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A Critical Micro Evaluation of the English Language Program Reforms in State Schools: A Language-in-Education Policy and Planning Study

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Abstract

Teaching English as a second or foreign language has internationally turned into a determiner of success for societies. Thus, the demand has risen for changes in English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula in different contexts. In response to the growing globalization and the dissatisfaction of many Iranian ELT stakeholders with the former program in lower and upper high-school levels, the Ministry of Education, in 2010, initiated the renovation of national policy documents, coursebooks, and the introduction of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) orientations. The present study is part of a larger project that aims to qualitatively scrutinize the implementational complexities of the new program using a systematic language-in-education planning (LEP) framework. In this respect, 30 experienced headteachers' perspectives and voices from several provinces were explored through open-ended semi-structured interviews designed based on the analysis of school-based documents and observations of ELT goings-on in state schools. Interviews were then transcribed and the content was analyzed to identify the recurring themes. Key findings indicated that the new received program suffers from drawbacks like underbudgeting, students' unequal access to quality ELT, the shortage of prepared teachers, etc. We further found that the program still requires dedicated support of the macro- meso- and micro-level agents at the national scale. Correspondingly, implications for revisions and suggestions for future research are offered.

Keywords: Curriculum evaluation, English language, Language-in-education policy and planning, Headteachers, State schools

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1. Introduction

Many polities have allocated large budgets for designing or revising programs in their national education system to keep up with changing needs and trends in ELT. Since the formation of the *communicative competence model* in the 1970s (Canale & Swain, 1980), the countries in the Kachru's expanding circle (1985) attempted to include CLT into their state/private curricula. Some countries acted earlier and some like Iran remained "hesitant" (Kirkpatrick, 2017, p.5). This originates partly from conservative attitudes toward English as a pointer of the Western hegemony (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). Due to community and national experts' criticizing of the former program (Riazi, 2005), Iranian Ministry of Education (MoE) modernized the program in 2013 (Kheirabadi & Alavi Moghaddam, 2014). Following the completion and modification of the national policy documents (henceforth NPDS) like The Fundamental Reform Document of Education (2011), the prompt and overblown undertaking of the MoE was the production of new coursebooks for lower and upper level high schools (from grades 7 to 12) from 2013 to 2017.

In 2019, the first student high-school population graduated while they had learned English according to the new curriculum in the twelfth grade making the curriculum ripe for constructive evaluation. The abundance of published papers on the efficacy of new endeavors is an appreciated sign of the in-house ELT experts' interest in the reforms. Many studies have examined only one aspect (Davari & Iranmehr, 2021; among others) of a multifaceted phenomenon, and are often centered on researchers' expertise and personally problematized experiences. Research using a systematic LEP framework to evaluate the new CLT-based curriculum does not exist (Davari, et al., 2020) or, in Zare and Anani Sarab's (2020, p. 103) terms, needs to be supplemented to avoid the "tunnel vision" evaluation approach. In addition, experts believe that to aid policymakers, innovative curricula must be comprehensively evaluated and feedback sent to them (Nation & Macalister, 2010), which to our knowledge to date, is inconclusive in Iran.

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ELT in Iranian *state* schools is notorious for inconsistencies in several aspects (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017; Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2016; Zare & Anani Sarab, 2020, among others). After thirty years of inflexible curriculum following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the change commenced cautiously. The first step was the rushed* publication of new coursebooks called Prospect series for the lower high schools in 2013 and Vision series for the upper high schools (Asadi, et al., 2016). Accordingly, the lack of published accounts on evaluation processes in *different contexts* has been a commonly cited gap in the field (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). To this end, the present study is an attempt to expand the research on the effectiveness of curricular reforms initiated in 2013 in Iranian state schools using Kaplan and Baldauf's overarching LEP framework (1997) supported by headteachers' observations.

2. The theoretical framework and Review of Literature

Kaplan & Baldauf's (1997; 2003) evolutionary LEP framework has been updated and widely used for evaluating ELT programs (Hamid, 2010; Hornberger, 2006; Nguyen, 2011), particularly in centralized systems. It consists of the following nine policies.

1. **Access policy:** Who should learn what language(s) and when?
2. **Personnel policy:** How are teachers trained, employed and updated?
3. **Curriculum policy:** Is the curriculum mandated? What are the objectives? How much space and time is allocated to language teaching? How should it be implemented?
4. **Materials policy:** How are the materials prepared? What are the content and the objectives? Are they compatible and consistent? Are they teachable and learnable?
5. **Methods policy:** How should the materials be taught? Is the method prescribed?

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6. **Community policy:** How is the attitude of other stakeholders, including policy-makers, parents, and teachers towards language learning in general and language teaching in state schools in particular?
7. **Teacher-led policy:** How do teachers' agency, beliefs, and bottom-up decisions affect the successful implementation of the CLT-oriented reforms?
8. **Resourcing policy:** Is there adequate budget for everything?
9. **Evaluation policy:** How are teachers and students' performance evaluated? How is the program success appraised? Who are the evaluators? Is the evaluation consistent with the curriculum objectives? Are the objectives attained?

