

ELT in Iranian high schools in Iran, Malaysia and Japan: Reflections on how tests influence use of prescribed textbooks

Mohammad Reza Ghorbani
University Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the current teaching practices of Iranian EFL teachers using prescribed textbooks at Iranian high schools in Iran, Japan and Malaysia. Based on my own experience teaching in these countries, I argue that external pressures, especially the use of particular testing instruments, influence how teachers use these textbooks. In Iran, the highly standardized national tests force both teachers and learners to focus only on structural or formal grammatical features of English because these are the ones needed to perform well in the exams. In Japan and Malaysia, TOEFL and IELTS tests in a sense encourage teachers to use communicative approaches in the classroom because these communicative skills are necessary in these tests. The immediate implication of this study concerns the need to use textbooks which address the needs of the students. However, it is also necessary to go 'up' to the level of policy-making: because of the huge impact of testing on teaching in the classroom, there must be a serious re-viewing of the Iranian curriculum in English language teaching in order to broaden the skills required for students to learn in school.

KEYWORDS: *Iran, ELT textbooks, textbook culture*

Introduction

Any educational system is composed of five important components (students, a teacher, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation) which are closely interrelated. Even in the context of communicative language teaching, teachers and learners tend to rely heavily on prescribed textbooks which are still a staple in most of EFL classes. While language teachers often teach based on informal analyses of their learners' needs (Tarone & Yule, 1989), freedom to make decisions in class is usually undermined not only by prescribed textbooks but also by other external pressures as well. But as Cunningsworth (1984) asserts, "course materials for English should be seen as the teacher's servant and not his master" (p. 15). Using textbooks only is not enough to meet students' needs. Instructors need to strike a balance between creative instruction and being a slave to their texts (Garinger, 2002). The problem, however, is when external pressures lead teachers into using particular ways to teach prescribed textbooks. Indeed, teachers must

not be slaves to their texts, but it is usually the case that they have little choice because of social demands largely due to the pedagogical culture of the specific ELT classrooms.

In Iran, educational policies are decided primarily by the central government. All of the decisions made by the central government are passed down through provincial organizations for implementation at lower levels which have less authority in decision-making. All major educational policies concerning the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system and so on, are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (ME).

According to Jahangard (2007), students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks. They are not tested in the university entrance examination, as well as in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers put much less emphasis, if any, on oral drills, pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. The main focus is to make students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books.

Similarly, according to Namaghi (2006), there are sociopolitical forces which help determine teachers' work in Iran. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, their input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have positive washback on teaching and learning. Third, since a higher score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by grade pressures from students, parents and school principals. Consequently, as Namaghi argues, teachers become mere implementers of prescribed initiatives and schemes without recourse to their own professional knowledge and experience.

With such background information on Iran's pedagogic culture, this study seeks to find out how the same textbooks are used by Iranian teachers at Iranian high schools both in Iran and outside the country (Japan and Malaysia). More specifically, the paper seeks to explore how teachers use the same prescribed textbooks through variations in approaches and methods. Are there external pressures influencing the way they use these textbooks?

Iran's textbook culture

The major difference between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts is that in an ESL context, English is the partial or universal medium of instruction in some or most subjects in school, while in an EFL context instruction in other subjects is not normally given in English (Prator, 1991). In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) and is practiced within a context-restricted environment where language learning is shaped largely by classroom practices, including the use of particular textbooks and the teacher's management of classroom work, without substantial support from social contexts outside the classroom. Following the Islamic Revolution

in 1979, English education in Iran was formally introduced from the 2nd grade of junior high schools; Arabic education was to be introduced in the first grade. Currently, English teaching starts from the 1st grade of junior high schools. The Ministry of Education compiles, develops and publishes textbooks and teaching materials for public and private high schools nationwide. Thus, all high schools follow the same curriculum standards.

Before the 1990's, English education focused on reading skills in order to help students read and translate materials written in English. The curriculum in general, thus, was aimed at promoting students' grammar knowledge in reading and translation. Consequently, high school English teachers essentially used grammar translation to meet the expectations of the national curriculum. The revised curriculum for high school English education in the last decade seems to have put more emphasis on communicative competence. Nevertheless, it is still far from being called 'communicative'. Teachers continue to use the grammar translation method through textbooks which lack listening and speaking activities and deploy grammatical exercises disguising as 'writing' activities (Hosseini, 2007). They do so because the standardized national exams are still largely structural in orientation.

As far as Iranian schools abroad are concerned, the situation is also generally similar. While these schools have fewer students in class compared to the schools inside Iran, and while the teaching and learning contexts are different from one country to another, the rules, standards and textbooks used are also prescribed by the Ministry of Education. Specific social factors, however, to some extent dictate the manner by which textbooks are negotiated and appropriated by Iranian teachers outside Iran. Interestingly, these factors are also influenced to a large part by particular language tests which, say, Japanese students, are expected to take. Because these tests require some kind of communicative competence, parents and students themselves require the teaching of English that makes use of 'communicative' methods and resources.

