THE IMPACT OF CULTURAL IDENTITY AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING ON PRONUNCIATION LEARNING OF IRANIAN EFL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: *The present study was an attempt to measure the impact of cultural identity and attitudes towards foreign language learning on pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL students. To do so, 60 Iranian EFL students studying at a high school in Sabzevar were selected. They were school boys and girls aging between 16 and 18 years of old. The Language Learning Attitude Questionnaire and the Cultural Identity Questionnaire were used in order to measure the participants' attitudes and cultural identity towards pronunciation learning. The results indicated that the participants hold positive attitude towards pronunciation learning. Also, cultural identity has a meaningful association with learning pronunciation among the Iranian EFL students.*

KEYWORDS: Cultural identity, foreign language learning, pronunciation learning, learners' attitude, Iranian EFL students.

INTRODUCTION

It is believed that language learning has a pivotal role in helping human to express his opinions (Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012). In the language learning process, affective variables have become important (Dehbozorgi, 2012). Among different factors that influence the foreign language learning, affective variables such as attitudes, orientations, motivation and anxiety are as important as aptitudes, intelligence, age, and personality (Zainol Abidin, et al., 2012;Noels, Pelletier, & Vallerand, 2000).

Among these various factors, learners' attitude towards language learning is considered as one of the key factors in motivating the learners to learn that language (Zainol Abidin, et al., 2012). The matter of learner's attitude is acknowledged as one of the most important factors that impact on learning language (Fakeye, 2010). Students differ in their motivation towards learning a second language and they display many different attitudes towards learning a second language. A student that has negative attitudes towards learning a language could be changed and turn those negative attitudes into positive ones and get a positive result (Ellis, 1994).

There is now a wealth of research that explores the relationship between identity and language learning, testament to the fact that issues of identity and power are being recognized as central to SLA (Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Block, 2003). Further, while much of this research explores the multiple and intersecting dimensions of language learners' identities, there is also a growing body of research that seeks to investigate the ways in which particular relations of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation may impact the process of SLA.

Taking the above point together, the present study was an attempt to investigate the impact of cultural identities and attitudes towards foreign language learning on pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL students.

In early sociological research, aspects of identity such as gender, first language (L1), and ethnicity tended to be treated as straightforward, easily categorized, relatively homogeneous and static group variables-an assumption critiqued a generation later. A student or speaker belonged to one social (e.g., ethno linguistic) group or another and the relationships (correlations, causal relations) between that group identification and certain traits (e.g., L2 proficiency), behaviors (L2 use), attitudes, or motivations were investigated.

Language use (e.g., code choice, register, genre, accent) itself conveys social information such as group identity: geographical region, language variety and thus, in some contexts, socioeconomic status or educational background. Linguistic variants therefore mark "insider" (in-group) or "outsider" (out-group) status relative to one's interlocutors or audience. Accordingly, in the present study, the aim of the researcher is to measure whether cultural identity and attitudes towards foreign language learning has an impact on pronunciation learning of Iranian EFL students.

The main purpose of the present study is to learn about students' attitudes towards learning a foreign language pronunciation. A subordinate aim is to investigate and discuss whether they think social factors, cultural identity, matter while learning a foreign language pronunciation.

Rsearch questions and hypothesis

The present study aimed to answer the following questions:

Q1: What are students' general attitudes towards learning English language pronunciation?

Q2: What are the specific attitudes of Iranian EFL students towards learning English language pronunciation in terms of behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects?

Q3: Is there any statistically significant relationship between cultural identity and English language pronunciation?

Subsequently, in order to investigate the above mentioned research question, the researchers formulated the following null hypothesis:

H0**:** there is no statistically significant relationship between cultural identity and English language pronunciation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As attitude is one of the key predominant factors for success in language learning, numerous studies have already been conducted in the field of language attitude (Alhmali, 2007; Ghazali et al., 2009). In addition, Saidat (2010) mentions that language attitude research has been considered in the previous 50 years because of the growing relation between the importance of the language use and the nature of individuals.

Gardner's argument led Wenden (1991) to present a comprehensive definition of the attitude concept. He classified the term "attitude" into three interrelated components namely, cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive component involves the beliefs, thoughts or viewpoints about the object of the attitude. The affective component refers to the individual's feelings and emotions towards an object, whether he/she likes or dislikes. The behavioral component involves the tendency to adopt particular learning behaviors.

