



Cultural Understanding of Controversial Issues in Class and Teacher Credibility: Introducing the Concept of Envolvement

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ethos, the term used by Aristotle (n.d./1991), refers to the credibility that may play a key role in convincing the receivers in the communicative contexts. Nowadays, source credibility is more commonly used instead and has been defined as “the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a communicator” (McCroskey and Young 1981: 24), or the extent to which a source may be considered believable (McCroskey 1998). Research has shown that teacher credibility is one of the crucial factors impacting the teacher-student relationships and communications (Frymier and Thompson 1992; McCroskey, Holdridge, and Toomb 1974; Schrodt, Witt, Turman, Myers, Barton, and Jernberg 2009), and also affecting the students’ motivation and learning (Johnson and Miller 2002; Teven 2007; Teven and McCroskey 1997). That might justify why some students are probably motivated to attend a particular class where the teacher as the main source is perceived credible while the



same students might be demotivated or unwilling to take part in another class where the teacher is not believable, and that also could explain why some students give higher scores in terms of evaluation to the teachers who are judged credible (Teven and McCroskey 1997).

As earlier mentioned, due to the importance of teacher credibility and its considerable influence on students' perceptions and information they receive from their teacher as the main source in the classroom, a number of scholars embarked upon investigating different variables which probably exert an influence on teacher credibility. For instance, a wide range of variables such as attractiveness (Buck and Tiene 1989), sexual orientation (Russ, Simonds, and Humt 2002), the instructor's age and misbehaviour (Semlak and Pearson 2002), and affinity-seeking strategies (Frymier and Thompson 1992) have been identified to contribute to teacher credibility. In their study, Frymier and Thompson (1992) revealed that the more a teacher uses affinity-seeking strategies, the more likely s/he is perceived to be credible. Therefore, it can be concluded that establishing a strong rapport and taking students' emotions into consideration can affect the students' perceptions of teachers' competence. Furthermore, Shanmugasundaram and Mohamad (2011) believed that little attention has been given to the emotional aspect of education and language learning, and researchers have focused mainly on the behaviorist, cognitive, and social movements for the development of multiple approaches within the field of L2 learning (Brown 2007). Thus, to fill this gap and to show that learners' emotions play an important role in the different dimensions of L2 learning, Pishghadam, Tabatabaeyan, and Navari (2013) introduced *emotioncy* as a new emotion-oriented approach in L2 education. Emotioncy, which is a blend of the terms "emotion" and "frequency" is defined as the emotions stemmed from the senses which may relativize one's understanding of the world (Pishghadam 2015). To shed more light on this new concept, Pishghadam (2015) proposed a hierarchical and incremental model based on which the learners can move from *avolvement* (null emotioncy) to *exvolvement* (auditory, visual, and kinesthetic emotioncies), and then to *involvement* (inner and arch emotioncies). Therefore, in an educational setting, this conclusion can be reached that a teacher may adopt three different approaches if s/he decides to bring up an issue or topic. First, s/he may decide to avoid discussing the issue in order to avolve his/her students. Second, the teacher may create an environment in which his/her students can hear, see, and also feel a closeness to the issue (to exvolve his/her students). Finally, if s/he decides to involve his/her students, not only does s/he let them hear, see, and feel it, but also experience it and do some research on it. As a result, the avolvement, exvolvement, and involvement classifications paved the way to have a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of *envolvement* proposed by Pishghadam (2016), meaning that the *envolvers* (people who have authority such as teachers) decide when to avolve, exvolve, or involve an individual in different subjects or issues, especially the ones which may provoke considerable controversies.

A controversial issue is defined as "lesson, unit, course, or curriculum that engages students in learning about issues, analyzing them, deliberating alternative solutions, and often taking and supporting a position on which solutions may be based" (Hess 2008: 124). The teacher, as a "curricular-instructional gatekeeper" (Thornton 1991), or as an "envolver" (Pishghadam 2016) determines what curriculum should be included or excluded. A number of reasons have been uncovered by some



teachers for restricting the discussion of controversial issues. The negative feedback or backlash they receive from society (Ho, Alviar-Martin, and Leviste 2014; Patterson 2010), the burden of high-risk assessment (Misco, Patterson, and Doppen 2011), and the misunderstanding around academic freedom (Misco and Patterson 2007) are the possible reasons why many teachers show little inclination to discuss the controversial issues.

