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A Comparative Study of English Education Policies in Iran, China and Singapore

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Abstrasct
It is not an extravagant claim to call English the most widespread language of the world. English is the language which is used wildly for international commerce, communication, diplomacy and tourism. The unprecedented spread of English as a lingua franca, along with globalization has had its own effects on the way English is viewed and taught in different countries (Kirkgöz, 2008). Kachru (1997) estimates the number of English speakers at more than two billion and mentions that the number of its speakers is constantly growing. In China, estimates put the number of English learners and users in China at about 200 to 300 million which make the country the largest community of English learners in the world. In some parts of the world such as south Asia and parts of Africa extensive changes in phonetic, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels has been made through a process of acculturation and nativization. East European countries are gradually replacing Russian with English. In Western Europe English is taught as an obligatory second language in schools and in some countries such as Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy and Netherlands it is taught as the first foreign language (Kim-Rivera, 2001). English has now gained the status of a lingua franca (Crystal, 2003). As to the importance of the global use of English as Kiany (2012) maintains it may suffice to say that the official language of about 85 percent of the international organizations is English and that about 90 percent of the scholarly papers are published in English.
Keywords: English Education Policies , Comparative Study, English learning.

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The current status of English as a lingua franca has prompted many countries to adopt English as a second or foreign language in their school curriculum. The value assigned to English in these curricula is evident from the fact that in most of these countries English is one of the main subjects of the national or international high stakes tests. Thus it is apparent that English language instruction is a common concern for both educators and students.

Pae (1990, cited in Kim-Rivera, 2002) contends that the roles and functions of English language education is to a large extent determined by a nation's needs in social, political, economical areas and by that nation's international relations. Pae argues that while the goals and purpose of learning a language may vary for different individuals, the goals and purposes of English language education in a country are specified by that country's national language policies which in turn are determined by larger social, political, economical and ideological issues. So it can be argued that all aspects of language education from teacher education, methodology, material development to evaluation (both material and student evaluation) are (or should be) indirectly shaped by the larger national policies determined by government.

The above discussion about the necessity of formulating language policies based on the established national policies is in fact the depiction of an ideal situation. In reality, language educational policies do not follow the larger national policies. In his study of ELT profession in India with relation to the national language policy, Parasher (1989, cited in Kim-Rivera, 2002) found that a lack of correspondence between the stated national language policies and the actual educational practices has led to an incoherent and inconsistent policy on English language education. Moreover, it goes without saying that due to the importance of English as a language of science and technology the disparity between the national policies and ELT policies has serious effects on the outcomes of educational system as a whole. On the other hand, if the policies formulated by the government do not reflect the real needs of language learners in a permanently changing world, the implementation of these policies do not do much better in fulfilling the needs of the educational systems.

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Hence the vitality of formulating well-thought policies and the exact implementation of these in language programs.

During the last decade a number of countries have found comparative studies of foreign language teaching policies a worthy practice from which valuable information can be drawn (Pufahl, Rhodes and Christian, 2000). In their study Pufahl and her colleagues examined the common practices of ELT in nineteen countries and evaluated their success or failure. A number of respondents in this study stressed the importance of policy formation. Other interesting findings included the importance of developing appropriate language assessment tools and the importance of improving teacher education.

ELT in Iran

English as a second language is introduced from the first grade of secondary school (for children aged 12). Due to the shortage of facilities, classes are usually over-populated and as a result any group work is nearly impossible. The Ministry of Education is responsible for curriculum development and for providing textbooks for all levels of school courses. It prints over 100 million books per year. The Centre for Educational Technology (CET), part of the Organization for Research & Educational Planning, produces and distributes supplementary audio and visual materials for schools. The CET is also responsible for developing the Roshd national intranet for schools.

Although the majority of teaching and learning occurs in public schools, private schools (including English language institutes) were permitted to re-open in 1988 as ‘non-profit institutions’ (UNESCO, 1995). It is estimated that over 1 million students (both children and adults) are currently enrolled in private English Language institutes, the most renowned centers being the Iran Language Institute, Safir institute and Kish Language Institute. Except Safir, the other two bodies are self-funding but government affiliated, and account for approximately half the total enrolment nationally.

There are very few native English speakers permitted to teach within Iran and the methodology and resources available to English teachers is very limited compared to other countries. In recent years however, the classes in some private institutions are equipped with multimedia devices and native speakers are offered high wages to teach. UK ELT textbooks are commonly used in these language schools, with ‘Headway’ being the most popular. The majority of the books used are pirate copies.

