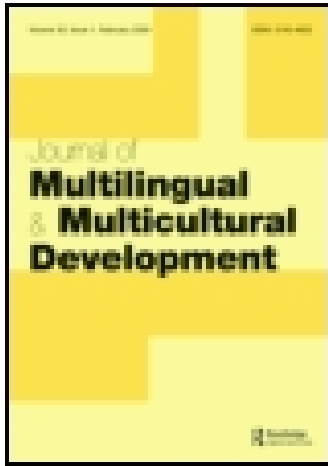


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The idea of English in Iran: an example from Urmia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the place of English in Iran. To do this, we look at the social presence of English in Urmia (the capital of West Azerbaijan province, Iran). The paper draws on instances of the use of English in different contexts in Urmia, including its use in academia, business, state and private education, media, and people's ordinary lives. The idea of English in Iran is also investigated by studying a cohort of 115 English language learners' motivations towards learning English as well as their attitudes towards the language. The results suggest that English has an active status in Urmia, alongside Turkish, Persian and Kurdish, and is regarded as an important international language among Iranians living in Urmia as well as one that accrues a number of social benefits to its users.

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Introduction

Based on one of the authors' personal experience, first-time visitors to Iran are often pleasantly surprised by a reality that may not match their expectations. Iranians they encounter are generally friendly and hospitable and enjoy meeting and interacting with foreign visitors (see, for example, the report in *The New York Times*, February 23, 2015 on Bob Belden's music concert in Iran). They are proud to share information about Iranian history, culture and customs with visitors and many are fluent speakers of English or are interested in learning English and practicing their English with visitors (see, for example, Cortazzi et al. 2015). As a TV celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain recently tweeted after a visit to Iran: 'Never would have guessed that of all countries in world, my crew and I would be treated so well everywhere, by total strangers in Iran' (*The New York Times*, June 24, 2014). And in almost every part of Iran there is a growing interest in learning English, a proliferation of private language institutes teaching English as well as an extensive English language teaching profession which supports a variety of professional activities for English language teachers, including professional journals and magazines, workshops and national and international conferences. English appears to have achieved this status in Iran despite its somewhat ambivalent official status. At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, English was described as a 'foreign' language and given the official status of 'alien' language, reflecting the attitude at the time towards the language spoken by Iran's perceived enemies such as the USA and the UK (Borjian 2013; Davari & Aghagol-zadeh 2015). Since then English has come to be viewed differently, a change of attitude prompted by a famous quotation of Iran's late leader (Imam Khomeini, PBUH) whose opinion of foreign languages in Iran appears on the opening pages of all school-level English books in Iran:

Earlier there was no need for foreign languages. Today, there is a need, however. The world's living languages should be included in the syllabi of schools ... Today we can remain in Iran and promote ourselves in other parts of the world using another language. (n.p.)

As the world's international language, English now features prominently in Iran's official education curriculum and even more so in the private education sector. Knowing English is now considered a marker of educational as well as social achievement. For example, English is an obligatory subject in middle and high schools, and all university majors at BA, MA and PhD levels include compulsory courses on English (either general or English for specific purposes [ESP]). In the private sector, English education starts at a very early age and there are numerous institutes offering English conversation classes for pre-school children as well as adults, with the number of such centres increasing every year, especially over the summer season. This paper seeks to clarify the status of English in Iran, both by examining the different functions it performs in contemporary Iranian society as well as by attempting to characterize its symbolic role – that is, the 'idea' of English that its use reflects (Sergeant 2009). Thus we seek to clarify the following questions:

- (1) What is the status of English as reflected in language policy and societal practices?
- (2) For what reasons do people study English?
- (3) What purposes does English serve for them?
- (4) What values do they attribute to the use of English and to the learning of English?
- (5) How is English conceptualized as an international language in Iran?
- (6) How is this conceptualization reflected in its use in Iran?
- (7) What costs and benefits result from the status of English in Iran?

To do this, we will examine the role of English in the city of Urmia (formerly known as Rezaeyieh and Chichest), a city of 963,738 residents (based on 2012 census), the capital city of West Azerbaijan Province (with a population of 3,080,576) in northwest Iran (Iran's *National Centre for Statistics*, amar.org.ir). Urmia is the 10th most populated city in Iran. The population is mostly made up of Azeris (also called Turks), together with a sizeable number of Kurds (both Muslims), and a minority of Assyrians and Armenians (who are Christians) as well as Persian-speakers who have migrated to the city mainly for employment. There are also a limited number of other minorities (Zoroastrians and Jews) living in the city (Iran's *National Centre for Statistics*, amar.org.ir). Most people in Urmia (and West Azerbaijan Province) speak Azeri (or Turkish as it is locally known, as their first language); Persian is quite common (and very fashionable among the young generation, especially in Urmia); and a good number of people speak Kurdish as L1. The city lies at an altitude of 1330 m above sea level on the Shahar Chay River (City River). Urmia is situated on a fertile plain called Urmia Plain on the western side of Lake Urmia and is separated from the Turkish border by a small range of mountains.