In brief, although several variables affecting teacher credibility have been investigated, this body of research, which takes a quantitative approach, can be different from prior studies in terms of its focus on the discussion or involvement of the controversial issues as another factor that can adversely affect teacher credibility and can probably give teachers another compelling reason to avoid such issues in the classroom. Thus, this present study intends to answer the following questions:

RQ₁: Does the involvement of the controversial issues scale (ECIS) enjoy the psychometric properties?

RQ₂: Is there any statistically significant relationship between the sub-scales of the ECIS and teacher credibility in light of the emotioncy hierarchies?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1. Emotioncy

Emotions are believed to play a central role in the processes of education in general (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, and Perry 2002), and in foreign language learning in particular (MacIntyre and Gregersen 2012). However, little attention has been given to emotions in the language learning settings; therefore, to incorporate teaching with emotions and to point out that the focus of teaching should not just be on the specific subjects but should also highlight the profound impacts of the emotional dimensions, Pishghadam, Adamson and Shayesteh (2013) and Pishghadam, Tabatabayean, et al. (2013), inspired by the Greenspan's (1992) developmental individual-difference relationship-based model (DIR), injected *emotion-based language instruction* (EBLI) as a new perspective on second language learning. They asserted that the emotional involvement gives meaning to L2 learning and facilitates the processes required to learn a language. To shed more light on this newly-developed concept, the term emotioncy indicates that people might hold varying degrees of emotions toward the different lexical items and entities of a language (Pishghadam and Tabatabayean et al. 2013). They claimed that the lexical items which evoke higher degrees of emotioncy would be learned and acquired more easily and quickly than items with lower levels of emotioncy. Later on, in an effort to expand the concept of emotioncy, Pishghadam (2015) designed a six-level emotioncy matrix (Figure 1). As depicted in Figure 1, emotioncy moves from avolvement to exvolvement and eventually to involvement. Hence, to associate emotioncy with the classroom settings, learners can move from exvolvement to involvement and become more engaged with the item or language entity with which they are struggling to learn.

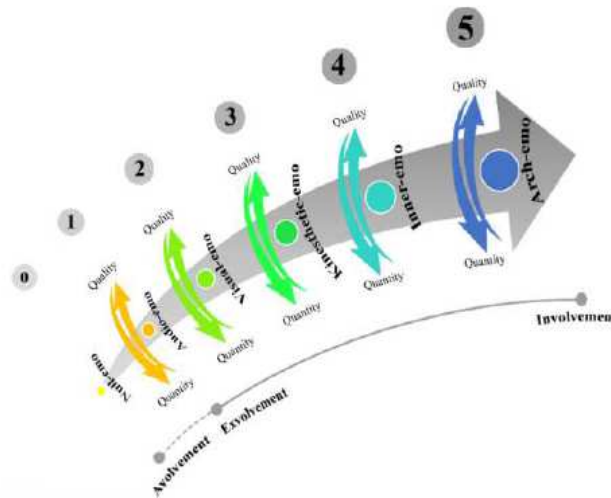


Figure 1. Emotioncy Levels (Adapted from Pishghadam, 2015)

Furthermore, Pishghadam, Jajarmi, and Shayesteh (2016) attempted to broaden and develop the concept. To do so, they labeled the different kinds and types of emotioncy (see Table 1 for the conceptual definitions).

Emotioncy		
Types	Kinds	Experience
Avolvement	Null	When an individual has not heard about, seen, or experienced an object or a concept.
Exvolvement	Auditory	When an individual has merely heard a word/concept.
	Visual	When an individual has both heard about and seen the item.
	Kinesthetic	When an individual has touched, worked, or played with the real object.
Involvement	Inner	When an individual has directly experienced the word/concept.
	Arch	When an individual has done research to get additional information.

