

Fear of Democratic Influences – The Iranian Regime's Fear of the Introduction of the English Language and Culture into Iran

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Abstract

In 1979, the main fundamental change is the regime change: Iran transformed from a pro-Western kingdom into a theocratic Islamic republic. The second change is the rise of religious rule: Ayatollah Khomeini came to power and introduced the principle of “rule by the cleric.” Therefore, the Iranian regime made changes and imposed restrictions on English teaching in both the private and public sectors immediately after it came to power in 1979 to curb the influence of English language teaching. The Iranian regime, which came to power following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, feared that through the teaching of English, foreign ideas and values would be spread in Iran, which could undermine the country’s cultural and religious identity.

Keywords: Iran, Iranian regime, English Studies, English teaching.

1. Introduction – The Islamic Revolution of 1979

A new constitution was drafted in 1979, creating the role of “Supreme Leader” for Khomeini, a position through which he could control the military and security services, and veto candidates for other positions in the country. A president would be elected every four years, but only those approved by the Supreme Leader (through the Revolutionary Guards) could run. Khomeini became head of state for life, as “Leader of the Revolution” and then as “Supreme Spiritual Leader.”

After a period of internal competition over Iran’s future, a coalition led by the Ayatollah Khomeini, who supported Iran as a theocratic state, emerged victorious. On February 1, 1979, Khomeini returned from France after 15 years in France, Turkey, and Iraq and launched a revolution that led to the overthrow of the Shah on February 11 and the appointment of Khomeini as Supreme Leader of Iran.

The new government was extremely conservative. It nationalized industry and restored Islamic traditions in culture and law. Western influence was banned, and the pro-Western elite rushed to join the exiled Shah. There were struggles between the “religious” factions. The various and severe repression has become commonplace. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Iran has transformed from a pro-Western kingdom into an Islamic republic under theocratic rule. The revolution brought an end to the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and the establishment of a new regime led by Ayatollah Khomeini. The new regime is based on the

principle of “rule by the cleric” (Velay-e Faqeeh), according to which the Supreme Leader is the absolute ruler of the country. The Supreme Leader is appointed by the Assembly of Experts and has extensive powers, including determining foreign and domestic policy, commanding the armed forces, and appointing many senior officials (Bagheri, 1994).

2. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the changes that occurred in Iran following the rise of the new regime

The main fundamental change is the regime change: Iran transformed from a pro-Western kingdom into a theocratic Islamic republic. The second change is the rise of religious rule: Ayatollah Khomeini came to power and introduced the principle of “rule by the cleric” (Velay-e Faqeeh). The third change is the nationalization of industry: The new government nationalized industry in the country. The fourth change is the application of Sharia law: The regime anchored the Shiite Islamic religion and traditions in culture and law. The fifth change is the suppression of opposition: A severe suppression of political opposition began. The sixth change is the limitation of Western influence: Western influence was banned, and comprehensive censorship was introduced. The seventh change is the establishment of the Revolutionary Guards: A new military force was established to protect the new regime. The eighth change is mass migration: between 2-3 million Iranians, mainly from the urban middle class, migrated to the West. The ninth change is a change in the social and economic spheres: the Revolutionary Guards have become a significant factor in the economic, industrial, and social spheres. The tenth change is a change in foreign policy: Iran became hostile towards the West, especially against the US and Israel (Riazi, 2005) (Schwartz & Galily, 2021).

3. The impact of the Islamic Revolution in Iran on the general education system in the country

The Islamic Revolution affected the education system in Iran in several areas:

- Assimilation of Shiite-revolutionary ideology: The Iranian regime introduced Shiite content into the curriculum and limited the place of Sunni religious scholars in public education.
- Establishment of Shiite schools: Public Shiite schools, such as the “High Messenger”, were opened in various places in the country.
- Promotion of the Persian language: Iran is working to establish the Persian language among children, for example by opening schools for learning Persian.
- Religious studies for adults: Cultural centers were established, the aim of which is to influence residents to accept the principle of the rule of the religious scholar and convert their religion to Shiite.
 - Higher education: Iranian universities established branches in the country, Expanding Iranian influence in higher education.
 - Religious discrimination: Restrictions were imposed on certain religious groups, such as the Baha'is, who were banned from higher education institutions.
 - Removal of teachers and students: Baha'i teachers and students were removed from the public education system.

