Socio-imposed Theory of Language Proficiency and its Application in Iran

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Abstract
The theory which has been put forward by the authors of this study seeks to shed light on the current situation of language learning in public and private language schools in Iran. Based on the *socio-imposed theory of language proficiency*, there are two types of definitions for language proficiency: psychological and sociological. Psychological definitions deal with the psychological reality of language proficiency and the way language learning occurs; however, the sociological definitions of language proficiency, which are seen mostly in centripetal education, deal with the way each society dictates its learners how to learn a language. In fact, the theory is to show that even the definition of language proficiency is not value-free. The theory hypothesizes that if there is a mismatch between the psychological and sociological definitions of language proficiency, learners may get demotivated and solidify a negative attitude towards learning another language. In this study, we intend first to explicate the newly-proposed *socio-imposed theory of language proficiency*, and then to analyze the formal and informal situations of language learning in Iran in the light of the theory.

Key terms: Socio-imposed theory, Language proficiency, Formal and informal education

Introduction
According to critical theories of education (Freire, 1985), education is not value-free. Each sector of education can be biased towards a kind of ideas and ideals. In this regard, Foucault (1975) holds the idea that those who are in power via access to media can create the desirable discourse, which can determine the reality the way they want it to be. In English language teaching, critical applied linguistics has attempted to deal with issues of critical education, such as poststructuralism and postcolonialism (Pennycook, 2004).

In language testing, Shohamy (2001) has introduced the concept of critical language testing, trying to delve into the relationship between power, ideology, and language testing. In the same vein, we have tried to look at critical issues in language testing from another perspective. We call this new perspective *socio-imposed theory of language proficiency*, holding the idea that it can be a possible line of explanation for English language learning problems in Iran.

*Socio-imposed theory of language proficiency* holds the idea that language proficiency can be defined from two perspectives: psychological and sociological. Psychological definition deals with expert definition of language proficiency while sociological definition is concerned with non-expert definition, which is pinned down by powerful people in society. This theory can be utilized to explicate the reasons why the formal education of English language learning is not much successful at Iran’s schools while the informal education of English language learning is successful at private language institutes.

Therefore, in this study we aim at throwing more light on the *socio-imposed theory of language proficiency* and employing it as a model for delineating the status quo. To achieve these aims, we first provide the readers with the theoretical background, and then present the theory in the context of English language learning in Iran.
Theoretical Background

1.2 English Language Proficiency

Historically analyzing language proficiency, we might come up with various models each of which have some deficiencies or have even been later refuted by other scholars. The first model was proposed by Lado in 1961, called ‘Discrete-Point model’ (Lado, 1961). He proposed a definition of language in which language is considered as a complex system of phonemes, morphemes, clauses, and sentences. As Motallebzadeh and Baghaee Moghdam (2011, p. 43) put it, Lado tried to “materialize the abstract concept of language that could be used by language testers”.

Since Lado’s proposed model considered language components separately, it was rejected later by Oller (1979, 1983) who put forward another model called ‘Integrative Model’ or ‘Unitary Trend Hypothesis”; as the names imply, Oller tried to present a holistic view of language and this view resulted in the creation of tests such as cloze tests and dictations. However, as Vollmer and Sang (1983) also mentioned, what Oller ignored in his model was the ‘communicative component of language’.

In contrast to the models put forward, Canale and Swain (1980) introduced a new concept of language proficiency and presented a new model called ‘Communicative Competence Model’ in which the main focus was on sociolinguistics; the model consisted of three components at first and one was added later: (a) grammatical, (b) sociolinguistics, (c) strategic and (d) discourse (Canale, 1983). What made Canale and Swain’s model different from the previous ones was the focus they put on communication as a dynamic process (cited in Motallebzadeh & Baghaee, 2011). Their presented model was also put into question by other scholars such as Faulcher and Davidson (2007), who argued that based on this model, language proficiency would be limited to demonstration of communicative ability. Canale and Swain by adding the component of ‘discourse’ and ‘conscious’ and ‘unconscious’ knowledge necessary for communication tried to compensate for the insufficiencies of the model but Faulcher and Davidson did not find it as a great change. Another criticism wasbrought to this model by Farhady (2005) who argued that even native speakers of English might not be able to achieve such competence.

Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996, 2010) made an innovation in the trend of language proficiency models by highlighting “the central role of strategic competence, metacognitive strategies or higher-order processes that explain the interaction of knowledge and affective components of language use” (Fulcher & Davidson, p. 45, 2007). According to Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996), ‘language competence’ and ‘strategic competence’ should be separated. Language competence as they believe might be affected by personal characteristics such as age, gender, cultural background, background knowledge, and cognitive abilities.

Seemingly, all these definitions of language proficiency have tried to help language learners master a second language in a short period of time. Due to the educational and learning nature of these definitions of language proficiency, we can claim that they are the psychological definitions of language proficiency, which try to show the shortcuts, while clearing away all learning roadblocks.

2.2. Critical Look into Language Education

There have been critical approaches to language and linguistics so far among which we can refer to critical discourse analysis, critical language awareness, critical sociolinguistics, critical literacy, critical pedagogy,
Critical applied linguistics, and critical language testing to name but a few; all these perspectives are of paramount importance in the realm of English language teaching and learning (Pennycook, 2004).

Critical applied linguistics, to start with, deals with analyzing language in its social context or in other words reestablishing the connection between language learning and the “social and political context” in which it occurs (Pennycook, 2004, p. 796). As Candlin (1990, p. 461) also puts it, through this critical dimension, hidden connections between “language structure and social structure” are revealed.

According to Kress (1990, p.85), in critical discourse analysis (CDA), a major domain in critical applied linguistics, the interconnection between “linguistic-discursive practices” and “sociopolitical structures of power and domination” is dealt with. In the same vein, Fairclough, (1995, p. 132), states that through CDA, the relationship between discursive texts and events, and social and cultural processes is investigated, that is the way these are shaped by “relations of power and struggles over power” is taken into consideration.

Pennycook (2004) believes that critical applied linguistics is also at work with critical language education, the combination of which would be essential in scrutinizing the underlying ideologies of constructing textbooks. Pennycook (2004) goes further to mention that critical applied linguistics work in language education consists of three major domains: (a) area of interest, (b) self-reflexive stance on critical theory, and (c) transformative pedagogy; the ‘area of interest’ considers the extent to which each domain defines a critical approach, ‘self-reflexive stance’ concerns questioning of common assumptions of a work, and ‘transformative pedagogy’, as the name implies, investigates how much an approach to education aims at transforming.

Another critical approach, which has been to the interest of many researchers (e.g. Kunnan, 2000; Norton Peirce & Stein, 1995; McNamara & Roever, 2007), is critical language testing (CLT). According to Spolsky (1995, p. 1 P791), testing has always been a tool for the exertion of power and control and “a way to select, to motivate, to punish”. He believes that testing is so efficacious in exerting authority that sometimes the issues of testing theory are of less importance than those of power and domination.

A key figure in critical language testing, Shohamy (2001), believes that language tests are not neutral and social, cultural and political factors have important roles in shaping participants’, learners’ and teachers’ lives. She goes on to mention that if you pretend that language testing is neutral, it would merely give a chance to authorities and those in power to ‘misuse language tests’. Shohamy also argues that since language tests are always political, we must be cautious about their effects and uses; by the same token, she calls test takers “political subjects in a political context” (p. 131).

**Socio-imposed Theory of Language Proficiency**

Granted the fact that generally the powerful determine the right and wrong of issue in life, we are of the view that language proficiency besides the psychological aspect can have a sociological one. The psychological aspect is determined by the experts in the field of language testing, which can enjoy the psychological reality. This definition can be working around the globe, having global favor and flavor. For instance, the way Bachman (1990) has defined language proficiency is very close to the reality of language learning in all contexts of language education. This definition of language proficiency seems to be less politically value-laden, having scientific value.