Table 1. The Emotioncy Classifications (Adapted from Pishghadam, Jajarmi and Shayesteh 2016: 4).

2.2. *Envolvement*

Whether the teachers decide to bring up some specific issues in the classroom is heavily dependent on their individuality and also the societies in which they live. Research with respect to teaching (Clark and Peterson 1986) and curriculum (Connelly and Clandinin 1988) has shown that the teachers' attitudes toward the society, learning, instruction, the students' personality traits, and the curriculums affect the



materials and the syllabuses they develop for their courses. Therefore, it can be claimed that the teachers have an authoritative role in the process of pedagogical decisions which persuaded some scholars such as Thornton (1991) to view teachers as the curricular-instructional gate-keepers and Pishghadam (2016) to identify them as the envolvers, as an individual who has the power to determine whether to broach a subject. As previously mentioned, the students can move across the spectrum of emotioncy and become more involved in the tasks they are performing; therefore, based on the notion of involvement, as illustrated in Figure 2, it is the responsibility of an envolver (teacher) either to avolve (keep the students in the state of null emotioncy by not bringing up the subject at all), to exvolve (moving the student to the state of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic emotioncies), or to involve (moving the students to the inner and arch emotioncies) in a specific topic.

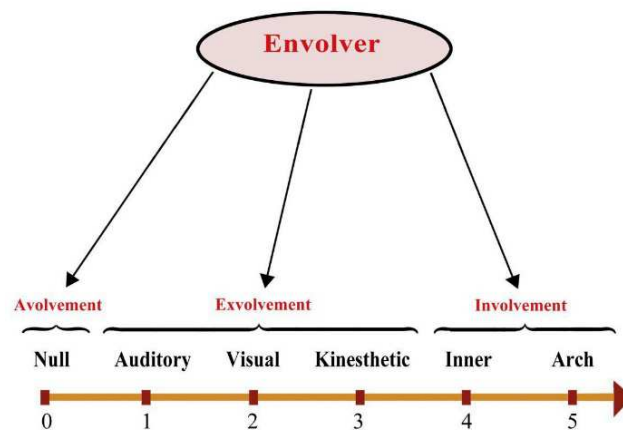


Figure 2. Viewing the envolver as the main source of power in light of the emotioncy sub-scales

According to the concept of involvement, when one teacher decides to avolve the students in a topic, say religion, he would completely avoid discussing the topic so that the students would remain in the state of null emotioncy. On the other hand, another teacher chooses to exvolve the students in the religion-related issues by using some visual or auditory aids or even making plans for a kinesthetic activity by inviting a religious person to the class. The final stage of this continuum occurs when a teacher decides to deeply involve the students in one aspect of religion not only by discussing it but also by suggesting that they take one step forward and do some research on the topic.

2.3. Controversial issues

Oulton, Dillon, and Grace (2004: 411) defined the controversial issues as those topics that "significant numbers of people argue about [...] without reaching a conclusion"



and would lead to some kind of disagreement (Levinson 2008). A number of reasons have been given for the importance of the discussion of the controversial issues in the social studies classes. For instance, Harwood and Hahn (1990) believed that the discussion of the controversial issues would help the students to have a proper preparation for their roles in a democratic society, would be useful for the development of their critical thinking abilities, and would also contribute to their interpersonal skills.

Moreover, teachers may take different stances while dealing with the controversial issues (Byford, Lennon, and Russell 2009; Ersoy 2010). Kelly (1986) recognizes four perspectives of exclusive neutrality, exclusive partiality, neutral impartiality, and committed impartiality as the possible stances that teachers could take, and he introduces the committed impartiality as the best role that a teacher could have. According to this stance, teachers should express their views regarding the controversial issues rather than hiding them. According to Byford et al. (2009), the teachers in social studies classes maintained that the discussion of controversial issues could be useful and irreplaceable although they decided to avoid having it.

