

Impacts of the English Language Acquisition on Language Learners' Culture and Identity: The Iranian EFL Contexts

Sadegh Rahimi Pordanjani¹, Laode Muhammad Firman Guntur¹

¹ Monash University, Iran

*Correspondence: sdqhrhmp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Researchers and sociolinguists report that culture and language are inextricably intertwined by highlighting "language is culture and culture is language", they believe that language is a crucial tool for individuals to maintain their culture and identity. Due to several functions of the English language in different sectors such as education, communication, and business, the number of language learners willing to learn this language is growing. As a result, numerous concerns have been raised in the field of sociolinguistics towards the acquisition of this language. Sociolinguists have been worried about some major effects of the English language acquisition on language learners' mother-tongue, culture, and identity. They report that English as a major language influences many minor languages and changes the language learners' culture and identity negatively. This article aims to review various literature in order to identify some of the impacts of the English language learning which can have influential roles on the Iranian EFL learners' culture and identity in language centers and universities.

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1. Introduction

By the significant functions of English as an international language, every day the number of people learning this language is enhancing enthusiastically. This phenomenon in the sociological and sociolinguistics fields has caused several particular reactions towards the EFL language learners' culture, language, and identity. Furthermore, researchers mention that the status of the English language has encountered conventional domination of British and American values and norms in different sectors such as education and business (Aswad et al., 2019; Rahman et al., 2019; Hanafiah et al., 2022). It is reported that this language has been used as a tool to establish and impose cultural identity and linguistic hegemony to other nations (Khatib & Rezaei, 2012). According to some scholars, culture and language are interdependent and correlated (Risager, 2007). They state that language is an essential tool for individuals to maintain their identity and culture because their uniqueness and history are all preserved in their language. Kramsch and Widdowson (1998) and Risager (2007) add that identity and culture are manifested through the learners' native language and learning a new language can lead to a shift of identity and culture. This paper aims to concentrate on reviewing an extensive relevant literature on cultural-linguistic-identity effects that the Iranian EFL learners (especially the Muslim students whose culture and identity are tied into the Islamic norms and values) obtain while learning English as a foreign language. In this article, existing papers towards some books comprising Spectrum, True to life, Interchange, and Top Notch, which are taught at language institutions, are analyzed. Further to this, some university poems like "The flea" and "The sun rising" by John Donne and "To the virgins" by Herrick are under investigation in order to conclude how strong is the English language instructions in westernizing the EFL language learners' culture and identity.

1.1. Imperialism

The term of imperialism is defined briefly by different authors in this paragraph. For example, Ritzer (2011) points out that imperialism is the spread of domination exercised in the foreign organizations as a medium to maintain their empires. A key definition of this term is given by Phillipson (1992) who represents that it is a kind of relation whereby a society dominates another one and manifests itself in distinct dimensions such as economic, language, politics, military,

culture, education, and society. As Hassan (2015) mentions in his book, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Edward Said believed in western education as not a neutral system but a kind of medium to control other races and nations. Nietzsche's notion of "the will to power", Foucault's concept of "episteme", Gramsci's idea of "hegemony", and Said's criticism on "orientalism" are considered in this regard (Hassan, 2015). In addition, Lenin (1999) states that imperialism, which is a monopoly stage of capitalism, was applied in England during the development of an empire in 1890s by the extension of the British Empire to national economic policy. This term was also applied in other languages to highlight the conflicts between European rivals while securing their colonies in Asia and Africa from 1880s to 1914, a period which was called the age of imperialism (Ansre, 2017).

1.2. Linguistic Imperialism

Philipson (1992) argues that linguistic imperialism is observed in several major instances throughout the history. First, by the United Kingdom over the age of colonization. Then, by the English-speaking countries during the age of globalization which describes the practices of entities and multinational organizations to increase the use of the English language to benefit its speakers. Philipson explicates that linguistic imperialism considers linguistic hierarchisation which characterizes countries into core and periphery (oppressor and oppressed). He reports that linguistic imperialism is a top-down, dominant-dominated, supply-demand, and push-pull structure. According to Philipson (2009), one center of the imperialism is education which comprises economic and ideological functions. Regarding the economic function, he mentions that it legitimizes the English language as a medium for qualifying individuals to contribute to their cultures and operates technology via language. Towards the ideological function, it is a path for shifting the social and cultural norms in which this language is a getaway for high standards of living, communication, and better education. Additionally, Philipson (1992) introduces two major mechanisms of English as imperial language: Professionalism and Anglo centrality. The former, which is related to ELT techniques and approaches, refers to pedagogy. The latter deals with the comparison of other cultures and languages to those of England. Philipson concludes that due to the professionalism and Anglo centrality, a large number of regional languages and cultures are endangered or even destroyed gradually since the age of colonization. Pennycook (1995) prefers to call Philipson's Linguistic imperialism as a discourse imperialism and English around the world which is a place for creating inequalities in the field of education.