In 1992, Baker proposed a comprehensive theoretical model, focusing on the importance of conducting attitudinal research in the field of language learning. Baker (1992, p. 9) states that: "*In the life of a language, attitudes to that language appear to be important in language restoration, preservation, decay or death.*"

Recently, De Bot et al. (2005) assert that language teachers, researchers and students should acknowledge that high motivation and positive attitude of students facilitate second language learning. Thus, if a learner does not have the interest and tendency in acquiring the target language to communicate with others, this learner will possess a negative attitude and will not be motivated and enthusiastic in language learning. Therefore, learners' attitudes could incorporate in language learning because it may influence their performance in acquiring the target language.

Ellis (1994) claims that learners' attitudes have been identified as one set of variables of major importance. The attitudes are shaped by the social factors mentioned, which, in turn influence learner outcome. There are both negative and positive attitudes towards the L2 being learnt. The positive attitudes are typically connected to the speakers of the language in question and the culture represented by its speakers. Such positive attitudes can be expected to enhance learning, since learners can be expected to want to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning. In other words, if students are interested in the countries were the languages are spoken, they may be more motivated to learn the language (Noels et al. 2003).

Negative attitudes, on the other hand, can impede language learning, since you usually get those attitudes when you are not interested or have difficulties with the teacher (Ellis 1994). Those attitudes usually have a negative effect on learners, but this is not always the case. Negative attitudes may also have a positive effect on L2 learning, if the learners have a strong will to learn a language .Sometimes students who are struggling with their attitudes are true fighters. They work so hard in the end because they want a good grade and they have a strong will to learn (Saville-Troike, 2006).

Norton (2000) argued that in many language classrooms, the targeted community may be, to some extent, a reconstruction of past communities and historically constituted relationships, but also a community of the imagination, a desired community that offers possibilities for an enhanced range of identity options in the future.

Based on a study of Chinese students learning English, a report from teacher, Kevin (2007) states that a student's first language and cultural background can be seen to influence the student's second language acquisition. In China learning English is considered a valuable skill and is not considered to be threatening to the dominant identity of Chinese people in general. Thus, there is general motivation to learn the language, at the same time the students' background in rote learning comes through as a preferred way to learn the current language. Some students have even continued to use such a method of study, even when their teachers

suggested against it. These students' first language and cultural experiences are thus heavily influencing how the students go about obtaining their second language skills.

Nutt (2011) states that the first time she realized that the knowledge of a foreign language has to do with identity formation was when she suddenly discovered that for some reason she felt more comfortable to express feelings in English than in Armenian. More comfortable, because she could construct quite a logical, affective discourse in that foreign language, whereas in native language we would end up with incoherent, heavily emotional discourse that would confuse our interlocutor and us even more.

RESEARCH METROLOGY

Owning to the nature of the research question and aforementioned null hypothesis, in the experimental study, cultural identity and attitudes towards foreign language learning were the independent variables and pronunciation was the dependent variable of the study.

Participants

The participants will be selected from among 60 Iranian EFL students who study at high school in Sabzevar. They are school girls aged between 16 and 18 years of old. All participants are nearly from the same economic and social background. A convenience non-random sampling procedure will be used for participant selection. As a matter of fact, two main reasons promoted the initial choice of these particular groups of participants. First, the intermediate school girls had just passed few terms and seemed to have sufficient pronunciation skills. Second, the age factor was considered important because at this age, students are ready for pronunciation learning and having attitudes about learning a foreign language.

Instrumentation

In order to obtain measureable data with which the results of the current study could be statistically analyzed, the following instruments were utilized:

a) **Language Learning Attitude Questionnaire**: The measuring instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire focusing on the attitudes towards learning English. The items were partly adapted from the attitude questionnaire test employed in a study by Zainol Abidin, et al. (2012).On the whole, there were 9 items concerning attitudes towards English language pronunciation learning in terms of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional aspects of attitude. The items were put in a 5-point Likert scale from Level 1: Strongly Disagree to Level 5: Strongly Agree.

b) **Cultural Identity Questionnaire:** the questionnaire was a 9-items questionnaire focusing on the cultural identity. This questionnaire was partly adapted from Jenny B. Mathews' Cultural Identity Questionnaire (2007). On the whole, there were 9 items concerning cultural identity and pronunciation. The items were put in a 5-point Likert scale from Level 1: Strongly Disagree to Level 5: Strongly Agree.