Reflections on teaching in Iran, Japan and Malaysia

As a teacher of English, I have had the opportunity to teach English in what may be referred to as ESL and EFL contexts. To a large extent, I have found that they are different in many ways, requiring the teacher to approach classes differently. The need for different approaches stems from the fact that in an ESL setting, students usually live within the target culture, whereas in an EFL setting, classes are usually monolingual, and students live in their own country. Brown (2001) reminds us that there is a "continuum of contexts" in English language teaching, "ranging from high visibility, ready access to the target language outside the language classroom to no access beyond the classroom door" (p. 116). In my case, my teaching experience broadly encompasses the transition from an EFL context in Iran to another EFL context in Japan, then from these EFL contexts to an arguably ESL context in Malaysia. I am currently teaching English at the only Iranian high school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The first main difference between the teaching of English in Iran and in other

countries like Japan and Malaysia is the perceived better communication skills of students attending Iranian schools outside Iran. Even Iranian students at the university level lack the necessary skills to be able to use English communicatively (Farhady, Jafarpoor & Birjandi, 1994). Here, English language textbooks are very critical because they are the sole source of language input for the students. The quality of paper, binding and printing of these textbooks may be excellent, but they seriously lack variety in communicative tasks and information gap activities. Similarly, Iranian high schools outside Iran also teach the same textbooks and follow the same standards and rules. However, English teachers at Iranian high schools in Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur also use other teaching materials and methods (e.g., *Steps to Understanding* [Hill, 1988] in Tokyo and *New Interchange English for International Communication* [Richards, 1997] in Kuala Lumpur). Thus, this can partly explain why Iranian students in these schools are generally more proficient in using English communicatively than their peers in Iran. So what is it in these prescribed textbooks that highly constrain the learning of English?

Prescribed textbooks and their weaknesses

First, there is imbalance between the teaching of listening, speaking, reading *and* the teaching of writing. Ideally, the textbooks are supposed to devote spaces for reading and writing, but real-world writing is wanting. Writing exercises and activities simply mean practice in grammatical structures. The textbooks do not incorporate daily activities like writing a diary, writing a letter to a friend and so on. For example, the following excerpt from *English Book 3* (Birjandi, 2003, p. 61) reveals the highly de-contextualized nature of writing exercises.

Change the following sentences into indirect speech.

He told me, "Complete the form and give it to the man sitting at the desk over there".

The man told her, "Don't put your heavy bags on the table".

Secondly, the textbooks are not methodologically in line with current worldwide theories and practices of language learning (see Williams, 1983; Sheldon, 1988; Brown, 1995; Cunningsworth, 1995; Harmer, 1996; Jahangard, 2007). Of course, being current does not automatically make a textbook great. A textbook may be based on the current practices in ESL contexts which are not necessarily appropriate for EFL contexts. However, current communicative theories and practices at the very least help learners use English outside the classroom which is normally the main reason why these groups of students (Iranian students at least) study English in the first place. Indeed, although the overall objective of English language education in Iran is to develop students' basic communication abilities, in reality there is very little focus on uses of English in real-life situations. There are dialogues, but they do not appear to be communicative at all, as exemplified by the following excerpt from *English Book 2* (Birjandi, 2005, p. 9):

Ask your friend to do the things below. Use this model: *Would you mind opening the window?*

1. return these books to the library for me?
2. help me clean my room?
3. open the window? It is very hot.

The focus of this activity is to teach the students a grammatical point. The instruction asks students to use a particular grammatical structure: *would you mind* followed by *verb + ing*. There is no cohesion or coherence to tie sentences grammatically and semantically. Separate sentences like these can hardly lead to students' communicative abilities.

Thirdly, the textbooks are not accompanied with audio CDs for listening purposes; the exercises are not sufficiently challenging to the learners primarily because they do not help learners use English outside the classroom situation. Moreover, although there are phonological gaps between English and Persian, these gaps are ignored in the textbooks. Persian, for example, lacks English sounds like *w*, *th* and a number of vowels but they are not dealt with in textbooks like Birjandi's (2006) *English Book 1*. The following sample pronunciation practice shows that the exercises are de-contextualized (p. 78).

Practice the following words {& letters} with the sound /ei/ as in "say".

ate, they, weight, wait, April, stay, j, k, h, etc.

Factors affecting Iranian English teachers' curriculum planning and instruction at Iranian high schools in Iran, Japan and Malaysia

Given the above discussion on Iran's textbook culture, it is now worthwhile to explore the much larger pedagogical culture of English language education in Iran and in Iranian schools in Japan and Malaysia to identify variations in teaching and learning in these different contexts. It will be seen that while textbooks are prescribed in these contexts, teachers' planning and instruction are also affected by social demands on the teaching and learning of English. For example, different notions of professionalism and different attitudes to learning English influence the way teachers use the prescribed textbooks.

