A Critical Look at the EFL Education and the Challenges Faced by Iranian Teachers in the Educational System

Parvin Safari * & Nasser Rashidi**
Shiraz University, Iran

Abstract
The ultimate aim of any EFL program is to promote long life language development in learners and prepare them for the language use in real life communicative situations. However, many educational systems all over the globe might not achieve this end. Actually, a number of factors within or beyond any system can influence the success or the failure of the language curriculum. In the case of the educational system of Iran, a critical look reveals the fact that despite a great amount of investment and expenses on the part of the government for so long, it is yet unable to generate proficient learners. Keeping this issue in mind, the researcher as the teacher educator teaching in an in-service class held through the Education Organization of Yazd, Iran could uncover the teachers' views and perceptions accordingly. Using currere and collaborative dialogue, the researcher in this qualitative study attempted to explore the challenges faced by teachers in addition to the potential factors leading to the current failures of the language curriculum in the system. The insightful findings of this study can be of great assistance to policy makers, textbook writers, and teacher educators to take critical actions towards the betterment and fruitfulness of the EFL program in our education system.

Key words: language development, language curriculum, currere, collaborative dialogue

*Parvin Safari is a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL at Shiraz University of Iran. She received her M.A in TEFL from Yazd University in 2008 as the top student. So far, she has published and presented several papers in different national and international journals and conferences. Her areas of interest are teacher education, critical pedagogy, discourse analysis, and sociocultural theory of language learning.

**Dr. Nasser Rashidi is an associate professor of TEFL at Shiraz University of Iran. He has published and presented many papers in different national and international journals and conferences. His areas of interest are sociocultural theory of learning and teaching and learning, teacher education, critical pedagogy, and critical discourse analysis.

Correspondence: psafari2009@gmail.com

Introduction

The history of language education has witnessed dramatic changes starting by a shift from Grammar Translation Method towards more communicative approaches such as task- based language teaching, post-method, and critical pedagogy. Actually, this paradigm shift provides the basis to claim that foreign language education is seen as a discipline in need of on-going self-examination and reflection (Reagan & Osborn, 2002). Accordingly, each language education along with the development in the field of language learning and teaching needs to be continuously re-examined in order to offer the best services for language learners.

Foreign language education in Iran has been overwhelmed with theories, methods, approaches, and practices over the past decades, but no change can be seen in the language system of the Ministry of Education; as learning English in a seven-year-continuum of public schools, very little empowers graduated students from highschool or universities with a tool to communicate effectively in real-life situations. Actually, the government's policy is to spend a great amount of time and expenses on language learning in Iranian public schools, but there is no plausible outcome; so students try to improve their English language proficiency in private language institutes. To investigate Iranian students' lack of competency, we are required to challenge different aspects of education by considering different factors and constraints leading to the failures of ELT in the Ministry of Education in Iran. This research, on the one hand, highlights the factors and constraints which directly/ indirectly intensify students' English language learning failure, and on the other hand, paves the way for further investigation of Iranian educational policy from different perspectives and provides hints and clues for policy makers, language educators, and teachers to critically and reflectively consider the current status of English language teaching and make the necessary amendments based on their students' needs and current level of language proficiency.

A Review of Related Literature

History of education in Iran and place of EFL in the Ministry of Education

Educational system of Iran enjoyed three periods of ancient Persian, Islamic, and modern era that were basically influenced by the political, economic, and religious trends of the time. During ancient Persian, ideas of Zoroastrianism such as justice, self-restraint, and honesty were reflected in education. In the meantime, in this era, the right of being literate and learning was bestowed to members of Royal families and high ranking individuals in the society. However, passage of years showed engagement of other members of society in the process of learning and teaching, as it was also expanded during Islamic era. So, education was integrated with Islamic values by Khwaja Nezam Al-molk who founded Nizamiyyeh. In this era, a clergy was in charge of instructing the fundamentals of religion and basic literacy to the youth.

In 1850, Amir Kabir founded the first institution of higher education in Iran named as Dar ul-Funun. The first subject matters included medicine, theology, military sciences, and engineering. In 1886, the first primary school was established in Tabriz by Haj Mirza Hassan Tabrizi. However, the establishment of school was accompanied by protests on the part of conservatives claiming that primary school was regarded as a means for westernizing learners and as a threat for the Islamic identity of the society.

During Pahlavi era (1925-79), a number of policies were conducted aiming at modernizing and advancing the education in Iran. For years, the educational system was based on French secular model, as it trained learners for modern occupations including management, science, administration, and foreign languages. There was also a special emphasis on the learning and teaching English, as communication between countries was the agenda of each curriculum and teaching program during Pahlavi regime. During this era, native language teachers were frequently teaching English to native speakers of Persian in schools and universities.

After the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the philosophy, policies, strategies, and objectives of the previous educational system were reexamined. The Islamization of the educational system was the most important change. In 1986, the Council of Fundamental Change in Education was established. Actually, this organization was affiliated with the Higher Council of Cultural Revolution to reform the educational policy and propose a system based on the Islamic doctrine and religious values in education (Derry, 2000). These changes influenced all aspects of the education system in Iran and English language teaching and learning was not an exception, so for a decade or so, English lost its credibility and position in education, and was regarded as a tool in the hands of superpower countries dominating other countries. Teaching and learning English were also impeded at universities and it was no longer studied or taught as a course after Cultural Revolution in Iran. During this time, students of English had to abandon their studies or change their fields of study.

