



From Qajar to the Islamic Republic: Power, Policy, and Pedagogy in English Language Teacher Education in Iran

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Abstract: This study examines the historical evolution of English language teacher education (ELTE) in Iranian higher education, tracing its development from the Qajar era to the present through an analysis of power structures, policies, and pedagogical change. While existing research has largely focused on synchronic policy debates or program evaluations, no study has traced this trajectory across all three major sociopolitical eras of Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic, particularly for higher education institutions under the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) and its predecessors. Drawing on primary archival records, policy directives, and institutional documents analyzed through qualitative content analysis, and guided by historical comparative education, historical institutionalism, and postcolonial theory, the study reveals three persistent cross-era patterns: the enduring and intensifying centralization of state control over ELTE; a persistent political duality whereby English is pragmatically retained for scientific advancement yet ideologically rejected as a vehicle of Western cultural influence; and the structural persistence of formal program frameworks despite radical ideological shifts in content. These continuities have produced critical challenges including diminished institutional autonomy, contested and inconsistent curricula, and a fragmented pedagogical identity for ELTE professionals. The study recommends concrete reforms: curriculum flexibility within mandated frameworks, teacher-driven action research, and structured dialogue between policymakers and practitioners to foster greater professional agency within Iran's historically centralized system. By providing the first historical analysis of ELTE at MSRT-affiliated universities, this study offers essential context for contemporary policy reform aimed at balancing national priorities with professional effectiveness.

Keywords: Centralization, English Language Teacher Education (ELTE), Historical Comparative Education, Historical Institutionalism, Indigenization, Iran, Iranian Higher Education, Political Duality, Postcolonial Theory.

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Introduction

English language teacher education (ELTE) holds critical importance for two interrelated reasons: the well-documented link between teacher quality and student success ([Aliakbari & Tabatabaei, 2019](#); [Gholami & Qurbanzada, 2016](#); [Jalali et al., 2025](#)), and the position of English itself as a site of political, sociocultural, and ideological contestation ([Burns & Richards, 2009](#); [Daneshfar & Moharami, 2025](#); [Mirhosseini & Miryouness Haghi, 2024](#); [Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019](#)). These factors render ELTE consequential, especially in contexts like Iran, where English has long been intertwined with questions of modernization, national identity, and foreign influence.

In Iran, ELTE programs operate through multiple institutional pathways under two ministries. Public and private universities, as well as language institutes, are supervised by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), while teacher education universities (e.g., Farhangian University) are overseen by the Ministry of Education ([Jalali et al., 2025](#)). They all prepare English teachers, but with different emphases: language institutes train instructors for private contexts, teacher education universities prepare public school teachers, and MSRT-affiliated universities provide broader academic education for university instructors and other contexts.

Despite the significance of these programs, research on English language education in Iran has largely centered on the broad course of language teaching or sociopolitical debates around language policy ([Borjian, 2013](#); [Farhady et al., 2010](#); [Kiany et al., 2011](#); [Mirhosseini et al., 2023](#); [Mirhosseini & Miryouness Haghi, 2024](#); [Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019](#)). Far less attention has been paid to the historical development of ELTE itself, particularly through studies that integrate power structures, policy shifts, and pedagogical reform. This is a gap that extends beyond Iran. [Yuan et al. \(2022\)](#) note that research on ELTE in higher education remains limited worldwide, with historical perspectives especially underrepresented. Globally, ELTE has evolved through distinct phases, from colonial-era language teaching to post-war professionalization and contemporary globalization-driven reforms ([Howatt & Smith, 2014](#); [Pennycook, 2017](#)). However, the majority of ELTE historiography remains focused on Western, English-dominant contexts, with non-Western contexts largely absent from historical accounts ([Yuan et al., 2022](#)).

Iran provides a particularly valuable instance for understanding how ELTE is shaped by shifts in state ideology and geopolitics. Its history over the past two centuries has included monarchy, authoritarian modernization, Westernization, and revolutionary Islamic governance. This is a political arc that is historically rare and analytically rich, one that few

other national contexts can offer. This makes Iran not merely a non-Western example, but a significant test case for understanding the relationship between state power, policy, and pedagogy in ELTE.

Building on this significance, the present study addresses the gap by tracing the evolution of ELTE at MSRT-affiliated universities from the Qajar era to the present. No study has examined ELTE across all three major sociopolitical eras of modern Iran under the supervision of the MSRT and its predecessors. This focus is justified for three reasons: MSRT institutions prepare the majority of university-level English instructors; no comparable historical study exists for this pathway; and these universities have been the primary site of academic professionalization in ELTE, including graduate education and research requirements. This pathway thus offers a unique window into developments of ELTE in Iranian higher education.

To analyze these developments systematically, the study is guided by an analytical framework that draws on three interconnected intellectual traditions: historical comparative education (Kandel, 1939; Hans, 1949; Kazamias, 2009), historical institutionalism (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002), and postcolonial perspectives on language education (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2017). Historical comparative education provides the methodological grounding for comparing three distinct sociopolitical eras within a single national context, consistent with the intra-country tradition of comparative education. Historical institutionalism offers concepts of path dependence and institutional layering to explain how institutional structures, once established, persist and constrain policy choices across political regimes. Postcolonial theory, in turn, illuminates the cultural and ideological dimensions of English language education. Together, these lenses move the analysis beyond description to examine how power structures, policy frameworks, and pedagogical practices have interacted across nearly two centuries of Iranian history.

Consistent with this framework, pedagogy in this study is broadly understood as encompassing program structure, curricula, evaluation systems, and content requirements. This expanded definition is appropriate for a historical analysis because it captures how power structures have consistently shaped pedagogical practice in Iran, where ELTE has long been contested (Borjian, 2013). English in Iran has been alternately embraced for modernization and resisted as a conduit for Western influence (Borjian, 2015; Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019), tensions that have left clear traces in teacher education programs.

To capture these traces across time, the study is periodized according to Iran's three major sociopolitical eras of Qajar (1836-1925), Pahlavi (1925-1979), and Islamic Republic (1979-present). These periods represent distinct configurations of state power and governance

structures, which are mechanisms of state control over the educational enterprise. The study begins with the Qajar era, which starts in 1836. This period marked the beginning of intensified encounters with European powers, which would later catalyze the establishment of Iran's first modern higher education institution, Dar al-Funun, in 1851. This periodization reflects historical consensus in Iranian educational historiography ([Aghazadeh, 2007](#); [Mahboubi Ardakani, 1971, 1991](#)).

By reconstructing this historical journey across the above-mentioned three eras, the study aims to deepen discussions of power, policy, and pedagogy in ELTE beyond short-term changes or surface-level reforms. This historical perspective provides a foundation for reform by revealing which features of the system are historically entrenched and resistant to change, and which are more adaptable. This understanding grounds reform efforts in an awareness of the deep structural and political forces that have long shaped ELTE, a practical necessity in an era of frequent educational change. This historical study is guided by the following two research questions:

1. How did governance structures, policies, and pedagogical features (program structure, curricula, and evaluation systems) shape ELTE across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras?
2. What cross-era patterns can be identified in power structure, policy implementation, and pedagogical reform across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras?

