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A Socio-Cultural Study of Language Teacher Status

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Abstract

The present study pursued two goals: First, to discover the subscales underlying the teacher Status Scale (TSS); and second, to reveal the status of the teachers of Persian, Arabic, and English in Iranian junior high school students' perceptions in order to determine the relative roles of national, religious, and western influences in the identity construction of the students. The data was collected from 650 junior high school students, who rated their 80 teachers. Regarding the first goal, an Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed revealing three subscales of the TSS: personal status, social status, and educational status. As for the second goal, a number of Chi-square tests were run on the data. Based on the results, English teachers were found to have the highest status in all the three factors and as a whole, denoting the more dominant role of western influence in the construction of the students' identities.

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1. Introduction

In all educational systems, there is usually a considerable share of the curriculum devoted to the instruction of certain languages. The decisions regarding which languages to be taught and introduced at which school level differ from one system to another, and like many other curriculum issues, these decisions are mainly of political nature (Levin, 2007). In Iran, there are three languages taught in the formal system of education: Persian, as the formal language of the country; Arabic, as the language of religion; and English, as the language of international communication. Out of these three, English has for long been looked up to as the language of modernity, technology, and prestige in the country and this seems to explain the unquenchable thirst of Iranians for learning English, which is evident in the relatively great number of individuals who either have mastered or are learning it in spite of the fact that it is just a foreign language to them (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2011).

The educational system of the country is a centralized system with high emphasis on unification so as to minimize the individual differences between teachers, teaching material, and teaching methods (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008). Considering this feature, it is believed that ascertaining the relative status of language teachers in students' perceptions can, in effect, shed light on the status of the three languages themselves. In turn, knowledge of the status of Persian, Arabic, and English as perceived by the students can have great implications with regard to the things each of these languages represent. That is to say, considering the close link between language learning and identity construction (Norton, 2000), such knowledge can indicate the significant role of national, religious, and western influences in the identity construction of the students.

Still, there are two important points which add to the significance of the issue. First is the critical time the two foreign languages are introduced to students in the formal system of education— they are included in the school curriculum from grade 6 on, i.e., age 13. Clearly enough, adolescence is the critical period in a person's identity formation

(Brown, 2007), and accordingly, this timing can intensify the effects of the likely changes on the learner's identity and worldview caused by contact with a new language and culture. The second point, which makes the issue especially significant in the context of Iran, is that the country has for long tried to avoid the linguistic imperialism of the west and among the measures taken in this regard are great cultural and economic investments in promoting an Islamic-Iranian identity. Thus, the findings of this study can reveal the extent this policy has achieved the expected outcomes in the educational system.

Unfortunately, in spite of its high significance, there has been no study conducted in Iran to date examining this issue. Therefore, the present study is aimed at revealing the status of the teachers of Persian, Arabic, and English languages in Iranian junior high school students' perceptions in order to determine the relative weight of national, religious, and western influences on the identity construction of the students.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Language Learning and Identity Construction

Literature on the negotiated, constructed, and conflicted nature of identity in the realm of language use and language learning is not scarce. Brown (2007), for instance, argues that along with learning a second language, a second identity is internalized; thus, the learner's worldview, self-identity, and ways of thinking, feeling, acting, and communicating can be disorganized by a new culture contact. Similarly, Miller (2003) views language use as a form of self-representation which is deeply connected to one's social identities and values. In the same vein, Mitchell and Myles (1998) regard the language learning process as "essentially social", and the learner as essentially "a social being, whose identity is continually reconstructed through the processes of engagement with the L2" (p. xi).

Norton was one of the pioneers in highlighting the close link between language and identity. *Identity* in Norton's (1997) work refers to the way one understands his/her relationship to the world, the way such relationship is built across time and space, and the way one understands

his/her future possibilities, accordingly. Language learning, according to Norton (1997, 2000), is in fact a process of construction and negotiation of identity. That is to say, speaking a second language for language learners is beyond a simple exchange of information with some interlocutors, but it involves constant organization and reorganization of the sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world.

Furthermore, the notion of “investment” indicates how developing the command of a new language and culture simultaneously involves the development of new identities (Norton, 1995). *Investment* refers to “the socially and historically constructed relationship of learners to the target language and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 1997, p. 411). Accordingly, there appears a shift of concern from the motivation and personality type of the learner to the way the learner’s relationship to the target language is socially and historically constructed since an investment in the target language is, in effect, an investment in a learner’s own social identity changing across time and space.