Byford et al. (2009) argued that the teachers mostly refuse to have the discussion of controversial issues in their classes because they are afraid of losing their positions as a result of trespassing school and district rules, and also their little comfort over the discussion of such topics. Furthermore, Misco and Patterson (2007) studied a group of regional pre-service teachers on the extent to which they showed an interest in bringing up the controversial issues in their classrooms. The results indicated that the teachers had a great interest in teaching the topics related to political conflict (39%) and racial conflict (26%) while sexual orientation (24%), sexual harassment (16%), and religious conflict (16%) comprised topics which they were less interested to discuss.

One important concern regarding the controversial issues is to find out the appropriate method to deal with them in a classroom context. To achieve this aim, Hand and Levinson (2012) introduced the concept of the discussion as a promising answer. They held this view that controversial issues would contribute to the students' engagement in the different discussions. Consequently, the discussions would provide them with a sense of insight into and affinity with the opposing ideas and their holders. In addition, they proposed that the discussion of the controversial issues can be facilitated using different implements, such as doing a thorough preparation prior to the class or selecting topics which might arouse interest in students. Harwood and Hahn (1990) also pointed out that the teachers apart from having the required skill and practice in order to have a good discussion also need to give enough evidence if they choose to express their own ideas and assure the students that it is only one idea among others.

2.4. Teacher credibility

Teacher credibility is defined as the degree to which a source may be perceived believable by the students (McCroskey 1998). A number of researchers have defined and refined the components of teacher credibility throughout the years in order to come up with a most conclusive scale for measurement. McCroskey, Holdridge, and



Toomb (1974) introduced a scale comprising five components for teacher credibility including competence, character, sociability, composure, and extraversion. Later on, McCroskey (1992) proposed caring (goodwill) as another component of teacher credibility, but the most noted scale was put forward by McCroskey and Teven (1999) who introduced a three-dimensional scale of teacher credibility including competence, trustworthiness and perceived caring. Competence is defined as perceived knowledge or expertise that a teacher applies in his/her classroom while teaching (Teven and McCroskey 1997), trustworthiness is accounted for the extent to which a teacher is perceived by his/her students as an honest one (McCroskey 1998), and perceived caring stands for the students' perception of their teacher in terms of how much s/he recognizes their values, well-being, and interests (McCroskey and Teven 1999).

A number of variables such the use of technology (Schrodt and Witt 2006), instructors' age and misbehavior (Semplak and Pearson 2008), the Twitter posts shared by the instructors (Johnson 2011), and nonverbal teacher immediacy (Pogue and AhYun 2006) have been identified to be associated with the perceptions of teacher credibility. For example, Semplak and Pearson (2008) investigated the impact of instructor age and his/her behavior (offensive, indolent, or incompetent) on the three dimensions (trustworthiness, caring, and competence) of teacher credibility. Their findings indicated that the older teachers were perceived to be more credible than the younger ones. Also, offensive teachers were viewed as more credible than were the indolent and incompetent teachers. In another study, Pogue and AhYun (2006) aimed at finding the effect of teacher nonverbal immediacy and credibility on student motivation and effective learning. Their results showed that the students received more effective learning and motivation when they were taught by the highly immediate and highly credible teachers. Additionally, they received more effective learning from the low-immediate, high-credible teachers than from the high-immediate, low-credible teachers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The present study was conducted with a total of 228 undergraduate students of English (71 males and 147 females) attending Ferdowsi, Islamic Azad, Tabaran, and Khayyam universities in Mashhad, a city in the Northeastern part of Iran. Participants voluntarily took part in this study and were chosen based on convenience sampling. Ages ranged from 18 to 43 ($M= 21.92$). The main purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between the involvement of the controversial issues based on the emotioncy classifications and teacher credibility; therefore, the participants were chosen from four major universities to have a wider range of teachers and consequently to increase the probability of generalization.