However, after many years, due to the significance of English as an international language, it somehow gained its place in the educational system of Iran. In recent years, the government has tried to put an emphasis on English as a subject matter, in addition to the requirement for communicative fluency and competency. It is indeed believed that mastery of English is required for international competitiveness, increasing Iran's international opportunities and integrating it into the international community. In other words, the government has attempted to establish a balance between the aspiration for spiritual and cultural independence from the West, and the wish to do well as a modern country in competition with the West (Salehi-Isfahani, 2000).

The educational system in the Islamic Republic of Iran has not undergone any significant changes since Pahlavi's era and is modeled based on the French system (Madandar Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012). After the Islamic Revolution, for long, the educational system included pre-primary school in which students spent one year prior to the primary school. In primary school, there were five grades each containing different subject matters usually taught by the same teacher. However, English was not regarded as the main subject matter. But some non-public schools chose English as a prestigious course in order to attract more applicants. Students then continued their studies in a three-year-continuum of junior high school. They had to spend a course of English including 4 hours a week during an educational year for each grade. Each of English textbooks at this level included dialogues, oral drills, grammar points, pronunciation, and reading passages. The grammar exercises, pronunciation, and oral drills were all decontextualized not indicating any trace of authentic life.

Highschool as the next level of learning cycle involved 4 grades, where English was taught 3 hours a week in the first year of learning. At grades two and three, just 2 hours a week were allotted to English courses in the teaching syllabi. Actually, the number of sessions per week and the number of lessons did not match with each other at these two grades. In the respective textbooks, there was a focus on vocabulary, grammar, conversation, pronunciation, and reading passages. However, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation were detached from any contextualization. In the case of reading passages, unattractive long passages accompanied by some questions including yes-no, wh-questions, true-false and multiple choice questions reflected discrete point approach to teaching. It was at grade 4 that there was an increase in the number of sessions involving 2 sessions with 4 hours a week. But the focus of this course was just on reading skill and nothing more. The unattractive reading passages included many vocabularies which were so demanding for students.

However, a reform occurred in the educational system in 2012 which changed the number of grades in schools. The current system is somehow similar to Pahlavi's educational system in which primary school, junior high school, and highschool included six, three, and three grades respectively. The new system has been administered up to the second grade of junior high school. English as a subject matter is introduced in junior high school. Generally, Grammar Translation Method is the most prevalent teaching methodology in public schools, as English teachers utilize GTM through the textbooks which are devoid of any listening or speaking activities and just deploy grammatical structures and exercises disguising as the 'writing' activities (Hosseini, 2007). Thus, the language knowledge is summarized in terms of knowing the vocabularies, the ability to read and translate the texts, and the knowledge of grammatical rules and structures. It means that a mastery of this

knowledge is sufficient for a student to obtain the passing score for entering the next educational year.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Despite a vast amount of investment including time, money, and human resources on the EFL program in the Ministry of Education in Iran, it has not yet been able to achieve the satisfactory outcomes for so long in order to produce the competent learners in comparison to other systems of education in different countries. Taking a critical look at the status of English in the ministry, one can pursue the reasons for its failures including constraints, and obstacles as the potential factors impeding the language development in the Ministry of Education as a relentless authority which creates constraints contributing to the current failures of English language teaching and learning. In Iran, the ministry is mainly in charge of all educational policies from determining, planning, and designing the instructional materials and textbooks, time of the subject matters, system of exams and testing, employing teachers, and financing to providing facilities for public schools.

In order to investigate the causes for the failures of EFL programs, and the challenges faced by teachers in the process of language development, English teachers' experiences and perceptions constitute the invaluable sources because they are considered to be a core component of the system touching and challenging the constraints and problems directly/ indirectly far more than any element. Hence, in this study, the researcher who was a teacher educator instructing English teachers in an in-service class attempted to explore Iranian English teachers' perceptions concerning the respective issue as their views regarding the factors leading to the inefficiency of EFL program in Iranian public schools provide enlightening insights which can be of so much assistance to the policy makers, the curriculum developers, language planners, and teacher educators.

Methodology

Participants

In this qualitative research, the participants consist of twenty five experienced English teachers who have been working for more than 10 years in the Ministry of Education. Actually, these English teachers participated in an in-service class held by one of the education centers in Yazd, Iran. The researcher as the teacher educator who is a Ph.D. student in TEFL taught this group of teachers during a two- month period. Such a teaching methodology course was planned to enhance teachers' knowledge of the innovative teaching methods and approaches aiming at improving the language competency of the students in the public schools. To establish the ethics of the study, the researchers promised the participants not to report their names in the study.

