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## The Iranian Foreign Language Practitioners' Perspectives about Iran's Foreign Language Education Policy

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### ABSTRACT

The present study was conducted to identify the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language practitioners about Iran's foreign language education policy within a systemic functional linguistics approach. To this end, 8 Iranian male and female foreign language practitioners were interviewed and asked to talk about what they thought about Iran's foreign language policy. The findings obtained from analysing the process types and participants employed by the Iranian foreign language practitioners within a systemic functional linguistics approach point out that the FLEP document is heavily influenced by and draws on well entrenched ideological, historical, religious, economic, and political discourses. Further investigations within a systemic functional linguistics approach indicate that the Iranian teachers believed that while English is a tool for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances, achieving these goals through the teaching of English is sometimes problematic within an absolute Islamic framework. The findings obtained from a transitivity analysis for the Iranian foreign language practitioners by subjecting their responses to the questions on the interviews to a systemic functional linguistics approach are also indicative of the Iranian foreign language teachers' loyalty to the "the younger, the better" belief. Likewise, course content was a topic for controversy. Some of the practitioners believed that course content should be developed around a variety of topics. Whereas others asserted that the inclusion of different topics in the foreign language education policy document may increase the workload on the part of the teachers. Other issues such as culture, the Islamic ideology, and imperialism were identified as causes of different understandings among the Iranian foreign language practitioners as well.

**Keywords:** *Iran's FLEP Document, Systemic Functional Linguistics, Processes, Participants*

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### 1. Introduction

Policy can be defined as a statement intended to act as a binding guide on the actions of those designated by the statement. Such a binding guide is formulated and enforced by the society in which it operates through political processes that acknowledge the reality and legitimacy of conflicting interests and desires among its participants (Elham and Tavakkol, 2017). In other words, "a language policy is a binding language guide, which is meant to be enforced by the society that formulates it through a political process" (Elham and Tavakkol, 2017 p. 3). There are many reasons for setting a language policy. Spolsky and Shohamy (1999a) assert that, "one seemingly simple approach to finding a rationale for a language policy might be to declare some absolute linguistic rights" (p.55). The second reason for setting a

language policy could be facilitating access to information and to cultural knowledge. The study of English, and to a lesser extent, other world languages, is intended to provide access to knowledge, especially in technology and science. Another important reason for articulating a language policy could be economic. Understanding that economics plays an indispensable role in all aspects of individual and social life, there is a tendency towards the languages of the so called economically powerful countries. In addition to pragmatic and practical incentives, setting a language policy could also be traced to identity. In this case the goal of the language policy is to gain greater prestige for the national language and to strengthen its linkage to the nation.

Accordingly, language policy making in Iran has been influenced by different social,



cultural, economic, and political factors throughout history. Generally speaking, Iran's history can be divided in three main periods, each of which have influenced its languages (both native and foreign) and language policies. These three periods, pre-Islamic, Islamic and modern, may be viewed as a reflection of three great historical events: The emergence of the Persian Empire, the Arab conquest and the beginning of the modern era. Multilingualism was common in ancient Persia, especially during the Achaemenian rule (550 BC-331 BC). Despite this linguistic diversity, the Old Persian language (Pahlavi) was the official language of the Empire and remained the means of communication and cultural transmission during the twelve centuries of the Persian Empire (550 BC-641 AD). The established policy of promoting the Persian language was observed until the invasion of Iran by Alexander the Great and the decline of the Achaemenian dynasty when it was interrupted for a while. After the fall of the Macedonians, and the rise of Ashkany dynasty (250 BC-226 AD), the old policy of supporting Persian was resumed and reached its culmination during the Sassanid dynasty. With the spread of Islam that was the result of the Arab conquest in the seventh century (650 AD), Arabic gradually replaced Pahlavi as the official language and Persian was used as the vernacular language. Generally speaking, the language policy that accompanied this new form of Persian emphasized instruction of Arabic as the foreign-and to some extent the second-language of the Iranian people. The introduction of Islam in Persia was followed by ten centuries in which Arabic was taught in all traditional schools. This policy persisted until the Qajar dynasty (1779–1925), when Iran built significant ties with particular European countries and with the United States of America in general.

During the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, the Iranian officials and people realized the scientific and economic gap that existed between Iran and the European countries. As a result of this awareness several students were sent to Europe to acquire the necessary scientific skills. Later, the first modern educational institution in Iran, Dar-al Fonoon (The House of Techniques) was established in 1851. Since foreign languages were the medium of training and instruction, one of the fields developed there was the teaching of foreign languages (Safavi, 2004,

p. 21). In fact, the communication between foreign staff and teachers and their Iranian students, and the proper learning of materials written in foreign languages, was the main purpose of foreign language instruction in the Dar-al Fonoon (House of Techniques). Since most instructors were from France, French was the language of instruction in all programs and was the first foreign language taught in its own right (Sediq, 1971, p. 176). With the assassination of Mirza Taqi Khan in 1852, British and Russian instructors began to find their way into the House of Techniques. Meanwhile, with the emergence of the United States as a new super power, Iranians began to establish stronger ties with their American counterparts. Since then, English smoothly established itself as the dominant foreign language in Iran.

