

NEW HORIZONS IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN IRAN: A TRANSITION FROM READING-BASED METHODS TO COMMUNICATIVE ONES BY “ENGLISH FOR SCHOOLS” SERIES

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ABSTRACT

After setting some macro-level policy documents such as “The 20-year National Vision of Islamic Rep. of Iran”, “The Comprehensive Scientific Roadmap” and especially “The National Curriculum” which was finalized and ratified in early 2013, Iran’s ministry of education is now responsible for paving the ground of an educational revolution and obviously English as a compulsory subject which is thought for 6 years in both junior and senior high school level has received much scholarly attention. The major argument of this article is to report the ongoing revolution of TEFL in k-12 official education system of Iran. Arguments have encompassed both the administrative changes in factors such as time, grades and methods of teaching English in Iranian high schools and teaching resources, mainly the new textbooks. In this paper we will start the discussion with a view to the relevant literature of TEFL in Iran before and after the educational reform of recent years. This will be followed by introducing different aspects of this above mentioned revolution with a main focus on newly authored and published textbooks known as “English for schools” series. Although the research has been done within Iranian context and reports this country’s experiences and achievements, many findings and suggestions may be interesting for other foreign/second language situations.

KEYWORDS: *Teaching English, National Curriculum, English Series, Prospect 1*

INTRODUCTION

Although Borjian (2013) studies the roots and backgrounds of English education in Iran much before this time, many researchers believes that the history of formal teaching of English in Iran dates back to 1938-1939 (See for example Foroozandeh, 2010). In first English textbook series designed and published by the ministry of culture in academic year of 1938-9 included 6 books for 6 grades of high school education. The Iranian committee of writers of this series and a group of English speaking educators who launched and implemented this joint project under the

sponsorship of the ministry of culture had adopted the Direct Method (DM) and Reading Method (RM) and the series course books were not designed based upon any official curriculum. Foroozandeh (2010:68) evaluates that “the 6-book series did not follow the same design and procedure in all the lessons. ... The 1939 series was not accompanied by any work book or teacher’s manual, but the “foreword to teachers” provided comprehensive guidelines on classroom managements, student-teacher relationship, the importance and necessity of adopting a humanitarian approach to language teaching and learning, taking account of learner factors, error correction, and dictation.”

This initial series was taught up until 1964 when it was replaced by a very well-known and widely discussed series called “the Graded English series”. Graded English which was also a 6 books series was claimed to adopt the main stream approach of its time (situational language teaching) and the textbooks were designed in a way that get the students acquainted with the basic knowledge and information of English necessary for daily life and future academic studies.

Containing a clear set of aims and objectives clear syllabus, defined activities, and procedures with a step by step explanation in teacher’s guide provided for each book are some advantages of this series as Foroozandeh (2010:67) has put forward (for other specifications and features of this series see Foroozandeh 2010 pp.64-67)

The Graded English series stayed in circulation of formal education system up until the Islamic revolution of 1979, when it was completely removed from the schools and replaced by other series, the most well-known one is “Right path to English” which is still serving the education system and is planned to be replaced by the newly designed “English for School” series in the coming academic year commencing October 2013.

A brief survey of English textbooks taught in formal k-12 education system of Iran shows that they were mostly and generally developed under the influence of structural and formal camps such as RM and DM and suffered from the lack of a national curriculum and roadmap which encompasses the overall process of formal teaching of English in Iran. It also seems that the pros and cons of teaching English in post-revolutionary Iran considerably corresponds to different historical and socio-political periods in a way during the first years of the revolution victory, the English teaching underwent some consecutive reforms and early after the revolution, teaching English in the first grade of junior high school (known as guidance school) was stopped for a while and teaching English postponed to the second grade of guidance schools. In general, in the political situation in which top US officials had and has spoken Iran as an enemy state and blamed Iran of being “the axis of devil” and put the strongest political and economic sanctions against this country, it seems quite rational that some Iranian officials may be disposed in a situation of not be so eager to back teaching English willingly and strongly.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this introductory article, we mainly attempt to introduce the advantages and characteristics of new English textbook of Iran junior secondary level titled" Prospect1" Although much has been

written and discussed about teaching English in Asian countries, finding relevant researches and literature which best describe the current and coming situation of TEFL in Iran is not as easy and applicable as it initially seems. The main question of the article is to survey the outstanding point of this new textbook which is planned to be taught to a 13 million population of Iranian students.

