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Privatization of English Education in Iran: A Feasibility Study

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Abstract

Privatization of Formal English Education (FEE) in Iran's public schools has become a controversial issue. There have been hopes and worries about the probable procedures and outcomes of privatizing English education among Iranian educational authorities. In this respect, we conducted a survey as an attempt to evaluate the current status of English education in public schools, as well as to examine its feasibility for privatization. A questionnaire was administered to 1470 junior and senior high school students, EFL student teachers, English teachers, and parents. Sixty-one high-ranking authorities of the Ministry of Education and university professors were also interviewed. The findings highlight certain inadequacies in English education currently being practiced in Iranian public schools. Furthermore, the study indicates the feasibility of the English education privatization in Iran as far as the educational, socio-cultural, economic, and administrative aspects are concerned. Yet, such a transition, according to this study, has to be done under government authority and supervision and should be conducted through setting up defined standards. [1]

Introduction

Developing an appropriate curriculum that satisfies the needs of students is one of the main issues of education; however, the core issue is *which* strategy, attitude, or

beneficial and reliable curriculum content can properly respond to the educational needs of the society? According to Moayeri (2005), the Iranian educational system has two complementary commitments: it is both mandatory and free. An important characteristic of any educational system is, however, its structural cohesion. It is obvious that any change in an educational system, including Iran's, can dramatically influence society. In such a case, the recognition of problems and difficulties must be made prior to proposing any solution.

The problem areas of the Iranian system of English education, roughly analogous to the educational system in Iran, can be found in recognizing its goals, output, cause, and nature. Some of these problems may be due to the performance of the system of English education, while others might be due to an increase in the number of institutions, the students and the diversification of the needs. In the qualitative side, some remedies can be sought on reforming the content and methodology and performance of the institutes to improve English instruction. In the quantitative side, however, problems basically arise from services provided. Informal analyses suggest that formal English language education might have some probable weaknesses in the following areas: determining needs and defining goals, programming curriculum content, implementation of the program, appropriate methodology, end products of the curriculum, and system of evaluation.

English education in Iran faces a variety of predicaments. First and foremost is the issue of educational goals. These goals are articulated based on national educational objective settings and teaching-learning issues. Curriculum developers, constrained by older paradigms and other infrastructural issues, have almost certainly neglected to pay attention to students' needs and future demands. The research results might be, by a hair's breadth, generalizable to formal language education. Developing a curriculum is a complex task. Local as well as regional needs should be well taken care of, especially in a large multicultural country like Iran.

According to *Sazman-e Sanjensh-e Amoozesh-e Keshvar* (literally, Iran's Educational Measurement Organization), the country is divided into three different regions: privileged, semi-privileged, and deprived. Evidently, the most tangible issue of any curriculum development is identifying the needs of each region independently. The curriculum should act idiosyncratically and have relevance to the individual characteristics of the students. Third is the issue of educational facilities. A formal curriculum should enable accessibility of useful curriculum goals while considering facilities and should not be restrained by the administrative and executive conveniences. Time allocation is the fourth consideration. The ideal procedure is to define the curriculum based on the educational goal(s), something that does not seem to be put into practice. In reality, the syllabus cannot meet the allocated time for Formal English Education, which in turn renders major problems in weekly English class times. The disagreement between school function and time allocation to English classes is visible and reduces teachers, students, and school performance. Last but not least is the age of onset in learning a foreign language. Evidently, numerous countries use a comparable curriculum consisting of different subjects like math, science, and

languages. In their research on education in 125 countries, Benavot, et al. (1991) found considerable similarity in primary school curricula throughout the world. Learners start learning a second language from elementary school (Chasten, 1986; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1992). It is worth mentioning that second language education in Iran starts in junior high school, when students have already passed the assumed best age of second language learning, the age of puberty.

Some efforts have been made to start second language instruction at the elementary school level. Recent research by Ministry of Education also confirms the feasibility of such a program. The point is in the questions raised by Birjandi and Maftoon (2005): Have we developed competent teachers, specially trained ones for this purpose? And, are the appropriate materials prepared? The answer to these questions is unclear.