Instrument

To fully gain teachers' perspectives and attitudes towards foreign language education failures, constraints, and problems of language development in the Ministry of Education of Iran, the researchers used currere (reflexive narrative) and collaborative dialogue. The purpose of currere which was firstly introduced by Pinar (2004) is to put an emphasis on subjectivity and narrative voice in teaching. Actually, this method of data collection as an autobiographic tool provides a framework for critical reflection on the inherent problems of the education system. However, using currere to obtain teachers' perspectives and attitudes follows four stages of regressive, progressive, analytical, and synthetical. At first, teachers' experiences are the focus of attention and reflection. In the progressive stage, teachers' ideas towards constraints, problems, and obstacles that might prohibit teachers' future performance are investigated. Then a critical examination of the past and present is done through analytic stage. And finally, insights from past, present, and future are combined in order to transform the social milieu (Sedeghi & Ketabi, 2009). Meantime, collaborative dialogue also provides teachers with a chance of discussing and collaboratively dialoguing the failures of EFL program in the education system, problems, constraints and their challenges to develop learners'

English language proficiency. The researchers used three steps of data analysis based on Strass and Corbin's (1998) constant comparative method involving open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Then, the credibility of data was ensured through member checking as a method of triangulation used at the last phase of data analysis by asking participants for further accuracy, clarification, and meaning (Aray, Jacobs & Sorenson, 2010).

Key Findings

After the process of transcribing, codifying and analyzing the data, the researchers could uncover relevant themes and concepts with respect to the Iranian English teachers' perceptions concerning the issue of the failures of EFL program in the Ministry of Education in Iran. Below, we examine each theme as a cause, a constraint or a challenge responsible for the current status of EFL program and the failures.

The Authoritarian and Rigid Nature of the System

Kanpol (1998) claims that the authoritarian nature of education can be described in terms of absolutely rigid rule structures, control systems, strict disciplines, and top-down hierarchy. Accordingly, Freire (1985) states that the root of authoritarianism is in bureaucratic system in which all the people dealing with education are assigned clearly defined roles and positions in the form of structural leaders and subordinates from which they cannot violate. One shortcoming of this restricted system is that teachers and learners find no opportunities for creativity and innovation. The power hierarchy of the system materialized in the form of domination can be seen among teachers, principals, and students in a sense that principals as an absolute authority dominate their power over the teachers and the teachers exert their power over learners. Freire (1985) believes that in this kind of system, students become authority-dependent and the future passive citizens through learning that education is summarized at listening to what teachers tell them to do.

Regarding the status of the educational system of Iran, Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) believe that the educational system of Iran with the authoritarian nature pursues rigid rules, rigorous education structures, inexorable control systems and strict disciplines. Actually, principals in such unyielding systems are regarded as absolute authorities that, according to Hattie (2003), have influence on the climate of the school. Principals' authorities are defined in terms of their freedom in making any decisions, no matter how much unreasonable these decisions might seem. These superficial and unreasonable decisions that sometimes emanate from their blind beliefs cover a wide range of educational decisions related to the curriculum development, learners' needs, assessment, and the choice of instructional materials and even the teaching methodology of English teachers. In this regard, through the interview that I had with one of these teachers, she expressed her opinions as follows:

> During the 12 years that I work in schools, there has always been a wide gap between principals and teachers. The principal like an authority has a separate room to which nobody has access. We indirectly receive decisions made by her, sometimes these decisions are illogical, but we have no rights to resist against them. Actually, these decisions have been made before, without consulting with other academic members in school."

As vividly perceived in the above-stated comment, the schooling relationships in the form of the ladder of control and power can clearly be examined between the principal as someone who has the absolute authority in school and the teachers as the people who should obey the orders with no objection. These asymmetrical relationships and the imbalance of power between the people in educational settings have indeed led to the perpetuation of the status quo and the maintenance of the silencing atmosphere prevalent in our schools.

In the context of Iranian language classrooms, this asymmetrical relationship can be seen between teacher as the power and students as the subordinates. To create a democratic atmosphere and

social transformation in education, according to Freire and Macedo (1987), a dialogic relationship is essential through which the different parties negotiate and share the power. In this kind of system, teachers are not authoritarian but rather they tend to learn from their students. Accordingly, Gracia and Leiva (2014) state that a collaborative process should be included in education so that teachers, school leaders, principals, and staff members can participate equally. Through this process, all voices are considered and put alongside each other, leading to the creation of a safe space for each individual.

Teachers' Financial Needs

When the issue of education and the development of EFL are raised, we always prefer to focus on everything covering a wide range of educational issues such as good teaching, teacher training programs, Professional development, curriculum evaluation, testing, language teaching methodologies, learners' performance, learning outcomes and so on. These issues are actually worthy of attention until we can find a way to resolve the problem of teachers' low salaries. An average salary that an Iranian teacher receives monthly is less than $350 which is the lowest salary on average among all ministries' hired staff, in spite of the fact that the inflation rate based on the government's confession in the country stands about 16%. During the 18 months of Hassan Rohani's presidency, fortunately, the inflation rate has decreased from more than 40% to 16%, yet no raise in teachers' salaries have occurred.

Keeping this issue in mind, how do we expect Iranian English teachers to enhance professional development, language competency, teaching strategies, knowledge of second language research while they are not financially supported on the part of government and the ministry? It should be remembered that raising families on this low salary is impossible for Iranian teachers. Then, what can be the consequence? Teachers have to work outside the school to make ends meet! A teacher expressed his ideas as the following:

> I'm expected to teach well, to create a fresh atmosphere in the classroom, and to patiently and energetically implement the phases of lesson. But is it possible at all? I receive the lowest salary in the society; on this salary, I cannot support my family at all. Thus, after leaving my school, my major work begins. In the afternoon, I have to work somewhere else. Actually, I have no time to spend for further study. Feeling really tired, I will begin the following day. I'm feeling so tired that I want to fall asleep in my class.

