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# **The Perceptions of Iranian Policymakers as Articulated in Iran's Foreign Language Policy Document: A Systemic Functional Linguistics Approach**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present study was an attempt to investigate the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language policy makers as articulated in Iran's foreign language policy document using a systemic functional linguistics approach. To this end, the type of processes and participants who have been used in Iran's foreign language policy document were identified and interpreted in light of the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics and the related literature. The findings point out that the foreign language education policy document is heavily influenced by and draws on well-entrenched ideological, historical, religious, and political discourses. Further interpretations show that the FLEP document is heavily influenced by what is referred to as the Islamic ideology and discourse. In addition, applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to the document also offers a host of other interesting information about the Iranian foreign language teaching policymakers underlying perceptions about foreign language teaching and issues of globalization and imperialism. The concept of agency and how it is deemed by the Iranian foreign language practitioners was another identified topic. An investigation of the National Document of Education that includes the FLEP document as one of its subsections further showed that teachers have been appropriately described as autonomous individuals who possess the required agency to conduct and direct the classroom learning and teaching processes. Investigations also provide information on the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language education policymakers about the age that students must begin the learning of a foreign language at school.

**Keywords:** FLEP document; systemic functional linguistics; culture; politics; ideology

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## Introduction

Spolsky and Shohamy (1999a) refer to language policy as the effort to change or influence language practices. Language policy can also be considered as an endeavour “to change the status of the language structure, its acquisition, its study, or its spread to other countries” (Jabareen, 2005, p.27). “Language policy can be presented in the form of official documents, a language law, a government document, or administrative regulation” (Spolsky & Shohamy, 1999a, p.43). Language policies are set for different reasons. According to Spolsky & Shohamy (1999a), “one seemingly simple approach to finding a rationale for a language policy might be to assert some absolute linguistic rights” (p. 55). The second reason for setting a language policy could be ease of access to information and to cultural knowledge (Amara & Mari, 2002). Economic development and progress are other two important reasons for articulating a language policy. Setting a language policy could equally be attributed to identity. Regardless of the form of articulation, every policy, in general, or language policy, in particular, is ineffective unless the government, institutes, groups, or individuals ensure that it is appropriately enforced (Amara & Mari, 2002). In Iran, the responsibility of observing the language policy document lies with the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution and ministry of education.

The history of foreign language teaching in Iran has experienced a lot of ups and downs. Before the Islamic Revolution in 1979, as a result of extensive economic, educational, political and cultural collaboration with the West, especially the USA and UK, English and English education received much attention such that French was eventually replaced by English as Iran’s primary foreign language at that time. But English did not enjoy this status for a long time. With the advent of the Islamic Revolution and due to perceptions of parallelism between English and the USA and UK, the language was faced with waves of hostility from some post-revolutionary officials. During this period, debates folded around maintaining or removing English from school and university curricula (Borjian, 2013). In the long run however, the post-revolutionary Iranian officials agreed with resuming the teaching of English while nationalising its use (Tollefson, 1991).

In addition to the inconsistencies between foreign language education policies in the last 70 years, the lack of an independent and comprehensive foreign language education policy document in Iran’s education system has muddled the waters even more. Whereas language-in-education policy is one of the most important initial steps for implementing educational language policies, until recently no formal independent comprehensive national or educational foreign language policy document has been developed or operationalized. The only official available policy document in the field is the Iranian national foreign language education policy document (FLEP) which is part of the wider Iranian national education policy document (discussed in the following section) that has been developed by the Iranian Ministry of Education to direct the Iranian education system to meet the needs of the teachers, students, and other stakeholder according to the prevalent valued ideologies and culture in 2012. In such a context and in the absence of any specific foreign language education policy document (Kiany, Navidinia, & Momenian, 2011), foreign languages (particularly English) have been explicitly and implicitly pointed out in a few recently developed educational and development documents.

One of the consequences of the absence of a language education policy document in the past years was the formulation of contradictory discourses in the documents that articulated these policies (Davari, 2013). The recent FLEP document could be considered as a great step forward for solving many of the problems that were associated with the absence of such a document. However, the mere development of the document does not suffice. Research needs to be conducted to identify the underlying discourses, ideologies, and value systems. In this way, possible discrepancies in the articulated policies and practices can be noticed. Conducting research is also helpful in that it illustrates whether there has been a shift in language policy

making or the recently established policies are fashionable restatements of previous ones in the form of an official foreign language education policy document. Based on the aforementioned discussions and considering the prominence attached to the FLEP document, it needs to be investigated. Although some studies have been conducted on the FLEP document ever since its introduction, the majority of them are mere descriptive accounts which lack a rigorous theoretical framework. Therefore, the present study was conducted to investigate Iran's foreign language education policy document by identifying the process and participants within a systemic functional linguistics approach. According to the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics, the type of process and participants employed in a text provide useful information about the underlying ideologies and patterns of thought.

### Literature review

Although language policy practice boasts a long history, the study of it is a more recent phenomenon which was created as a field of study in the optimistic days after World War II when many societies were facing the challenge of rebuilding (Spolsky, 2012). The first book which had "language policy" exclusively in its title appeared in 1945 (Spolsky, 2012). In 1959, Haugen introduced "language planning" as an academic term in an article (Haugen, 1959a). There, language policy is an activity which provides orthography, grammar and other guiding principles for orators and writers in a multi-lingual society (Haugen, 1959b). Later in the 1960s, language policy eventually emerged as an independent academic discipline. The establishment of language policy as an academic specialty was mainly attributable to the fact that the world was undergoing drastic changes during that period.