Norton’s (1997) work was greatly influenced by Weedon’s (1987) Theory of Subjectivity introduced within a feminist poststructuralist framework. In this theory, Weedon (1997) discusses the integration of language, individual experience, and social power with an emphasis on the important role of language in constructing the relationship between the individual and the society, that is, social identity.

It is due to such important impacts of learning a new language on the construction and negotiation of identity that educators decide so prudently about the languages to be taught and the way to teach them. In the following, language teaching in the Iranian system of education is discussed in details.

2.2. Iranian Formal System of Education

The formal system of education in Iran is a conservative and highly centralized system with “a one-size-fits-all policy” (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008, p. 103). This policy is evident in the exertion of the prescribed textbooks all over the country, the

administration of national tests, and demanding full conformity from teachers in an attempt to unify their instructions and, hence, the students from all around the country. Therefore, the system gains itself the control over not only the input, through the prescribed curriculum, but the output, through the national testing scheme (Ostovar-Namaghi, 2006).

English teaching at all school levels of the system seems to pivot around one central policy, i.e., developing and enhancing the reading skill at the expense of the other three skills. Such trend of English instruction is implemented via textbooks and exams. An analysis of the Iranian English textbooks clearly confirms this fact (Allami, Jalilifar, Hashemian, & Shooshtari, 2009; Ghorbani, 2009; Hosseini 2007; Jahangard, 2007; Razmjoo & Riazi, 2006). That is, the materials which are primarily aimed at developing the reading ability constitute a big share of these books. The listening skill, on the other hand, is hardly ever addressed and one can rarely find exercises particularly designed to enhance the listening ability. The productive abilities, i.e., speaking and writing skills, are taken into account peripherally through isolated sentence production activities in a decontextualized and sterile milieu of communication. Moreover, alongside the reading skill which constitutes the first priority in the design of the books, a large portion of lessons is devoted to the explicitly stated grammatical rules and various grammar drills as well as long lists of vocabulary with poor contextualization (Jahangard, 2007).

The same trend of instruction can be vividly observed in the Arabic classes. That is, the main goal is developing the reading skill through explicit teaching of prescriptive grammatical rules and through emphasis on translation and memorization of poorly contextualized vocabulary. Also, compared to the English instruction, teaching Arabic involves even less emphasis on the speaking and listening abilities.

Being the formal language of the country, Persian is to some extent taught differently from the other two languages. Here the focus is on developing the writing skill. However, this goal is again pursued through teaching

prescriptive grammatical rules and extending vocabulary knowledge (e.g. affixes, word families, etc.). There are also some reading texts whose primary aim of inclusion in the textbook is improving fluency in reading.

The present study seeks to reveal the status of the teachers of these three languages as perceived by junior high school students. The primary motive in conducting this teacher status analysis is finding out about the status of the three languages in the students' perceptions. This, the researchers argue, is possible due to the fact that the recruitment and training of the teachers in such centralized educational system unifies, as much as possible, the teachers and their teaching methods and material (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008). Hence, students' opinions about the teachers would be an indirect indication of their opinions about the languages themselves.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study was conducted on 650 female students who rated their language teachers in Mashhad, Iran. They studied at junior high school and belonged to an age range of 12 to 15 years old. The 80 teachers whom our subjects rated were all female teachers of junior high school –in Iranian school system there is no male teacher in junior high schools for girls –aged between 20 and 50 ($M= 25$) with a range of between 2 to 27 ($M= 12.5$) years of teaching experience.

The rationale behind choosing junior high school out of the three school levels of Iranian educational system –primary, junior high, and high school –was that Arabic and English are first included in the school curriculum at this level. Moreover, since the data collection procedure was almost done by the female researcher, her access to boys' schools was somewhat limited with respect to the policies employed by the Ministry of Education.

3.2. Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a teacher status scale (TSS) designed and validated by Pishghadam and Saboori (2014). The scale included 18 adjectives pertaining to

different aspects of a teacher status to be marked for the teachers of the three languages: Persian, Arabic, and English. Rasch model version 3.74 was applied by Pishghadam and Saboori (2014) to substantiate the construct validity of the scale and its results demonstrated that all the items met the unidimensionality criterion. Also, employing Cronbach Alpha, the reliability of the TSS was calculated to be 0.81.