However, in order to build an ideal education system in our society, we need to support teachers. This cannot be possible unless they are financially supported. In other words, supporting teachers gives rise to the improvement of the quality of education, the development of teachers' competency, and the enhancement of success among learners. So, good education is impossible without good teaching and the good teaching depends on the teachers' job satisfaction. If teachers are paid at a plausible level, they can further focus on their work. Regarding this important issue, the government should take appropriate actions to economically improve teachers' life conditions.

Public School Textbooks and Instructional Materials

Given that instructional materials and textbooks play a crucial role in promoting the curriculum goals and in facilitating the processes of teaching and learning, it should be noted that it is necessarily required for policy makers of education, language educators, teachers, and instructors to regularly take into account the issue of appropriate materials and textbooks. As Tomlinson (2012) puts it, materials for language learning serve to pursue different aims. They are said to be *informative* as they inform the learner about the target language and features, *instructional* guiding the learner in practicing the language, *experiential* giving learner the chance of using language, *eliciting* as they encourage the learner to use the language and finally *exploratory* getting the learner to make discoveries about language. According to Oxford (2002), as learners learn at different ways, the ideal materials are those aiming at the provision of all the ways to help learners acquire the language through experience and use.

Due to the fact that the education system in Iran is extremely centralized, textbooks as the main medium of instruction across the country are centrally provided, written and used in all schools. Each course at each grade has its own textbook used in every school in Iran. Teachers in each course are instructed to use the textbooks to direct every aspect of their instruction. The students are required to study the textbooks in each course. Finally, testing and evaluation are also restricted to the contents of each textbook (Madandar Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012).

With respect to the types of language instructional materials and textbooks used in the Ministry of Education of Iran, it can be said that Tomilson's (2012) functions are not observed in the nationwide textbooks of the public schools. They just include demotivating drab language features accompanied by the decontextualized exercises detached from authentic life. No trace of language use can be seen; actually, if there is, it has no similarity to the tasks learners face in the outside world. A teacher referred to this reality as:

> The exercises, grammar, reading texts, language functions and all the things embedded in the book aren't appealing at all. Because I explain the things which are of no use to my students, not only learners but I also get tired soon. Sometimes I'm waiting for the bell ring to get rid of such a torturing atmosphere.

According to Cummins (2005), a focus on the language features should be linked to critical inquiry into the issues of language and power. Further, a focus on the target features must be integrated with the extensive input through reading and chances for written and oral language use. What is emphasized in the state school EFL textbooks is language features at the expense of language use.

A cursory look at the EFL course books used in the ministry of education makes it also vivid that the contents of English books do not pursue any theoretical and practical basis, scientifically researched-based principles and the most recent theories of language learning. A participant in this project stated his opinions as the following:

> The textbooks that I use to teach English to my students are the ones that I actually read when I was a student, about 20 years ago. I think the content, exercises, colorless pictures and useless grammar points are written in the way as if teaching and learning processes were static and fixed without being influenced by the findings of second language acquisition research.

The textbooks of Iranian public schools remind us of banking education through which a teacher as the absolute authority is in charge of creating a silent atmosphere to facilitate the process of sending pieces of knowledge and information located in the book into the empty minds of passive learners as the receivers. As Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) claim the instructional materials and textbooks used in Iranian public schools are saturated with the compilation of information and taken-for-granted knowledge not reflecting any social issues related to the learners' lived experiences in the real world. In other words, as Cummins (2005) puts it, teachers should create a context in language classrooms where culture is expressed, affirmed, and shared. Doing so motivates learners to invest themselves in the learning process. This can be done through the inclusion of topics related to students' lives, experiences, and cultures in the textbooks. But the Iranian EFL textbooks are devoid of such topics. In this regard, an experienced teacher said:

> The book gives me this chance to make learners listen to me all the time. My students must take in all the explanations, information, and knowledge. They should listen to me carefully; otherwise they are not able to learn. When I provide them with exercises during the class, students can't find any chance to talk to each other."

The Employment System

Another controversial issue which deserves special attention concerning the low performance of the ministry in EFL policy is the issue of hiring competent teachers. Undoubtedly, teachers should possess necessary skills, knowledge, and plausible language proficiency to rely on it as the basis for their own professional development and also for the enhancement of learners' competency, success, and learning. In Hattie's terms (2003), the single most powerful influence on students' achievement which is actually regarded as the gold standard of expertise is located in the hands of teachers.

In education, excellence in teachers really makes differences, as teachers' knowledge and skills help them to become intellectuals and the agents of educational change. However, those who have no competency cannot transform into the social agents; hence, they maintain status quo in the growth of students' success. With respect to the level of teachers' competency, Richards (2011) claims that teachers are in need of language-specific competencies of which fluency is of high significance. In this regard, Medgyes (2001) also states that teachers are required to reach a threshold proficiency level in order to succeed in effective teaching. Further, teachers are required to possess academic proficiency in order to promote students' learning. The academic proficiency, according to Krashen and Brown (2007), includes knowledge of academic language, knowledge of the subject matter (e.g. the knowledge of linguistics, teaching methodology, educational research, and etc.) as well as strategies.