These changes reflect the Iranian regime’s efforts to use the education system as a tool to spread revolutionary ideology and strengthen its political and religious influence. The education system in Iran since 1979 has been characterized by religious discrimination, restrictions on

academic freedom, and significant ideological changes while persecuting minority groups and alternative educational institutions.

Along with the rise to power of this regime, a policy was also adopted regarding the teaching of English in Iran (Rassouli & Osam, 2019).

4. The changes made by the Iranian regime in English teaching immediately after its rise to power in 1979.

The Iranian regime made changes and imposed restrictions on English teaching in both the private and public sectors immediately after it came to power in 1979 to curb the influence of English language teaching. The changes and restrictions were as follows:

First, the age at which language acquisition began was limited. English language acquisition begins only for students in the seventh grade.

Second, private English institutes were closed as part of the cultural and political changes led by the country's new leaders. The leaders of the revolution feared that private English institutes would spread foreign ideas and values that could undermine the country's cultural and religious identity.

Third, textbooks for teaching English in the public education system were replaced. Until 1979, English was taught in books called: "The Graded English Series". The study of these books was based on the situation-based language learning method of the time. The books allowed the acquisition of basic knowledge in the English language for an academic future.

From 1979, the books: "Right Path to English Series" with emphases were introduced into the education system. For the Khatab – the books focused on pronunciation, vocabulary and alphabet recognition. For the upper division – the books focused on reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar. Language acquisition through these books was acquired through GTM (Grammar Translation Method). These books did not include writing, listening, and speaking. These books were used until 2013, more than 3 decades (34 years).

Fourth, Methodology – The methodology of teaching the English language was influenced by the books, which were replaced immediately after the rise of the regime. In the public sector, language teaching was based on GTM (Grammar Translation Method). The main skill in these books was reading comprehension. However, this skill did not provide students with the opportunity to communicate, because it was not based on dialogues from life in realistic situations. There was also an emphasis on translating sentences from English to Persian. Although this was considered a method Useful for raising students' awareness of both the source and target languages, through a form-focused approach, its widespread use is considered a disadvantage of English language teaching in Iran.

Fifth, teachers in the public education system – the significant disadvantage is the lack of quality teachers, and those that exist in the public system are unmotivated. They were trained using traditional methods. In addition, they had to endure pressure because they had to finish teaching from books by a given time while ignoring essential skills and strategies of learning English (writing, listening, and speaking). Not only did they not have the ability to communicate in English, or teach communicative English, but there was also no other way to teach.

Sixth, students in public schools did not have to learn communicative English because university entrance exams did not test communicative English skills, but rather tested knowledge of grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. These students lacked productive skills such as listening and speaking.

Seventh, assessment – University entrance exams did not test communicative aspects of language, but rather grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Therefore, students learned receptive skills and were lacking in productive skills (listening and speaking).

The private sector has experienced significant changes over the three decades since 1979. In the first decade, private English language institutes were abruptly closed by the new regime. In the second decade, institutes began to emerge and grow due to the demand and need of the population in the private sector. In the third decade, the institutes became a profitable industry and a big business (Atai & Mazlum, 2013).

When private institutes in Iran returned to serve the population, they adopted a different approach and contrasted with that which existed in the public sector.

English language teaching in Iran is characterized by a struggle between two opposing approaches: the public sector versus the private sector. The public sector represents a local version of English, adapted to Islamic and Iranian values. This sector is characterized by local textbooks, traditional teaching methods, and less skilled teachers. In contrast, the private sector promotes a global version of English, using international teaching materials, Communicative teaching methods, and more skilled teachers. The Iranian regime dictates English teaching according to the local approach (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018).

