Towards a Harmonized Foreign Language Education Program in Iran: National Policies and English Achievement

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Abstract

Foreign language education (FLE) in Iran has experienced many ups and downs in the contemporary history of the country. The national policy documents, however, seem to be able to pave the grounds for introducing a sTable FLE program. The present study, therefore, sheds light on one of the consequences of having contradictory views of English language teaching and will show the relevance of Iranian national policy documents to FLE reform in the country. Analysis of high school English language scores obtained from 438 graduates of a state university of medical sciences indicate that while the correlations between second-grade teacher-made tests, third-grade teacher-made tests and third-grade national examinations are moderate, the magnitude of relationships between these sets of scores and the fourth-grade English language exam scores at high school are weak. The decline in the mean score of fourth-graders at high school and the low correlation reflect the contradictory effects of English teaching in this context. In order to suggest ideas for mitigating such negative effects, the researchers will refer to the results of analyzing the contents of the major national policy documents and discuss implications for harmonizing national FLE.

1. Introduction

It has been suggested that English language has become a lingua franca of international communication which has impacted language policies of non-English speaking countries (Crystal [1]; Kachru [2]). According to Spolsky [3], the spread of English is not only influenced by external factors but also by the perceived needs and enthusiasm within the communities. In comparison to Hong Kong, India, Japan and China, Iran seems to be opting for more conservative policies of English language education and does not regard English as the key to the international world of commerce (Farhady, Hezaveh and Hedayati, [4]).

As the history of foreign language teaching in Iran shows, on the one hand FLE is thought to be necessary for economic and technological developments and on the other hand it is regarded as a threat to the national and Islamic identity of the nation. Similarly, the national policy documents reflect the fact that the country needs to experience rapid scientific and technological advancements and at the same time preserve its identity. However, most of the changes introduced into the Iranian foreign language education so far have been arbitrary in the sense that they were not linked to the country's other macro and micro policies and were mostly based on the personal ideas of separate individuals. The result has been unsystematic changes which reflect the motivation to teach and learn English and conservative attitudes about the effects of teaching English language in schools and English language institutes.

In the present context of FLE, the study aims to investigate high school English language achievement of graduates from a school of medical sciences. To achieve this goal, the following questions have been formulated:

- What are the relationships between students' achievement of English language in the second, third and fourth year of high school?
- What is the relationship between students' achievement of English language on the teacher-made tests and their achievement on national achievement examinations in high schools?
- What is a model for harmonizing high school FLE program in Iran?

2. Education in Iran

The history of education in Iran is divided into three periods: ancient Persian, Islamic and modern era. Education in ancient Persia (650 BC-651) reflected the religious ideas of Zoroastrianism. Learners were

instructed in justice, self-restraint and honesty. Boys were trained in horsemanship, swordsmanship and hunting and girls learned their duties to become successful housewives. During this era education was at first mostly limited to the royal families and high-ranking individuals in society (Mahmoudian [5]). However, gradually the educational system began to expand and middle-class people could also have access to education. An example of educational developments in ancient Persia is the establishment of Gundishapur Academy in which philosophy, medicine, science, astronomy and theology were taught.

Later during the Islamic period, education continued to expand. The Nizamiyyehs which were founded by Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk blended education with Islamic values. The great Iranian poet Saadi was a graduate of Al-Nizamiyyeh Baghdad which was founded in 1065 (Vakilian, [6]).

In 1850 Daralfunun which was the first modern institution of higher education in Iran was established by Amir Kabir. The subject matters taught in Daralfunun included medicine, military sciences, engineering and theology. Some years later in 1886 Haj Mirza Hassan Tabrizi established the Roshdieh School which became the first primary school in Iran. The school incited anger among the conservatives in the city of Tabriz where it was located. The protestors believed that the primary school was intended to westernize students and perceived it as a threat to their religious identity.

In today's Iran after one year of pre-elementary education, students start their primary education at the age of 6. There are five grades in the primary school after which students may go to junior high school where they spend three years before they can start their high school education. In the first grade of high school all the students use almost the same curriculum and during the same year they decide on their future high school program. In the subsequent years of high school education, the system is divided into theoretical, technical and vocational branch. Students who complete the K-12 education can take the national University Entrance Examination (UEE) the results of which show students' eligibility for a field of study and a particular university. According to the ministry of education (as cited in Farhady, Hezaveh and Hedayati, [4] between 2001 and 2007, each year more than one million university students were studying at various universities affiliated with the ministry of education and Islamic Azad university in Iran.