Hence, a major task of the Ministry of Education is to recognize and employ highly proficient English teachers possessing professional knowledge, skills, competencies, and capabilities through which they can promote English competency and proficiency in learners. As there is a lack of structured and systematic plan to choose the proficient teachers among the pool of candidates, the ministry confronts with the problem of not having any homogeneous English teaching staff concerning the plausible level of language competency. As an English teacher, I myself have always witnessed the presence of different English teachers in the same school possessing absolutely various teaching methodologies and levels of language proficiency. A teacher in her journal wrote as:

> I think our students can progress more if English teachers are actually chosen from the most skilled graduates. Currently, the most important issue is English teacher who, in my opinion, is the key to all the prosperity of the ministry in developing the field of EFL. In English language group that I belong to, rarely can a fluent, skilled, and proficient English teacher be seen. The English teachers, their numbers actually reach over 60, were all selected from Azad University 20 years ago; they all hold translation degree which has no similarity to TEFL. At the time of their employment, the organization of education was in severe need of completing English teaching staff. Thus, everybody whether strong or weak graduating from this university was employed as an English teacher. Since then, there has been no employment of English teachers in this organization anymore!!!"

To this teacher, the ministry suffers from not having a well-structured system for the employment of competent teachers, so that, as seen, no vacancies during this long period of time are left for the recent proficient and skillful graduated teachers who have the updated professional knowledge and skills. While teachers are participating in in-service classes, it can be found that possessing a great amount of grammatical knowledge, rules, and features is judged to be as a criterion for a teacher's proficiency and skills. Thus, a teacher who has such kind of knowledge is given some priorities, for instance, she or he can teach in the best school or even teach to other teachers as the educator. A teacher said:

> In my opinion, teachers' knowledge is summarized in knowing about grammar. In the in-service classes, the focus is just on grammar and nothing else. The instructor who wants to teach for instance the teaching methodology of book one of high school comes to the class having some thick grammar books in hands. She opens the book one and directly goes to the lessons, reads sentence by sentence, and then mentions the detailed grammar rules of each

> sentence. She elaborates the grammar rules so detailed that we then forget all the other things. Actually, this is the teaching methodology class which lasts for 30 hours. At last, we are required to take a grammar exam to receive certificate for the methodology class and it is finished!!!!

According to this teacher's view, the knowledge of grammar is perceived as the sole criterion for language competency seen not only among the English teachers but also among the educators and instructors. When teachers believe that the knowledge of grammar is so significant that the instructors themselves value it a lot, they have nothing but the transmission of grammar knowledge to students. And hence, the banking education continues and perpetuates in the language classrooms. As a result, students silently sit and listen to the teacher as the source of grammar knowledge and power sending a huge amount of grammar information to their blank minds which is of no use in their real lives.

The Status of English as a Subject Matter in the System

After the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, the Islamic government commenced severe actions against any secular ideologies, Americanization, imperialism, and the hegemony of English. In the early years of Islamic government, accompanied by Cultural Revolution and the widespread religious hegemony throughout different educational settings, there were attempts to vanish English from the educational scene; since it was regarded not as a subject matter or a course on its own right taught at universities or schools rather as a means through which the superpowers could further oppress and dominate our country. However, after many years, this superficial ideology has changed since language policy makers feel that there is a need to have a special focus on English as an international language to develop the country. In order our country to politically, economically, and technologically involve in competitiveness against other countries; the government has recently taken positive actions to boost the competency in English among students. Furthermore, there is an increase in the establishment of language institutes all over the country contributing to the generating of fully competent learners of English in Iran.

On the whole, the history of EFL in Iran indicates that English on the one hand is thought to be of vital necessity for the scientific, economic, and technological developments while at the same time more emphasis on its significance is considered to be a threat to the Islamic identity of the nation (Kiani, Ghafarsamar & Mahdavi, 2011). Although in recent years, the negative severe reactions towards English have gradually been disappeared and English as a subject matter and as an instructional course has been included in the school curriculum or at universities, due to its menace to people's Islamic and cultural identities and beliefs, it has, to some extent, gone unnoticed and not yet found its genuine place as a subject matter in the Ministry of Education. Considering the status of English language education in Iran as a tool for the linguistic or cultural imperialism after revolution, it should be noted that it has not yet gained a plausible place in education, as the beliefs and attitudes in the form of hidden biases and hindsight continue to remain in language education even after so many years of teaching and learning. It is so interesting to quote what a teacher says about his experience:

> I teach English in grade two of high school having 12 classes per week, each class including just one hour and a half. I wish I could be a teacher of another subject since the number of lessons is 7 with a great amount of grammatical rules and exercises, long tiring passages and some other useless exercises. The amount of work demanded does not match with the number of sessions. At the end of the term, I cannot finish the determined budget of the book on time. So I have to borrow other teachers' class time hour to cover the lessons; while there are some other subject matters which seem to be of no use for students have twice more than my class time hour in comparison to English. Several times, I talked about this issue to the head of English group. He says it is something which is not our business. And we have written some letters to the ministry but with no answers.

Another teacher stated some other point as:

> At the end of the educational year when the exam schedule is announced, English is located at the end as the last exam. Actually, it seems such a burden since at that time other teachers have corrected learners' exam papers, but I want to begin a hard working job. Another thing is that, during this period of time, learners have forgotten lots of things.

