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Aspects of ‘English language education’ policies in Iran: ‘*Our own beliefs*’ or ‘*out of who you are*’?

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Abstract: The worldwide English language teaching enterprise is mostly known by its professional and practical features such as teaching methodology and proficiency tests which tend to overshadow the cultural politics of language education and broader policy-level issues. To probe aspects of such less-addressed concerns and with a consideration of the crucial role of policies in education, including English language education, in this paper we explore officially stated English teaching policies in Iran as well as implicitly embraced de facto policy orientations in this area and their possible (mis)matches. Four major national documents bearing policy messages for English language education are examined as sources of overt national policies in this regard. Moreover, to observe parts of the related covert policies, we employ data obtained from interviews with teachers of private language teaching institutes as representative settings of real-life English teaching in Iran. Based on the illustration of the two types of policies and specifically considering the sociocultural implications of embracing or avoiding elements of these policies, we raise some concerns regarding the overall direction of English language education in Iran that could apply to the wider non-English-speaking world as well.

Keywords: sociopolitics of English language teaching (ELT); language education policy; ELT policy; English in Iran; Iranian language institutes

Introduction

It has been argued that the contemporary global arena of culture and knowledge has witnessed “a changed (dis)order” (Shi-xu 2005: 67) shaped around certain ideological systems that are pushing to sell themselves as universalities (Ghahremani-Ghajar & Mirhosseini 2011; Shi-xu 2016). The produce of such a trend has been the largely unidirectional spread, export, and even imposition of ideas from a purported *center* located somewhere in the western hemisphere to the rest of the world which is trickily treated as the *periphery*. The discursive and material construction of such a core–periphery fabrication has been discussed relatively extensively (e. g. Alvares 1991; Asante 2006; Guilherme & Dietz

2015; Muzaffar 1995; Pardo 2010; Raju 2010; Shi-xu 2005, 2015). A significant aspect of such a global structure is the “role of English in the current world (dis)order” (Mirhosseini 2008: 313) which is not widely discussed outside certain academic circles of applied linguistics and language education.

In debating cultural conceptualizations of competing discourses in the world, Shi-xu (2005: 67) has observed that the global cultural atmosphere features “increasing interconnections confounded by growing antagonism and resistance, so much so that the basic existence of many of the world’s cultures and populations is under threat and erosion”. Similarly, it has been argued that such erosion of cultures is fostered by the global enterprise of teaching the English language to speakers of other languages that continues to accelerate “the rolling stone of English in a world of diversities” (Mirhosseini 2008: 316). In the wider context of understanding the language-based nature of global sociocultural forces (Szende 2014; Phillipson 1992; Zarate et al 2004), this specific concern over the cultural politics of globalization through Englishization has been the substance of various discussions on English language education in different non-English-speaking countries worldwide (e. g. Fishman et al 1996; Karmani 2005, 2006; Pennycook 1994, 1998; Phillipson 2010; Rivers 2011).

Nonetheless, the English language teaching (ELT) edifice tends to be known by its more rudimentary elements such as the linguistic and cognitive aspects of course materials, teaching procedures, and high-stakes proficiency tests. Teachers, learners, administrators, and many academics generally deal with aspects of these frontline matters, possibly at the expense of noticing higher-order policy-level forces that may not only direct the entire ELT enterprise at the professional and practical level but may also bear cultural, economic, and even political implications (Ball 1990; Dixon 2009; Tsang 2004). Although issues of language policy and educational policy have been fairly extensively discussed in different contexts around the world for decades now, *ELT policy* as a specific combination of these two broad concerns which is the particular focus of this article, is a relatively recent and less-widely addressed issue.

In devising and implementing foreign language education policies, including ELT policies, a diversity of considerations including fundamental philosophical and theoretical perspectives regarding language and education; sociocultural and identity-related problems; and even financial and administrative issues need to be taken into account (Butler & Iino 2005; Hato 2005; Kirkgoz 2009; Ricento 2015; Seargeant 2008; Silver & Skuja-Steele 2005). Therefore, exploring and understanding ELT policies may be viewed as a rich point of departure to probe wider related sociocultural issues in a country. Serious considerations of

policy documents like Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) and United States' ESL policies and standards (US Department of State 2004) may be understood on this ground.

