choices (Liddicoat, 2004), it is important to analyze Iranian national curriculum, English language part, and compare it with major plans and documents. It was claimed that major documents were cornerstone of adapted national curriculum.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTION

1. Is national curriculum base on modern world of teaching methodology?
2. Is national curriculum in the line with major documents?

## IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer research questions Iran's national curriculum was the main source of investigation, English language 37-38. To answer first question, major documents *Iran's 20-year vision plan* and scientific map of Iran were analyzed and compared them with Iran's national curriculum. In order to answer first question, it is necessary to know about language and its changes during time in Iran.

## V. DISCUSSION

### A. First Question

#### *1 Evolution of Language in Iran.*

The official language of Iran is Persian, which is known as Farsi. It is an Indo-European language, although in Iran there are different regional languages such as Azari (Turkish), Kurdish, Arabic. Besides regional languages, there are many dialects, which can be found in each province or even small cities. None of these languages and dialects is not taught at schools and universities. Major foreign languages are Arabic and English. Arabic receives more attention at schools because Iran is an Islamic country and their holy Quran is in Arabic. At university, English receives more attention because policy makers believe that English is the language of science and university students should understand it very well.

There are four stages in the history of Iran regard to language. The first stage referred to Old Persian in Sassanid dynasty. The second stage started with Arab wars against Iran which led to introduce Arabic language to Iranians. At that time, Iran's religion changed to Islam and it made a major revolution with itself because Iranians' language, behavior, culture, economy and politics followed Islamic rules. Therefore, Persian language "welcomed and incorporated Arabic terms and the two languages mixed with each other to a great extent." (Riazi, 2005, p. 101)

The third stage referred back to Qajar dynasty, when western culture was introduced to Iran. In 1851 Dar-al-Fonoon (The House of Techniques) was founded as the first institution in Iran. At that institution, western teachers who did not know Persian taught Persian students, therefore gradually English and French language were the language of institutions and some of main organizations like oil company, under control of British.

"English became an important requirement in the Iranian military because a good command of English was needed for the army personnel to go to the US for further specializations." (Farhady, Sajadi Hezaveh, & Hedayati, 2010, p. 10) Moreover, Farhady and et.al. (2010) stated teaching English language became a social requirement and private language schools mushroomed in the capital and many large cities.

Gradually English language became part of school curriculum. English was taught at Iranian schools during the six years of secondary education in the period 1934 to 1970. After 1970, when the new system of education was put into practice, English was taught for seven years: three years at guidance and four years at high schools.

After world war II, universities in Iran expanded and in some of them English was the main language like Shiraz university. At that university students had to study English two-month then began their formal education. Therefore, English was the major second language of the country and was included in the curriculum of both schools and universities.

The last phase of language in Iran is after Islamic Revolution in 1979. By Islamic Revolution, a great change occurred in all levels of Iran. Downplay of western culture even educational system was the main change in Iran. "The education system was the very first target. Curriculum change in order to eradicate elements of Western thought and to replace this with Islamic-Iranian values was the major agenda of the policy-makers and curriculum-developers." (Riazi, 2005, p. 107)

In this period, English language was not eliminated from school curriculum but it was limited to English book in guidance- and high school. As a result, Western thought and culture was removed from all books even English books and students just learnt vocabularies and grammar. Nevertheless, its importance cannot be denied and even after Revolution Imam Khomeini, Iranian leaders, stressed language learning's importance.

The major problem after the Islamic Revolution, however, has been the lack of an official language-planning blueprint in the country to determine the status of available languages, as well as expectations from language teaching and learning curricula in the formal education system... As regards teaching and learning language, a reductionist approach towards language instruction has been followed at all levels, from primary schools to postsecondary levels. Graduates of high schools, colleges and universities usually lack a 'functional' proficiency in their L2 and even they are unable to use their L1 with its total capacity. This is mostly a result of the language curriculum and teaching methods prescribed for the educational settings including schools and universities. (Riazi, 2005, p. 108)

English was viewed as a purely scientific and international language, the use of which had become an indispensable part of developing the educational system to address recurrent waves of globalization and modernization. Accordingly, Persian consolidated its status as the predominant medium of instruction, but English continued to be taught as a foreign language in both private and public schools. (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010, p. 31)

"Although the state's policy towards the English language is not the vast dissemination of the language, the process of globalization has nevertheless exerted its own pressures to promote the learning of English as a hidden curriculum." (Riazi, 2005, p.113) Besides globalization, cultural and political survival has a strong impact on the status of languages in Iran.

