

## BRIEF REPORTS AND SUMMARIES

TESOL Quarterly invites readers to submit short reports and updates on their work. These summaries may address any areas of interest to Quarterly readers.

**Edited by LAWRENCE JUN ZHANG**

*University of Auckland*

**MARY JANE CURRY**

*University of Rochester*

### *The Role of English Language Institutes in Iran*

**FATEMEH MOHAMMADIAN HAGHIGHI AND BONNY NORTON**

*University of British Columbia*

*Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada*

doi: 10.1002/tesq.338

English language institutes (ELIs) are playing an increasingly important role in Iranian society. The proliferation of ELIs provides evidence of the increasing value of the English language in Iran (Sheibani, 2012) and, as argued by, Borjian (2010), “it is hard to imagine the accomplishment of the private sector without considering the enormous interest shown by Iranian youth in attending these institutions” (p. 60). Although the surge in the number of Iranian ELIs is well documented, what has not yet been adequately researched is the role of ELIs in Iran, and their appeal for Iranian students. Therefore, of central interest to our pilot study were the two relevant questions: What is the role of English language institutes in Iran? Why do ELIs appeal to Iranian students?

In this brief report, we share our findings from a 2012 pilot study of five ELIs in Shiraz, Iran, whereby we gained greater insight into the role of ELIs in Iran and their appeal for Iranian students. We argue in this short report that ELIs serve not only as language learning institutions, but also as complex social spaces that increase the range of identity options for students, and women in particular.

## CONTEXT

Kiany, Mahdavy, and Samar (2011) note that during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) in Iran, English was regarded as an instrument for modernizing the country, but after the Islamic revolution in 1979 it was perceived as a threat to national and Islamic identity. Similarly, Farhady, Hezaveh, and Hedayati (2010, p. 11) argue that while many countries such as Hong Kong, India, Japan, and China consider English as the “key to the international world of commerce,” this position is not as evident in Iran. According to Hayati and Mashhadi (2010), “Iranian educational policy for English mostly centers on grammar and reading—elements incommensurate with the ever-increasing demands of society” (p. 34). Along similar lines, Borjian (2013) notes that after the Islamic revolution in Iran, the sociocultural aspect of language was considered “inappropriate” and “only phonological, morphological, and syntactical aspects of English were included in school curricula” (p. 73).

As a result, while the English language is a compulsory subject for 6 years (from Grade 7 to Grade 12) in the Iranian public school curriculum, the government’s language policy for public schools does not promote and accommodate communicative skills. Dahmardeh (2009) notes further that since the majority of language tests in Iran do not assess communicative language content, “teaching communicative skills remains a neglected component in many foreign language classrooms” (p. 9), and public school teachers focus their pedagogy on the explicit teaching of grammar rather than English communication skills (Baleghizadeh & Farshchi, 2009). Students who wish to develop their communicative English skills look for support beyond public schooling, and therefore choose to study at private ELIs. According to Ghorbani (2011), ELIs “owe their existence to the very weakness of spoken English instruction in the formal education system” (p. 512). The purpose of our pilot study was to investigate these claims and gain a deeper insight into the language practices of ELIs and the role of ELIs in the Iranian society.

## METHOD

In August 2012, we identified five very different ELIs in Shiraz, a major city in Iran, and sought the cooperation of the leading administrators in these ELIs. It is important to note that while we were centrally interested in the views of Iranian students, our purpose was primarily to seek preliminary insights from these established administrators, who had many years of experience with a wide range of

students. This pilot study lays the groundwork for a more extensive study of the students themselves.

The main methods of data collection were questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, undertaken jointly by the researchers. In order to have a license to open an ELI in Iran, one has to be working for the public school system. Therefore, two of the research participants, besides being ELI administrators, were also public school English teachers. We were therefore privileged to gain a better understanding of how English is taught in public schools.

The research sites were the following ELIs (all the names of the ELIs that appear in this article have been changed to protect the confidentiality of our research participants): Mojdeh, Saba, Sohrab, Peyman, and Shiraz Language Centre, which were established in 1985, 2002, 2002, 2003, and 1998, respectively. Mojdeh and Saba ELIs are among the largest and most popular ELIs in Shiraz and have multiple branches across the city. They offer classes for school-aged and adult language learners. They have separate buildings in different locations, exclusively for male or female school-aged students under 18 years old, and some branches for co-educational classes for adult students. At the time of the study, Mojdeh ELI had approximately 14,000 language learners (about 7,840 female and 5,701 male), half of whom were teenagers, and a total number of 140 teachers (92 female and 48 male). Saba ELI had over 6,000 students (about 4,000 female and 2,000 male), and 70 female and 30 male teachers. The remaining three ELIs all had fewer than 3,000 language learners. Shiraz Language Centre only provides classes for language learners above the age of 18, while Sohrab and Peyman ELIs are exclusively for female school-aged students.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

It is important to summarize our findings by focusing on (i) the student population of ELIs, (ii) student expectations of ELIs, (iii) the curricula in ELIs, and (iv) the materials used in ELIs.