The teacher her/himself is the other issue. Needless to say, the role of English teachers in qualitative and quantitative implementation of the curriculum is vital. Over and above being incoherent and confusing, English teacher education in Iran is stage-bound and sequential (Beh-Afarin, 2002). Such an activity, with differing, irrelevant stages, does not match regional inevitabilities or may mismatch semi-privileged and deprived infrastructures. Finally, there are the educational materials. There are conflicting views on the present situation of English course books. Educational materials should not be restricted to predefined knowledge and must be just right in the originality of its contents and logical order of presentation. It is known that students at this age have inadequate learning experience. However, steamrolling material designers' capability with those of students is a difficult task. English books, on their own, should be able to help students learn and be a complement for teachers' possible insufficiencies. Materials should be simple, coherent, and well ordered, and must be designed in accordance with issues in psychology of learning.

Privatization is an integral part of any educational reform. The number of students educated in private schools varies from country to country: the USA (11%), the Netherlands (70%), Denmark (75%), Belgium (50%) and the Philippines (75%). Some believe privatization leads to financial abuse of students, but it's important to note that privatization involves miscellaneous functions and applications. According to Levin (2001), privatization is a general term that refers to the handing over of public activities, funds, and responsibilities to real and legal individuals. Some experts, however, take privatization and liberalization the same. Still others equate privatization with a situation in which new markets are developed to replace public services. Levin (2001), for example, categorizes privatization into different but related subjects: provision of services, financing as well as administration, decision-making, and accountability. With respect to the tuition fees, families, instead of the government, might be responsible for paying some or all of educational costs. In the United States, in some private schools students pay tuition, which accounts for part of the educational costs, and the government pays the rest. A list of countries with at least 25 percent of privately educated students is found in Parry (1997).

In most developing countries, as in Iran, parents take part in paying educational costs. According to Iran's constitution, education at primary and secondary schools is free; however, some schools charge a fee for a variety of reasons. Complete privatization of education is impossible, although balancing education by using public and private sectors seems possible. In this case, an educational-service market forms in which educational service providers (public or private) compete, sector (public or private) effectiveness is measured, and parent-student needs are satisfied by subsidies and educational vouchers. The purpose behind this research was, as stated earlier, to look for the feasibility of Formal English Education privatization in Iran.

Materials and Methods

A descriptive research method was utilized for the purpose of this study. The reason behind using such a method was that the descriptive method in this research takes advantage of a choice of techniques, including questionnaires and semi-structured interviews.

Instrumentation

Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were utilized to obtain relevant data. The questionnaires included statements on four different issue-areas: educational, socio-cultural, economic, and administrative. The interview section included five questions: one question on the current status pathology of FEE and the remaining four questions on the feasibility of English education privatization. Questions were prepared while concerning intervening factors, expert's evaluations, calculating coherence and other normalizing criteria. Various questions for each research group were used in the questionnaires for the purpose of gathering information from the subject pool after being validated and standardized. The interviewees were then asked five questions concerning the subject of research. The researchers constructed both instruments.

There was no time limit, so the participants were able to take their time to answer. (Some participants did not answer the questions appropriately, a known drawback of survey studies.) Face and content validity estimates were two key elements preserved in these questionnaires. Complex, leading, and provocative questions were also avoided. The areas under investigation were classified into their parts and one question was asked about each part. The main structure was defined first.

The main construct under study was the feasibility of handing over FEE to the private sector. This construct was classified into four educational, social-cultural, economic, and administrative sub-constructs. Each sub-construct was then divided into indexes and sub-indexes. The schematic relationships between construct, sub-constructs, and indexes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Main Construct and Sub-Constructs Under Investigation

MAIN CONSTRUCT			
Feasibility of Privatizing Formal English Education			
SUB-CONSTRUCTS			
Educational aspect	Socio-cultural aspect	Economic aspect	Administrative aspect

For each index, several questions were normalized, evaluated, and tested by the research team. As there were several questions on each, the researchers tried to reduce the number of questions. After the pilot study, inappropriate questions were excluded from the questionnaires. Later, a Persian literature professor edited the questions for language use. Her comments were taken into account in finalizing the instruments. Questions were written in a plain style of Persian so that students could understand them easily. General information received from each respondent in each group, such as personal information, school records, and so forth, proved useful in classifying, comparing, and further analysis of the data.

Each group was presented a variety of questions: students: 63, student-teachers: 125, teachers: 79, and parents: 77. Answers were collected and then analyzed through a Likert scale (range 1 through 5). Every questionnaire had three types of questions:

1. Questions with 4 or 5 items (on the cover)
2. Questions with value of 1 to 5 (inside)
3. Questions with 3 items (inside)

Interview questions, like those of the questionnaires, were tested and standardized and finally five questions were adopted. Evaluating the indices was the same as those of the questionnaires.

