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Implicit ELT Policies Embedded in the Professional Practices of Selected Private Language Publishers and Institutes in Iran

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Abstract

English language teaching policies have recently become a growing concern in several countries, including Iran. Whereas several studies have noted the role of explicit policy documents and texts, fewer studies have explored the role of implicit ELT policies. This research investigates the implicit ELT policies embedded in professional practices of selected private English language publishers and institutes in Iran. The study's qualitative data comprised documents and archival information taken from sources such as official websites, social networking accounts, catalogs, and brochures of eight prominent publishers and eight leading English language institutes. Thematic analysis of the data revealed three aspects of the publishers' activities (Nominal features, Supplementary materials, and Practical features) and four main aspects of professional practices of the language institutes (Overcategorizations, Tests, Teachers, and Coursebooks). The findings suggest that the practices of the leading publishers and institutes might act as implicit policies which would most likely provide directions for other publishers and institutes in the country to pursue and adopt. Thereby, it is suggested that instead of following pre-set accepted agendas, the leading publishers and institutes work creatively to analyze local requirements and respond to the needs of Iranian learners to enhance the status of ELT in the country.

Keywords

ELT; implicit policies; professional practices; language institutes; publishers.

1. Introduction

According to Johnson (2013), language education policies are mechanisms that influence "the structure, function, use, or acquisition of a language" (9). As Schiffman (1996) mentioned, discussions related to English Language Teaching (ELT) policies, emphasize the difference "between the policy as stated (the official, *de jure* or overt policy) and the policy

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as it actually works at the practical level (the covert, *de facto* or grass-roots policy)" (2). Whereby the former is explicitly codified by official stakeholders in national top-down approaches, the latter remains implicit and should be discovered through bottom-up policy processes by the local activities (Ricento and Hornberger 1996; Tollefson 2002). Notably, scholars have emphasized the agency of local individuals who challenge unequal official language policy and create change through grassroots movements (Liddicoat and Baldauf 2008). In such cases, policies must be inferred from actual language practices through the analysis of textbooks, teaching techniques, and testing systems.

Considering the Iranian context, because of the shortcomings in state formal policies and inadequacies in the school formal education system, there has been an increasing growth of private English language institutes all over the country to rectify the failings of the public sector and fulfill the needs of Iranian learners (Riazi, 2005; Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Though the existing literature on ELT policies has highlighted the significance of such bottom-up policies and grassroots movements (Hoenberger 2012; Hornberger and Johnson 2007), it seems that this issue has not received due attention in the Iranian context except for a few studies like Mirhosseini, et al. (2021), and Rassouli and Ossam (2019). One neglected area is the analysis of implicit policies embedded in the professional practices of the leading English language publishers as the main feeding advocates of the institutes. Another intriguing field is the investigation of the prominent institutes' bottom-up language teaching schemes operationalized in their professional practices.

To address part of the gaps in the existing literature, this inquiry was initiated to document various aspects of the professional practices of several renowned language institutes and publishing agencies in the country through an ethnographic study of different data sources including their official websites, social networking accounts, brochures, and catalogs. To this end, eight prominent English language institutes and eight leading English language publishers were chosen and institutional ethnography was used to acquire an extensive knowledge of the research contexts (McCarty 2015). It was tried to develop grounded theories about English language education as it was practiced in the local contexts of this study. As Canagarajah (2006) favored, our purpose was to employ a primary, well-contextualized, hypotheses-generating, emic positioning to the contexts. It was aimed to explore the less attended implicit ELT policies which are never mentioned in de jure explicit documents, but have grown vigorously in the Iranian community affecting teachers, learners, and specialists in the field. The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the implicit ELT policies embedded in the professional practices of English language publishers?

2. What are the implicit policies embedded in the professional practices of English language institutes?

Regarding the publishers' and institutes' predominant function and influence, exploration of their professional practices seems to be significant for at least two reasons: first, because a considerable part of the ELT community in the country is dissatisfied with

the public schooling system of English, several community members are affected by the activities of these leading agents that can be seen as the nourishing agents of the ELT industry throughout the country; and second, the professional strategies followed in these eminent contexts might be taken up as roadmaps for other less-notable or recently-established language teaching prompts. The results of this research can point to the minutes of implicit ELT policies embedded in the professional practices of more prolific English language publishing agencies and institutes that have attracted an increasing number of audiences and are powerful enough to impact other contexts with similar agendas in the country.