### **The ELI Students**

Our pilot study found that the majority of students who participate in English classes at ELIs are school-aged students from middle-class, low-income families. Although issues of inequality and poverty may exclude poor families from access to ELIs, some ELIs try to address this issue by offering lower tuition rates to top students from low-income families. As one administrator said,

The English language is quite popular in Iran, especially in Shiraz for different reasons. In Shiraz most people, even low-income families, are concerned about the education of their children. That has been quite helpful to us for running our institute. That is why we have been successful.

These school-aged language learners attend English classes at ELIs after school hours, usually from 6–8 p.m. As noted by one of the administrators,

The students directly, after finishing school, come here and they are so tired, but they come with interest because they like it! Because the system is totally different from the public schools. Here, we have more flexible techniques and ways of teaching.

As pointed out earlier, the number of female students at ELIs is far greater than that of male students. This highlights the particular appeal of ELIs for female language learners, and the extent to which families support language education for females. It is also consistent with research around the globe that suggests that learning English is a way of seeking gender equity (e.g., Kobayashi, 2002; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). English teaching and translation offer women a socially sanctioned occupational choice, a profession that is considered socially acceptable in Iran. Extending this argument, our data also illustrate that female English teachers outnumber male teachers, which provides evidence for the active role of women in language education in Iran. It is also noteworthy that the average age of female and male teachers ranges from 25 to 32, which is indicative of the youthful population of English teachers at these ELIs.

In the Iranian context, many young women have limited mobility. Generally, for young women from a religious, middle-class family, going to cinemas, restaurants, or coffee shops with friends is generally not an option approved by parents. Therefore, for such families, English classes are a particularly desirable form of outdoor recreation, a place where young women can experience a different world. For instance, women from religious families who are generally limited to Iranian media in their homes now have the opportunity to become familiar with English songs and movies, and through English course books they expand their knowledge of different cultures around the world. In co-educational “chat classes” they freely discuss controversial topics with the opposite sex and voice their opinions. The diverse curricula of ELIs provide opportunities for young women to socialize with their peers, experience a different environment, and expand the range of imagined identities available to them (Kanno & Norton, 2003; Norton, 2013).

## Student Expectations

We discovered that Iranian students have diverse reasons for learning English, including being able to find information from different sources on the Internet, continuing education abroad, getting scholarships overseas, finding better jobs, travelling to foreign countries, or living abroad. The young people attending ELIs are planning their futures and their long-term goals at this early stage of their lives. Their participation in English classes is not mandatory, but they are eager to learn English and “they come with enthusiasm,” as one of the administrators noted.

As for the adult language learners, ELIs were appealing for a range of reasons. One administrator remarked,

People like to learn English because it's an international language and it means a passport for them to gain status. If they want to be somebody, to go abroad, to have new opportunities, they have got to learn the English language.

Due to the high demand for learning English, ELIs run some classes from 8 to 10 p.m. These classes target individuals who cannot participate in classes during regular hours because they work during the day. These learners attend English classes after work. Interestingly, neither their busy schedules nor their physical tiredness seem to decrease attendance at these classes.

One administrator noted that in teacher training sessions he always tells the teachers “don't think that everybody who comes to class merely wants to learn a language or English. For some people it's a kind of relaxation, it's a hobby. It's a fun place.” He went on to say that

For people who are suffering from emotional hardship or for those who are experiencing some kind of family drama, English classes are a kind of psychological relief. For them, English class is a place of refuge where they can spend a couple of hours on language learning and forget about their life difficulties.

The “psychological relief” mentioned in this quote is explained in part by the research of Kubota (2011), who has found that a language class can be a place “in which learners enjoy the activity through socializing with like-minded people and being exposed to an exotic English-speaking space removed from daily work or family life” (p. 480).

Saba is the only ELI in Shiraz that runs a special English conversation class for elderly learners. This is in response to the needs of parents whose children live abroad. Referring to the elderly learners, the administrator of Saba ELI said, “these seniors make new friends in

English classes. It's like a community for them. Some people even say if they don't want to be a victim of Alzheimer's, they should learn English to have a kind of mental exercise." This echoes the findings of Bialystok, Craik, Klein, and Viswanathan's (2004) study that show that bilingualism can reduce the rate of cognitive decline that is caused by aging.