Ever since the establishment of language policy as a discipline, many researchers have conducted research on its various aspects in different contexts. Honna and Takeshita (2005), for instance, showed how Japan as an eastern Asian country, is trying to develop a comprehensive English teaching and learning policy and apply it to its educational system to meet the needs and expectations of all the stakeholders. "Japanese with English Abilities" act centres on introducing English at primary school, sending teachers abroad, and appointing specific level for each grade at school. Other researchers including Hagerman (2009) and Kubota, (1998) have also investigated Japan's language education policies.

The lack of employing a systematic and rigorous linguistic framework for analysing language education policies is not limited to the Japanese context and is clearly also evident in the language education policy studies conducted in some European countries. In one such study, the trajectory of a language education policy in Ireland from initial formulation to efforts at implementation which have been influenced by the changing sociolinguistic map and language situation has been explored by Ó Laoire (2011). The author there calls for "a new understanding of the policy process because they epitomize the kinds of local contexts and specific circumstances that implementers confront not only in Ireland but also in regions and areas where societal bilingualism is beginning to change into or compete with multilingualism in an LEP." (Ó Laoire. 2011, p.17).

Language education policy is an appealing topic which lends its self well to research and is not limited to a specific context. Accordingly, it has been also a topic of research in North American countries. In one such study, adapting and using Levin's (2001) and Blaikie and Soussan's (2000) model of policy cycle as an analytical framework, Fallon and Rublik (2012) investigated Second-Language Education Policy in Quebec and concluded that an incongruence is manifested in how schools understood and implemented the ESL policy and corresponding curriculum. What

distinguishes this study from other similar studies which investigate language education policies is the inclusion of an analytic model which guides the data collection phase and adds integrity to data analysis. It is further particularly effective in interpreting and discussing the findings. Nonetheless, such models of language policy may be limited in that they are mainly concerned with some aspects of language education policy. However, language policies are constituted of multiple inherent operating ideologies, values, and belief systems which can only be investigated by a powerful approach such as systemic functional linguistics.

Despite the plethora of research on language policies in other contexts, there have been a few studies which specifically centre on the English section of the national curriculum in Iran (i.e. Alavimoghaddam & Kheirabadi, 2012; Ebrahimi & Sahragard, 2016; Foroozandeh, 2011; Kiany et al. 2011; Rahimi and Nabilou, 2009). Among the researchers who have investigated Iran's foreign language education policy, Kiany et al (2011) have contributed significantly to enhancing our understanding about the Iranian national curriculum in the field of foreign language teaching. In one such study, having defined what is meant by language education policies, the authors focus on the matches and mismatches between the teaching of foreign languages in the national curriculum and Iran's 20-year vision plan. Despite being insightful, the major shortcoming of the study is the absence of a powerful analytic framework which limits it in terms of investigating the underlying ideologies and discourses. Accordingly, similarities between the two documents are superficially referred to in the study. In another study which also focuses on Iran's foreign language education policy, Kiany et al (2011) criticize Iran's national curriculum in the field of foreign language teaching with respect to theories, methodologies, and the amount of integrity and clarity in its content. The authors conclude that the curriculum suffers from major weaknesses in terms of inconsistencies in the defined goals. As with their earlier study (Kiany et al. 2011), it is not clear how the researches come to such conclusions without employing a powerful analytic tool.

Despite the fact that there is already a considerable quantity of academic works dealing with the issue of language policy, language policy research is in great need of theory intervention which may provide new perspectives to approach the discipline and better address the problems that have arisen during the implementation process. A systemic functional linguistics approach to language policy can meet that requirement for the following reasons. First, language policy is defined as a science about language choice (Spolsky, 2004), which corresponds with the fundamental idea in SFL that language is a meaning potential from which choices could be made (Halliday, 1978; Halliday, 1985; Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004). The correspondence in the core ideas has laid the foundation for theory application. Second, SFL can provide different angles for language policy, enabling scholars to conduct their research from both internal and external perspectives. Third, a theoretical integration of SFL core ideas can offer a better access to examine the implementation process of language policy along with its possible problems.

Applying the SFL approach to language policy is expected to enable researchers to observe the characteristics of language policy with a new vision. For instance, the ideational analysis provides insights into the relationship among participants, processes and circumstances, and such relationship reflects people's experience of the world that is either around or inside them. The interpersonal analysis offers insights into the interaction between the speakers (or writers) and the listeners (or readers), and such interaction enables the researchers to examine the social and inter-subjective relationship. The textual analysis gives insights into the organization of language resources, and such organization provides the necessary relevance. Accompanied by other relevant dimensions such as stratification, system, context and probability as inseparable parts of the SFL approach to language policy, it is believed that the characteristics of language policy can be illustrated better.

In the same manner, the plethora of research on language education policy in Iran suffers from flaws in the instruments, inappropriateness of research methods, and most importantly, lack of a theoretical framework. The problem inheres in most of these studies (e.g. Alavimoghaddam & Kheirabadi, 2012; Kiyani et al, 2011; Ebrahimi & Sahragard, 2016) is that they are mere comparisons of the statements in The National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching with the statements in other upper-hand documents).

