

An overview of development of French and English language education throughout Iran: Political, economic, social, and military aspects

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Abstract

This paper surveys an overview of development of se French and English language teaching throughout Iran. The researcher explores developments of French and English language in Iran in terms of political, economic, social and military aspects. For example; the French language has originated in Iran in the 19th century. During the reign of the last Qajar king, scholars, writers, as well as industrialists has emphasized on learning the French language. At the same time, the first Iranians went abroad to study academically and to better understand Western civilization, especially France. All of these factors worked together, and from the French language, they created a language with an undeniable influence on various scientific, political, social, philosophical, and other fields. Also, the researcher investigates the English Language in Iran: 1901 to Present.

Keywords: French language, English language in Iran, challenges English and French language in Iran

An overview of development of French and English language education throughout Iran: Political, economic, social, and military aspects

1. Introduction

Language is extensively considered as a vital marker of identity and community (Anchimbe, 2013; Edwards, 2009; Tong, Hong, Lee, & Chiu, 1999). As such it has been subject to government policies that may seek to subjugate certain communities and elevate others, to ensure the survival of local languages under threat and the cultures they embody, or to give nations economic advantage. It is, in other words, an instrument used – and often manipulated indiscriminately, even ruthlessly – to serve political interests and the underlying social and political ideologies (Van Dijk, 2006). And the stakes are high indeed, for government policy in respect of languages has the potential to inform decisions that can determine the fortunes of particular languages and indigenous cultures by, for example, influencing the choice of national and official languages and the basis on which schooling is organized so as to achieve high levels of bilingualism or multilingualism for minority and dominant groups and/or promoting the learning of particular foreign languages.

As Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1996, p. 432) observe, such policy decisions serve as “a barometer of identities at the subnational, national and supranational levels and of how education systems and society at large encourage or subdue languages and identities.” Therefore, this paper surveys an overview of development of French and English language teaching throughout Iran. The researcher explores developments of French and English language in Iran in terms of political, economic, social and military aspects. For example; the French language has originated in Iran in the 19th century. During the reign of the last Qajar king, scholars, writers, as well as industrialists has emphasized on learning the French language. At the same time, the first Iranians went abroad to study academically and to better understand Western civilization, especially France. All of these factors worked together, and from the French language, they created a language with an undeniable influence on various scientific, political, social, philosophical, and other fields. Also, the researcher investigates the English Language in Iran: 1901 to Present

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 History of the French Language

French language is the first language of 136 million people worldwide. According to Wikipedia (2017), French language is a Romance language spoken around the world by ninety million people as a first language, by 190 million as a second language, and by about another 20 million people as an acquired foreign language. It is an official language in twenty-nine countries, most of which form what is called *La Francophonie*, the community of French-speaking nations. French speakers are present in 57 countries. Most of them are natives of this language in France, which is the origin of this language. Others are mainly in Canada, Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and some parts of the United States, including *Louisiana*. Most people whose second language is French live in France, France; North Africa, which can be boldly said to be more numerous than the native speakers. The French-speaking Canada is a French-speaking region of Canada that consists mainly of *Quebec* and *Brunswick*, as well as Ontario and southern Manitoba (Wikipedia, 2017). French is the third most spoken language after Spanish and Portuguese and belongs to the Roman family of languages. French is the official language of 29 countries, of which 12 are only one language and 17 languages are spoken in addition to French. It can be said that French was the forerunner of World War II, especially in the fields of diplomacy, trade, transportation, and transportation (Wikipedia, 2017).

2.2 The Role of Tourists

In order to get to know Iran, there were always many obstacles in the way of the uneven world. In 1660, at the same time as the Safavid dynasty, a great deal of attention was paid to this part of the world, and a new chapter in the concept of Persians and Persians was introduced to the world. Everyone longed to see the land of Persia: Numerous travelogues were written that included worldview observations of customs, geography, art, trade, and the history of Iran; it was one of the most popular types of drinks among the French until the 18th century. Among them, the first tourists of this period were Chardin, Tavernier, and Kondogubino, who, in particular, were the goblins and played an important role in introducing French and French to the Iranians. Following the writings of these tourists, it became possible to establish wider contacts in the fields of science, philosophy, politics, and society.