In 1934 English entered the educational system. Under the Pahlavi dynasty, English was the only foreign language that was taught on a national level, pushing all the other foreign languages to secondary position. This pattern continued until the appearance of the Islamic revolution in 1979. With the completion of the new curriculum and its enactment in 1982, Persian, as the official language of the country, became the medium of instruction in universities and the whole educational system with Arabic included in the curriculum. Although English did not enjoy the same status it had enjoyed during the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties, it was still taught in schools, despite its cultural and ideological associations. English was viewed as a purely scientific and international language, the use of which had become an indispensable part of developing the educational system to address recurrent waves of globalization and modernization. Accordingly, Persian consolidated its status as the predominant medium of instruction, but English continued to be taught as a foreign language in both private and public schools.

Although the pattern of presenting English at Iranian schools and universities has not changed very much from 1982, the perceptions of the Iranian people and officials has changed drastically. This can greatly be attributed to the radical changes that the status of English has experienced in the last fifty years when it was merely thought as the language of choice for international communication. Today, English is deemed as what Crystal (1997)

refers to as 'the natural choice for progress' (p. 75). Global English (or Globish) is tied not only to the cultural identities of its users but also to fundamental human values such as freedom, individuality, and originality (McCrum, 2010). It is not only a language of globality but also a language of coloniality. According to some scholars, English just happened to be in the right place at the right time (Crystal, 1997); others believe it rode on the back of colonialism (Pennycook, 1998). Several others highlight its insidious nature of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992), its imperial character that still lingers (Kumaravadivelu, 2006a), and its encounters with different forms of resistance (Canagarajah, 1999). The development of Iran's foreign language education policy document (FLEP) is a very good example of the change in the Iranian officials and policymakers perceptions about English and their attempt to respond to the nations language needs.

Ever since the development of the FLEP document, studies have been conducted to investigate it. However, there has not been much research about the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language teachers and practitioners about the FLEP document. The rare studies conducted on this topic lack a vigorous and comprehensive theoretical framework. Consequently, they fail to deeply address the underlying ideologies and discourses. Hence, the present study was conducted to identify the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language policymakers and practitioners' perceptions about Iran's FLEP document using a systemic functional linguistics approach. It was assumed that identifying the process types and participants through a transitivity analysis could help understand the prevalent patterns of thought and ways of understanding.

## **2. Language Policy Research**

Although language policy practice has a long history, the study of it is a more recent phenomenon (Spolsky, 2004). The first book, which had 'language policy' exclusively in its title appeared in 1945 (Spolsky, 2004). In 1959, Haugen introduced 'language planning' as an academic term in an article (Haugen, 1959). Later in the 1960s, language policy eventually emerged as an independent academic discipline. Ever since the establishment of language policy as a discipline, many researchers have investigated it. Yet the majority of these studies suffer from lack of a systematic

approach to investigating these policies. Another drawback of the majority of these studies is that they don't include the perceptions of the practitioners.

The lack of employing a systematic and rigorous linguistic framework for analysing language education policies is clearly evident in the language education policy studies conducted in different contexts. In one such study, Hagerman (2009) examines the present and past policies and practices undertaken in Japan with regard to language education from societal and educational perspectives. It is argued there that there has been a historical and continuing disparity between official goals and implementation that have rendered English language education less effective. The author further argues that despite the fact that a reform of foreign language education policy in 2003 signals a positive move towards more effective communicate methods, failure to reimagine the university entrance exam system and continuing to take an egalitarian approach are indicative that true language reform has never been the underlying objective of foreign language policy (Hagerman, 2009). Perhaps the inclusion of an analytic framework and a reference to the practitioners' perspectives would have yield better results.

In a more practical attempt and one that slightly moves away from the mere descriptive accounts which are typically given about language education policies in different contexts, Inceçay (2012) investigate the challenges that Turk English language teachers in state schools have faced during the implementation of the new policy prepared by the Ministry of National Education in 1997. To this end, ten Turk teachers of English as a foreign language have been interviewed. The views of teachers on new English language teaching policy at primary level; the challenges they have faced within practice and the amount of support they have received in the process of implementation were the main issues of the interview. Later the interviews were transcribed and coded by the pattern coding strategy. The results identify patterns about the reasons behind policy development and the advantages and disadvantages of it. Despite addressing the Turkish foreign language educational policy and tying it to more practical issues, the study does not employ a framework for analysing the data which have been obtained through the interviews with the teachers. The coding



procedure mentioned in the study is vague and data analysis seems to have been achieved within a set of subjective assumptions. Perhaps using and explicitly articulating the coding procedure in more detail and employing an analytic framework would have solved many of the mentioned and unmentioned issues.

Language education policy is an appealing topic which lends its self well to research and is not limited to a specific context. Accordingly, it has been also a topic of research in North American countries. In one such study, adapting and using Levin's (2001) and Blaikie and Soussan's (2000) model of policy cycle as an analytical framework, Fallon and Rublik (2012) investigate Second-Language Education Policy in Quebec and conclude that an incongruence is manifest in how schools understood and implemented the ESL policy and corresponding curriculum. What distinguishes this study from other similar studies which investigate language education policies is the inclusion of an analytic model which guides the data collection phase and adds integrity to data analysis. It is further particularly effective in interpreting and discussing the findings. Nonetheless, such models of language policy may be limited in that they are mainly concerned with some aspects of language education policy. Language policies constitute of multiple inherent operating ideologies, values, and belief system, which can only be investigated by a powerful approach such as systemic functional linguistics. Further improvements could have been made to the design of the study by including the perceptions of the practitioners.