As an alternative, the present study was conducted to voice the Iranian foreign language education policymakers' perceptions as articulated in Iran's National Curriculum in the field of Foreign Language Teaching with respect to practical issues and considerations using a systemic functional linguistics approach. It is assumed that the first step in developing an effective FLEP is identifying the concerns of all stakeholders. The major underlying assumption here is that applying a systemic functional linguistic approach in analysing the Iranian foreign language education policymakers' perceptions as articulated in the FLEP document grants access to novel and less considered spheres and horizons for Iranian and non-Iranian language (education) policy researchers. Accordingly, many of the less evident problems and issues may be identified and efforts may be made to resolve them.

## Method

### *Materials*

#### *Iran's FLEP document*

The Iranian national foreign language education policy (FLEP) is part of the wider Iranian national education policy document (discussed in the following section) which was developed to direct the Iranian education system to meet the needs of the teachers, students, and other stakeholder according to the prevalent valued ideologies and culture in 2012. The original version of the document which is available for download at the ministry of education official website is written in Persian (Appendix 1).

The FLEP document consists of three sections:

1. Necessity and function
2. Field and realm
3. Content and education

In the necessity and functions section, the necessity of developing communicative skills in foreign languages and their role and importance in national and international affairs is explained. In the section devoted to 'field and realm', developing communicative competence in the four language skills is emphasised. The time of starting the teaching of foreign languages and the foreign languages that are taught is mentioned. Finally, in the content and education section, the content which foreign language learners are familiarized with in different periods is addressed.

The document was translated into standard British English in the present study. The justification for this comes from the fact that providing the excerpts in English facilitates understanding for those readers who are non-Persian speakers. Also note that caution was exercised not to change the language of the document and its constituting structures in anyway. This is because the types

of processes (verbs), participants (nouns, adjectives), and circumstantials (adverbs) are of extreme importance in systemic functional linguistics and even the slightest changes in them could result in different interpretations and justifications. Likely, the theme and rheme patterns which are, in turn, dependent on the MOOD and transitivity functions may be misinterpreted in case any differences exist between the Persian and English versions of the FLEP document.

### *The National Document of Education*

Iran's national document of education is an overarching document which spells out and directs all aspects of education at school level. The document has been enacted and put into force since 2012. The national document of education is comprised of fifteen sections:

1. The philosophical and scientific foundations of the national curriculum
2. Perspectives
3. Principles for curriculum and education
4. Overall approach and direction
5. Goal-setting standards
6. The general purpose of curriculum and education
7. Basic competencies
8. Teaching and learning areas
9. Principles governing the choice of learning strategies
10. Principles governing the evaluation of educational Progress
11. The process of production and implementation of curriculum and training
12. Material and media production policies
13. Structure and time of teaching
14. Policies and executive requirements
15. National curriculum evaluation

Each of these sections is further divided into subsections which focus on a specific aspect of the educational procedure.

### *Data collection procedure*

The present study employed a qualitative approach which is a more comprehensive approach in that it presents a clearer and in depth picture of the phenomenon under study. Consequently, the data were collected in different stages from different sources. In the first phase, Iran's FLEP was downloaded from the ministry board of education's official website. The sections of the document were meticulously studied and the parts that were more relevant to the purpose of the study were underlined. However, since the document was originally written in Persian and an English copy is unavailable, the document was translated into standard British English to also make the excerpts in the study understandable to those who do not have a familiarity with Persian and are interested in understanding or applying the findings of the study. Later, the different parts of the document were broken down into separate sentences to make analysis easier. In the last

step, the different parts of the document were subjected to a systemic functional linguistics approach and the process types, participants, theme and rheme patterns were identified.

#### *Data analysis procedure*

The FLEP document was subjected to a systemic functional linguistics model and the underlying major factors were identified. More specifically, the processes (material, mental, behavioural, relational, and excisional) and participants (goal, range, beneficiary, causative, and circumstantials) were identified. The analysis in this phase started by studying the Persian version of the FLEP document; meanwhile, the verbs, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs were underlined for further reference. The analysis proceeded by translating the FLEP document into English and carefully comparing the Persian and English copies. In the third stage, each paragraph of the FLEP document was broken down to separate simple or compound sentences. The purpose of this stage was to make further analysis easier. Finally, the identified sentences were further broken down to their constituting elements and labelled according to SFL terminology based on the roles and functions that they fulfilled in the sentences. The end result of the whole procedure in this phase was a set of data in the form of processes, participants, and circumstantials which were interpreted in the light of the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics and the relevant available literature.

### **Results and discussion**

The FLEP document is a sub-section of the National Document of education. Hence, any analysis of it would be flawed without considering the assumptions of the National Document of Education. In the following sections, an analysis of the FLEP document will be presented with a reference to the tenants and underlying assumptions of the National Document of Education.

#### *The use of implicit language in the FLEP document*

An analysis of the FLEP document through a systemic functional linguistics approach indicates that the use of material process is much more than the use of any other process. This prevalent pattern begins from the very first line of the text and traces of it are seen towards the very end of the document. As stated elsewhere, material verbs/clauses construe 'doing' and 'happening' processes, which represent some 'material' or visible, tangible change in the flow of events or the environment, through input of energy (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). These verbs construe (create and construct) a person's experience of the world (Halliday & Matthiessen 2004). Hence, it could be implied that the developers of Iran's FLEP document have intended to noticeably articulate their desire for change by bounteously using material process:

#### Excerpt 1a

The foreign language education curriculum (*agent*) must familiarize (*Pr: material*) students' with the required vocabulary and language structures necessary for efficient international communication.

#### Excerpt 1b

The students have to read (*Pr: material*) intermediate texts.