Procedure

After distribution of the questionnaires, the teachers attempted to monitor the participants they fill the questionnaires completely. Before distributing the questionnaires, the teacher explained the students to mark the options are closer to their feelings.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed by The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, Version 21.0) aiming to answer the research questions quantitatively. To answer the third research question, descriptive statistics were conducted to determine the frequency, the mean, the variance and the standard deviation of the gathered data. It is a value to put each research question under analysis according to the scope of the researcher and the aim of the study. The study also employed two questionnaire, a researcher-made questionnaire focusing on the attitudes towards learning English and a Cultural Identity Questionnaire.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The relationship between identity and language learning is of interest to scholars in the fields of second language acquisition (SLA), language education, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics with greater focus on sociological and cultural dimensions of language learning. In spite of the fact that some scholars such as Deckert and Vickers (2011) claim that the ideas of identity and self are not synonymous, Owens (2003) maintains that they are related. McCool (2009) referring to identity points out, 'everyone is faced with developing a sense of self, a process that begins in adolescence' (p. 6). Joseph (2004), not mentioning the argument, claims that although the expression of self and the emotions is one of the principal functions of language, it has largely been neglected by linguists as being a matter of aesthetic, falling within the field of literary criticism and the rhetoric of persuasion (quoted in Riley, 2007). This perspective, inherited from Aristotelian dualism but still massively present in contemporary code-centred linguistics, saw the emotions as related to the body rather than to the mind and, therefore, as not being amenable to or worthy of scientific investigation. Unquestionably, identity is not a static quality of an individual, but it is a flexible, fluid, and multi-aspected co-construction that is only partially representative of an individual's sense of self. Disregarding the probable differentiation between expression of self and identity, in this paper attempt is made to examine the relation between language learning and identity through analyzing the effects each poses on the other.

Descriptive Findings

In the descriptive statistics section, tendency central and variability were examined in order to describe the data collected.

Validity and Reliability

The concept of validity answers this question whether the instrument measures what it should measure. So, without a test of validity the accuracy of the data collected will be skeptical. The measurement instrument may be valid for measuring some specific characteristic yet it may not be valid for other feature or other population (Sarmad et al, 2007). Accordingly, in the present study after some experts evaluated the instruments, the questionnaire validity was

confirmed.

Reliability

In the present study, the investigator first conducted a pilot study among 25 participants. For calculating the questionnaire reliability, the Cronbach's alpha was utilized. After entering the data into SPSS22, the alpha value was computed. Table 1 shows the result.

Table 4.1 *Reliability of the Questionnaire*

Variables	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cultural identity	9	0.940
Emotional aspect	3	0.750
Cognitive aspect	3	0.754
Behavioral aspect	3	0.872
Attitude	9	0.793

As can be seen in Table 1, the alpha value for all parts of the questionnaire is larger than 0.7. The alpha values for the cultural identity questionnaire is equal to 0.940 and for the language learning attitude is equal to 0.793.

Descriptive Statistics of the Research Variables

Table 2 illustrates the results of descriptive statistics of the research variables.

Table 4.2 *Descriptive Statistics of research variable*

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cultural identity	60	1	5	3.41	1.065
Attitude	60	1	5	3.18	0.900
Emotional aspect	60	1	5	3.26	1.072
Cognitive aspect	60	1	5	3.16	0.962
Behavioral aspect	**60**	**1**	**5**	**3.12**	**1.489**
Pronunciation learning	**60**	**8**	**20**	**14.38**	**3.622**

Considering Table 4.2, the cultural identity has a mean score 3.41 and language learning attitude mean score is 3.18. Also, between aspects of the language learning attitude, the highest mean score belongs to emotional aspect with mean score 3.26 and the lowest mean score belongs to behavioral aspect 3.12. The mean score of pronunciation learning is 14.38

Test of Normality

In order to evaluate normality of the data distribution, the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test was applied. Table 4.3 shows the test.

