Evaluation and Justification of a Paradigm Shift in the Current ELT Models in Iran

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Abstract:
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English language teaching in Iran has usually been considered an EFL model. This position, though common and widespread, seems to need revision in several grounds. Through comparing EFL, ESL and EIL (English as an international language) models based on Smith's (1978) comparative study, the present article reveals that the ELT in Iran no longer follows the EFL tradition. The comparative evaluation makes it clear that in terms of most categories, ELT in Iran shows the characteristics of EIL. Therefore, through characterizing it as a developmental process along a continuum towards EIL, the present study argues for instances of paradigm shift and thus claims that the ELT context in Iran is ripe for revision.

1   Introduction

The title of this study begs a prior question on the label, nature and treatment of the English teaching programs at work in Iran. With respect to this question the immediate answer given by people involved in the field seems to be that presently English is taught as a foreign language in the country. However, the approval of the prevalence/correctness parallelism is a matter of conjecture and will, therefore, cast doubt on the validity of the assumed conception. Besides, it may be admitted that this distinction, though plausible and apparently reasonable, has so far not been supported by empirical research. Therefore the absence of systematic research and observation in this area makes any position speculative, uncertain and even undependable (see Talebinezhad and Alakbari, 2001 for characteristics of EIL; see Aliakbari, in progress for documented evidence on this paradign shift.). Adapting Smith's (1978) model, the present study tries to evaluate the ELT model at work and to shed light on the direction it is headed.

1.1   The present state of ELT in Iran

The dominant trend in ELT context in Iran is toward more, not less, language teaching. As a required course from the second grade of junior high school, English is instructed with three to four hours of practice in a week. There is an extended and still growing private sector in the country, a distinctive feature of which is introducing English at primary school and even pre-school levels. In almost all private schools functioning within the three levels of general education in Iran namely; primary, junior and high schools, English receives striking attention and probably extra hours of practice. It is so crucial a factor that the quality of the English program and the skill of the teacher or teachers working in each school may determine the families' choice to send their children to one or another school. The multiple variation observed in the programs delivered signifies a great tendency to learn English in Iran on the one hand and a notable endeavor to fulfill the learners' communicative needs on the other.

So far, English seems to have smoothly found its way right to the heart of the Iranian society, approving itself as an undeniable necessity, rather than a mere school subject. English is the

dominant language of the foreign trade, international conferences, air traffic in international airports and sea navigation. Our relation with the world is mainly in English. English dailies, weeklies, journals and other English periodicals directed by our nationals are issued and available throughout the country. The government's policy for promoting the export of non-oil products made companies and exporters take advantage of this medium to introduce their goods and products to the world market. The Iranian national TV has started broadcasting programs in English. Internet, the use of which requires a proper English proficiency level and through which people enjoy global communication, has gained national recognition. Iran's cooperation with the UN, Islamic Conference Organization, ECO, OPEC and other regional and world organizations makes English quite practical for the involved nationals. International book fairs and the trade exhibitions held annually in the country demonstrate the country's readiness and its dependable capacity to maintain its world relationship in English. In short the evidence seems quite convincing that the use of English in Iran is more akin to English as an international and not as a foreign language(Aliakbari, in progress).

1.2   Basic ELT models

English is now taught under a variety of conditions and for different purposes all over the world. Thus a number of terms have been created to account for the uniqueness of and differences among these programs. To date, ELT (English language teaching) EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language) and ESOL (English for the speakers of other languages) are among the most common ones. However, these terms are often overlapping in definition and neither EFL nor ESL seems adequate to fully describe the present state of English language usage.
Smith (1978) notes that by English as foreign language the advocates mean English taught as a school subject or on an adult level solely for the purpose of giving the student a foreign-language competence which he may use in one of several ways: to read literature; to read technical works; to listen to the radio; to understand dialogue in the movies; and to use the language for communication, possibly with transient English or Americans. Stern (1992) also notes that in a foreign language setting the language is learned for educational purpose and not for immediate application. Likewise, Nunan (1999) expresses that EFL is used in contexts where English is neither widely used for communication nor used as the medium of instruction.