The study

In order to explore the idea of English in Iran and to provide an answer to the above questions, we looked at the presence of English in Urmia in the way it is used by the public, in media, in academia, etc. We also conducted a short survey on Iranian students' views of English in terms of their motivation to learn English as well as their attitude towards the language. Before reporting our findings, we highlight the official status of English in Iran's education system.

Official status of English in Iran

In formulating language policy towards the teaching of English in a country, a variety of options are available to educational planners. For example, English could be positioned as the language of English-speaking countries such as the UK, Canada, the USA and Australia and be linked to the cultures of those and other English-speaking countries. Another option would be to emphasize its role as an international language and as a means of communication with the world beyond a country's borders. A different function for English would be to position it as a tool for providing access to information

needed for technical, scientific and economic development within a country, that is, as a form of economic capital.

In Iran, English serves primarily the second and third functions above (Kiany, Mahdavy, and Ghafar Samar 2011), and particularly as a means of having access to information. In the public sector including schools and universities, English is regarded as a tool providing access to new knowledge and technology, hence there is an emphasis on reading comprehension. Those studying English in private institutes do so for a variety of reasons but often to develop functional communication skills (see below) and to pass international tests. The need to learn English is explained in the following way in 'A Word with the Students' in *English Book 1* (Birjandi and Soheili 2000) for middle school students (the stage at which English is formally introduced to public education):

The importance of learning English is not hidden for anyone. Those who wish to enter university and continue their education to the highest level, those who would like to find a good job in the society ... have no other option than learning English to the highest level. In short, everybody needs to learn the Language (English) in the twenty-first century. (n.p.)

Furthermore, based on *The National Curriculum Document*, foreign language (including English and Arabic) education is considered a major component of the system of state education at both elementary and higher levels. This document describes the aim of teaching foreign languages to be the development of foreign language skills with a focus on Islamic-Iranian identity, national culture and local beliefs (Mirhosseini and Khodakarami 2015, 25). Indeed as Rashidi and Najafi (2010, quoted in Zandian 2015) highlight, as a school subject, English is used primarily as a medium for representing Persian and Islamic ideology. Among other foreign languages promoted by the education system, only the status of Arabic can be compared to that of English. Arabic has an important place in the curriculum since it is the language of religion and the Koran; however, judging by the widespread interest in learning English in private institutes, English is considered more important and prestigious than Arabic for many learners.

English in public education

In the current system of education (in effect since 2013), primary education lasts for six years and middle and high schools for three years each. In the official curriculum of public education, English is listed as one of the required courses for middle and high school levels (based on the official website of Organization for Curriculum Development (TALIF); www.talif.sch.ir). According to Atai and Mazlum (2013), policy-making in the current ELT curriculum in Iran is highly centralized, with no local policy-makers involved. English is formally introduced at the first year of middle school (also called Secondary School Round 1). In the older system of education which came into effect after the Islamic Revolution in 1979, English was introduced in year 2 of middle school (Ghorbani 2009). Students in middle and high schools take between two and four hours of English instruction each week with different syllabi for different years, which are revised from time to time. The syllabus and course content are prescribed for all schools, and teachers are not able to make changes to course content or structure. The current 'revised' syllabus used in public education aims to move beyond a focus on reading skills and to develop basic English proficiency; however, the course materials at middle school primarily address alphabet recognition, pronunciation and limited vocabulary instruction, while those used at high school continue to focus on reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary development, with little emphasis on writing beyond decontextualized sentence practice. Listening is almost absent in the syllabus, and speaking is limited to a few drills (mainly intended to practice grammar) and short dialogues to introduce language functions. Consequently after six years of formal English instruction, unless students have taken additional courses in a private institute (in larger cities a common choice for students from well-off families), they normally have minimal communication skills in English.