2. Literature Review

In this study, the purpose was to uncover the implicit ELT policies embedded in the professional practices of English language publishers and institutes in Iran. These policies are not overtly stated, and they should be inferred from these two agents' actual activities and decisions. Before doing the analysis, it is necessary to describe and synthesize the major studies related to the topic. Thus, it is attempted to provide an informative review of previous research to the present time.

2.1. Language Policy

A language policy is a collection of notions, laws, guidelines, protocols, and practices with the purpose of gaining some planned language change (Kaplan and Baldauf 1997). They may be manifested in formal (overt) documents and discourses or informal statements of purpose or may remain unstated (covert) and implicit (Baldauf 2006). According to Johnson (2013), implicit language policies are unofficial and de facto, and occur without or despite official policy texts; they are concerned with language tenets and practices and regulate language use and communication within communities and schools. These de facto policies are produced by local practices that may(not) represent explicit or de jure policies.

Within the landscape of language policy studies, language education policy research (Martin-Jones and Cabral 2018; Naziha Ali and Coombe 2022) addresses educational contexts as significant sites for the creation, explanation, and appropriation of language policies (Al-Habsi, et al. 2022; Johnson 2013; Shohamy 2006). The people involved are predominantly policymakers and officials at different levels, like curriculum developers, educational authorities, and linguists. Some of the issues involved in language education include policies that are related to the personnel, curriculum, methods and materials, resourcing, community, evaluation, and teachers (Kaplan and Baldauf 2003). Notably, a significant related change that has become more noticeable is what Baldauf, et al. (2008) have called non-mainstream language teaching, or other language teachings outside the school, that is related to communal, promotional, and financial goals. The possible impacts of these non-mainstream targets on formal educational organizations should not be discounted, as they can have unanticipated influences on the policy processes (Spolsky and Hult 2008).

2.2. ELT Policy

ELT policy as a sub-part of (foreign) language education policies, has been studied in different countries in recent years (e.g., Al-Issa and Mirhosseini 2020; Ashadi 2022; Chang-Bacon 2022, Chowdhury and Kabir 2014; Mirhosseini and Babu 2020; Nero 2014). The subject is viewed to be interrelated with issues in the wider context of society (Ahn and Smagulova 2022; De Costa, et al. 2022). Phillipson (1992), for instance, related the global domination of English to the systematic discrepancies between the sovereign Western (center) states and less-developed countries in the periphery; thus, even in the proclaimed post-colonial hybrid world, we are disposed to see a straightforward procession of information from the West to language classrooms in less developed regions through materials, textbooks, theories, pedagogies and teaching practices whereby values and desires for native proficiency goals are advanced greatly (Canagarajah 2002; Philipson 2007, 2012). This could make several ELT members in the periphery undervalue their initiatives that might develop local abilities and linguistic realities (Philipson 1992).

For instance, standard North American or British varieties of English are legitimized, methods like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) are exported, and high-stakes tests like the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) are advanced as if their validity could spatiotemporally go beyond limits. Also, related materials and courses that are representatives of neoliberal ideologies (Gray and Block 2014) have brought high profits to publishers that disseminate them to people and institutions (Graddol 2006). As Gray (2010) mentioned, "when it comes to the production of ELT coursebooks, commercial considerations, rather than ethical or educational concerns, are seen to be paramount" (175). Further, coursebooks like the *Interchange* series, lag behind theoretical developments in the field of Applied linguistics and the claimed content-based changes have been superficial containing fallacies like real-life-ness and globality while underrepresenting women, colored skin, the disabled, and the elderly (Garshasbi and Parsaiyan 2021; Roohani and Heidari 2012).

Moreover, according to Bascia, et al. (2014), the development of standards and homogeneous approaches for English language curriculum design means that "curriculum policies increasingly prescribe not only what is taught but also how it is taught" (231). One instance is the multifarious language proficiency rating scales constructed by the US state organizations, like the pervasive use of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) which has developed set stages of language learning as if language acquisition occurred along a prescribed and controlled linear sequence (Shohamy and Menken 2015). The CEFR is educationally strong as it has turned into a conventional spectrum of how and what learners acquire – a disputable issue that is criticized by Fulcher (2004) and Shohamy (2006), among others.

Though the Western ideologies have prevailed for a long time, there have been movements that reassume local knowledge in language education (e.g., Canagarajah 2005) and try to pluralize the tenets by validating local knowledge, identities, and pedagogies This approach is related to a postcolonial agenda of post-method pedagogies (Kumaravadivelu 2003) which is a bottom-up educational process initiated by local language teaching professionals. As Richards (2017) mentioned, the growing demand for English language proficiency has made educational authorities move towards new ELT policies, develop standards, and new approaches to curriculum design, teaching, evaluation, and teacher education. Whereas these changes might not be exhaustive, they can make ELT vibrant and dynamic (Nunan 2003; Renandya and Widodo 2016). Different issues related to both globalized and localized English language teaching have been researched in countries such as China (Rai and Deng 2016), Japan (Shiroza 2016), Indonesia (Widodo 2016), and Iran (Salimi and Safarzadeh 2019).