1.3. Cultural Imperialism

Rahimi and Sahragard (2013) believe that the linguistic imperialism can lead to cultural imperialism. Significantly, Beltran (1978) defines cultural imperialism as a social influential variable process by which a country dictates its set of beliefs, behavioral norms, and style of life in different sectors, particularly education. Hall (1990) adds that a new and different culture appears from the overlapping of society and culture, an overlapping which has been occurred historically in the contact spots where a culture intersects with one as imperialist and others as dominated. It means the subordinated culture mingles its culture with the components of hegemonic culture. He asserts that the cultural imperialism as a fruit of capitalist culture globally not only deals with production mode, but also implements a total of political, experiential, socio-relational, and technical-economic culture. Then, Morris (2002) mentions that the cultural imperialism is related to a powerful culture which is based on Western culture dominating other cultures. According to Sarmela (1977), nations are becoming culturally westernized and identical in technical advancement, education, fashion, literature, and music. Samela reports that the imperial of culture is investigated from two different spheres: the political economists which is related to neo-Marxist theory and the second one which refers to the behavioral and social scientists. Beltran (1978) concludes that the cultural imperialism is one of the advanced form of imperialism, an elementary form of the future imperialism and a normative element in the relationship between the underdeveloped and the advanced societies.

1.4. English Language Teaching (ELT)

ELT is known by the cognitive and linguistic aspects of teaching pedagogy and textbooks (Ball, 1990; Dixon, 2009). Regarding pedagogy, by the spread and the domination of the English language, it is reported that an appropriate style of teaching is a monolingual way referring to the use of the English language only in the language classrooms. According to Philipson (1992), the tenants of the English language teaching including monolingual, native speaker, earliest start of this language, and maximum exposure subtractive fallacies are constructed just to increase the expansion of this language across the world. Towards the textbooks, Gray (2000) emphasizes that English language teaching materials which are published in Britain and USA are not only the sources of lexical and syntactical contents but are also known as commodities which are replete with cultural diversity advertisements. Researchers support that English language teaching classes and textbooks are the sources of shifting learner's perceptions toward their cultures

and identities and culture which is a superficial aspect of language is given a great attention (Berns, 1990; Naji & Pishghadam, 2013; Ndura, 2004; Zarei & Khalesi, 2010). Canagarajah (2005) exemplifies that approximately 95% of the English language teaching textbooks and materials in periphery nations were produced based on the culture of USA and Britain.

1.5. The History of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Iran

Tollefson (1991) mentions that before the Islamic revolution in Iran, the English language was instructed as a part of the Iranians' motivation to accomplish modernization. Since mid-1950s to late 1978, the English language had expanded gradually as a second language and became the major language of the higher education, military service, media, and business. In contrary, after the Islamic revolution in 1979, this language was applied in diverse sectors restrictedly. In other words, changing the frameworks of the Iranian regime was an end to the English domination. Dahmardeh (2009) states that after the revolution due to the political chaos existing between Iran and America, it disposed Iranian authorities to have a negative image about this language. He adds that in Iran, the religion is dominated by Islam which is the religion of authorities who play significant roles in the language policy and planning. As a result, from 1980 to 1982, the society was purified based on Islamic norms against the western identity, culture, and values (Borjian, 2013).

One of the great shifts was in the field of English language teaching and learning which led the Iranian ministry of education to be conservative about the EFL policy, because they believed this language could present fear and threat to Islamic culture and identity. For instance, the secretary of education in 2006 declared that Islamic values dealing with the Islamization of materials and textbooks were implemented appropriately in the curriculum. Therefore, learning the English language in schools had been unsuccessful and learners after studying this language for 7 years in the junior and senior high schools had some deficiencies in using this language. Although the English stance in Iran passed through some restrictions, this language seems to get more popular over the recent years (Riazi, 2005). Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2003) report that this language entered to the heart of the Iranians smoothly which has become an unavoidable necessity of the people. Enthusiastically, this language has been taught in language centers and universities by instructing the authentic materials in order for learners acquire the skills of this language efficiently.

2. Methodology

This paper implements a theoretical inquiry with an argumentative discussion and critical review of a diverse relevant literature on the impacts of the English language acquisition. A synthesized investigation from several case studies are built in order to generate findings. The cultural- linguistic- identity impacts which the Iranian EFL learners gain while learning the English language are discussed based on the current literature. The findings of this article are related to English language classrooms in Iranian private language centers and universities where the authentic resources are designed by the British and American organizations and authors.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Impacts of the English Language acquisition on the Iranian EFL learners

Khatib and Rezaei (2012) state that the English language learning can lead learners to lose their ethic, language, culture, and identity. In particular, Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad (2010) assert that textbooks in English language institutions and universities include several ideologies and cultural rules such as hegemony of the English language, cultural stereotypes, and sexism. Unfortunately, the EFL teachers are aware of them but not concerned about their effects. Abdollahzadeh and Baniasad believe that in the field of English language teaching, the centers which produce materials as a tool of Western cultural aggression targeted the Islamic culture. In addition to this, the shifts in culture and identity can be seen in different contents and resources in English language sectors. For example, based on the evaluation of "Spectrum" and "True to life" books, the existing ideologies are associated with materialism and consumerism such as shopping, entertainment, and fashion which have a great impact on the EFL learners to get westernized (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010). It means, in these books, the content is related to the styles of living which is strange in the learners' perspectives and focuses on specific norms which are not in line with their home countries' ideologies. Kasanian (2011) reports that the textbooks comprise the western norms and lifestyles such as the participations of students in parties and mixed-gender swimming pools where people drink alcohol and females mingle with their boyfriends. He adds that the frequent exposure of the EFL students to the pictorial and textual descriptions of the American and British movies and websites, which are the manifestation of the Western culture, can also threaten the EFL Muslim students' culture and identity.