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In spite of all the above mentioned provisions, and despite the fact that Iranian students receive hundreds of hours of language instruction during their school years (Hosseini, 2007), the overall outcome of this instruction is not satisfactory. This is evident in university students' poor command of English. Explanations as to the possible reasons of such situation vary. Jahangard (2007) argues that the main cause of Iranian students' lack of communicative ability is a lack of emphasis in textbooks on oral and aural skills. Hosseini (2007) singles out the students' obsession with tests as one of the contributors. Namaghi (2006) blames the broader curriculum and policies as the forces at work. Regarding the policy, as Kiany et.al (2011) argue we may refer to the fact that both at the level of policy planning and policy implementation the elements of ELT curriculum are not working in harmony but as isolated elements are even at times working against one another each serving a different and sometimes opposite objectives. All these explanations, while worthy of attention, are incomplete because they provide only a partial picture of problems in language education in Iran. For language educators and government officials, a bigger and more comprehensive picture is needed to enable them to take necessary measures to solve these problems. This bigger pictures can to some extent be depicted by drawing on the experiences of other countries in developing curriculums for English education.

The present study seeks to investigate the current ELT practices in Iran, China and Singapore. Given that both China and Singapore have had extensive modifications in the English language curriculum recently; their experiences might prove to be useful in designing a suitable curriculum for English language in Iranian Context, however,, given the broad scope of ELT and its wide range of practices, this investigation has been limited to only one of the main areas of educational planning, i.e. policy making.

Research Questions

Thus this paper seeks to find answers to the following questions:

What similarities and differences do exist in English education systems of China, Singapore and Iran in terms of onset age, decentralization of policy making, material development, approach and teaching of culture?

What implications do these similarities and difference have for improving English education in Iran?

Methodology

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Cohen et al. (2007) maintain that methods concern different approaches used in educational research for the purpose of collecting data which are intended to be used as a means of deriving meaning to predict or explain something. In a similar vein, since "methods refer to techniques and procedures used in the process of data-gathering, the aim of methodology is to describe approaches to, kinds and paradigms of research" (Cohen et al. 2007, P. 47). There is no one blueprint or planning for carrying out research. The notion of "fitness for purpose" governs the design of research.

This study was based on reviewing and analyzing a number of official documents as well as available literature related to English language education in Iran, China and Singapore. After determining those aspects of English language policy and planning which formed the focus of this study, the researchers began a tedious journey to find the document concerning those aspects. A huge body of references was prepared and those documents which were deemed more relevant were chosen for analysis. Based on the above-mentioned discussion of the nature and design of research, the researchers developed a number of steps according to which the analysis of the documents was carried out:

First, the researchers determined the purpose of the analysis. In the case of this study, the researchers decided that the documents are being analyzed to provide information and to back up facts collected from other resources.

The second step was concerned with skimming the documents to see if they are relevant to the subject of the study.

In the third stage, the researchers read the introductions to the articles to determine the focus of the papers. This stage was very important, because due to the huge bulk of raw data, the most relevant sources needed to receive more attention compared to other sources.

The main body of the document was analyzed. In analyzing the main body of the document, the researchers kept the focus of the study in mind to see how the document expands on the focus.

The fifth stage was dedicated to determining whether the document is accurate or biased based on the information gathered from other resources. This stage was particularly important, since the data were to be used as a source of inspiration for suggesting possible modifications in English language policy in Iran. Cross-referential comparisons of documents were made to clear all inconsistencies.

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Findings

Onset Age

English instruction at schools begins from the first year of junior high school in many countries. Maftoon et al. (2010) cites a study by Benavot et al. (1991) who found significant similarities in primary school curricula throughout the world. In most of these countries (such as China, Singapore, Lebanon, and most European countries, just to mention a few) English is offered at the primary level.

China

China is no exception in this regard. Hu (2002) argues that among the many changes in the English language education curriculum, one has been very important i.e. the fast introduction of English into primary schooling, first Primary Five, then Primary Three, and now Primary One. While the agenda implemented by the China Ministry of Education mandated that English instruction start at Primary Three, the development of ELT in primary schools was so rapid that almost no official could hinder this expansion. By 2000, nearly 85% of all the primary schools in Shanghai had offered English classes at Primary One. The relative success in the expansion of ELT into the primary schools convinced the Ministry of Education to issue guideline which recommends that all the schools in municipal and country levels should offer English at primary three from the autumn 2001. As a matter of fact, primary schools in large cities and developed areas have begun to teach English for almost a decade back. Currently, Efforts are being made to implement a two-stage learning process consisting of the primary/junior high/senior high stage and the university stage, which cover a total span of 14–16 years (Wu, 2001).

Singapore

English education in Singapore also begins from primary school. In 1979, the government adopted the bilingual education policy, which, with a few modifications is still in place. According to this policy, all students are required to study their subject-matter curriculum through the medium of English, but they also need to reach a 'second language' level of proficiency in their official Mother Tongue—Mandarin for Chinese, Malay for Malays and Tamil for Dravidian-speaking (Tamil, Malayalam) Indians (Yip et al. 1990, cited in Dixon, 2009). After almost four decades of implementing a bilingual policy, there is now a clear evidence of the rise in literacy rate (Pakir, 1993). Pakir points out that there had been not only rising literacy rate in

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Singapore but bi-literacy among the four major ethnicities, especially among the younger generations. Overall, it is now well recognized that Singapore's language policy has been successful and contributing to its economic success.