## The ELI Curricula

An examination of ELI curricula provides further insight into the appeal of ELIs for Iranian students. All the ELIs in our study offer IELTS and TOEFL preparation courses, due to the increasing demand of students. The majority of those who attend these classes hope to pursue their education abroad or travel to English-dominant countries. In addition to conversation classes, Mojdeh and Saba ELIs offer a co-ed discussion class known as *chat class* for high intermediate and advanced learners. In this class, the language learners have the opportunity to engage in contemporary debates. This is one of the most popular English classes because not only do learners have a chance to practice their English, but they can also freely express their views about topics that may be avoided in other public contexts. Since these classes are usually co-ed, they are particularly appealing to young adults. Other popular courses among language learners are media classes in which various types of media such as newspapers, audio or video news, and popular Western movies or soap operas are utilized. These help the students to improve their listening skills and learn more about common English idioms and expressions used in media.

As part of their extracurricular activities, ELIs occasionally take their students to English tours within the city. Since English is a foreign language in Iran, students have very little opportunity to communicate in English outside the classroom. Some teachers address this gap by planning English tours to historical monuments and tourist attractions, so that students can practice English with one another, or if fortunate with tourists, outside the classroom context. For political and financial reasons, foreign governments tend not to grant tourist visas to Iranians unless they provide documents that indicate the traveller has extensive financial resources or strong ties to Iran. Consequently, only affluent people can travel to English-dominant countries. For people who have fewer financial resources, the only available option would be travelling to neighboring countries.

In response to the need to communicate with English speakers—and, as noted by one of the administrators, “because of sanctions and the problems we have, we cannot have native English speakers in

Iran”—administrators are making increasing use of webinar presentations by fluent English speakers. However, despite the interest of language learners and ELI administrators, organizing webinars has its own challenges, partly due to time differences, low Internet speed, and sometimes reluctance on the part of native English speakers.

All the administrators agreed that compared to English classes at public schools, ELI classes are more appealing to students. As a participant noted, “ELIs in general made the students more interested in learning English and opened a way for them to communicate with the world outside Iran.”

## **ELI Materials**

A comparison of ELI materials in public schools with those in ELIs provides further insight into the appeal of ELIs for Iranian students. One administrator, who besides being an ELI administrator is also a teacher in the public school system, noted, “English textbooks in public schools are uninteresting because they lack the cultural component of the English language.” Borjian (2010, p. 61), for example, points to the “failure of the state-designed ‘homegrown’ English textbooks and the curricula” offered by the public school system. ELIs, in contrast, utilize the most recent ESL course books on the market, available from leading international publishers. The topics introduced in these books are dynamic and culturally informative, and hence language learners learn about current world events and become familiar with cultures around the globe. This has a great appeal for students and is one of the major contributing factors to the success of ELIs in attracting young adult learners. For example, the role-play activities in international ESL course books put students in situations that are totally different from what they experience in daily life in Iran. However, that is not to say learners’ lived experiences are taken for granted. On the contrary, by practicing such role-play activities, learners make a connection between their personal experiences and imagined identities.

In Iran, ELIs are free to choose any course books they desire. However, virtually all the course books on the market have already been stringently reviewed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Some specific topics such as dating, drinking, and so forth, which are not in accordance with Islamic culture, are either deleted or replaced with more culturally appropriate terms. For instance, one of the participants noted that in one of the lessons, the term “tattoo” was changed to “voice recorder.” Thus, “the boy wanted to get a tattoo” was changed to “the boy wanted to get a voice recorder.” All the ELI administrators pointed out that “culture and language are inseparable” and

shared the view that “the government is very sensitive about cultural matters.” ELIs are advised by the Provincial Culture and Islamic Guidance Organization that they should “put the English culture aside.” One of the participants explained, “we play it safe. For example, if we have a passage about dating, we tell teachers, don’t delve into it, don’t open up the issue that much.” Despite these limitations, administrators explained that they use Western pop songs in their classes for educational purposes to enhance the listening skills of language learners.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In many countries less politically isolated than Iran, people have a wide range of options for improving their English language proficiency and communicative ability. In Iran, however, high levels of English proficiency are difficult to attain unless students attend English classes at ELIs or engage in self-study. The role of ELIs in Iran is thus best understood with reference to the enhanced range of identities made possible by improved communicative command of English and associated increases in economic, social, and cultural capital (Darvin & Norton, 2015). Of particular significance is that ELI language practices expand the range of identities available to students in the future (e.g., global citizen, multilingual consumer, bilingual executive, international traveller). Many students might never have the opportunity to travel abroad with their families, as do those with extensive financial resources, but they can experience what it is like to watch movies in English, to obtain first-hand information via the Internet, and to feel a sense of belonging to the global community. ELIs also enable Iranian students to reimagine their future identities as international scholars by pursuing their education abroad and contributing to world science, as well as enhancing the growth of Iran as a developing country.