To date, there have been a few studies which specifically centre on the English section of the national curriculum in Iran. In a rare study, Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) studied the national curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran in the field of teaching foreign languages, particularly English. According to their critical analysis, "national curriculum of Iran has some inherit considerable advantages. However, the successful application of its elements to the teaching of foreign languages requires careful planning and preparation. Despite being one of the rare studies which investigates Iran's foreign language education policy from a critical perspective, Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi (2012) don't employ a specific

model for investigating the policy nor do they resort to more powerful analytic approaches. Consequently, the study could be considered suffering from lack of a powerful analytic tool which would have been extremely useful in identifying the underlying operation systems in Iran's foreign language education policy. Further information could have been obtained by including the views of the teachers.

Foroozandeh (2011) also addressed Iran's National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching with respect to the history of high school English course books in Iran by thoroughly discussing the regular changes and modifications made to the Iranian textbooks at school level. She investigates the changes which have occurred in the methods of teaching English and attributes these inconsistencies in methodology to the absence of a comprehensive national curriculum for the teaching of foreign languages, particularly English. Despite these findings and in the absence of a comprehensive analytic framework, it is not possible to fully attribute the modifications in Iranian foreign language course books to the lack of a comprehensive national curriculum for teaching foreign languages in Iran. It is likely that changes in the underlying social, cultural, and political ideologies and discourses which are influential in developing a foreign language education policy have contributed to the change in course content. Understanding that making such claims is unrealistic given the nature of the study conducted by Foroozadeh (2012), adds even more prominence to the necessity of applying an analytic framework to such studies.

Kiani (2011) as a researcher who has contributed significantly to enhancing our understanding about the Iranian national curriculum in the field of foreign language teaching takes a critical approach towards the foreign language education policy with respect to the national curriculum and demonstrate how language policies are interwoven to and influenced by the broader educational, social, and political policies. Having defined what is meant by language education policies, the authors focus on the matches and mismatches between the teaching of foreign languages in the national curriculum and Iran's 20-year vision plan. However, the absence of a powerful analytic framework does not allow for investigating the underlying ideologies and discourses.

Accordingly, similarities between the two documents are superficially referred to in the study. What is also missing from this study, is the absence of the views of the Iranian foreign language practitioners.

Another strand of research addresses the benefits and drawbacks of applying major revisions to Iran's national curriculum. In this regard, Rahimi and Nabilou (2009) analysed Iran's national curriculum based on some major documents such as *Iran's 20-year vision plan* and compared it with the available literature on teaching English as a foreign language. Kiany, Navidinia, and Momeni (2011) searched for the unity of Iran's national curriculum and compared it with *Iran's 20-year vision plan*. They came to the conclusion that the national curriculum was not in line with *Iran's 20-year vision plan*. In spite of these findings, such studies are not considered comprehensive in nature because they do not include the perceptions of teachers and students as important stakeholders. These study also shares with earlier studies conducted on language education policies in that it does not include a powerful analytic tool and the views of the Iranian foreign language practitioners.

In the past few decades, scholars of language policy have mainly conducted their research in a random way. Most scholars have focused on the survey of language policy in a particular country, and sometimes the policy's subsequent impact has been measured and evaluated. Although much research has been conducted on language policy, few of this treats the issue within a specific linguistic theory, except for a handful of researchers touching upon the topic from a theoretical perspective (Haugen, 1966; Kloss, 1969). In the same manner, the plethora of research on language education policy in Iran suffers from flaws in the instruments, inappropriateness of research methods, and most importantly, lack of a theoretical framework. The problem inherit in most of these studies is that they are mere comparisons of the statements in The National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching with the statements in other upper-hand documents (e.g. Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi, 2012; Kiyani et al, 2011; Ebrahimi and Sahragard, 2016; etc.). In more simple terms, these studies set out to see whether the proposed objectives of the upper-hand documents are included in the FLEP document or not. Surprisingly, the

conclusion often drawn is that despite the benefits, mismatches do exist which need to be addressed and resolved. Although such critical attempts are helpful in identifying the gap between upper-hand and lower-hand policies and even try to minimize them through a so called reform (e.g. Kiyani et al, 2011), what is missing from them is that they don't employ a specific linguistic theory which may provide new perspectives to approach the discipline and better address the problems that have arisen during the implementation process.

Contrary to the prevalent and dominant pattern to studying language policies, in an extremely exceptional and tremendously rare case study Yang and Wang (2017) apply the SFL approach to analysing language policy in early years of PRC and language policy in modern times of PRC. According to the authors, the research could be a substantial help in re-examining the influential thoughts of language policy and creating a new approach based on SFL. Yang and Wang (2017) believe that the SFL approach to language policy can to a great extent accelerate the progress of language policy research. They assert that applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to analysing language policies could "offer theoretical guidance to procedures of language policy, such as designing, arrangement and implementation of language policy" (p. 3). The researchers even step a foot further and say that the SFL-based approach to language policy may serve as a useful complementary tool along current theories in language policy. In their view, the SFL approach to language policy is also a valuable experiment of applicable linguistics as recently proposed.