Meanwhile, many studies reported contradictions between NPDS and pedagogy at the school level to implement CLT (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Barabadi & Razmjoo, 2016). For this reason, no LEP study would be beneficial unless the conditions, performance, and the agency of practitioners at the practice level in specific contexts are recognized (Liddicoat, 2014). After all, pedagogy is partly veiled in guidelines and actualization of teacher beliefs (Borg, 2003). Chua and Baldauf (2011) also argue that there are three levels of *macro* (government level) *meso* (intermediary institutions and offices) and *micro* (local agents and their local practices). Even so, daily curriculum events and policies can be better evaluated by observing social issues of the educational community. Similarly, Kirkpatrick and Barnawi (2017, p. 7) have stressed that the study of the nature of educational policies in different ecologies is a *never-ending* process, and "even the interested layman [layperson] will find much worthy of study". Moreover, when researchers probe a research context as reputable insiders, the mutual understandings and confidence of colleagues affect positively the inquiry progression and honesty (Fleming, 2018; Hamid, 2010).

As mentioned above, studies that have focused on *individual* components of the new ELT program abound. Some recent studies (among others) focused on culture (Davari & Iranmehr, 2021), onset age (Khooei-

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Oskooei, et al., 2021), and textbooks (Gheitasi, et al., 2019). Although aforesaid studies reveal valuable insights about ELT conditions in Iran, there will be scholarly solutions which only meta-corpus-based research (such as Farjami, 2019) can bestow.

The study findings of the former ELT program in Iran like those of Atai and Mazlum (2013) and Zare and Anani Sarab (2020) might have set the ground for further multifaceted evaluations of the 2013 reforms. Zare and Anani Sarab (2020), for instance, have recently focused on curriculum reforms based on the Henrichsen's (1989) multifaceted Hybrid Model. Their major findings, which are in harmony with the previous studies, include teachers' positive attitude towards change, the vagueness of objectives, logistical problems, inefficient teacher training programs and in-service training courses (INSETS), etc.

We now turn to the more pertinent yet scanty category of LEP evaluations using Kaplan & Baldauf's (1997) framework. Tajeddin and Chamani (2020) did a worthy LEP content analysis of Iranian NPDS. They reported that NPDS include the greatest number of references (=30) to *curriculum policy* and *zero* references to *resourcing policy*: a self-evident and paradoxical discovery! More recently, Davari, et al., (2020) published results of an evaluation of the new curriculum. Their findings, reflecting the perspectives of five *ELT experts* in Iran, include low instructional hours, crowded classrooms, teachers' limited CLT skills due to ineffective INSETS, and satisfying textbooks. Moreover, using this framework in future curriculum evaluations has been *overtly* recommended by them to examine other stakeholders' perspectives especially those of *practicing teachers*.

Curriculum reform is doomed to letdown without factual feedback from the micro-level actors. In addition, attention should be paid to the micro-grassroots level (Liddicoat & Taylor-Leech, 2014). To this end, the present study, as part of a larger project, attempted to fill this gap in context. Likewise, it will set the ground for

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interested researchers to build upon the methodology and findings to explore other characteristics of the new curriculum in Iranian schools at micro level.

Thus far, it has been stated that although the studies regarding Iranian national ELT curriculum are abundant, there are five limitations: 1- They evaluated the old grammar-translation-based curriculum dictated and implemented before 2013 communicative-oriented reforms. 2- They evaluated one aspect or one component of the ELT syllabus such as one textbook, or in-service training courses, etc. 3- The evaluation studies of the new general ELT curriculum in Iran which are based on a multifaceted, multilayered (micro-meso-macro), systematic, and well-known framework like that of Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) is only limited to Davari, et al., (2020) (Critical General ELT), Atai, Iranmehr, and Babaii, (2018) (Critical evaluation of Iranian EAP programs), and Tajeddin and Chamani (2020) (Critical evaluation of ELT Grand documents). 4- In Davari, et al., (2020), however, only ELT experts' beliefs regarding the new curriculum have been explored within the Kaplan and Baldauf's (1997) framework. Besides, Davari, et al., (2020) have excluded three of the framework policies because of their own research scope and limitations while we have retained all nine policies. Additionally, the exploration of the grassroots practitioners' beliefs like those of school teachers within Kaplan and Baldauf's (1997) systematic framework has been exhorted by in-house researchers and international scholars like Davari, et al., (2020) and Ricento & Hornberger (1996). 5- No study was found to date to be conducted possessing the four aforementioned characteristics devoted exclusively to ELT in the context of public/state schools in Iran. The current research project, correspondingly, is a modest attempt to address these five gap issues. Concerning the theoretical perspectives above, the following inclusive research question will be responded to vis-à-vis the 2013 curriculum reforms.

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- Are **policies** of *access, personnel, curriculum, methods/materials, community, teacher-led, resourcing, and evaluation* (and their subcomponents) addressed sensibly and adequately to implement curricular reforms successfully?

3. Methodology

A qualitative method was selected to explore the complex scope of beliefs that guide the reformed curriculum processes in Iranian *state* schools during and at the end of the program implementation. The research was supported by secondary and primary data sources (see section 3.2.).

3.1. Participants

The purposive typical case sampling has been used to divide the country (Iran's map) into four geographical sections from which participants for the interviews were selected. The same type of sampling has also been used in Atai & Mazlum (2013) for the same purpose. Moreover, criterion sampling was used to identify particular criteria of importance and interviewing those participants that would meet the criteria (Table 1) (Dornyei, 2007). That is why criterion sampling is preferred to identify the system weaknesses for improvement (Cohen & Crabtree, (2006). It is also widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, et al.,2015). Thus, experienced headteachers or ex-headteachers-now-teachers (female = 6, male= 24) having certain characteristics were selected and contacted for the interview thanks to the first researcher's extensive connections with the school ELT community (Hamid, 2010). Firstly, typical case sampling was employed in this study (Suri, 2011) to divide the Iran's map into four sections. Secondly, the criterion-based purposeful sampling was used for the

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selection of the interviewees (Iranian district or province school headteachers) and headteachers of several provinces in Iran were contacted for interviews. In brief, headteachers are a panel of key informants (Weiss, 1995).