2. 3. ELT Policy in Iran

In Iran, ELT issues have been interrelated with the professional practices of an increasing number of English language institutes and their feeding advocates, i.e., English language publishers. These two companions now play a crucial role in developing the English language in Iran and feed the ELT industry on large scale (Borjian 2013; Zarrabi and Brown 2015).

One reason for their dramatic growth can be attributed to the current official policy documents that include only short segments about English language education and avoid vividly articulated policies which might result from the government's indecisiveness towards English (Mirhosseini and Khodakarami 2016). For instance, The Fundamental Transformation of Education, authorized by the Ministry of education in 2010, includes only one sentence related to foreign language education. According to this document "foreign language study [will be offered] as an optional (semi-prescriptive) course in the curriculum on the condition that its teaching stabilizes and strengthens the Islamic and Iranian identity" (20). Thus, several implicit ELT patterns have been shaped in the Iranian ELT community, most of which are presented by private English language publishers and institutes (Atai and Mazlum 2013; Hayati and Mashhadi 2010). It can be said that whereas students pass several English language courses both at school and university, confident communication is almost unlikely for most of them, and that is why they aspire to achieve their English language learning goals by attending private English language institutes and using imported English language textbooks and materials (Aghagolzadeh and Davari 2017).

3. Method

As it was aimed to document the professional practices of eight leading language institutes and publishers in the country, institutional ethnography was selected to obtain a thorough knowledge of the research context through exploring the institutes and publishers' documents and archival data (McCarty, 2015). The researchers were concerned with studying and perceiving how ELT directions were created, appropriated, and interpreted by the selected publishers and institutes. They were especially interested in uncovering the

indistinct voices, covert desires, invisible examples, interconnected ideologies, and unintended results that were emergent in the study contexts (Hornberger & Johnson, 2011).

3.1. Contexts

There are two main research contexts in this study, i.e., private English language publishers and private English language institutes that are the main agents of creating de facto grassroots movements in the Iranian ELT community. The publishers import, print, and publish English language education books in large numbers which are from foreign/western publications such as Oxford, Cambridge, and Pearson Longman. They suggest different types of books like coursebooks, graded readers, dictionaries, and books for international standardized exams. Iranian ELT publishers work under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). In this study, most of the publishers have more than a decade of experience in introducing and promoting English language books. They have one central branch in Tehran as well as other branches, stores, and several distribution agencies in other cities of Iran.

The institutes, which are nourished by the publishers, have their official activity permits from state ministries such as the Ministry of Education (MOE) and/or the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). The institutes have had a mushroom-like growth all over the country which has brought them stability over the years and increased their longevity. Thus, it is not surprising to see that some of the institutes of this study have lasted more than half a century and after a few decades they will become centennials.

Overall, eight language publishers and eight language institutes were chosen for addressing the purpose of this study. The following information about each setting is extracted from its official Persian website, translated into English, and then paraphrased. However, for the sake of anonymity and confidentiality, the websites' addresses are not mentioned and a number is used as the title of each setting. A summary of the history and branches of the selected language publishers and institutes is provided in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Publisher One has had extensive cooperation with several state and private organizations in the country and also with institutions from neighboring countries.

Publisher Two has a wide network of distributing books across the country even in the farthest areas. It has not only supplied the necessary material for the main institutes but has established its big bookstores in Tehran and other cities of Iran.

Publisher Three has attempted to publish English language education books having the permit of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Publisher Four offers services including the publication of the newest English language books and books for the institutes and has a large variation in its products including 8000 different titles in the institutional and academic field of English and other languages.

Publisher Five has one of the biggest and most complete online stores in the country. By facilitating sales conditions such as periodical discounts, the store has tried to save time and reduce expenses.

Publisher Six has always wholeheartedly wished to provide the best quality, the lowest price, and exceptional discounts in producing and serving the academic and scientific community of the country.

Publisher Seven deals with activity areas such as English language education books at all levels; reading, writing, listening, and speaking books; TOEFL, IELTS, GRE, and other international examination books, dictionaries, and storybooks at different levels, audio and movie educational CDs, and flashcards.

Publisher Eight mentions that for different books and software provided on its online store, one can search, compare and ask for guidance about the products and get them at the best price.