As stated by these two teachers, English as a subject matter has totally been neglected in the educational system and is regarded as a subject deserving no attention and respect since it is yet subconsciously thought to be as a linguistic and cultural tool of imperialism and a hazard for people's moral, spiritual, and cultural values. Thus, regarding these views, it is suggested that in order to develop students' language competency, all the policy makers, educators, principals, and teachers are required to critically reflect on their beliefs and attitudes making them explicit. In that case, they can make a good decision regarding the status of English not as a foreign language but as an international language that our students need to learn.

Learners' False Expectations and Erroneous Beliefs

In the contexts of language learning classrooms, the perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes that learners bring with them in the learning situation are said to have a contributory factor in the process of their learning and ultimate success (Breen, 2011). As the positive beliefs and perceptions about language learning can be contributory and fruitful, the unrealistic and false expectations can impede this process. According to Horwitz (1988), since students' beliefs about language learning can be based on limited knowledge and/or experience, the teacher's most effective course is to confront erroneous beliefs with new information. In some cases, students may never have had their views about challenging language learning.

In Iranian educational contexts, teachers are frequently faced with language learners' false conceptions concerning different issues including the eventual goal of language learning, fully competent English teachers, and a good language learner. A teacher stated his views in this regard as the following:

> Each year, I have to deal with my students' erroneous expectations that are in need of being challenged. They expect me to be a good teacher if I explain grammar rules completely, translate all English sentences into Persian, and not to speak English in class. They believe that the eventual aim of language learning is to help learner become proficient in possessing the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and pass the tests based on discrete point approach. A good learner is the one who listens to the teacher, does the homework, and pass the formative as well as achievement tests.

Based on this comment, Iranian English teachers are necessarily required to appropriately challenge these misconceptions and beliefs. As most of these unrealistic expectations arise from their lack of knowledge, information, and limited experience, the teacher should justify learners to become informative through explaining and elucidating the main goal of language learning, the characteristics of a good teacher and learner. In Cummins's (2005) sense, a school language policy is process-oriented rather than product-oriented, that is, it attempts to generate organizational structures and patterns of teacher-student interactions that will enhance student participation. Thus, through creation of student-teacher collaboration and interactions, teachers can encourage language learners to explicitly and critically gain awareness about their own beliefs and conceptions; consequently, change them into the positive beliefs to reconsider language learning courses as the means to prepare them to use language in the real world. Thus, a good language teacher as a social agent whose duty is to create changes in education can help learners in this journey to critically undergo social transformation to use language for expressing their voices and worlds.

When students' false expectations and beliefs change, they see language learning as something far beyond learning certain useless decontextualized rules and structures. Through the process of transformation, they understand that teachers are the intellectuals that link language contents to the

students' real world experiences in order to create contextualization. Thus, teaching is not summarized in terms of transmitting knowledge to learners; rather, as a process which relates the classroom to the social, cultural, political, and historical aspects of the students' lives in the outside world.

The System of Assessment

The system of assessment in Iran is plagued by serious problems (Madandar Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012). There are some factors which are believed to be the potential obstacles to the reformation of the traditional system of assessment in the Ministry of Education. Among various factors, the lack of teachers' consciousness and understanding of the harmful effects of the traditional exams, the lack of familiarity and knowledge about modern assessment approaches, and the lack of awareness of the global innovations and experiences are highly significant (Ahmadi, 2004 & Ghosgolk, 2005). Some researchers have also indicated that undue emphasis on the final score has caused damage to the students' creativity as well as the lack of exposure to higher cognitive skills (Porahmadi, 2008; Kakia & Almasi, 2008). Accordingly, Van Lier (2004) states that narrow test-based accountability cultures in schools cut off the academic success. In fact, they might acquire good grades in the short term, but they will not be well-prepared to confront challenges in real-life situations.

It is worthy of note that the system of assessment is defined in terms of the contents of the textbooks (Madandar Arani, Kakia, & Karimi, 2012). Students are required to study and memorize the contents of the books for achieving the passing score. Every academic year of public schools consists of two terms in which students are obliged to take two summative tests as necessary for proceeding to the pursuing academic year. In doing so, teachers stick to the books and become the slaves of the books to teach solely on the basis of the textbook contents. So, they resort to the transmission model of teaching and learning, and transmit the information to the passive learners. Actually, following and covering the textbook contents is an obligation taken by teachers to transmit the curriculum to the students. This method of teaching and testing kills students' creativity by removing them from the realities of the actual lives and world.

In regards to the assessment of English, it is said that testing is on the basis of the textbook materials including grammatical rules, exercises, decontextualized sentences, and texts. Students' listening and speaking are not measured because the system does not include them in the textbooks. Reading and writing are also restricted to the memorization of grammatical intricacies, arcane paradigms and their applications in the decontextualized sentences. A teacher said:

> About the system of testing, I can say that it is based on the book. The book includes grammar, exercises, and vocabulary so that students should study all these to get the passing score. In class, I teach about all these things in detail. All the students study what I say as well as do all the exercises. Testing is just based on what is covered in the book and what I teach in the classroom and nothing more.

According to Van Lier (2004), since the grammar teachers neglect to relate the language to the living language, they create this impression in learners that the real language is what is included in the textbooks. As a consequence, students who have spent six or eight years of foreign language learning in schools are really shocked as they encounter foreign cultures. It is the reality of foreign language education in our system. After many years, students who are accustomed to the traditional way of teaching, learning, and testing, are embarrassed when they encounter with real life challenges. They have nothing but many useless grammatical rules in mind that they also forget them after a while.