In total, thirty headteachers (with experience years of between 15 and 33) took part in the study who were familiar with ELT in both lower and upper high-school levels. Furthermore, they all have received their academic degrees in Iran and are well-aware of the research context. Headteachers had a minimum of 15 and a maximum of 33 years of professional experience (Degrees of B.A: 4, M.A: 14, Ph.D.: 8, Ph.D. Candidate: 4). They had professional working experience in the provinces of *Yazd, Isfahan, North Khorasan, Kohkilooyeh-o-Boyer Ahmad, Chaharmahal-o-Bakhtiari, Mazandaran, Ardebil, Hormozgan, East Azarbaijan, Semnan, Arak, Qom, Khorasan Razavi, and Tehran* (all including urban, suburban, and rural areas). Informed consent was obtained to respect privacy in recording and reporting the data.

3.2. Instruments and sources of data

Since the ELT curriculum in Humanities is a complex educational phenomenon in terms of policy making and planning, the choice of in-depth open-ended semi-structured interviews is recommended to gain an in-depth understanding of the central issues (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Data thus were collected by conducting 30 in-depth open-ended semi-structured interviews. We did not include more participants because we felt we had reached the data saturation point after the 20th interview. However, we conducted 10 further interviews to ensure full data richness. The range of interviews duration was between 25 and 71 minutes (sum= 1299 minutes). In the initial phase, interview questions were inspired, demarcated by the Kaplan and Baldauf's LEP framework, by the secondary existing data sources (Amedeo, et al., 2009, p. 32) such as curriculum evaluation literature, debates exchanged in Social Networks and in national/local informal and formal meetings of English language teachers, TV/News Agencies' interviews with ELT experts, ethnographic data such as classroom

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activities, examination sessions, debates raised in INSETS, and, importantly, authors' long insider experience of and involvement with ELT and teacher training in Iranian milieu (*Cf.* Hamid, 2010). The use of secondary existing data (as complementary to the primary data collected by the researchers) would further serve the purpose of triangulating the data and increasing the trustworthiness of the findings (Amedeo, et al., 2009). In the second phase, questions were structured within the limits defined by Kaplan & Baldauf's framework (1997). In the third phase, initial questions were delivered to 3 national experts whose expertise is curriculum design, evaluation, and planning. Moreover, four Ph.D. headteachers gave their comments on draft interview questions. Final controls were done by authors themselves to verify the conformity of the questions to NPDS, objectives, and theoretical underpinnings of the study.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted in 2019 on the phone. Initial contacts were made with the participants to obtain consent and specify a suitable time for doing detailed interviews. This helped both parties to converse without concern for time or interrupting factors. All interviews were conducted in Farsi (the participants' mother tongue) and later were transcribed and translated by the authors. Flexibly, data from the first three interviews were used in a pilot phase to revise the questions where justified (Robson, 2002). Each interview started with a brief preview of the objectives of the study and the reformed curriculum by the interviewer. It was stressed that the focus of the present study is on CLT reforms only in *state* schools. Then, participants were asked to present a summary of their biography as well as their overall attitude towards the new curriculum. Each interview was recorded with the participants' consent and was listened to twice or more before transcription and translation to become familiar with the important categories and patterns. Raw themes accompanied by their representative quotes induced from each interview were sent back to the interviewees to check for probable misconceptions. Firstly then, open coding was used to categorize the transcribed written data into first-order meaningful

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concepts. Modifications were made as new concepts emerged during open coding phase. Later, through axial coding, meaningful patterns were formed and arranged through the comparison of the individual meaningful concepts and by writing memos and establishing connections among concepts. Thirdly, selective coding was used to identify a core theme which could pull all related concepts together. A further analysis was made to confirm the credibility of the extracted theories through member checking (Dornyei, 2007, Yin, 2003).

4. Results

In this section, the results of in-depth open-ended semi-structured interviews with 30 headteachers contacted from different regions of Iran are presented in the form of the recurring themes and the representative headteachers' (HT) quotes in Table 1. The results are presented in a table for conciseness, lucidity, and ease of comparison (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021)

Table 1.

Summary of the Major Themes and Interviewees' Representative Quotes

Policy	Themes	Headteachers' Representative Quotes
Access policy	• ELT-driven inequality in education • Double-minded view of late ELT onset • Early onset is early engagement with language	• Many families cannot send their children to private institutes. It's not fair…Kids from poor families are being deprived of their right to learn English from an early age (HT2). • Although they (MoE) will face problems like lack of budget, infrastructural deficiencies, and enough skilled teachers, MoE should overcome these problems and start ELT at least from grade 3 or 4

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	learning.	(HT4). • Despite difficulties, earlier onset leads to earlier engagement of the families and students with English learning activities...It can have facilitating effects (HT12). • Late ELT start is a waste of opportunity for the children to be exposed to English language (HT15). • At least 45 minutes of teaching English in a week are necessary from grade 1 to 6…using songs and games (HT21).
Personnel policy	• lack of institutional, financial, and professional support • incompatible national teacher education programs • teacher shortage • job dissatisfaction • teacher retention policies • inefficient and inadequate INSETS	• Teachers themselves are victims of an inefficient and counter-creative education system. They are employed and never supervised or updated effectively (HT12). • Teachers pass a lot of courses at universities but they learn how to cope with school conditions by trials and errors in the classrooms…Schools are not policy-making labs (HT10). • Reform is senseless without energetic, professional, and prepared teachers (HT1). • Salaries paid to teachers are not proportionate to the annual inflation rate. Performance quality does not make a difference (HT14). • Encouraging teachers to postpone retirement is not helpful for CLT reforms in the new program (HT25). • Unfortunately, INSETS are very disorganized…They are not based on local needs of teachers and students, especially in rural areas …They are not based on CLT objectives (HT22). • I can say there is no supervision over the content and implementation of the INSETS by officials…They are like friendly gatherings (HT23). • In fact, our schools need flexible post-method teachers (HT11). • Adapting to change is not an easy task, especially for veteran teachers in large classes and ill-equipped schools (HT30).