3. Foreign language education in Iran

At junior high schools in Iran, learners spend four hours a week learning English and during the three years at high school they have a six unit credit English course. In addition, in the fourth year of high school, they are required to pass a four unit credit English course. As it was suggested by Farhady, Hezaveh and Hedayati [4], selection of a language to be taught as a foreign language in a country is not made on the basis of pure academic criteria but it fundamentally depends on the country's national policies which include social, economic, educational and political considerations. In Iran languages such as French, Germany, Italian, Spanish and Russian have been planned to be taught in schools in addition to English. However, because of lack of resources, in the majority of schools it is mostly English which is being taught as the only foreign language. The textbooks in high school focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension and the methodology for teaching them is basically grammar-translation and audio-lingualism and reading skills are not usually taught in the three years of language learning in high school. In the fourth-grade English books there seems to be more topics and contents related to science and technology and the teaching of reading skills with a deeper comprehension of passages is intended. Razmjoo [7] compared textbooks taught in high schools and private institutes in terms of the extent they fulfil the communicative principles in the Iranian context and concluded that school textbooks fail to reflect the CLT principles. Riazi and Mosalanejad [8] investigated the types of learning objectives in the high school and fourth grade English textbooks using Bloom's [9] Taxonomy and found lower-order cognitive skills in all the grades of high school textbooks. They showed that only in the fourth-grade textbook there are some degrees of higher-order learning objectives. According to Jahangard [10], the nationwide exams which are administered in the third year of high school and English part of the University Entrance Examination (UEE) determine the norm for foreign language teaching and classroom foreign language test construction. As a result, most of the class time is spent teaching to the tests. The tests which are usually multiple-choice, matching or fill-in-the-blank items assess students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures in the textbooks. Except for the fourth-grade exams in which the assessment of the reading skills are included and deeper comprehension of passages is encouraged, in the three years of high school reading skills are not appropriately taught and assessed and most of the reading comprehension exercises and exam items require superficial comprehension of the passages.

Namaghi [11] described a typical high school English language class located in the urban areas of a province in the eastern part of Iran as follows: "Nearly thirty students sit in rows facing the blackboard. A ninety minute class is mainly teacher-fronted, and teacher centred. Lecturing is the rule, though there may be occasional variation on the part of novice teachers. Learning activities are text-centred. Teachers' main concern is coverage rather than responsive teaching. Similarly, students' main concern is passing the final exams and scoring high rather than learning English. Thus responses to the questions about the text tend to consist of relevant passages quoted from the text. A limited version of Grammar Translation Method (GTM) is the best guarantee for teachers to cover the material in the pre-specified time-line, and an efficient method of helping students score high in the finals since oral skills are totally ignored in the finals. Since final exams cover reading comprehension, vocabulary and grammar, teachers' main tasks are: providing Persian equivalents for new words, translating the text, making the students translate, explaining grammar, and making students do written exercises at home, and finally giving feedback on the accuracy of their answers..." (p. 217).

Although English is not the medium of instruction in the Iranian universities and many of the textbooks in different fields of study have been translated into Persian, a large number of resources which are mostly results of the most recent scientific contributions and technological developments are in the English language. Therefore, if a sizeable growth in the production of science and technology is needed, as it is indicated in most of the policy documents, there needs to be a focus on the development of an ELT program which does not threaten the national identity of the country. In the present study, graduates from a school of medical sciences in Iran were the participants because they belong to a population of university students who are more directly involved in the scientific and technological developments. These students' English language achievement scores on the teacher-made and national examinations in the second, third and fourth year of high school were analyzed and the results were used to discuss high school English language achievement in light of policies.

4. Iranian Foreign Language Education Policies

Policy setting has been defined as the authoritative allocation of values which are of prescriptive nature (Ball [12]). In a hierarchical relationship, policies determine goals which are established by intuitions and authorities. Goals in return specify the objectives which are more situation-specific orientations towards the implementation of policies. One of the famous policy-driven reforms in FLE is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which was developed by the Council of Europe in 2001. The reform was intended to introduce a more communicative orientation in foreign language teaching and according to the Council of Europe's website; the Council develops continent-wide agreements to standardize member countries' social and legal practices and promotes shared values among them. The Council's mission in the area of education and language education accords with its political goals of preparing citizens for a globalized world. Other examples include National Curriculum for England in the United Kingdom, Canada's Toronto Benchmarks, Australia's Curriculum and Standards Framework and United States' ESL standards.