2.3 French Language Teaching in Iran

The history of French language teaching and the construction of French schools in Iran dates back about 300 years ago. Since then, French has been taught in our country. During the Qajar period, French language was used as the first foreign language. During Reza Khan's period, with the sending of Iranian students to France to study in various fields, the importance of the French language in Iran became much greater than before. Most of the children in these families used private tutors to teach the French language. From socio-cultural perspectives, the role of the French language and that of the Iranians who spoke it is very important. The French language has originated in Iran in the 19th century. During the reign of the last Qajar king, scholars, writers, as well as industrialists has emphasized on learning the French language. At the same time, the first Iranians went abroad to study academically and to better understand Western civilization, especially France. All of these factors worked together, and from the French language, they created a language with an undeniable influence on various scientific, political, social, philosophical, and other fields. Before addressing the place of French as a foreign language in pre-revolutionary Islamic Iran in Iran and beyond, it is better to mention the history of the relationship between Iran and France and the teaching of this language in Iran. In this regard, for example, we will suffice with a brief introduction to pre-revolutionary French-language schools, such as St. Louis, Jandrak, Maryam, and Razi.

2.4 French language in Iran

In contemporary Iran, French is the second most popular language after English. The French language has been considered in Iran since the Safavid period. This language flourished especially during the Qajar period through the translation of Dar al-Fonun textbooks, which were originally in French, and expanded due to the revival of the printing industry. Since students were mostly sent to France, the French language became popular in the country, and with its expansion, not only the works of French writers but also the literary works of some other European languages were translated into Persian. The first play to be translated from French into Persian was Moliere's play *People Avoid*. The translation and publication of the book took place after the death of Prince Abbas Mirza during the reign of Mohammad Shah Qajar, but it peaked again during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah and Muzaffar al-Din Shah. Mohammad Taher Mirza, Mirza Habib Isfahani and Mohammad Hassan Khan Etemad Al -Saltanah were among the most prolific translators of this period.

After the Pahlavi dynasty came to power, the translation process accelerated, encompassing all scientific, technical, and literary realms because the number of educated people and the extent of all-round relations with foreign countries increased. During this period, many valuable works were translated into Persian, and the number of talented and so-called professional translators increased dramatically. Translations were made mainly in French until the early 1930s, but after World War II and the subsequent political and cultural developments, English became more important in translation and took precedence over quantity. However, in terms of quality, the best translations still belonged to translators who translated from French (Kamali, 2013). Since Qajar, when many political figures went to France to study, many French words entered Iran through legal rules, and many of these words are still used in Persian today, and sometimes these words have become so common in Persian that Many

people do not know that these words are French. Examples include: shower (bathroom), Croatian, shop, family, gift, show, elevator, coup d'etat , promenade, passage, massage, assembly, cutlet, omelette, toilet , agency, emergency, mantle, coat and thank you Kurdish.

The Role of the Dar al-Fonun school and its translation - With the establishment of the Dar al-Fonun school, the French language flourished especially during the Qajar period through the translation of Dar al-Fonun textbooks, which were originally in French, and expanded due to the revival of the printing industry. Undoubtedly, the translation of foreign works into Persian has a long history. The existence of various dictionaries of words in various languages, which date back to the Sasanian period, testifies to the importance of translation in our country. In the field of French-Persian translations, we can refer to the studies of Francis Richard, which leads us to the source of familiarity with the Persian language in France. The construction of a translation school in Tabriz by Abbas Mirza can also be considered another reason for the importance of translation in Iran.

Abbas Mirza ordered the translation of most of Napoleon Bonaparte's donated books, most of which were devoted to historical subjects, including Peter the Great, Alexander the Great, and Charles II. But in the field of translation, Dar al-Fonun has played as the most effective role in translating European textbooks into Persian. Not only were all European professors required to translate their textbooks into Persian to be taught in class, but even Iranian professors at the Academy of Arts were no exception, and they had to return the books they were reading to Persian. Thus, translation became widespread in the capital and suburbs. It should be noted that here, too, French language books had the first priority in translating into Persian. Nasser al-Din Shah was interested in history books and French newspapers, and their translation was accepted by his suggestions. Also, Etemad al-Sultan was personally responsible for reading and translating, and read the newspapers of French cities every hour at a certain time.

Nasser al-Din Shah was familiar with the French language when he was with reading newspapers. He began learning French with religious preachers in Tabriz and continued to do so during his reign, under the supervision of Dr. Klukke, Motamed al-Malik, and Etemad al-Saltanah. Therefore, a considerable number of French books on various subjects were translated into Persian in the second half of the 19th century. Mirza Kazem Mahallati, one of the first students of the Dar al-Fonun school, is one of the most prolific and well-known translators of this era. He translated the books "The War between Germany and France" and "The War between Ottoman Turkey and Russia" and two books on chemistry and physics. After graduating from Tehran, he left for France to continue his education. Returning home in 1862, he taught chemistry and physics at the Dar al-Fonun school.

