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## Cultural Foundations of the Society and Students' Ability for Establishing EFL Teaching in Iranian Primary Schools

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**Abstract:** This study aims to investigate the cultural context of the society in Iran and also learner's ability concerning learning English in primary school, in order to propose practical strategies for starting teaching English as a foreign language in its proper time in Iran. This descriptive study was performed on 314 high school teachers working in cities of Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Kerman, who were selected by random sampling method. The data gathering tool was a researcher made questionnaire including 60 items based on 5 point likert scale ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. The validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts and its reliability was 0.89 by Cronbachs Alpha. The data was analyzed by SPSS software using t-test, ANOVA, Tukey and paired t-test. The response rate was almost 98%. The total mean score indicating the appropriate cultural context among teachers for establishing English language teaching in primary school was  $3.58 \pm 0.56$  out of 5. There was a significant difference between this mean and the assumed average score of 3 ( $p = 0.01$ ). The mean score for children's ability as well as their tendency to start learning English language in primary school was  $4.6 \pm 0.53$  which had a significant difference with the average score of 3 ( $p = 0.001$ ). According to the results, there is appropriate cultural context in Iran's society for starting teaching English language in primary school. Also, children encompass proper ability and tendency to start learning English language in primary school age. For establishing teaching English language in primary school, taking advantage of the experiences of other countries could be very useful.

**Key words:** EFL, language teaching, cultural foundations, children's ability

### INTRODUCTION

In today's world, teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has a special situation among other educational topics and is considered an educational priority, specially due to globalization and new advancements in information and communication technology (Chun, 2006). In formal education in Iran, English teaching is started from the age of 12 (first grade of junior high school) and lasts until the age of 18. In other words, English teaching is not provided for primary schools and even for junior high schools it is presented  $2 \text{ h week}^{-1}$  for 1st grade and  $4 \text{ h week}^{-1}$  for 2nd and 3rd grades. Moreover, in the 1st grade of high school, English is taught for 3 h, in 2nd and 3rd grades for 2 h and in the 4th grade for  $4 \text{ h week}^{-1}$ . This shows that the total hours for English language teaching are about 450 h for Iranian students. This is while, a comparative study regarding English teaching in different countries shows that, the hours of teaching English in Iran are approximately 250 h

less than some countries such as Japan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Korea, Thailand and China (Ebadi, 2004). On the other hand, in Iran, the start of teaching English to students, in contrary to many other countries is delayed until junior high school. In many countries such as Egypt, Argentina, South Korea, Bangladesh, Czech Republic, China, Japan, Mexico, Qatar, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Jordan, Thailand and Taiwan, it is started from primary school (Ebadi, 2004). Considering the demands of international society and the necessity to communicate through English language, these countries have changed the curriculum of English teaching to be able to respond to the needs of their learners as well as the needs of the society and have started to teach English as a foreign language in primary schools. But, the question is if it is appropriate and necessary to start teaching EFL in primary school in Iran.

Penfield (Scovel, 2000) was the first person who discussed the idea of the sooner the education the better the results. Following Penfield research, many researchers

started to study the effect of age on language learning (Moyer, 1999). In total, experimental studies have shown that, the learners who start language learning in early ages can speak more fluently and without accent and even like native speakers (Asher and Garcia, 1982; Oyama, 1976). In today's world, many studies are performed in order to increase the effectiveness of teaching foreign language. The main focus of these studies has been on investigating the reasons for success or fail in learning the foreign language (Sparks *et al.*, 1995). Sparks *et al.* (1997) revealed a significant relationship between the success of students in language learning and the time of starting learning a foreign language. Berliner (1990) and Marzano (2000) also showed that the more the duration of language learning, the more we face successful results. Lipka *et al.* (2005) mentioned that learning the foreign language is better to take place in early ages. Perego and Boyle (2004) also believed that oral language is learned better in early ages. Fahey and Reid (2001) consider success in university education due to learners' ability in language skills which is higher if learned in early ages.