Formal English instruction also continues at tertiary education (other compulsory general courses include topics such as Persian Language and Literature, Theology, Life Lessons). Unlike pre-university education, there is no fixed syllabus for teaching English at university and instructors are able to develop their own syllabus and to choose relevant teaching materials. SAMT (the organization in charge of overseeing and producing educational materials for universities in Iran) has produced a few books for English at tertiary level but there is a very limited choice. Some instructors choose books published outside of Iran. Typically English courses at university focus on written English and emphasize grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension, with little or virtually no attention paid to spoken English and oral communication. Classes are conducted in Farsi both at pre-university and university levels. However few students in these courses are seriously committed to learning English since they do not see it as relevant to their fields of study. In addition the English course only takes up between 20 and 30 hours, often not taught by staff from an English department, and consequently students gain little from it.

The school textbooks

The first English books for schools in Iran (which were in use until 1979, the time of Islamic Revolution) were developed by a team of American and Iranian materials writers in 1938 (Foroozandeh and Forouzani 2015). The current English textbooks used in public education are written by a team of Iranian authors affiliated with the Ministry of Education, with no other alternatives available (Dahmardeh 2009). In the current 6-3-3 system of public education (six years of elementary school, three years of Round One secondary school [formerly junior high school] and three years of Round Two secondary school [formerly senior high school]), the first level English book for middle school introduces the letters and sounds of the English alphabet, and a basic set of vocabulary items together with short dialogues. With level 2, further vocabulary and dialogues are introduced as well as reading comprehension texts and writing exercises. At higher levels, the school textbooks contain longer reading passages accompanied by detailed comprehension and vocabulary exercises as well as grammar practice. However, there is little focus on oral communication skills.

Post-revolution school English textbooks in Iran can be grouped into three categories based on changes they reflect at different times: 1982–1990 period, 1991–2010, and post 2012 period (Foroozandeh and Forouzani 2015). Periodically minor changes have been made to the content and structure of the English textbooks used in schools during the last 30 years. According to one of the authors of English for Round One secondary school (*English for Students: Prospect 1* Khedir Sharabian et al. 2013), no major changes were made to the content of school books for 27 years (interview with Seyed Behnam Alavi Moghaddam, available at the official website of Curriculum Development Center: <http://eng-dept.talif.sch.ir/>). However, more recently (after 2012), major changes are claimed to have been introduced to English textbooks in order to focus on ‘active meaning-oriented communication’ (*Prospect 1: Teacher’s guide*). Prospect 1 focuses on literacy skills; Prospect 2 extends the emphasis to phrase level skills and Prospect 3 mainly concentrates on grammar (Foroozandeh and Forouzani 2015). One of the features claimed of this new series is to give attention to mastery of the language skills and to communicative abilities. It is recommended that English classes be conducted in English; however, as far as one of the authors’ experience indicates, classes are typically conducted in the students’ mother tongue (e.g. Farsi, Turkish or Kurdish due to the learners’ [and sometimes the teachers’] limited English proficiency). Consequently, a translation and grammar-based approach to teaching is the norm despite the book authors’ recommendations that English be used for conducting communicative-oriented sessions. Such a teaching method is also largely affected by the nature of the final term assessment system that tests linguistic knowledge rather than communicative ability. Anecdotal evidence from teachers, students, parents and school managers attests that English education at school level is problematic and frustrating for both teachers and students because of mixed-level classes (Sadeghi and Richards 2015).

English as a specialization in higher education

In most universities in Iran, including the five universities located in Urmia, English is also offered as a subject that students can major in. Currently in Iran, some 29 state and 35 distance education universities offer an English programme for the 2013–2014 academic year in either English Language and Literature, English Language Teaching, or English Translation at BA level (www.sanjesh.org). In addition to state universities, many more private (Open) universities (including Islamic Azad University and non-for-profit universities) offer English as a major field of study. There are also numerous MA and PhD programmes offering a specialization in English both at state universities and Islamic Azad University. For the Fall 2014 semester, for instance, Iran's state universities are scheduled to admit more than 100 candidates as PhD students in TEFL (www.sanjesh.org). There is a strong competition among candidates to enter PhD programmes. For the 2014–2015 academic year, for example, 99 candidates were invited to be interviewed for 14 vacant positions at Urmia University and for the 2015–2016 academic year, some 70 candidates competed for 6 positions. For English majors, all course assignment and projects are completed in English. Teachers in these programmes are invariably Iranian nationals, many with qualifications obtained abroad.

English in academia

Increasingly, academics in Iran are expected to be able to communicate in English, depending on their discipline. Publication in English in international journals is encouraged. For some scholars this means preparing articles in Farsi and having them translated into English or having papers written in English proof-read and corrected by more proficient English teachers or post-graduate students. Private companies and individuals offer such translation and editing services in larger cities. There are a growing number of English-language publications (mainly scientific journals and a limited number of newspapers or general magazines) in Iran covering different subjects. For example, Urmia University publishes two periodicals in English, one on Veterinary Sciences and the other on Language Teaching. English is also the language of numerous academic gatherings and conferences at local, regional, and national levels, as well as international conferences in English-related fields organized by different state and open universities as well as by private organizations and language centres.