Iran

English is offered to students from the first year of junior high school. Despite the many attempts regarding the incorporation of English into primary school curriculum, the onset age has been remained unchanged due to different reasons. As Birjandi and Maftoon (2005, cited in Maftoon et al., 2010) argue some important questions need to be answered before with implementing such a plan. These questions concern a wide variety of issues related to English language education, from training skilled teachers to developing suitable materials. Most importantly higher order policy makers are worried about the possible negative cultural and linguistic impacts of introducing English at primary school level.

Implications for Iran

While the above discussion seems to imply that an early onset age for language education might lead to a better proficiency, recent studies cast doubts on much of the previous assumptions about an early onset age. For one thing, Abrahmsson and Hyltenstam (2009) reported that children learning a language do not necessarily develop a native-like pronunciation. Having conducted a large scale study of Spanish/Swedish bilinguals, they found that adult learners can never learn a second language like a native, and native like attainment of a second language among children is much less common than has been previously assumed. Another important issue concerns the possible effects of an early onset age on the identity of the students. According to Guiora's (1972) concept of language ego, learning a language requires taking on of a new identity. While children certainly posses a much more permeable identity compared to adults, the danger exists that the new cultural horizons introduced to the pupils affects their L1 culture and identity. Considering all these contradicting issues, the question of whether language instruction should begin from the primary school seems a very difficult one. Thus it might be necessary for policy makers to investigate all the different aspects of this decision before proceeding with its implementation.

Decentralization of Policy Making

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Decentralization is defined as "the transfer of decision-making authority, responsibility, and tasks from higher to lower organizational levels or between organizations" (Hanson, 1998, p.112). There are at least three types of decentralization: deconcentration, devolution, and delegation. According to Paqueo and Lammert (2000), "deconcentration involves shifting management responsibilities from the central to regional or other lower levels so that the center retains control". "Delegation occurs when central authorities lend authorities to lower levels of government, or even to semiautonomous organizations, with the understanding that the authority can be withdrawn". Devolution, on the other hand, is "the transfer of authority over financial, administrative, or pedagogical matters" on a permanent basis (Question 4).

China

In order to ensure educational equality and control over the quality of education, China Ministry of Education has traditionally designed national curriculums, syllabuses and textbooks. But from the mid-1980s there have been strong criticisms against the imposition of these unified curriculums, syllabuses and materials. The basic argument has been that the centralization of decision-making might lead to a negligence of the diversity between different parts of the country and their local needs. In response to these criticisms, the Ministry of Education has granted seven economically developed areas the autonomy to develop their own curriculums, syllabuses and teaching materials (Hu, 2005). Moreover, Shanghai and Zhejiang were entrusted with the task of pioneering curricular changes in basic education and providing relevant experience for curriculum reforms in other parts of China. The number of syllabuses informed by the recent developments in applied linguistics and language education theory is increasing. The range of textbooks developed nationally, locally and internationally has made it possible for teachers and practitioners to choose the most suitable material for their students (Jiang, 2003).

Singapore

Singapore's decentralization policy began with the establishment of independent and autonomous schools. In 1981, the government gave school principals the authority to make their contribution to educational policies of the country. This is considered as the first step towards providing schools and the principals' with greater autonomy and more responsibility in making decisions. In 1986, the Ministry of

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Education announced that one of the guidelines for education is that "Creativity in schools must be boosted through a 'bottom-up' approach whereby initiatives must come from principals and teachers instead of from the Ministry" (Tan, 1986, quoted from Ho and Gopinathan, 1999, p.105). As a result, Singapore began a plan in 1988, according to which schools became independent. Three famous schools which had branches throughout the country were encouraged by the government to become independent, which means that they are given greater autonomy in administrative and professional aspects.

Iran

Despite all these successful efforts in many countries regarding decentralization of educational decision making, Iranian officials still seem to be too conservative about taking such an approach. The Ministry of Education is responsible for developing the curriculum, the materials and even the teacher guidelines for teaching English language. All the students throughout the country study similar books prescribed by the Ministry regardless of their (possible) differences. Local needs of the students are usually neglected and the teachers are also given little freedom to adapt their teaching methods according to their students' abilities or their classroom realities. Namaghi (2006) argues that due to a number of sociopolitical forces, teachers are bound to follow a pre-determined and rigid procedure which is not in line with the students' needs and demands. First, teachers are limited by the prescribed curriculum since they are not permitted to choose textbooks which suit their students' needs. While one might accept Widdowson's (1990) argument that the aim of the curriculum is to delimit the teaching process to make it manageable and meaningful, the strictness of the curriculum in addition to the little time devoted to language education makes it impossible for teachers to show any innovation and initiation in their classes. The second problem mentioned by Namaghi is that due to the national testing scheme the output of language education is controlled by the national tests rather than teacher-developed tests which might provide positive wash back effects. Finally, since in Iranian culture, high test scores are equivalent with high achievement, the pressure exerted by the students, their parents and even school administrators for high scores prevent teachers from a more fruitful implementation of teaching strategies and force them to focus only on the course books provided by the