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Curriculum policy	• not fulfilling students' future needs • centralized mandated curriculum • idealistic hard-to-operationalize objectives • inadequate and mismanaged instructional hours • irregular breaks in instruction • diffidence about increasing instructional hours • examination policies • inconsistencies across grades and levels • overpopulated classrooms • amassing of low-achievers in many state-school classes • counter-creative ELT climate	• We need to have decentralized ELT programs on our agenda… Of course, it may not be much hopeful in the beginning years (HT29). • All decisions are Tehran-centered. This will not work…We must give roles to local teachers and trust local potentials... Every teacher can be a treasure of experience (HT8). • CLT-based objectives expressed in the preface to the new coursebooks are too general and vague…Even in the guidebooks, we find few practical guidelines for the operationalizing of those objectives (HT9). • Instructional hours are not enough for the full implementation of CLT skills...Portions of dedicated time will be wasted for dealing with misbehaviors, irregular breaks and holidays (HT5). • Teaching time is not enough… but with scarce resources and a shortage of prepared teachers and substandard classrooms, if the time is increased, it will be wasted (HT9). • Reforms have not taken teacher creativity and autonomous learner training into account…Critical aspects are also overlooked…The worst things are NUEE and school-exit exams (HT10). • Learners face two contentual inconsistencies. The first one is in grade 9 and the second one is in grade 10 (HT1). • Tenth graders suffer severely from issues with literacy skills…even in reading and writing the alphabets (HT3). • Hasty reforms should not be imposed on the ELT community in schools…This can get very problematic psychologically and professionally in the long run along with a waste of time and budget (HT14). • CLT cannot be implemented in overpopulated classrooms... especially when there are many weak learners in every class...Teachers cannot even cover the coursebooks content, let alone the communicative

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		activities (HT17).
Materials policy	• new coursebooks as sole manifestation of reforms • new coursebooks as incentives for the updating of teachers' knowledge base • teachers' positive attitude towards new coursebooks • new coursebooks inconsistent with Iran's multicultural and diverse geographical characteristics • overplaying of existing errors by teachers • traditional reading sections • impractical presentation of oral skills • teachers' positive attitude towards appearance and design features of new coursebooks • long dull lessons • culturally sanitized content and appearance • over-attention to grammar • the availability of supplementary materials	• New textbooks are a good manifestation of reform policies and claims (HT15). • New coursebooks are strong incentives for teachers to change attitudes and upgrade themselves …They (textbooks) have injected a sense of hope and refreshment into the school ELT community (HT30). • I have seen that although many teachers overplay minor errors in the new coursebooks, they express overall positive attitudes towards them (HT13). • Teachers in suburban and rural areas face serious problems in teaching new coursebooks. I think they (the coursebooks authoring team) have failed to address appropriately cultural, geographical, and social diversity, and different proficiency levels in Iran (HT12). • Reading texts are interesting but not provocative enough…Post-reading questions are mostly self-evident and traditional …Lack of genre variety and the absence of target-language culture are apparent (HT11). • In Vision Series, conversations are long and dull followed by comprehension checks. Some teachers ignorantly force students to memorize them (HT2). • New coursebooks have an appealing appearance. Use of colors and font variety are good… Some graphics and photos are not facilitating learning and related to the language content (HT3). • Lessons are long and boring (HT22). • Textbooks without (target-language) culture have positive and negative aspects…One positive aspect is that we can focus on the language content without being distracted by cultural debates (HT4). • There are too many grammar points and very limited time to turn

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		them from input into output (HT5). • The preparation of workbooks and teachers' guides is a positive aspect of the produced materials...but instructional videos for students are missing (HT3).
Methods policy	• antidote eclecticism • non-implementable CLT principles • dominant use of Farsi as medium of instruction	• My method of teaching depends on the students' needs, levels, school and classroom conditions…For example, my teaching method and activities are different from classroom to classroom even in one day in one school (HT16). • Most of my colleagues focus on grammar. I too focus on grammar and vocabulary because students and parents like this way of teaching and complain less (HT17). • In many of my classrooms, CLT cannot be implemented… So, I resort to the grammar-translation method to finish the book… Otherwise, I will be blamed for being bungling (HT21). • My students are overconcerned about NUEE. If I don't teach to the test, they will object to the way of my teaching. Students say we want to be successful in NUEE and don't want to learn to speak English (HT13). • I believe that we should not stop a weak student from being graduated because I have seen many of them after graduation do technical works in the factories or independently and they are successful in their carrier (HT2). • I speak Farsi in the class most of the time, especially when I want to teach grammar...There are about 34 students in every class and more than half of them cannot understand the lesson points if I explain them in English (HT3). • Teaching through the medium of English is more demanding for teachers and most of them speak Farsi in the classes (HT14).