Private institutes

In order to develop practical skills in English, many young people take courses in private institutes. In Urmia, there are over 60 registered language schools offering English conversation courses at different levels for various age ranges. In addition, there are numerous unregistered language courses throughout Urmia offering courses in general English, business English, ESP classes as well as preparation courses for international tests such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Institutes vary in size, ranging from those with 50 students to those with more than 2000. Enrolment in these schools typically doubles during the summer months. Textbooks used in institutes are often locally printed but unauthorized versions of popular international courses such as Headway or Interchange. In addition to studying English at institutes, some parents employ private tutors to teach their children at home.

In some parts of the world such as Japan, English is promoted as an asset that facilitates international travel, as a commodity that can lead to greater wealth, better employment prospects, and prestige, as well as a language that is linked to being 'cool' and modern (Kogar 2014; Seargeant 2009). The idea of English being cool and modern is perhaps reflected in the images used in the following advertisements for cool (nice and modern) female clothing (Figure 1) and modern (and high class) furniture (Figure 2) in Urmia:



Figure 1. Kolbeh [cottage] female clothing.



Figure 2. Harmony home furniture.

Better-known institutes in Urmia typically place such ads on billboards in areas where residents enjoy a higher socio-economic status. Institutes also advertise in local business-oriented newspapers and magazines as well as on their own websites. Rather than marketing their courses through stressing the affordances knowledge of English can bring, institutes may refer to the quality of their facilities (e.g. technological support, well qualified teachers, being affiliated to a university [Figure 3, left and right]), unique features [Figure 3, left and right], etc.), the number of branches the institute has, as well as their use of widely recognized EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbook series such as Top Notch, Headway or Interchange (Figure 4, right). The contents of almost all ads are exclusively in Persian (Figure 4, left) except for the name of the institute and the title of the courses they offer.

Organizations and businesses

While English is not used for oral or written communication in private or public organizations, most private organizations (and increasingly public ones as well) tend to recruit staff with some proficiency in English. Knowledge of English, together with computer literacy, is considered essential for employment (especially for secretaries) in almost all private institutes. Academic staff in most private and state universities are expected to have a certain level of English proficiency (assessed according to TOEFL/IELTS or localized versions of these proficiency tests). There are also a limited number of export companies in Urmia (involved in exporting cement, steel, fruit concentrate, etc.) which use written English for communication, however most communication takes place in Turkish as their main customers are in Turkey. A few central banks also use English for communication with their international counterparts, although this has been less common since the imposition of international economic sanctions on Iran five years ago. From time to time prestigious (international)



Figure 3. (Left) Urmia University Language Centre ad for courses on English, German, Italian and Russian as well as TOEFL, IELTS, TOLIMO/MSRT (Iranian version of TOEFL). (Right) AVA TALK Language School (Urmia University of Technology) ad for English courses for kids.



Figure 4. (Left) Maghreb Zamin (Westland) Language Academy ad for courses on English, German, French and Russian for kids and adults. (Right) SADR Language School ad for English courses for Kids as well as German, French, Spanish, and Russian.

companies and language centres publish their job announcements in English, although this is not very common.

English in the public domain

English has a public presence in Urmia as reflected in shop names, advertisements, street signs (Figure 5, right), public messages and so on. One use of English is represented in words or phrases in English (sometimes misspelt) in public signs and messages (Figure 5, left), often appearing below the Persian word or phrase. This is common in shop windows (Figure 6, right), entrances to offices and organizations, mainly private (Figure 6, left), street names, traffic/address signs, parks, and hotels.

While providing information for visitors who do not understand Persian, use of English in these situations also carries an additional symbolic meaning conveying attributes of prestige and status.



Figure 5. (Left) Department of Islamic Education (Urmia University). (Right) Street sign (at Azadeghan Square).



Figure 6. (Left) SAMEN Private Bank. (Right) COWAY air/water conditioners.

English (along with Farsi) is also found on almost every domestic product such as dairy products, electric devices, food and household items, although there are many other imported foreign products (especially housing appliances and medication) which carry an English label only (or English along with another foreign language). People who have not received any exposure to English or any foreign language written in Latin script such as German, French and Turkish, generally assume such words are 'English'. Young people are often seen wearing clothing items with English words or phrases printed on them (Figure 7), which is perhaps seen as 'cool'. They may not be aware of what the words mean or that the meaning may sometimes be offensive to religiously inclined people. Their use by young people may even serve to mark a distinct and different identity from people with more traditional values.