Multi-Level Language Classes

A challenge for teachers has always been how to manage classes with students from different levels of language proficiency. According to Mathews-Aydinli and Van Horne (2006), a multi-level class presents challenges for teachers so that they need to be addressed. In fact, the teacher in such classes requires training, sufficient experience, and extra time to appropriately prepare lessons and

instructional materials. Also, in doing so, they can benefit from teacher collaboration and program support in order to plan activities meeting all the abilities in the classroom. If activities only meet the needs of average proficiency-level learners, those low-proficiency learners may get frustrated, and those advanced leaners may become bored (Boyd & Boyd, 1989; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Thus, instructors and teachers teaching in this type of classes should utilize multi-level lesson planning including strategies for organizing group, pair, and individual work.

In the public schools in Iran, all the language classes are presented in the form of multi levels in which the average number of students in each class sometimes goes beyond thirty. Hence, an Iranian teacher's challenge is how to deal with the problem of both the management of crammed classes and the planning of instructional activities to meet the needs of all the students with different levels of language proficiency. An English teacher should adroitly undertake the management and control of such classes while at the same time they are required to devise instructional strategies and plans to create a challenging environment for students with high level of language ability and a supporting milieu for low level language learners to feel secure and safe. In regards to this constraint in such classes, a teacher said:

> When I teach in English classes in the ministry, I feel so tired. Sometimes I don't know what to do. In each class, there are few students whose English is perfect, and even they are able to speak fluently. They expect me to teach challenging materials because they think the book contains simple materials that they know all. On the other hand, there are a large number who are average and a few who are very weak. I don't know what activities I should use to involve all the students. The large number of students in class is also another challenge so that their management becomes so difficult for me.

Thus, due to the nature of English classes held in public schools, one solution can be to instruct teachers through in-service classes about the appropriate strategies to deal with these challenges.

The Pre-Service and In-Service Classes for English Teachers

Hui (1995) believes that the pre-service and in-service classes are the most efficient resources through which teachers can gain professional abilities and increase their academic awareness. Actually, the purpose of teacher education programs, seminars, and conferences held in different countries is to broaden teachers' conceptions of the discipline, update their professional lives, and inform them with the latest language learning theories and developments, philosophical and theoretical considerations, as well as practical and pedagogical aspects of language learning and teaching.

According to Kumaravadivelu (2012), the traditional ways of teacher education follows the transmission approaches by which teacher educators transmit a set of pre-determined, pre-selected, and pre-sequenced bodies of knowledge to student teachers. These approaches assume the role of the teacher educator to that of conduits passing on the digestible bits of professional knowledge to student teachers. That is, teachers receive the master teacher's professional knowledge and apply it in the classroom. These top-down approaches assume the role of conduit for the teachers through which they as passive technicians channel the flow of information from expert to learners without altering the content of the information.

It is suggested that the pre-service and in-service classes for Iranian teachers are based on the transmission approach through which the teacher educator as a conduit tries to pass on his or her own knowledge to teachers. Actually, the educator's professional knowledge is also summarized in terms of a host of grammatical intricacies and complicated grammar features transmitted to teachers as passive recipients. In regards to the nature of pre-service and in-service classes held through the Ministry of Education for the enhancement of Iranian English teachers' professional knowledge, as Safari and Pourhashemi (2012) put it, what actually matters in such classes is nothing except the provision of

linguistic knowledge and the elaboration of useless decontextualized structures aiming at updating English teachers' professional skills. One teacher said:

> To this date, I've taken part in more than 500 hours of in-service classes presented by the ministry. I think the most ridiculous classes which are a waste of time and energy. An instructor comes and teaches grammatical rules and structures of the book in detail. After the course is finished, we all forget all the details about grammar.

When teacher educators have lost the right path, how do we expect Iranian English teachers as the transformative agents to create changes in their classes? And how can they teach learners on the basis of this superficial knowledge within socially, politically, culturally, and historically situated contexts? In fact, the drastic transformation should occur in all facets and components of the system from the education system to other elements such as policy makers, language planners and educators. Until the elements of the system do not get critically aware of the status of language program in the system, any effort towards the betterment is futile. The teacher educators themselves are required to critically reflect on their actions and make their ideologies and beliefs explicit. Surely, the explicitness of their conceptions helps them make better decisions on how to teach English in their classes.

Conclusion

Language learning education constitutes one of the most important elements within the realm of any educational system. The aim is to teach learners in order to acquire the skills necessary for any challenges they face in real lives. To generate highly proficient students, the education system is required to investigate the best ways to develop the curriculum efficiently. Actually, this can firstly be achieved by dint of critical reexamining and reconsidering all the different aspects of the education system which directly/ indirectly affect language development. In the case of the status of language curriculum in the Ministry of Education in Iran, it can be said that it has ended up with failures in producing the proficient learners. Actually, this qualitative study as an attempt tried to exploit teachers' views on the failures of language program and the challenges they confronted in the system. Inspired by their views, this study could also explore the factors leading to the current failures of the EFL curriculum in Iran. An awareness of these factors, undoubtedly, helps policy makers, language planners, curriculum developers, textbook writers, and teacher educators to critically take a step towards a major reform in the EFL program in the ministry of education.