Literature Review

English language teacher education (ELTE) encompasses not only classroom methodology but also the broader configuration of program structure, curricular mandates, evaluation systems, and regulatory frameworks that shape how teachers are prepared ([Burns & Richards, 2009](#); [Richards et al., 1996](#)). As [Cochran-Smith et al. \(2008\)](#) and [Tedick \(2005, 2013\)](#) argue, the complexities of language teaching have evolved alongside societal change, requiring continuous investigation of preparation programs to inform teacher educators, policymakers, and researchers alike. In contexts where English is entangled with questions of national identity and foreign influence, such investigation becomes increasingly important ([Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019](#)).

In Iran, ELTE has historically been shaped by governance structures and policy decisions as much as by pedagogical change, making the field a critical site for examining the relationship between state power and educational practice, a relationship that this study analyzes through the lenses of historical comparative education, historical institutionalism, and

postcolonial theory, as introduced earlier. Within this conceptual framework, the comparative dimension of the study is grounded in historical comparative education (Kazamias, 2009); centralization is understood through the lens of historical institutionalism (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002); and the duality in language policy, along with content indigenization, are examined through postcolonial theory (Pennycook, 2017). This framework is further informed by Cowen's (2009) concept of structural sedimentation and Kumaravadivelu's (2006) observations on enduring centralization in language education policy, both of which underscore the persistence of institutional forms and top-down control across ideological shifts.

Policy Studies

Language policy in Iran has received substantial research attention. Kiany et al. (2011) analyzed foreign language education policy within broader national educational frameworks, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in official documents while calling for a unified policy that involves all stakeholders. A top-down communication gap between planning and practice was uncovered by Atai and Mazlum (2013), indicating that centralized policymaking systematically excludes teachers from decision-making. This pattern is echoed across several other studies, which have documented discrepancies between stated policies and classroom practices (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2016), conflicts between language policy and societal needs (Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019), and mismatches between government positions and public attitudes toward English (Rassouli & Osam, 2019). Most recently, Mirhosseini and Miryouness Haghi (2024) highlighted the influence of Islamic values on official ELT policies alongside a persistent lack of policy coherence, while Daneshfar and Moharami (2025) examined policy's role in shaping learner identity and stated that the English language policy in Iran needs to change for disregarding people's needs.

What unites these policy studies is their synchronic focus. They describe the present state of language policy and its shortcomings but do not explain how current governance arrangements emerged from prior political regimes or how policy mechanisms have shifted across Iran's distinct historical eras. From the historical institutionalist perspective, this limitation is significant because the cultural and ideological tensions surrounding English in Iran cannot be fully understood without examining their historical roots. Centralization, the concentration of decision-making authority at the national level, has been a recurring theme in educational governance, yet it remains unexplored in these studies. The present study addresses this gap by tracing power, policy, and pedagogy development across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras, thereby responding directly to the first research question.

Program Evaluation Studies

Beyond policy analyses, several studies have directly assessed the quality of Iranian ELTE programs. Aliakbari and Tabatabaei (2019) concluded that continuous evaluation and targeted improvements are necessary. Similarly, Ranjbari et al. (2020) evaluated EFL teacher education curricula through input from teachers, educators, and student teachers, finding that while curricula were generally adequate in pedagogic and linguistic skills, outdated materials and insufficient resources hampered professional growth. In a more focused study, Tajik et al. (2022) examined preparation programs in private language institutes in post-revolutionary Iran, revealing a narrow focus on certain methodologies and a lack of cultural consideration in teaching.

These evaluation studies offer valuable snapshots of program quality at specific moments, yet they document what exists without explaining its historical formation. The origins of current curricular features, such as indigenization, remain unexamined. Another issue is that these studies focus almost exclusively on Ministry of Education or private institute programs, with minimal attention to MSRT-affiliated universities. The present study addresses this gap, through the first research question, by tracing the historical evolution of program structure, curricula, and evaluation systems across all three eras.

Comparative and Historical Studies

Comparative studies have situated Iranian ELTE against international benchmarks. Nezakat-Alhossaini and Ketabi (2013) compared teacher training in Iran, Turkey, and Australia, finding that Iran and Turkey share similar challenges while Australia's system is more structured and resource-rich. Avanaki and Sadeghi (2014) analyzed teacher education in Iran and the United Kingdom, noting that Iran's centralized model contrasts sharply with the UK's historically decentralized approaches. Extending this line of inquiry, Rajaenia et al. (2018) examined pre-service teacher education in Iran relative to five other countries, observing that Japan adopts a more sensitive approach while Germany and the United States present more advanced systems. Shahi et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of ELT policies in Iran and Singapore, highlighting Singapore's coherent policy implementation and contrasting it with Iran's inconsistent policies and negative stakeholder perceptions. Most recently, Iranmehr et al. (2024) compared English language education policies in Iran and Saudi Arabia, showing that neoliberalism shapes Saudi policies while anti-imperialist sentiment influences Iran's approach.

These comparative studies usefully demonstrate what Iranian ELTE lacks relative to other contexts in terms of coherence, resources, and stakeholder inclusion. Yet they typically treat Iran's contemporary situation as a static given rather than as an outcome of historical processes that could be examined and understood.

Overall, the existing literature on Iranian ELTE has documented policy fragmentation, evaluated program quality, identified curricular shortcomings, compared Iran's system with international models, and explored professional challenges. What remains mostly absent is a historically grounded analysis. As [Kazamias \(2009\)](#) observed regarding comparative education, historically oriented research has declined due to the methodological demands of archival and documentary work. Similarly, [Howatt and Widdowson \(2004\)](#), along with [Pennycook \(2017\)](#), demonstrate the value of historical perspectives, a tradition that directly informs the present study's intra-country comparative approach.

A notable historical analysis in Iran is [Jalali et al. \(2025\)](#), who analyzed the development of ELTE programs under the supervision of Iran's Ministry of Education, identifying six historical phases and tracing a curricular transition from classical and structural methods to communicative and interactive approaches. This study is an important exception, yet it focuses exclusively on programs under the Ministry of Education. Universities overseen by the MSRT have remained largely overlooked in historical studies of ELTE. Specifically, no study has traced the evolution of ELTE at these institutions from the Qajar period to the present. The present study addresses this gap by extending [Jalali et al.'s \(2025\)](#) historical work to MSRT-affiliated universities across all three major sociopolitical eras of Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic, thereby integrating the analysis of power, policy, and pedagogy and directly addressing both research questions of the study.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a historical document analysis design to examine the evolution of ELTE in Iran from the Qajar era to the present. This design is appropriate for addressing the study's two research questions, which require tracing long-term governance patterns, policy developments, and pedagogical changes across distinct sociopolitical eras ([Bowen, 2009](#)). This approach was selected because the study's primary aim is to reconstruct policy and institutional trajectories rather than capture lived experiences. While oral history could have provided teacher perspectives, the absence of such voices, particularly for older eras such as Qajar, made document analysis the most feasible method for establishing a comprehensive account of

power, policy, and pedagogy. Consistent with the intra-country historical comparative approach outlined earlier, this design allows for the integration of primary and secondary sources to construct a cross-era perspective.