Another impact of English is seen in the use of letters from the English alphabet to express Persian words. This is sometimes seen in shop names where only the English 'script' might be used for Persian words rather than an English equivalent. Many people (and primarily the younger generation of university students) also use English 'script' for their text message communications. Almost all email communications are carried out using Farsi but written with English script. The reverse case is where English words are used (e.g. as shop names) but in Persian script. Examples include: 'Lady' beauty saloon; 'Talk' language school, 'Prestige' home decoration, etc., where words within inverted commas are written in Persian script.



Figure 7. A teenager T-shirt.

Use of English in spoken or written communication between Iranians in Urmia and elsewhere in Iran is limited to very restricted situations. For example, professionals familiar with English (and in particular English students and teachers) sometimes take the advantage of communicating in English language (via email). Oral communication using English is almost non-existent apart from instances between learners or learners and teachers at language institute/university settings (particularly with beginner learners). However, many educated and internationally oriented people in Urmia include some English words when speaking Turkish or Farsi (such as *cancel*, *surprise*, *ok*, etc. which are usually pronounced differently from their use in spoken English; e.g. ‘surprise’ is pronounced/sur-piz/). Sprinkling a few English words in with Turkish or Farsi also carries prestige. Some young people may also use occasional English words related to romance (e.g. seen in messages on walls) and sing songs in English (e.g. ‘Happy Birthday’) on some occasions. At the same time many English words have become part of the Turkish/Persian language such as *tealeaf*, *bank*, *hotel*, *sandwich*, *jean[s]*, as well as numerous technology-related words (mainly common among new generation) such as *computer*, *laptop*, *mobile*, *telephone*, *tablet*, *internet*, *file*, *save*, *delete*, *cut*, *paste*, *chat*, *email*, *address*, *user(name)*, *pass(word)*, *passport* and so on. At times English is also used in humour, when, for instance, in the famous Turkish ‘Samad Mamad Humour Series’, one of the characters who cannot speak Farsi properly, tries to speak English to a woman in order to impress her, saying ‘I am a windows’ or ‘I am a donkey’. Not knowing English is here seen as a sign of being uneducated. Similarly, an Urmia-based satirist (who does not wish to be identified by name) intersperses English words in his Persian writing: ‘A “Pofyooz” ... is someone who, when he goes to Europe for 10 days, [miss]es his friends, becomes [happy] seeing them on return, [change]s his life [style] when he comes back, and drinks [coffee],’ where the words in square brackets appear in English in his Persian text to highlight the superficial prestige using English words may bring to the Farsi speaker.

English thus occupies a specific space in Urmia alongside Turkish, Kurdish and Farsi and carries additional meanings beyond those of a purely lexical nature. For example, its use on shop signs and buildings serves to attract attention. It can serve to signal prestige and status and membership of a higher socio-economic class. When linked to products, it may signal quality. It can also signal that its user is well educated and has an international perspective. It can serve to distinguish someone from those with a religious orientation. For some, it also means being young and can carry messages of love and romance. Our observations on the social meaning of English in Urmia are similar to Sayer’s (2009) findings on the iconic and innovative uses of English in Oaxaca (a colonial city in southern Mexico), namely that ‘English is advanced and sophisticated (Figures 6 and 8, right); English is



Figure 8. (Left) Writing on a wall. (right) SEPID detergent.

fashion (Figures 1 and 7); English is being cool (Figures 1 and 2); and English is for expression of love (Figure 8, left).

Iranian English

The fact that many educated Iranians are fluent English speakers raises the question of what kind of English they aim to speak. The emergence of the notions of English as an international language and lingua franca English suggests that like other users of English as a ‘foreign language’, Iranian speakers of English have several choices as to the kind of English they might wish to master – whether it be a native-speaker target for spoken English with the accent of standard British English or American English, for example, or an Iranian-flavored English – that is both fluent and accurate but reflecting features of L1 phonology – whether this be Farsi, Turkish, etc. (Seargeant 2012). This latter variety of English is often observed among educated bilingual Iranians and it may be interpreted as a way of preserving a sense of Iranian identity through English. This however is an issue that awaits further research.