As indicated above, one key facet of the policy process and the formulation of new orthodoxies is critique. New policies feed off and gain legitimacy from the deriding and demolition of previous policies (see Ball, 1990) which are thus rendered 'unthinkable'. The 'new' are marked out by and gain credence from their qualities of difference and contrast. In education in particular, part of the attraction of a new policy often rests on the specific allocation of 'blame' from which its logic derives. 'Blame' may either be located in the malfunctions or heresies embedded in the policies it replaces and/or is redistributed by the new policy within the education system itself and is often personified in the 'incompetent teacher' and 'failing school' (Thrupp, 1998).

This mandatory process is strictly observed in every language education policy regardless of the context in which it is to be applied. However, policymakers prefer to follow this rule implicitly to avoid the numerous negative consequences associated with explicitly objecting former policies. Employing material process and participants is a good way by which policymakers can show their interest for certain assumptions and the people and procedures to carry them out. Note that the dominance of a foreign language education policy for learning does not mean that other competing views do not exist, but rather that the policy focus, for now, has been captured in a specific set of texts/policy practices which marginalize and de-legitimate these alternatives.

One of the possible undesirable consequences of explicitly articulating one's rejection to former language education policies is that people often form guarding attitudes when meeting objection and display it in their actions and behavior. Understanding that one broad aspect of the tumultuous ELT story in Iran has been historically shaped by the official influences of sociocultural and political authorities (Riazi 2005; Borjian, 2013), articulating the language education policies in a way that lowers the negative consequences seems mandatory. Stated otherwise, the successful application of every language education policy requires the full cooperation of all stakeholders, without which policies will definitely fail. Former language education policymakers may have been assigned new roles and responsibilities which may directly or indirectly influence or hinder the full operationalization of the more recent document (Riazi 2005; Borjian, 2013). Therefore, language education policy documents, including Iran's FLED policy employ material process abundantly to show their interest in the actions and events and the participants who carry them out without directly accusing previous policies.

#### *The FLEP document and the Iranian-Islamic identity*

The results of the systemic functional linguistic analysis show that as an introductory part, the first section of Iran's FLEP document uses material processes to express the overall objective(s) of the FLEP document and show how it differs from and what it shares with former language education policies:

#### Excerpt 2a

**The teaching of foreign languages** (*Agent*) **paves** (*Pr: Material*) the way for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances in various aural, visual, and written forms for different purposes and audiences **through the framework of the Islamic system** (*Circ: manner*).

In excerpt 2a, the use of the material process '*paves*' could be indicative of the fact that the Iranian foreign language education policymakers consider '*the teaching of foreign languages*' as a powerful factor which has the potential to influence the students in many ways. This is well evidenced within a systemic functional linguistics approach in which 'agents' are defined as 'participants' which initiate the action or make it happen. Here, '*the teaching of foreign languages*' has been assigned the role of 'agent' and could therefore be interpreted as an influential factor which



could bring about substantial changes in the form of enhancing understanding cultural exchanges and facilitating transferring technological advances.

Another observable pattern in excerpt 2a is the use of circumstantials which are defined as almost always optional argumentations of the clause (Halliday, 2014). In systemic functional linguistics, the use of this group of participants is non-obligatory and is employed in cases where the speaker/writer intends to express the time, place, manner, or other circumstantial features. Accordingly, the use of the circumstantial 'through the framework of the Islamic system' (*Circ: manner*) shows that the manner through which a foreign language is to be presented may have been of supreme importance to the Iranian foreign language education policymakers.

Employing this pattern could be interpreted as a departure from earlier language education policies, particularly in the first few years after the Islamic revolution in 1979 when English was viewed as a purely foreign language that was associated with devastating negative consequences. The use of the phrase 'through the framework of the Islamic system' (*Circ: manner*) implies that the Iranian foreign language teaching education policymakers have developed the understanding that the Iranian education system can benefit from the advantages of "the teaching of foreign languages" (*agent*) and meanwhile limit the so called negative impacts 'through the framework of the Islamic system' (*Circ: manner*). The use of the phrase 'the teaching of foreign languages' in the role of agent accompanied by the circumstantial 'through the framework of the Islamic system' further indicates that the views of the Iranian officials and language education policy makers have softened, that is, they have implicitly accepted the powerful agentive role of English as an influential global language which carries personal, social, professional and economic advantages.

The deliberate and timely use of the phrase 'through the framework of the Islamic system' (*Circ: manner*) is also indicative of the policymakers' strong concern about the highly valued Iranian-Islamic identity, an indispensable part of which is Islamic ideology and values. Taken together, the Persian language and Islam, along with other factors shape the Iranian-Islamic identity which is highly valued by Iranian people and authorities. This high respect for the Iranian-Islamic identity has also been reflected in the more recent FLEP document. The use of Circumstantials "through the framework of the Islamic system" (*Circ: manner*) shows the Iranian officials' attempt and concern for protecting this identity. To be more precise, the language education policymakers are clearly communicating this message that the Iranian-Islamic identity is a top priority and that the teaching of any foreign language must accord with it. This is where the recent FLEP shares with earlier language education policies. An inspection of the previous English language teaching curriculum clearly indicates how this concern has been practically spelled out in Iranian textbooks and teaching procedures; sometimes even resulting in the absence of target language accepted cultural norms and values (Aliakbari, 2004).