Participants

The subject pool formed 852 junior and senior high school students, 174 EFL student-teachers, 213 English teachers, and 241 parents from capital cities of nine provinces as well as 61 ministerial authorities and university professors. Apart from the main study, 193 subjects participated in the pilot study. Tehran, Semnan, Yazd, Bandar-e Abbas, Ahwaz, Tabriz, Kermanshah, and Kerman were selected for the purpose of the study. Cochran's formula was used to determine the sample size. Since a better understanding of the issue-areas directly or indirectly related to FEE needs careful consideration of human resources apart from merely students and teachers, it was attempted to obtain data on in-service EFL student teachers who are directly related to the formal education and the curriculum. Parents' views were also gathered because they are directly involved in the learner's future success or failure. Apart from the major cities, data were collected from some smaller cities, including Susa, Bisetoon, and Garmsar.

Regarding the semi-structured interviews, it is worth mentioning that high-ranking authorities from Ministry of Education, including minister of education's consultants, director general of organization for research and educational planning, director general of educational technology, heads of organizations in the provinces as well as their deputies in junior and senior high school education were interviewed. Other interviewees included university professors from state-run universities, Islamic Azad University, and teacher educators from Teacher Education Center. All interviews were videotaped and are available at the Organization for Research and Educational Planning, Ministry of Education.

Results and Discussion

To provide reasonable answers to the research questions, descriptive (frequency and percentage) as well as inferential statistics (i.e., multivariate regression, factor analysis, Mann-Whitney, and Crossill Wallace) were utilized in this survey by the use of SPSS and STATISTICA packages. However, we do not present detailed statistical tables and figures, opting to focus on the findings of the study. In the following sections, a comprehensive and detailed description of the information obtained through the instruments is provided.

Junior and Senior high school students

More than half of the subjects declared that regular inspection, standardized supervision, and teacher choice were the main advantages of private education. Almost all students believe the private sector has more facilities. They state that because private institutes are smaller than public ones, it is easier to equip them.

EFL students (Associate diploma)

These participants believed that privatization would reduce the value of teacher education and would have no effect on educational technology. They claimed privatization of English language teaching would improve the level of language knowledge, would enable the choice of better teachers, and would enable the classroom to contain a lower number of students. Concerning the homogeneity of education in both deprived and privileged regions of the country, their idea was that privatization would lead to asymmetrical educational services and would hamper the expansion of improved education. Associate diploma students were concerned with job security, job enhancement, employment, and the possibility of upgrading public participation. However, they also believed privatization would not be useful as far as satisfying social needs of English education are concerned. A majority of students believe privatization is possible and would improve teacher employment, EFL curriculum development according to the local needs, use of qualified teachers, and facilitated policymaking. They also believe privatization would not be useful as far as teachers' job security and reduction of teacher education value is concerned.

EFL Students (BA)

The EFL students surveyed hold that privatization would lead to asymmetrical educational services and would hamper the expansion of quality education. Most of them agree that privatization might improve the appropriate proportion of students in each class (number of students per class), English teacher employment, upgrading public participation, and providing better grounds for English teachers' performance. Privatization, in their eyes, was neutral in satisfying social needs of English teaching/learning, and teacher roles in producing educational facilities. To them, privatization would have little effect on the possibility of making use of English teachers in other majors. They maintained privatization would lower the chance of English teacher employment, due to the improved standards in privatized fields. Students also held that due to intense competition, there would be better execution of appropriate curricula in the private sector. Yet, they believe privatization would not help upgrade the knowledge of English teachers.

English language teachers

This group declared that privatization might enable classrooms to accommodate a proper number of students and it would also help the compilation of curricula to comply with the real needs of the country. They confirmed the cost-effectiveness of the privatized Formal English Education; they maintained privatization could enable classrooms to accommodate a proper number of students and would promote teacher employment, enable English teachers (with non-English majors) to work in other fields, facilitate policy-making, and improve execution of curricula. They believe privatized English education, compared to public or Formal English Education, would have the following strong points: it may enable classrooms to accommodate proper number of students, develop curricula, meet the real needs of country, and promote teacher employment at institutes.

