International Journal of Research in English Education (IJREE)

Original Article **Published online: 20 June 2023.**

Proceedings of the First National Virtual Conference on English Language Teaching in the Iranian Mainstream Education System

The Qualitative study of Stakeholders' Perceptions on Challenges and Opportunities of Implementing Fundamental Reform Document of Education and English Teaching Programme in Iran

Mohammad Javad Ansari[1*]

Correspondence:
mohammadjavad57@gmail.com

1. Ministry of Education, Qom, Iran

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Abstract

The current paper aimed to investigate the main stakeholders' perception regarding Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDOE) in Iran and the related challenges and opportunities. To this end, the qualitative study was run by interviewing four groups of stakeholders, namely, one policy-maker, one material writer, three teacher trainers, and thirteen language teachers. After validating and evaluating the credibility, nine interview questions were run and inductive bottom up thematic analysis was applied in order to extract the codes. The findings illustrated that the ELT programme has not been regarded as the required necessity in FRDOE because of the political challenges with the West. It is not even considered as the L2 in the educational policy; therefore, the current trend in the EFL programme cannot be regarded as the fundamental reform. In order to fulfill the requirement of ELT in Iran and be at the satisfactory level, the FRDOE is recommended to be revised and the language teachers, in particular, should be involved in preparing materials for English setting in the Ministry of Education of Iran.

Keywords: language planning, language policy, perception, English language teaching

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1. Introduction

Language planning and policy (henceforth, LPP) is among the critical concepts which should be considered and studied carefully in every educational setting. Though planning and policy are usually used interchangeably, these two concepts should be treated separately. It does not mean that they do not have any connection with each other; in reverse, language policy affects language planning and vice versa. Language planning is the deliberate, future-oriented systematic- change code, use and/or speaking, most visibly undertaken by the government, in some community of speakers (Baldauf, 2010a).

Any change in the educational system influences all aspects of the society at local and national levels. In other words, the change is so immense that no one can deny its impact on social, political, economic, and, even, cultural aspects; of course, the reverse condition is also possible. Consequently, the language behaviour of people changes. Language education is among the main concerns of the policy-makers. Language planning at the national level and local level attracts the interest of the scholars in the field of Applied Linguistics. "National language policy is a regular topic" (Spolsky, 2004, p. 2). It means that revising and changing the LPP is not an unusual phenomenon. For instance, some countries such as China and Turkey passed a new language law that bans the use of foreign words. Such conditions illustrate the centrality of language to education and, as a consequence, the choice of language as the medium of instruction in school is vital and crucial (Spolsky, 2004).

Regarding language planning, one key variable in LPP is agency, which plays an important role in LPP. To balance the power of policy (discourses) with an empirical understanding of the agency of the policy actors is an essential challenge for the LPP researchers (Johnson, 2018). "Rather than focusing on the work of governments and their agencies as the agents in language planning, a micro-level approach needs to consider a range of agents, which exist within greater or lesser formality within their local speech community" (Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008, p. 5). Teachers are central agents in language policy development (Baldauf, 2010a).

The implementation of LPP depends on the teachers' support and involvement (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003). In other words, micro-support is the main prerequisite for the implementation of macro-level LPP. This point means that the failure of the agency at micro-level will lead into the failure of the LPP in other levels since, as Liddicoat and Baldauf (2008) maintain, language planning at the micro-level is mostly located within the work of individuals who work to revive or promote the use of language(s). Perception is one of the main factors that should be studied in any educational context. How the stakeholders perceive a new trend in an educational setting affects instructional practices (Fives, Lacatena, & Gerard, 2015).

Constant revision in the educational system is inevitable in every society because of the economic, linguistic, cultural, and political conditions and their changes. These changes provoke the policy-makers to reconsider every domain of the power structures. One of these major structures is the management of the educational system, which plays a crucial role in stabilizing the bases of power. Those who are at the macro-level are so sensitive to the educational system, in which the ideology of the dominant power should be translated in all parts of the society, in particular schools. Language management, as Spolsky (2008) asserts, is the application of power, which comes from authority.

The Ministry of Education of Iran attempts to reform the educational system so as to focus on the country's 2025 vision in which the country is expected to elevate to the highest level at regional position, and the changes in the educational system have begun since 2013 by changing the system of education: the system consists of two parts: the elementary schools (6 years) and high schools (6 years). Upon the Philosophy of Education Document, FRDOE was approved by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution in 2011; the authorities wanted to implement the document though this document did not directly address ELT programme in Iran. This document set goals such as fostering the good citizens and developing and deepening the culture of research among the individuals. The FRDOE states the values, missions, visions, goals, strategies, and operational objectives clearly.

