

## **Obstacles and opportunities**

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### **Alireza Talebzadeh talks to Matt Salusbury about the challenges and possibilities facing English language teachers in Iran**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution religious values have penetrated Iranian education. Authorities have tried hard to Islamise textbooks, schools and universities by segregating females from males, making hijab (female head coverings) mandatory and revising Western university disciplines such as social sciences and philosophy.

English textbooks developed and distributed by the ministry of education are 'neutralised' in content, devoid of any elements of Western culture. They are seldom updated, some dating back ten years. The ministry's current Radical Reform Plan of Education says, 'English language can be included as a subject in the national curriculum, provided that Islamic as well as Iranian identity is maintained and consolidated.'

Students and the younger generation have a craving for learning English, which independent researchers suggest is not fulfilled by public ELT. Students are thus drawn to private language institutes.

Teachers need training, especially those working in the public sector. English teachers working in universities are well paid, but most teachers in public schools work long hours for very small salaries. They are not motivated and their poor training and living conditions contribute to the low quality of education.

Our association, AzerELTA (Azerbaijan English Language Teachers' Association), tries to inspire our country's often discouraged teachers. We are a non-profit, non-governmental organisation affiliated to the Iranian ministry of education. Since 2002 we have aimed to enhance the quality of public-sector ELT, especially in the four Azerbaijani provinces that constitute the Azerbaijan region of north-western Iran. We are also involved in teacher training courses, building up resource centres, materials development, conferences and networking among ELT practitioners across Iran.

The English business in Iran is a profitable one – especially the market for test prep courses run by private language institutes. These have mushroomed in recent years: in early 2013 there were seventeen active private language institutes just in the small city where I live. Parents see English as a key to their children's success, but they don't trust public education, so they send their children to private language institutes.

ELT policymaking in Iran is undergoing major shifts, with the old structured syllabus (emphasising grammatical and linguistic competence and reading) giving way to a communicative one. In 2013 the ministry of education released the new Prospect 1 textbook for the first grade of junior high school, with other books in the series to follow. Nowadays there is much emphasis on fostering communicative competence, integrating language skills, and a focus on speaking and writing. This has led to a rise in the number of Iranian students who achieve the Toefl or Ielts scores needed for entry to the world's top universities, and then go on to publish in international journals in English.

There are also signs of progress in teacher training. There is more awareness and investment – at least in the private sector – in pre-service and in-service programmes. ELT conferences in Iran are now of a high calibre and some cutting edge research projects on ELT are carried out in Iranian universities. Browsing through the top ELT journals these days, you're likely to come across Iranian researchers who are pushing the boundaries of ELT. In my view, Iran's ELT workforce is ahead of other subjects taught in schools and universities. While some EFL teachers manage to attend international events such as Iatefl, many ELT practitioners can't afford to, or encounter other hurdles such as visas. Public sector schools have little access to educational technologies, let alone the training to use them.

AzerELTA hopes to build an effective network of teachers around Iran and reach teachers in its remote regions. We also plan to cooperate with other similar associations – especially in south Asia. We hope to hold annual

international conferences and to provide opportunities for interested teachers to get together and help each other with professional development.



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