In the same manner, the plethora of research on language education policy in Iran suffers from flaws in the instruments, inappropriateness of research methods, and most importantly, lack of a theoretical framework. The problem inherit in most of these studies is that they are mere comparisons of the statements in The National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching with the statements in other upper-hand documents (e.g. Alavimoghaddam and Kheirabadi, 2012; Kiyani et al, 2011; Ebrahimi and Sahragard, 2016). In more simple terms, these studies set out to see whether the proposed objectives of the upper-hand documents are included in the FLEP document or not. Surprisingly, the conclusion often drawn is



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As an alternative, the present study was conducted to voice the matches and mismatches between the Iranian foreign language education policymakers' perceptions as articulated in Iran's National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching and the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language practitioners with respect to practical issues and considerations using a systemic functional linguistics approach. It is assumed that the first step in developing an effective FLEP is identifying the concerns of all stakeholders and determining the distance between theory and practice. The major underlying assumption here is that applying a systemic functional linguistic approach in analysing the Iranian foreign language education policymakers' perceptions as articulated in the FLEP document and the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language practitioners grants access to novel and less considered spheres and horizons for Iranian and non-Iranian language (education) policy researchers. Accordingly, many of the less evident problems and issues may be identified and efforts may be made to resolve them

As an alternative, the present study was conducted to voice the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language practitioners with respect to Iran's foreign language education policy document using a systemic functional linguistics approach. The previously stated assertions could be formulated in to the following overarching research question:

1) What do the emerged patterns, from adopting a systemic functional linguistics approach to the obtained excerpts from the interviews, suggest about the practitioners' perspectives about Iran's foreign language education policy?

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Eight male (n=4) and female (n=4) English foreign language teachers were selected for the purpose of the present study.

The teachers taught at secondary schools and held a BA or MA in English teaching. Caution was exercised to include both seniors (those with more teaching experience) and those teachers with fewer years of teaching experience with respect to the first group. The purpose of choosing teachers with different teaching experiences can be attributed to their established beliefs, values, and ideologies about language teaching in general and English language teaching in particular. Age and gender were the other two determining factors in participant selection. The present study included male and female language teachers between 24-65 years of age.

#### **3.2. Data Collection Instruments**

A semi-structured interview was used in the present study. The interviews were mainly conducted in Persian. This procedure was employed to prevent misunderstandings occurring as a result of the low level of some of the participant's English. It was also assumed that conducting the interviews in Persian would develop more rapport between the researcher and participants. Approximately, each interview took 20-30 minutes depending on the participant's willingness to communicate their thoughts and the amount of exchanged information. Although the interviewer had access to a set of pre specified questions, the wordings of the questions and the number of asked questions differed from one participant to another depending on the participants desire to share his/her thoughts with the interviewer. The interview consisted of three phases. In the warn-up phase general questions were asked to put the participants at ease and break the ice. The participants' were also told about their roles as participants in the study and that their opinions were of supreme importance to the researcher. In the second phase, the main phase of the interview, more serious and detailed questions were asked about foreign language teaching in Iran. The purpose of the questions asked here was to direct the talk and brainstorm the participant. In more specific terms, the raised questions were intended to act as hints to draw the participant's attention to the topics of interest. In the last phase of the interview, the wrap-up phase, the participants' were put at ease and their involvement in the study was acknowledged.

#### **3.3. Materials**

##### **3.3.1. Iran's Foreign Language Education Policy Document**

To date, Iran's foreign language education policy document is the only document that specifically addresses the teaching of foreign languages. However, the document is not an independent language policy document in its own right and is considered as a subsection of Iran's national education policy document. Despite this, the foreign language education policy document (FLEP) document is considered as a great achievement, one which paves the way for the articulation of an independent FLEP document in future. The assembly of issues as wide as *cognitive* considerations, *neurological* aspects of language acquisition, *methodological* issues in teaching foreign languages, and *socio-political* concerns in foreign language education in one place, is indicative of the fact that Iran's education planners and policy makers have realized the need for a more systematic and comprehensive language education policy.

### *3.4. The Theoretical Framework*

The present study employed a systemic linguistics approach to identify the various ideological, political, cultural, educational, and religious discourses that may have shaped and influenced the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language education policymakers as articulated in the FLEP document. To this end, the various mental, material, excisional behavioural, and relational processes as well as their participants were identified and interpreted in light of the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics and the available body of literature. Further investigations were made by analysing the different theme and rheme patterns. Together, these two sets of data helped to understand the different prevalent underlying discourses that have shaped the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language policymakers and subsequently the development of the FLEP document.

### *3.5. Procedures of Data Collection and Data Analysis*

In the present study, semi-structured interviews were conducted to become familiar with the perceptions of the Iranian practitioners' about foreign language teaching in Iran. The procedure followed here was that the participants were informed of their time of interview some days before it was actually conducted. It was assumed that employing such a strategy was helpful for the participant to organize his/her thoughts and cope with the possible anxieties and stresses associated with the

interview session. On the interview day, the participant was greeted warmly and asked to make himself/herself at home by drinking a cup of tea or coffee. The interview was in session from the very moment that the participant entered the room. However, implicit procedures were employed to put the participant at ease and make them more willing to freely display their thoughts. After the warm-up phase, the interview proceeded with more explicit questions about what the participants thought about the foreign language teaching enterprise in Iran. Employing humor was a useful strategy at this stage to establish more rapport with the participants. Although the pre allocated time for starting and finishing the interview was previously set at twenty minutes, the interview was not rushed until data saturation was reached. The interview ended with cooling down the participants and walking them to the door while thanking them for participating in the research project.