5. In the formal (public) education system

In analyzing the regime's attitude towards the teaching of English and its policy on the matter in the public sector, the period can be divided into two phases:

Phase One: From 1979-2013 (34 years) approximately 3 decades.

Phase Two: From 2013-2017.

We will review the policy and its impact on textbooks, methodology, teachers, students, and the assessment of knowledge in language acquisition.

6. In the formal education system in the first phase: From 1979-2013 (34 years) approximately 3 decades

Textbooks – In the first phase, textbooks were replaced in 1979 with books called:

“The Right Path to English Series” - which emphasized skills of pronunciation, vocabulary and recognition of the English alphabet in middle school, while in high school they emphasized skills of reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar. In contrast, skills that were not addressed in these books were: writing, listening and speaking (Seidi et al., 2016; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015).

Methodology – The methodology in the public sector was derived and based on English textbooks. The Grammar Translation Method (GTM). This approach incorporates a primary language skill: reading comprehension.

This methodology is acquired through teaching patterns Grammar in a didactic way and vocabulary memorization. The approach did not allow students to communicate because it was not based on real-life dialogue (Mazlum & Poorebrahim, 2013; Forouzani, Foroozandeh & Sharaki, 2015).

The method emphasized translating sentences from English to Persian. This was considered an effective technique, through which students paid attention to the source and target

languages by focusing on formality. The widespread use of this was considered a shortcoming of the language learning system in Iran (Shishavan, 2010; Dolati & Seliman, 2010).

Teachers – The teachers, who taught in the public sector, were not of high quality, and did not show motivation. This was a major shortcoming. They learned using traditional methods, they were not able to communicate in English or communicatively teach English. There was also no other way to teach. They were forced to finish the books each time while ignoring essential skills and strategies for learning English. In these boring classes, students were not motivated enough to learn English and only thought about how to get passing grades to finish the course (Akbari, 2015).

Students – Students in the public sector did not learn English for communication, because they had to pass university entrance exams. University entrance exams did not test communicative aspects of the language, but only tested grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge. Therefore, students acquired only receptive skills (reading and listening) and lacked productive skills (speaking and writing).

Assessment – University entrance exams in English were based on grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary knowledge, not communicative aspects. Therefore, students acquired only receptive skills (reading and listening) and not productive skills (speaking and listening) in written essays, as they had to prepare themselves for standardized tests. The Iranian education system was based on summative mode exams (Kherabadi & Moghaddam, 2019).

7. In the formal (public) education system in the second stage: Starting in 2013

Textbooks – Starting in 2013, textbooks were replaced in schools in the public sector.

In middle school, textbooks called: “English for Schools” began to be taught. These books taught literacy and communication, not through a grammar-translation method, as they had taught for three decades earlier. Also, unlike the previous three decades in which they taught pronunciation), vocabulary, and letter recognition. Also in 2013, they emphasized, through the new books, learning the letters of the alphabet with their corresponding sounds, when they are presented in context, which was not taught in the previous three decades. The books from 2013 combined the teaching of communicative language based on local themes and local culture (Leather & Motallebzadeh, 2015).

This with touches of local identity and culture, enriches the learners. They have characteristics of communicative language such as the insertion of real pictures instead of drawings, the use of all four language skills, a reflection that is close to real life, contexts of conversations and attractions, paying attention to meaning more than form and integrating students in interactions.

In three years of high school, they studied books called: “Vision”. The vision book for the upper division also contains the four language skills, diverse and interesting communicative tasks, communicative tasks and activities, while enjoying the right strength of dealing with situations. It is worth noting that the English presented in such books is devoid of Western culture and presents Persian culture and ideology as well as Islamic values. (Mohammadian-Haghighi & Norton, 2017).