Parents

Parents, unlike what was expected, believed that privatized English education would be a somewhat blunt instrument, although they believed that privatization might promote teachers' knowledge, quality of the content materials, and teacher employment. Besides, they believed that privatization would provide English teachers with non-English education to be employed elsewhere (see Table 2 and Figure 1 below).

Table 2. Feasibility Estimates by the Participants

	Educational	Social-cultural	Economic	Administrative
Junior high school students	64%	63%	47%	53%
Senior high school students	57%	55%	45%	53%
EFL students (Associate)	48%	42%	75%	85%
EFL students (BA)	54%	47%	75%	55%
EFL teachers	59%	60%	72%	64%
Parents	60%	60%	72%	55%

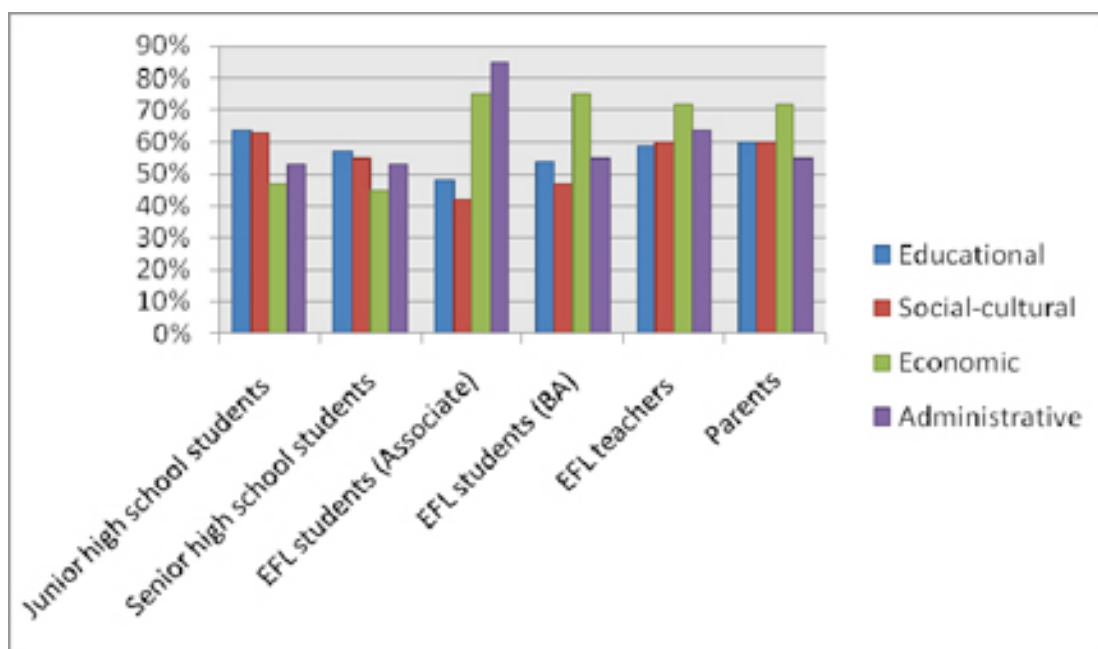


Figure 1. Participant Views on the Feasibility of FEE in Iran

Experts, authorities, and University professors

participants in the interview section of the study believe that English education privatization is possible and would bring about positive effects. Interview results revealed that the problems of FEE in Iran might be listed as follows:

1. Disregarding students' linguistic abilities
2. Improper methodology
3. Lack of appreciation for English courses compared to other school subjects
4. Lack of English conversation in classes
5. Lack of teacher motivation
6. Limited time allocation to English classes

7. Low knowledge of teachers
8. Poor contents or low levels of knowledge presented in the books
9. Unfamiliarity of teachers with latest developments in language teaching

Predicted variables in different aspects were as follows:

Educational aspects

- Better teacher training/development
- Educational facilities
- Educational materials
- Improved abilities of students and teachers
- Improved curricula
- Parent-student satisfaction
- Supervision
- Teacher-student motivation

Social-cultural aspect

- Attitude
- Familiarity with basics of culture
- Homogeneous education

The subjects believe that different readings on foreign cultures and even lack of knowledge about them might bring negative attitudes towards privatization. It is worth mentioning that familiarizing students and staff with foreign cultures seems to be a good groundwork for intellectual development. This might be facilitated by privatization.

Economic aspect

- attracting private sector's participation
- cost-effectiveness
- job opportunities

The subjects held that privatization was cost-effective, provided that Education authorities fully supervise the process and the content be fine-tuned according to the needs and expert opinions.