Furthermore, Roohani and Molana (2013) mention that there is a deconstruction of cultural elements and inequality of gender, nationality, and sex in the "Interchange series". Because in these books, white people are dominant and black individuals are marginalized. Also, in "Spectrum VI" (P.11) and "True to life" (p.36), a great concentration is given to sportsmen and famous men which indicate an influential image of discrimination and inequality between males and females (Abdollahzadeh & Baniasad, 2010). Based on the data analyzed by Ashraf et al., (2013), it is reported that from 123 participants of the "Interchange Series", about 25 people (20%) are strongly affected, 80 people (65%) are affected, and 18 people (15%) are less affected by the materials. Therefore, there is a representation of these series' materials which have significant impacts on the EFL learner's cultural and identity-related attitudes.

According to another case study conducted towards the Iranian university students, researchers concluded that due to the interwoven connection between culture, language, and identity, students learning and majoring in the English language are more detached from their culture and identity (Hejazi & Fatemi, 2015). Pishghadam et al., (2013) supports that the learners not only have lost their pride in their culture and heritage, they have also missed their national identities smoothly. As a result, they do not have consistent identities in playing their roles in their societies effectively. For example, in the field of the English language and literature, the university learners read some texts whose attitudes are alien to Islamic moral principles. Several poems including "The flea" and "The sun rising" by John Donne and "To the virgins" by Herrick are the representation of female's responses to male's sexual advances and pleasures. These texts endorse pornographic and sexual relationships which are against religion and moral beliefs. In other words, reproaching the tendency of single females to protect their virginity and impelling them to neglect moral scruples can lead Iranian Muslim students to promote their beliefs and attitudes according to the Western lifestyles.

Moreover, Ghaemi and Oghabi (2015) believe that in the textbooks published by the Western organizations, the most appropriate approaches of teaching are the communicative language teaching (CLT) and the task-based language teaching (TBLT). Proponents of these approaches report that these styles of teaching concentrate more on authentic activities and communicative skills to motivate students to become interactive and critical thinkers. To elaborate more, in a study conducted by Rahimi and Guntur (2019), researchers report that in the Iranian EFL classrooms due to the CLT approach, student's identities shift from passive to interactive and creative persons. It means the classes where the TBLT and CLT are instructed, there are some communicative and critical thinking tasks which allow students to go beyond the texts critically and compare their home country's norms, lifestyles, and socio-political issues with those of the Western contexts. Rahimi and Guntur mention that because the Iranian government plays a key role in cultivating a culture of silence, the English communicative classes are considered as threats for the authorities (Abednia & Izadnia, 2013). Also, Varzandeh (2014) indicates that the "Top Notch" and "Interchange" series have a significance influence on learners in the formation of a new political identity which means they become alienated from their political identities and beliefs. These textbooks use language as a medium to restrict national and regional politics by teaching students some political attitudes against their cultural identities and linguistic perspectives. Varzandeh explicates that while learners increase their language proficiency and cultural awareness, they occupy a powerful position in threatening their country's political discourses. Burden and William (1997) state that teaching and learning the English language establish a sense of personal value to learners to feel differently in their own society. Therefore, the communicative language classrooms in Iran encourage the learners' emotions, creativity, self-knowledge, and self-evaluation to a great extent which are hazardous for the Iranian authorities who cultivate the culture of silence.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, due to a spread of the English language around the globe and the presentation of its hegemony into different sectors including education, economic, politics, and society, a great number of people are eager to learn and use this language. It is reported that language, culture and identity are all interconnected to each other because our uniqueness, beliefs, personalities, and histories are all presented through the language we speak. As a result, learning a new language like English can push learners to become familiar with a new culture and identity. This paper aimed to review a relevant literature to understand the influences that the Iranian EFL learners obtained during their language acquisition. Because the English language is a medium for dominating the cultures, languages, and identities of the world by imposing some cultural points in the English language teaching (ELT), such elements will conflict with the Islamic perspectives in a context like Iran. In other words, some western elements in the English language textbooks like having boyfriend, girlfriend, having sex before marriage, and drinking wine are all against the religious ideologies in Iran. Even the communicative approaches of teaching like CLT and TBLT can impact the Iranian EFL learners to become more critical, communicative, and creative which impose threats to the authorities and policymakers who have indispensable roles in cultivating a culture of silence.

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