Methodology – Under the influence of the shift from the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) to a communicative approach, Aghagolzadeh, and Davari (2017, p.55) write that in this ongoing reform process, which aims to reorganize English teaching through the integration of language skills and language components, it is believed that Iranian students will be better equipped to communicate. In the new curriculum, English teaching has been redefined to primarily encourage students’ active participation in the learning process and the use of the target

language in communication and to also encourage teachers to promote students’ communication skills and reduce the use of the mother tongue. Leather and Motallebzadeh (2015) call this reform: This reform is a ‘revolutionary process’.

Teachers – Despite this revolutionary process, teachers are not prepared to deliver the course to the new communication standards. Observations show that teachers do not feel prepared to teach communication skills adequately by the curriculum given to them. There is a significant lack of adequate training before entering teaching and during the job, which has led to an ambiguous implementation of the new communication approach.

Students – Following the social changes in families based in the major cities of Iran, there has been a widening gap in the level of English proficiency among students. Many students with low English proficiency feel confused about how to learn English and how to deal with other students who have high English proficiency. In some areas, classrooms are overcrowded, leading to a lack of sufficient time for each student to participate in class discussions or group and pair work. In such classrooms, students are not motivated enough to learn English.

Assessment – While classroom assessment is based on formative and integrated tests, the English section of the university entrance exam, which was planned to be held for the first time in 2019, is still unknown to teachers and students. In conclusion, as Aghagolzadeh and Davari (2017: 53) point out, although it is still too early to assess and test the quality and performance of the new curriculum, especially the new government-supported textbook series, it is clear that due to the low availability of skilled teachers, limited time, and unclear procedures for assessment, achieving the goals seems out of reach.

8. In the informal (private) education system

Textbooks – The private institutes used textbooks, which were commercially produced but (copied) pirated. As Al-Kabari (2004) writes, the private sector did not publish local textbooks to achieve the goal, but rather, most of them used commercial foreign books, developed by experts in the field which are more interesting because they contain activities, tasks, interesting topics and materials according to difficulty levels. These books prepare students for communication in authentic situations while knowing the target language and culture, and a corresponding assessment method. They use books of high reputation while representing Western culture. These books are based on real situations. These books help students reach their desired goals. They learn the language as an international language (Baleghizade & Motahed, 2010).

Methodology – The methodology in the private sector was built according to the books, which led to the communicative approach. This approach integrates 4 language skills in an integrative way. It comes to responding to the needs of the learners and what interests them.

Teachers – Teachers recruited to teach in institutes were more professional. They were trained and participated in courses before and during their employment. This allowed them to communicate interactively with students. These teachers were more motivated than in the public sector.

Students – Students who come to study in institutes are motivated to learn. This is because students’ participation in language acquisition in institutes is not mandatory.

Assessment – Assessment techniques in the private sector are consistent with communicative principles and are more communicative and interactive, to assess students’ ability to use language in the context of real-world situation (Iranmehr & Davari, 2018).

9. Conclusion: Fear of Democratic Influences – The Iranian Regime’s Fear of the Introduction of the English Language and Culture into Iran

The Iranian regime, which came to power following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, feared the introduction of the English language along with its culture, for several main reasons. The first reason was due to opposition to Western influence, and in particular American influence, which was contrary to the Islamic and national values that the regime sought to promote. The second reason was due to fear of the introduction of foreign values into Iran. The leaders of the revolution feared the English language because they saw it as an imperialist language. In other words, they feared that through the teaching of English, foreign ideas and values would be spread in Iran, which could undermine the country’s cultural and religious identity. The third reason was due to the regime’s policy focus on teaching Persian. The new regime sought to promote the study of the Persian language, to deepen it and strengthen it, as a symbol of national identity on the one hand, and the other hand, it worked to reduce the study of foreign languages in private schools. A fourth reason was due to the regime's policy of maintaining state education only. The regime worked to centralize the education system under government supervision, it wanted to ensure full control over educational content and educational influences.

From all that has been said above, the regime saw the penetration of English along with its culture as a threat to Islamic-Iranian identity and therefore tried to limit the influence of the English language and its culture.

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