Data Sources

The data comprised both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources provide first-hand accounts of events without interpretation or analysis and are typically found in public historical archives (Ary et al., 2018). For this study, primary sources included national-level archival records, official policy documents, and institutional archives. Specific materials consisted of government decrees, educational regulations, national policy documents, curricula, evaluation frameworks issued by the MSRT and its predecessors, university-level reports, faculty meeting minutes, and teacher education program descriptions. Secondary sources offer second-hand descriptions of historical events resulting from the analysis and interpretation of primary sources (Ary et al., 2018). These included book chapters, research articles, and dissertations.

Primary sources, most of which were unpublished, required extensive retrieval from public and historical archives. We obtained them through in-person visits to research sites or by accessing their digital libraries or archives. The research sites that we consulted for archival documents included the MSRT, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and its Secretariat, the Islamic Parliament Research Center, the National Library and Archives of Iran, and the Central Library and Documentation Center of the University of Tehran. These archives provided access to macro-level educational policies, governance patterns, and institutional structures that have shaped Iranian ELTE before and after the 1979 Revolution.

Secondary sources were accessed online and in libraries, offering further understanding of local policies and the country's economic, social, cultural, and ideological climate as it affected ELTE. These sources were identified through systematic database searches (e.g., Google Scholar and Scopus) using the study's keywords. Sources were included based on their relevance to the research questions, their coverage of the three historical periods (Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic), theoretical grounding, and their credibility (peer-reviewed journals, reputable publishers).

Data Selection

Given the large volume of available materials, Gross's (2018) inclusionary and exclusionary criteria were employed to guide document selection. The inclusionary criteria were: documents dated from the Qajar era to the present related to Iran's educational context; documents

connected, even remotely, to teacher education in Iranian higher education institutions, with special emphasis on ELTE; and documents concerning the country's sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and ideological atmosphere. These criteria ensured that selected materials provided a comprehensive picture of ELTE's evolution in Iran. The exclusionary criteria, applied to reduce irrelevant or redundant data, included: damaged or unreadable documents; documents in languages other than Persian or English; provincial educational documents without bearing on national-level policy; and documents with misleading titles.

The selection process proceeded through three iterative screening stages. From over 9,000 pages gathered through systematic searches, initial screening based on titles and abstracts eliminated approximately 4,000 pages. Next, full-text review for relevance eliminated an additional 2,500 pages. Final selection based on richness of content and direct relevance to ELTE resulted in approximately 2,000 pages. Documents sought but inaccessible, primarily due to institutional gatekeeping or restricted access, were noted, and their potential impact on the findings is acknowledged.

Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the gathered data by taking an inductive approach through which codes, themes, and categories emerged (Ary et al., 2018; Mirhosseini, 2020). The analysis followed three steps. First, documents were organized chronologically within each historical era. Second, thematic coding was applied guided by the research questions to identify instances of governance intervention, policy directions, pedagogical features, and recurring patterns. Third, a cross-era comparative analysis highlighted continuities and discontinuities in governance, policy, and pedagogy.

The coding process proceeded through three cycles. The first cycle involved descriptive coding using broad categories such as governance, policy directive, curriculum content, and evaluation method. The second cycle refined these codes into analytical categories; for example, governance became a centralization mechanism. The third cycle involved cross-era comparative analysis, where these analytical categories were compared across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic periods to identify enduring patterns. The entire coding process was documented through analytical memos maintained throughout, which recorded interpretive decisions and emerging themes. To enhance rigor, a second researcher independently coded a subset of documents (approximately 15% of the total), and discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus. Drawing on Saldaña (2021),

this iterative coding process supported both data reduction and analytical interpretation, facilitating the identification of patterns across historical periods.

Archival materials were examined in their original Persian. Translations into English were conducted by the first author, a native Persian speaker, and double-checked by the co-authors, also native Persian speakers with expertise in ELTE. Translation decisions, mainly regarding key policy terms, were documented in analytical memos to ensure transparency. While formal back-translation was not employed, this verification process served a similar function.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure credibility, data were triangulated across multiple source types. Where possible, policy statements were cross-checked with contemporary institutional reports and independent scholarly accounts. Analytical memos were maintained to document interpretive decisions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, peer review of the coding was conducted by a second researcher to improve accuracy and consistency.

Researcher Positionality

As Iranian researchers, we acknowledge that our position may have influenced document selection and interpretation. As insider researchers, we bring cultural and linguistic familiarity that facilitated interpretation of Persian documents. However, this insider status also carries potential biases, including assumptions about historical events, political orientations, and political significance. While the research team shares a national context, individual members hold different political and ideological perspectives, which were navigated through peer review of coding and interpretation. To mitigate biases, we grounded interpretations in documented evidence, triangulated across source types, and subjected coding to peer review. Our goal has been to present a balanced account without privileging any single political perspective. We also acknowledge that our positionality as academics within the Iranian higher education system may have shaped our focus on MSRT-affiliated universities, which we have justified in the Introduction.

Ethical Considerations

Because this study relied exclusively on archival and published documents, it did not involve human participants and did not require Institutional Review Board approval. We have adhered to ethical principles of responsible research conduct, including accurate representation of

source materials, proper attribution, and transparent reporting of data selection and analysis procedures. All documents were used in accordance with the access policies of the respective archives and libraries.

Limitations of the Methodology

Document analysis is inherently limited by the partial and selective nature of archival preservation. State-generated documents reflect the priorities of ruling regimes, potentially obscuring dissent or alternative perspectives. Despite our efforts to access all relevant materials, some documents were inaccessible due to institutional gatekeeping. These limitations are further addressed in the Conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

This section deals with the research questions in light of the data gathered from all the primary and secondary document sources. The findings are presented and discussed within Iran's historical, social, cultural, economic, and political context, as according to [Wright and Beaumont \(2014\)](#), educational enterprises cannot be understood in a vacuum. It is important to mention that there has been a scarcity of documents pertaining to ELTE in Iran; as a result, it has to be taken into consideration that most of the documents collected regarding teacher education in this study address all aspects and subjects of education and can, therefore, be interpreted as covering ELTE among other subject areas. We made every effort to analyze all relevant documents related to teacher education, English language education and higher education, with a particular focus on ELTE at universities in Iran supervised by the MSRT.

