



## English Language in Iran: Why *Practice* is More Common than *Practise*?

### LA LANGUE ANGLAISE: POURQUOI LA PRATIQUE EST PLUS COMMUN QUE DE PRATIQUER?

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#### Abstract

Present article discusses the history of English language and its role in academic and non-academic context in Iran. The study also tries to investigate why American English is more common among English language learners and teachers in Iran. In order to fulfill the aims of the study, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 55 university professors, high school teachers and English language students. The findings revealed that a number of main factors such as linguistics, political and cultural factors have lead to priority of American English in Academic education of Iran.

**Key words:** English language; American English; Academic education

#### Résumé

Le présent article traite de l'histoire de la langue anglaise et son rôle dans le contexte académique et non académique en Iran. L'étude tente également de déterminer pourquoi l'anglais américain est plus fréquente chez les apprenants de la langue anglaise et les enseignants en Iran. Afin d'atteindre les objectifs de l'étude, une série d'entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés avec des professeurs d'université, les 55 enseignants du secondaire et aux étudiants en langue anglaise. Les résultats ont révélé qu'un certain nombre de facteurs principaux tels que la linguistique, des facteurs politiques et culturelles ont conduit à la priorité de l'anglais américain dans l'éducation universitaire de l'Iran.

#### INTRODUCTION

As Hasman (2004) asserts, "the global spread of English over the last years is remarkable. It is unprecedented in several ways; by the increasing number of users of the language; by its depth of penetration into societies; and by its range of functions" (p. 19). English language has found its way in Iran like other countries. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in learning English among Iranian students. As Dahmardeh (2009) maintains "English seems to have found its way smoothly right to the Iranian society, proving itself to be a necessity, rather than a mere school subject" (p. 278). He further elaborates on the influence of English in Iranian society maintaining that

English dailies, weeklies, journals and other English periodicals directed by Iranian nationals are issued and available throughout the country. The government's policy for promoting the export of non-oil products made companies and exporters take advantage of this medium to introduce their goods and products to the world market. The internet, the use of which requires a substantial English proficiency level and through which people enjoy world relationships, has gained national recognition. Iran's cooperation with the UN, Islamic Conference Organization, ECO, OPEC and other regional and world organizations makes English a practical necessity for the involved nationals. International book fairs and trade exhibitions held annually in the capital demonstrate the country's readiness and its dependable capacity to maintain its world relationships in English (p. 278).

In Iran, people aim to learn English with different

purposes in mind. One may learn it so as to travel to foreign countries, another one want to be an English teacher while others may want to be tour leaders or to have economical communications with other countries, or to be able to pass TOEFL or IELTS exams in order to get their PhDs. It is worth mentioning that despite many other countries such as Japan, which English was promoted to a high status of the vehicle of internationalization (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2008), it was kept as a vehicle to educational advancement in Iran (Farhady et al., 2010). English has been predominantly efficient in educational system of Iran. This system requires all of the students to have a basic knowledge of English. Regarding the varieties of English used by students, Shomoosi & Marzban (2010) believe that Iranian students learning English mostly follow American English and this trend can be seen in accent, spelling and style as far as writing and speaking are concerned. In Iran, American English is clearly more prevalent than other varieties as most of the students leaning English prefer this variety. Present study aims at investigating why American English is more prevalent in Iran. To date, there are quite few, if any, studies addressing the role of English and popularity of American English in Iran.

## 1. HISTORY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN IRAN

The emergence of English language in Iran dates back to Qajar dynasty in 1873. Qajar kings traveled to European countries and got familiar with culture and language of western countries. Naser Aldin Shah was the first king of Iran after Islamic period that traveled to European countries including England. After extraction of oil in Iran in 1908, many English engineers and missionaries traveled to Iran for extraction of oil. The interaction of Iranian people with English in that area was very widespread due to economical and political relations.

By the emergence of United States as a new powerful country, the cultural, economical and political relationship between Iran and America became more noticeable. Due to large demand for learning English, a lot of foreign schools were founded by the government, foreign cultural associations, institutes and missionaries. During Pahlavie's kingdom (1925-1979), the relationship between Iran and America became closer. At that time, because of king and his families' interest toward western cultural values, mostly English-speaking countries, relationships and trips of imperial family to European countries increased and much value was assigned to English language. In 1934, this language was established in Iranian educational system and attempts were made in order to expand it in the country (Hayati & Mashhadi, 2010). American efforts to officially contribute to development of English language instruction lead to the establishment of the Iran

American Society (IAS) in 1950. The aim of this institute was development and extension of English language in Iran. In line with these attempts, many American instructors were recruited to teach English language to Iranian students in IAS. Fulbright program also began in 1950 and up until 1959. This program provided some grants for English language teachers and professors to study English literature and teaching methodology in American universities. It also held some training seminars for teachers who had not studied in United States (Strain, 1971).