3.2. Instruments



3.2.1. Envolving controversial issues scale (ecis)

The researchers developed and validated the involvement of the controversial issues scale (ECIS) based on avolvement, exvolvement, and involvement, the three sub-categories of emotioncy. Politics, religion, and sexuality were determined as the controversial issues that might be brought up in a classroom. The authors intended to find the most tangible and real-life examples for each of these controversial issues so that these examples could be included as the items of the questionnaire. The participants responded to the 18 items presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *completely agree* to *completely disagree*. Furthermore, in order to pilot the ECIS, it was distributed among six students to ensure that the content is suitable and the scale is reliable. Ultimately, the students were told to pass their comments if the items were not comprehensible to them. Accordingly, a number of items underwent some changes. Using *Cronbach's alpha*, reliability coefficients of .78, .73, and .81 were obtained for avolvement, exvolvement, and involvement, respectively (see Appendix A).

3.2.2. Teacher credibility scale

The teacher credibility scale developed by McCroskey and Teven (1999) was utilized to measure the credibility level of teachers. Also, It should be noted that since all the participants were Iranian students, the Persian version of this scale translated by Pishghadam, Seyednozadi, and Zabetipour (2017) was employed so that the items could be comprehensible to each respondent. Trustworthiness (TR), competence (CO), and goodwill (GO) are the three sub-scales of this seven-point bipolar scale which enjoys the reliability of 0.86 using *Cronbach's alpha* (see Appendix B).

3.3. Procedure

The researchers asked for teachers' permission and cooperation in distributing the questionnaires in their classes. Afterwards, both scales were administered to the students. Since all the participants' mother tongue was Persian, the Persian form of each scale was given to them to avoid the vagueness of the items and mount their response rate. They were also informed that their participation was not mandatory and their answers would be anonymous. The participants filled both scales in fifteen minutes in May 2017. After collecting the data, *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 20 program was used to analyze them. The homogeneity of the items was measured by *Cronbach's alpha* (α) coefficient. Afterwards, CFA was utilized to confirm the construct validity of the ECIS. Finally, the relationships between the variables were examined through using SEM, and to examine the structural relations, the proposed model was tested using the *Amos* statistical package.

4. RESULTS



This study aimed at constructing and validating the involvement of the controversial issues scale (ECIS) in light of the three sub-scales of emotioncy and investigating its possible relationship with teacher credibility. Table 2 illustrates the descriptive statistics of the four variables in this study, namely, avolvement, exvolvement, involvement, and teacher credibility.

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Avolvement	2.78	.72	1.00			
2. Exvolvement	3.91	.46	-.276**	1.00		
3. Involvement	4.11	.39	-.456**	.676**	1.00	
4. Teacher credibility	4.56	.45	.312**	-.191*	-.276**	1.00

Table 2. A General Schematic of the Relationships Between Sub-scales of Emotioncy and Teacher Credibility

SEM was carried out to answer the research question. The goodness of the fit measures in *Amos* were employed to probe the feasibility of the proposed model for the ECIS. Figure 3 reveals the interrelationships among the 18 items of the ECIS according to avolvement, exvolvement, and involvement. In this study, the chi-square/*df* ratio, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), Normed Fit Index (NFI), Comparative Fit Index (CFI), and Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) were used. The acceptable value for the chi-square/*df* ratio should be lower than 2 or 3 and for GFI, NFI, CFI a value greater than .90 proves to be a viable fit for the data. For RMSEA a value about .06 or .07 is considered to be acceptable (Schreiber, Nora, Stage, Barlow, and King 2006).

	<i>X</i> ² / <i>df</i>	GFI	NFI	CFI	RMSEA
Acceptable fit	<3	>.90	>.90	>.90	<.08
Model	2.211	.911	.901	.900	.078

Table3. Goodness of Fit Indices

The results of the CFA suggested that all the goodness-of-fit indices were greater than the cut-off point according to Schreiber et al.'s (2006) study. Therefore, it can be stated that the proposed model had a perfect fit with the empirical data (Table 3). To measure the strengths of the causal relationships among the components, the standardized estimates were checked. As demonstrated in Figure 3, an estimate is displayed on each path.