3.3. Procedure

The data collection took place in the last month of the school year (May) 2012. It took an average of 10 minutes for each person to answer the scale. Before starting to answer, and in order to unveil what they truly thought of their teachers, the students were assured that their answers were confidential and that none of the school staff would get to see them. Students were required to mark the adjectives which were more prominent for each teacher. There was no limitation in marking so that students could mark all or none of the adjectives for each teacher and it totally depended on their view about the teacher.

The analysis of the data entailed two phases: In the first phase, the construct validity of the TSS was substantiated through the application of Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) with the aim of pinpointing the underlying factors of this scale. The internal consistency of the whole questionnaire was measured with the Cronbach Alpha reliability estimate. Moreover, using Cronbach Alpha, the reliability of each factor constructing the validated test was also examined. To validate the questionnaire, in the first place, Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was employed to extract the underlying factors through calculating the eigenvalues of the matrix greater than 1.0. The Scree test was used in order to decide upon the number of factors to retain for rotation. For conducting factor rotation, Varimax (orthogonal rotation) with Kaiser Criterion was used. The result was a rotated component matrix and a transformation matrix. The rotated component matrix indicated the variables loaded on each factor so that the researchers could come up with the new factors. In the second phase of the analysis, a series of Chi-squares (using SPSS version 19) were run on the data to see

whether the differences between the statuses of the teachers in the gained factors and on the whole were significant.

4. Results

4.1. Reliability and Validity of the TSS

In the first phase, Cronbach Alpha estimated the reliability of the whole items as 0.81. After factor rotation was inspected, the number of items remained 18. All of the three factors yielded good reliability estimates ranging from 0.68 to 0.80 (Table 1).

Table 1

Reliability of Each Factor

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Factor 1	.71	7
Factor 2	.80	7
Factor 3	.68	4
Total	.81	18

The Factorability of the intercorrelation matrix was measured by two tests: Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin test of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The results obtained from the two tests revealed that the factor model was appropriate (Table 2).

Table 2

KMO and Bartlett's Test

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		.788
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	591.234
	N	200
	Sig.	.000

The construct validity of the TSS was examined through Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA). PCA extracted 5 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 which accounted for 51% of the variance.

The results obtained from the Scree Test indicated that a three-factor solution might provide a more suitable grouping of the items

in the scale. The researchers, then, inspected orthogonal rotation. The result of Varimax with Kaiser Normalization was a rotated component matrix. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 3. The results indicated that the first factor consisted of 7 items. The second factor consisted of 7 items. And, factor 3 consisted of 4 items.

Table 3

Rotated Components Obtained via Principal Component Analysis and their Loadings

Component 1	Component 2	Component 3
Kind= .70	Influential= .53	Well-educated= .62
Patient= .55	High class= .52	Knowledgeable= .52
Honest= .55	Respectable= .62	Intelligent = .49
Polite= .31	Consultable= .34	Open-minded= .44
Friendly= .45	Conversationalist= .44	
Sense of humor= .34	Good appearance=.33	
Trustworthy= .45	Entertaining = .61	

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

Finally, the researchers analyzed the items comprising each factor and named the three factors as *personal, social, and educational*

status. Items representing each factor are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

Three Factors of the Scale

# areas	Statements	N of items	Percentage
1. Personal status	Kind, Patient, Honest, Polite, Friendly, Sense of humor, Trustworthy	7	38.8
2. Social status	Influential, High-class, Respectable, Consultable, Conversationalist, Good appearance, Entertaining	7	38.8
3. Educational status	Well-educated, Knowledgeable, Intelligent, Open-minded	4	22.2
	Total	18	100

4.2. Questionnaire Results

As for the second phase of the analysis, the results of the TSS were examined to reveal any possible difference between the three

language teachers in each of the discovered factors as well as the overall status ranks. To do so, a number of Chi Square tests were run on the data.

Table 5

Results of the Chi Square Test for the Personal Status of Teachers

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	Test Statistics	
English	1347	1107.0	240.0	Chi-Square	1.736
Persian	1217	1107.0	110.0	df	2
Arabic	757	1107.0	-350.0	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Total	3321				

As indicated in Table 5, while there was no significant difference between English and Persian teachers regarding the first factor, i.e., personal status, the difference between these two and Arabic teachers turned out to be significant. In other words, students

considered both Persian and English teachers to be of significantly higher personal stance than Arabic teachers ($\chi^2=1.736, p<.05$).