When the term English as a second language is used, the reference is usually to a situation where English becomes the language of instruction in the schools, as in the Philippines, or a lingua franca between speakers of widely diverse languages, as in India. Lightbown and Spada (1993) also agree that ESL refers to the learning of English for use in a setting where English is the principal language used by most people(for example, immigrants learning English in Britain).

Yet a great number of authorities including Alptekin & Alptekin (1984); Smith (1981); Shaw (1981); Jenkins (1998); and Campbell et al. (1982) seem to be no longer satisfied with these terms and the distinctions they draw. They feel it is time to look into the possibility of creating new terms, which would more accurately reflect the present state of English language usage around the world.

Interestingly, a wide range of evidence seems to support these initiations. English is the language most frequently used in international trades, diplomacy, and tourism. As a language other than the mother tongue, it is studied by more people than any other language. Crystal (1992) notes that from among the total of 1.5 billion liberally estimated speakers of English only about one-third of them use it as their mother tongue. Campbell et al. (1982) realize the role and the importance of English in the modern world when they say: " It is increasingly becoming the common language of people who come from different nations, but interact in international contexts" (p. 35).

Smith's (1981) contribution is also insightful, as she claims: "We are witnessing a rapid increase in the use of English as a language of wider communication. It is the language of air-traffic controllers at international airports all over the world. It is the language used most frequently for international mail at international conferences. It is the principal language of international commerce and international aid" (p. 7).

To these functions, one may add that it is the language of industrial revolution and remains the language of science and technology. More importantly, it is the language of computer and internet and is the chief language of tourism all over the world. Shaw (1981) is also supportive when he

asserts that English is used as library language, medium of science, technology and international trade, and as a contact language between nations and parts of nations. He further sees it as vestige of British colonialism and as an arm of American cultural imperialism. However his final impression is that "English is all of these things and more" (ibid. p. 21).

This increase in the use of English has led to the development of a functional concept of English as an international language *EIL*, (Smith,1976; Quirk, 1978; Strevens, 1978; Kachru & Quirk, 1981; Smith, 1981; Campbell et al., 1982; Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984; Stern, 1992; and Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2001). Thus new terms as EIL (English as an international language), EIAL (English as international auxiliary language), EWL (English as world language) and EIIL (English as international or intranational language) have been introduced and have achieved world recognition.

1.2.1   EFL, ESL , EIL Distinction

The EFL/ESL distinction has been an important one in language pedagogy for many years because in each case the context in which teaching takes place is very different, requiring different materials, syllabuses, and pedagogy . The concept of EIL is quite distinct from, though related to, EFL and ESL since they both deal with non-native speakers of one nation communicating with a native speaker of another nation. The emphasis is usually placed on training non-natives to interact with the native speakers. EIL deals with it too, but more comprehensively. Emphasizing the need for communication between two non-natives, it also strengthens the native speakers' need to speak with non-native speakers.

 TESOL's president, in his (1999) message confesses that for many years the ESL/EFL distinction has been widely used and generally accepted, and it has provided a useful conceptual framework. He further notes that such distinctions and categorizations are no more fruitful and thus calls for a new orientation. "I find the distinction increasingly problematic, for a number of reasons . In the first place the contexts in which L2 are taught and used differ considerably, as do EFL settings. Also impinging on the distinction is the growth of English as a world language, (EWL) . In fact, with globalization and the rapid expansion of information technologies has come an explosion in the demand for English Worldwide" ,(Nunan 1999,p. 2).

1.2.2   EIL, EIIL, EIAL, Operational definitions

 Attempting to define the international and intranational functions of English (EIIL), Smith (1978) notes "by international it means one which is used by people of different nations to communicate with one another. By interanational language it means a language other than the mother tongue, which is used by nationals of the same country for communication" (p. 14).

In their definition Campbell et al. (1982) attended to the function of language. Thus their main focus is on the English used in international settings. "By international setting we mean international work situations where people of two or more nationalities meet and use English as a medium of communication. In these situations, English is used by non-native English speakers to communicate with other non-native speakers as well as with native English speakers" (p. 35).

Advocating EIAL, English as an international auxiliary language, Smith (1976) tries to make it clear what she means by an auxiliary language. "My operational definition for auxiliary language is a language, other than the first language, which is used by nationals of a country for internal communication"   (p. 1).