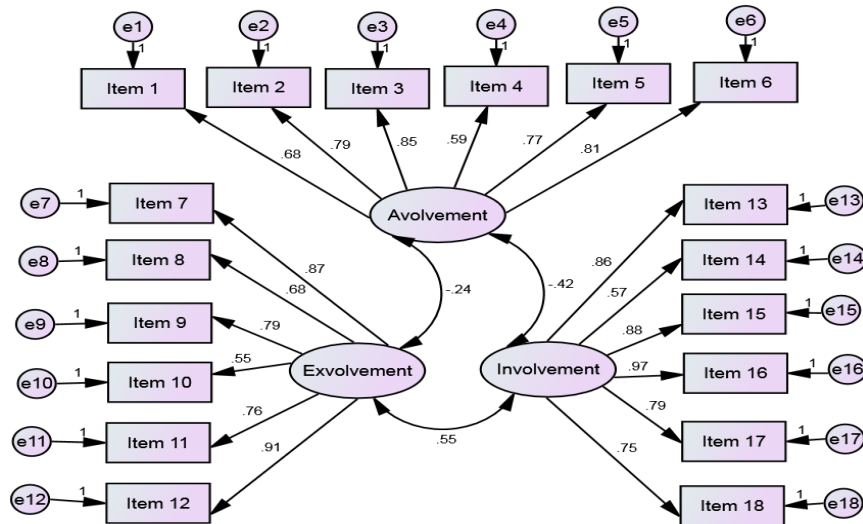
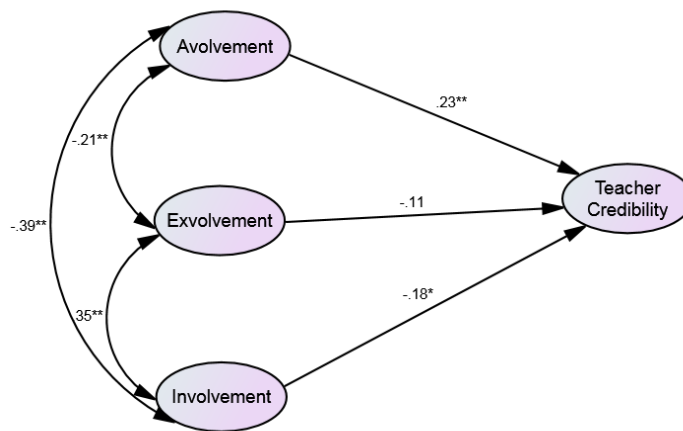


Figure3. The interrelationships among the involvement scale items according to avovement, exvovement, and involvement

As demonstrated in Figure 4, avovement is positively correlated with teacher credibility ($\beta = .23, p < 0.05$). In other words, avovement can be a positive consistent predictor of teacher credibility, indicating that the more the teachers keep their students avolved in some specific issues, the more the students would perceive them credible. However, the relationship between exvovement and teacher credibility is negative and insignificant ($\beta = -.11, p < 0.05$) and the same path goes for involvement as well ($\beta = -.18, p < 0.05$), meaning that an increase in the discussion of the controversial issues in light of the emotioncy hierarchies would not necessarily result in a higher level of teacher credibility.



** $p < .01$

* $p < .05$

Figure 4. The relationships between avolvement, exvolvement, and involvement with teacher credibility

5. DISCUSSION

The present study attempted to explore any possible relationships between the sub-constructs of involvement in light of the emotioncy levels and teacher credibility. Envolvement was first introduced by Pishghadam (2016) and was meant to categorize different individuals such as the teachers based on their tendency for avolving, exvolving, or involving their students in different topics. Moreover, the controversial issues are those which may create controversy between individuals (Levinson 2008); therefore, one may proceed with extreme caution while dealing with them. The first aim of the current study was to substantiate the construct validity of the ECIS which was successfully confirmed through CFA. Moreover, the reliability of the scale was measured through Cronbach's alpha suggesting that the scale enjoys high reliability.