From the time on, English language found its status in Iranian society as a foreign language i.e. English dominated over other languages taught in educational setting and became nationwide as the only foreign language with primary importance in academic environment. Later on, some students were sent to English speaking countries conventionally to pursue their studies for graduate and post-graduate levels (Sediqi, 1971). New universities employed American and British instructors so as to promote English language in academic setting. Some universities like Tehran and Shiraz used English as a medium of instruction. In addition, foreign academic institutes mostly used English as a language of instruction in order to have more language exposure directly and efficiently. These institutes got benefits from native teachers and staffs in the language teaching process. Moreover, English became a key necessity in the military since a high ability of English proficiency was necessary for the army employees to go to the United States for getting more expertise. In the process of military modernization, most of the high-ranking officers were sent to United States to study in military sciences. So they had to pass some courses in English language as a prerequisite (Tollefson 1991).

According to strain (1971), the Fulbright program initiated the teaching of English in Iranian secondary schools in 1959. In order to implement teaching in this level, five American English teachers held workshops for the Iranian English teachers in different cities of Iran. In 1960, the Iranian Ministry of Education assigned some other graduates to these teams and they traveled to different cities and provided teacher training courses. After Fulbright program, the Peace Corps program started its English language program in Iran in 1962. In the same year the Fulbright program changed its focus from the secondary school level to the university level. In 1967 this program extended and concentrated on other levels. (Strain, 1971). It was also in 1962 that a contract between Pahlavi University in Shiraz and the University of Pennsylvania was developed. The objective of this contract was the establishment of a bilingual institution for promoting western technologies in the country. The University of Pennsylvania recruited graduate Iranian students as faculty members in Pahlavi University. In this institution, all of the materials taught were presented

in English. These attempts made a great contribution to English language teaching and learning in Iran. The English teaching programs in the country lasted up to Islamic revolution in 1979.

## 2. PRESENT STATUS OF ENGLISH IN IRAN

### 2.1 English in Non-academic Context

Iran is an old country with a long history exceeding 2500 years; there are many historical sites and museum in the country which attract the attention of tourists. Every year, many tourists from around the world travel to Iran to visit historical sites and cities. By the advancement of tourism industry, some of the gift sellers in big historical cities like Tehran, Esfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz, Tabriz and Kerman attend English language classes in order to learn English so that they do not miss their chances in the competitive market. They aim to attract more foreign customers to their shops via informative discussion about their gifts and antique products. For hostess and host in hotels, waitress and waiters in restaurant, the goal is to offer the best services to tourists since it not only attracts their attentions but also act as an advertisement for a permanent marketing. For those who deal with tourism industry, the conversational skills are of primary importance in order to meet their needs. Therefore, sellers in historical cities like Esfahan mostly are familiar with English to some extent. English has also influenced business trades and communication. E-commerce is one the prominent factors for most of the companies to reach their goals in marketing contest. Also, for entrepreneurship, it is a way of alleviating the problem of unemployment. For this group of people, again communicative skills seems important to focus on not to leave the pace of improvement. As a result, the syllabus for some of the classes of society leads to EOP (English for Occupational Purposes).

The role of English is mostly vital in business market. In recent years, the export products of Iran have increased and companies try to find new international markets for selling their products which makes using English inevitable. For example, even on products used inside the country, name and description of the products are written in English beside their Persian equivalents.

English language also has found its way in media in Iran. Recently a channel has been founded called Press TV which broadcasts Iran and the world news in English. The channel belongs to Iran's state broadcasting company, the only authorized body in the country to have radio and television channels. Press TV has a lot of reporters all over the world. Some of these reporters are native speakers of English. Furthermore, other channels have special news programs which are broadcasted in English. Moreover, some English newspapers are published in English. One

of the recent reasons for development of English in Iran is emergence of internet and web sites that people surf. Due to the fact that many useful web sites are in English, people like to learn English in order to use these web sites. Beside this, there are some publishers in the country which publish books in English for different disciplines.