The Evolution of ELTE in Iran: Governance, Policy, and Pedagogy within the Country's Historical, Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political Context in Each Era ***Qajar Era (1836–1925): Introduction of Higher Education under Centralized Royal Patronage, Pragmatic Policy, Non-Standardized Programs, and Practical Curricula***

In response to the first research question about governance structures, policies, and pedagogical features, the Qajar era was characterized by the initial establishment of centralized state control over higher education, driven by pragmatic diplomatic needs and the beginning of modernization efforts. These efforts resulted in non-standardized program structures, practical

curricula, and informal evaluation systems, reflecting a European-modeled approach to education. Table 1 provides an overview of power, policy, and pedagogy in the Qajar era.

Table 1. Overview of Key Themes in the Qajar Era: Power, Policy, and Pedagogy

Theme	Key Points
Policy driver	Driven by pragmatic diplomatic needs and initial modernization efforts
Governance and centralization	Central government assumed full responsibility for education; established foundational centralized structure
Key institution(s)	Dar al-Funun (1851): First higher education institution; government-funded and managed
Administration and regulation	Ministry of Education created in 1909; 1911 law authorized sending students abroad, half for becoming teachers
English language status	English introduced as pragmatic policy for diplomatic and trade ties; not a systematic program
ELTE status	Formal ELTE did not exist; teacher preparation lacked standardization and relied on foreign nationals
Program length	Non-standardized and variable: Dar al-Funun (7 years → 5 years → 4 years)
Curricula (content)	Non-unified and imported; relied on foreign instructors and materials
Curricula (philosophy)	Practical focus; contrasted with memorization-based Maktabas
Evaluation system	Informal and merit-based
English language teaching	Pragmatic and integrated into broader training; not an independent program

As Table 1 indicates, the policy driver during this period was the state's pragmatic diplomatic needs and its initial modernization efforts, which included modernizing the army, establishing trade relations, requesting European consultants, and sending students abroad ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The first major institutional action was the establishment of Dar al-Funun in 1851, a polytechnic college where the central government assumed full responsibility for funding and management ([Aghazadeh, 2007, 2009](#); [Mahboubi Ardakani, 1971](#); [Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)).

The Ministry of Education was created in 1909 ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 1910](#)), and in 1911, the National Parliament authorized sending students abroad, half designated to study education to become future teachers ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 1911](#)). The Central Teacher Training School for Males and Females followed in 1918 ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1917](#)). These policy initiatives formally recognized teacher preparation for the first time, while their implementation remained restricted to primary and secondary education.

As for the status of English, its introduction was a pragmatic policy linked to diplomatic and trade ties rather than a systematic program ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1924](#); [Ringer, 2001](#)). Initially, French was taught as the global lingua franca, but the curriculum later evolved to include English and Russian. Old handwritten documents confirm a teacher's request to teach English at Dar al-Funun ([National Library and Archives of Iran, n.d.](#); [National Library and Archives of Iran, 1924](#)). This shift reflected growing British influence, yet English instruction in Iran remained limited. Formal ELTE did not exist in this period and teacher preparation lacked standardization and depended on foreign nationals ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The state did not yet conceive of language teaching as a profession requiring specialized education.

The employment of European teachers introduced Western culture and contemporary teaching techniques, placing education in a state of imitation and adaptation ([Safarzadeh, 2018](#); [Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#); [Yaghmayi, 1997](#)). The curricular philosophy was practical in focus, aimed at solving societal and administrative problems ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)), contrasting sharply with the memorization-based Maktabas (traditional schools) ([Farasatkah, 2000](#); [Mahboubi Ardakani, 1991](#)). These developments introduced tensions between tradition and modernity within the society of this era ([Toreyfi Hosseini et al., 2012](#)).

The pedagogical features detailed in Table 1 illustrate the non-standardized and variable nature of early program length. There was no exact curricular document found, but evidence indicates non-unified, imported curricula with reliance on foreign instructors and materials ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The evaluation system was informal and merit-based: high-performing students were called Khalifeye Dars (teacher assistants) and were assigned to teach or write books proposing solutions to societal problems ([Mahboubi Ardakani, 1991](#)).

The Qajar era established the foundational pattern of centralized state control over higher education that would persist into subsequent periods. Control was exercised through

royal appointment of educators, direct state funding, and the authorization of foreign instructors. The reliance on foreign instructors and imported materials created a dependency that carried Western cultural influence, foreshadowing the political duality that would intensify in later eras, as the state needed English for strategic purposes but was uncomfortable with its cultural baggage (Borjian, 2013; Pennycook, 2017). From a historical institutionalist perspective, this period constitutes a critical juncture, wherein foundational decisions regarding the control, funding, and staffing of higher education were established (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). These decisions created institutional pathways that subsequent regimes would inherit and amplify. The Qajar period did not produce a coherent model of ELTE, but it established the governance template that would shape the field for generations.

Pahlavi Era (1925–1979): Expansion, Modernization, Authoritarian Control, Standardized Programs, and Western-Modeled Curricula

Addressing the first research question's focus on governance, policy, and pedagogy, the Pahlavi era was characterized by the expansion and professionalization of ELTE under authoritarian top-down control, linked to a comprehensive Westernization and modernization agenda. This period saw the standardization and expansion of ELTE programs and the adoption of Western-modeled curricula. Table 2 provides an overview of the key developments in the Pahlavi era.

Table 2. Overview of Key Themes in the Pahlavi Era: Power, Policy, and Pedagogy

Theme	Key Points
Policy driver	Driven by Westernization and modernization agenda
Governance and centralization	Authoritarian top-down control and limited institutional autonomy; universities created by the state to meet its needs
Key institution(s)	Tehran University (1934): first modern university in Iran
Administration and regulation	Ministry of Culture (1940) and Ministry of Science and Higher Education (1967) assumed complete centralized authority over higher education; 1928 law authorized sending students abroad
English language status	English strongly linked to Westernization and modernization policy.
ELTE status	Formalization and standardization of teacher preparation; a shift from French to American education model

Program length	Formalized into multi-year degrees; 3 years of study at Faculty of Literature resulted in a bachelor's degree (1947)
Curricula (philosophy)	Standardized and aligned with Western academic models; introduced linguistics, pedagogy, and literature
Curricula (content)	Classic English literature and skills-based courses (grammar, conversation, composition); detailed syllabi and credit units
Evaluation system	Formalized through written examinations, coursework assessments, and placement tests
English language teaching	ELTE formally established as a specialized, credit-based academic major within national universities

As presented in Table 2, the policy driver during this period was the state's Westernization and modernization agenda. Educational institutions became the primary vehicle for inducing preferred cultural norms on society ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The important point here is that education was no longer merely a strategic tool for state survival, but an active instrument for cultural transformation.