2.5 *English in Iran*

English in Iran has a higher status than one might imagine. The TV celebrity Anthony Bourdain once remarked: "Never would I have guessed that of all countries in the world, my crew and I would be treated so well everywhere by total strangers in Iran" (New York Times, June 24, 2014). At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, English was regarded as an "alien language," and above all, the language of Iran's perceived enemies, the USA and Britain (Borjian, 2013, cited in Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2015). Today, however, English is gradually being recognized as an indispensable means of communicating across national borders, allowing access to the requisite knowledge and technology for promoting technical, scientific and economic development within the country (Riazi, 2005). The language, in other words, has become a form of economic capital. A good knowledge of English is generally acknowledged in Iran to be the key to university entrance as well as to higher research both at home and abroad.

The English Language in Iran: 1901 to Present - The English language was mostly prominent in Iran during the reign of Pahlavi prior to the arrival of the Islamic regime. In the early 1900s, the British socialite, William Knox D'Archi, could win assent of the Persian king on oil concession in Persia. Since then, the English language, despite oppositions made by extremist clergies, has been entrusted a new role of opening doors to modernity in Iran. After the establishment of the first Iranian modern educational institution, Dar-al-Fonoon, in 1851, the main objective of the foreign language instruction was communication and understanding of French, which was the

medium of instruction (Sadiq, 1965). The administration in Dar-al-Fonoon was based on Western teaching methods, especially on French system of education, and most of the teachers were native French speakers.

After the excavation of oil by the British engineers and the expansion of dependency of the Iranian economy on its oil revenue, English served as the substituting foreign language. However, after the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran in 1941 and ensuing attempts to nationalize the Oil Industry by the Iranian Prime Minister of the time leading to the nationalization of the oil industry, the United States was able to achieve a greater presence in Iran.

The American Dream, as well as the expanding presence of the United States into the rest of the world, especially in the Middle East, enticed the Iranian state to develop its economic, political, military, and educational relationships with the United States. Many Iranian students, teachers, and professors went to study in the United States to advance their professional, technical, and communication skills (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011).

As Strain and New York State English Council (1971) reports, one of the focal objectives of the Iranian education system was bilingualism. English was instructed as a foreign language during the last 6 years of the Iranian K-12 programs between 1934 and 1970 and was increased to 7 years afterward (Bagheri, 1994). In 1950, the Iran-American Society, first official language institution teaching English in Iran, was established. American English teachers were sent to various parts of the country to host training workshops for native Iranian teachers, and study-abroad programs, such as Fulbright activities (1950-1959), were actively encouraged as part of the attempt by the United States to increase its involvement in teaching English as a foreign language in the Iranian schools (Khatami, 1977; Strain & New York State English Council, 1971). Moreover, English was the key requirement for entering the military. In the process of military modernization, most of the high-ranking officers were sent to the United States to study military sciences. Therefore, they had to pass some courses in English as a prerequisite (Tollefson, 1991). Motivation of the Iranian students in learning English was relatively high as well; Strain and New York State English Council (1971) writes that more than 90% of the Iranian school students elected English as a foreign language.

All these factors led to a situation of modernization becoming amalgamated with the Iranian culture. "If Iran before Islam had a mainly Persian identity and Iran after Islam had an Islamic-Iranian identity, Iran after the exposure to the West found a triple identity, that of Islamic-Iranian- Western" (Riazi, 2005, p. 102). However, this mixture was not well welcomed among the religious majority of the Iranian society who feared endangerment of the society's Islamic identity. In 1979, the society led by an Islamic fundamentalist, Ayatollah Khomeini, rebelled against the secularization and Westernization with the principal momentum of diluting Western norms and espousing the Islamic values, which he felt were being marginalized during the modernization era in Iran.

After the victory of Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, ELT has rapidly begun to disappear. All ELT institutions were shut down, and native-speaking English teachers and university professors were expelled. Moreover, the ELT materials were placed under rigid censorship and were purged of any Western norms and messages. In addition, the Islamic regime entrusted locally trained nonnative English language teachers to develop indigenized textbooks empty of any elements advertising English or Western culture.