METHODOLOGY

Material and Method

However, in recent two or three years, and after setting, ratifying and communicating of some infrastructural and macro-level policy making documents such as “The 20-year National Vision of Islamic Rep. of Iran” and “The Comprehensive Scientific Roadmap” there is an ongoing attempt to improve the scientific situation of Islamic Republic of Iran in regional and international level and current situation of teaching English is introduced as a big flaw of education system. In early 2013, and after some years of discussion, the national curriculum of Iran as the road map of the education system of the country was finally ratified by the supreme council of Cultural Revolution, and is expected to carry the burden of educational renovation in all levels. In the following section, we will introduce the new English series designed and published by Organization for Educational Research and Planning (OERP) to be taught in Iran’s junior and senior high schools. The newly designed series which is called “English for Schools” seems to play a pivotal role in changing the track from traditional reading based approach of “Right Path to English” series into a communicative one.

Introduction of the new series “English for Schools”:

The ministry of education of Islamic republic of Iran has announced a so-called fundamental reform of education system since 2010 and the most prominent step toward shaping this reform was the preparation and ratification of "National curriculum of Islamic Republic of Iran" finally ratified in late 2012. This national curriculum is composed of 12 educational domains and the 11th domain is dedicated to teaching foreign languages. This is the first time that in formal education system of Iran a set of objectives for teaching foreign languages is designated and formally announced by the ministry of education. On its 11th educational domain, The national curriculum of Iran states the objectives of teaching foreign languages in formal educational system as the following:

- Teaching foreign languages should pave the way for reception, perception and transmitting cultural messages and human science achievements within linguistic means of communication.
- besides the interpersonal and intercultural functions, teaching foreign languages should play an active role in economic developments such as tourism industry, IT technology science development and so on so forth.
- the education of foreign languages initiates from the 7th grades and lasts for 6 years and its main objective is educating four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing and making the students familiar with the communicative approaches.

The teaching methodology prescribed by this document is titled as " interactive self-reliance communicative approach" which is a localized version of Communicative language teaching

approach (CLT). The organization for educational research and planning organization (OERP) which is the official body responsible for textbook preparation nation widely has introduced a new English series for Iranian students of grade 7th. This new series which is called "English for Schools" is planned to have 6 volumes for grade 7 to 12 within two three-year phase of junior and senior high school level.

The English for Schools book 1 (designed for 7th grade students-students of the first grade of junior high school) has been recently designed, published and distributed by OERP to be taught to about more than one million and a half 7th grade students all around the country.

This book (hereafter called as its cover title: Prospect 1) for the sake of brevity is planned to be an introductory course for zero beginner 11-12 years old students. Prospect 1 consists of a student book, a work book, a student audio CD, teacher's guide and teacher's flash cards. The student book has 8 units, each lesson centered around one educational Theme and two or three related functions chosen from the lists of themes and functions suggested in The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). The themes and functions taught in book 1 can be found in map of the book which summarizes the lessons titles, themes and functions, literacy section named as sounds and letters and vocabulary and grammatical points section called Key Language. (see appendix 1)

Table 1: is the introductory covering chart of the first lesson of book 1 teacher's guide which depicts the general idea of lesson 1

Lesson Objectives

Functions

- Greeting
- Introducing oneself

Literacy Skills

- Identifying, saying, and writing **a, k, m**
- Spelling one's name

Key Language

- **Words and Expressions:** name (first name, last name), hi, hello, good morning, good afternoon, Mr., Mrs., Miss, fine, thanks
- **Conversational Language Frames:**
Hello/Hi/Good morning/afternoon,
How are you?
Fine, thanks
What's your (first/last) name?
My name's/ I'm

After presenting this introductory chart, the teachers can find a completely detailed teaching procedure guide line as following:

Conversation

Preparation (10 minutes)

- Describe the lesson objectives in Persian.
- Tell students to look at the picture on Page 6. Ask the following questions in Persian:

-Where is the location of this conversation?

-what do you think about the relationship among these people?

-what are they speaking about?

-how do you usually greet someone in Persian?

- **(Optional Activity)**

Act out the conversation in class using your own name and your students' names. Remember to use mimes.

Listening (10 minutes)

- Now ask the students to look at the picture again and listen to the conversation on CD.
- Play the CD two or three times.
- Now ask questions (in Persian) to check what your students have understood.