Table 2. Summary of the publishers' history and branches

Publisher	Foundation year	# Branches in Iran	Online store
One	1990	3	Yes
Two	1991	3	Yes
Three	1999	1	No
Four	1980	4	Yes
Five	2013	1	Yes
Six	2007	1	Yes
Seven	2009	1	Yes
Eight	2017	1	Yes
Total	#	15	#

Institute One claims that it is the international teacher education agency of Oxford University and Cambridge University. The institute uses the products of a publisher which is the sole official distributor of Oxford educational products in Iran.

Institute Two aims to turn into the most qualified English language education institute in the country in the short run. Its long-term vision, for all Iranians all over the country, is to become able to speak in English and at least answer their daily needs in foreign travels.

Institute Three suggests services such as free student support, free Q&A sessions, home tutors, and social networks for students' connections. The institute also cooperates with schools, companies, and institutions.

Institute Four, as one of the first institutes to develop the English language in the country, suggests several courses for all age groups. The late manager of this institute was called the father of English language education in Iran.

Institute Five offers services such as online smart tests, educational online videos, educational articles, file sharing and download, students' portals, and educational mobile applications.

Institute Six, starting its work by publishing language books, has several activities like distributing CDs, educational films, and supplementary materials as well as establishing language laboratories for educational and academic centers.

Institute Seven has had several achievements such as holding international examinations of Cambridge, receiving the best Award of English Language Education and Respect for Customers at the National Festival of English Language Education, having more than 20 years of experience in teacher education, and receiving the Praise Certificate as the best entrepreneur in The Seminar of Best Entrepreneurs.

Institute Eight is honored to declare that today it is one of the most distinguished centers among state and private organizations in the country.

Table 1. Summary of the language institutes' history and branches

Institute	Foundation year	# Branches in Tehran	# Branches in Iran
One	1999	34	131
Two	-	10	11
Three	2003	19	22
Four	1950	28	41
Five	1988	53	100
Six	1990	4	23
Seven	1970	5	52
Eight	1969	14	35
# Total		167	415

3.2. Data Collection

The data collection procedure included several stages. First of all, one of the researchers went to the headquarters of each institute and publisher, collected related brochures, catalogs and fliers, and took photos of the posters on the walls with the permission of the staff. Second, all social networking accounts of the selected institutes and publishers, like Instagram, Telegram, Facebook, Linked In, and YouTube were checked to find out details on their professional practices which led to selecting a representative sample of the posts with similar themes. This representative sample was an unbiased reflection of

the related data. Third, selected posts, as well as all textual and pictorial information on official websites, were copied and pasted into word documents summing up to 1028 pages and 276789 words, and 1562 posts on social networks, in general. The data were analyzed to address the purpose of the study and generate credible results. In Tables 3 and 4, detailed descriptions of these sources are provided for the publishers and institutes, respectively.

Table 3. Summary of the publishers' collected data

Publishers	Website	Instagram	Telegram
One	62 pp. (25.064 words)	12 posts	15 posts
Two	19 pp. (7.870 words)	4 posts	4 posts
Three	21 pp. (8662 words)	-	-
Four	15 pp. (6312 words)	27 posts	-
Five	14 pp. (5515 words)	6 posts	-
Six	35 pp. (14064 words)	5 posts	7 posts
Seven	8 pp. (2907 words)	7 posts	7 posts
Eight	5 pp. (1919 words)	-	-
Overall	179 pp. (144626 words)	61 posts	33 posts

Table 4. Summary of the institutes' collected data

Institute	Website	Instagram	Telegram	Others
One	432 pp. (73700 words)	21 posts	17 posts	39 real photos 18 Facebook posts 20 LinkedIn posts 17 Pinterest posts 13 fliers/brochures 3 books 54 minutes video
Two	79 pp. (16048 words)	15 posts	15 posts	19 real photos
Three	101 pp. (24865 pages)	33 posts	30 posts	18 real photos 24 Facebook posts 3 Pinterest posts 5 fliers/brochures
Four	29 pp. (3994 words)	40 posts	15 posts	42 minutes video
Five	41 pp. (14594 words)	125 posts	39 posts	-
Six	33 pp. (6572 words)	86 posts	30 posts	2 fliers
Seven	21 pp. (3827 words)	60 posts	20 posts	-
Eight	113 pp. (24563 words)	117 posts	12 posts	-
Overall	849 pp. (132163 words)	497 posts	178 posts	-

3.3. Data Analysis

We adopted the grounded theory approach to analyze our corpus. Following Charmaz (2006), during *initial coding*, the early data taken from archival data were mined for analytic ideas to pursue in further data collection. Sticking closely to the data, the information in text documents was read carefully and the posts on social networks were checked several times to remain open to all possible theoretical directions. The provisional comparative initial codes that were grounded in the data, were prompted to see areas in which we lacked the needed data. Later, *focused coding* was used to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories in large groups of data. It was tried to make the codes more directed, selective, and conceptual to synthesize and explain larger data segments and categorize them incisively and completely. Next, through *axial coding*, categories were related to subcategories, and the features and dimensions of a category were specified to sort, organize and synthesize large amounts of data.