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Community policy	• instrumental value of learning English • superiority of private institutes in teaching English over state-schools • teachers misperceived as determiners of students' success or lack of which • teachers feel overburdened by reforms	• It is obvious that nearly all parents and the young recognize at least the instrumental value of learning English (HT26). • Many parents believe that ELT in state schools is not effective and invest in the private sector. Some parents invest in private tutoring as well (HT22). • Unfortunately, many people blame only teachers for the shortcomings of ELT in state schools because they (people) are unaware of ELT complexities (HT23). • Many students and people, non-consciously or consciously, compare ELT in state schools with ELT in private institutes…This comparison is wrong (HT14). • Any change to be implemented should be nationally supported and examined. I personally think that MoE is alone in this respect (HT15).
Teacher-led policy	• the effects of teachers' decisions • teachers' skepticism about and resistance to change • inattention to teachers' feedback and ideas • calcified teacher beliefs	• Policymakers should ask for and respond to sound teacher feedback…This is not truly happening, I think, … (HT19). • Officials don't have high ELT expectations from state schools and teachers (HT13). • Teachers don't like to be implementing tools…They don't agree with some policies and therefore ignore or change them in the classrooms (HT10). • MoE was responsive to true critics…Not all critics are reasonable and noticeable…Many critics leveled by teachers are not acceptable…Some are acceptable (HT3). • Many schools are highly score-oriented (HT4).
Resourcing policy	• unequipped schools and classrooms • underresourced INSETS • large classes	• Many state schools face severe financial problems…They cannot equip all classrooms with recent technology like PCs, high-quality speakers, etc. …This is in marked contrast to CLT activities (HT12). • Adequate and efficient INSETS are essential to prepare teachers for

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	• demotivated and debased teachers	understanding and implementing the reforms. This is highly dependent on adequate budgeting and resourcing (HT11). • Doing CLT activities in overcrowded classrooms requires more time and more energy on the part of the teacher. MoE faces underbudgeting and is not able to expand the physical space to increase the classrooms and employ new teachers (HT8). • Because of infrastructural and resourcing shortcomings, competent teachers become exhausted and demotivated to teach in a CLT way. So, they teach to the test to increase pass scores (HT1).
Evaluation policy	• lack of ELT-specific criteria to evaluate teachers' performance • unworkable centralized criteria for evaluating teachers' performance with highly localized concerns • negative effects of high stakes paper-and-pencil exams • teachers' unsupervised liberty and autonomy in formative assessment of students' oral skills	• There is no ELT-specific mechanism for the evaluation of language teachers' performance… Also, meso-level officials pay lip service to the reports delivered to them by headteachers on some teacher's weak performance (HT11). • When the system cannot upgrade its staff, how can it expect them to teach well (HT15)? • When teachers teach in diverse areas and under differing conditions, their performance should not be evaluated based on a fixed set of criteria (HT23). • Because of Konkoor (NUEE), students and parents coerce us to practice grammatical and vocabulary points …and since many teachers do it, I have to do the same, otherwise, I will lose my face (HT22). • Many teachers have problems with assessing oral and aural skills in terms of time and criteria. One of teachers called me and said frankly: "I don't know how to measure the speaking ability of about 150 students… so I have to rely only on the results of the written tests (HT18). • Testing speaking and listening has been delegated to teachers to administer. But many teachers skip them because of a lack of time,

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		energy, and facilities (HT6). • When I cannot teach communicatively in a crowded classroom, why should I be unfair and act rigorously about testing listening and speaking (HT12)?

5. Discussion

The results (Table 1) are discussed and interpreted below regarding the existing literature on the implementation of 10-year-old reformed Iranian ELT/CLT curriculum in *state* schools and through a wider prism of Kaplan and Baldauf's LEP framework (1997; 2003) vis-à-vis (mis)matches, constraints, (mis)steps, concerns, and suggestions.

5.1. Access Policy

ELT is not authorized in Iranian state primary schools (Davari, et al., 2020). However, headteachers stressed early ELT onset and ELT-driven inequalities in education and society since being admitted in high-stakes exams and gainful employment depend heavily on the knowledge of the English language. Headteachers also believed that late-onset and early-onset both could bring about inequality. In the case of the former, many families invest in the private sector, and many do not. For the latter, the equitable distribution of educational facilities like good teachers and modern technology can pose serious challenges. Zhang, et al. (2014) and Baldauf, et al. (2011), in support of our findings, reported the same concerns in different contexts. Teachers' concerns are also congruent with what Khooei-Oskooei, et al. (2021) presented as a double-minded view of the early onset. Headteachers, therefore, tentatively advocated early onset of ELT and early engagement as predictors of future success for the impoverished.

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5.2. Personnel Policy

Teachers are at the very center of education in all nations (Toropova, et al., 2021). In Iran, NPDS have resembled teachers' jobs to that of prophets (Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020). However, English language teachers are highly critical of and dissatisfied with teacher-debilitating matters including lukewarm professional support and discriminated salary and welfare.

Headteachers said highly exam-oriented NTTPS train young teachers unacquainted with classroom life. Another query is at work addressing the issue of the needs-baseness of NTTPS. The answer is less decisive to our knowledge to date (*Cf.* Baniasad-Azad et al. 2016). Novice teachers' views and experiences of NTTPS should be explored in other in-house contexts to reinforce Nabi-Ranjbari, et al.'s (2020) congruent findings with ours. However, veteran teachers' viewpoints are negative regarding the compatibility of NTTPS with the needs and contextual conditions of the schools. Moreover, formal reports on NTTPS circumstances in the Middle East polities (Kirkpatrick, 2017) reveal comparable drawbacks which either persist or have been lately tackled.