The data obtained from the participants through semi structured interviews was subjected to a systemic functional linguistics model and the underlying major factors were identified. More specifically, the processes (material, mental, behavioural, relational, and excisional) and participants (goal, range, beneficiary, causative, and circumstantials) were identified. The procedure followed was that the data was organized into different paragraphs, each paragraph was broken down to its comprising sentences, and the elements in each sentence were assigned systemic functional linguistics terminology. At the very end, the data was interpreted according to the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics and discussed in light of the proposed statements in Iran's foreign language education policy document.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

The analyses in the following sections using a systemic functional linguistics approach were intended at identifying the type of processes and participants that the Iranian foreign language practitioners have used. Since, different process types and participants are attributed with presenting different thoughts and ways of behaving, investigating these patterns can be a help to understanding the Iranian foreign language practitioners cohort ways of thinking about the different aspects of foreign language teaching in Iran.

### *4.1. The Islamic Discourse*



The analyses within a systemic functional linguistic approach reveal that Iran's FLEP document is under the heavy influence of what is referred to as Islamic discourse. The use of material processes and circumstantials such as the phrase 'through the framework of the Islamic system (*Circ: manner*)' is a clear evidence for the Iranian foreign language policymakers adherence to the principles of Islamic ideology and their attempt to protect the Iranian-Islamic identity against the so called detrimental influences of foreign language instruction, particularly English:

Excerpt 1a

**The teaching of foreign languages** (*Agent*) **paves** (*Pr: Material*) the way for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances in various aural, visual, and written forms for different purposes and audiences **through the framework of the Islamic system** (*Circ: manner*).

Accordingly, the Iranian foreign language practitioners were asked about the different factors that were present in the Iran's FLEP document to determine what they think about it. The first topic that was investigated in this regard was the 'teaching of English within an Islamic framework'. The findings obtained by applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the participants' responses on the interviews here imply the Iranian teachers and practitioners believed that while English is a tool for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances, achieving these goals through the teaching of English is sometimes problematic within an absolute Islamic framework:

Excerpt 1b

**...Unlike abroad** (*Circ: manner*), **[the people] the country** (*senser*) **considers** (*Pr: mental*) many aspects of the English language taboo (*phenomenon*)...

In excerpt 1b which has been obtained from the response of Sina in one to one online chat to a question about what he thinks about teaching English within an Islamic framework, the use of the mental process 'considers' and its senser 'the country' in his response signals that an invisible line has separated the practitioner in terms of his perceptions regarding English teaching from the statements articulated in the FLEP document. By employing the circumstantial of manner 'unlike abroad' which is a non-obligatory participant in systemic functional linguistics, the participant makes a comparison between

different understandings which exist about teaching English in Iran and other countries and signals his awareness of the fact that differences do exist. The results of the analysis by systemic functional linguistics also point out that Sina has also employed the phrase 'many aspects of the English language taboo' which is a phenomenon in functional linguistics to further implicitly point out that the current common understanding about English limits the teachers and practitioners in some ways. This can be interpreted in the context of what is referred to as cultural barriers. Namely, those traditions which become hurdles in the path of understanding or teaching/learning different languages, among which social factors, religious beliefs, and things that are considered taboo as cultural dimensions are noteworthy (Mirdehghan et al, 2011).

4.2. Imperialism

In addition to the above interpretations, applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to excerpt 1 also offers a host of other interesting information about the Iranian foreign language teaching practitioners about foreign language education policy in Iran. Here, the Iranian foreign language practitioners were asked about the dull atmosphere which surrounds English teaching in terms of linguistic imperialism and its impact on the student's motives for foreign language learning. Farzad was one on the practitioners to clearly articulate this concern in one of the interviews:

Excerpt 2

in such a context (*Circ: location*), **the students** (*actor*) will eventually **enrol** (*Pr: material*) in the language [English] with a lower incentive (*Circ: manner*)...

In excerpt 2, the practitioner employs material processes (*enrol*), participants (*the students*), as well as circumstantials of location (*in such a context*) and manner (*with a lower incentive*) to establish a link between the atmosphere that surrounds foreign language teaching and the level of the students' motivation for learning a foreign language. The teacher refers to the prevalent patterns of thought among Iranian officials and policymakers as one of the causes of demotivation for language learning among Iranian students by using a spatial circumstantial of location which is perfectly suitable for this purpose. This is accompanied by the use of a circumstantial of manner which attributes the manner of

participating in English courses through 'mental processes' to the 'actor'.

The evidence obtained from applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the responses of the Iranian foreign language practitioners to questions about 'the teaching of English within an Islamic framework' and 'the impact of common understandings on the English language enterprise' obtained from the interviews indicates that whereas the developers of the Iranian foreign language education policy document believe that the teaching of English through the Islamic framework may benefit all of the stakeholders at micro and macro levels, the Iranian practitioners assert that a full commitment to it may be problematic to some aspects of language teaching. An understanding which was evidenced by employing different process types and assigning the role of circumstantial to the phrase 'through the Islamic framework' in the excerpts which were obtained from the interviews. Likely, there were a group of practitioners who are dissatisfied with the present language education policy and had articulated it by employing material processes and circumstantial of manner. This is while, the Iranian foreign language policymakers not only don't believe that overemphasis on antiimperialistic behaviours could have negative impacts on the English language teaching enterprise in Iran, but have also favoured from various means to devise implicit and explicit measures in the FLEP document to counter it.