3.4. Trustworthiness

As far as trustworthiness was concerned, referring to Tracy's (2010) eight "big tent" approach for impressive qualitative research, it was tried to include the criteria including "worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethicality, [and] meaningful coherence" (270). The study had a "worthy topic" because the topic was relevant, timely, significant, and interesting. It had "rich rigor" because of using a reliable theoretical construct. The research had "sincerity" because it was transparent about the method and challenges. The research was "credible" as it was marked by thick description and triangulation. The study had "resonance" because it could move the readers through naturalistic generalizations and conveyable findings. The work had a "significant contribution" because of its theoreticality and practicality. It was "ethical" because honesty and transparency were taken into account. The analysis had "meaningful coherence" as it used appropriate methods and procedures and interconnected literature, research questions, findings, and interpretations in a meaningful way.

4. Results

This part reports on the outcomes of the data-gathering phase. The collected data and information are analyzed in detail as related to the overarching research questions posed in the thesis:

What are implicit ELT policies embedded in the professional practices of English language publishers? And, what are the implicit ELT policies embedded in the professional practices of English language institutes?

Inherent in these questions is the assumption that policies created by private English language publishers and institutes are different from macro policies advocated by state officials and governmental authorities. The term implicit policy refers to the idea that the publishers' and institutes' decisions are not overtly expressed in purpose statements or official documents but remain covert and unvoiced. These can be inferred from actual professional practices and decisions made by the institutes' authorities to develop ELT status in the country. The data were coded and analyzed to investigate the research questions by adopting an ethnographic approach. As the approach was qualitative in nature, themes and sub-themes were extracted to express the ELT directions of the publishers and institutes.

4.1. The Publishers

The analysis of various sources of data indicated that the books promoted by the publishers had certain nominal features and included certain supplementary materials. Also, the publishers emphasize practical features that identified characteristics belonging to certain types of books. In the following, explanations, descriptions, and exemplifications are presented for each of these categories.

4.1.1. Nominal features

The ELT publishers of this study primarily emphasized the nominal features of various books. The main nominal features included the CEF levels and authors. These nominal features, at the surface level, identified why a book was considered good enough to be promoted by the publishers.

> *Oxford Discover series is ideal for students who have finished Jolly Phonics books. The six levels of Oxford Discover books [include]: Discover 1: Beginner to Elementary, Discover 2: A1, Discover 3: A2, Discover 4: B1, Discover 5: B1, Discover 6: B2. (Publisher Seven, Website)*

> *American English File third edition is written by Clive Oxenden, Christina Latham-Koenig, Paul Seligson, and Jerry Lambert. These four persons have been able to put together the newest technology and best language education method to offer the newest and most successful language education books to language learners all over the earth. (Publisher Eight, Website)*

In particular, accordance with the CEF table and level-based organizations could bring order and arrangement to the acquisition process in homogenous standardized ways; however, as language is considered a unified whole, one may wonder how such divisions were made and how it was decided that some parts of the English language were easier and came first, whereas the others were more difficult and came later. Also, it could be asked how a person living in places far from our country could be aware of the real needs and peculiarities of the educational context in Iran.

4.1.2. Supplementary materials

The supplementary materials for different types of books suggested activities in similar pre-identified ways. The materials included items such as a student's book, workbook, teacher's guide, assessment package, picture cards, CDs and DVDs, software, online support websites, posters, etc. For instance, Publisher Four, on its Instagram, mentioned that *Four Corners'* components included "a print Workbook, Teacher's Edition with Complete Assessment Program, Presentation plus classroom presentation software, audio and video files." These materials, though very useful, could be unfavorable as they would probably limit the space for teachers' and students' creativity and initiative activities. The abundance of helping resources might suggest the idea that almost everything was provided for the complete acquisition of the English language; but for the advancement of the acquisitional process, several other locally appropriated materials would possibly be needed to provide more familiar contexts for Iranian learners and teachers.