However, in a small-scale study (reported below) American English was the most-preferred variety of English for university students majoring in English as well as for language learners in institutes, with British English the next preferred variety. None of the students favoured an Iranian/localized version of English as their preferred variety of English. Indeed, while most Iranians learning English seem to aim for an American or British model of spoken English, a local, Iranian accent is generally observable in Iranian speakers of English, especially in less proficient speakers. Advanced learners of English also often use aspects of sentence stress and intonation in ways that differ from native American or British English usage. Other features of the phonology of Iranian speakers of English are traceable to L1 interference, such as problems with some initial and final consonants and consonant clusters, the specific difficulties depending on the learners’ L1 (e.g. Turkish or Farsi).

English in the media

Some English is also used in the media in Iran. Although major international English language channels such as CNN and BBC are not currently available in Iran, some local channels have limited broadcasts in English, intended for foreigners living in Iran. Most such programmes (broadcast by Iran’s News Network Channel and Channel 4) are news programmes; however, documentaries (on wildlife, lives of famous people, etc.) in English are also frequent on Channel 4. Similar news services exist on the radio as well, though on a more limited scale. The presenters on these programmes generally have a North American accent and are Iranians who have lived or been educated in English speaking countries. Movies or other entertainments are rarely broadcast in English, but in

bigger cities such as Tehran (but not in Urmia) cinemas are found which broadcast foreign films in their original language (sometimes with subtitles in English). However movies in English are readily available on the market for purchase and home-use. There are some newspapers published in English in Iran such as *Tehran Times* and *Iran Daily* and these are available in Urmia. Their readers would typically be foreigners living in Iran and students majoring in English who would like to develop their reading skills/vocabulary knowledge or to use excerpts for their Translation and Reading Media courses. Some monthly entertainment periodicals (in English) such as VIVA are also found, though on a limited scale.

English has a very limited presence in social media in Iran. Indeed most international social media such as Facebook and Twitter and chatting services are banned in Iran, but most Internet users access these media using filtering devices. LinkedIn is, however, not filtered in Iran and many university students and professors are active in this network, while Facebook is favoured by the general public. Most posts in these social media are in Farsi or Farsi using English transcript. English students sometimes communicate in English in these media.

Reading materials in English

Most large cities in Iran including Urmia contain many bookshops selling books in English. Few bookshops deal exclusively in English books, and most sell books in Persian and English, on a variety of subjects. In Urmia, there are at least five bookshops specializing in English books, with two exclusively selling English books. Most of the books sold in these bookshops are academic texts – either books used in language schools such as Interchange, Headway, Top Notch, etc., or books for university students majoring in English related to Teaching English as a Foreign Language and Literature. To the best of our knowledge of the Iranian book market, most books are locally printed (and generally unauthorized) copies of international books, including dictionaries, vocabulary books, grammar books, TOEFL/IELTS preparation kits, as well as simplified readers and full length novels. Although bookshops display a few copies of the original foreign textbooks, these are very expensive and few students can afford original copies. Consequently most Iranian publishers reprint popular textbooks such as Interchange, Passages, Top Notch, etc. (disregarding copy-right issues) at much more affordable prices. Most of the books sold in these bookshops are ordered from Tehran on demand, and more technical materials (e.g. books needed by PhD and MA students) as well as recently published books are in the form of e-books rather than printed books. Some shop-owners specialize in preparing e-books from various sources, which are then sold as e-books or printed and made into a book. Apart from academic books, very little else in English is sold in bookshops. Such books that are intended for the general public are generally phrase books, with titles such as ‘English on Trip’ (Figure 9). Books in English are virtually non-existent in public libraries with the exception of General English books for university students (with key to exercises and translation of reading passages and vocabulary items), simplified readers and novels usually with a romantic focus as well as TOEFL or IELTS practice books and test preparation booklets for university entrance examination (based on high school English books).

Motivation for learning English

In order to explore attitudes towards English and learning English as well as the motivation to learn English, the researchers included three groups of English learners as participants: those who voluntarily wanted to learn English by attending private language schools; those who chose English as a university major; and those who had to take a compulsory English course as part of their university education (non-English majors). With these criteria in mind, we selected 115 students (26 male, 88 female, 1 not stated) to take part in the study following a convenience sampling procedure. These participants were either taking an English course at a private language institute in Urmia ($N = 30$), or majoring in English Language and Literature ($N = 56$) or in Chemistry ($N = 29$, and taking

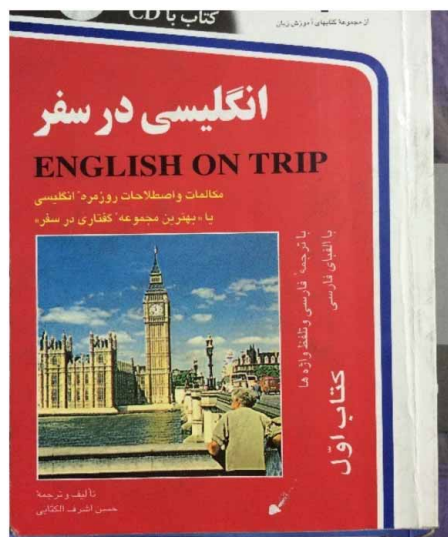


Figure 9. English–Persian phrase book.