General dominance of West-produced ELT knowledge in NTTPS (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Davari, et al., 2014) is not limited to Iran (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2017: p. 18). The same conundrum has also been eloquently addressed by Kumaravadivelu (2012). The same claim made by headteachers may be further considered by ELT policymakers. Moreover, accepting the fact that school modernization might not actualize soon, policymakers might revise NTTPS to make it more school-adapted by doing needs analysis, considering courses on overpopulated classroom management and post-method pedagogy (Kumaravadivelu, 2012) to diminish confusion, trials, and errors for (novice) teachers. In this respect, Meihami and Husseini's (2020) findings regarding the inclusion of action research and reflective teaching courses in the teacher education programs are noteworthy. Moreover, Darling-Hammond and Bransford (2005, p. 710) exhort that teacher

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educators concerned about how teachers teach may join their concerns within schools before and during making evidence-based NTTPS' policies.

In marked contrast to CLT reforms are the worsening plight of teacher shortage (not limited to ELT) and hiring teachers with any level of capabilities. Although mentioned by Gholaminejad and Raeisi-Vanani (2021), the crisis has not been scrutinized by in-house researchers. However, other factors like competent teachers' turning to secondary jobs and deprofessionalized teachers blatantly contribute to quality teacher attrition. Milner (2013) expresses similar concerns over the commissioning of unprepared fast-track teachers for force majeure reforms. Moreover, some teachers hold entrenched beliefs (*Cf.* Zare & Anani Sarab, 2020) and unprepared teachers cannot implement CLT principles properly (*Cf.* Davari, et al., 2020). On the other hand, most retirees find it backbreaking to manage noisy classrooms during CLT activities, especially in underprivileged regions.

The issues of biased salary, undifferentiated teaching and MoE's inability to modernize schools are sources of ELT teachers' serious chronic complaints which lead to demotivation and downhearted teaching (*Cf.* Zare & Anani Sarab, 2020). Ferguson (1991) congruently argued that the extra money spent on highly competent teachers results in greater student achievement.

Despite the rationale of retaining good teachers to increase secured and coherent instruction in schools (Podolsky, et al. 2016), our findings, contrarily, unveil that legal persuading of teachers to postpone retiring and CLT renovations pose a curious paradox. Firstly, teachers' fresh knowledge of CLT principles is determining the success. Secondly, the CLT approach in an EFL context like Iran is better actualized through learner-centered communicative activities, post-method orientations, and abandoning of ethos. Alas, all this exhaust the retained teachers in ill-equipped schools. Thirdly, many re-recruited teachers have no bent for attending teacher gatherings and INSETS, resulting in their neglect of reform goals and circulars.

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Our participants deplored incompatible and non-compulsory INSETS since they believe INSETS can be very supportive socio-instructional opportunities for teachers to update knowledge. The significance of INSETS was similarly illuminated by Borg (2011), especially when new curricular changes are introduced by policymakers. Inefficient INSETS are attributed to several factors including lack of locally needs-based, practical, and supervised delivery, and inefficiency of online or cascade INSETS because of shallow content and narrow assessment. The ineffectiveness of INSETS is also verified by Davari, et al. (2020) and Zare and Anani Sarab (2020). Our findings, however, are not confirmed by Saadatmand and Shahrokhi (2019) due to their non-random sampling in one city (Isfahan). It is speculated that MoE officials, despite their will, do not put stock in INSETS because they are so plagued by tremendous budgeting and infrastructural problems.

5.3. Curriculum Policy

The findings demonstrated that the curriculum is mandated and its objectives are idealistic and hard to operationalize in the Iranian EFL context. Inadequate and mismanaged instructional hours, irregular breaks, examination policies, logistical deficiencies, and inconsistencies across grades and levels are out of teachers' control. Participants also expressed dubiety about increasing instruction hours by acknowledging two preconditions: 1. Equipped schools 2. Adequate Competent teachers; otherwise, there will be a waste of resources. The same problems undermined LEP success in the Pacific Basin polities (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003), in some Asian nations (Baldauf, et al. 2011), and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2011). Uncertainties over reforms resulting from the above problems should be predetermined through needs analysis and pilot programs (*Cf.* Davari, et al. 2020; Zare & Anani Sarab, 2020). According to (Ketelaar, et al., 2012), the teachers' ownership impact on curriculum reform is conceived as a psychological condition of being the owner of a novelty which is in contrast with mandated programs. It develops through the teacher's mental or physical attempts for remaining loyal to reforms.

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5.4. Methods Policy

Field observations and interview findings indicated that almost all teachers used or favored an eclectic approach that is not principled (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) but is rather localized and antidote to chronic ELT complications in Iran. Nonetheless, the following reasons well explain the fragility of CLT innovations in schools to date.

- Incompatible teaching conditions and the push of NUEE and school exit exams render oral/aural skills de trop.
- Although many teachers are successful in ELT private institutes, prestige originates from teaching to the test in schools.
- Quality CLT teaching in schools is not demanded by influential families.
- The dominant use of Farsi as the medium of instruction by many teachers is a double-edged sword. It reduces both anxiety and communication opportunities in classrooms.

5.5. Materials Policy

In general, the situation for produced materials is more propitious. The new coursebooks epitomize reforms. They also reach out to the rural agents deprived of professional occasions. Additionally, they act as accessible framing of reform expectations and strong incentives to shake teachers out of mindsets.