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Until now, no research has been conducted, to the knowledge of the researcher, to study the perceptions of the stakeholders regarding the implementation of FRDOE and the ELT programme, so the challenges and opportunities, which were created have not been explicitly stated. The implementation of any document related to the ELT programme is one thing, but the delving to its results is another thing. Generally, in relation to the educational setting, in particular, ELT setting, perceptions of the stakeholders have been neglected. Hence, the issues, which are addressed in this study, are the challenges and opportunities related to the ELT based on FRDOE through surveying and interviewing policy- makers, materials writers, teacher trainers and language teachers. , the aim here was to investigate the perceptions of policy-makers, materials writers, teacher trainers, and language teachers regarding FRDOE and to study meticulously the challenges and opportunities which exist in this new trend in ELT programme based on the stakeholders' perceptions.

2. Review of the Related Literature

According to Chimbutane (2012), the historical evolution of language policies is related to language planning and policy and this issue, in turn, is associated with sociolinguistics "that characterize most of these contexts have played a key role in the constitution and theoretical development of LPP (p. 167). When we look back at the history of the development of LPP, three historical phases are identified, according to Ricento (2000): (a) decolonization, structuralism, andpragmatism (the 1960s); (b) the failure of modernization, critical sociolinguistics, and access (early1970s -1980s); and (c) the new world order, postmodernism, and linguistic human right (themid-1980s to the present day).

Three central elements in the first phase were recognized. Firstly, macro sociopolitical (decolonization and state formation); secondly, epistemological (Structuralism and social sciences); and thirdly, strategic (solving the language problems through planning). A growing awareness of the negative effects – and inherent limitations – of planning theory and models characterized the next phase and a realization occurred "that sociolinguistic constructs such as diglossia, bilingualism, and multilingualism were conceptually complex and ideologically laden and could not easily fit into existing descriptive taxonomies" (Ricento, 2000, p. 202). The formative stage is the main feature of the last phase and it is difficult to characterize the issues, but the migrations, the reemergence of the national, ethnic identities and languages are the considerable events during this period.

All in all, Ricento and Hornberger (1997) present a schema of agents, levels, and processes of LPP in terms of layers making up the LPP. They are as follows: legislation and political processes; states and supranational agencies; institutions; and classroom practitioners. Accordingly, Lo Bianco (2006) talks about the practical nature of problems, which LPP deals with, and believes that language is only a part of policy-making in contexts. "A clash of value systems is brought to bear on the ultimate decision: linguistic diversity, cultural pluralism, ethnicity, race, power, status, politics, and economics" (Brown, 2014, p. 196).

LPP is complex in nature while the Ministry of Education is only one of the institutes for implementing LPP and the other factors should be taken into consideration. The promising results of LPP partly lie at schools at micro-level, the other agencies at meso-level, and policy-making at macro-level. McKay and Rubdy (2009) state that "The social context of language learning and teaching is greatly impacted by a nation's political decision to give special status to a particular language or languages" (p. 10). The assumptions in early LPP era are reflected in its historical links with modernization and development. The beliefs were based on this claim that linguistic changes led to desired social and political transformations (Tollefson, 2010) and this manifests the power of language for any polities.

As Baldauf (2005) argued, language policy consists of a set of ideas, laws, and practices intended to achieve some planned changes in language, whereas language planning focuses on the implementation of the mentioned plans in language policy. "Language planning is the application of language knowledge to address a perceived problem"

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(Huebner, 1999, p. 6). This statement implies that language planning is the subcategory of language policy. The values affect the practice, though gradually; the practice influences the values and this is a dialectic relationship. "Language planning is concerned with any problem area in which language plays some role: it is the organized pursuit of solutions to language problems" (Corson, 2001, p. 680).

Kaplan (2011) holds that language planning is a visible activity undertaken by the government and intended to promote systematic language changes among the target speakers. The other concept, which is connected with LPP, is 'unplanned language planning.' Baldauf (1994, as cited in Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 298) has suggested four reasons for considering unplanned language planning in LPP: (a) the coexistence of planned and unplanned language features in the same situation, (b) the absence of some activity providing information about it, (c) the powerful relation between LPP activities, and (d) the unplanned situation existing in much micro language planning. Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) assert that unplanned language change is a problem for language planners since the language eco-system makes it more difficult to develop the accuracy and effectiveness of language planning strategies.