Professionalism in teaching

How do different conceptions of professionalism affect teachers' use of prescribed textbooks? According to Khaniya (1990), "A large number of teachers help students cope with examinations in order to preserve their reputation as good teachers" (p. 51). Teachers' fear and the associated guilt, shame or embarrassment of poor results as a consequence of their students' performance in public examinations might lead teachers to teach English for testing purposes

only (Alderson & Wall, 1993). According to Jahangard (2007), teachers in Iran are pressured into shaping their teaching practices based on the demands of nationwide exams (also Hosseini, 2007). Consequently, for ELT in the country, professionalism essentially means helping students master the textbook(s) being used and perform successfully in the final exam. There is very little motivation for innovation in the use of the textbooks, thus they resort to grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods. They also then use Persian to teach English (essentially out of lack of competence in English, and not because of some solid theoretical framework in the use of L1 in ELT classrooms) and cannot be persuaded to use the target language communicatively. The prescribed textbooks are grammar-oriented, the national exams are likewise structural in orientation, thus teachers do not have much choice but to conform to the pedagogic culture of Iranian ELT. Their concept of professionalism is simple: if student grades in the exam are good, the teacher "becomes" a good teacher.

However, in Iranian high schools in Japan and Malaysia, professionalism takes on a slightly different perspective, though still within the broad influence of specific testing practices. It does not only mean good performance of students in government or state-mandated exams, but also the ability of the teacher to help the students use the language communicatively. The Iranian students' needs in Japan and Malaysia are different because listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are tested in TOEFL and IELTS. Passing these tests is required for admission into English-medium universities. There is, therefore, more desire (and pressure) on the part of the teacher to be more creative and to defy the potentially structural focus of prescribed textbooks.

It must be noted further, however, that it is the Iranian English teachers in Malaysia who feel the most pressure from external forces such as from parents, school principals and students to teach more communicatively. This can be explained by the fact that English is taught as a foreign language in Iran and Japan, but as a second language in Malaysia. The medium of instruction for teaching science in Malaysian schools is English but in Iran and Japan English is taught only as a subject. The demand to learn communicatively is therefore much higher in Malaysia than in Iran and Japan, as evidenced by the fact that much more communicative teaching materials and methods are used in Malaysia than in the two other countries. In addition to the prescribed textbooks, other materials such as *New Interchange*, some articles of *Special English* from Voice of America (VOA), and English lessons from the BBC websites, are used by English teachers at the Iranian high school in Malaysia.

Students' learning attitudes

Another factor that leads to various practices in the use of prescribed textbooks involves students' learning attitudes. Students, particularly those who have high expectations of themselves, expect their teachers to cover all examinable topics. In Iran, as already mentioned a few times above, most of the students demand that their English teachers focus on textbooks prescribed by the Ministry of Education. They may not like the textbook but they know that final exams are

based on them. Their learning attitudes, thus, influence the teachers' curricular and instructional knowledge (see Beattie, 1995). However, those at Iranian high schools in Japan and Malaysia have a different perspective on textbook use. In these countries, Iranian students are expatriates who need to communicate with people who speak a different language. They also aim to enter English-medium universities in these countries (partly because free university education in Iran is very competitive) so the pressure to use English as often as possible, and in as wide range of contexts as possible, is very real in order to improve their chances of passing their (English) tests. Thus, their expectations of what teachers should do in the classroom are different: the teachers must use communicative materials and provide communicative spaces in the classroom.

External pressures in teaching

English teachers too use different materials and methods in different situations because of pressures from principals, other school administrators, colleagues, parents, the community and the media. Herman and Golan (1991; 1993), in their comparative study of teachers' perceptions of the effects of standardized testing, report that teachers in schools which put high premium on test scores usually receive a lot of pressure to improve their students' scores from external sources more than teachers in schools with less interest in quantitative student performance. In other words, the teachers believe that testing has affected instructional planning and delivery because of these external pressures. It is for this reason that Hamp-Lyons (1997) suggests that broad forces in education and society be taken into consideration while studying the politics of washback in teaching.

In Iran, expectations of parents and school principals merely revolve around the students' performance in exams which, as earlier noted, is not grounded in communicative principles in language teaching. On the other hand, parents and principals at Iranian high schools in Japan and Malaysia do not just expect good marks from students, but they also expect to see improvement in students' listening and speaking abilities. Such demands in turn affect the teachers' perspective on what good teaching is all about, including what materials and exercises are deemed appropriate and necessary for the students.

Conclusion

The immediate implication of this study concerns the need to use textbooks which address the real needs of the students. However, it is also necessary to go 'up' to the level of policy-making: because of the huge impact of testing on teaching in the classroom, there must be a serious re-viewing of the Iranian curriculum in English language teaching in order to broaden the skills required for students to learn in school. This way, the learning of English becomes more communicative and, perhaps, useful. Whether it is in Iran, Japan or Malaysia, the 'communicative' demands on the textbook and the teachers' classroom practices are to a large extent influenced by what is being tested. In this case, a close collaboration between the

language curriculum developers and testing authorities is very important: it will help ensure the incorporation of communicative skills into the curriculum and the standardized (national) examinations. In the process, the communicative potential of English language teaching in Iran and in Iranian schools in other countries will be greatly enhanced.

CORRESPONDENCE

Any correspondence should be directed to Mohammad Reza Ghorbani, University Putra Malaysia (mrg872@yahoo.com).

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