In Iran during the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979), English was regarded as an instrument for modernizing the country. However, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, it was perceived as a threat to the national and Islamic identity. Consequently, as it was argued by Farhady, Hezaveh and Hedayati (2010) [4] at present time unlike many countries such as Hong Kong, India, Japan and China, Iran has not decided to see English as the key to the international world of commerce and continues to hold conservative attitudes towards it. Up until now, almost all the changes introduced into FLE reflect the fact that there is a desire for including English in the educational programs; however, there is also a motivation to neglect the foreign language (Dahmardeh [13]). This is perhaps due to the fact that it is believed by not paying enough attention to the teaching of English, the perceived negative effects can be minimized.

Reflections on the policies of English language teaching in Iran have not focused on the relevance of the Iranian national development policy documents. Many of the statements in the Iranian policy documents clearly indicate that English language education is a necessity for the implementation of policies although in most of the cases they are not situation specific. In the 20-year national vision [14] which determines the general directions for most of the other documents, it is stated that Iran should promote research and increase the share of the country in international knowledge production. Furthermore, according to the document, Iran should attain nano, bio, information and communication, environmental, aerospace, and atomic technologies. According to the 5th 5-year Development Plan (2010-2015) [15], one of the major priorities in the development of the country is achieving the second regional scientific and technological rank in the region. In the comprehensive science roadmap [16] which was prepared to set national policies for the educational system, the

roadmap for the scientific, research and technological developments of the country has been delineated. The document includes statements such as constructive interaction with advanced scientific and technological centers of the world and conducting joint research projects at international levels. Definitely, realization of such goals cannot be made possible without English which is currently a lingua franca. A subsection of the national document of education [17] is concerned with FLE stipulating that foreign languages are instrumental in interpersonal and intercultural communication in addition to economic developments including improvements in tourism, business, technology and political awareness. Therefore, it can be concluded that according to the contents of almost all the national policy documents, education of a foreign language which is mostly English in the educational system of the country seems to be necessary. However, the policies and goals have not been made specific in terms of the situations in which English is used for implementing them.

5. Participants

The participants in the study were 438 male and female graduates from one of the state universities of medical sciences in Iran. Obviously, they were high school graduates from different cities and provinces across the country. There are at least two justifications for including these students in the study:

1. They are the elite members of society who are more directly involved in the implementation of the technological and health care standards defined by the policy documents and decision-making centers.

2. As the final exam scores show (see Table 1), they are normally high achievers on the school English examinations. Therefore, their scores may be minimally subject to inaccuracies caused by different sources of measurement error.

6. Procedures

The final exam scores of the students at high school were used to explore the consistency of their performance on different English language exams. The exams from which scores were obtained included teacher-made achievement tests given to the second, third and fourth graders at high school. The tests are developed, administered and scored by the high school teachers. The final exam of the third-graders in the second half of academic year is, however, a national achievement examination developed by experienced teachers, administered nationwide and anonymously scored by teachers. Students' performance on this

exam was also utilized as another source of the obtained data.

The contents of both national and teacher-made tests previously administered in the country were reviewed and guidelines provided by the ministry of education for developing foreign language exam items were carefully studied. Spelling (10%), fill-in-the-blank (17.5%), writing the correct form of words in parenthesis (7.5%), sentence comprehension (10%), multiple-choice grammar items (7.5%), making sentences with scrambled words (5%), transforming sentences (5%), answering questions with picture (5%), matching words with meanings (10%), identifying the pronunciation, stress and intonation (5%), multiple-choice cloze passage (7.5%) and a reading passage followed by true/false and/or multiple-choice comprehension questions (10%) are typical items in English examinations of the second and third graders at high school. The fourth-year exams have a different content and test formant. They include comprehending sentences, answering a standard cloze test and comprehending two long texts which account for almost 50% of the students' final score. Other parts which include sentence functions, vocabulary and grammar account for 10%, 20% and 20% of students' scores respectively.

7. Data Analysis and Results

Relationships between students' examination scores were investigated by running correlation analysis between different sets of exam scores obtained from the teacher-made and national achievement English exams in the four years of high school. The Table below provides descriptive statistics for the students' performance on the second, third and fourth grade teacher made exams and their performance on the third-grade national examination.

