Problematicizing EAP education in Iran: A critical ethnographic study of educational, political, and sociocultural roots

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ABSTRACT

The undeniable shortcomings of EAP education in Iran, from unformed policies to uninformed choices of materials based on unverified assumptions to flawed methodologies and haphazard practices by unqualified teachers, has hitherto piqued the interest of several EAP specialists and researchers. They have explored the actual classroom practices to figure out where exactly the problem lies, but to no avail. Most of the studies conducted in this respect have ended up with a mere list of problems faced in this context rather than the sources or how to fix them. Thus, this triangulated ethnographic study deals with a multidimensional analysis of the status of Iranian EAP education to explore the nature and sources of the problems that have brought EAP to its current form. Data were compiled from several sources including: class observation, semi-structured interviews, informal talks, focus-group discussions, and the researchers’ retrospection. Participants included 7 subject teachers, 15 ELT instructors, 17 graduate students, and 178 undergraduate students, from eight universities. The data were qualitatively analyzed. Our findings point to the educational, political as well as sociocultural and ethno-religious nature of the higher-level causes of this collective dissatisfaction amongst the stakeholders regarding various dimensions of EAP education.

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1. Introduction

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is a mainstream of English education which pertains to the English needed in an educational context. EAP program evaluation process has the crucial social role of ensuring appropriate materialization of the goals set for the course, adequate planning and implementation of these goals, the program’s effectiveness, and its continuous improvement based on the feedback coming from all the parties involved and their views on what is needed or should be included in the program (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987; Tsou & Chen, 2014). In Iran, like many other countries around the world, EAP education constitutes a significant part of the university curriculum for all academic programs. Students need to know the language to continue their specialist studies or essentially become active members of the professional community to which they belong. Atai (2002) considers EAP instruction in Iran to have gone through three different phases 1) the (golden!) phase of joint implementation by Iranian universities and
foreign academic centers, 2) the post Islamic revolution phase of textbook compilation by SAMT\(^1\) publication through nation-wide collaboration with English language professors, and 3) a recent phase of emphasis on content specificity of EAP textbooks for highly narrow academic disciplines. He characterizes the second and third phases as being inspired by an eagerness to optimize academic performance after Islamic revolution of Iran and takes numerous SAMT publication of subject-specific EAP textbooks as ironclad evidence of this claim. On the contrary, as we see it, the last two phases were the start of countless problems resulting in the decline of EAP. There are, we believe, serious problems concerning almost all the micro and macro factors which are deemed essential in designing EAP programs in Iran. For instance, no systematic needs analysis used to be conducted in preparing SAMT books until the recent attempts to incorporate NA results of students and teachers into the books (Afshar & Movassagh, 2016) regarding which there has been no reports so far as to inform us of the results of such incorporation.

There have been a number of critical evaluative studies in post Islamic Iranian EAP contexts, each pointing to several problematic areas in the university-level EAP education with dire consequences. So, apparently there exists a research agenda, but has not made any significant changes so far. Perhaps because, on the one hand, the results of research on EAP instruction in Iran are either kept somewhere in a university’s library (if conducted for master’s thesis or PhD dissertations) to be used only by other researchers for literature reviews or as a model for doing their own research or else published as research articles to have the same readership rather than policy makers and major stakeholders. On the other hand, most of the studies have merely listed some of the critical problems and issues that confront teachers and learners in Iranian EAP situation including, but not limited to, unsystematic courses in absence of needs analysis, untrained teachers, inappropriate textbooks and insufficient supplementary materials, inefficient facilities, students’ lack of or inhomogeneous general English proficiency levels, duration and timing of the classes, and lack of motivation and incentive on both sides (Atai, 2000; Atai & Fatahi-Majd, 2014; Atai & Tahirian, 2003, 2004; Hayati, 2008; Khany & Tarlani-Aliabadi, 2016; Soodmand Afshar & Movassagh, 2016). In effect, little systematic research has really been conducted on the true nature of the problems that teachers and learners as the main stakeholders might face and the higher level causes or major sources of these problems by which we mean such macro-level forces as language policies formed on the basis of biased ideological orientations towards English language. These forces, which are sometimes officially and sometimes unofficially dictated, are at work and have influenced almost the entire administration and practice of this institution. This has particularly led to a flawed educational system with problematic teacher education and teacher recruitment systems.

This paper reports on a critical ethnography carried out into EAP courses in search of the underlying orientations that condition the real-life post Islamic revolution practice of Iranian EAP. We embarked on a revisiting of the status quo of EAP education in Iran, but not with the aim of just recounting the existing problems. We look specifically at the sources and the nature of the problems causing such defects, failures, and dissatisfaction by touching upon multiple domains or areas that fall within the rubric of EAP. To expose the causes of failure in the system and explore the policies in Iran and the overarching orientations at which the practice of learning and teaching EAP is directed, we need to diagnose the problems affecting various aspects involved which requires the viewpoint of the main parties involved namely, teachers and learners and their accounts of how the system is actually working. We also try to find the possible ways to ameliorate the situation. The analytical foci of the present study are Needs analysis, methodology, course materials, course objectives, ESAP teachers, ESAP students, and also right analysis which are among the major and most visible elements of EAP edifice. The stakeholders including; teachers, learners, administrators, and many academics, generally deal with aspects of these frontline matters and notice higher-order steering forces that direct the broad EAP enterprise; however subtly. Our fondest hope is that the readers find some stimulation of thought and practice in these pages, whether this stems from agreement or disagreement with what is actually claimed.

2. Related literature

A number of critical studies worldwide have so far attempted to explore the quality of EFL teaching in various contexts and the challenges faced by stakeholders mostly due to conflicts in views and perspectives and complex power dynamics involved in educational policy-making and enactment (Ahmad & Sajjad, 2011; Hu, 2005; Johnson & Freeman, 2010; Omoniyi, 2007; Yu, 2001), Escudero, Reyes Cruz, and Loyo (2012), for instance, conducted a critical ethnography on the implementation of a public elementary school EFL program in a Mexican state in order to identify instances of power struggle and conflicts in ideology within different government agents and how they affect language policy and their implementation in educational settings. They reported that the decisions of school district supervisors and principals regarding English teaching entry and scheduling create local policies that re-direct macro-policy in ways unintended by state government agents in addition to power struggles within the level of macro-policy. According to Norton and Syed (2003), the challenges and constraints EFL teachers at any level face have their roots in the contextual framework of language education. Lack of motivation, literacy,
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