4.1.3. Practical features

Analysis of the data showed certain general practical features about the publications of selected publishers. These included the identification of the four main language skills and subskills and accordance with international standardized exams. In different coursebooks of kids, teens, and adults, it was noted that the books emphasized the four language skills and subskills. For example, Publisher Four, on its website, said that the *Magic Time* series "… has the purpose of developing main skills of speaking, listening, and primary writing." As another instance, Publisher Four, on its website, mentioned that in Kid's Box, there was a "phonics section to help students with better pronunciation and spelling." This kind of segmentation based on pre-identified skills and subskills would divide language as a whole into the parts and sub-parts to facilitate and organize the learning process. However, one may wonder if such homogenous pre-set division and drawing sharp lines to separate parts of the language was efficient enough to be entitled as all language skills or main language skills and subskills. Perhaps, other skills such as cognitive skills and mental abilities could be included as the main language skills. Also, subparts such as idioms, proverbs, slang, colloquial language, poems, and appropriate literary texts could receive more attention in the coursebooks.

Besides, for different coursebooks, subskill-based and exam-based books, conformance with international standardized exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge exams was notably emphasized. For instance, Publisher One, on its website, mentioned that *Kid's Box* books were "ideal for teaching general English and completely cover Cambridge's standard exams and programs for kids and teens." Also, Publisher Five, on its website, said that the book, Oxford Word Skills, "is designed for the need of students who would like to take part in international exams like IELTS, TOEFL, First Certificate in English (FCE), Certificate in Advanced English (CAE), Certificate of

Proficiency in English (CPE), Preliminary English Test (PET), and Key English Test (KET)." Whereas such considerations could prepare students for better performance in international examinations, they could have some unfavorable results as the students would mostly be familiarized with questions and exam structures that were identified by these international exams. Also, at times, students would attribute exam-based features to the English language learning process from a young age.

4.2. The Institutes

Analysis of the language institutes' documents and archival data indicated that their professional ELT practices included areas related to Overcategorizations, Tests, Teachers, and Coursebooks. Each of these main themes was further divided into several sub-themes which are described, exemplified, and explained below.

4.2.1. Overcategorizations

Overcategorization, as one of the major themes, refers to the classifications and sub-classifications created to organize and facilitate the learning process. More simply, it focuses on the division of classes based on the type of courses; namely, general courses, particular courses, and age considerations. Our analysis revealed that though, mainly, general courses intend to answer students' general needs to build successful communications through the use of the four main language skills, overemphasis was put on developing speaking skills and conversational abilities. Even though conversational abilities could greatly help learners in building successful communications, the significance of other skills seemed to be overshadowed as they received less attention. This orientation was homogeneously used in almost all of the General courses we studied. The following excerpt indicates this observation:

> General English courses are planned with the priority of learning conversations. In these courses, all four language skills are practiced; however, as most of the students do not have the opportunity to practice speaking outside the classrooms, the major part of general courses is devoted to practicing conversations. (Institute One, Website)

Secondly, in categorizations of English language courses, particular courses were meant to meet learners' special needs and aimed at achieving a certain English language purpose. They included classes of IELTS and TOEFL, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), as well as Teacher Training Course (TTC) and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). We found that both IELTS and TOEFL were highlighted as the most credible international exams to evaluate the proficiency level of candidates who wished to live, study or work in English-speaking countries like England, the US, Canada, or Australia. The following extract is an instance of the primacy of IELTS:

> IELTS is a criterion for measuring the English language knowledge of those who wish to study or work in English-speaking countries or immigrate to these countries. … This exam follows the highest and most credible international standards for measuring candidates' English language level and evaluates the four skills … (Institute Four, Website)

Though the above finding might reveal that both IELTS and TOEFL could help provide possible appropriate ways of English language learning and evaluation, it can be said that they could cause the narrowness of the curriculum and bring teaching-to-the-test impacts in the classroom. This might have marginalizing influences on other possible ways of effective English language instruction and evaluation as well as discouraging creativity for educators and learners, at least to some extent.

In addition, the institutes offered ESP courses to interested learners. As stated on the website of Institute Five, ESP courses include "specialized courses for jobs and different specialties through which special vocabulary and required skills are taken into consideration." These might include "business, tourism, international negotiations, and correspondence." It can be said that ESP courses were powerful enough to motivate learners to acquire and use English in ways that were identified by certain pre-set ESP agendas and coursebooks, but the question was how it was truly possible to make a detailed analysis of the various needs of experts in the Iranian ESP context.