Regarding four skills, teachers displayed satisfaction with the innovations. However, significant limitations subsist. This is partly because of adopting a centralized approach despite Iran's multicultural and diverse geographical characteristics. Differentiated attention to the educational necessities (in rural contexts) has also been recommended by Gregory and Chapman (2013) for community-inclusive reform elements.

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Reading sections are typically reminiscent of the 1950s-60s and 1980s language-skills-strategies-based approaches to teaching reading (Masuhara, 2013) which can be due to coursebooks writers' commitment to NPDS, time pressure, and rushing to dope learners to read academic texts in post-school phases.

Participants said conversations in Vision Series are dull, long, culture-free, and inauthentic. Moreover, communicative activities are almost impossible due to stuffed classrooms and lack of time. This is congruent with Davari, et al., (2020) and Zare and Anani Sarab's (2020) findings. Moreover, many curricular failings are out of teachers' control but debase their performance.

Notable findings also related to the satisfaction of teachers with coursebooks' appearance and design except for some decorative childish photos which do not facilitate learning. Lessons are also long which induces a sense of lingering. The benefits of short lessons are expressed by practicing teachers and the present authors. They reiterate that *short semi-sequenced lessons* moderate the transition pace, reduce monotony, and create senses of brain cool-down. Many assertions have been underpinned by cognitive psychologists emphasizing spaced learning and memory optimization principles (Kang, 2016).

Coursebooks reflect Islamic Iranian culture which is consistent with NPDS and favored by participants because learners are not distracted by cultural issues (*Cf.* Davari & Iranmehr, 2021). However, through students' growing access to the Internet in the last decade, intercultural awareness activities could be included prudently (*see* Nault, 2006).

Despite claims made in favor of CLT by policymakers and teachers, grammar has plausibly retained its place. Firstly, grammatical competence is a key component of the *communicative competence model* (by Canale & Swain, 1980). Secondly, many ELT experts advocate the inclusion of grammar (Ellis, 2016). Thirdly, and based on Bell and Gower (2011, pp. 139-140), a revolutionary change of teaching materials would result in content alienation and negative attitude of their conventional users. Fourthly, it is the impact of high-stakes

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exams and the learnability of grammar that persuade teachers and students to play up the grammatical points (*see also* Swan, 2002).

5.6. Community Policy

Results corroborated the fact that, despite the polity's outspoken aversion toward English culture and language, people's want for learning English has incessantly increased due to the growth of online information and globalization (Aghagolzadeh & Davari, 2017). This attitude change is simply confirmed by the expansion of private institutes and the marginalization and depopularization of state schools and teachers. Correspondingly, the government's sensitivity towards centralization and sanitization of public education has been amplified. Therefore, the community's potency and role in defining LEP decisions have been greatly contained recently to the point that teaching of multiple languages was proposed to break the English language monopoly (Alhagh, 2016).

5.7. Teacher-led policy

Major factors like teachers' intentions, beliefs, feedback, and knowledge base form teacher agency. They are scrutinized during three pre- while- and post-reform stages (Driel, et al., 2001). Based on Hornberger and Johnson (2007), the agency exists in all phases of policymaking, interpretation, and implementation. We found that *overt, covert, and imposed teacher agency* can abort or even reformulate the new syllabus. Such findings are likewise corroborated by personal viewpoints to teach adaptively (Borg, 2003). Firstly, *overt* agency, enacted through disregarding listening/speaking activities and encouraging students to join counter-reform extra classes, is explained by the dominance of low-achievers, time pressure, sloppy monitoring, and extremely teacher-directed assessment. Secondly, *covert agency*, which is manifest to peers, is the result of teachers' endeavors for (1) increasing pass scores for face-saving (2) responding to local stakeholders' uninformed

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demands, and (3) attracting tutees. Thirdly, as expected, all teachers are not content with many practices they do. They believed they are compelled to follow certain teach-to-test procedures to lighten burnout and to disguise their helplessness in teaching oral/aural skills in subnormal contexts.

Despite an overall positive attitude, findings revealed evidence of both resistance and reluctance to implement the new CLT policies because of inattention to teachers' voices, skepticism about success, calcified beliefs, teachers' unmet expectations, financial dissatisfaction factors, and lack of nationwide academic support. These attest claims made by Foroozandeh and Forouzani (2015), and Terhart (2013) and can be interpreted as major outcomes of the following major shortcomings:

- Vague guidelines
- Propagation of exam-orientedness in mass media
- Lack of incentive for teachers to update themselves professionally

Some studies have not *incorporated teacher-led policy* perhaps due to overlap with other data or different research scopes (Davari, et al., 2020; Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003; Nguyen, 2011; Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020). Findings, however, showed that teachers have a curtailed role in the pre-reform stage but their role in while- and post-reform stages is *uncontainable* in Iran in terms of curriculum, methods/materials, and evaluation practices. In sum, teachers can adapt many things based on needs and stakeholders' stultifying pressures in the absence of macro-meso-level strict supervision. Nevertheless, teachers have the power to withstand pressures by remaining faithful to reforms or simply ignore them to avoid burnout and defamation.

5.8. Resourcing Policy

As Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) put it, LEP (sub)policies are liable to deviation and loss if not adequately resourced. Findings represented a bleak picture of many state schools that are stringently funded by parents and philanthropists. Irrespective of the meager expenditure on modernizing schools, the enactment of other

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(sub)policies, especially INSETS, is still awaiting massive budgets (*Cf.* Davari, et al., 2020). Gostaresh News Agency lends support to the findings: 'The ratio of public education expenditure to gross domestic product has reduced from 6% in 1979s to about 3% in 1999s! The share […] is declining' in Iran (News-ID: 13146092). Surprisingly, no mention is also made to ELT resourcing policies in Iranian NPDS (Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020).