#### *The FLEP document and imperialism*

In addition to the above interpretations, applying a systemic functional linguistics approach to excerpt 2a also offers a host of other interesting information about the Iranian foreign language teaching policymakers' underlying perceptions about foreign language teaching as articulated in the FLEP document. As discussed earlier, the phrase 'the teaching of foreign languages' has been used as what is referred to as 'agent' in functional linguistics terminology. There, an 'agent' or 'actor' is defined as participants which bring about change through material processes by excreting implicit or explicit physical or non-physical power. Hence, 'the teaching of foreign languages' (*agent*) could be considered as a powerful factor which is influenced by various social, cultural, ideological, and political influences.

However, the writers of the FLEP document have also used an optional circumstantial entity to specify the appropriate context that the 'agent' and 'process' are better to occur in. As discussed earlier, the employed circumstantial of manner here is not value-free and connotes prevalent discourses in the Iranian context. One of the predominant discourses which is associated with the common Islamic discourse and correlated with the Iranian-Islamic identity is the presence of strong anti-Western ideologies; according to which, all that is deemed foreign and considered a threat to the Iranian Islamic identity is somehow rejected or neglected. Under the same light, Iranian senior officials and policymakers consider foreign languages, particularly English, as a tool which is employed to spell out imperialistic thoughts and have devised some strategies to counter it. For that reason, the simultaneous use of 'the teaching of foreign languages' (*agent*) and 'through the framework of the Islamic system' (*Circ: manner*) in excerpt 2a may be interpreted as the Iranian foreign language teaching policymakers' endeavour to favour from the beneficial 'agentive' aspects of teaching foreign languages while limiting their negative and often imperialistic facets.

Further evidence for the Iranian foreign language policymakers concern about the impact(s) of foreign language teaching can be identified in other sections of the FLEP document by employing a systemic functional linguistics approach. For instance, another good illustration of this fact is the reference which has been made to the topics that are to be included in the foreign language teaching enterprise. There, the policymakers argue that 'the topics' (*carrier*) should be based on (*Pr: intensive*) sanitation, healthcare, and local culture (*attribute*) in the 'lower levels of foreign language teaching' (*Circ: location*). They also assert that the topics (*carrier*) should be based on (*Pr: intensive*) foreign culture, science, politics, and economics (*attribute*) 'in the advanced levels of foreign language teaching' (*Circ: location*). Leaving other factors (discussed in the forthcoming sections) aside for the time being, these statements can be taken as evidence for the fact that Iranian foreign language policymakers have understood that foreign language teaching has educational and cultural dimensions to it. Accordingly, they have tried to lower these influences by including topics from the local culture at least at the lower levels to shape the perception of the Iranian foreign language learners before familiarizing them with foreign topics. These assumptions accord with the current prevalent assumption underlying Iran's foreign language teaching enterprise and denote the idea that the inevitable teaching of foreign languages could be directed successfully to promote the socio-political status of the country and meanwhile strengthening the integrity of the Iranian-Islamic identity.

#### *The FLEP document and globalisation*

An investigation of the second paragraph of the FLEP document through the lens of the systemic functional linguistics approach also shows the employment of material processes (*Pr: allows, affects, enhances, and increases*) by the Iranian foreign language policymakers to show their interest in the actions, events and the participants who carry them out. Here, 'learning a foreign language' and 'the teaching of foreign languages' have been assigned an 'agentive' role:

#### Excerpt 2b

**Learning a foreign language** (*agent*) **allows** (*Pr: material*) the students to communicate with the world

#### Excerpt 2c

**Learning a foreign language** (*agent*) **allows** (*Pr: material*) the students to use recent technological advances

#### Excerpt 2d

**The teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) **affects** (*Pr: material*) economic development.

Excerpt 2e

**The teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) **enhances** (*Pr: material*) political awareness.

Excerpt 2f

**The teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) **increases** (*Pr: material*) social vigilance

An investigation of Iran's foreign language education policy document through systemic functional linguistics is indicative of the fact that Iranian policymakers have simultaneously viewed globalisation as a major new source for optimism in the world and have perceived it in negative terms. The existence of such statements like 'the teaching of foreign languages (*agent*) enhances (*Pr: material*) political awareness' (refer to excerpts 2b-2f for more examples) show that they understand that globalisation is a concept that is associated with progress, prosperity and peace. In other words, the Iranian foreign language policymakers have viewed 'the teaching of foreign languages' (*agent*) as a factor which has a capability of increasing the political vigilance of the Iranian foreign language learner probably by granting them access to first hand target language resources. This mutual understanding and political awareness are then applicable to developing shared political discourses and common ways of understanding. In this way, globalisation can be perceived as a factor which leads to peace. However, the use of circumstantials such as 'through an Islamic framework' also injects the idea that the Iranian foreign language policymakers have also realized that globalisation can also conjure up deprivation, disaster and doom by enacting a body of foreign ideologies and discourses and eventually downplaying or even replacing native ones through the foreign language under instruction.

Generally speaking, an investigation of the document by systemic functional linguistics shows how the Iranian foreign language policymakers have assigned an 'agentive' role to 'the teaching of foreign languages' and meanwhile attempted to strip it from its cultural and political baggage by employing an optional circumstantial of manner (*'through the Islamic framework'*). In other words, it seems as if the policymakers in Iran have formed policies to promote English language education in ways that best serve the socio-political, sociocultural (Sharifian, 2013) and socioeconomic interests of the Islamic world. In this way, potential threats to the Persian language and the Iranian-Islamic identity substantially decrease while the agentive role of language as a contributory factor to all aspects of development is preserved (see excerpt 2a).