a required General English course) at Urmia University. The participants' age ranged from 16 to 33 (with 72% of them being less than 23 years old). We did not administer a language proficiency test to check the participants' English proficiency (as this was not a determining variable in our study), and instead, we asked them to self-rate their proficiency, which is common practice when language proficiency is not an independent variable. Five per cent of the participants rated their English proficiency as Beginner, 10% rated themselves as Advanced or native-like speakers of English while the majority rated themselves as being more or less Intermediate.

To determine the students' reasons for learning English (i.e. whether they were motivated to learn English as well as the type of motivation), and also to find out the attitudes learners had towards the language, we constructed a questionnaire intended to explore these constructs. While we consulted similar questionnaires made by other scholars (such as Al-Tamimi and Shuib 2009; Kim 2006; Tsuda 2003), our questionnaire is regarded as constructed rather than adopted or adapted as most of the items were prepared by the authors. In addition to a cover letter, the questionnaire included four sections on Background Information, Reasons (Motivation), Attitudes, and Further Information. The questionnaire was piloted on a small group of learners similar to the target group, and was revised based on pilot findings and expert advice. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the questionnaire was estimated to be .72. The English version of the questionnaire was administered to language institute and university participants (English majors). For Chemistry students, a translated (Persian) version of the questionnaire was used (available on request). All questionnaires were administered in person by the researchers' assistants and the participants were given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaires. Most learners completed the survey forms in less than 25 minutes.

In order to understand whether and how our participants were motivated to learn English, we asked them to rate 16 reasons from 'very important' (=score of 3), through 'somewhat important' (2), to 'not important' (1). Their reasons with mean scores are summarized in Table 1.

The data suggests that for this group of students their reasons for studying English reflect their interest in the language, their recognition of its importance internationally, as well as the practical affordances and benefits it offers them. It can facilitate travel abroad, enable communication with native-speakers, help students find employment as well as facilitate studies in higher education including study abroad. Reasons with less pragmatic value for learners such as listening to English and watching films in English are rated as less important for these learners. Although our findings

Table 1. Motivation for learning English.

1	Because I like English 2.66
2	Because English is an international language 2.66
3	Because I want to travel 2.64
4	Because English is an important language 2.63
5	Because I want to go to university 2.57
6	Because I want to speak with native speakers of English 2.56
7	Because I want to find a good job 2.41
8	Because I want to continue my education abroad 2.38
9	Because I want to earn credits 2.33
10	Because I enjoy listening to English 2.30
11	Because I want to watch English films 2.20
12	Because I like English textbooks/materials 2.17
13	Because I want to live in a foreign country 2.09
14	Because I like my English teacher 1.99
15	Because everybody does 1.7
16	Because my parents want it 1.56

primarily reveal different motivation types the participating students had for learning English, they also lend support to Meshkat and Saeb's (2013) claim that Iranian EFL students are highly motivated to learn English in that most of their reasons for learning English received a score of 2+, which means that they regarded learning English as either 'very important' or 'somewhat important'. Our observations are also in line with Ardavani and Durrant's (2015) claim that many Iranian students have a strong motivation to achieve 'internationally oriented self-states' (37), believing that learning English can provide them with such an opportunity outside Iran: the main motivation to learn English in their sample (eight university students not majoring in English) was to leave Iran, rather than an interest in English as in our case.

Attitudes towards English

One section of the questionnaire focused on learners' attitudes towards English. Table 2 lists the Likert-scale items that were scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). All items with a score above 3.5 indicate a positive attitude towards English and items with a score of below 2.5 indicate a negative attitude as far as the relevant item is concerned. The scores are interpreted in a reverse way for items such as 'English should not be a compulsory subject in secondary schools in Iran'. All in all, out of 27 items, 24 indicate that the participating students have a positive attitude towards English while responses to three items suggest a neutral attitude towards English (though with a trend towards a positive attitude). Interestingly, no responses reflect a negative attitude towards English. The overall mean score of all items (3.98) reveals that, generally speaking, the participants' attitude towards English is very positive. This finding supports Soleimani and Hanafi's (2013) observation that Iranian university students overall hold highly positive attitudes towards learning English. The order of the items in Table 2 moves from those with the highest positive attitude to those with the lowest positive attitude; that is, those in the first part of the table (items 1 through 24) indicate a positive attitude; and those in the second section (items 25 through 27), a neutral attitude, with no items reflecting a negative attitude.