Studying foreign language learning requires investigating internal and external factors. Among external factors are the grammatical and lexical features, society's support from foreign language, the application of foreign language in different affairs, the credibility and the social stand of the foreign language. Moreover, the physical and psychological characteristics, cognitive development and personal talents and motives of the learners are considered among internal factors affecting foreign language learning (Zarghamian, 2005). Lipka *et al.* (2005) believed for comprehending the complicated process of language learning, we should be acquainted with different environments in which learning occurs. In other words, teaching and learning the language happen in a cultural and social context which should be recognized and considered in order to have an efficient education (Donato, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf and Apple, 1994). Teachers' skills in teaching, Parents' education, the start age of learning language and Students' intelligence and understanding is effective on their success in learning language (Donovan and Cross, 2001). Moreover, the parents' role in children's learning specially in early ages is very essential (Martinez-Pones, 2002; Wood, 2002). Chun (2006) reported that 80% of parents in Taiwan believe that their children should start learning the foreign language in early ages.

But, are children really prepared to learn a foreign language in early ages? During childhood, due to flexibility of the brain and before its uni-lateralization, learning a foreign language is more effective and

sustained (Moyer, 1999). Also, different studies on brain function show that the brain of 4 years old children is active as twice as adults and this high activity causes trillions of communications between brain neurons and facilitates learning a foreign language (Mills, 2001). According to Marcos (1998), 4 or 5 years old learners who study a foreign language have a better performance in standard tests as well as Math. Naserdeen (2001), believes if learning a foreign language does not start in primary school, the learner could not pronounce the words as a native speaker. Moreover, if learning a foreign language starts in lower ages, the cognitive ability of the learners would increase and their class performance would be beyond the expectations (Naserdeen, 2001). Therefore, considering these studies, in many countries of the world, teaching English language starts in early ages.

However, what is the society's role in this situation and is the society prepared to provide necessary grounds for starting foreign language in early ages? The progress in information communication technology, tourism, globalization as well as the necessity to expand the communication with other nations, have triggered many countries to revise their programs and methods regarding teaching English language (Kim-Rivera, 2002; Yang, 2002). Since, globalization is not avoidable and is a process which takes the whole world and on the other hand, English language is considered the international language through which many economical, scientific, political and cultural communications take place, we need to reconsider the policies concerning learning English as a foreign language specially to start it in primary school.

Considering the fact that the formal language in 52 countries is English and many countries started English learning in primary school, the educational managers in Iran should also take a close look at this concern. In other words, due to the situation of international society in today's world and the necessity to acquire the ability to establish effective communication within this international society, the educational programs of teaching English language, specially starting it in primary school need to be revised in Iran. The authors believed, if the social and cultural context of the society (as external factors) and the learners' capacity (as internal factors) for learning English are appropriate, it is the time to start teaching English as a foreign language in its proper time and situation, using a systematic, psychological and logical approach. So, this study intends to investigate cultural and social context as well as learner's capacity for learning English in primary school, to be able to propose practical strategies for achieving this goal.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research method in this study was descriptive which was conducted during the last six month of the year 2006. The statistical population included all English teachers working in high schools, in cities of Iran including Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Kerman. Three hundred and fourteen teachers were selected by random sampling method. The data gathering tool was a researcher-made questionnaire including 60 questions and 2 short answer questions. By studying the available resources and performing interviews with experts, the researcher developed the first version of the questionnaire which was refined by experts, teachers and through pilot study. The scale of the questionnaire was 5 point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). For scoring the items, completely disagree was assumed to get the score equal to 1, disagree equal to 2, no idea equal to 3, agree equal to 4 and completely agree the score equal to 5. The face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by experts. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.89 according to Cronbachs Alpha. In order to distribute the questionnaires, the researcher having an introduction and recommendation letter from Faculty of Education, referred to the board of education in the related cities. During 156 days, the questionnaires were distributed and almost 98% of them were gathered. Some limitations during this distribution were, geographic disparity of the schools, difficulty in access to teachers and limitations on behalf of school managers in some high schools. The descriptive and inferential statistics was used to analyze data by SPSS software. t-test, one way ANOVA, Tukey and paired t-tests were used in data analysis.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The response rate in this study was about 98% meaning that 309 teachers returned their questionnaires. Among the participants, 190 (61.5%) were females and 119 (38.5%) were males. This proportion seems right because among the total population of teachers (N = 2375), 1520 were female and 855 were male. 84.7% of teachers had a bachelor degree and 15.3% of had a master degree or higher. Most of the teachers participating in this study were in the age group of 30-40 (41.1%) and only 4.8% of them were above 50 years of age.