Baldauf, Li, and Zhao (2008) have suggested because unplanned language growth is politically neutral, its success and failure should be seen as a sensitive indicator of the prestige allocated to a particular language. Eggington (2010) believes that unplanned language planning plays an important role in any language planning and summarizes four reasons for its significant role as follows. Firstly, the symbiotic relationship can coexist between planned and unplanned language planning. Secondly, the presence or absence of unplanned language planning can offer vital information. Thirdly, the power relationship exists in all the unplanned language planning activities in the society and therefore, any formal language should take this fact into consideration. Finally, the universal language competency provides people with all the authority they need to become involved in language planning.

Regarding Iran, Borjian (2003) categorizes the history of English in Iran into three distinct phases as follows: ELT programme under the Qajar Dynasty, ELT programme under the Pahlavis, and, finally, ELT programme under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Before starting the discussion, Kennedy (2015) asserts that qualification is the common ground of concern among the students in higher education. Most of the learners want to contribute to Iran's growth; therefore, internalization and globalization are two main issues for achieving this goal and the main carrier for them is to learn English. Though there were negative attitudes toward English at the beginning of the Islamic revolution (English was called 'alien' language), by spreading the concept of 'English as International Language (EIL), the attitudes are gradually changing. As Borjian (2003, p. 115) confirms this claim in this way that "the global flavor of the proposed 'reform package' indirectly paved the way for English to carve out a new role within the country's education system." In order to conduct the study following questions were addressed in this research:

Q_1: How do policy-makers perceive the implementation of FRDOE regarding the ELT programme in Iran?

Q_2: How do materials writers perceive the implementation of FRDOE regarding the ELT programme in Iran?

Q_3: How do teacher trainers and language teachers perceive the implementation of FRDOE regarding the ELT programme in Iran?

3. Research Method

The qualitative approach was applied in this study and it is consisted of four interviews with one police-maker, one materials writer, three teacher trainers, and 13 language teachers (overall, nine interview questions). Each data set was analyzed independently using content thematic analysis. The respondents were selected purposefully and four types of respondents were purposefully selected: one policy-maker, one materials writer, three teacher trainers, and thirteen language teachers. The third group consisted of the teacher trainers with more than 20 years of experience in teaching English and they all were also invited to run the workshops for the language teachers.

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The interviews were conducted in an exploratory way in order to elicit the positions of the different agents regarding FRDOE. In determining the validity/ credibility of the questions of the interviews, the questions were emailed to the experts who were eminent and distinguished in the field of Applied Linguistics. By elaborating on their comments, the final version of the questions was prepared and the questions were piloted. For determining the reliability/ dependability of the coding, another researcher was invited to codify the content of the interviews and, as a consequence, the reliability/ dependability of the coding was approved by checking the similarities and differences. To conduct the study, the inductive bottom up thematic analysis was used for analyzing the interviews.

4. Results

4.1 Policy-maker

Policy-makers have an influential role in providing and compiling any document in any society. Policy-makers in educational settings set the guidelines at the higher status and these guidelines affect the subsequent stakeholders from high to low. In order to evaluate the ELT in FRDOE, three questions were developed:

1. In what ways has the ELT status been redefined in FRDOE?
2. According to this document, what are the expectations of language teachers?
3. What is your expectation(s) of administering FRDOE regarding the materials?

After thematic content analysis of the document, the next stage was to interview with the policy-maker. He asserted that the ELT programme should be placed on top priority in any document regarding any changes in the educational setting.

Table 1. Themes and codes extracted from the policy-maker's responses

Main Themes	Codes	Data Extracted
Identity issues	Identity crisis Islamization Localization	Safeguarding Islamic identity; localizing the L2; ELT be Islamized; pluralismand identity
Materials	Significance of text selection	Logically and rationallyacceptable texts
Language	ELT International language Globalization	International interactions; globalization and political and economic controversies
Teacher	Commitment Proficiency	Preference of commitment over proficiency
Cultural Issues	Multi-culturalism	Culture is prerequisite for globalization; High- and Low- culture

4.2 Materials Writer

The materials writers are the key players in translating the educational policy. The guidelines and orders prescribed for them are very important in developing the textbooks and materials. Thesuccess or failure of FRDOE is partly dependent on the materials and textbooks developed in the new framework. For doing this, the head of materials development and writer was interviewed based on the following questions:

1. In what ways have the overall objectives been translated into the materials and textbooks for the language teachers?
2. For administering the FRDOE, what are the criteria for presenting the contents and concepts in the materials and

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textbooks?