Table 4.3 *One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test*

variables	Mean	Std. D	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig
Cultural identity	3.41	1.065	1.294	.070
Attitude	3.18	0.900	1.099	.130
Emotional aspect	3.26	1.072	1.215	.076
Cognitive aspect	3.16	0.962	.776	.584
Behavioral aspect	3.12	1.489	1.301	.058

Considering Table 4-3, the Sig. value is larger than 0.05 for all the research variables. Therefore, all the variables had a normal distribution. Also, for testing the research variables the researcher used parametric test.

Inferential Findings

The Research Questions

Q1: What are students' general attitudes towards learning English language pronunciation?

To answer the first question, the researcher compared the obtained mean scores with mean score 3. To do so, she used the one- sample T-test. Table 4-4 illustrates the results.

Table 4.4 *One-Sample Test*

N	Mean	Std. D	t	df	Sig.
60	3.18	.900	1.545	59	.128

According to Table 4-4, Sig>0.05, therefore, in 95% level of confidence the mean scores are equal to the average number 3. In other words, the students' attitude towards learning English language pronunciation is in average level.

Q2: What are the specific attitudes of Iranian EFL students towards learning English language pronunciation in terms of behavioral, cognitive and emotional aspects?

For this question, the researcher compared the obtained scores with average score 3 for each aspect. Accordingly, the researcher used the one- sample T-test. Table 4-5 illustrates the results.

Table 4.5 *Independent sample t-test*

variable	N	Mean	Std. D	t	df	Sig.
Emotional aspect	60	3.26	1.072	1.887	59	.064
Cognitive aspect	60	3.16	0.962	1.298	59	.199
Behavioral aspect	60	3.12	1.489	.607	59	.546

With regard to Table 4-5, Sig>0.05, therefore, in 95% level of confidence the mean scores are equal to the average number 3. In other words, the students' attitude towards learning pronunciation in terms of three emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects is in average level.

Q3: Is there any statistically significant relationship between cultural identity and language learning attitude?

For this question, the researcher used One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test and for examining the data normality, she applied Pearson's correlation coefficient test. Table 4-6 presents the results.

Table 4.6 *Pearson's correlation coefficient test for cultural identity and attitude*

variable	Correlation Coefficient	Sig
Attitude	-.137	.297
Emotional aspect	-.051	.701
Cognitive aspect	-.083	.530
Behavioral aspect	-.158	.227
Cultural identity	-.150	0.70

According to Table 4-6, the Sig. value is larger than 0.05 for all the variables. Consequently, no meaningful relationship exists between cultural identities (r= -.150, sig= 0.70), attitude(r= -.137, sig=.297) and emotional (r= -.51, sig.=.701), cognitive (r= -.83,sig=.530) and behavioral (r=-.158, sig= .227) aspects.

Test of Research Hypothesis

H0: *there is no statistically significant relationship between cultural identity and English language pronunciation.*

In order to test the research hypothesis, the parametric Pearson's correlation coefficient test was used. Table 4-7 illustrates the results.

Table 4.7 *Correlation coefficient between cultural identity and pronunciation learning*

Variable	Correlation Coefficient	Sig
Identity and pronunciation learning	0.343	.007

According to Table 4-7, Sig is smaller than 0.05. So, a statistically meaningful relationship exists between cultural identity and pronunciation learning. Consequently, the hypothesis is rejected. Therefore, cultural identity directly associates to pronunciation learning.

Discussion

As the findings of the study showed, cultural identity affects pronunciation learning; that is, holding a secondary identity and readiness to learn a foreign language affects learning foreign language pronunciation among Iranian EFL students. The recent studies view identity as multiple and dynamic. Language serves as a 'site of identity construction'. Identity can be assumed as the potential ability and it is the social context that provides the language learner with opportunities to enhance this potentiality. There is a mutual and dynamic relationship between the identity language learners assume and their success in language learning even in a foreign language learning context. Ethnic identity cannot be easily separated from other types of identity. It is for this reason that post-structuralist accounts present identity not as something unitary and stable but rather as multiple and dynamic.