Accordingly, with the spread of English language education worldwide, the appearance of issues of ELT policies as research topics has started to increase in various research scenes and to shape a more considerable part of the literature of related academic fields. The unprecedented spread of English has had its influence on the way English is being viewed in different countries (Erling & Seargeant 2013; Kirkgoz 2009; Tollefson 2000). Research on ELT policies has, therefore, started to move beyond its marginal status in the literature of applied linguistics and language education and to gain momentum as a viable research area in various countries around the non-English speaking world, including Bangladesh (Chowdhury & Kabir 2014), China (Pan 2011; Zhu 2003), Hong Kong (Tsang 2004), Jamaica (Nero 2014), Japan (Butler & Iino 2005; Seargeant 2008), Korea (Kim-Rivera 2002), Oman (Al-Issa 2005, 2007, 2011), Singapore (DeCosta 2010), Sweden (Hult 2012), Tanzania (Vavrus 2002), and Turkey (Kirkgoz 2009).

In the specific context of Iran there have been a rather small number of studies on some macro-level concerns of ELT, including studies focusing on cultural aspects of ELT (Khajavi & Abbasian 2011; Mahboudi & Javdani 2012; Zarei 2011) and, more specifically ELT ideological considerations, particularly with regard to the ideological orientation of internationally developed and imported ELT textbooks widely taught in Iran (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad 2010; Baleghizadeh & Motahed 2010; Taki 2008; Zarei & Khalessi 2011). The number of studies particularly focusing on ELT *policy* in Iran is even smaller but there are a few recently emerging studies of this sort (Atai & Mazlum 2013; Kiany et al 2011; Narafshan & Yamini 2011).

In an attempt to expand this small research stream, in this paper we explore aspects of ELT policies in Iran and the overarching orientations of the practice of learning and teaching the English language. Such ELT policies, probably like policies of many other social involvements, may be officially developed and announced but may also remain unofficially embraced and practiced without being overtly stated. Based on the distinction that has been made between *overt* and *covert* policies (Nero 2014; Schiffman 2006), ELT policy should not only be seen as “the explicit, written, overt, *de jure*, official, and “top-down” decision-making... but also the implicit, unwritten, covert, *de facto*, grass-roots, and unofficial ideas and assumptions” (Schiffman 2006: 112). Carrying the same distinction to the specific area of

ELT policies, we scrutinize officially stated policies as well as implicitly embraced policy orientations and the possible (mis)matches between them.

The study

Within the conceptual and sociocultural context of ELT sketched above, this study addresses the features of official policies of teaching the English language in Iran, on the one hand, and the nature of de facto unofficial policy orientations in this regard, on the other. The interface of these two policy lines shapes our specific research problem. Although we address this research issue in the particular cultural and educational context of Iran, the concern over ELT policies is already argued to be globally relevant and to bear serious international (inter)cultural and sociopolitical implications (Gao 2016; Hall & Eggington 2000; Pennycook 1994). The global implications of scrutinizing and problematizing such policies becomes more evident in the context of the purposeful spread of the English language in the world today which is further discussed in the concluding section of this article.