Putting everything together, one may conclude that presently, throughout the world, English is being used most frequently as an international language and sometimes as intranational language rather than a foreign or second language. And the situation in Iran is seen as taking a direction no different from that of the other countries or the global direction.

2   Comparison

Smith (1978) attempts to figure out some distinctive features of EIIL versus ESOL in English language education. She provides a rather comprehensive comparison between EFL, ESL, English as international language and English as interanational language according to seven major headings: scope and depth of language treatment, officialdom, purpose of language learning, student population, language model, performance target, language interactors and cultural emphasis. Accordingly in the sections that follow, we will try to compare the national condition with the given criteria.

2.1   Scope and depth of language treatment .

With respect to this category, EIL does not present a different form of English than the one found in EFL or ESL situations. Indeed there is little difference among the terms in this respect. Only in ESL classrooms General English is taught to a greater depth and has a greater range than that in EFL. ESP is common to and practiced at all three programs. As far as this criterion is concerned both EGP and ESP have received due attention in Iran. While ESP is limited to university level and in-service trainings, EGP is practiced in primary, secondary and university levels.

2.2   Officialdom or public function.

Under this heading, there are clear distinctions among the programs. While in an EFL situation English is found only as a school subject, it is the medium of instruction or the lingua franca of the community in ESL situation. In this aspect, EIL is seen to be the same as ESL "except that in second language situation the English used as the lingua franca is only *sometimes* a local educated variety of English whereas in international situation the English used would *most frequently* be the local educated variety"   (p. 16). The distinction here seems hazy in the Iranian ELT context. English is not the medium of instruction (except for limited classroom instruction in English major courses) and there is no English medium college in the country. Nor is it the nation's lingua franca. And a local educated variety has not yet developed. However, the social practice of English in Iran, though has not reached its EIL destination, is not limited to the school practice. Actually, it has enjoyed an increasing extension, the quality of which was given earlier in section 1.1.

2.3   The purpose of learning

Smith (1978) recognizes the job opportunities and increasing the possibility of higher education as the high and communication in spoken or written form as low priority in EFL situation. In a second language situation, the purpose for learning English is to be able to take part in internal as well as international interactions when English is commonly used. Quite naturally, in ESL communication gains high priority too. As far as learning purpose is concerned, the advocate of the model finds EIL similar to ESL situations. In this relation, we think of a transient period and imagine a move across a continuum. Iranians' purpose for learning English is not limited to that of EFL. There are reasonable instances of communication in both spoken and written modes. However, it is not a general trend and for some students it is no more than a school subject for which no later functional use is thought of or expected.

2.4   Student population.

With respect to this aspect, it seems obvious that students studying English in EFL, ESL and EIL situations are all non-native speakers of English. However, for English as an international language according to Smith's criteria, both native and non-native speakers make up the student population. She illustrates this distinction through two models presented below. Figure 1 specifies the distinction drawn between native speakers speaking English with other native varieties of English in the same country or elsewhere and the use of English with non-natives from all around the world. Figure 2 below represents the traditional expectation that non-natives will become native-like in their performance and that native speakers will make little or no attempt to accommodate non-native English speakers.