English/ Persian > Arabic

Table 6

Results of the Chi Square Test for the Social Status of Teachers

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	Test Statistics	
English	1618	1090.0	528.0	Chi-Square	4.669
Persian	1039	1090.0	-51.0	df	2
Arabic	613	1090.0	-477.0	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Total	3270				

With regard to the social status (Table 6), however, English teachers were found to own a significantly higher place than Persian and Arabic teachers ($\chi^2=4.669, p<.05$). In other words, students perceived English teachers as

socially superior to Persian and Arabic teachers.

English > Persian/ Arabic

Table 7*Results of The Chi Square Test for the Educational Status of Teachers*

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	Test Statistics	
English	918	653.0	265.0	Chi-Square	1.827
Persian	604	653.0	-49.0	df	2
Arabic	437	653.0	-216.0	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Total	1959				

As illustrated in Table 7, the results of the third factor resembled those of the second factor in that it was the English teacher again who got the first rank and stood in a significantly higher stance than the Persian and Arabic teachers ($\chi^2=1.827$, $p<.05$).

Accordingly, it can be inferred that students believed in the English teachers' educational superiority to the Persian and Arabic teachers.

English > Persian/ Arabic

Table 8*Results of the Chi Square Test for the Status of Teachers*

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual	Test Statistics	
English	3883	2850.0	1033.0	Chi-Square	756.154
Persian	2860	2850.0	10.0	df	2
Arabic	1807	2850.0	-1043.0	Asymp. Sig.	.000
Total	8550				

Finally, to find out whether the difference in the overall rating of the teachers' statuses was statistically significant, a Chi-square test was run on the data. Based on the results, there was a significant difference between the status of the three language teachers as perceived by the students ($\chi^2=756.154$, $p<.05$). As evident in Table 8, English teachers were rated by the students as having the highest status ($n=3883$); the second status rank was that of Persian teachers ($n=2860$); and the lowest rank belonged to Arabic teachers ($n=1807$).

5. Discussion

This study set itself two goals: First, to discover the underlying factors of the TSS. This was accomplished through the use of EFA and the results alluded to the existence of three underlying subscales which were named by the researchers, based on their containing items, as *personal status*, *social status*, and *educational status*. The second goal was to reveal the status of Persian, Arabic, and English teachers from the perspective of the students. The results of the status scale were discussed first in an atomistic view –

analyzing each of the three subscales separately – and next, in a holistic view – analyzing the overall status ranks of each language.

As the results indicated, in two of the three factors, i.e., social and educational status, English teacher got the first rank. This implies that, students believe in the significant social and educational superiority of English teacher to the Persian and Arabic teachers. One possible explanation for such a perception is not difficult to guess. In effect, the most prominent explanation seems to be the stance of the U.S. in the world today, due to its being a superpower and dominating international commerce and finance, science, education, etc. In addition, the fascinating picture of the western culture presented through the influential and powerful media under its control –Hollywood, the Internet, video games, etc.– play an important role in the creation of such a perception especially in younger generations.

Yet, the case with the third factor, i.e., personal status, was slightly different. Here

again, the rating of the English teacher was higher than the other two teachers though its difference from the Persian teacher's status was not significant. That is to say, the English teacher shared the first rank with the Persian one while the Arabic teacher remained at a lower rank.

Considering the big picture, the TSS results revealed that English teachers had the highest overall status in the students' perceptions. Persian teachers got the second rank and Arabic teachers were perceived as having the lowest status of the three language teachers. As mentioned earlier, a probable justification may be that, a main policy in the Iranian educational system is unification, based on which the recruitment and training of teachers is conducted in a way so as to minimize the individual differences between teachers and their teaching methods (Pishghadam & Mirzaee, 2008). Having this in mind and considering the relatively large number of teachers involved in this study, it can be inferred that the status ranks were, in fact, given to the subject matters, i.e., the languages being taught, rather than the teachers themselves; and hence, it was the English language which, in students' perceptions, had the highest status.

This brings to light the high significance of the culture represented by each of the languages. Simply put, with regard to the close link between language, culture, and identity, it appears that western cultural influences have more weight than national and religious ones on the identity construction of these Iranian teenagers. This shows that, learner's attitude towards the language remarkably affects the identity construction (Brown, 2007). That is to say, the higher the learner's opinion of the language, culture, and its native speakers, the more detrimental role the new identity will play in the learner's life. This new identity could become the dominant one playing the central role in nativizing and modifying other identities on its own basis. As for the case in point, the students' belief in the superiority of English over Persian and Arabic could imply that, their English identity has a detrimental role by overshadowing their national and religious identities. In other words, learning English has, for these Iranian teenagers,

resulted in fading their local identity and causing cultural derichment.