We examine two main bodies of data: official policy documents and interviews with language teachers. The first data set which is explored to depict officially stated overt policy directions comprises four national documents that set educational policies or bear policy messages applicable to educational endeavors like ELT. Based on a qualitative content analysis approach, the full text of the documents are subjected to careful thematic analysis in search of notions directly or indirectly related to teaching the English language in Iran and the emerging themes are applied in depicting the official ELT policies traceable in these texts. This first bulk of data includes the following documents:

- The 20-year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran (National Vision 2005)
- The Comprehensive Science Roadmap (Comprehensive Roadmap 2009)
- The National Curriculum Document (National Curriculum 2009)
- The Fundamental Reform Document of Education (Reform Document 2011)

Our second body of data is shaped by interviews with teachers of private language teaching institutes scrutinized in search of underlying covert assumptions that shape the real-life practice of ELT in Iran. Six language teaching institutes were approached and nine participants, including teaching as well as administrative staff, were interviewed. We tried to focus on some of the most popular language institutes with considerable spread of branches nationwide. The branches we accessed, however, were located in the two provinces of Tehran

and Alborz. To preserve anonymity, in the discussions presented later in the article the institutes are referred to as institutes A, B, C, D, E, and F.

The interview process was generally aimed at understanding if English language institute staff were aware of the official policies and how they addressed the covert policies in the practical context of their institutes. The semi-structured interviews included two sections. The first section focused on the overall directions as well as the cultural and social concerns of the institute authorities towards various aspects of the practice of English teaching. In the second section the official ELT policies that emerged from the exploration of the official national documents were briefly presented to the interview participants and they were asked to comment on them based on their institutes' position and to compare those official policies with implicit institute policies.

The interviews were conducted in English (although sometimes the interviewees felt more comfortable to switch to Farsi), recorded, transcribed, translated where needed, and explored based on a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006). The thematic patterns that emerged from the exploration of these interviews were considered along with the outcome of the exploration of the first body of data. The interface of these two streams of overt and covert policies and their comparison and contrast is the basis of the discussions presented in the following sections. The (mis)matches between these two policy lines and the implications of such considerations in the global context of ELT beyond the setting of this study are also discussed in the concluding section.

Iranian overt ELT policies

One broad aspect of the tumultuous ELT story in Iran has been historically shaped by the official influences of sociocultural and political authorities (Borjian 2013; Riazi 2005). Official language (education) policies in Iran, probably more than many other places, are linked to the sociocultural conditions of the country and the political and religious attitudes (Mahboudi & Javdani 2012; Narafshan & Yamini 2011). In a recent research on the attitude of high school English teachers about the policy of government towards English language teaching in Iran, seventy percent of the participants believed that the policies are mostly influenced by political views as the authorities are politically sensitive to English-speaking countries and being fluent in English is not their top priority while the rule does not apply to Arabic language because it is the language of the Holy Quran and Islam (Narafshan & Yamini 2011). Some of these sensitivities may lead to a view of *English* in the entire ELT

enterprise as a *commodity* like Levi's Jeans and Coca Cola, *imbued with cultural promise* (Mahboudi & Javdani 2012).

Official policies, though not regarded as the final say, do leave their own traces on actual ELT practice and the allocation of different types of state resources are determined by such overt policies. Therefore, in probing the overt-covert ELT policy interface in Iran, we first turn to the four official national documents and the relevant policy messages that they project (National Vision 2005; Comprehensive Roadmap 2009; National Curriculum 2009; Reform Document 2011). (In the rest of this section, the quotes from the documents are our translation of the original Farsi texts except for the Fundamental Reform Document that has an official English version which we quote from.)

The National Vision is set to lead the country through twenty years of progress towards the comprehensive goals of the nation. The document, which is devised by the Supreme Leader and the Expediency Council, is a reference for all official involvements, including education. The broad vision set by this document can be viewed as bearing messages for the general direction of official educational practices, including ELT. The following are among the ideals set in the National Vision to be reached by 2025:

- *The Iranian society, within the perspective of this vision, will have these features: developed in accordance with its own cultural, geographic, and historical characteristics and relying on the ethical principles and values of Islam...; loyal to the revolution and the Islamic system and to the blossoming of Iran, and also proud of being Iranian.*

The Comprehensive Science Roadmap sets national-level policies in science and technology. It includes broad policy lines as well as more specific plans and goals to be attained within science and technology including educational involvements, encompassing foreign language education. The following statements are excerpts of the Roadmap that bear messages as to the policies that need to be adopted regarding ELT at different levels:

- *Values: The supremacy of the Islamic Tawhidi worldview in all aspects of science and technology; fundamental scientific reformation, especially revising humanities within the framework of the Islamic worldview. (p. 9)*
- *National strategy: Incorporating the Islamic perspective in educational syllabi and textbooks. (p. 36)*
- *National strategy: Increasing the level of Islamic awareness, belief, and behavior of those active in the area of science and technology... (p. 37)*
- *National action: Reform and transformation of language teaching methods, especially for*
- *Arabic and English in general education. (p. 51)*

- *National action: Localization and development of foreign language education syllabi and contents based on Islamic culture.* (p. 57)

The National Curriculum Document considers *foreign language teaching and learning* as a major educational area. Together with content specification and features of other educational areas such as Persian language and literature, Arts, and Sciences, the document focuses on foreign language learning and teaching with the aim of developing "*the skills of a foreign language*" and of "*strengthening Islamic-Iranian identity*" (p. 18). The following are highlights of ELT-related specifications in this document:

- *Foreign language education is a suitable ground for understanding, receiving... and transferring human achievements in various oral, visual, and written forms for different purposes and audiences within the framework of the Islamic system...* (p. 37)
- *Foreign language teaching... should be considered as a means of strengthening national culture and our own beliefs and values... At elementary levels, educational content should be organized around local topics and learner needs like health and hygiene, daily life, the environment, and societal values and culture... At higher levels, the selection and organization of content will be based on cultural, scientific, economic, and political function...* (p. 38)

The Fundamental Reform Document of Education sets educational reform ideals. Efforts are stated to have been made to “*take note of the strategic objectives of the Islamic Republic... [and] the perspective and goals of education in the country’s 2025 vision*” (p. 7). In stating its basic values, the document refers to the National Vision as well as the Science Roadmap and puts emphasis on “*Islamic–Iranian and revolutionary characteristics*” (p.17) and “*joint Islamic–Iranian identity*” (p. 18) on the part of learners. In setting objectives and strategies the document specifically refers to educating individuals who, among other characteristics “*believe in Islam as a right path and a norm system and ...abiding by the religious ritual and ethical principles...*” (p. 29).

Among the ideals mentioned in this document, cultivating commitment to “*the culture of Islamic... manners*” (p. 32); to “*the values of the Islamic Revolution*” (p. 32); and to “*Hijab (Islamic dress code)*” (p. 34) is highlighted. The document, while emphasizing the need to strengthen “*Persian language and literature*” (p. 18), sets a clear policy for foreign language teaching and states one of its strategies as: “*provision of foreign language education... [based on] Islamic–Iranian identity*” (p. 32).

Covert ELT policies in Iran

The realization of these official policies in actual ELT practices is not easy to assess. However, a sketch of educational involvements in a few teaching contexts may illustrate

some aspects of how overt policies are received in the real-life learning and teaching setting of educational institutions. As depicted by the thematic patterns that emerged from the exploration of the interview data discussed in the following discussions, the institutes' policy directions appeared to fall into three categories of thematic patterns: *general positions*, *sociocultural stance*, and *positions towards official policies*. The following is a fairly detailed depiction, explanation, and exemplification of these major themes and their minor thematic components.

General positions

The first major emerging theme depicts the private language institutes' general view of issues like an ideal language learner and ideal teaching. In many cases the teachers referred to the lack of consistency among institute branches. Different branches may act differently toward policy issues but the overall aims and directions of institutes' decision makers as interpreted by these teachers comprise the concerns of *business success* and addressing *student demands* that shape the two subthemes of this major theme.

