

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN IRAN: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This study reflects upon English language education and proficiency in Iran while highlighting it as a merit for getting employed. Contrary to its political and historical reputation in the world, Iran has not been well presented regarding its educational system in general and its foreign-language education in particular. Of course, a critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian education system requires an in-depth analysis of its structure that goes beyond the scope of this study. However, we will attempt to provide some basic information about the educational system in Iran with a discussion of the problems in EFL education and acquiring ELP for employment, along with some suggested solutions. English Language Proficiency has a positive effect on employment probabilities, and lack of English fluency leads to earning losses.

Key words: *English Language Proficiency, Education, Employment, Jobs, Iran*

In the age of globalization and in today's societies, a citizen, as a man of the information age needs a set of abilities and skills that can help him to start a work or business and by leading it in the right path pave the ground for improvement of the business. These skills include:

1. English language proficiency (ELP)
2. IT: ability to work with computer and internet and being familiar with procedures and rules of e-commerce
3. Management: ability to direct and lead
4. Marketing: Familiarity with buying, selling, advertising and e-marketing
5. Financial and economic skills: familiarity with accounting, cost and revenue concepts and economic issues

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So anyone can evaluate his abilities for today's jobs and businesses by interpreting his familiarity with the above skills. From one perspective, these five factors before being skills and abilities to be acquired seem to be essential needs of today's man. Besides it can be said that the first skill may, to some extent, overshadow all others.

As the whole world has shrunken into a global village, the importance of English as the dominant international language cannot be ignored. Over two million people in the world now speak English. The ability to speak and understand this language is mandatory in certain fields, professions and occupations.

English in many countries works as an Intermediate Language and it is the most significant one in the political, economic, military, industrial, cultural and scientific fields and international relations. It opens up vistas of advanced learning in science and technology, commerce and industries, politics and judiciary. It has and will play a vital role in establishing our access to scientific and non scientific learning at the advanced level and will bring our younger generations closer to the level where they will find it easy to achieve what they choose to. As a source language, it is the only language which is fully equipped with vernaculars and it renders adequately the entire corpus of technical terms and scientific jargon.

A Historical Overview

Deciding on a language to be taught as a foreign language in a country is not a matter of pure academic choice but a matter of government policy often motivated by political, social, economic, and educational factors. In Iran English is a foreign language which is not spoken so often by the people.

Furthermore, while most countries around the world have already responded to the issues of globalization, internationalization, and competition among multinationals by endorsing bilingual and multilingual educational systems, Iran has not been much willing to move in this direction in order to keep national unity and identity among the young school generation. This in part can be accounted for by the fact that countries like Hong Kong, India, Japan, and China see English as the key to the international world of commerce; whereas, Iran is more conservative when it comes to foreign language policy. The main reason for this is the politicization of the language issue after the Islamic Revolution and the fear that English presents a threat to the Persian language and Islamic culture.

With many ups and downs, however, at present teaching English in public schools is stabilized with four hours a week at junior high school, a 6 unit credit course at high school, and an additional four unit credit course at the one year pre-university level (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006). An interesting point is that while teaching English was almost banned early after the revolution, it has been given the same number of credit units as other main subject matter areas such as biology and chemistry.

In contrast with the complexities of entering the universities, teaching English or other foreign languages at the university level follows a simple and straightforward policy. Usually, there is a 3-unit credit requirement for all university students regardless of their major. Beyond this general requirement, depending on the needs of the students and the approval of the school, students might take up to 4 units of ESP courses. The way English is taught at the universities is often translation oriented because the main objective is to enable students in different majors to read and understand materials written in English in their own majors.

Due to the determining effect of the context of instruction, no two environments would share exactly the same features. Every community is managed by culturally, mentally, and educationally different people. However after much effort in designing and redesigning the EFL policy in the country, some problems with the teaching of English at public schools and universities solved. Given the fact that learning a foreign language is easier at childhood level for example English language teaching has been added in Primary schools of the country in recent years.