References

Ahmadi, G. (2004).*Situation and role of educational improvement assessment in education and process-oriented learning.* Paper presented at the first educational assessment symposium, Tehran: Ministry of Education.

Ary, D., Jacobs, L.C.,& Sorenson, C. (2010). *Introduction to Research Education* (8th Ed.). New York, NY: Wadsworth.

Boyd, J. R.,& Boyd, M.A. (1989). *Input-output teacher's manual.* Normal, IL: Abaca Books.

Breen, M. P. (E.d.). (2011). *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research.* Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

Cummins, J. (2005). Teaching the language of academic success. In C.F. Leyba (ed.) Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework 3rd edition (pp. 3-31). Los Angeles, CA. Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University, Los Angeles.

Derry, J. (2000).*Iran.*In D. Coulby, R. Cowen, & C. Jones (Eds.). *World Yearbook of Education 2000: Education in Times of Transition.* London UK: Stylus Publications.

Freire, P. (1985). *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power, and Liberation.* South Hadley, MA: Bergin Garvey.

Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world.* Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.

Garcia, D., & Leiva, C. (2014). Theorizing and enacting translanguaging for social justice. In A. Blackledge & A. Greece (eds.), *Heteroglossia as Practice and Pedagogy.* Dordrecht: Springer.

Ghosgolk, A. (2005).*A New Look at Educational Improvement Assessment and its Role on Educational Reforms.* Paper presented at first educational assessment symposium, Tehran: Ministry of Education.

Hattie, SJ. (2003). *Teachers make a difference: What is the research evidence?* Paper presented at the ACER Annual Conference, October.
http://www.leadspace.govt.nz/leadership/articles/teachers-make-a-difference.

Horwitz, E. K. (1988). The beliefs about language learning of beginning university foreign language students. *Modern Language Journal, 72*(3), 283-294.

Hosseini, S.M.H. (2007). ELT in higher education in Iran and India: A critical view. *Language in India, 7,* 1-11. Retrieved November 25, 2014 from http://www.languageinindia.com/dec 2007/eltinindiaandiran.pdf

Hui, L. (1997). New bottles, old wine: Communicative language teaching in China. *EnglishTeaching Forum, 35*(4), 34-41.

Kakia, L.,& Almasi, A. (2008). *A comparative study of effectiveness's evaluation of qualitative and quantitative assessment methods on learning, anxiety and attitude of primary pupilsof Tehran City.*Paper presented at Formative Assessment National Conference, Khoramabad: Lorestan's Education Organization.

Kanpol, B. (1999).*Critical pedagogy: An introduction* (2nd ed.). The United States of America: Bergin& Garvey.

Kiani, G., Ghafar Samar, R., & Mahdavi, B. (2011). Towards a harmonized foreign language education program in Iran: National policies and English achievement. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal, 2(*3), 462-469.

Krashen, S., & Brown, C.L. (2007). What is academic language proficiency? *STETS Language and Communication Review.*

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2012). *Language teacher education for a global society: A modular model for knowing, analyzing, recognizing, doing, and seeing.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Madandar Arani, A. Kakia, L., & Karimi, V. (2012). Assessment in education in Iran. *SA-eDUC Journal,*9(2).

Mathews-Aydinli, J. , & van Horne, R. (2006). *Promoting the success of multilevel ESL classes: What teachers and administrators can do.* Washington, DC: Center for Adult English Language Acquisition. Retrieved November 25, 2014 from http://www.literacyminnesota.org/sites/6bc90f8a-e528-403a-8c6b-ffdd2e3dd3a7/uploads/promo.pdf

Medgyes, P. (2001). When the teacher is in a non-native speaker. In M. Celcie-Murcia (ed.),T*eaching English as a second or foreign language* (3rd ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 415-427.

Oxford, R. L. (2002). Sources of variation in language learning. In R. B Kaplan (ed.), *The Oxfordhandbook of applied linguistics* (3rd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press, 245-252.

Pinar, William F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Porahmadi, M. (2008).*Assessment Instruments Characteristics and Information Gathering at Formative Assessment.* Paper presented at Formative Assessment National Conference, Khoramabad: Lorestan's Education Organization.

Reagan, T. G.,& Osborn, T. A. (2002). *The foreign language educator in society: Toward a critical pedagogy.*Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Richards, Jack C. (2011). *Competence and performance in language teaching.* New York:Cambridge University Press.

Sadeghi, S.,& Ketabi, S. (2009). From liberal ostrichism to transformative intellectuals: an alternative role for Iranian critical pedagogies. *Journal of English Language Teacher and development* 12, 52-60.

Safari, P., & Pourhashemi, M.R. (2012). Toward and empowering pedagogy: Is there room for critical pedagogy in educational system of Iran? *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2*(12), 2548-2555.

Salehi-Isfahani, D. (2000). Demographic factors in Iran's economic development.*Social Research*, 67(2): 599-6.

Strauss, A.,& Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nded.).Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Tomilson, B. (2012). Materials development for language learning and teaching. *Language Teaching*, *45*(2), 143-179.

Van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning.* New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Wrigley, H.S.,& Guth, G. (1992). *Bringing literacy to life: Issues and options in adult ESL literacy.* San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International.