Practice 1 ➡ Greeting

(15 minutes)

- Tell your students that they are going to learn different ways of greeting someone. Let them know what each turn means.
- Then play the CD two or three times and ask them to repeat the turns. You can also divide the class into two groups and ask each group to repeat one turn. This can be practiced with individual students.
- Then ask the class to greet you.
- Next ask your students to pair up and practice greeting each other.
- Finally, invite pairs to come to the front of the class to role play the greetings.

Practice 2 ➡ Introducing Yourself

(15 minutes)

- Tell your students that they are going to learn different ways of introducing oneself. Let them know what first and last names are.
- Then play the CD two or three times and ask them to repeat the turns. You can also divide the class into two groups and ask each group to repeat one turn. This can be practiced with individual students.
- Then ask the class to ask your name.
- Next ask your students to pair up and practice asking each other's names and greeting.
- Finally, invite pairs to come to the front of the class to role play the introductions and greetings. (book 1 teacher's Guide, pages 22-23)

Teacher's guide briefly illustrated the teaching procedure in the following steps:

Steps in Teaching Conversation and Practice

1. Warm-up
2. Audio-Visual Presentation (two or three times)
3. Checking and Explanation
4. Introducing Functions
5. Audio-visual Practice
6. Pair/Group Work

Steps in Teaching *Sounds and Letters*

1. Warm-up
2. Audio-Visual Presentation (two or three times)
3. Checking and Explanation
4. Initial Teaching of Letters
 - Visual Recognition
 - Audio Recognition
 - Extension
 - Oral Production
5. Teaching Letters for Reading and Writing (using flash cards)
 - Sounds of the Letters
 - Shape of the Letters
6. Follow-up Task
7. Assignment

Steps in Teaching *Listening and Reading*

1. Warm-up
2. Audio-Visual Presentation (two or three times)
3. Checking and Explanation (feedback)

Steps in Teaching *Speaking and Writing*

1. Warm-up
2. Pair/Group Work
3. Checking and Explanation (feedback)

Steps in Teaching *Your Conversation/Role Play*

1. Warm-up
2. Pair/Group Work
3. Student Presentation
4. Checking and Explanation (feedback)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, we briefly introduced a panoramic view of the new English teaching program in Iranian formal educational system and introduced the features and characteristics of Prospect 1, the first publication of a 6-year-series designed to be taught to Iranian junior and senior high school students.

As we previously mentioned, this book is a turning point in teaching English in Iran and I anticipated that this new communicative book may have influential effects on Iran educational system. Undoubtedly monitoring the revolutionary process of substituting traditional teaching methods with communicative ones is of pivotal importance for both Iranian and international TEFL experts.

CONCLUSION

This introductory article introduced the new series of Iranian English textbooks known as “English for Schools” series and especially focused on the first book of this 6 volume series known as “Prospect1” and after briefing the history of teaching English in formal educational of Iran, we went through different parts and elements of the English series. This is the first experience of formal education system of Iran to design a communicative English series for high schools and consequently this unique situation means a potential revolution in teaching English to Iranian students. However, the stake holders of the program face a serious challenge in implementation phase due to the fact that the apparently a great number of Iranian English teachers need especial training courses to make them more familiar with essential theoretical concepts and practical approaches of CLT and offering such courses is a key to success of the whole program. While this paper was done on a national project, the results may be relevant and useful for TEFL researchers of other countries regionally or internationally. As the final point, interested scholars can have access to PDF file of the Prospect 1 Student book1 at the following URL:<http://www.chap.sch.ir/books/1383>

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Appendix 1: The map of Prospect 1

Map of Prospect 1			
Welcome			
Lesson	Function	Sounds & Letters	Key Language
Lesson 1 My Name	Introducing yourself Greeting	Aa Kk Mm	<p>Vocabulary: name (first name, last name), Mr., Mrs., Miss</p> <p>Expressions: What's your name? My name is / I am Hello, Hi, Good morning/afternoon How are you (today)? Fine/Great, thanks. How do you spell?</p>
Lesson 2 My Classmates	Asking someone's name Introducing others	Ee Bb Pp	<p>Vocabulary: boy, girl, man, woman, friend, classmate</p> <p>Expressions: Who's that (boy)? He's my (friend) This is my (friend) Nice to meet you. Nice to meet you, too. Sorry, what's your (last) name again? Can you help me, please? I can't spell</p>
Review 1	Lessons 1 - 2		