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ministry of education. Most of these problems seem to originate from a curriculum which is not flexible enough to suit different students' needs and abilities. Of course, it should be noted here that neither teachers nor local officials are yet prepared to carry out this demanding responsibility, a problem which needs to be resolved before proceeding with any hand-over of responsibilities.

Implications for Iran

The above discussion clearly demonstrates the urge for a coherent and well developed decentralization policy. However, in the process of decentralization a number of issues need to be seriously taken into account. First of all, as Khandaghi and Dehghani (2011) argue decentralization of curriculum development necessities modifications in the structure of the local bureaus as well as educating local officials to undertake the responsibility of developing the curriculum. Second, it is of utmost importance to note that decentralization involves two simultaneous processes, restructuring the local and central governmental offices, and the development of materials. As Khandaghi et al. argue, in most cases, the restructuring phase has received more emphasis compared to the second phase i.e. developing the suitable materials. The third important issue concerns the supervision required for the immaculate implementation of these policies. Hawkins (2000) argues that the existence of layers of educational supervision (in which higher-ranking officials supervise lower ranking ones) might have very positive influence on the well-being of the system.

Textbook Development

Developing materials for language instruction has always been a very important and difficult issue for language educators. The process of material development has witnessed significant changes during the last century. While at the beginning of the twentieth century standardized books and uniform materials were deemed most suitable for maintaining educational equality, the final decades of the century were greatly affected by the principles of new educational trends, which emphasized attending to students' needs and abilities.

China

Since 1986, the State Education Commission has adopted a policy which is meant to make significant reforms in the textbook development. The plan consists of two phases. The first phase is concerned with developing textbooks at a provincial level, based on a

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national syllabus to meet the needs of different regions. In the second phase, different syllabuses would be used for developing different materials so that a wider variety of students' needs are served. The steering committee, established in 1986, assesses primary and secondary textbooks and grants publication permission to those textbooks who come up to standards (Hu, 2002). Several universities and educational agencies now undertake the responsibility of developing materials for use in different region. This policy is in line with the decentralization policy mentioned above.

As Hu (2002) argues, these measures have led to more up-to-date textbooks in terms of teaching and learning theories, and are higher in terms of quality compared to their antecedents. Adamson (2001) maintain that the current approach in developing textbooks in China is an eclectic one, in which some principles of CLT are synthesized with existing practices. As Adamson and Morris (1997) argue:

Along with a general focus on communication, the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing all receive attention; use of the mother tongue is permitted; and there also are elements of audio-lingualism in the drills used (p.23).

Lessons are organized around topics instead of structures and there is a wide variety of activities which contains culture-specific and cross cultural information, ethical behavior and scientific knowledge. Teachers also receive a comprehensive package which guides them in their instruction. The package includes teachers' books, CD ROMs, wall pictures, and different toys and figures. Teachers' books contain detailed guidelines about teaching objectives, pedagogy, teaching steps, time allocation, instructional techniques and methods for teaching skills (HU, 2002).

Singapore

The 2001 syllabus specifies in detail the types of text which the pupils are likely to use for different purposes with different audiences in real life context. The syllabus specifies the following text types to be taught:

Recounts,
Narratives,
Instructions,
Information Reports,
Explanations, and
Expositions

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An important change was the argument that teachers in primary and secondary schools should have a choice as to the textbooks that they would like to adopt for their respective schools as was the case in the 60's and 70's. Consequently, CDIS was closed down in December 1996 and the task of producing language textbooks was returned to the commercial publishers, whom they felt were now more ready and equipped to produce high quality textbooks. As the publishers would have to compete for their market share, it was argued that they would be sufficiently motivated to produce the best possible materials. (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2001).

Textbooks for primary schools, produced under the 2001 syllabus by commercial publishers, were also communicatively-oriented with task-like activities based on the promotion of communicative fluency. They were not much different from PETS or New CLUE as they emphasized the integration of skills, contextual teaching, and learner's participation such as group work. Cooperation and group work continue to be emphasized. All the language textbooks for primary and secondary schools include tasks and mini-projects, which require students to work together while learning the four language skills. All the primary English textbooks make use of "themes" (e.g. "hobbies", "adventure", "sea creatures") as the framework by which to organize their linguistic content, despite the fact that the syllabus has pointed the movement away from themes to areas of language use as an organizational framework. Much like PETS, the themes used often involved the individual (e.g. my hobbies, my friends, my pets, my family); fantasy (e.g. fairy tales, monsters, witches); and general knowledge (e.g. of animals, weather, sports) (Singapore Ministry of Education, 2001).