Given the status of English as a global language, English has remained the main foreign language offered in educational system. Even now, English is still taught for seven years at junior and senior high schools with roughly the same methodology and practices that it had under the previous educational system. Iranian educational policy for English mostly centers on grammar and reading. (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010, p. 34)

It seems that gradually, English language found its real place in the Iranian society and nobody can deny its necessity, because it is the main language in science, international conferences, air traffic in international airports and sea navigation. (Talebinezhad and Aliakbari, 2002)

### **2 English curriculum in Iran.**

At Iran's public schools, two foreign languages are taught; Arabic and English. National curriculum divided both into two different fields of study. Therefore, tenth part of curriculum named as learning foreign language, which was not referred to Arabic language. It did not mention English language directly instead remarked whatever languages will be considered to teach by educational ministry (p. 38). "Teaching foreign languages is a proper basis for understanding, gaining, and cultural communication which led to transfer science in oral, face to face, and written form" (National Curriculum, p. 37).

"Knowing other languages to communicate with other countries is the importance of teaching foreign languages at school. Moreover, knowing other languages affects economy like tourism, business, technology, science, and social-political awareness." (p.37) The scope of language learning focused on solving a problem and communicating. According to the scope of national curriculum, "foreign language curriculum should contain structures and vocabularies to assist students in making successful connection with world." (p. 37)

Teaching foreign language starts at 7<sup>th</sup> grade, teaching four skills and familiarizing students with skills of communication. From 10<sup>th</sup> grade, students should understand intermediate texts, write short articles, and be able to communicate in foreign language.

Major attitudes in teaching foreign languages in national curriculum were:

"Teaching foreign languages should go beyond universal methods and attitudes, and consider it as a scope to develop national culture, beliefs, and values... at the beginning of teaching, students became familiar with national subjects like health, daily routines, values, and culture in an interesting framework. In advanced level, subjects of study are cultural, scientific, economical, and political issues..., which have to be in accordance with other fields of studies at school. At the end of high school, students have to be able to understand proficient texts and write an article. Therefore, from 10<sup>th</sup> grade proficient vocabularies are introduced to understand special texts and make a scientific communication." (p. 39)

### **3. Criticism toward National Curriculum.**

Supporting national curriculum, Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) believes that "national curriculum of Iran holds some considerable advantages" (p. 27) included extending time of teaching foreign languages, changing books, and working on four skills.

Foreign languages were the 10<sup>th</sup> course elaborated while it did not mention which language should be taught. It revealed, "there was not any need analysis based on major goals of country in the perspective document and they were unaware of students' needs and English language function as an international language." (Kiany, Navidinia, & Mo'menian, 2011, p. 199)

English is introduced only at high school and it is taught at a very basic level. At high school, it is studied for two to three hours a week for six years as one of the main courses of study. "The proclaimed purpose of this course is to enable students to read simple English texts and improve their reading comprehension through passages built around newly introduced vocabulary items." (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010, p. 34)

Although most of serious concepts in English language were mentioned in The National Curriculum Document, at least two issues were ignored: first, mentioned concerns were too broad to include all complicated aspects in foreign language learning policies. Stated Policies need more elaborations and discussion to clear ambiguities in these regard. (Kiany, Mirhosseini, Navidinia, 2011)

"Secondly, the strength of The National Curriculum Document in including a diversity of theoretical views and approaches in foreign language education could itself be a weakness as well." (Kiany, Mirhosseini, Navidinia, 2011, p. 62) mixing political features of language learning with method of teaching, benefiting of different school of thought in language teaching were examples which showed lack of involvement of foreign language education experts in the process of setting policy guidelines within the National Curriculum Document. (Kiany, Mirhosseini, Navidinia, 2011)

Therefore, due to the weaknesses of the English curriculum program at schools and the necessity of learning English language, different EFL institutes have been established in all over the country (Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). Therefore, private section under control of educational ministry of Iran "has shouldered the responsibility of helping the public sector meet the country's demand." (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010, p. 34)

In fact, although the educational system of Iran found the importance of English language learning, it acted inefficiently and unable to fulfill learners' need at schools. (Razmjoo, Ranjbar, & Hoomanfar, 2013).