*The FLEP document and the concept of agency*

At the surface level, investigation of Iran's FLEP document through systemic functional linguistics indicates that this understanding of the way that the local has a bearing on the thinking and behaviour of "subaltern" local agency on the ground may have been overlooked by or hidden from the policy maker's centralist gaze. In more technical terms, the FLEP document does not include 'teachers' as one of the most important actors (in functional linguistic terminology) who have a powerful agentive role in the language teaching process even once. Instead, the policymakers have preferred to use the phrase '*the teaching of foreign languages*' in an agentive role (in a functional linguistic sense) and as a powerful factor which can bring about the required changes in its own right:

Excerpt 4a

**...the teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) paves the way for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances in oral, visual, and written forms for different purposes and different individuals with in an Islamic framework...

Excerpt 4b

...**the teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) allows them to communicate with the world and use the most recent technological advances...

Excerpt 4c

...**the teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) has an impact of economic development such as tourism, commerce, technology, scientific progress, as well as social vigilance and political awareness...

Excerpt 4d

...**the teaching of foreign languages** (*agent*) stresses communicative competence and problem solving. In a way that the individual can communicate using the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) on graduation...

The pattern observed in FLEP document resembles the rational planning model of decision-making which has prevailed up to now in language policy implementation which works on the assumption that agency is only present at the centre. Often, criticism of inadequate half-hearted implementation of policy and the failure to achieve the goals specified tends to posit policy as being 'rational'. From this perspective, implementation is perceived as an administrative process, devoid of values, interests or emotion (Wagenaar & Cook, 2003) or agency. People are considered only as either those who have policy done to them or as shadowy resistors (Ball, 1997). According to the more recent sociocultural and ecological perspectives however, policies are not merely implemented, but are actually shaped on the ground (Ball 1997) through what is referred to as subaltern agency. It is in the local and situated micro realms that planning has its ultimate impact (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Liddicoat & Baldauf, 2008; Ó Laoire, 2008). Accordingly, and in line with recent language policy research which highlights individual agency in the processes of language use, attitudes and policies (Ricento, 2000), subaltern agency is no longer considered as the passive depicted concept in research accounts, referring to public body practitioners (Ball, 1997; Shohamy, 2009), but as an active and powerful social agency of change exercising power and influence within the constraints imposed by organisational structures (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2009).

*The students in the FLEP document*

Another important stakeholder in every language education policy are the students. In fact, the entire language education policies are developed to favour this group of stakeholders more than any other groups. Interpreting how the 'students' are perceived in the FLEP document necessitates a reference to the broader National Document of Education in which the policymakers perceptions about the students are articulated. The image portrayed here strongly resembles that of Islamic ideology and thought, particularly, Shia Islam. As with the section which was devoted to 'teachers', the policymakers use of relational processes along with mental and material ones expresses their understanding about the significance of students to the language teaching enterprise and the skills and abilities they possess.

Students are considered as individuals who have been put in the hands of the education system as celestial deposits on the part of Allah. Accordingly, this understanding about students has been articulated in the FLEP document by employing intensive attributive processes which are employed to assign certain properties to the 'carrier' in systemic functional linguistics. The pattern of presenting the material here which is similar to the pattern of presenting the material in the teachers section of the National Document of Education is indicative of the Iranian foreign language policymakers concern about the characteristics and features that Iranian students

possess. What this implies is that the educational system is responsible for identifying each students' inborn characteristics and acting accordingly to make them meet their ultimate potential.

#### Excerpt 5

**Students** (*Carrier*) **are** (*Pr: attributive*) **celestial deposits** (*attribute*) in the hands of the educational system.

Students have also been described in the document:

#### Excerpt 5a

**Students** (*sensor*) **understand** (*Pr: mental*) the conditions of every situation and can take appropriate action to improve them.

#### Excerpt 5b

**Students** (*actor*) **interact** (*Pr: material*) with the educational setting.

#### Excerpt 5c

**Students** (*carrier*) **have** (*Pr: intensive*) **will and motivation** (*attribute*).

#### Excerpt 5d

**Students** (*carrier*) **have** (*Pr: intensive*) different **abilities, experiences, skills, and capabilities** (*attribute*).

A transitivity analysis in excerpt 5a-5d clearly illustrates the use of material processes and mental processes beside relational processes for the first and only time in the section devoted to students in the National Document of Education. This shift in the manner of presenting the material accords with the earlier discussions and correlates extremely well with the goal of the policymakers which seems to have been ascribing certain properties to the students and presenting them as autonomous individuals. Based on the assumptions of systemic functional linguistics, relational processes denote the state of being or having. Therefore, they are suitable for ascribing certain features and characteristics to certain people. This process is neatly observed in the National Document of Education. However, concepts such as 'autonomy' and 'autonomous learning' include much more than a set of innate properties. The appropriate operationalization of such concepts requires that the students have a sound understanding about the teaching and learning context, have the right to act, and are in the position to spell out their autonomy. In such cases, the use of material and mental processes which respectively signal a change through the input of energy and refer to the individuals' inner thoughts and feelings are most appropriate for this purpose. Accordingly, the National Document of Education employs material and mental processes and assigns the role of actor and sensor to the students to communicate the message that Iranian students possess the required characteristics, have the required level of understanding, and the freedom to act as autonomous individuals.

Unlike teachers who were not directly referred to in the FLEP document, the students have been abundantly referred to in the FLEP document. However, the type of processes used in the FLEP document differs from the type of processes that have been used in the National document of Education. Whereas the latter employs relational, material, and mental processes, the former exclusively employs material and mental processes. The difference in the manner of presenting the material in the two documents could be attributed to the difference in their objectives. In other words, since the purpose of the FLEP document is prescribing the state of affairs, the use

of material processes which is associated with such texts is much more compared to other process types. On the other hand, the purpose of the sections devoted to students in the National Document of Education is more concerned with ascribing properties. Therefore, the use of relational processes is more dominant than other process types:

#### Excerpt 6a

The students (*actor*) must be able to **read** (*Pr: material*) intermediate text (*goal*).