Business success

Apart from policies on teaching and learning practices, language teaching institute authorities seem to have financial success as of the their most important overarching aims and concerns. Finance appears to be a major policy setting force in their ELT practices. According to the teachers interviewed, in both state and private institutes teaching and learning content and even the regulations are strongly connected to financial issues (this is more obvious in private English institutes than government supported ones, as they do not have any external financial support and they rely on earnings from class registrations), branch expansion, and attaining so-called *international standards*:

- *As long as the student comes and pays for each term it's ok... The fact is that it's more like a business than anything else... (A)*
- *...there are no ideals. There are no clear cut definitions of a good student. ...based on what I can see in the institute, a good student is the one who comes and registers each and every term... And a good teacher is a teacher who... keeps the students happy... No matter what you do in the class you got to keep the students happy, students and parents. I mean the person who pays... (A)*
- *...to be honest with you, the first goal I think that ideal for... all institutes is earning money ...and second is make students attracted... not the learning process... the only think the pay attention to is making money... and to expand branches (A)*

- *What they probably dream about is keeping in line with international standards... so you see all these workshops... CELTA, CELT, DELTA. (B)*

Student demands

Translating the policy goal of *business success* into a more tangible version, the institute managers regard the satisfaction of client demands as their major overall aim. English language learners, despite diversity in age and social status, often share similar concerns when devoting time and money to learning English. The importance of what is labeled learning quality and gaining the supposedly best *results* dominates even learners' minds and, in the case of younger learners, highly concerns many parents. Fulfilling these ambitions is a major target of each English language center in order to retain the learners as their clients. The ability to *communicate*, regardless of its exact meaning, is probably the most important stated student demand and, is therefore a high priority in the overall policy of the institutes. More strict institutes request the teachers to stick to textbooks in order to accomplish that demanded goal:

- *The aim is to have students who are proficient in English... who can communicate in the language. (B)*
- *As we have this globalization... the English they have mastered in the classes have helped them a lot in foreign trips when they wanted to start a relationship with foreigners... business trips and communications... (F)*
- *Well the ideal... is to have a person who is competent in English who can speak the language... But other than the test we have no means of measuring... whether the student has been successful or not. (B)*
- *The main aim is being able to speak English perfectly. (C)*
- *...the main goal is communication. (A)*
- *Mostly ideal... are the people who are able to use the language. (D)*
- *...they have to continue that for a long time in order to get to that ideal person, ideal English speaker. (E)*
- *They have a book and they would call it the bible ironically, that means that you cannot have any creativity and anything and you have to follow all the steps (F)*

Apart from the broad and unspecified purpose of being able to *speak English*, a vast majority of adult Iranian learners start learning English with the motive of either applying to universities abroad or qualifying in the national university entrance examinations for postgraduate studies, both requiring a language proficiency certificate. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to see institutes advertising their teaching quality by promising learners high scores on the international English language tests like IELTS and TOEFL which are regarded as the

yardstick of measuring learners' language proficiency and are in high demand on the part of learners in language institutes:

- *Actually the main aim... is IELTS... They want to learn many things and try to pass that level with actually about seven. Good mark is seven for them. (C)*
- *We have these classes... the whole level is taught in one term so in 40 days the whole elementary level is covered and it has been especially designed for people who want to emigrate... That is how we serve the society [laughing] ... (B)*
- *In our institute we have also TOEFL and IELTS examination again with the intention of emigration either for education or for life. (A)*
- *...most of the times when we ask students why they are studying English they say that we want to go Europe or America. (D)*

Sociocultural stance

When specifically prompted to reflect on the institute directors' perspectives regarding the social and cultural concerns in English language education, three main patterns emerged which shaped the subthemes of the major emerging theme of *sociocultural stance* in teachers' interviews: a purported adherence to *social service*, an apparent commitment to *cultural values*, and avoiding so-called *contentious topics*.