The second purpose of this study was to examine the possible relationships between involvement of the students in the controversial issues and teacher credibility. Three subjects of religion, politics, and sexuality were examined in light of the sub-scales of emotioncy. The results indicated that a positive correlation between avolvement and teacher credibility was evident, meaning that those teachers or envolvers who decided to keep students avolved with regard to the controversial issues were perceived to be more credible by the students. On the other hand, involvement and exvolvement proved to have a negative relationship with teacher credibility. This could mean that the Iranian undergraduate students majoring in English preferred not to hear about the controversial issues let alone having a discussion regarding them in their classes. This finding is not in line with Hand and Levinson's (2012) study in which they introduced having a discussion as a way of coping with controversial issues. One line of justification for participants' lack of propensity to be involved in controversial issues could be the conservative society in



which they are living so that they prefer not to have discussion on religion, politics or sexuality, which are regarded as highly controversial issues in Iran, especially in the academic settings. Another reason could simply be that the students were only concerned with the academic achievements and would rather have the academic discussions rather than the controversial ones in their classes.

Harwood and Han (1990) in their study strongly advocated the benefits of the discussion of controversial issues from an authoritative point of view and pointed out some of the great advantages of the controversial issues discussion, such as improving students' democratic citizenship, their critical thinking capabilities, and also their interpersonal skills. However, our findings are not in line with Harwood and Han's (1990) study since it was revealed that the students showed no interest in being involved in such issues as they chose those teachers who did not bring up the discussion of controversial issues as the more credible ones. Consequently, it implies that the teachers would be faced with making a tough decision as to whether to establish their credibility by not broaching the discussion of the controversial issues in their classrooms or bear the great burden of having such discussions in a class which is replete with a plethora of the students' conflicting viewpoints which as a result may jeopardize their job security (Byford et al. 2009).

As already mentioned, involvement and teacher credibility are proved to be closely associated. This could be practical for everyone who is involved in the process of making the decisions in an educational program ranging from teachers who make the decisions in the classrooms to the authorities who set the policies. Knowing how much of the discussion of the controversial issues is perceived by the students to be desirable would be beneficiary for those teachers who intend to gain the utmost respect and credibility. It can also be of substantial benefit to those who are in charge of making policy, especially the material developers who are willing to know how much of these controversial issues to include in their course books. In brief, the most important implication of this study can be for the teachers to restrict the topics which can create controversy and might marginalize the main goal of education. Furthermore, It is worth mentioning that the outcomes of this study can be a good milestone for teachers and practitioners within the realm of L2 learning and teaching and can be a starting point for a line of research in light of involvement.

The results of this study should be interpreted in light of some shortcomings. The number and nature of the participants can be pointed out as one of the areas which could be alleviated. That is to say, sampling a larger number of participants as well as including a wider range of participants with regard to their age, level, and field of education could strengthen the results of this study. As earlier mentioned, the participants of this study were the university students of English; therefore, the future researchers could work on the students at English private schools with presumably different preferences and attitudes toward the controversial issues. Another shortcoming can be the selection the sub-categories of the controversial issues. In this study, religion, politics, and sexuality were chosen to be analyzed, simply because in a religious and conservative society like Iran, they are mainly construed as controversial while a wider array of issues is available to be examined. Finally, another aspect to consider is that the main focus of this study was to examine the relationship between the learners' preferences and their feelings with regard to teacher credibility and how this relationship would influence the perception of the students of their teachers and



information they receive from them. As a result, teachers' behavior in the classroom concerning the controversial issues was not investigated. Hence, future studies can be carried out in order to examine the actual classroom situations, interactions, and also teachers' behavior.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Sample items of the Envolvement of the Controversial Issues Scale (ECIS)



Avolvement: 5. I prefer that my teacher never discusses politics and issues regarding political organizations in the classroom.

Exvolvement: 13. I would like my teacher to bring up the political issues in the classroom or show us some pictures, or invite political figures to the classroom.

Involvement: 12. In addition to bringing up the political issues in the classroom, showing us pictures or inviting some political figures to the classroom, I also would like my teacher to make us experience and do some research on such issues.

Appendix B

Sample items of the Teacher Credibility Scale

6) Untrustworthy 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Trustworthy

7) Inexpert 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Expert

8) Self-centered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Not self-centered

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