#### 4.3. The Age Factor

Another issue which has been precisely addressed in Iran's FLEP document is the age that students must begin the learning of a foreign language at school. The results of the analyses by systemic functional linguistics point out that Iran's FLEP document sets the time for introducing language learning in to the curriculum no sooner than when the students have almost reached puberty:

##### Excerpt 3a

The teaching of foreign languages begins **in the first year of secondary school** (*Circ: location*).

In the FLEP document this understanding which was presented by material processes (*Pr: begins*) and through the circumstantial of location (*Circ: in the first year of secondary school*) denotes that Iranian officials and language policymakers have either adhered to the perception that

adults and adolescents are as effective language learners as children, and that age is not a major contributory factor; or indicates that the policymakers have valued other considerations rather than the age factor.

However, the Iranian foreign language practitioners have stayed loyal to the "the younger, the better" belief. This perception has been articulated by the Iranian foreign language practitioners in different ways. One of the interviewed teachers employed material processes, participants, and circumstantials to explain how the younger generation have started learning English from a younger age at nursery and the fact that they have extremely progressed more in a short period of time compared to himself and people of his age:

##### Excerpt 3b

**Minoo** went to English classes **at the age of five or six** (*Circ: location*) and knows a lot more compared to us who started learning English **at secondary school** (*Circ: location*).

There, the speaker assigns the role of actor to Minoo and uses material processes and circumstantials of time twice to compare the language skills of someone who has started learning a foreign language at a lower age with someone who has started learning it at a much later time. The use of circumstantials of location here perfectly suits this purpose and makes comparison possible. A comparison between the statements of the FLEP document with that of Iranian foreign language teachers within a systemic functional linguistics approach indicated that whereas the latter group believed that language learning should start at small age and evidenced it by employing circumstantials of location (*at young age; at the age of five or six*), the former group asserted again through circumstantials of location (*in the first year of secondary school*) that the teaching of a foreign language should begin at secondary school. However, despite the fact that the findings of most research suggest that "the earlier is the better," meaning that younger L2 learners are better at learning language than are older learners, the causes of this particular phenomenon continue to be controversial (DeKeyser, 2013). Some researchers believe there is in fact a fundamental difference in the way early learners acquire an L2 versus late learners, others believe there is a gradual decline in language learning abilities across the lifespan (Hakuta, Bialystok, & Wiley, 2003), and still others consider the variation to be a



difference in motivation and other affective factors. Thus, it is very difficult, though not impossible here to vote for the precision of either opinion with respect to the age factor and the appropriate age for the introduction of a foreign language.

#### 4.4. *The Purpose of Foreign Language Teaching*

Iran's foreign language education policy document also determines the tasks (goals in functional linguistics terminology) that the students must be able to perform using a foreign language at the end of secondary school and after six years of language instruction. These include the ability to read and comprehend English texts, writing an article in the foreign language, using references in the target language, and communication in the target language. Many Iranian language specialists and language practitioners including the ones in this study have criticized these policies and pointed out that the articulated intentions are alluring but may be too idealistic given the potential and nature of the Iranian foreign language teaching enterprise at school level. In the same way, the results of the systemic functional linguistics analysis for one of the interviewed teachers in the present study shows that he objected to the FLEP document's pre-specified purposes in terms of reading and asserted that while the document sets the students (*actor*) ability to 'read' (*Pr: material*) and 'comprehend' (*Pr: mental*) 'intermediate texts' (*goal/phenomenon*) 'at the end of secondary school' (*Circ: location*) as one of the goals of foreign language teaching, it fails to address some very significant questions about the conditions necessary for developing this skill. He believed that there must be a reasonable amount of correspondence between the determined goals and the reality of the language learning conditions:

##### Excerpt 4a

**The teachers** (*actors*) don't **teach** (*Pr: material*) reading. **They** (*actors*) **translate** (*Pr: material*) the texts (*goal*) in to Persian and give the meaning of new words.

##### Excerpt 4b

**The readings** (*carrier*) **are** (*Pr: intensive*) vocabulary exercises (*attribute*).

The results of the systemic functional linguistics analysis in excerpt 4a which was obtained from the response of one of teachers to the questions on the interview show that Mona employs material processes (teach, translate) and assigns the role of 'actor' to teachers to show the difference

that exists between the purposes of foreign language teaching in the FLEP document and the reality of many of the foreign language classes. The material processes, participants, and goal used in the teacher's speech reveal that while the FLEP document sets developing in reading skill as its goal, the teachers' teach in a manner that improves the learners' ability to superficially translate a string of words. In excerpt 4b, through relational processes, Mohsen draws his audiences' attention to the properties of 'the readings' (*carrier*) and the fact that they are merely vocabulary exercises. These discourses convey that the Iranian foreign language teachers and teacher educators (*actor*) have fully understood that familiarity with the meanings of the words and expressions and translating the text (*goal*) in to the native language does not guarantee the development of reading skills. The perceptions of the participants obtained from their responses to the questions on the interviews indicate that the purpose of foreign language teaching in Iran accords with the findings of earlier studies which indicate that teaching comprehension strategies to language learners are ignored in most Iranian EFL classes (Chalak & Nasr Esfahani, 2012). The strategies mostly used there are limited to finding the meaning of the unknown vocabularies, teaching grammatical rules, and translating the texts into the students' native language (Chalak & Nasr Esfahani, 2012). This traditional approach simply results the partial comprehension of the passages.