The main codes and themes emerging from the interviews were *the manifestation of the goals in the materials* and the *evaluation of this manifestation in the materials and textbooks*. These codesand themes are elaborated in this section.

Table 2. Themes and codes extracted from the materials writer responses

Main Themes	Codes	Data Extracted
Teacher	Proficiency	Ability to implement Englishfor performing interactions; developing and improving basic skills
Language	English	International language; Interaction with the world
Materials	LocalizationIslamization	Cultural issues; English neither British nor American;Religious issues taken into consideration
Approach	Specific Methodology Teacher-centeredness Learner-centeredness	Communicative Language Teaching; communicative skills; movement is from the teacher-centeredness towards the learner-centeredness

4.3 Teacher Trainers

The other group of stakeholders which has an influential role in administering FRDOEsuccessfully is the teacher-trainers. Teacher-trainers (henceforth, TTs) have to translate the ELT programme for teachers in an efficient way. TTs are responsible for translating the objectives set in for the language teachers in an appropriate way. For this purpose, three interviews were run with three TTs and the following questions were administered:

1. For translating the new objectives, what are the characteristics of a good language teacher?
2. According to the contents of the materials and textbooks and TTC, how are the contents compatible with the TTCs?

Two themes emerged from the interviews: (a) the characteristics of the good teachers, and (b) the compatibility of the contents with TTCs.

Table 3. Themes and codes extracted from the teacher trainers' responses

Main Themes	Codes	Data Extracted
TTCs	Virtual/Electronic courses	Not showing special things regarding teacher's proficiency and knowledge
Materials	Textbooks and their relation with the courses	No clear relation between materials and TTCs
Teacher	Authority Good teachers	Establishment of teacher's authority; Lack of discussionrelated to the characteristics of a good teacher
Teaching/learning issues	Basic skills Communicative skills Evaluation	No clear guidelines and criteria for evaluating the basic skills and competence and performance

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4.4. Language Teachers

The last group of players is teachers. The role of the teachers and the contents of the textbookswere asked to explore the actual results of ELT in FRDOE. Thirteen language teachers were interviewed according to the following questions:

1. In educational process, to what extent was the language teacher's role changed?

2. To what extent does the materials' content motivate the language teachers to study further and find a suitable solution for the educational problems?

The main themes derived from the interviews regarding teacher's role are: teacher, materials, teaching/ learning issues, technology, and methodology.

Table 4. Themes and codes extracted from the language teachers' responses

Themes	Codes	Data Extracted
Teacher	Role of teacher	No changing in teacher'srole; Establishing the authority
Materials	Lack of integration among the contents Low motivation	Loosely relation among the contents; unable to invoke the learners to study the contents
Teaching/ learning issues	Knowledge-source Parrot-learning Basic skills	Rote- and parrot-learning are applied; Disproportional attention has been given to the basic skills
Technology	IT	Shortage of time; Lack of facilities
Methodology	Low interest in applying new findings into the ELT programme	GTM; Crowded classes; Lowsalary

Like the thematic content analysis of the document, themes and codes have been derived. Regarding the ELT programme, English has been regarded as an International language in the Ministry of Education and the goals of ELT is to empower the learners to read the scientific textsand to communicate with other countries.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

From the interviewees' positions, as the analysis showed, nine codes have been extracted: language, teaching and learning issues, cultural issues, materials, teacher's practice, evaluation andfeedback, technology, approach, and TTCs. Each of these codes has its sub-themes. According tothe policy-maker and materials writer, the central points in the ELT programme are to avoid the Westernization and Americanization together with having commitment and proficiency. Meanwhile, it is expected to provide the situation so that the needs for international relationships and globalization be satisfied. It seems that there is a paradox. Proficiency and competency might be sacrificed because of the commitment and Islamization. The materials writer put emphasis on the commitment besides proficiency.