In criticism of English national curriculum, Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) stated "although teaching English language is a threat to local language, it cannot be forget that learning English is the key of making relationship with the world." (p. 121) Therefore, they believed in hardship of educational ministry of Iran, which should be careful about teaching English on the one hand and be careful about local language, Persian, on the other hand.

There were some suggestions to Educational Ministry of Iran to adopt and change English curriculum: 1. Change the method of teaching, 2. Teach English language teachers, 3. Analyze students' needs, 4. Change goal of learning language, 5. Producing new materials, 6. Change the method of assessment.

### **B. Second Question**

Curriculum “has arguably changed very little over the last 100 years or so, either in terms of its officially stated purposes or in basic curriculum content and design” (Moore, 2015, p. 1) To analyze English curriculum in Iran, it is necessary to have a look in *Iran's 20-year vision plan in 2025* (in 1404 H.Sh.). The 20-year National provision is a document with macro strategies that lead the country through the twenty years of comprehensive development to the aims of the nation. (Kiany, Mirhosseini, Navidinia, 2011) Iran's 20-year vision plan is a governmental perspective of Iran, which views Iran in next 20 years as a developed country, which reach to the first class in economy, science and technology in the region, with the Islamic and the revolutionary identification, and inspire the world of Islam with the constructive and the effective interaction in international affairs.

In this document, Iranian economy, scientific and technology will achieve to the first level in the South West Asia (including Mid-Asia, Caucasia, the Middle East, and the neighboring countries). Putting emphasis on software movement and science production, fast and constant economic progress, and ... having constructive and effective interaction at world based on glory, wisdom and expediency principles. The document was administered from ten years ago in 2005.

Accordingly, the perspective was divided into four 5-year Development Plan. The first two 5-year based on 20-year vision plan focused on educational system as one of important issue to be improved. Therefore, vision plan is an obliging reference to all ministries, especially educational ministry.

Educational ministry of Iran used these documents as a reference and prepared Iranian national curriculum. The national curriculum is macro program for eleven fields of study which foreign language was the tenth. The curriculum was approved in 2011. The curriculum tried to make a relationship and cooperation among teachers, students, and parents.

Based on curriculum, teachers should pave the way through mental and spiritual life and guide students in their educational and true lifelong. These ideas came from Islam who believes in teachers as prophets and teaching is prophets' profession. Therefore, teacher is the main character in leading students toward well educated in both education and real-life. (National Curriculum, p.12)

In a comparison between new Iranian national curriculum, based on Iran-provision, and Council of Europe in its framework of reference for languages, centered on “choices between kinds and levels of objectives” (p. 135) in curriculum design, we can find some similarities. First, have a look to some of Council of Europe's objectives for languages learning, teaching, and assessment:

- a) Development of the learner's general competences
- b) The extension and diversification of communicative language competence
- c) Better performance in one or more specific language activities
- d) Optimal functional operation in a given domain
- e) The enrichment or diversification of strategies or in terms of the fulfillment of tasks

It can be inferred that Iran's provision in 20-year leads Educational Ministry of Iran to work for some of mentioned objectives. Because of importance of science, students should have general competency to understand the depth of science. As well, the most important part of Iran's provision in 20-year is science production and its rank among Middle East and Islamic countries, therefore the prospective emphasize the enrichment in terms of the fulfillment of scientific tasks.

According to Iran's provision in 20-year, comprehensive map of science of Iran announced science as the main mean of development. The map emphasized on incorporation of teaching, training, research, and proficiency. It searched for presenting education to all people and leading them to be responsible and independent in society.