We found that ELIs can also serve as a safe recreational and career space for young women, given that Iranian women with high levels of English proficiency can work independently as tutors or translators, or they can work in private language schools or in public schools. They can thus have greater independence and freedom of choice in determining their future identities. According to Shavarini (2005), for female students in the Iranian context “higher education and studies represent: a sphere of hope, a refuge, and a place to experience limited freedom beyond restrictive family environments” (p. 329). Based on these arguments, we can infer that both language learning and continuing education provide opportunities for women to broaden



their horizons and expand the range of opportunities available to them.

In sum, our study suggests that ELIs in Iran are culturally hybrid institutions that are navigating complex cultural practices both within Iranian society and the wider global community. The appeal of ELIs for Iranian students is that their pedagogy and curricula are more diverse and exciting than those available in public schools, and provide young Iranian students, and women in particular, with a wider range of imagined identities.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all who participated in this study and generously gave of their time toward this research. We are also grateful for both helpful comments by the anonymous reviewers and guidance from the editorial team.

## THE AUTHORS

Fatemeh Mohammadian Haghighi is an educator of English as a second language. She earned a Master of Education in TESL from the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, where she is currently completing her MA in TESL with a focus on language assessment.

Bonny Norton is a professor and Distinguished University Scholar in the Department of Language and Literacy Education, University of British Columbia. A fellow of the American Educational Research Association, she was the 2016 co-recipient of the TESOL Distinguished Research Award.

## REFERENCES

- Baleghizadeh, S., & Farshchi, S. (2009). An exploration of teachers' beliefs about the role of grammar in Iranian high schools and private language institutes. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 52(212), 17–38.
- Bialystok, E., Craik, F. I., Klein, R., & Viswanathan, M. (2004). Bilingualism, aging, and cognitive control: Evidence from the Simon task. *Psychology and Aging*, 19(2), 290. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.19.2.290
- Borjian, M. (2010). Policy privatization and empowerment of sub-national forces: The case of private English language institutes in Iran. *Viewpoints Special Edition: Middle East Institute (MEI) Series on Higher Education and the Middle East*, 58–61. Retrieved from <http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Education%20VP.pdf>
- Borjian, M. (2013). *English in post-revolutionary Iran: From indigenization to internationalization*. Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Dahmardeh, M. (2009). *English language teaching in Iran and communicative language teaching* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Warwick, Coventry, England.

- Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2015). Identity and a model of investment in applied linguistics. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 35, 35–56. doi:10.1017/S0267190514000191
- Farhady, H., Hezaveh, F. S., & Hedayati, H. (2010). Reflections on foreign language education in Iran. *TESL-EJ*, 13(4). Retrieved from: <http://www.tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej52/a1.pdf>
- Ghorbani, M. R. (2011). Quantification and graphic representation of EFL textbook evaluation results. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 1(5), 511–520. doi:10.4304/tpls.1.5.511-520
- Hayati, A., & Mashhadi, A. (2010). Language planning and language-in-education policy in Iran. *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 34(1), 24–42. doi:10.1075/lplp.34.1.02
- Kanno, Y., & Norton, B. (2003). Imagined communities and educational possibilities: Introduction. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, 2(4), 241–249. doi:10.1207/S15327701JLIE0204\_1
- Kiany, G. R., Mahdavy, B., & Samar, R. G. (2011). Towards a harmonized foreign language education program in Iran: National policies and English achievement. *Literacy Information and Computer Educational Journal*, 2(3), 462–469.
- Kobayashi, Y. (2002). The role of gender in foreign language learning attitudes: Japanese female students' attitudes toward English learning. *Gender and Education*, 14(2), 181–197. doi:10.1080/09540250220133021
- Kubota, R. (2011). Learning a foreign language as leisure and consumption: Enjoyment, desire, and the business of Eikaiwa. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(4), 473–488. doi:10.1080/13670050.2011.573069
- Norton, B. (2013). *Identity and language learning: Extending the conversation* (2nd ed.). Bristol, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Pavlenko, A., & Norton, B. (2007). Imagined communities, identity, and English language learning. In J. Cummins & C. Davison (Eds.), *International handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 669–680). New York, NY: Springer.
- Shavarini, M. K. (2005). The feminisation of Iranian higher education. *International Review of Education*, 51(4), 329–347. doi:10.1007/s11159-005-7738-9
- Sheibani, O. B. (2012). Language learning motivation among Iranian undergraduate students. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 19, 838–846. doi:10.5829/idosi.wasj.2012.19.06.168