#### Excerpt 6b

The students (*sensor*) must be able to **understand** (*Pr: mental*) intermediate text (*phenomenon*).

#### Excerpt 6c

The students (*actor*) must have the ability to **communicate** (*Pr: material*) in the target language (*goal*).

#### Excerpt 6d

The students (*actor*) must be able to **read** (*Pr: material*) non-sophisticated technical text (*goal*).

#### Excerpt 6e

The students (*sensor*) must be able to **comprehend** (*Pr: mental*) non-...sophisticated technical text (*phenomenon*).

In excerpts 6a to 6e, which include the sentences that have been articulated in the FLEP document about the students, 'the students' have been used in the role of 'actor' and 'sensor' in mental and material processes, respectively. Based on the function and the basic meaning of material processes which is to show that some entity does something or undertakes an action, it can be implied that the Iranian policymakers and foreign language policymakers have attached such prominence to 'the students' as one of the major stakeholders in the Iranian education system that they have intentionally decided to discuss both in the National Document of Education and the FLEP document. In excerpt 6a, the students have been introduced as individuals who are supposed to be able to 'read' texts in a certain foreign language that has been taught after enrolling in language classes. Here, the use of 'intermediate text' (*goal*) which is an optional element in systemic functional linguistics is indicative of the unawareness of the Iranian foreign language policymakers about the fact that foreign language skill development needs extensive time, effort, and logistics, many of which are currently absent from Iran's language teaching enterprise. Following the same pattern, excerpt 6d provides more information on what is expected of the Iranian students after foreign language instruction and provides information about the texts level of difficulty which the students are expected to be able to read after taking language courses. Like excerpt 6a, the use of the phrase 'non-sophisticated technical text' (*goal*) seems to imply the Iranian policymakers have a bad or incomplete understanding about the current status of foreign language teaching in Iran.

In excerpts 6b and 6e the use of material processes has been substituted for mental processes. With respect to the fact that the only difference between the sentences in excerpts 6a and 6d with sentences in excerpts 6b and 6e is the type of the processes used, it is clearly evident that the Iranian foreign language policymakers have understood that the mere correct superficial pronunciation of a string of words that have been written on a page is not an indicator of foreign language skill development. This understanding has been clearly articulated in the FLEP document by employing mental processes (*comprehend, understand*), sensors (*the students*), and phenomena (*non-sophisticated technical text, intermediate text*) in excerpts 6b and 6e. There, the

policymakers assert that the students must not only be able to read intermediate non-sophisticated technical text but must also be able to understand and comprehend them after enrolling in foreign language courses.

#### *The FLEP document and the age factor*

Another issue which has been precisely addressed in Iran's FLEP document is the age that students must begin the learning of a foreign language at school. To this end, the FLEP document employs the material process 'begins' and the circumstantial 'in the first year of secondary school' (*Circ: location*). The analysis further shows that the Iranian foreign language policymakers have indirectly referred to the age of starting the teaching of a foreign language instead of directly specifying an exact numeric value. The policymakers' decision to articulate the time of starting the teaching of a foreign language through circumstantials seems to correlate with the lack of a consensus about the most appropriate time of beginning foreign language instruction. It may be likely that the Iranian foreign language policymakers have tried to lower the criticisms that are associated with the topic of biological puberty and foreign/second language learning by refraining from providing their audiences with a numeric value.

According to the document, it is appropriate to start the teaching of a foreign language in the first year of secondary school (an assertion that at least at the surface level runs contrary to some prevalent patterns of thought). In more technical terms, the Iranian foreign language policymakers assert that the students start being offered foreign language courses at a time which coincides with what is referred to as the end of the critical age hypothesis and the beginning of hemispheric lateralization:

#### Excerpt 7

**the teaching of foreign languages (*agent*) begins (*Pr: material*) in the first year of secondary school (*Circ: location*).**

Superficially and hastily drawing on the beliefs held both by the general public and some linguists who find age a burden for L2 learning (Asher & Garcia, 1969; DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Ramsey & Wright, 1974) will lead to falsely concluding that Iranian foreign language policymakers have totally misunderstood about the starting the teaching of foreign languages. Evidence in favour of the superiority of young children, however, has proved surprisingly hard to find. Much research, on the contrary, shows that age could be a positive advantage (Asher & Price, 1967; Eckstrand, 1978; Harley, 1986; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1977).

It has become a common practice to distinguish short-term benefits of youth from long-term disadvantages of age (Singleton, 1989). According to Cook (2006), if the students are intending to spend many years learning the second or foreign language, they might as well start as children rather than as adults. If they are going to learn the second language for a few years and then drop it, like the majority of learners perhaps (the same case is true for Iranian students), there is an advantage for adults, who would reach a higher standard during the same period. However, Spolsky (1989a) has a different opinion and points out that 'Education systems usually arrive first at a decision of optimal learning age on political or economic grounds and then seek justification for their decision' (p.91). When to teach children a foreign or second language is seldom decided by language teachers or L2 learning experts. It is then likely that the same issues have been operating when Iranian foreign language policymakers were deciding on the age to begin the teaching of a foreign language at school. Political factors such as the countries' international relations with the English speaking countries, particularly the USA may have played a determining

role in this decision. Equally important may have been economic factors which hinder or promote the operationalizing of a full-fledged language education policy. Under certain conditions, lack or shortage of financial resources push policymakers to act despite their belief and value systems and make decisions that do not correlate with them.