The map considered more religious and regional issues like Islamic science, promotion of Islamic idea in society, and Iranian-Islamic culture. It tried to promote a research base culture and persuaded students to be qualified teachers and researches by smoothing problems in this way. The document is an interval between Iran's provision in 20-year and national curriculum and its focus is on regional and Iranian-Islamic culture. The map divided priorities into three levels. At each level, number of subjects was mentioned but foreign language was ignored at three levels.

#### *Comparison of national curriculum and major documents.*

As the national curriculum is based on 20-year Iran's vision plan, there is not any special hint to foreign language learning, while government try to “reach the first place in science and technology among Islamic countries and has an active communication with world” (20-year Iran's vision plan, p.24)

“The prospective was not included how to teach foreign languages and in the other view it was not about education. Of course it did not mention exactly about teaching foreign languages but comprised hint for educational program, especially foreign languages.” (Kiani, Navidinia, and Momenian, 2011, p.199)

Moreover, in accordance with all criticisms toward English language teaching in Iran, Rouhani, President of Islamic Republic of Iran, in a ceremony to greet teachers' day in Iran on May 4<sup>th</sup> 2015 mentioned that, students

“may attend to other classes to learn language (English language). If they did not learn it in classes, they attend to private classes. He (student) knows that language (English language) is essential in contemporary life... Do not forget, some of languages are the science languages, therefore without them we cannot reach to heart and depth of science... Each language has its own characteristics and points, for instance if you read Quran in its Persian translation 10 times, it is different from a person who understands Arabic language completely.” (Educational ministry's cite)

Comprehensive map of science of Iran was too broad and repeated what was mentioned in the 20-year Iran's vision plan in other expressions. This map led human science to improve base on Islamic ideology and regional needs while ignores international needs of that human. Therefore, it was obvious that in all parts of map, even human sciences, foreign languages were disregarded.

In this regard, foreign language part of national curriculum ignored western culture and emphasized on learning foreign language apart from its appropriate culture. "At beginning of teaching, should be accord with regional subjects like health, daily life, believes, and (regional) culture...at higher level it should lead to comprehend scientific, cultural, economical, political text".

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study investigated Iran's national curriculum and compared it with major documents of Iran. As educational system in Iran is a governmental department, all of documents were designed according to major documents. Therefore, there is congruency among all documents. The other strong point of national curriculum is its focus on regional issues led to understanding different dialects and different cultures in Iran.

On the other hand, one of weak points of national curriculum was ignorance of teachers, students, and parents in planning it. Teachers place was mentioned in both Comprehensive map of science and national curriculum but when curriculum was designed, they were ignored. As a result, teachers in Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) view are central group who should understand curriculum, teach it, and evaluate students. While in Iran national curriculum, teachers were passive in designing national curriculum.

In line with Kiany, Navidinia, and Mo'menian (2011) there is insufficient explanation on teaching foreign languages in national curriculum. Teaching foreign language part in national curriculum was less than two pages while teaching foreign language is a broad subject with different subparts.

It can be mention that major documents comparing with national curriculum guided Iran to reach first place of science in east west of Asia and to be in contact with world. The question here is with which language they make connection? If answer is science language (English), what president Rouhani said, why Comprehensive map of science ignored importance of it and did not mention it as one of its priorities? At the same line of map, national curriculum did not mention foreign language importance in major objectives of country.

The other problem with national curriculum was disregarding appropriate age of learning second language. In Iran, foreign language is included into curriculum when students are 13 years old, which is against researches in appropriate age. Before 2015, English language was an obligatory course at private primary schools, but in 2015, it was proscribed by educational system and private schools were forced to remove it from their curriculum.

Language without culture was the obvious setback of national curriculum and comprehensive map of science against 20-year Iran's vision plan to be in contact with world and emphasis on producing science in science language. While to have efficient and non-stop communications, both sides need to understand each other without any misapprehension. disregarding culture leads to misunderstanding and in some cases stop communication. Therefore, in agreement with Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) curriculum needs adaption.

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