Social service

The teachers interviewed believe the institutes view the very provision of language teaching as serving the society. Moreover, the feeling of responsibility for educating students, especially teenagers, personally encouraged some teachers not only to act as their English teachers, but also as a mentor who can train and help them in troubles. Although, in none of the cases the institute wanted teachers to respond to students' emotional or intellectual needs. Some of these teachers highlight points like the ones in the following interview excerpts:

- *As far as I know the main aim of institute... is just IELTS... I've been teaching in this institute for about three years and I have not seen anything regarding society so far... nothing is mentioned about society, values, culture, beliefs, nothing... The main service is just IELTS examinations and how to prepare students for such [an] exam... (C)*
- *...language can bring many functions in the society. ...language can make students feel independent in the society and they can have a strong sense of being in the society among their peers and age mates (F)*
- *...they want to create proficient learners, and they don't talk to us about the society or the values we have in Iran. The main goal is being able to speak English perfectly. (C)*

- ...all the students are willing to work and study...Because they are younger they can serve much better in the future... In the future the students... can use their language in the society in whatever they are working. (E)

Cultural values

Beyond the mere service provision of language education and at a deeper sociocultural level, institute managers are viewed to be committed to some sort of cultural values as well. The teachers confirm that their institutes do recognize the cultural and social relevance of their ELT practices and materials. The following examples, however, show that conceptions of value and the meaning of commitment are hardly unified. Nor is the nature of the values necessarily in line with overt official policies discussed earlier. Discrepant cases also exist, like the third one below pointing to an entirely different direction and the last one that interestingly mixes *usually* and *never* and surprisingly views some culturally loaded issues as *not very culture-based*:

- *We all have to wear maghna'e [headgear]. Girls and teachers... male teachers are not allowed to wear jeans or t-shirts. They have to wear formal clothes... They should not make a relationship with each other.* (C)
- *...mostly it is the kind of religious cultural value because they already have to accept them... have to wear special type of clothes the teachers the students everybody for example the teacher is obliged to come with scarf only, and shawl or something like that is not accepted and for the students they have to come with scarf they have to come with minimum amount of make-up...* (E)
- *...I have witnessed that even in TT [teacher training] courses nothing is mentioned about society, values, culture, beliefs, nothing.* (C)
- *We usually never talk about culture whether it's Iranian culture or British... Even the British culture doesn't come up... because the topics are about shopping, holidays... Even the topics are not very culture based...* (E)

Cultural values in English classes of these institutes received the most mixed receptions from the interviewees. The institutes, depending on their policies, adopt different positions towards local and Western cultural values but the thread among them is that there is no direct institute-level guideline for teachers in this regard; one of the teachers stated, *no one has ever told me that*. The interesting point here is that most of the teachers relate religious and cultural issues like Easter and Thanksgiving to English language not Christianity, and, in the words of one of the interviewed teachers, *when you're learning English you should know what Fourth of July is*. She obviously emphasized on the importance of knowing about the Independence Day of America, ignoring the fact that English is spoken in many other

countries as well and, therefore, learning about the history of those countries should also be part of the agenda. Other examples of this position follow:

- *...the books... in all of them culture is included... and it has to be included in the class process... administrators of the institute insist on being them included in the progress of the teaching (A)*
- *...they are studying English they are supposed to follow their culture (A)*
- *When you learn a language you should learn their culture... when you're learning English you should know what Fourth of July is... Easter, thanksgiving; you should know these things (A)*
- *...when you are... teaching the language... you may bring a lot of music, a lot of movies,you're actually teaching that culture (D)*

Contentious topics

A further intriguing issue is the type of topics covert institute policies require to be avoided. They seem to be similar to the kind of content which is also avoided by commercial internationally circulated ELT textbooks. Regardless of the reason why these two types of avoidance coincide, the important point is that the policies in the official documents require engaging with such issues with certain positions. Avoiding them may be interpreted as an attempt not to encourage different viewpoints that might clash with official policies, and this may be seen as trying to avoid confronting state perspectives. Institute authorities tend to tell the teachers to solely follow the steps in books, nothing more. In such a climate, avoiding topics like *religion* and *politics* altogether hardly conforms to official policies:

- *In our institute three topics are forbidden... You do not touch them...hijab, religion, and politics... (B)*
- *I know we had troubles, especially during the elections [2009] ... they say... just avoid these topics and we avoid trouble. (B)*
- *...two main topics are avoided in any range. One is religion, the other one is politics... We're not supposed to talk about that... (D)*

Position towards official policies

Interestingly, none of the interviewees had ever heard about the major official ELT policies described earlier in this chapter. They think their institute authorities are not aware of these policies either or, at least, the teachers were not told about such policies in teacher training courses or institute meetings. However, when told about and asked to reflect on such policies, the teachers interviewed depicted two categories of institute attitudes: *unaware but sympathizing* with the official policies and *unaware and non-sympathizing* with them. These two attitudes are discussed below.