Tehran University, Iran's first modern university, was established in 1934, borrowing its form from Western nations ([Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1949](#)). The integration of teacher training into the university system marked a significant shift from the Qajar era. Teacher preparation was institutionalized within a degree-granting framework, with the Higher Teacher Training College's literary and scientific departments becoming the Faculties of Literature and Sciences ([Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1949](#)).

The Pahlavi state exercised authoritarian top-down control that limited institutional autonomy. The president of Tehran University was appointed by the Ministry with the direct approval of the king, and the university's budget came entirely from the government ([Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1949](#)). This structure ensured that higher education served the regime's modernization goals rather than developing independent professional authority.

Administratively, the Ministry of Culture (1940) and later the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (1967) assumed full centralized authority over higher education ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 1962](#)). These bodies oversaw educational policy, university affairs, curriculum design, and entry requirements. A 1974 law added responsibilities that included monitoring universities and providing teacher training opportunities ([National Library](#)

and Archives of Iran, 1977). To address the need for teachers, the 1928 law authorized sending 100 students abroad annually, most designated for teaching careers (Islamic Parliament Research Center, 1928). The National Parliament also authorized a Higher Teacher Training College for Males in 1929 and, in 1933, approved the development of colleges for both sexes (National Library and Archives of Iran, 1934). These policies formalized what the Qajar era had only initiated, a systematic, state-directed approach to teacher preparation.

Following the Second World War, educational policy shifted from the French model to the American system through international cooperation agreements. American universities played a role in developing higher education in Iran (National Library and Archives of Iran, 1977). An agreement signed in 1958 between the United States and Iran assigned technical advisors to aid teacher preparation (National Library and Archives of Iran, 1961). This shift revealed the Pahlavi state's willingness to adopt international best practices when they served its modernization goals within its centralized structure.

As Table 2 summarizes, English was not merely a subject of study but a symbol of the regime's desired cultural alignment with the West, occupying a privileged position within the foreign language curriculum. Regarding ELTE status, this era saw the formalization and standardization of teacher preparation (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1949). By the end of the Pahlavi era, ELTE had become a recognized academic field with standardized curricula and formal degree requirements.

Program length in the Pahlavi era was formalized into multi-year bachelor's degrees. The study period for Teacher Training Colleges was three years, requiring a high school diploma for admission (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1934). By 1947, three years of study at the Faculty of Literature resulted in a bachelor's degree (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1947). By 1960, the requirement was formalized as at least 60 credits of coursework plus a final exam (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1960, 1964).

Curricula were standardized around Western academic models, incorporating linguistics, pedagogy, and literature. The English Literature certificate program required studying poets and authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, and Wordsworth, using classic Western texts (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1938). This emphasis on English literary classics positioned English not merely as a tool for diplomacy but as a gateway to Western culture and modernity itself.

Evaluation systems became formalized through written examinations, coursework assessments, and placement tests. Students were categorized by a placement test at the Institute

of Foreign Languages. They were also assessed every two months and required a minimum GPA of 16 to advance (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1964). This metrics-driven system replaced the informal, merit-based evaluation of the Qajar era.

ELTE was formally established as a specialized, credit-based academic major within national universities. Candidates for a bachelor's degree in teaching studied educational foundations beyond their subject area, including psychology, sociology, philosophy of education, principles of education, and history of education (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1938). By the 1969–1970 academic year, the Department of Foreign Languages at the University of Tehran enrolled approximately 500 students across four majors, two-thirds of whom were studying English, with about 40 instructors, one-quarter of whom were foreign nationals (Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1970). The creation of a dedicated, credit-based ELTE major represented a fundamental transformation in Iranian history. English language teaching was recognized as a distinct professional field requiring specialized training.

The Pahlavi era transformed ELTE from an informal, ad hoc arrangement into a formalized, standardized field within Iran's first modern university. This professionalization was embedded in a governance system that prioritized state control over teacher autonomy. The reliance on foreign models and instructors created a dependency that would later be contested, a pattern consistent with postcolonial analysis of imported and adapted Western educational models in non-Western contexts (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 2017). From a historical institutionalist perspective, this period represents a phase of institutional consolidation, wherein the foundational decisions of the Qajar era were codified into formal structures that would prove remarkably resilient (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). What the Pahlavi period bequeathed to the Islamic Republic era was not only a fully institutionalized ELTE infrastructure but also a pattern of centralized control that would persist despite ideological uprising. English occupied a privileged position within this framework as a symbol of modernity, setting the stage for the ideological contestations that would follow after 1979.

Islamic Republic Era (1979–present): Ideological Realignment, Centralization, Indigenized Curricula, Dual Evaluation, and Standardized ELTE Programs

Turning to the first research question, the Islamic Republic era is characterized by extreme centralization, ideological oversight, and an enduring duality between revolutionary ideology and pragmatic scientific needs in ELTE. In pedagogical terms, this period has seen the

introduction of ideologically aligned curricula, dual evaluation systems, and the persistence of structural frameworks inherited from the Pahlavi era. Table 3 summarizes the key power, policy, and pedagogical features of this period.

Table 3. Overview of Key Themes in the Islamic Republic Era: Power, Policy, and Pedagogy

Theme	Key Points
Policy driver	Driven by ideological realignment and centralization; aimed at Islamization of higher education and training instructors committed to Islamic ideology
Governance and centralization	Extreme centralization and ideological oversight; Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution's resolutions enforceable across all educational fields
Key governing bodies	Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the MSRT direct macro-level policy for ideological conformity
Administration and regulation	Indigenization policies: establishment of SAMT (1985); Instructors' Training University founded (1982) to train devout professors; development plans (1989 onward) shaped policy; censorship of online content (2001); Vision Document and Scientific Map (2005, 2011) outlined long-term goals
English language status	Policy duality: English pragmatically retained for science and technology but viewed negatively as language of imperialism; Western socio-cultural content excluded
ELTE status	Ideological realignment of ELTE; personnel control through ideological screening of teachers and faculty members
Program length	Basic multi-year, credit-based structure retained: Associate (2 years/72 credits), BA (4 years/112-134 credits), MA (4 semesters), PhD (3-4 years)
Curricula (philosophy and content)	Restructured to align with Islamic values; English for scientific advancement with resistance to cultural influence; using English to spread revolutionary and religious values
Curricula (new focus)	Localized content (e.g., 'Language Teaching in Iran and the world'); recent revisions emphasize technology-assisted language teaching (CALL)

Theme	Key Points
Evaluation system	Dual (academic and ideological); teacher candidates assessed on Islamic values, pedagogical competence, and professional skills; retaining formalized methods (exams, theses, comprehensive exams)
English language teaching	ELTE established as a specialized, credit-based academic major within national universities; revised and evolved through time

As Table 3 indicates, following the 1979 Revolution, the educational system underwent fundamental ideological change ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The state shifted to extreme centralization and ideological oversight, primarily directed by the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1981](#)). The Council was tasked with training pious professors, screening students, Islamizing universities, and eliminating Western secular influences ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The Instructors' Training University was founded in 1982 specifically to train devoted professors, including foreign language professors ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1987](#)). This centralization exceeded even the Pahlavi era's control, as ideological conformity became the explicit measure of institutional legitimacy.