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the responses of teachers to questions regarding cultural context for establishing English language teaching in primary schools. According to Table 1, the most agreement (92.5%) belonged to item number 1 which shows that parents with higher education have more agreement with starting English language learning from primary school. Then, the item number 4 regarding the high number of children willing to attend English classes (as an extracurricular activity) had the highest agreement (79.9%). The lowest agreement belonged to items, the primary school administrators are oriented towards the goal of this project with 39.2% and the primary school teachers agree with English Language teaching in primary schools with 45.4% agreement, respectively. The mean scores of the items ranged from 3.35 to 4.66, out of the total score of 5. The total mean score showing the appropriate cultural context among teachers and parents for establishing English language learning in primary schools was 3.58±0.56 out of the total score 5. One sample t-test showed a significant difference between this mean and the assumed average score of 3 (p = 0.01) which

Table 1: The frequency distribution of the responses of teachers to questions regarding cultural context for establishing English language teaching in primary schools

Items of the questionnaires	Completely disagree	Disagree	No idea (%)	Agree	Completely agree	Mean score (out of 5)	Cumulative percentages of completely agree and agree (%)
The parents are aware of the importance and necessity of English language learning	5.5	39.0	9.1	39.3	6.5	3.02	46.4
The cultural context is prepared for accepting English language teaching in primary schools	1.3	15.6	13.3	53.9	15.9	3.67	69.8
The primary school teachers agree with English language teaching in primary schools	1.9	17.5	35.1	29.2	16.2	3.53	45.4
The high number of children willing to attend English classes shows the appropriate context for this purpose	1.3	7.8	11.7	44.3	34.8	4.19	79.1
The parents do not agree with paying for English courses in primary schools	2.9	23.7	14.9	39.3	19.2	3.48	58.5
The primary school administrators are agree with this project	1.3	13.0	35.2	31.3	19.2	3.54	50.5
The parents with more education are more interested in this project	0.3	3.9	3.3	31.6	60.9	4.48	92.5
The primary school administrators are oriented towards the goal of this project	5.2	36.7	28.9	12.0	17.2	2.99	39.2

**Table 2: The frequency distribution of the responses of teachers to questions regarding children's ability in learning English language**

Items of the questionnaires	Completely	Disagree	No idea	Agree	Completely	Mean score (out of 5)	Cumulative percentages of completely agree and agree (%)
	disagree				agree		
------(%)-----							
Primary school children have high ability in learning English language	0.6	2.6	4.6	31.6	60.6	4.48	92.2
Children enjoy learning English language through pictures	0.6	1.0	1.6	25.6	71.1	4.65	96.7
Children prefer learning English language through poems	0.6	1.9	4.9	27.6	64.9	4.54	92.5
Children enjoy learning English by physical and individual games	0.3	1.3	1.3	26.0	71.1	4.66	97.1
Primary school children can imitate correct pronunciations very well	0.7	3.9	5.5	26.4	63.5	4.48	89.9
Using language labs increases children's learning ability	0.3	3.6	11.4	31.8	52.9	4.33	84.7
Using multimedia such as film and CD, facilitates children's learning	1.0	2.6	2.9	30.2	63.3	4.52	93.5
There is no difference between boys and girls in learning language	3.9	20.5	13.6	28.6	33.4	3.67	62.0
The best time for learning a foreign language is forth grade	5.5	21.2	24.8	29.6	18.9	3.35	48.5
Learning the second language can even be started in pre-school	3.9	11.7	14.0	31.8	38.6	3.89	70.4

means that there is appropriate cultural context for this matter. Comparing teachers' viewpoints regarding appropriate cultural context according to their degree, gender and experience revealed no significant difference but ANOVA showed a significant difference between the viewpoints of teachers from different cities ( $p = 0.02$ ). According to Tukey test, the teachers from Shiraz and Tehran cities believed more in the existence of appropriate cultural context for teaching English language in primary school.

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the responses of teachers to questions regarding children's ability in learning English language. According to Table 2, the items regarding children enjoy learning English by physical and individual games (97.1%) and children enjoy learning English language through pictures (96.7%), had the highest cumulative percentage of agreement. The least percentages belonged to the best time for learning a foreign language is fourth grade (48.5%) and there is no difference between boys and girls in learning language (62%), respectively. The mean scores of the items ranged from 3.35 to 4.66 out of the total score of 5. The total mean score showing children's ability as well as their tendency to start learning English language in primary school was  $4.6 \pm 0.53$  out of the total score 5. One sample t-test showed a significant difference between this mean and the average score of 3 ( $p = 0.001$ ). This means that according to teachers, the ability and tendency of children for starting English language learning in primary school is significantly higher than average level. Comparing teachers' viewpoints regarding Children's ability to learn English in primary school, according to their degree, experience and the cities under investigation showed no significant difference but according to t-test, there was a significant difference between the viewpoints of male and female teachers ( $p = 0.039$ ) regarding the ability of primary school children to learn English language.