Unaware but sympathizing

The first group of institutes is those whose personnel are not aware of or do not explicitly consider the officially stated overt ELT policies but to some extent seem to be in agreement with such concerns. Such policies may be seen as implicitly and partially enacted in the institutes' ELT practice. This covert implementation might be apparent in textbook content or in institute regulations:

- *I think Islamic... [perspectives] exist a lot... and to be honest... I think they exist and to a very big degree, very strongly. (A)*
- *...the fact that teachers are discriminated by... [gender] and students are divided and there is no coeducation and sometimes the topic that you bring up in the classes for ladies are different... I mean if my supervisor comes into my class I may shift the topic, because I'm not looking for trouble.(A)*
- *...these types of policies are not given to the teachers... but still I think... [E] is more in line with those goals. (E)*
- *The same things about the cultural values I told you, for example the teachers have to come with scarf or the students and teachers have to use the minimum amount of make-up... (E)*
- *...in the very first session that I went for my demo, after the test, I was said that... if you want to bring any example please bring in local ones, for example if you want to talk about the Christmas Eve... talk about the Norouz too, you have to localize everything for students... (E)*
- *[Translation] I think the goals you mentioned here are tried to be achieved by [the institute] under the name of localization... a team of experts formed to present a new textbook... (F)*
- *The policy makers believe that ... America or England or English language speaking countries try to attack culturally or invade culturally. I believe behind the stage there is a fight between the countries. (F)*

Unaware and not sympathizing

Institutes in this second category, according to the teachers interviewed, would shrug the official statements off or even dismiss them if they are told about them. These institutes do not consider implementing official policies even implicitly because such perspectives are not in accord with their own beliefs. The only exception might be in the event of a student or parent complaint regarding a book's content or the institute's environment. In such a case the institute owners' own policy might be altered to avoid trouble:

- *I see no trace of such policies even Islamic ones... I'm observing teachers. What they say and what they actually do in their classroom is exactly the opposite of what we believe as Iranian people let alone Muslims... (C)*

- *I haven't heard any of these [policies] being mentioned by our [institute] authorities, I don't think they know any of these, I don't think they consider... any of these... (A)*
- *What they [institute authorities] probably dream about is keeping in line with international standards of what teaching English language is... They are not Iranian. They are not Islamic. They make you a better teacher based on British or American English speaking standards. So, they do not consider these policies... and I think for them it's senseless. (B)*
- *...you're teaching the language... You may bring [in] a lot of music, a lot of movies. You're actually teaching the culture. Teaching those [cultural] norms is a little bit part of the language... It's part of your job because they [students] ask you for that, because they want to emigrate most of them... (D)*
- *The institute is a very biased one. It tries to get you out of who you are and... like what you see in the ideology of the country... (F)*

Overall, government supported institutes and private ones seem to be distinct in the sense that a trace of stated overt policies can be tracked in many of them. And this again relates to financial support; covert policies in the private institutes are based on the clients interest, they go there for learning something new, but policies of governmental institutes follows the interest of the government and even the material and teacher's behavior are under surveillance by students themselves. Language institute staff may know about the national level sociopolitical directions but they may perceive themselves as a community apart from the Iranian society; they may think that as long as they are teaching a foreign language, they are out the concern of domestic affairs. They might also feel financially insecure by stepping into a career road away from official interest.