The other type of particular course was the TTC which aimed to train those who were eager to become English language teachers with the "necessary skills to teach different English language courses" (Institute Three, Website). Also, TESOL courses were included as the most credible teacher training courses at the international level. According to the website of Institute Four, "the TESOL holder can teach in all institutes around the world at all levels. This certificate shows the acquisition of global standard skills for teaching." Though we agree that both TTC and TESOL courses were advantageous in equipping several teachers with necessary teaching skills in similar pre-identified ways, the (in)sufficiency of these courses to meet the requirements of the Iranian context was a point that was rarely addressed in the cases of this study.

To practically implement General and Particular English language courses, one primary factor was making categorizations for a large number of learners based on their age group. Mostly, learners were divided into four main age groups; i.e., preschoolers (aged below 7), kids (aged 7-12), teens (aged 12- 16), and adults (aged 17 and above) whereby each group received its particular kind of instruction. Among all age-groupings, children received special attention; and in several cases, it was emphasized that young-age English language learning was the most efficient. For instance, it was said that "many linguists and experts believe that the lower the age of learning a second language is, the

more development will be achieved in its learning and use." (Institute Four, Website). It can be said that whereas age-based divisions could appropriate the educational materials to some extent, questionably, one might wonder if it was true to draw such bold lines among different ages and identify ELT processes based on such age divisions as this partitioning could lead to artificial classroom procedures that were different from the real world. Moreover, whereas young-age learning might prove efficient for some of the learners, one would ask if the early years of life were the best time for all children to learn the English language.

4.2.2. Tests

Examination of the data indicated that the institutes use different types of tests for evaluation purposes. The most frequent ones were achievement tests held in the form of midterm and final exams and were based on the content of coursebooks. These tests could have barring impacts as the students were tested based on homogenous criteria and the passing score was set identically for all of them. The one whose test performance was different from others or got a score on the test that was lower than what was expected very probably would have been left behind and might need to repeat the same term to get the identified passing score.

Moreover, at times, Cambridge University's mock exams were held so that students' proficiency levels would be homogenously identified based on certain pre-set criteria claimed to be international standards. Institute Four, on its website, stated that "at the end of the course, mock [Cambridge] tests would be held based on international standards for the better preparation of the candidates." Though the tests might be useful in making some measurement and evaluation judgments, possibly they could lead to some teaching-to-the-test impacts whereby the teacher would have to cover certain content areas for students' success in the exam. Additionally, these tests might create test-dependency in young test-takers from an early age and impose certain notions of English language correctness on youngsters.

Also, IELTS mock tests were held so that the students, by gaining experiences similar to the main exam, could identify their strengths and weaknesses and estimate their scores on a real test in advance. According to the website of Institute One, the IELTS mock test was "the simulated example of IELTS exam which provides the possibility for careful measurement of scores in a standard exam without the complexities of the official exam's registrations and with lower fees." It can be said that whereas these tests could prepare students for some of the aspects of English language proficiency, they may cause the syllabus to become narrow and reductive because only homogeneous pre-identified IELTS-based tasks would form educational behaviors.

4.2.3. Teachers

Data investigation indicated that the institutes of this study considered having teachers who were among the best and most experienced ones. Some of the institutes emphasized the educational proficiency of their teachers by highlighting their academic graduation degrees or having international ELT certificates. An example:

> The teachers … all have graduation certificates from credible universities in Iran and the world, and additionally, have TESOL certificates, TTC certificates from [this institute], Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA), and IELTS. (Institute One, Website)

Whether or not all holders of such ELT certificates were legible enough to teach, remains an open question. Even if some of these teachers were truly efficient, their teaching practices would be based on pre-set rules identified by popular ELT agendas like TESOL, CELTA, or Diploma in Teaching English to Speakers of Other languages (DELTA) which would bring homogenous patterns in the ELT context, create standardized criteria and marginalize other possible local pedagogies.

4.2.4. Coursebooks

It was found that in some of the cases, the institutes had selected the same coursebook series for a certain age level, though variations existed. For instance, in kids' courses, Institutes One and Five used the *Super Minds* series, and Institutes Two, Three, Four, and Six used the *Family and Friends* series. For IELTS courses, the Mindset and Complete IELTS series were used by institutes One, Two, Five, and Six. On the whole, it seemed that the well-known institutes tended to introduce and utilize similar coursebooks leading to the popularity and promotion of certain books. This could suggest the idea that special Western-produced textbooks written by authors residing in places far from our country were reliable enough to be utilized extensively in different English language education settings. Notably, hardly ever there were any references to local books and/or authors catered to the special needs of Iranian learners.