Iran

The Ministry if Education undertakes the responsibility of developing textbooks for English language instruction in Iran. A large number of studies have aimed at evaluating Iranian English textbooks on the hope that these evaluation studies could contribute to an improvement in the development of materials for language instruction in schools.

In his evaluation of high school textbooks, Yarmohammadi (2002) used Tucker’s model for his analysis. He came to the conclusion that these textbooks suffer from a lot of shortcomings: 1. they are not authentic; 2. English and Persian names are used interchangeably; and

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3. oral skills are ignored. At the end, some suggestions were proposed to remedy the shortcomings.

Jahangard (2007) evaluated four EFL textbooks that have been used in the Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education. He discussed the merits and demerits of the textbooks with reference to 13 common criteria extracted from different materials evaluation checklists. The criteria were as follows: explicitness of objectives, good vocabulary explanation and practice, educationally and socially acceptable approaches to the target community, periodic review and test sections, clear attractive layout, print easy to read, appropriate visual materials, interesting topics and tasks, clear instructions, clearly organized and graded content, plenty of authentic language, good grammar presentation and practice, fluency practice in all four skills, and independent learning situations. The results of the study indicated that book four had better features in comparison with the three other textbooks (which needed huge revisions and modifications).

Ansary and Babaii (2002) presented some characteristics and criteria for a good textbook based on a close scrutiny of a corpus of 10 EFL/ESL textbook reviews plus 10 EFL/ESL textbook evaluation checklists. The features they presented were:

Dissemination of a vision (theory or approach) about the nature of language,

The nature of learning and how the theory can be put to applied use;

Stating purpose(s) and objective(s) for the total course and for individual units;

Selection and its rationale for coverage, grading, organization and sequencing;

Teacher's satisfaction with the syllabus for providing a guide book, advice on the methodology and explaining theoretical orientations, and keys to the exercises and supplementary materials;

Learner satisfaction with the syllabus for giving piecemeal, unit-by-unit instruction and clear instructions for exercises.

Riazi and Mosalanejad (2010) evaluated Iranian high school English textbooks and with regard to the aims manifested by the content of the books. They came to the conclusion that the most frequent learning objectives pursued in the high school and pre-university English textbooks in Iran were lower-order cognitive skills, that is, knowledge, comprehension, and application. There is even a lack of progression

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from the lowest (knowledge) to the highest (evaluation) cognitive levels as we move from Grade 1 to pre-university textbooks.

Implications for Iran

Despite all the efforts made to improve the quality of the textbooks, it seems as if English textbooks developed by Ministry of Education have not been able to successfully achieve their aims. As Dahmardeh (2009b, online) points out:

These textbooks cannot meet the learners' and the teachers' needs within the Iranian educational system and it is a bit strange that they still emphasize structural methods and ignore the communicative role of the language.

Probably one of the main reasons for this situation is the textbooks' failure in catering for the needs of the students. Allami et al. investigated different aspects of textbooks from the learners' eyes and found that the materials offered in schools do not satisfy students' needs. They also reported that these materials are really below the par with students' expectations.

Thus, what is urgently required before proceeding with any radical modification in the textbooks seem to be a large scale needs as well as means analysis. These analysis of means and needs would hopefully bring insights into the needs and expectations of all the stakeholders (including the policy makers, teachers and the students) and would provide the textbook writers with more data according to which they can design and develop their materials.

Approach

The approach hold by different countries towards English language education is to a great extent determined by the country's socio-political views. While some countries welcomes English instruction and regard it as a language of trade, communication and science at the international scene, others view English as an instrument of cultural hegemony (Jiang, 2010). These different approaches lead to different a policy which ultimately determines how English is treated in the school curriculum.

a. China

Language policy and planning in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has always been influenced by the country's social, political and foreign policies. While as Widdowson (1990) argues every language teaching curriculum reflects to some extent the broader

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social and political policies administered by the government, the case in China is exceptional in the sense that China's amity or enmity with different countries has affected the curriculum in such a way that it has even determined the language to be taught as the foreign language. Thus in different periods in China's contemporary history Russian and English have alternatively been taught as foreign language (Adamson and Morris, 1997). Therefore, it is obvious that the teaching of foreign languages in China has pursuit certain political and social goals and as a consequence has undergone fundamental changes in different periods of the country's political history (see Jin and Cortazzi, 2006).