A key initiative was the establishment of the Organization for Researching and Composing University Textbooks in Islamic Sciences and the Humanities (SAMT) in 1985, a state-run publishing house responsible for indigenizing the curriculum by developing homegrown textbooks. Substituting Western cultural values with Islamic ones was one of SAMT's duties ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1981](#)). The creation of SAMT represented an unprecedented level of state intervention into the curriculum. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution passed a bill in 2001 that authorized censorship of online content deemed contrary to Islamic principles ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2019](#)).

From 1989 onward, Iran's development plans reflected a series of shifting political discourses: reconstruction (1989–1997), reformist (1997–2005), conservative (2005–2013), and moderate (2013–2021), each of which shaped higher education policy in distinct ways. The Third Plan (2000–2004) renamed the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education to the MSRT and broadened university autonomy over academic planning ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2000](#)). The Fourth Plan (2004–2009) made explicit reference to English language education and the need to update English curricula ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2004](#)). Following plans continued to prioritize indigenization, Islamization, and the

preparation of university faculty ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2017](#)). The Twenty-Year Vision Document (2005) and the Comprehensive Scientific Map (2011) set out long-term national objectives, though neither addressed ELTE at universities directly ([Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011](#)). Despite these shifts in political rhetoric, the fundamental structure of centralized governance and ideological supervision has persisted ([Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2022](#)).

English in this era has been characterized by an enduring duality: pragmatically retained for scientific and technological independence, yet viewed negatively as the language of imperialism ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#); [Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, n.d.](#)). Regarding ELTE, macro-level plans continued to emphasize indigenization, Islamization, and the training of pious university professors ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 2017](#)). Ideological screening of teacher candidates and faculty members became standard practice, reflecting the state's view of teachers as ideological agents whose political commitment often outweighed professional credentials ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1987, 1993](#); [Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011](#)).

Pedagogically, the structural framework established in the Pahlavi proved remarkably resilient, even as its ideological content was transformed. The formal program length and credit-based framework remained largely intact, but the content was ideologically overhauled, indicating a significant structural continuity ([Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)). Curriculum objectives expanded beyond professional skills to promote revolutionary, spiritual, and religious values ([Borjian, 2013](#); [National Library and Archives of Iran, 1981](#)). Despite efforts to indigenize materials, foreign English textbooks remained present in the local market, indicating an ongoing demand for internationally current resources ([Borjian, 2013, 2015](#)).

Evaluation systems retained formalized methods of credit-based systems, examinations, and projects but expanded to include both ideological and academic components. Teacher candidates are now assessed on their adherence to Islamic values as well as their pedagogical competence and professional skills ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The addition of ideological assessment marked a significant departure from the Pahlavi era, where academic credentials alone determined eligibility.

Localization initiatives introduced new courses, such as “Language Teaching in Iran and the World” within the revised PhD program ([Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)). Recent curriculum revisions, including the 2019 MA in Technology-assisted Language Teaching (CALL), emphasize integrating modern technologies into teaching ([Ministry of](#)

Science, Research and Technology, 2025). The COVID-19 pandemic (2019) forced a rapid shift to emergency remote teaching, requiring ELTE programs to adapt to virtual instruction (Fathali, 2023; Khosravi et al., 2024; Mirzadeh Rahni & Parsaiyan, 2023). Despite ideological pressures, ELTE survived and adapted. These developments point to a twofold agenda: indigenizing content to counter Western influence while adopting global technological advances to stay professionally current.

The Islamic Republic transformed ELTE through extreme centralization and ideological realignment. The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the MSRT directed macro-level policy, while SAMT indigenized the curriculum. English was pragmatically retained for science and technology but ideologically suspect as the language of imperialism. Despite all changes, the ELTE program structure proved resilient, reflecting Cowen's (2009) concept of structural sedimentation. The enduring centralization aligns with Kumaravadivelu's (2006) observations on top-down control in language education policy. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this period represents a critical juncture, a moment of radical ideological change that still preserved existing institutional structures through layering (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). The Pahlavi-era structural template proved remarkably adaptable to Islamic Republic ideological mandates. What the Islamic Republic period has contributed to ELTE is that the structural framework of professional teacher preparation persists, but its content and evaluation are now battlegrounds where pragmatic necessity and ideological purity constantly negotiate (Borjian, 2013; Pennycook, 2017). The above-mentioned journey has shaped the cross-era patterns examined in the following section.

Cross-Era Patterns in Power Structure, Policy Implementation, and Pedagogical Reform

The historical analysis indicates that, despite major sociopolitical and ideological shifts across the Qajar, Pahlavi, and Islamic Republic eras, three persistent patterns have shaped ELTE policy, power, and pedagogy. These patterns, including centralization, political duality, and structural persistence, are not merely descriptive categories, but reflect deeper mechanisms of institutional continuity that can be understood through historical institutionalism and postcolonial theory.

The Enduring and Increasing Centralization of Power

The most prominent cross-era pattern is the persistent, top-down, and increasingly centralized control exerted by the state over higher education, which has severely limited institutional autonomy in ELTE.

The Qajar era established the foundational centralized structure through state responsibility for Dar al-Funun ([Mahboubi Ardakani, 1971](#); [Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). The Pahlavi era amplified this control, with ministries assuming complete centralized authority and limiting institutional autonomy ([Islamic Parliament Research Center, 1962](#)). The Islamic Republic era intensified this pattern through extreme ideological oversight, with the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution directing policy and enforcing ideological conformity across all educational fields ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)).

What intensifies across time is not centralization itself, but its scope and reach, from state funding in the Qajar era, to ministerial authority in the Pahlavi period, to explicit ideological oversight in the Islamic Republic era. From a historical institutionalist perspective, this pattern exemplifies path dependence: each era continues the institutional framework of its predecessor, and the costs of reversing this centralized structure made it easier for subsequent regimes to inherit and amplify it rather than dismantle it ([Pierson & Skocpol, 2002](#)). The mechanisms of control evolved, but the underlying structure of top-down governance remained remarkably stable. This finding aligns with [Kumaravadivelu's \(2006\)](#) observation that language education policy in many contexts is characterized by enduring centralization, limiting institutional and professional autonomy.