## Conclusion

Many complicated and interwoven factors constitute a language policy. The underlying operating ideological and value systems shape a language policy and spell it out in a manner that is considered most appropriate in a specific situation and a particular context. No language policy, no matter how subjective it claims to be, can free itself from the heavy social, political, economic, and religious pressures. Accordingly, one of the questions that guided the present study was about the emerging patterns in Iran's FLEP document from adopting a systemic functional linguistics approach and what they suggest about the perceptions of the Iranian foreign language policymakers. The findings here show these powers at work and uncover how language policies, including the Iranian FLEP, are shaped simultaneously by occasionally contradictory national and international forces. Applying a systemic functional linguistic approach to Iran's FLEP document reveals interesting patterns about the perceptions of the Iranian policymakers. The first identified pattern in Iran's FLEP document was the heavy influence of the Islamic discourse and the policymakers concern for protecting the so called Iranian Islamic identity. Another observed pattern was the Iranian foreign language policymakers' realization about the concept of language globalisation and its various interpretations. The policymakers signal their awareness for this concept by employing various process types and participants to point out that globalization is not simply about movement and flows, but needs to be interpreted also as a hegemonic project, constituted by the power of capital.

The emerged patterns also suggest that Iranian foreign language policymaker's perceptions accord with the current prevalent assumption underlying Iran's foreign language teaching enterprise that is based on strong antiimperialistic feelings. The use of the phrase "through the framework of the Islamic system" (*Circ: manner*) in Iran's most recent FLEP document indicates that the policymakers have been deeply concerned about the English language imperialism and the potential cultural imperialism that follows it. The use of circumstantials further denotes the idea that the inevitable teaching of foreign languages could be directed successfully to promote the socio-political status of the country and meanwhile strengthening the solidarity of the Iranian-Islamic identity.

Besides, evidence from the identified patterns points out that the Iranian foreign language practitioners' have been cautious of the concept of globalisation and its various interpretations while developing the FLEP document. An investigation of Iran's foreign language education policy document through systemic functional linguistics is indicative of the fact that Iranian policymakers have simultaneously viewed globalisation as a major new source for optimism in the world and have perceived it in negative terms. Likely, the Iranian foreign language policymakers have taken concern that the globalisation of English can refer to the increasing intrusion of the English language into the lives of almost all people over the world, it can also refer to the rapid spread of English as a second and foreign language, and it may refer to changes taking place in all varieties of English due to contact with other varieties. With respect to the concept of agency, the investigation of Iran's FLEP document through systemic functional linguistics indicates that this understanding of the way that the local has a bearing on the thinking and behaviour of "subaltern" local agency on the ground may have been overlooked by or hidden from the policy maker's centralist gaze. The pattern observed in FLEP document resembles the rational planning



model of decision-making which has prevailed up to now in language policy implementation which works on the assumption that agency is only present at the centre.

Unlike teachers who were not directly referred to in the FLEP document even once, the students have been abundantly referred to in the FLEP document. Here, the Iranian foreign language sth missing describe and assign different attributes to the students. Another issue which has been precisely addressed in Iran's FLEP document is the age at which students must begin the learning of a foreign language at school. The analysis further shows that the Iranian foreign language policymakers have used indirect means to refer to the age of starting the teaching of a foreign language instead of employing a direct procedure such as an exact numeric value to specify it. Political factors and economic factors may have pushed the Iranian foreign language policymakers to act despite their belief and value systems and make decisions that do not correlate with them.

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## Appendix 1

### Iran's FLEP document

The teaching of foreign languages paves the way for understanding cultural exchanges and transferring technological advances in various aural, visual, and written forms for different purposes and audiences through the framework of the Islamic system.

Since social interactions have developed through intercommunication and technological advances, it is necessary for students to learn a foreign language in addition to their mother tongue which enables them to communicate at the household, local, and national level. Learning a foreign language allows the students to communicate with the world and allows them to use the most recent technological advances. In addition to establishing communication between different individuals and cultures, the teaching of foreign languages affects economic development such as tourism, commerce, technology, scientific progress. It increases social vigilance and enhances political awareness. The teaching of foreign languages should develop communicative competence and problem solving in a way that the individual can communicate using the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) on graduation. The foreign language education curriculum must familiarize students with the required vocabulary and language structures necessary for efficient international communication.

The teaching of foreign languages begins in the first year of secondary school with the purpose of teaching the four language skills and familiarizing students with communicative strategies within the pre-specified frameworks. In the fourth year of secondary school, the students must be able to read and understand intermediate texts. In addition, the ability to write a short article in the foreign language must be reinforced in them. The students must have the necessary abilities to use first hand references and communicate in the foreign language by this time. The teaching of foreign languages will be in English, French, German, or any other language ....

The teaching of foreign language must pass the limitations of language theories, approaches, and methods and be employed as a tool for promoting the national culture and local beliefs and values. In the lower levels, the course content will be organized around local issues such as sanitation, health, and cultural values. In more advanced levels, course content will include political, scientific, economic, and cultural topics and will focus on deepening the student's understanding about these issues. At the end of the sixth year of secondary school, the students must be able to read and comprehend non-sophisticated technical text. In the second three years of secondary school, vocabulary building will help the better understanding of texts and scientific interactions.