Executive/administrative aspect

- Appropriate policymaking as to educational purposes
- Defining suitable a approach
- Educational programming
- Possibility of employment of expert teachers
- Providing equal educational services in different regions of county

Participants firmly believe that if the government supervises the privatization process, there will be fewer problems in Formal English Education. Also, privatization might enable the employment of expert teachers at the private sector. According to participants, it will be possible to appropriately program the education and make suitable policies under privatized FEE.

Conclusion

Formal English Education in Iran has attracted much attention in the past two decades. This might be due to the fact that FEE, at least to many Iranian youths, is the most important and cheapest way of learning English. Schools are expected to employ all their facilities and use competent teachers to gain excellent results. Recently, some apparent reforms in English teaching/learning have been made. Cities like Shiraz and Tabriz started to teach English at the elementary school level. Lack of laws and regulations have made the schools change their English training courses to be considered extracurricular activities. Other non-profit schools use institutional facilities and teach English in the afternoon sessions.

The study results reveal that most Iranian schools, regardless of their geographic location, bring into play some English learning activities. Strong competition exists among schools in this respect, obviously resulting in quality performance. Unfortunately, these trainings do not follow a coherent agenda and there is no effective supervision on them. One might claim that, in reality, such activities do not support overall English education. There is ample evidence that some schools attempt to make contracts with famous institutes only to attract the parents' attention. It is interesting to know that the so-called "famous institutes" mostly hire two or three qualified teachers and the rest of the teachers have a disappointing performance.

Concerning the vast geographical distribution of education in the country and different needs of various geographical locations with different educational, cultural, economic, and administrative infrastructures, a unified or integrated English education seems to be doubtful. The presence of traditional materials development paradigms is another obstacle in the process of integration. Many education authorities, including the authors and program developers themselves, have expressed their positive attitudes towards the need for further achievements in the teaching materials; however, there have been little financial or officially authorized support, especially by the Organization for Research and Educational Planning at the Ministry of Education, to accomplish the task. Learning a language is a demanding process; therefore, the more attracting and appealing the materials, the better the results will be. The educational materials used by language institutes—the private sector—are more diverse and attractive. As unmistakably involved in English education, parents, teachers and students expressed their preferences for the materials introduced by the private sector, although this does not mean that the materials currently used in FEE are useless or lack coherence. In addition to the current teaching/learning materials, adding aesthetic aspects, diversifying the tasks and activities, and preparing work and

test books, teacher manuals, CDs, videotapes, etc. would definitely improve results. The participants believed that holding seminars, material evaluation workshops, etc. would have little or no effect on addressing their real needs.

It is clear that the Organization for Research and Educational Planning at the Ministry of Education has to supervise a serious challenge in the future. It might be ideal to hand over the administration of EFL education to the private sector and let the government monitor or supervise the performance. This does not mean that the government will have no legal right or role to supervise the educational activities, but it is asking for assistance from active private sectors.

This report confirms the possibility of privatization of English education. Overall, the results gained from interviews and questionnaires revealed that it is possible to hand over the administration of FEE to the private sector, yet defining public supervision and relevant standards are the key elements.

From a pathological perspective, one cannot claim that privatization of English education eliminates all FEE problems. The private sector might be helpful in the education of effective manpower, use of financial capital to equip educational facilities, revision of educational materials, and presentation of a standard educational system. Lack of operationally defined FEE goals has resulted in many educational drawbacks. Moayeri (2005) believes any factor hampering school effectiveness is a loss. This report suggests that privatization might help us prevent such losses.

Final remarks

Privatization of English education has not been confirmed yet. Although there are many benefits in privatizing English education, some existing doubts have prevented its ratification. More research is needed to determine its effectiveness. Evidently, supervision is the most important criterion mentioned in this research and it must be defined; novel ways of evaluation, supervision, and revision focusing on the facilitating role of supervising measures are of utmost importance. Iranian EFL supervising systems should focus on counseling, negotiation, and facilitation of self-upgrade and self-evaluation. The compilation of standards for various educational programs such as manpower (teachers, students, and educational staff), goals (micro and macro), curriculum, methodology, content (materials), and evaluation is vital. It would be wise to practice EFL privatization in some major cities to evaluate the possible problems. The report suggests the deployment of FEE privatization in all three regions (deprived, semi-privileged, and privileged) to look for proper privatization models across the country.

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