As the results show, the mean scores, which are out of 20, are almost the same for the second-grader and third-grade exams but there is a decline in the mean of students' fourth-grade exam scores.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the high school English test scores

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min	Max
Second	438	17.82	2.12	10	20
Third1	438	17.75	2.18	7.5	20
Third2	438	17.38	2.31	10	20
Fourth	438	14.74	2.71	10	20

Notes: Second: Second grade teacher-made exam; Third1: Third grade teacher-made exam; Third2: Third grade national exam; Fourth-grade: fourth-grade teacher made exam

In the second stage of data analysis, the relationships between the scores obtained from the

major high school English language examinations were explored by running several correlation analyses:

Table 2. Correlation matrix of high school study measures

	Second	Third1	Third2	Fourth
Second	1.00	.66**	.59**	.16**
Third1		1.00	.60**	.23**
Third2			1.00	.30**
Fourth				1.00

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Notes: Second: Second grade exam; Third1: Third grade exam; Third2: Third grade national exam; Fourth: Fourth grade exam

As Table 2 shows, correlations between students' performances on the second-grade teacher-made tests, third-grade teacher-made tests and third-grade national examinations are stronger than the correlations between these exam scores and performance of the fourth-graders. Table 2 shows shows, while the correlations between these examination scores are moderate, the magnitude of relationships between these sets of scores and fourth-grade English language exam scores are weak.

8. Discussions

The study showed that the relationship between the performance of students on the second-grade and third-grade examinations is relatively high. The result does not come as a surprise since there are many similarities between the content of the courses including the books, teaching methodology and assessment in the second and third grade of high school. The magnitude of correlation between the third-grade teacher-made test scores and the third-grade national achievement exam scores is also one of the highest correlations among the relationships. The national achievement tests are developed by experienced teachers, administered nationwide and scored anonymously by the teachers. The degree of go-togetherness between these two sets of test scores indicates the extent to which centralized system of assessment yields similar results compared with scores obtained from the English language tests teachers develop, administer and score. This may be particularly useful for the ELT experts trying to find substitutes for the national University Entrance Examination (UEE) which is supposed to be eliminated in a few years according to a law.

The lowest correlation was found between high school exam scores and high school fourth-graders' English language exam results. This is mainly because the fourth-grade English textbook which has been more recently published is different from all the English language books in the three grades of high school. The book emphasizes reading comprehension and has a special focus on the teaching of reading skills. Moreover, the reading texts in the textbook and examinations are longer. The decline in the mean score of students' performance in the fourth-grade of high school (see Table 1) and the weak correlation between fourth grade scores and scores obtained from other high school exams (Table 2) find support in Riazi and Mosalanejad [8] who found a significant difference between senior high school and fourth-grade textbooks in terms of learning objectives. The authors who used Bloom's [9] Taxonomy to analyze the books concluded that the fourth-grade textbook contains 'some degrees of higher-order learning objectives'. The difference between students' performance on the first three years' English exams at high school and their fourth grade exam results is clearly due to a sudden increase in the cognitive level of learning objectives in the fourth-grade English textbook and examinations. The results show the contradictory effects of English language which can be traced in the history of foreign language teaching in Iran and the country's recent development policy documents.

The fact that there is more emphasis on English language in the fourth grade of high school is shown by the low correlations between this year's exam results and students' scores obtained from the second and third year examinations. The emphasis on the teaching of English for the purpose of scientific and technological developments in the fourth grade of high school reveals the desire to include English for developmental purposes; however, the mismatch also shows that English is regarded as a threat to the national identity of the people. The sudden decline in the English language achievement mean score of an elite sample of students in the fourth year of high school in addition to the relationship mismatch also show that high school English language education has not been systematically and smoothly linked to the country's policies from the first year to the last year of high school. In other words, according to the results, national ELT needs to be defined in the context of the country's policy documents so that goals and objectives can be clearly stipulated and justified for each grade of high school English language education. Figure 1 illustrates the process of integrating language curriculum development models with a reform model of national ELT in Iran.