In order to triangulate the above data and to check the extent to which the opinions expressed reflect the actual views of the participants we also asked them a few general questions on their feelings towards English and English-speaking people. These questions formed part of the questionnaire and appeared at the end of the questionnaire. Below is a summary of our observations:

When asked whether they liked English, more than 87% of the students replied 'yes'; when asked to rate the degree of their liking on a scale of 1–10, the average score was 8.86. A slightly higher rate was found for both questions when candidates were asked about 'learning English'. More than 90% of the students reported that they would like to make friends with English-speaking people and that they have positive feelings towards foreigners, both indications of a very positive attitude towards

Table 2. Attitudes towards English.

1	I love talking with expatriates in English. 4.63
2	When I hear someone speaks English well, I wish I could speak like him or her. 4.53
3	I like seeing signs in English, writings on shops, cars, streets etc. 4.44
4	It is a good thing to have English as the foreign language in Iran. 4.41
5	The teaching of English should start as early as the first grade in the Iranian schools. 4.36
6	I like to see English films in English. 4.36
7	I like English emails, text messages. 4.20
8	The command of English is very helpful in understanding expatriates and their cultures. 4.15
9	I like reading English magazines, newspapers, books, etc. 4.10
10	I like the countries where English is spoken. 4.06
11	The use of English in government and business offices helps in getting things done easily. 4.05
12	I like people who speak English. 4.04
13	I am forced to learn English by the people around me. 1.96 [= 4.04]
14	If I use English, it means that I am not patriotic. 1.99 [= 4.01]
15	If I use English, my status is raised. 3.97
16	The spread of the use of English is one of the most crucial factors in Iran's development today. 3.96
17	The development of our country is possible mainly by educated people who know English well. 3.95
18	I do not feel awkward when using English. 3.90
19	Frankly speaking English is not necessary in my life. 2.11 [= 3.89]
20	If I use English, I will be praised and approved of by my family, relatives and friends. 3.81
21	English films are more enjoyable than films in any other language. 3.76
22	I feel uncomfortable when hearing one Iranian speaking to another in English. 2.32 [=3.68]
23	English is the mark of an educated person. 3.65
24	English should be a medium of instruction in the schools in Iran. 3.59
25	English should not be a compulsory subject in secondary schools in Iran. 2.53 [= 3.47]
26	My social science and mathematics textbooks should be written in Persian. 3.38
27	At least some subjects like Physics and Chemistry should be taught in English at the secondary level in Iran. 3.17

English. When asked for their attitude towards Iranians who can speak English well, 73 out of 86 (more than 85%) stated that they felt respect towards such people; nearly 10% envied those who spoke English well and only 3% expressed indifference towards Iranian users of English. Regarding their preference for a variety of English, the majority (more than 70%) favoured American English, with some 20% favouring British English; only six students (chemistry majors) said that they favoured a localized version of English as spoken by an educated Iranian. This is in line with Dahmardeh and Hunt's (2012) report that there is a common belief among Iranians that English is associated with the USA and that is why most teachers and students prefer American English. Juxtaposing these figures alongside those reported in the above table as well as with the information described earlier in this paper, it is clear that university and private institute students in Urmia attach a very high value to English, a finding which we presume is more or less generalizable to other large cities in Iran, as evidenced by the growing demand for English courses across Iran.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the concept of the idea of English in Iran, to describe the status of English in Iran as reflected in language policy and societal practices and to explore the motivation behind learners' desire to learn English. We examined the functions English serves in Iran, the values Iranians attach to English, the place of English in comparison to other languages spoken in Iran as well as the general attitudes of Iranians towards English and people who speak English. To provide answers to these questions, we took the city of Urmia as an example and looked at different purposes for which people used English in Urmia as well as its place in the domains of public and private education, business, media, and academia. We also carried out a small-scale survey to investigate English language learners' motivations in learning English and their attitudes towards the language. While further research is called for to arrive at a fuller picture of the role of English in Iran, our findings indicate that, as far as Urmia is concerned, the idea of English in Urmia is that of a language that is seen as a valuable asset for Iran and for Iranians, one that earns its speakers prestige and that

enables people to interact with the wider world. While this exploratory paper reflects the small amount of information currently available on the role of English in Iran, findings of the kind revealed in this study can serve as a useful resource in planning for the teaching of English in Iran and in developing learning materials that reflect the motivations and aspirations of young Iranians in relation to the learning of English.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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