### 2.2 English in Academic Context

The most prominent role of English in Iran can be seen in academic setting especially in graduate programs. As a language of international communication, it has led Iranian officials to take it as a must in ministry of education and plan different programs during all of the academic stages in the country.

Currently, English is taught for three years in junior high school four hours per week and also three years in senior high school for three hours per week as a six unit credit course and one of the main courses of instruction (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). The aim of this course is to help students read simple English texts and to improve their reading comprehension. Also some new vocabulary and grammatical points are presented in this level. After high school level, students who want to enroll university have to pass pre-university programs for one year. In this program, they study pre-university English course for four hours a week. Again, in this level focus is on reading comprehension of texts. In pre-university level, the texts are some times selected from authentic materials, such as internet sources, to enhance students' reading comprehension ability. Unfortunately, in high school level the conversational skills are severely neglected at the cost of paying more attention to reading. As such, students' real need which is communication is forgotten. However, time limitation is another problem (four hours allocated per week) and it is difficult to cover the language skills within the academic year. Nowadays, the use of educational technology for increasing efficiency of learning is undeniable and audio visual media application has primary importance in language teaching; however, this is not paid enough attention in this level, and most of the schools lack language laboratory to get benefit from audio visual devices for enhancing conversational skills. As such, some students are not interested in learning English in high schools. To sum up, as the main purpose of English language learning in educational system in Iran and other countries is communication, because of some shortcomings like absence of well-formed syllabus, weaknesses in application of educational technology, limitation of time and teachers' burn out, it can not afford the needs of the Iranian EFL learners completely.

The significance of English language learning in a nation-wide level has led language teaching business to set out English institutes all over the country. While there is an increasing tendency among people to learn English, as the medium of scientific resources, references and communication, public schools can not afford the

communication needs of the students satisfactorily. To fulfill this inadequacy, the private language institutes have taken the responsibility of supporting people to meet their needs in communication. Students who are interested in learning English register in these private language institutes. In contrast to state educational programs, private institutes concentrate more on communicative skills to fulfill the conversational needs of the learners. Thus, the weakness of public schools is to some extent compensated by private schools efficiently. In some cities and towns, the classes are mostly welcomed, and considered very efficient by most of the people.

As the language of academic and scientific communication, English has a key role in universities, so it is included in the curriculum. Teaching English as a foreign language at university level consists of a three unit credit for all university students in any major; moreover, they have to pass a four unit credit as a ESP course regarding their major. English teaching in university often revolves around translation and the main objective is to enable students to read and understand English written materials in their majors (Farhady et al., 2010). The English language teaching in universities mainly consists of two parts. The first part is called general English which is taught about 51 hours within a semester, and all of the students in any field of study should pass this course. The second part called English for specific purposes usually consists of 51 to 68 hours taught regarding students' field of study. The aim of the first section is to strengthen students' general English mostly reading comprehension and the aim of the second one is to make students familiar with English specific concepts and technical words that are related to their majors. Likewise, English as a major is studied in three branches: Translation, literature and Teaching English as a foreign Language (TEFL).

English language also has a vital role in graduate studies; for those who are interested in getting PhD degrees, it is mandatory to have a certificate in TOEFL, IELTS or other language exams. Also for those who want to be accepted as a faculty member in university, having a good command of English is a privilege.

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### 3. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND PERSIAN ALPHABET AND SOUND SYSTEMS

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“Persian is an Iranian language belonging to the Indo-Iranian sub-branch of the eastern branch of the Indo-European language family” (Sadat Tehrani, 2008, p. 1). Farsi and English, though belonging to the same language family (Indo-European), are very different in alphabet, sound system, and syllable structure. The Farsi alphabet is based on Arabic, which is a consonantal system and contains thirty two letters: twenty three consonants and six vowels as well as two diphthongs and a total of 29

phonemes (Windfuhr, 1979 and Samareh 2000, cited in Hall, 2007, p. 26). Whereas, the English alphabet is based on Latin which contains twenty-six letters, twenty four consonants, twelve vowels, eight diphthongs, and a total of 44 phonemes (Sousa, 2005). It must be noted that English has fifteen more phonemes than Farsi. This can lead to many difficulties for Persian native speakers.

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## 4. THE STUDY

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As mentioned before, American English is more common than other varieties in Iran. Present study aims to investigate why American English is more popular among Iranians compared with other varieties of English such as British one.