On the other hand, the TTs and the languageteachers have their own stance which is different from the high stakeholders. The central issue here is that their agency has been neglected in preparing the new ELT program. This point illustrates that though the goal was to improve communicative skills among the language users, the actualization of this goal might be on doubt. It is because the perception of the language teachers is not positive since they believe that their status in the society and the Ministry of Education has been diminished (in spite of what the document claims). It seems that if their agencywere not neglected, the language teachers would be eager to cooperate with the new trend in an appropriate way.

Thus, language teachers are reluctant to apply the new methods and approacheswhich are new and innovative in nature.

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As a result, the teacher-centeredness is preferred over theother communicative approaches. This condition could pertain to the following reasons: (1) the language teachers did not have any place in designing the policies for ELT programme, i.e. lack of agency, (2) the examination of University Entrance has an undeniable effect on the language teachers' strategies in applying the methods and approaches at highs schools since the multiple- choice test is the prime tool for evaluating the knowledge of the students, the language teachers incline to use the discrete-point method instead of integrative ones; and (3) there is a lack of integration between the policies stated in the document and what is presented in actual situation due to the shortage of time and lack of facilities for implementing the communicative skills. Though the policy-makers and the materials writer put emphasis on the technology, the absence of the precise and clear guidelines for the materials and textbooks creates haphazard conditions. Therefore, the actualization of the ELT programme was not approved by all interviewees and all believed that the case could not provide a better condition for learning English.

Although the FRDOE emphasized the preference of commitment over the proficiency, it did not provide a definition for proficiency and commitment for the users. Lack of establishing the clear and exact definitions of some key terms such as 'teachers' and 'creativity' is one of the biggest challenges in the FRDOE. Hence, the partial failure, if not total, resulted in the ELT programme based on the language teachers' perceptions and attitudes. The other challenge is thatthe FRDOE is a future-oriented text and it has not specified if the previous experience has been taken into consideration and, as a consequence, the operationalization of FRDOE is under doubt. It can be stated that FRDOE has not been implemented for and operationalized to the ELT programme. Theoretically, there were some discussions around the characteristics of teachers andtheir commitment, and proficiency, but, in practice, there were not any debate regarding the characteristics of a 'good language teacher'. There were no rewarding and punishing mechanismsfor the language teachers and these haphazard situations have made the condition even worse thanbefore.

The results show that the ELT programme has not been regarded as the required necessity in FRDOE because of the political challenges with the West. It is not even considered as the L2 in the educational policy; therefore, the current trend in the EFL programme cannot be regarded as the fundamental reform. In other words, it can be concluded that the current ELT programme follows its predecessors. TTCs and the classrooms are managed according to 'grammar-centered approach' and this fact shows that ELT in Iran does not fulfill the international requirement and its place has not been changed. It is difficult to state that the ELT programme has been fundamentally changed after implementing the FRDOE based on the stakeholders' perceptions. From materials writer to TTs and language teachers, each interviewee has its own interpretation of the ELT programme and, asa consequence, the desired changes have not occurred yet. The findings show that one-size-fits-allmodel was recommended for implementing the ELT programme in language settings. Another issue is that changing the contents of the materials does not mean making reforms in the ELT programme. According to the stakeholders' perceptions, it seems that the goals and objectives havenot been precisely specified and defined. So, those who are at higher levels did not completely andappropriately understand the objectives.

The findings of the study may have implications for the educational policy-makers, English materials writers, language teacher trainers, language teachers, and EFL learners. The findings ofthe current study can help the policy-makers in the field of foreign language planning broaden their views regarding ELT and treat English as a special factor in the system of education becauseof the globalization and internationalization besides the need for reading the scientific texts writtenin English. To this end, the precise and exact wording is required for the successful implementationof ELT in the Ministry of Education and, in a broader sense, in the society (from micro- to macro- level). By justifying this immediate need, the other linkages of ELT also should be taken into account. The materials writers can benefit greatly from this research in that they have to study andresearch more before developing any materials and textbooks for ELT. It is not an easy task to collect various texts and grammatical points and then claim that they will make a revolution in theELT.

The interviews done in the present study could be expanded in the in-depth study of the discourse dominated the ELT programmes and it could be illustrated to what extent the ideology facilitates and/ or hinders the ELT programme at schools. Other studies could be done to investigate the practice carried out in the EFL classrooms based on the new trends and see whether teachers' interpretations correspond with what they do in their classrooms. Wodak and Savski (2018) propose the integration of critical discourse studies with ethnography so as to open the windows for discursive practice in various settings.

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