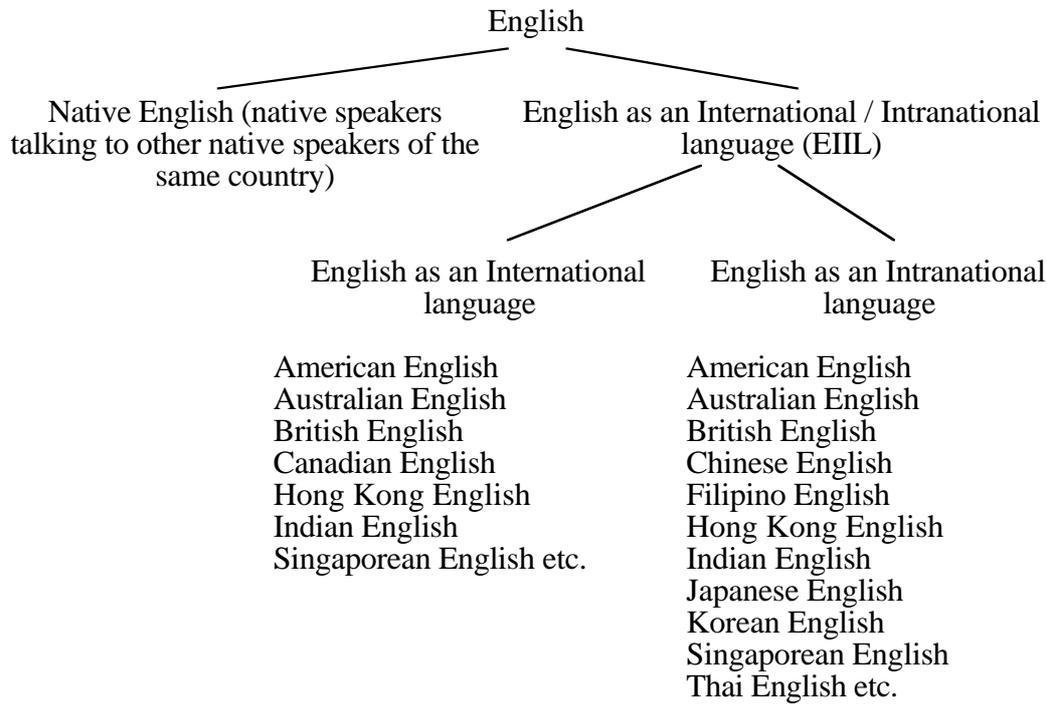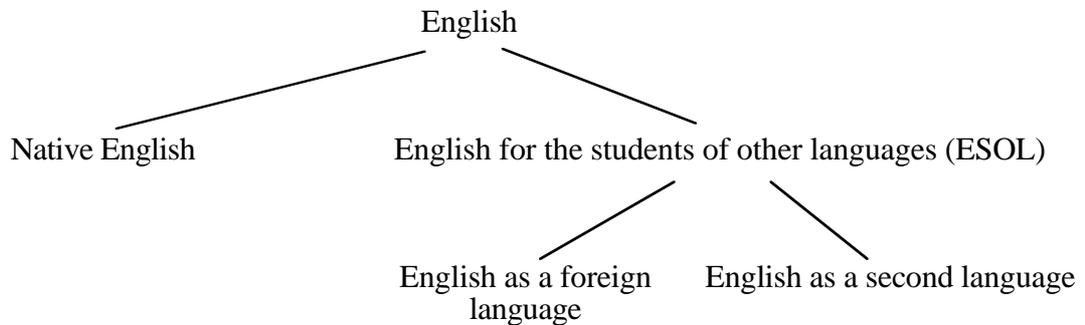Figure 1: *The new distinction in English instruction*

English

Native English (native speakers talking to other native speakers of the same country)

English as an International / Intranational language (EIIL)

English as an International language

English as an Intranational language

American English
Australian English
British English
Canadian English
Hong Kong English
Indian English
Singaporean English etc.

American English
Australian English
British English
Chinese English
Filipino English
Hong Kong English
Indian English
Japanese English
Korean English
Singaporean English
Thai English etc.

Figure 2: *The old distinction in English instruction*

English

Native English

English for the students of other languages (ESOL)

English as a foreign language

English as a second language

*(*Adapted from Smith 1983*)*

Since all language learners in EFL and ESL category are non-natives, the heading student population may not appear decisive in the investigation of ELT model in Iran. At least, it cannot draw a clear distinction between EFL/EIL consideration. However, figure 1. which is fundamental to this work and serves as the major building block and criterion classifies ELT in Iran as EIL.

2. 5   Language model

This heading may also lead to interesting insights. Language model , here, refers to the written and spoken texts used in language teaching. Thus in an EFL situation the model is always the educated native speaker . In ESL situation too, usually a native speaker or an educated speaker of the local English variety can be used. "In an international situation any educated English speaker is acceptable. It may be a native speaker, a local variety speaker or an educated speaker of a regional variety" (Smith 1978, p. 18). Though no local variety of English has so far been developed in Iran, the language model for the Iranian English learners is not necessarily a special native one. Moreover, due to the disagreement or hesitation over following American or British English on the one hand and the development of the national English textbooks designed by the nationals, the language model may not be an educated native speaker. Rather it seems to be any Iranian educated citizen.