As with reading, the FLEP document states that the students (*actor*) must be able to write a short article (*goal*) in English at the end of high school. The findings here however point out that the Iranian foreign language practitioners' believe that many conditions have to be satisfied before such goals can be fulfilled:

##### Excerpt 5a

Many of the **teachers** (*actor*) can't **write** (*Pr: material*) a single word [in English] themselves.

##### Excerpt 5b

There **is** (*Pr: existential*) no practical **plan** (*existent*) for teaching writing in most English classes.

In excerpt 5b, an existential process is employed to describe the current situation which exists about teaching writing in most of the Iranian foreign language classes. It can also be implied from this excerpt that writing (*carrier*) involves developing a unified set of 'plans' (*existent*) and

procedures about how to teach and develop it specifically as a field of reference. If language learners are expected to develop the ability to write a unified, coherent paragraph, and transfer this skill to full academic article writing, they must be fully familiar with all of its components.

In excerpt 6a, the teachers have been introduced through material processes and participants. Here, the role of 'actor' has been assigned to the teacher which normally denotes the idea that he/she must be able to do the deed or performs the action. However, a different pattern has been used by the teacher in this excerpt. The material process here indicates what the practitioner is unable to do with respect to the circumstantial of manner 'in English'. This pattern of presenting the material implies that the practitioner believes that teachers must be expert in writing and need to be aware of multifarious methodologies in language teaching and adopt diverse techniques for teaching target language writing (Farr, 2010). It further denotes the idea that factors such as poor writing ability, limit the teacher's agency in such a way that they either devote a small portion of class time to the superficial teaching of writing or abandon it altogether. Consequently, these discourses evolve in to what is referred to as a difference between the statements in Iran's foreign language education document and that of the practitioners in terms of goals and objectives of foreign language teaching in terms of writing.

The findings in this section obtained from applying a transitivity analysis to the data obtained from the Iranian foreign language practitioners responses to the questions on the interviews indicate that the Iranian foreign language practitioners thought that the goals and objectives that have been set for foreign language teaching in Iran may not be achievable in some cases. It is however unsound and unrealistic to put the blame on either group or vote for the plausibility of ones opinions over the other. Language policymaking and planning is a complex and multi-complex endeavour. Cultural and social factors come into play where language policy is concerned, in addition to political and even religious factors. This is corroborated by researchers such as Spolsky (2004), who posits that what essentially drives language policy is national ideology, the globalisation of English, sociolinguistics and minority language rights.

#### 4.5. The Course Content

Applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the section of the FLEP document which describes the course content in different levels of foreign language instruction showed that the Iranian foreign language policymakers employ relational processes to determine the topics on which the course content should be based. The use of circumstantials of location further differentiates between the course content in the lower and higher levels of foreign language teaching. The FLEP document declares that course content should be organized around such topics as sanitation, health care, politics, cultural values, science, and economics with a focus of deepening the language learners understanding as they progress. The question that remains to be answered is what Iranian foreign language practitioners think about these issues.

##### Excerpt 6a

**The topics** (*carrier*) **are based on** (*Pr: intensive*) **sanitation, healthcare, and local culture** (*attribute*) in the lower levels of foreign language teaching (*Circ: location*).

##### Excerpt 6b

**The topics** (*carrier*) **are based on** (*Pr: intensive*) **foreign culture, science, politics, and economics** (*attribute*) in the advanced levels of foreign language teaching (*Circ: location*).

The findings in this section indicate that different practitioners had a different perception in regard to the course content. Whereas, some of interviewed teachers approved the utility of the recent policy and judged the course content appropriate and related to daily affaires, others suspected that it put a heavy load on the teachers and believed that it overemphasised some topics while neglecting or downplaying others:

##### Excerpt 7a

**Topics** (*carrier*) **are** (*Pr: intensive*) update and attractive and related to the everyday life (*attribute*) (like: health, abilities, hobbies...).

##### Excerpt 7b

Basically, there **is** (*Pr: existential*) a **text** (*existent*) about a historical event or a scientific invention in every lesson (*Circ: location*).

##### Excerpt 7c

**I** (*senser*) **had** (*Pr: mental*) a hard time (*phenomenon*) to **teach** (*Pr: material*) the books last semester (*Circ: location*).

The employment of existential processes which are used to show the presence of certain things or conditions implies the practitioner's dissatisfaction with the topics



around which the course content has been developed. Sina who signalled his approval by using intensive processes points out (though circumstantial) that the course content is limited to one or two specific recurrent topics and lacks variety. He further signals his feelings by employing mental processes and asserts how he had been pushed to get through the job. The findings here correlate with the findings of earlier studies (i.e. Abbasian, 2017) which indicate that topics such as socialization and life cycle, family, school, media, ceremonies, art, social interaction, belief and behavior, social and political issues, national geography, stereo types, national identity and social identity, social group and regional identity, ethnic minority, as well as national history constitute the topics around which the course content is developed in the Iranian foreign language classes at school level.

The identified patterns from applying a SFL approach to the responses of the Iranian foreign language practitioners on the interviews points to the low incidence or total absence of culture as an undeniable topic in foreign language classes in Iranian schools:

Excerpt 8a

The names of people or places (carrier) are (Pr: intensive) in Persian or Arabic (attribute).