5.9. Evaluation Policy

This policy aims to evaluate (1) teachers' performance, (2) the compatibility of macro policies with micro practices, (3) students' progress, and (5) the new curriculum as a whole. The overall results indicated that teachers' ELT-specific performance evaluation has been delegated to headteachers who often believe there are no *ELT-specific authorized* criteria for appraising teacher performance. Additionally, the reports delivered to officials on some teacher's performance bring about non-binding obligations. Therefore, headteachers feel exhausted and unsupported by law. Moreover, teachers are pessimistic about being evaluated and supervised *centralizedly* since their concerns are highly *localized* and learner-dependent. These findings are also confirmed by Agheshteh and Mehrpour (2021) and Bailey (2006).

The evaluation of the students' progress is done during in-school and post-school phases. The former includes formative/summative assessments and the latter is done through standardized high-stakes examinations like NUEE, school exit, and open national employment exams. Although a set of limited and limiting guidelines (*Barombandi*) on score weighting and (sub)skills allocations has been proposed by MoE, teachers administer formative/summative assessments liberally and autonomously. Moreover, they often pay lip service to oral/aural skills in many schools due to the lack of facilities and substandard teaching. Large classes, amassing of low-achiever students in many schools, and score-centeredness also greatly constrain teachers' functionality. In fact, teachers are contextually aware and adapting agents who take learner's exigencies into

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account to prevent extraneous strictness. In this line, Connelly and Ben-Peretz (1980) aptly described teachers as practical adapters of the new curricular concepts.

The evaluation of the curriculum as a whole entity addresses the cost-effectiveness of the new program in terms of fulfilling the social needs of the community strata. Here, inferences could be made about this type of evaluation. Whether the new program must be pursued or revised is a thorny issue that requires nationwide, multifaceted as well as meta-research discoveries. However, our findings signposted that the current program is doomed to functional stagnation unless measures are taken to support and fund the program (Cf. Zare & Anani Sarab, 2020).

6. Conclusion

The present study was inspired by in-house and foreign ELT experts' call for systematic, comprehensive, contextual, and critical curriculum evaluation. Kaplan and Baldauf's (1997) LEP framework was used as the reference scheme to explore public-school headteachers' perspectives on the new ELT curriculum initiated in Iran in 2013. The overall results indicated that although welcome reforms have been successful in changing attitudes and pulling asunder the calcified beliefs of many ELT stakeholders, its implementability has been hampered by idealistic, top-down, and rushed delivery, the unpreparedness of many teachers and schools, and high-stakes exams like NUEE, etc. It was further found that reform mandates have fomented teacher confusion, inflated grades, unequal access to quality ELT, deprofessionalization of teachers, marginalization of state schools, and further popularization of the private sector.

At the macro level, MoE's policymakers should firstly conduct multi-level nationwide needs-analysis studies to discover voices of all teachers and university experts from all provinces and recognize them in the center-capital decision-making processes. Secondly, they should make modifications to NPDS where necessary. Thirdly, they should periodically re-examine coursebooks, high-stakes exams, strategies for motivating and

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professionalizing teachers, and make supervision more effective. At the meso level, increasing the number of headteachers and empowering them by financial and legal support are expected in terms of providing teachers with high-quality INSETS. Likewise, when macro-level decisions are wisely and collectively made and then interpreted, implemented, and transferred responsibly by the meso-level agents, due to their inter-connectedness, many problems at the micro level will be overcome in the long term.

Implications for teachers, as major micro-level actors, abound. They should take a dynamic and accountable role, participate actively in INSETS and teacher gatherings, engage in action-research and lesson-study undertakings, and embark on self-updating activities. However, the key problem lies in the incapacitating *shift-the-blame* climate that has become prevalent among the stakeholders at all three levels of macro, meso, and micro.

7. Recommendations for further research

Humanities in general, and the field of language learning in particular are so context-bound that strong claims seem ambitious rather than sensible. The present study would be supplemented by meta-research and further studies exploring the perspectives of other stakeholders like school principals in different contexts. The expectations of universities, employers, and organizations as *consumers* of school-based ELT outcomes, are highly determining in appraising the curricular success.

CLT-based reforms in Iran are in dire need of local LEP/CLT models which could help policymakers and practitioners depart from *entrenched centralism* and take advantage of local expertise, and the division of labor in terms of accountability. Additionally, interested researchers may explore solutions for the effective teaching and testing of four skills and minimizing the socio-instructional impact of high-stakes exams which destabilize CLT activities. Surprisingly, to our knowledge, the instructional impacts of lingered teacher shortage and re-recruited teachers on recent CLT practices in Iran and Asian countries constitute an under-researched area.

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Future researchers might present prudent ecological models of fostering intercultural awareness competence (*Cf.* Nault, 2006) in the coursebooks. Moreover, the evaluation of the effectiveness of CLT supplementary materials that could contribute to learner autonomy and teacher empowerment constitutes under-researched areas in Iran. More importantly, opportunistic comparative studies are also encouraged to compare CLT-shift practices in other EFL polities in the Middle East, etc. Last but not least, in case of qualitative methods, the recruitment of larger number of participants, which can be considered a limitation for the present study, would yield more valid results.

Note(s):

*(revealed in a personal communication with one of the authors)

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