2. 6   Performance target

This heading also relates to language model. The performance target in a foreign language situation is to achieve the performance level of the educated native speaker, a goal that has always remained unattained. This is often the case for ESL students. Moreover the educated level of performance in English varieties is also aimed at. "In international situation, the performance level of the educated speaker of the local English variety is almost always the performance target" , Smith (1983, p. 18). Accordingly in an international situation, when using appropriate language for the situation, the performance target is mutual intelligibility not the native like performance. In terms of performance target, Iranian students are not seen as good imitators of any variety. Actually several general deficiencies or pronunciation problems are commonly detected in their oral production of English.

2. 7   Language interactors

Of special interest to the researchers in SLA is the idea of language interactors. In a foreign language situation the language interactors are always the same. The local non-native speaker prepares himself to listen, talk, write, or to read materials written by native speakers. This can be shown in such a schematic fashion (L2 $\leftrightarrow$ L1). In an ESL situation the interactors may be the local non-native speakers with the native speaker (L2 $\leftrightarrow$ L1) or the interaction may be between two local non-native speakers using English interanationally (L2 $\leftrightarrow$ L2). In an international situation the interactors are nationals of different countries. There are local non-native speakers interacting with native speakers (L2 $\leftrightarrow$L1). Local non-native L2 learners may interact with non-local and non-native speakers (Intranational L2$\leftrightarrow$L2). In addition there are native speakers of different countries interacting with one another, (International L1$\leftrightarrow$L1). To Smith (1978) this last category seems more distinctive, for she notes "I think it offers clear distinction to English as an international language, which is not covered by the other concepts" (p. 19). The following figure represents the idea schematically.

Figure 3: *Language interactors in different ELT programs*

EFL	ESL	EIL
L1 ↔ L2	L2 ↔ L1 L2 ↔ L2	L2 ↔ L1 L2 ↔ L2 L1 ↔ L1

Since native speakers are not the sole counterparts for Iranian English learners, the category language interactors for the ELT model in Iran tends to affiliate itself with the EIL model.

2. 8   Cultural emphasis.

This title is also highly insightful for SLA studies. In a foreign language situation, the cultural emphasis is placed on the native speakers' culture. Though the authors of the article admit that there is no unique culture for all native speakers, the cultural elements thought of here, after all, belong to the culture of a group of native speakers. This is usually the case for the ESL situation as well. However, in ESL situations, the culture of the local minority is sometimes introduced in materials produced by their nationals. In English as an international language situation, the cultural emphasis is placed upon the cultures of specified countries in which the students are interested. Thus we do agree with Smith in that , "today few people are willing to sound like native English speakers or to identify with culture as typically required in second language situation" (Smith 1978, p. 19). Therefore, the concept of the cultural emphasis again characterizes ELT in Iran as EIL since the culture of no English speaking community is under the focus.

3   Conclusion / Discussion

The models presented earlier from Smith(1978) provide an appropriate avenue for investigation and evaluation of ELT programs. Having considered the different aspects of ELT in Iran, based on the above model, we can draw the following conclusions:

1. Compared with the 7th category (language interactors), which the advocate of the comparative model calls 'the clearly distinctive', ELT in Iran can be evaluated as an EIL model not an EFL one.

2. Three out of the eight categories , namely; performance target, language interactors, and cultural emphasis, clearly assign ELT in Iran to EIL.

3. Three other headings (public function, learning purpose and language model) characterizes ELT in Iran as going beyond the requirements of the EFL model, but not necessarily attaining the EIL state.

4. The two remaining categories, student population and scope and depth of language treatment are not distinctive criteria and thus do not clearly draw any distinctions between EFL,ESL and EIL models in Iran.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the current ELT in Iran is midway between the EFL and the EIL poles. It has started a move away from EFL, passing along a continuum, heading EIL. In this way, the ELT model in Iran may be characterized as a developmental process that is closer and more akin to EIL. Therefore, it is time the authorities called for a paradigm shift in the ELT context and what goes with it.

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