Adamson and Morris (1997) argue that the English education in China has been affected by two opposite views held by the Chinese leaders and policy makers. On the one hand, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders who support the Western-style "modernization" policies (albeit with preserving Chinese values), regard the teaching and learning of English as a key to the technological excellence and international trade. On the other hand, more conservative leaders who are mainly interested in preserving the China's culture and integrity, regard English as the language of the enemy which opens the country's gates into the imperialist, capitalist and even barbaric ideas. English is viewed as a language which undermines China's language, values and culture.

This tension has resulted in constant changes in the position of English in the curriculum as well as changes in the goals of language education. However, as Hu (2002) argues, in the last three decades the emphasis has shifted from a political and ideological view of foreign language education to a view which recognizes the importance of English as a language of modernization and development. Currently, English plays a vital role in both national and individual levels in China. On the national level, the government has finally come to recognize the importance of English education for China's economic and political development. On the individual level, proficiency in English will provide the individuals with a host of economical and social opportunities which are not offered to those non-proficient in English. This consensus in leaders' views about the role of English has resulted in longer-term and more stable policies in the countries educational system.

Wang and Lam (2009) enumerates a number of important features of the new curriculum introduced in 2001. They argue that the new

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curriculum is an enquiry based curriculum in which the emphasis is on enquiry rather than knowledge reception. The change of emphasis from learning through reception to learning through enquiry is in fact a reflection of a more fundamental change, i.e. the transition from an ideological and utilitarian view of language education to a more humanistic one. This is perhaps best manifested in the description of the role of foreign language. While the 1993 syllabus emphasized the instrumental value of English for acquiring culture and knowledge as well as becoming able to communicate with the world, the new curriculum goes beyond this instrumental value and emphasizes the value of language learning in transforming the learners' cognitive, social and personal development (Hu, 2005). The second feature of the new curriculum is the value assigned to the formative assessment in the process of evaluation. The third noteworthy feature of the new curriculum is the emphasis on the fact that language learning contains two developmental processes. The first is the development of language use ability, and the second is developing the students' whole person. The next feature worthy of note is the mention of 'developing as people', 'creativity' and 'cultural awareness' as final curricular goals which is in line with a humanistic view which envisage future generations of Chinese learners as thinking individuals capable of cognitive and personal development on their own beyond the confines of education. Another feature is the curriculum's plurality of components. Of the five components the curriculum mentions, two of them, namely, linguistic knowledge and linguistic skills are familiar components in all the curriculums developed during China's educational history. However, the other three components, namely, learning strategies, affect and cultural awareness are new elements in the curriculum which distinguish it from the previous ones. The new curriculum regards enabling students to learn autonomously and cooperatively as a high priority objective. According to the new curriculum, an English course should help develop students' 'critical thinking ability, information gathering and analysis ability, problem solving ability, and a world vision' (China Ministry of Education 2003: 2, cited in Wang and Lam, 2009: 72-73), which are all essential elements for citizenship in the twenty-first century. Finally, all the aforementioned components are graded into nine bands, two bands for primary school, three bands for junior secondary school and four bands for senior secondary school.

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b. Singapore

The choice of English as Singapore's common language came from the necessity for its survival in domestic and international economics and politics (Ho & Alsagoff, 1998, p. 201-203). As a small island nation, it depended upon the world economy for its survival with virtually no natural resources. Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore from self-rule until 1990 mentions economic reasons as the impetus for his party's decision to choose English as the official language of the country. However, the government knew that it is not possible to force people to all attend English medium schools, nor it is wise to elevate English above other ethnic languages. The government thus adopted a policy in which four languages, including three ethnic languages were recognized as the country's official languages.

In forming its Language –in-Education policy, the Singapore's government relies on a number of implicit and explicit assumptions concerning language planning and second language acquisition. Dixon (2009, p. 121) cites some of these assumptions as the following:

Language is a tool that should be carefully chosen for its utility to the national interest.

A 'language' is different from a 'dialect;' only standardized languages are appropriate vehicles for education.

The government should encourage the use of high-status languages at home and in social interactions (p.121).

Apart from assumptions about language planning a number of assumptions regarding second language acquisition have played a prominent role in shaping language policies in Singapore. Dixon (2009) enumerates some of these assumptions:

The earlier learning a second language begins, the learners become more proficient.

This assumption which directly originates from the critical period hypothesis, has led the government to begin second language education from the beginning of formal schooling. The belief in the merits of early start is reflected in the speech of Singapore's former and current Prime Ministers who both have urged parents to teach their children English as early as possible. Although the results for the

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existence of a critical period have been inconclusive (see Marinova-Todd et al. 2000) Singapore's experience of an early start has proved to be successful.

The development of home languages is not academically conducive to development of English language skills.

The above assumption prompted the government officials to persuade parents to take two steps to help their children gain a mastery of English. First, parents were urged to use English at home. After a major shift from the mother tongues to English in Singapore, the government then began urging the parents to use "standard" English rather than Singaporean English (Singlish) at home.

The amount of time devoted to learning a language would be a predictor of proficiency in that language.