As it was mentioned in the methods section, there was also two short-answer questions at the end of each

questionnaire. The first question asked their agreement with starting English language teaching at primary school. Among 305 teachers who responded to this question, 99% had agreed with the item. The second question asked about the most appropriate grade in primary school to start teaching English language. Among 301 teachers, who replied this question, 36.5% named 1st grade; 28.6%, 3rd grade; 14.3%, 2nd grade and 3.7%, named 5th grade as the most appropriate grade for starting English.

## DISCUSSION

This study showed that there is appropriate cultural context for establishing English language teaching in primary school. In fact most respondents agreed with this proposed project. Some priorities in the society such as having further education, appropriate job, the possibility to immigrate to other countries, having a better understanding of university text books and using English books, internet and satellite on one hand and on the other hand, globalization and following that, being able to establish scientific, economic, cultural, social and political communication with other countries, these all have led the people of the society to realize the importance and necessity of learning English language and promote their communication skills. Moreover, these people are informed about teaching English language in primary schools in other countries and realized the importance and practicality of this matter. One evidence on this claim is the high number of children and adults going to private English language institutions in Iran.

Comparing the viewpoints of participants based on demographic characteristics such as degree, gender and work experience showed no significant difference. But, the viewpoints of teachers from different cities were significantly different. The teachers from Shiraz and Tehran believed more in appropriate cultural context compared to teachers from Kerman and Esfahan. One reason could be that, the educational language in Shiraz University was English, before the revolution (the year

1979). Moreover, teachers in Tehran, the capital of Iran, are faced with more international experiences compared to teachers from other cities.

This study also showed that the ability of students for starting English language learning in primary school was significantly higher than average level. This result is in accordance with the findings of Hart *et al.* (1998), Stipek *et al.* (1998), Huffman and Speer (2000), Marcon (1999) and Jones and Gullo (1999). Moreover, the studies of Mills (2001), Marcos (1998) and Naserdeen (2001) indicated that English language teaching in early ages was successful.

Concerning starting English language teaching in primary school, 99% of the respondents of this study, agreed with primary school as an appropriate time. This findings is also in accordance with the results of other studies such as Chun (2006) and Kim-Rivera (2002) which all believed in starting English teaching in primary school.

About the appropriate grade for starting English language teaching, the results of this study showed that 36.5% of the respondents agreed with 1st grade, 14.3% with 2nd grade, 28.6% with 3rd grade, 16.9% with 4th grade and 3.7% with 5th grade as a good time for starting English teaching. The findings of Chun (2006) and Kim-Rivera (2002) recognized 3rd grade or higher as an appropriate time for this matter. The reason that in our study, starting English teaching in the 1st grade earned higher score compared to other grades, could be more tendency in Iranian society towards teaching English language to their children even before starting school which is due to the felt need to learning English. But in Kim-Rivera (2002) study, which mentions third grade as the most appropriate time for learning a Foreign language, one reason could be to prevent interference with children's mother tongue and to complete the learning of their mother tongue's alphabet in first grade then, institutionalize their mother tongue and its alphabet in the second grade. Moreover, children's mental preparation for imitation and recognizing phonemes, their affective development, their adaptation with school environment and so on in third graders causes the third grade (age between 9 and 10) to be the appropriate time for starting this project.

### CONCLUSIONS

In order to increase the duration to study English language and considering the fact that some physiological characteristics of human for learning a foreign language is lost during adult ages and also due to the results of this study about the existence of

appropriate cultural context and children's ability for learning English, it is recommended to start English language teaching in Iran in primary schools. Although, there are cultural foundations for teaching English in Iran, there is still a need to provide proper cultural grounds in order to increase the awareness of parents, teachers and school administrators about starting English language teaching from primary school. In this regard, taking advantage of the experience of other countries could be very useful. Also, establishing an English Language Planning Center for policy making, guiding the efforts and determining the learning objectives regarding English teaching could be very useful and effective. The other tasks of this center could be the situational analysis of English language education, determining the country's needs concerning foreign languages, detailed programming, determining the standards for English teaching, training the teachers, investigating parents' attitude, development, production and updating English language teaching.

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