The Duality in English Language Policy: Necessity Versus Ideology

A second persistent pattern is the core tension in policy implementation regarding the role of English. Across all eras, English was maintained for pragmatic reasons: diplomatic needs and trade ties in the Qajar era; Westernization in the Pahlavi period; and scientific advancement and international engagement in the Islamic Republic era ([National Library and Archives of Iran, 1981](#); [Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#)). Yet this pragmatic necessity was continually challenged by ruling ideology. The consequence is that the curriculum becomes the primary site of contestation. The Pahlavi era's Western-modeled content was replaced by the Islamic Republic's indigenized, ideologically reformed content, representing extreme content volatility ([Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2019](#)). While English was preserved for scientific advancements, it was simultaneously viewed negatively as the language of imperialism ([Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2009](#)).

A further consequence is the intensification of gatekeeping over English language teachers. They were viewed as agents of either cultural transmission or ideological purity. This

control evolved from informal reliance on instructor availability in the Qajar era, to formal academic credentialing in the Pahlavi period, to ideological gatekeeping in the Islamic Republic era. The dual evaluation system implemented after 1979 retained formalized academic assessment but expanded to include mandatory screening of teacher candidates based on adherence to Islamic values ([Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2011](#)).

From a postcolonial perspective, the cultural politics of English reflects that the language is never neutral but always embedded in power relations ([Pennycook, 2017](#)). In Iran's case, this manifests in the tension between the pragmatic necessity of English and ideological resistance. The state's pragmatic need for English could not be reconciled with its ideological commitment to resisting Western influence, creating a fundamental conflict that persisted across regimes. This has resulted in a policy where contradictory mandates force ELTE programs to navigate between professional standards and political conformity.

Structural Persistence and Pedagogical Reform

The third persistent continuity is the structural endurance of ELTE programs despite national and revolutionary ideological shifts. While political and social contexts changed dramatically, the formal academic structures established during the modernization phases were largely retained.

The academic framework shows clear structural continuity, as the multi-year, credit-based degree systems introduced in the Pahlavi era persisted into the Islamic Republic period ([Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1957, 1960, 1964](#); [Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)). Ideology rapidly influenced content, but political changes did not dismantle how teacher education was administratively delivered. Evaluation systems retained their formalized nature ([Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)). Requirements for postgraduate degrees, such as thesis writing and comprehensive exams, maintained standards of academic professionalization that transcended ideological divides ([Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)).

The history of ELTE pedagogy also reveals a recurring tension between external influence and indigenization, manifesting as battles between tradition, modernity, and ideology. The Qajar era relied on imported materials and foreign instructors ([Safarzadeh, 2018](#); [Secretariat of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2013](#); [Yaghmayi, 1997](#)). The Pahlavi era shifted from the French model to the American system ([Central Library and Documentation Center of University of Tehran, 1938](#)). The Islamic Republic mandated

localized, indigenized content ([Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, 2009](#)). However, professional demand for currency prevents total isolation from global advancements, as seen in recent curriculum revisions ([Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, 2025](#)).

From a historical institutionalist perspective ([Pierson & Skocpol, 2002](#)), the pattern of structural persistence and content change points toward institutional layering: instead of replacing the Pahlavi-era structural template, new regimes layered new ideological content onto it, preserving the underlying structure while changing its meaning. This stability in academic structure aligns with [Cowen's \(2009\)](#) concept of structural sedimentation.

While Iran's political trajectory is distinct, the patterns of centralization, political duality, and structural persistence are not unique to its context. In Europe, historical institutionalism has been used to explain how legacies of centralization continue to shape education policy in countries like France and England ([Haus, 2009](#)), and how path-dependent processes have preserved the school model in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark ([Elstad, 2023](#)). Furthermore, the tension between the EU's ideological commitment to multilingualism and the pragmatic dominance of English in national education systems mirrors the political duality observed in Iran ([Lanvers, 2024](#)). These parallels suggest that the dynamics identified in this study reflect broader global tensions between state power, ideological goals, and the practical demands of language education.

The above-mentioned enduring cross-era patterns demonstrate that the history of ELTE in Iran is defined not only by what changed across eras, but also by what endured. These patterns constitute the fundamental context for understanding contemporary ELTE in Iran and the challenges facing any meaningful reform.

Conclusion

This study explored the complex historical evolution of ELTE in Iran, demonstrating how state power, national policy, and pedagogical developments have shaped the field across three distinct sociopolitical eras. The findings revealed a clear progression: from the initial, centralized introduction of higher education under royal patronage during the Qajar period; through the Pahlavi era's state-driven expansion and professionalization aligned with a Western modernization agenda; and finally, into the Islamic Republic period characterized by ideological realignment and the imperative of national independence. However, the most significant insights lie in the enduring patterns that transcended these eras.

This study demonstrates that ELTE in Iran is defined by three continuities despite significant political and ideological changes. As discussed in the cross-era patterns section, the

first enduring pattern is the increasing centralization of power. The state has consistently retained and amplified control. This finding reflects deeper mechanisms of institutional path dependence and layering (Pierson & Skocpol, 2002). The second pattern highlights a fundamental contradiction in English language policy. While English is considered pragmatically necessary for scientific and technological advancement, it is rejected as a vehicle of cultural imperialism on national and ideological grounds. This supports Pennycook's (2017) argument that English is inherently political. The third pattern is structural persistence in the face of pedagogical reform. Despite radical ideological shifts, the formal academic structures established during the Pahlavi modernization period demonstrated remarkable resilience. However, pedagogy has shifted from wholesale imitation of foreign models toward a balance of mandated indigenization alongside the continued, pragmatic adoption of global methodologies and technologies to remain professionally current.

The above-mentioned enduring patterns constitute a critical legacy that continues to shape ELTE in Iran today. Key challenges facing ELTE can be traced directly to these three patterns. The first challenge is political centralization and diminished autonomy. ELTE policy in Iran is dictated by political, ideological, or national goals rather than professional pedagogical consensus. This top-down control is enforced through national bodies such as the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution and the MSRT. University departments have limited authority over curriculum design, materials selection, and faculty hiring, limiting their capacity to adapt to evolving professional and local needs. This dynamic has produced a disenfranchised professional community, whose specialized expertise is frequently disregarded by political imperatives. Morady Moghaddam and Murray (2019), as well as Tajeddin and Chamani (2020), have also discussed this continued top-down control as a significant challenge for English language teaching in Iranian higher education.

The second challenge is ideological inconsistency and a contested curriculum, which stems from the duality in English language policy. The perpetual tension between the pragmatic necessity of English language for science and technology and its ideological rejection as a vector of cultural influence creates contradictory policy signals. The curriculum becomes the primary battleground for this ideological conflict, resulting in mandatory indigenization of content, exclusion of Western socio-cultural material, and ideological gatekeeping for teacher candidates. The resulting instability undermines the necessary conditions for high-quality professional education, an ongoing challenge that has been documented in other local studies (Daneshfar & Moharami, 2025; Iranmehr & Davari, 2018; Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2016; Tajeddin & Chamani, 2020).