The emphasis on the amount of time devoted to learning English was a major determinant of the 1979 policy to teach all subject matters through English. In spite of the numerous negative reports indicating that this decision has affected the learning outcomes of the students in subjects such as mathematics (Goh, 1979, cited in Dixon, 2009) the government seemed to be determined in his decision to carry all instruction in English. Dixon (2009) argues that while time-on-task seems to be an important factor in enhancing students' learning since greater time devoted to learning a language means greater input, a number of important factors such as the quality of the input, the amount and type of feedback and the amount and type of interaction has been overlooked by the government.

Ability to learn languages is related to general education achievement.

This assumption manifested itself mainly in decisions regarding the results of the PSLE exam. Since the government believed that only those students who score high in most of the subjects are capable of becoming proficient in English, only those students who scored in the top 10% of the PSLE were eligible to study English and Mother Tongue at an advanced level; these requirements were expanded to allow those who score in the top 11–30% of the PSLE and who did very well on their Mother Tongue exam also to take advanced Mother Tongue. However, the Singapore policy has moved away from this assumption to permit schools to provide the students who do not meet the criteria with the opportunity to study their mother tongues at an advanced level if the schools believe it does not negatively affect the students' performance in other subjects.

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c. Iran

Before the 1990's, the emphasis in English education was on reading skills in order to enable students to read and translate materials written in English. The curriculum in general, thus, focused on promoting the grammar knowledge of the students in reading and translation. Students were required to take a 3-4 unit English courses which mainly consisted of memorizing words and translating passages. As a result, high school English teachers had no choice but to use grammar translation to satisfy the expectations of the national curriculum. During the early 1990's however, more emphasis was assigned to teaching English for communication. The aim of teaching English at high school level was stated as enabling students to use a foreign language to communicate with the speakers of other languages (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). Efforts were made to modify textbooks on the basis of a communicative approach. The revised curriculum for high school English education in the last decade aimed to provide the students with more communicative activities. (Hosseini, 2007). Nevertheless, the question whether these efforts have succeeded in achieving their aims still remains. The reductionist approach to language teaching is still being followed by the teachers. Teachers continue to use the grammar translation method and the textbooks are severely lacking in the materials which could provide the classroom with communicative context (Hosseini, 2007). They do so because the standardized national exams are still largely structural in orientation. As a result, both students and graduates of colleges and universities, suffer from a serious lack of functional proficiency.

One of the most important problems with language education in Iran originates from the kind of quantitative orientation taken toward education in general and language education in particular. In other words, the emphasis has been on the products rather than processes of education. As a result, the educational system has been unable to empower the students to come up with new insights and challenge the inequalities in the society (Akbari, 2008). To use Freire's (2007) term, the educational system in Iran is not emancipatory. In such a system, the needs of the students are also overlooked. The centralized system of education determines the materials, teaching method and evaluation procedures to be applied across the country, without considering the

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vast social, political, cultural and economical differences existing between different areas.

Implications for Iran

Farhady et al. (2010) enumerate a number of issues pertinent to the English education system in Iran. For one thing, they maintain that while theoretical orientations certainly affects all the aspects of language education, they cannot be directly translated into practice, thus a change in the approach taken by the government towards language education may require modifications in the beliefs of all those involved in the teaching-learning process, from policy makers to students.

Frahady and his colleagues also warn policy makers about the blind adaptation of a theoretical paradigm without having enough evidence for its properness. The fact that adaptation of any given paradigm entails modifications in different aspects of instruction leads us to the second important issue, that of availability of resources. An example from Dahmardeh (2009a) illustrates this point. Dahmardeh cites a memory from one of the writers responsible for developing communicative textbooks in Iran:

…… he spent three months on performing different researches before putting pen on paper. He then realized that there was a need for a teacher's manual, a workbook, a cassette or a CD for the book and also a companion web site. Everyone agreed with his plans but when it came into practice none of his plans was accepted (p.197).

It is clear that sufficiency of resources is a key aspect of educational planning, and thus policy makers should run a comprehensive means analysis before proceeding with adopting a paradigm.

Another important issue which is noteworthy here concerns the fact that while we may benefit from the experiences of other countries, we cannot assume that what has been done in China or Singapore is directly applicable to Iranian context. Every community has its own unique social, cultural, political and economical features and thus, it is of utmost importance for policy makers and language educators to scrutinize the ideas taken from abroad carefully and make them suitable for the Iranian context.