Conclusion

We find it insightful to start this concluding section by referring to Fishman's (1996: 3) questions about "whether English is "still" spreading in the non-English mother-tongue world " and, in case of an affirmative response, "whether that continued spread is any way directly orchestrated by, fostered by, or exploitatively beneficial to the English mother-tongue world". The following quotes from a report to the United States Senate (US Senate 2009) can illustrate that, to both questions, the response would be a fairly straightforward affirmative one:

There are currently 136 English Language Fellows in 76 countries. Fellows work with specific institutions on issues ranging from teacher training classes for English instructors to teaching English directly. These initiatives provide unprecedented pedagogical opportunities for the United States to impact Education Ministry policies throughout the world, but they are largely invisible to the general population of each country. (p. 12)

Teaching English will not only provide a marketable skill required for advancement in our international marketplace, but it will also allow us to re-introduce America and American values to much of a world that still views us with suspicion. (p. 16)

Returning to the Iranian overt-covert ELT policy concern, the discrepancy between officially stated ELT policies in Iran and the implicitly practiced ones seems to be evident, at least within the scope of the data in this study. However, what remains to be discussed is the interpretation of such a landscape. One way to interpret it may be represented by an awkward quotation from an academic in New York, which appeared on the back cover of a recent book on ELT in Iran: ‘There can be no clearer indication of the desire of the Iranian people and civil society to belong to the global culture and community despite continued government ambivalence in educational policy and its outright hostility to the transfer of foreign ideas.’ (Said Amir Arjomand, in Borjian 2013: back cover).

Such a statement may not be surprising coming from an observer far removed from the current sociocultural and political context of Iran and probably with a mentality of the need to inject democracy from the so-called global community into non-democratic hostile states. However, bearing the above quotes in mind, such positions might appear to be too naïve and simplistic to capture the reality. A more profound understanding may require a broader view of the spread of English within the past century and how British international policy after World War II combined with the emergence of the American presence in international media and academia fostered ELT in countries like Iran.

Such a view may crucially include pointers like these quotes from a 1959 United States Congress report (US Congress 1959): ‘...*world-wide interest in the English language is one of our greatest assets*’ (p. 31). ‘*Even in the Communist world American influence can be extended through the medium of the English language*’ (p. 22). The not-so-neutral transfer of foreign ideas can be seen in similar later documents as well (US Congress 1979): ‘*The international teaching of English can give the United States many important advantages... It offers an entering wedge into closed societies*’. (p. 45) More recently, similar positions can be found in other official documents: ‘...*it would be wise to invest in...developing ways to engage the next generation of Middle Easterners, especially through English education... After all, the battle for hearts and minds... is a long-term project*’. (US House 2001: 35)

Therefore, while ‘*understanding, receiving... and transferring human achievements*’ (National Curriculum 2009: 37) is clearly espoused by state documents touching upon official ELT policies in Iran, the official aim of *incorporating local perspectives into ELT syllabi* (Comprehensive Roadmap 2009: 36); *considering ELT as a means for strengthening the*

national culture and our own beliefs (National Curriculum 2009: 38); and *strengthening the Islamic–Iranian identity* (National Curriculum 2009: 18) through foreign language education may be easily judged as wise policies. What might be argued to be lacking is twofold:

First, the officially stated positions regarding ELT in Iran are mostly policy segments rather than coherently structured policies. This may make it difficult to depict a clear image of what is to be achieved by the policy and, for example, what *Islamic–Iranian identity* means. Second, even within this tentatively stated policy, there seems to be a lack of concerted effort to create awareness of the cultural, social, and political functioning of English in “a world of diversities” (Mirhosseini 2008). One may hardly assume that the language institutes’ policy makers are totally unaware of the official sociocultural policies. The issue is that to them, these official ELT policy statements may sound like *just big words*, as one of the interviewees describes them. Constructing coherent ELT policies; creating awareness regarding the ideological nature of ELT (Mirhosseini 2015; Rivers & Zotzmann forthcoming); and communicating the logic of official policies to frontline practice contexts may therefore be the missing links in ELT policies in Iran.

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