Excerpt 8b

There **are** (Pr: excisional) strange **words (existent)** that cannot be found in English.

The use of relational processes in excerpt 8a shows that the teacher believes that most of the names of the people or places which are referred to in the foreign language teaching materials are either in Persian or Arabic. In the context of English language teaching, this manner of expression could also denote the teacher's dissatisfaction with the fact that the terminology that are associated with the English language and the English speaking countries are missing from the foreign language teaching material to a great extent. This pattern could further be indicative of the integration of the Iranian foreign language policymakers' assumption of teaching English within an Islamic framework in to Iran's foreign language teaching material. The use of existential processes in excerpt 9b also shows that there are some cultural aspects present in the course content of the foreign language teaching material that are so unfamiliar to

the teachers even in their native language that they have problems with providing their students with an appropriate explanation. Generally speaking, the use of relational processes which are employed to ascribe certain properties to a carrier and existential processes which are indicative of the state in which things exist imply that the Iranian practitioners have developed the understanding that the cultural aspects present in the Iranian foreign language teaching materials do not fold much around authentic cultural aspects of the foreign languages under instruction.

The findings in this section correlate with the fact that there is no consensus about including target language cultural values in to foreign language policies and practices. Research findings indicate that familiarizing the language learners with the cultural values of the target language is a double blade. Whereas some studies have found presenting target language cultural values beneficial (Byram, 1990; Byram & Flemming, 1998), others have identified it as a source of difficulty and misunderstanding (Kachru, 1985, 1986; Kachru & Nelson, 1996; Canagarajah, 1999). Other alternative views contradict with the idea of teaching 'target language culture' along with English. However, while one of them supports the teaching of 'local culture' in English language teaching (Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; McKay, 2003), others hold the position that English has become a lingua franca and it should be taught in a culture-free context (Alptekin, 2005; Jenkins, 1996, 2000, 2002, 2005; Seidlhofer, 2001). Thus, it is extremely difficult to judge the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language policymakers or practitioners in negative light or a biased fashion.

## 5. Conclusion

Language policy can be defined as what governments do either officially through legislation, court decisions, or policy to determine how languages are used, cultivate language skills needed to meet national priorities or to establish the rights of individuals or groups to use and maintain languages. This is also perfectly true about foreign/second language teaching. The scope of language policy varies in practice from one country to another. This may be explained by the fact that language policy is often based on contingent historical reasons. Likewise, States also differ as to the degree of explicitness with which they implement a given language policy. Many

countries have a language policy designed to favor or discourage the use of a particular language or set of languages. Although nations historically have used language policies most often to promote one official language at the expense of others, many countries now have policies designed to protect and promote national, regional, and ethnic languages whose viability is threatened. No matter how much comprehensive a language education policy is, it needs practitioners to carry it out. Language practitioners' (teachers, teacher educators) are groups of people whose perceptions can have a great impact on how the foreign or second language teaching enterprise is operationalized. Therefore, the present study also included a question about Iranian foreign language practitioners and what the identified patterns suggest about their perceptions with respect to foreign language teaching.

The first topic that was investigated in this section was the 'teaching of English within an Islamic framework'. The findings obtained by applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the participants interview responses here imply that unlike the prevalent pattern that is evident explicitly or implicitly in different sections of the FLEP document, the Iranian teachers and practitioners believed that while English is a tool for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances, achieving these goals through the teaching of English is sometimes problematic within an absolute Islamic framework. Another issue and the one which was shown to be strongly correlated with the presence of a heavy Islamic discourse in the FLEP document was linguistic imperialism. Here, the practitioners refer to the prevalence of strong anti-imperialistic feelings among Iranian officials and policymakers as one of the causes of demotivation for language learning among Iranian foreign language learners.

With respect to the age factor, the observed patterns for the Iranian foreign language practitioners by subjecting their responses to the questions on the interviews to systemic functional linguistics are indicative of the Iranian foreign language teachers' loyalty to the "the younger, the better" belief. This perception has been articulated by the Iranian foreign language practitioners in different ways. In the same vein, the identified patterns for the Iranian foreign language practitioners in the present

study shows how they have criticized the policies in the FLEP document and pointed out that the articulated intentions are alluring but may be too idealistic given the potential and nature of the Iranian foreign language teaching enterprise at school level.

The findings obtained from applying a transitivity analysis to the data obtained from the Iranian foreign language practitioners responses to the questions on the interviews indicate that the Iranian foreign language practitioners thought that the goals and objectives that have been set for foreign language teaching in Iran may not be achievable in some cases. It is however unsound and unrealistic to put the blame on either group or vote for the plausibility of ones opinions over the other. Language policymaking and planning is a complex and multi-complex endeavour. Cultural and social factors come into play where language policy is concerned, in addition to political and even religious factors. This is corroborated by researchers such as Spolsky (2004), who posits that what essentially drives language policy is national ideology, the globalisation of English, sociolinguistics and minority language rights.

The identified patterns for course content indicate that the discourses obtained from applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language practitioners articulated in the interviews in regard to course content were uncertain; sometimes showing a resemblance to the views of the practitioners and at other times exhibiting divergence from them. Whereas, some of interviewed teachers approved the utility of the recent policy and judged the course content appropriate and related to daily affaires, others suspected that it put a heavy load on the teachers and believed that it overemphasised some topics while neglecting or downplaying others

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