5. Teaching of Culture

Closely related to the issue of approach, is the treatment of culture in English language syllabuses. While until the recent decades of the

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twentieth century, the popular belief was that learning a language means learning of the culture of its speakers, with the emergence of new educational schools such as Critical Pedagogy the importance of attending to native and local cultures was highlighted. According to proponents of these new schools while an awareness of target language cultural issues is necessary (Kramsch, 2001), the ultimate goal of culture teaching is to enable the students to appreciate the value of their own culture and recognize the similarities and differences between the native and target cultures to be able to act appropriately in unique contexts.

a. China

Hu (2005) reviewing the history of language teaching in China makes the following observation about the role of culture in the syllabus:

A close examination of the history of China's educational interaction with foreign countries in general, and foreign-language teaching in particular, reveals constant swings between selective introduction and prohibition of foreign culture…..A period of selective exposure Secondary English-language Teaching in China was always followed by a swing back to prohibition of foreign values and beliefs or substitution of foreign culture with Chinese culture, when the leaders of Chinese society felt that fundamental Chinese values and beliefs were being jeopardized by the influx of foreign ideas and values (Shen, 1989). In this light, there is the potential for another full swing if the current practice o teaching target-language culture should give rise to ideological consequences that the Chinese Government deems undesirable (pp. 37-38).

He argues that one of the noteworthy features of the new curriculum introduced in 2001 is "to instill in students a respect for meritorious cultural traditions of other nations and an understanding of, as well as love for, Chinese culture (p. 36). He maintains that the latest syllabus emphasizes the need to raise students' awareness of English speaking cultures. According to Hu, these improvements have been the results of two important modifications in the approach taken by officials toward language education. First, less ideological issues have been involved in designing ELT syllabuses. Second, an interest in incorporating newer theoretical assumptions about language learning and teaching has risen among policy makers.

b. Singapore

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Under the bilingual policy, every student learns English which is the common working language. Students also learn their mother tongue language (Chinese, Malay or Tamil), to help them retain their ethnic identity, culture, heritage and values.

The syllabus 2010 recognizes and emphasizes the fact that learning the language in a society with different languages is different from learning it in native contexts. This is indeed a great improvement in the way language learning is approached by official authorities. The repercussions of this approach is evident in the discussion of speaking aims in which no mention of native like pronunciation is given, instead the pupils are required to "speak and make presentations in internationally acceptable English (Standard English) that is appropriate for purpose, audience, context and culture" (p. 47).

A number of scholars in Singapore have advocated indigenization of language teaching according to the local cultures. Young (1987) argues that methodology in TESOL which developed based on the western culture failed in the Chinese context. He advocates for indigenization of TESOL methodology suitable for local cultures and the needs of students. Given the linguistic background of the Singapore society and the emergence of Singapore English, indigenization is essential. Thus indigenization of not only teaching methodology but also of the curriculum and teaching materials are needed.

c. Iran

In his analysis of cultural content of Iranian high school textbooks, Aliakbari (2002) found that the major part of the textbooks' content is culture free and refers to general or cultural-neutral issues. Based on the results of his study, Aliakbari (2002) argues that the texts in the Iranian high school textbooks do not contribute to improving students' intercultural competence.

On a similar study Rashidi and Najafi (2010) investigated the cultural references in Iran Language Institute advance level textbooks. They found that these textbooks do in fact represent cultural references at a significant level and thus are acceptable in terms of both quality of cultural information provided as well as the range of cultures represented.

The two studies mentioned above confirms the fact that mainstream schooling is far behind the private section in providing the students with the quality English language education they need. While private

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institutes are to a great extent feeding their pupils with the necessary ingredients they need for growing up, those in state-run schools seem to suffer from a mal-nutrition, at least as far is English education is concerned.

Implications for Iran

Decades ago, Hamers and Blanc (1989) emphasized that learning a second language is not successful without learning the second culture. While treatment of cultural issues in the classroom forms a very delicate and sensitive part of teaching-learning process, both Iranian policy makers and applied linguists seems to have neglected this significant issue. A quick survey on the web resources shows very few papers dealing with this sensitive issue. The work by Rashidi et al. (2010) cited above, is also not about mainstream English education in the country, but investigates cultural references in a semi-private institute. In another study, Noorafkan A brief look at the official documents also reveals that very few mention of culture has been made. The only document which deals with this issue is the document prepared by Anani Sarab et al. (2006), which is not an official document. This negligence, whether deliberate or not, is not conducive to improving English education at all. Policy makers as well as applied linguists cannot ignore the cultural aspects of language education, and they need to develop detailed guidelines as to what aspects of foreign culture should or should not be taught in schools, and this requires a knowledge base which would not be developed unless a body of problem-oriented research is carried out.

Conclusion

This study investigated issues related to English education policy making in three different countries, namely Iran, China and Singapore. The results of this study indicated that while positive reforms in English education policies in both China and Singapore have improved quality of English education in these two countries, Iran still seems to still lack a comprehensive and well-defined policy with regard to English education. While some innovations have indeed contributed to improving quality English education especially in private section, mainstream schooling needs to accelerate its movement if it wants to produce better results. This study also emphasizes the need for a knowledge base, which guides policy makers in making educational decisions, and this is where applied linguists and their research might have a role to play.

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