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EFL student-teachers' imaginations of English language and their motivation for learning and teaching

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigated three Iranian English as a foreign language (EFL) student-teachers' imaginations of English language and explored how these imaginations may affect their motivation for learning English currently and teaching it in the future. The findings revealed that the participants valued English due to the economic, cultural, symbolic, and social capital that this language could bring for them in the future and that their imaginations played important roles in their motivation for learning and teaching English. The study concludes with implications for teacher educators to consider the EFL student-teachers' imaginations and conceptions of English to make them more motivated to learn English and be effective English teachers in the future.

Introduction

Connecting the notion of imagined communities (ICs) to the classroom context, Norton (2001) argued that when sitting in a language classroom, the learners might be invested in communities that go beyond the class. While learners are learning a language, and they imagine who they may be, or who their communities may be, there is an emphasis on the future (Norton and Toohey 2011) and this can be a source of motivation for their present actions (Kanno and Norton 2003).

From an empirical perspective, relatively little is known about how Iranian EFL student-teachers' perceptions of future possibilities provided by English language proficiency affect their commitment to language learning practices. Hence, this study aims to examine EFL student-teachers' imaginations of English and their impacts on learning and teaching this language.

The study

In the present study, a qualitative research methodology was employed to gain insight into the participants' imaginations of English. Three EFL student-teachers, namely Sara, Ali, and Nastaran (all pseudonyms) participating in EFL teacher education programmes in an Iranian Teacher Education University (TEU) agreed to be interviewed. The authors

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followed ethics approval based upon informed consent procedures and informed the student-teachers of this point that they participated on a voluntary basis.

Each participant had one 70- to 90-minute semi-structured in-depth interview. The interview questions revolved around the language learners' imaginations and desires related to learning and teaching English both inside and outside the English classroom. The interviews were audio-recorded for data analysis. To identify the interviewees' imaginations and perceptions of English language, the researchers conducted a systemic qualitative data analysis which included open coding and axial coding.

Findings

In all the interviewees' comments, it was obvious that they were learning English for their dreams. Four main patterns of hopes and desires were identified based on the data: economic, cultural, symbolic, and social.

All the interviewees visualised an extensive economic value for English. Ali expressed that 'the major reason why I am learning English and have chosen to be an English teacher in the future is that I see English language like an item through which I can obtain financial resources'. Earning money was also a motivator for Sara. 'I see myself a very significant and wealthy TESOL instructor in Iran having workshops here and there with a lot of participants. Earning more money provokes me to improve my English knowledge'.

The other advantage of English language proficiency, as pointed out in the interviewees' responses, was the cultural capital (e.g. knowledge, skills, educational credentials, and appreciation of particular cultural forms). As Sara stated, 'Through English, I can know the latest news of the world. I even like to listen to and read Persian news in English websites and channels and then transfer this significant information to my students'. Nastaran noted that she wished to write a book in English to introduce Iran and Muslims to the world. Ali believed that not knowing English could endanger educated individuals' progress in Iran. He expressed that knowing English helped him to have access to the cultural capital (e.g. knowledge production) by 'publishing his papers in top foreign journals'.

Symbolic capital (e.g. distinction, prestige, honour, and friendship) was the other resource reflected in the interviewees' responses. Sara envisaged her teaching career as a job which would give her reputation, honour, and prestige. 'I learn English because it will help me have a prestigious job. It is honourable to speak in a foreign language in your job'. In Nastaran and Ali's view, knowing English could help them to have access to the symbolic capital they needed to 'enter the social network in the workplace' (Ali). Their comments reflected an image of respectability and this image could give them legitimacy and the right to speak.

Social capital was another resource associated with English language proficiency. The interviewees' responses implied that they desired to find opportunities which gave them access to the social networks they sought membership. As an example, Ali saw English as a gate to social inclusion and having membership in significant educational groups and associations. Sara expressed that 'thanks to my English knowledge, I will have the teaching career through which I can be easily related to social networks of influential educators'. Nastaran had the same view. She believed that 'English language proficiency can

help me be connected to significant professors I desire to be their colleagues'. With these views, they did their best to improve their level of competence in English.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined ways in which Iranian EFL student-teachers visualised English language and how these imaginations, hopes, and desires affected their motivation for learning English and teaching it. Results demonstrated that the EFL student-teachers invested in their desires and imaginations of English language. Different patterns of imaginations in terms of the resources gained through English language proficiency were recognised in the interviewees' responses including economic, cultural, symbolic, and social. Their strong desires to achieve these four types of capital had strong effects on their motivation and served as drives guiding them in the path of English language learning.

The current study provides teacher educators with information on the subtleties of the EFL student-teachers. It draws their attention to the point that individuals' imaginations concerning their use of the target language must be valued. Not paying attention to these imagined identities/ICs comes with a price since this ignorance can have negative effects on both their learning trajectories and their teaching practice in the future. We conclude with an argument for taking EFL student-teachers' ICs into consideration and harnessing these imaginations in the pursuit of greater investment in language learning and teaching.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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