The third challenge stems from the tension between structural persistence and pedagogical reform. ELTE programs must simultaneously uphold formalized standards of professional academia while navigating difficult policy mandates to localize content and adopt global methods. This challenge leads to a fragmented pedagogical identity. Teachers and trainers face pressure to teach a global language using modern, communicative methodologies but are often restricted to using localized, ideologically restrictive textbooks. This creates a disconnect between the professional competencies required by a globalized field and the content permitted by the state. Similar challenges in the pedagogical and structural aspects of English language teaching in Iran have been documented in local studies ([Jalali et al., 2025](#); [Morady Moghaddam & Murray, 2019](#)).

Implications for Policy and Practice

These enduring patterns and their associated challenges carry critical implications for policy and reform within the current Iranian ELTE system. Policy interventions must be designed to address the political roots of ELTE's pedagogical challenges.

Regarding the first pattern, the recommendation is to manage centralization through decentralized action. The inherent pattern of centralized state power implies that top-down reform is inevitable. Future policy efforts should focus on designing centralized directives that mandate greater professional autonomy at the ELTE departmental level, particularly in curriculum development for localized courses. Given the historical pattern of centralization, wholesale curriculum reform is unlikely. However, the MSRT could authorize ELTE departments to allocate 20–30% of curriculum credits to locally designed courses that respond to regional needs, while maintaining centrally approved core content. Central authorities could also engage ELTE professionals in action research on classroom issues and report their findings to decision-makers. This would generate evidence that could inform future macro-level decisions. It would also create a structured mechanism for practitioners to provide feedback and voice their concerns about the everyday realities of ELTE.

The second pattern, duality in language policy, can be addressed by reconciling pragmatism and ideology. Reform efforts should introduce coherent guidelines for English instruction and acknowledge cultural and ideological sensitivities. Policymakers could promote research aimed at developing national frameworks for English as a global language, prioritizing functional communication for international purposes while addressing cultural and ideological sensitivities. This would help balance the practical need for English with

ideological expectations. Such an approach would reconcile the necessity of the language with the ideological mandate. To further bridge the policy-practice gap that has characterized Iranian ELTE, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution could establish an annual advisory forum including ELTE faculty, researchers, and practicing teachers to provide input on curriculum and materials before final approval, thereby institutionalizing practitioner voice without ceding ultimate authority.

The third pattern, structural persistence, offers an opportunity to leverage stability for innovation. The resilience of the formal academic structure in Iranian higher education is a strength that should be utilized rather than resisted. Policy should employ the existing stable framework to introduce change efficiently. For instance, required thesis and dissertation research could be directed toward addressing local pedagogical and curricular challenges (e.g., research on the efficacy of homegrown textbooks), turning a structural requirement into an engine for evidence-based indigenization. This approach would allow programs to address local professional contexts without challenging the overall centralized structure, leveraging existing structural persistence by adding flexibility rather than attempting to replace it.

These recommendations acknowledge the political realities and implementation challenges inherent in Iran's historically centralized system. However, by working within the existing structure, these reforms offer realistic pathways toward incremental change.

In addition to the policy recommendations outlined above, this study offers ELTE departments in Iranian universities significant intellectual insights. Informing critical research and pedagogy is the most immediate contribution, as this study establishes a critical historical context for current professional issues that is vital for academic inquiry. Faculty members and postgraduate students can use the three cross-era patterns for more analytical studies (e.g., how does the centralized power structure constrain teacher agency in implementing the curriculum?). Such research addresses the root causes of educational problems rather than merely their symptoms.

Another important offering of this study is laying the groundwork for developing critical literacy in prospective teachers. Teacher candidates can use these findings to develop critical pedagogical skills, learning that the curriculum is a contested site and thus becoming better prepared to skillfully negotiate the tension between teaching modern, global methodologies and adhering to national, localized content mandates.

This paper also acknowledges the struggle for indigenization in Iran's ELTE by framing it not as a simple choice but as an ongoing historical necessity. This perspective favors the development of locally grounded textbooks and courses, informed by a deep understanding of

national history. For policymakers and administrators, this study offers a diagnostic overview of the systemic challenges and outlines strategic approaches to manage reform.

More importantly, this study contributes to the professional identity of the entire ELTE community by validating the existing tensions and professional struggles of Iranian ELT professionals. It assures them that their difficulty in reconciling global methods with local content is not a personal failure but a systemic, historical challenge inherent to the Iranian state's management of ELTE. Furthermore, this study demonstrates that ideological gatekeeping in teacher selection reflects the state's perception of English language teachers as significant ideological agents. This recognition can encourage teachers to adopt a more critical, reflective, and responsible approach to their work, acknowledging the broader societal implications of their practice.

Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be noted, as they affect both interpretation of the findings and the generalizability of the conclusions. First, the study's primary source is state-generated documents, including policy directives, institutional reports, and curricular guidelines. These sources are essential for understanding governance and policy; however, they inevitably reflect state priorities and may exclude the perspectives of teachers, students, and program administrators. The analysis is therefore necessarily state-centered and captures ELTE as a system of regulation rather than as a lived experience. This limitation is significant because it means the voices of those who experienced these policies are largely absent from the historical record, potentially overlooking how policies were resisted, adapted, or negotiated in practice.

Second, the study is limited by the partial and selective nature of archival preservation. State documents reflect the ruling regime's priorities and perspectives that can potentially obscure dissent, resistance, or alternative educational practices. Despite our efforts to access all relevant materials, some documents were inaccessible due to institutional gatekeeping or restricted access. These gaps may have influenced the analysis by limiting the range of perspectives represented in the historical record.

Third, the deliberate focus of the study on MSRT-affiliated universities means that the findings may not generalize to ELTE programs under the Ministry of Education or in private language institutes. Each institutional pathway has its own governance structures, curricular emphases, and professional cultures that need separate investigation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The limitations outlined above point toward several specific directions for future research that would complement and extend the findings of this study. First, qualitative research employing interviews and focus groups with ELTE faculty, prospective teachers, and program administrators could illuminate how policies are actually enacted, resisted, or adapted in practice, addressing the implementation gaps identified in this study. Second, ethnographic studies of ELTE classrooms and programs could reveal how teachers and students navigate the tensions between pragmatic and ideological demands in their daily practice, providing insights into the agency of actors within centralized systems. Third, comparative historical research across Iran's different ELTE pathways, MSRT-affiliated universities, Ministry of Education programs, and private language institutes, would enrich understanding of the diverse institutional landscape and the extent to which the patterns identified in this study apply across contexts. Fourth, research on the effectiveness of homegrown textbooks (e.g., SAMT publications) in achieving both linguistic and ideological objectives could provide evidence to inform curriculum revision and address the policy duality identified in this study. Fifth, comparative studies with other contexts (e.g., Turkey, Egypt, or Indonesia) could illuminate the extent to which the patterns identified in Iran are unique to Iran or reflect broader dynamics in language education policy.

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