If other studies come up with similar results, it might be concluded that language teachers and FL policy makers can feel more at ease introducing cultural aspects of the target language in their classrooms, materials and textbooks on one hand. On the other hand, language learners' desires may lead them to invest in L2 learning and accordingly provide them with learning opportunities. Enhancement of desires and identities, individual or social, should be of interest to language policy makers and text developers.

The inferential statistical analysis was employed to answer the research questions. The results of the first question reveal that at the Sig>0.05, in 95% level of confidence the mean scores are equal to the average number 3. In other words, the students' attitude towards learning foreign language is in average level. That is, attitude towards language learning could to some extent affect pronunciation learning.

For answering the second research question, the researcher employed the one- sample T-test. The results obtained from this section indicate that at Sig>0.05, in 95% level of confidence the mean scores are equal to the average number 3. In other words, the students' attitude towards learning pronunciation in terms of three emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspects is in average level. Accordingly, each aspect of language learning attitude could influence learning pronunciation in average.

Answering the third research question, the One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test and Pearson's correlation coefficient test were applied. Considering the results, the Sig. value is larger than 0.05 for all the variables. Consequently, no meaningful relationship exists between cultural identity (r= -.150, sig= 0.70), attitude(r= -.137, sig=.297) and emotional (r= -.51, sig. =.701), cognitive (r= -.83, sig=.530) and behavioral (r=-.158, sig= .227) aspects.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it can be concluded that that language and identity are inextricably intertwined, both affect one another and each produces a response from the other. Also, as the findings of the study showed, cultural identity affects pronunciation learning; that is, holding a secondary identity and readiness to learn a foreign language affects learning foreign language pronunciation among Iranian EFL students. The recent studies view identity as multiple and dynamic. Language serves as a 'site of identity construction'. Identity can be assumed as the potential ability and it is the social context that provides the language learner with opportunities to enhance this potentiality. There is a mutual and dynamic relationship between the identity language learners assume and their success in language learning even in a foreign language learning context. Ethnic identity cannot be easily separated from other types of identity. It is for this reason that post-structuralist accounts present identity not as something unitary and stable but rather as multiple and dynamic.

Implications of the Study

The results of this study have wide pedagogical implications for the education of EFL students and the training of their teachers.

First and foremost, the EFL teachers are recommended to create an encouraging atmosphere in the English classes to promote the students' positive attitudes towards English. They should also motivate the students to learn English, highlighting its importance. This can be achieved by implementing the appropriate methods and activities of teaching English effectively.

Second, they should integrate up-to-date materials and supplementary resources in addition to the English text books. This can help them capture students' attention to learn English successfully. Moreover, the EFL teachers should consider the role of gender perspective in language learning, exposing various approaches to improve the students' attitudes, motivation and language performance as well.

Furthermore, teachers are also recommended to teach the English curriculum as it is supposed to be taught, focusing on the communicative approach. The EFL teachers must be aware that communicative approach encourages EFL learners to collaborate and discuss their experiences and other issues regarding language learning. This can increase their attitude, enthusiasm and their motivation to acquire the language.

Other implication for educators is that curriculum makers should review the content and the design of the curriculum to meet the needs and the interests of the students. They are recommended to consider that the EFL learners have different perceptions about learning other languages due to their differences regarding gender, specialization, year of study, etc. Thus, taking all these issues into account, the curriculum design should be reevaluated so that students could see something different concerning the activities, content, topics, teaching practices etc. and be more motivated to learn English.

Moreover, the construction of identity is heavily influenced by the students' daily activities in which computer-based technologies play crucial roles. For this reason, if we want our students to enjoy their educational activities, we need to bridge the gap between the "digital natives" and the "digital immigrants" (Prensky 2001, 2010). It is possible that many students find the learning materials and classroom activities de-motivating because they cannot relate them to their life experiences. Moreover, when teachers use traditional learning materials and

instructional methods, today's technology savvy students may feel distant from their teachers and see a dichotomy of "us-vs.-them." In this situation, it is needed to focus on how students learn rather than how teachers teach. Learner-generated-texts can be culturally responsive because learners find familiar socio-cultural experiences in the stories they hear from their peers. It also gives them an opportunity to tell their own stories and become an active member of the learning community. Thus, communication technology and autobiographical texts can engage EFL learners in active learning activities and help them achieve their educational goals

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