5. Discussion

As the data revealed, the publishers introduced and promoted certain books by accentuating characteristics such as nominal features, supplementary materials, and practical traits; and the institutes, as the main consumers of the books and standardized exams, created curricular directions including overcategorizations, tests, teachers, and ubiquitous coursebooks. What is noteworthy is the fact that implicit ELT policies that were embedded in the publishers' and institutes' professional practices and represented in their educational orientations were mainly shaped by global (course)books and international standardized exams that lay at the heart of the curriculum. The books were believed to represent pedagogical correctness since they were unquestionably trusted,

promoted, and used without inquiring about their validity or appropriacy for the Iranian context. The books, greatly relying on standard inner-circle varieties of English, remained largely unexamined since there was no need to decide on the course goals, the materials, and how learning took place (Lindqvist and Soler 2022; Macalister 2016). Whereas this could be a facilitating factor in English language education, it requires more attention as the books include beliefs taken from illustrious but insufficient research in the anglophone center that prompt educational decisions, materials, and methods in the periphery, even if the decisions are incompatible with the local context and certain demands of the learners (Prodromou and Mishen 2008). Similarly, international standardized tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge exams could shape teachers' practices, students' tasks, and some of the overall pedagogical processes in their ways; i.e., the tests could drive what should be learned and how should be learned and that's why they would influence the curriculum and narrow the syllabus (Cheng 2008; Shohamy and Menken 2015).

Based on the data, one consequence of using global coursebooks and international exams was the development of standardization, homogeneity, and notions of correctness; i.e., several educators, teachers, and learners would similarly follow the prescriptive norms created by the pre-identified pedagogical structures. In this study, homogenous and standardized practices were manifested in different areas including classes of IELTS, TOEFL, ESP, Cambridge, and IELTS mock exams, teachers' practices based on TESOL, Celta, and Delta, age-consideration, as well as the acquisition of similar skills and subskills. Whereas the positive aspects of homogeneity and standardization such as the appropriation of the educational content cannot be ignored, the meaning and objectivity of standardization norms are under question, and homogeneity is said to be a construct that is detached from language realities (Davies 2008; Shohamy 2007).

Moreoveover, what seemed to be missing was the lack of creative ELT agendas developed by local Iranian authors and educators. In almost none of the discovered themes and subthemes, there were any traces of local ELT attempts to meet the special needs of Iranian learners. It could be said that the one-size-fits-all version remained a healthy attitude by which the local was excluded (Gray 2012). What deems necessary, is the use of activities and materials with both local and global conditions that can foster more awareness and motivation within learners than materials that only symbolize extrinsic global context because the latter is beyond learners' perception (Rai and Deng 2016; Sah 2022; Yang and Jang 2022). It can be said that if the leading institutes worked creatively based on the true analysis of local needs to answer the requirements of the Iranian ELT community, then we would possibly see new directions with more appropriacy for the complexities and intricacies of the Iranian context. These creative directions could include areas such as designing new coursebooks and tests, creating

procedures for teachers' practices and students' tasks, and suggesting ideas for activities on social networks so that a larger audience could find access to new resources. As Gray (2012) noted, there is a need for alternative approaches which include the creation of materials that are in accord with cultural and linguistic pedagogies. This trend actually would not exclude the target culture elements, but it would introduce a normalized distribution of the global and local components in the employed materials (Marwa, et al. 2021; Norton and Buchanan 2022; Yaman 2016). What is noteworthy, is the role of local authors, academicians, professors, and teachers who may take the roles of needs analyst, textbook writer, materials developer, exam designer, etc. and use their indigenous wisdom to localize ELT and create intellectual spaces for alternative epistemologies (Canh 2022).

6. Conclusion and Implications

Overall, as the research findings reveal, the professional practices of the leading institutes and publishers have provided several curricular directions, or more broadly policies, which comprise the concerns of English language education in Iran. In other words, they have conveyed several messages to other less prominent institutes and publishers that may consider the directions as ELT policies. The practices can also be considered as means of managing and imposing specific knowledge on the educational system which seems to work based on an unwritten contract that is taken for granted by several members of the ELT community. As several audiences have welcomed the institutes and publishers in different cities, it can be said that these ELT agendas have been somehow successful. However, it appears that the agendas are not truly based on the needs of Iranian learners, and their congruence with the peculiarities of the Iranian context is under question. The truth is that there is a need for coursebooks, tests, methods, tasks, and practices that provide better positioning and meanwhile connect the world of learners with the world of English. That's why it is suggested that the prominent institutes and publishers, with the help of local educators and researchers, take an initiative role and create new curricular directions which are based on the complexities and requirements of the Iranian community. Thereby, we would probably have an English language education system that works appropriately for the Iranian society without much dependence on foreign ELT agendas.

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