This finding is of particular importance in the context of Iran since it subtly unveils a discrepancy between the expected conditions and the status quo. In the recent decade, great cultural, educational, and economic investments have been made in highlighting and promoting an Islamic Iranian identity mostly as a decolonizationist solution to resist the ideological and linguistic imperialism of the west. Yet, it seems that, in spite of such great efforts and investments, English turns out to be the language Iranian teenagers look up to and consider as superior to their mother tongue. This contrast calls to mind Bakhtin's (1981) distinction between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse (Lin & Luke, 2005). Based on this distinction, authoritative discourse, as the name suggests, is the "language or discourse imposed on person", and internally persuasive discourse, is the one "hybridized and populated with one's own voices, styles, meanings, and intentions" (Lin & Luke, 2005, p. 93-94). As for the case in point, the anti-western authoritative discourse of the country has apparently not turned into the teenagers' internally persuasive discourse and, despite the great outward emphasis on the Iranian identity, they still inwardly appreciate the English language and culture.

This inward appreciation could allude to the apparent success of the western soft power in promoting linguistic and cultural globalization or, in short, the Americanization of the world. As a reaction to such homogenization of the world culture, Iran has discouraged direct interaction and wide intercourse and dialogue with the western cultures in order to create a controlled system for the country, believing that such delimitation would block the imperialistic endeavors of the west. And this brings us to another possible reason for the inferiority of Persian to English in the students' perceptions, that is, lack of dialogue. "Two voices", according to Bakhtin (1981, p.252), "is minimum for life, minimum for existence... if dialogism ends, everything ends". For an idea to live and develop, it needs to enter into genuine dialogue relationships with others' ideas. In other words, understanding never happens in an isolated

individual consciousness but in order to understand, the person who understands has no choice but to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding in terms of time, space, and culture. That is to say, one can only understand his or her culture by being outside it (Emerson, 1997). The dialogue and interaction between cultures is a vital condition of their existence, and it not only leads to cultural enrichment and awareness but at the same time causes better understanding of each while each one retains its unity (Bakhtin, 1986). On such grounds, it can be argued that, Iran's limited dialogue with other cultures has, in the course of time, led into a relatively weak home culture awareness and appreciation and that it might be due to such a weak cultural infrastructure that wide exposure to a language like English as an inevitable result of globalization has made Iranian teenagers believe in its superiority over their own language and culture.

Finally, as for the lowest status rank of Arabic, an important reason might be the decline in religious identity as a universal by-product of ideological globalization (Arnett, 2002). Promoting secularization and a global culture has resulted in ignoring religious issues in favor of consumerism, entertainment, and pursuit of individual enjoyment. That is to say, by transcending national boundaries through global communication, globalization has resulted in the creation of plurality and fluidity of identities and that, in turn, has led to the fading of religious identity and, hence, the language associated with that religion has lost its former stance.

All in all, this finding can have noteworthy implications. At a macro level, it necessitates a change of the country's discourse and a revision of its policies in order to more effectively promote an Islamic Iranian identity since, considering the students' inward appreciation of English language and culture, it seems that, the current policies have not been efficient enough in achieving the expected results. At a micro level, the superior stance of English teachers can be used to the benefit of educational purposes. That is, the system can make the most of it, through appropriate teacher training courses, both to resist linguistic imperialism, which is integral to teaching English (Phillipson, 1992), and to

enhance life qualities in students, and thus educate them for life. To this end, the system needs to make a paradigm shift in its ELT towards Applied ELT and redefine the role of English teacher—from a passive transmitter to the conscious agent of change—through training *educational language teachers* (Pishghadam, Zabihi, & Norouz Kermanshahi, 2012). To complement the notion of educational language teachers, quite recently, Pishghadam and Adamson (2013) broached the idea of *educational language learning textbooks*. They in fact believe that not only teachers but also textbooks are expected to cultivate various aspects of learners' lives prior to different language proficiency instructions.

In the end, it is recommended that future research further evaluate and improve the instrument developed in this study. Given that in the current study only females' attitudes were investigated, generalizability may be slightly problematic. Therefore, further research is called for to study males' perceptions as well. Furthermore, this scale can be used in combination with qualitative measures of interview and observation in order to help researchers assert more confident conclusions about the status of different teachers in different contexts. Also, future research can investigate language teachers' status by extending the scope of investigation to include the informal educational setting as well. Finally, another study can be conducted to reveal the status of English language teachers within different social classes.

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