Discussion

Unemployment is a major problem every country is struggling with in recent days. Young people have an important role in social and economic development of any society, given the fact that they constitute about 50% of any country's population. Many graduates in Iran also suffer such difficulties.

In this regard mastering English language can be conducive. No language can take the place of English in securing a job in the present day situation. Experts believe that a candidate, who comprehends a particular area of study through English, proves an asset to an organization. Teaching and learning of English must, therefore, be based on practical considerations. It should occupy a vital place in educational set up.

Given that this language has acquired its worldwide reputation due to the globalised power relations; many organizations will obviously see the advantage of hiring a person who knows English well.

English language at present is the important index for many employers who want to know "How will he fit in with my staff?" In these times of globalization and privatization, the employer is not the system but an individual who runs an organization. Getting a job also means coming to grips with such things as conditions of employment, insurance regulations, indentures of apprenticeship, and the like, most of which are not presented in easy stages.

As mentioned earlier there are few general English units in Iran educational system for students of any major to be fulfilled by all the students and few units of ESP courses in some other majors. However there are four main courses that dealing much with English language: English Language teaching, Translation studies, Linguistics and English Literature. Although the chance for getting a job is apparently for graduates of these majors, any other student who has command over English can try for a job easily.

The Challenge

The main job most students of such fields are seeking is to be employed either as a teacher in a school or a lecturer in a university. However with the support of public and private sectors many proper opportunities are available in many other areas:

Relations in seminars, conferences, festivals and fairs held in Iran can help a student of English literature to culturally communicate with people from other parts of the world. A student of translation study can also find jobs related to English book translation. A translation office can help graduates of such fields to be employed regarding their level of proficiency or they can work on their own side.

Nowadays tourism is one of major source of incomes for any country. Graduates of English fields can be much helpful for attracting people and improving tourism industry. They can also attempt publishing many tourism books and pamphlets by the use of English and held many fairs thereof and introduce rich culture of Iran to the world. Comparing global tourism marketing not much effort has been done regarding this so far.

In the field of industry and commerce and economics many activities are running and the presence of English professionals in factories, organizations and ministries to make ties with abroad public and private sectors is a must. Making use of internet and foreign source and references can improve the efficiency of any industry drastically.

Students of translation studies can be employed as a translator by organizations such as IRIB, Iran News Agency, Ministry of Agriculture and Foreign Affairs. A skilful student of English literature or linguistics can also put his step in translation of books, poems, novels, literary and linguistics texts or introduce different aspects of Persian language and literature to the world.

However despite these things we still observe unemployment of many such graduates in the country. There are many causes that have produced such condition: Weakness of education in schools and universities, being bookish not attempted practically with the outside world, lack of proficiency in English (sometimes even in Persian for translation), Incompatibility of graduates skills with market demand, unawareness of work place systems, few recruitment in public sectors, lack of effective ties between Iran and some western counties and so on.

Overcoming such obstacles needs a support from the government and a plan for improvement in educational and marketing systems in a long term. However individuals and graduates also can find ways to get themselves a better job:

1. Enrolment in private employment centres
2. Being informed of job opportunities through friends and acquaintances
3. Direct contact with companies and employers
4. Presenting their resume in the web
5. Reading the daily requirements, in magazines and newspapers

6. Noting news reports regarding new projects and thinking what kind of English related jobs can be elicited from them
7. Visiting the official websites of national and international companies and organizations for employment opportunities vacancy
8. Consulting with professional advisers or a person already employed
9. Participating in job training workshops
10. Learning English practically in real world and not relying on mere university course works

Conclusion

The present study gives a brief historical background of learning English language in Iran. While discussing some problems and challenges some suggestion and recommendation put forth in order to overcome some of difficulties regarding employment of English field graduates. It can be concluded that Proficiency in English language can pave the ground for many job opportunities in Iran and bring the unemployment rate to a lower level. It is also through English language that we prepare our students to compete at domestic, national and international levels enabling them to decode and decipher terms, rampantly used in the commercial world today.

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