For developing a language curriculum, various models have been presented. Storey [18] reviewed the models introduced by Brown [19] and Richards [20] and concluded the process of curriculum development includes the following:
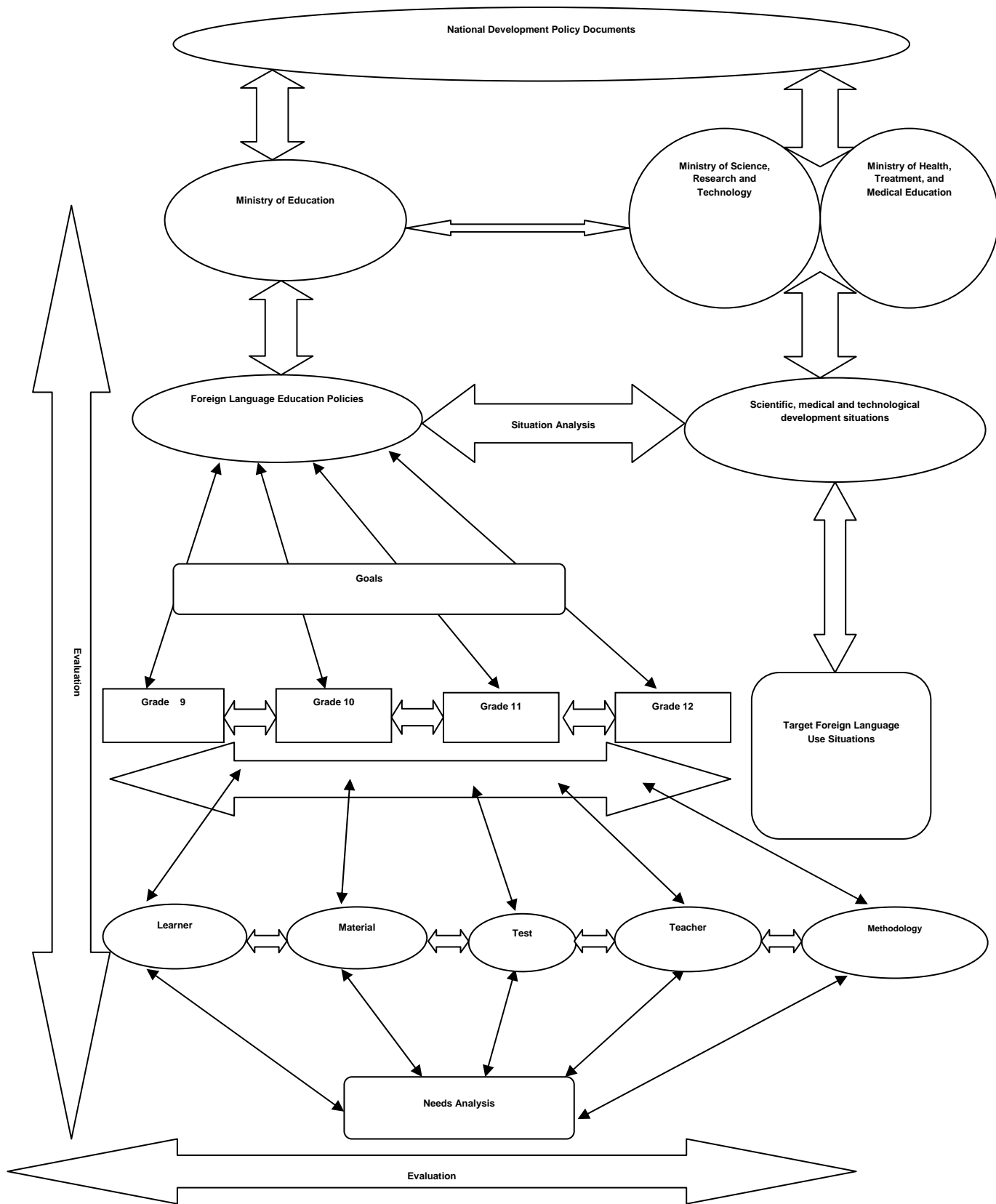
Figure 1. A theoretical model for harmonizing FLE in Iran

1. Needs analysis and situation analysis
2. Setting of objectives
3. Assessment and testing
4. Planning and organization of the course/syllabus design
5. Selection and/or development of materials
6. Planning for effective teaching
7. Evaluation

As Figure 1 shows, harmonizing national foreign language education in Iran depends on developments in other areas including the specification of situations in which developments should take place. According to this model, the process of developing goals for each grade of high school English program includes obtaining information from the policy documents and analysis of students' needs. The interaction between the policies and students' needs which can be explored through needs analysis studies result in an interconnected whole containing components which operate harmoniously in relation to each other and to the whole. Furthermore, this can help policies affect different components of the program evenly from the first grade to the last grade creating a more sTable foundation for high school FLE. Evaluation which is another component of the program provides empirical information about the effects of the program components, their relationships and the whole system. The Figure shows that evaluation studies may check both the hierarchical and non-hierarchical relationships. The present study tried to discuss the issue of coherence in the FLE program of Iran. It also presented a theoretical model which integrates national development policies and principles of language curriculum development. However, it is suggested that much research is needed to empirically examine various aspects of the model in detail before it can be actually implemented.

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