In sum, the Iranian education system went through an Islamization process that could be described as a "process of de-modernization" (Paivandi, 2012). Moreover, teachers opposing the ideology of Islam and Islamization of the educational system were expelled from the system. Certain restrictions were applied to both schools and their students; co-education, which was normal prior to the Revolution, was substituted with single-sex schools. In addition to those changes, a series of religious activities were added to the education system. Those speedy reforms were not completely applauded by the Iranian society. Despite the hostility of the Islamic regime toward English (Dahmardeh & Hunt, 2012), the society started to answer its needs by opening an increasing number of privately run ELT centers. Debates on minimizing the dependency of the Iranian economy on oil industry and promotion of alternative industries such as tourism grew stronger. The Iranian traders and industry owners, and workers and business owners, especially in tourist destinations such as Tehran, Kerman, and Tabriz, realized that their future was contingent on improving their communicative skills in English (Khajavi & Abbasian,

2011). English could also find its way through the heart of the Islamic regime. The Iranian government established Press TV and some other TV channels as well as several written media in English (Khajavi & Abbasian, 2011) to broadcast its ideological views and news.

English Language Teaching in Iran - It has been claimed that English is a neglected subject in the Iranian educational system (Dahmardeh, 2009). This, as we hope to show, is not quite true, even if there are serious problems to be combated. In Iran, compulsory schooling comprises primary education, which lasts for six years, followed by three years at middle school and three at high school. English is one of the obligatory courses at both middle and high schools (Ministry of Education. Organization of Educational Research and Planning. 2017, February 27). Policy making in English teaching is highly centralized (Atai & Mazlum, 2013). English as a subject is formally introduced during the first year of middle school, one year earlier than was the case before the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Ghorbani, 2009).

As Sadeghi and Richards (2016) demonstrate, middle and high school pupils receive comparatively little tuition in English, no more, in fact, than the equivalent of between two and four hours per week. Both syllabus and course content are centrally steered and cannot be changed, thereby precluding teacher initiative and adaptation to local needs and/or special circumstances. The focus in the current middle school syllabus is on improving Basic English proficiency, with a strong emphasis on alphabet recognition, pronunciation and vocabulary instruction (though the latter is limited). At high school, the focus is on reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary; writing, at this level, however, has a very low priority. Listening and speaking are also largely neglected; the few drills that are incorporated in the syllabus are primarily intended to practice grammar; and the short dialogues that are part of the approved syllabus are restricted as they focus primarily on introducing language functions. As a result, communication skills are poorly developed; only those pupils who have the opportunity to take private lessons are able to practice communicating in English (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016, p. 4).

In recent years, a number of private schools offering general English, Business English, and English for Special Purposes (ESP) have been established. They provide preparatory courses for international examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL. As Aliakbari (2002) emphasizes, however, negative attitudes towards English have led to the closure of many of the schools. The situation at the tertiary level is also problematical. As Sadeghi and Richards (2016, p. 4) demonstrate, for example, “there is no fixed syllabus for teaching English at university.” While this has created opportunities for instructors to develop their own syllabus and choose relevant teaching materials, it also pre-supposes that teachers have sufficient knowledge to introduce such innovations, and that the resources for creating and publishing materials are readily available. Such, however, is not the case. There are, in fact, only a few books written for use at the tertiary level and these are all produced by the same organization, SAMT. While books published outside Iran are sometimes used, they are relatively expensive and thus beyond the means of many institutions. Written English is prioritized over spoken at the university level, and there is a general lack of opportunities to use English communicatively (Kariminia & Salehi, 2007).

In addition, as discussed shortly, students generally find it difficult to appreciate the relevance of English to their area of study. Indeed, as Sadeghi and Richards (2016, p. 4) note, “the English course is typically only of 20 to 30 hours duration, often not taught by staff from an English department and consequently students gain little from it.” Despite these limitations, however, English is offered as a major subject in most universities in Iran (Iran’s Ministry of Education. 2017, February 27 www.sanjesh.org/). Students can choose between “English Language and Literature,” “English Language Teaching” or “English Translation” at the bachelor level. A variety of MA or PhD programs is also offered within various English specializations. The competition for PhD programs is particularly fierce. Iran recognizes that within Academia it is becoming increasingly important to publish in English. Some scholars, however, have to write in Farsi and have their papers translated; others require the services of proof readers. Despite these problems, there are nonetheless an increasing number of conferences in English, both national and international (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016, p. 6). It might be considered as paradoxical that despite the growing influence of English, the focus of Iranian students continues to be rather restricted and local: they do not see themselves as members of an international community. The fact is that those who grew up during the post-

Revolution regime have been actively discouraged from adopting “Western” values because these have been associated with internationalism and are thus regarded as a threat to traditional Iranian values. Rather, Iranians have been urged to maintain their Islamic beliefs and identification with the Muslim community (Razavi & Juneau, 2001, cited in British Council, 2015).