### 4.1 Methodology

#### 4.1.1 Participants

Fifty five university instructors, high school teachers and English language students participated in the study. The participants were from different universities and also affiliated with governmental and private institutions. They had long experience in learning and teaching English. They volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews.

#### 4.1.2 Procedure

We conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with university professors, high school teachers and English language students in order to find why American English is more predominant among English language learners and teachers. The reason behind applying interviews in the study was that through interviews we were able to assess the participants' ideas in a more thorough manner compared with questionnaire. After conducting interviews, we transcribed and coded the conversations. Then common patterns of responses were extracted and identified. The results are presented and discussed in the following section.

### 4.2 Results and Discussion

The interviews were analyzed carefully and most common responses and ideas were identified. Then, most common patterns were classified into the following categories. It is worth noting that all of the participants in the study agreed that American English is more widespread than British variety in Iran. The participants mentioned the following reasons for popularity of American English in Iran respectively.

- *Compatibility of American Phonological and Orthographical Systems with Persian*

90% of the university professors believed that American English is more similar to Persian than British variety. Persian native language speakers utter the letters which they see e.g. it is easier for learners to pronounce [teacher] than [teachə]. As another example, in spelling of Persian language, one consonant can not be followed by



another consonant. Therefore, it is easier for learners to write “center” than “centre”. Another reason for following American variety by Iranian learners was considered to be intelligibility of American accent based on teachers’ views.

*When I use American accent and pronunciation in my classes, students understand me better (one of the teachers).*

Many of the students believed that American English is easier for them to learn compared with other varieties of English.

*When I talk in American variety, I look more native like (one of the students).*

This can be due to similarities between American English and Persian in mentioned areas.

#### • **Political History**

Based on the literature close relationship between Iran and America in previous years lead to implementation of societies and institutes in Iran which their effects are obvious now. As Shomossi & Marzban (2010) maintain, Iran as an example of postcolonial society, where American culture and education used to show domination before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, can be a perfect case of how this effect has lingered through and still manifests itself in several educational dimensions. Some instructors attributed the dominance of American English to aforementioned reason.

#### • **Private Institutions**

There are many institutions which offer English programs to students in Iran. The number of these institutes is so high that it is difficult to find cities in which there are no English language institutes. Most of these institutes follow American English i.e. their textbooks and multimedia which are given to students are related to American English e.g. Streamline series. This has led to spread of American English among learners. Some of these institutes like Iran Language Institute, ILI (formerly IAS) strictly adhere to American variety and a lot of care is exercised by them in recruiting the instructors for these institutes. The methods used in this institute which has branches in different parts of the country emphasize heavily on American accent e.g. they immediately correct the learners who violate this variety. In their training courses, they ask instructors to follow American English

#### • **Professors and Teachers**

As mentioned before, in the past, many Iranian students were sent to US universities to obtain higher educational degrees. Also Iranian universities developed some joint programs with American universities, which accelerated the process of getting scholarships for students to get their MA and PhD degrees in American universities. Most of the professors who teach English or write books for English language learners are graduates from American Universities. They consciously or unconsciously follow American English. In addition, when these teachers teach

in universalities, they talk in American accent which encourages the students to do so. This rationale was supported by many interviewees.

#### • **American Media**

Nowadays, Hollywood movies are found in large quantities. There is a “kind of enthusiasm in the youngsters to follow American movies and methods of education” (Shomossi & Marzban, 2010, p. 42). Due to advancement of film industry, the youth are very interested in watching films and movies. Exposure of the youth to these films enforces them to adapt American accent. This may directly or indirectly have influenced the way students learn and use English. When watching these films, viewers are very much eager to know what the characters say. So, little by little, they get familiar with American accent. In addition, most of the educational CDs which are found in the market are American. This is another reason for popularity of American variety.

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## CONCLUSION

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Present article strived to find why American variety is more common in Iran. The study revealed that the role of English has been more pronounced in recent years and Iranian show interest in learning English. Also, a number of factors such as linguistics, political and cultural factors lead to priority of American English in Academic education of Iran. Due to the fact that there are few comprehensive published studies on the role of English language in Iran, it would be promising to conduct some further researches in this field. Of course, this study is a preliminary research and therefore, more studies are needed to investigate thoroughly the role of English and changes in the way that English is used in recent years in Iran.

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