

Save the Language, Save the Nation's Children: The case of the Azeri in Iran
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This paper discusses the marginalization of the Azeri language in Iran, where the official language as well as the language of instruction in school is Farsi (Persian). Two foreign languages are available starting in middle school: English and Arabic. Other languages can only be taken up at university.

Formerly the official language of Persia (prior to the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty), Azeri fell into disfavor with the shah. Even today, of Iran's 75 million people, 11-22 million have Azeri as their mother tongue. Upon entering school, children do not understand what is being said to them and some pass exams by memorizing the questions and answers in Farsi. In order to succeed, students need a proxy teacher at home. They go home frustrated and confused about the day's lessons, but the parents may or may not be literate in Farsi and may or may not be able to help them. Drop-out and repetition rates are high, and there is a threat to the identity of Azeri speakers and more and more are forced to learn Farsi as L1.

Outside the school, minority language speakers are looked down upon and are given lower social status. There is an unequal competition for jobs, as native-Farsi speakers are given preference. Azeri youth have negative attitudes towards themselves and their language, and the new generation of Azeri speakers has few children who speak the language. As a result, the language is in danger of extinction.

In the case of Iran, the challenge is more political than academic as the educational policy is very strict. On the other hand, allowing the use of Azeri as L1 would further the government's goal of discouraging separatist movements. A multilingual L1-based education would benefit at least one in three students and improve attitudes towards the self, government and other languages.