The earlier mentioned lack of opportunities for pupils/students to use language communicatively has compounded the problem, resulting in a formal learning environment which, as Gardner (2010) has demonstrated in other English learning contexts, is likely to have a negative effect on pupils’ motivation and their general attitude towards learning a foreign language. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that Iranian teachers dominate lessons and allow little interaction between pupils and teacher, and even between the pupils themselves. The strict division between teacher and pupil/student that prevails in Iranian classrooms cannot provide the supportive atmosphere necessary for effective communicative language learning. The problem is aggravated still further by the fact that there has traditionally been little natural communication with English speakers. This continues to be a problem and one which is not widely discussed. Not surprisingly therefore, examination results in Iran have been disappointing. Statistics issued by the Ministry of Education in 2013, for example, show that 81% of Iranian students received a zero score in the English part of the university entrance exam (Statistical Center of Iran, 2014). The Iranian government’s ambiguous policy with regard to English language teaching, which is based on a tension between tradition and modernity (Cortazzi et al., cited in British Council, 2015), is the primary cause of the present situation. It is essential to acknowledge that the few innovations which have been introduced are significant as indications of a gradual change in thinking and priorities. The publication in 2013 and 2014 of the first and second volumes of a six-series English textbook, Prospect, designed for high schools (Kheirabadi & Moghaddam, 2014) is a case in point.

This new curriculum is based on a partial re-conceptualization of English teaching where pupils are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process and to use the target language in class. This marks a tentative move towards giving greater emphasis to students’ communicative skills and minimizing the use of their mother tongue in class (Aghagolzadeh & Davari cited in British Council, 2015). It is clearly too early to evaluate this change in direction by the government – though not too early, it seems, for fears to be expressed about the attainability of the new goals (Aghagolzadeh & Davari cited in British Council, 2015). These, argue Aghagolzadeh and Davari, cannot be achieved without a general and substantial upgrading of English language teachers’ proficiency, knowledge and pedagogical skills. Appropriate in-service training for English teachers at all levels is needed. One of the major obstacles, however, is that there is a general lack of teachers in Iran who are fluent in English. In addition, no extra time has been allocated to the implementation of the new curriculum; indeed, the time allowed has actually been reduced in real terms. The current situation can be put in the context of Kaplan and Baldauf’s (1997) research, which demonstrates that most foreign language education worldwide comprises three 50-minute periods each week. The average total time in the Iranian education system is around 50 to 80 minutes per week (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, cited in British Council, 2015).

Language proficiency assessment is an additional challenge to the developing education system in Iran. The form of the examinations has remained largely unchanged. As already established, the centralized nature of the educational system in the country makes it difficult, if not impossible, for teachers to make independent decisions about the curriculum, let alone conduct any form of classroom-oriented action research (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2010). In addition, not only is the book used for teaching English the same right across the country, but teachers are not permitted under any circumstances to select alternative materials (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2010). This is an attitude based firmly in traditional Iranian culture.

2.6 *Political and Economic context*

English Education and Policies at Iran’s Universities - In Iran, two kinds of university exist: state governed and private. The most prestigious universities in Iran are state governed. Entrance is highly competitive but the government pays for tuition and accommodation for those who succeed in the entrance exam. Students failing the

entrance exam but still wishing to pursue their studies can join a group of private universities known as Islamic Azad University, which was established in 1982 as a solution to accommodate surplus students (Mohebati, 2004). Although it is hard to achieve precise figures on student numbers, roughly 50 per cent of high school graduates choose a path to higher education. Both private and public Iranian universities provide all students with the opportunity to study a core general English syllabus. Additional modules in English are available but subject to specific course requirements. The dominant method of teaching English within universities is Grammar-Translation, the main goal enabling students to read and understand English texts that may benefit their majors.

Iranian university students and migration - Iran, as a developing country, needs educated professionals to drive its economic development. However, it has lost a great number in the past few decades (Torbat, 2002). Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a large number of Iranians have immigrated to Western countries. They left their country between 1979 and 1988 (during the creation of the Islamic Republic and the end of the war between Iran and Iraq) and are identified as the 'Iranian diaspora' (Elahi & Karim, 2011). There are significant Iranian populations living in the United States and the rest are scattered across Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia (Abbasi, 2003). Today, many high-achieving students continue to leave Iran for the USA or other countries. According to UNESCO data (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014), 51,549 Iranian students are studying abroad. The most popular destinations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Most common destinations for Iranian students

Destination country	Number of students
Malaysia	9,311
USA	6,763
UK	3,372
UAE	3,204
ITALY	2,975
CANADA	2,805
GERMANY	2,757
AUSTRALIA	2,452
SWEDEN	2,440
INDIA	2,131

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014.

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

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

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