Although the psychological aspect of language proficiency is appreciated by all scholars around the world and all believe that the gateway to language learning can be the psychological endeavors, the powerful people in a society break or distort the psychological definitions, trying to indoctrinate their own ideologies. We like to call the definitions provided by the powerful, sociological aspect of language proficiency. For instance, authorities in charge may decide to confine language proficiency to reading, overlooking other types of skills.
The major point is that generally sociological definitions of language proficiency outweigh the psychological definitions of language proficiency in a society. Therefore, the socio-imposed theory of language proficiency hypothesizes that if there is a mismatch between the psychological and sociological definitions of language proficiency, probably the learners get demotivated and they may face learning failures.

English Language Proficiency in Iran

Educational system in Iran consists of primary school (5 years), junior high school (3 years), and high school (4 years). Generally, learners are motivated to memorize everything and transfer the materials presented in books, which are in fact prescribed by the Ministry of Education and are the same all over the country; in other words, rote learning is appreciated and critical thinking and creativity are depreciated. As Hashemi, Naderi, Shariatmadari, Seif Naraghi and Mehrabi (2010) put it, in the educational system of Iran, students are considered to be like computers, which should be filled with some sort of information and their minds are occupied with the data presented in their books.

English learning starts from the first year of junior high school in state schools, and from elementary levels in private ones. The books that should be taught are filled with reading texts and vocabulary lists to be memorized; that is they primarily focus on reading skill and the other skills are neglected. According to Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008), teachers cannot violate the rules and are supposed to teach exactly the materials in books and nothing more. Therefore, students’ knowledge of English would be confined to reading and useless list of words and this gets worse as they enter higher levels. Due to the fact that students are supposed to pass a national exam called ‘Konkoor’ to enter university, materials in high school books are devised to prepare learners for the multiple choice exam, sources of which are predetermined. Simply put, learners are motivated to memorize the stuff prescribed by authorities and this results in ‘teaching to testing’ and ‘negative washback effect’ and hindrance of critical thinking.

Entering university, students have to pass some English courses based on their field of study and these courses would contain long reading passages on technical subjects. As a result, there would be no benefit in the process of English learning, neither at school nor at university. Studying English in such educational system would result in training learners who have many useless words in their short-term memory, but are communicatively unable and cannot even produce a single sentence in English with the help of the pre-fabricated chunks in their minds; de-motivation, depression, frustration, and burn-out are the possible outcomes of such situation since learners would face emotional exhaustion; in line with what Pishghadam and Sahebjam (in press) mentioned, those facing emotional exhaustion would be worrying, anxious, insecure, bad tempered, depressed, and moody. As a result, when feeling impotent and despairing, some students would seek refuge in language institutes and some would detest English and leave it aside forever.

Students willing to communicate in English enroll in private language institutes, where books accentuating speaking along with all other skills. In comparison to schools where teachers are limited to authority-prescribed materials and set regulations, in institutes the materials are miscellaneous and classes claim to be communicative in nature. In fact, the system of education in private language schools is decentralized; and institutes and teachers have more options and freedom to select their own materials, that is why they are highly motivated to teach students, and hence less susceptible to burnout.

Concluding Remarks

Based on what has been portrayed in the context of language proficiency in Iran, we can claim that schools favor the sociological definition of language proficiency while private language institutes follow the
psychological definition of language proficiency. At schools learners are expected to place their emphasis on reading ability, overlooking other components of language proficiency while at private language institutes the psychological definition of language proficiency is adopted.

As the socio-imposed theory of language proficiency hypothesizes, when there is a mismatch between psychological and sociological definitions of language proficiency, learners lose motivation in learning. The analysis of language learning at schools exhibits that the psychological definitions of language proficiency have been distorted by the authorities in charge, and that is why students are not much interested in the books and the ways English is taught at schools.

Critically speaking, psychological definitions of language proficiency might also be affected by the western ideology. That is, each definition of language proficiency can convey a vestige of ideology, which may be biased towards a group of individuals. Delving into the nature of these definitions can shed more light on the probable biases which can be even colonial. It is of great interest to conduct research into the nature of different definitions of language proficiency to see whether they are biased towards any ideology.

We believe that the sociological definitions of language proficiency must be defined in a way that they do not kill interest and motivation in learners. Moreover, we believe that the type of language proficiency which is followed at private language institutes might increase language proficiency at the expense of faith in the native culture and shaking the foundations of one's identity. Therefore, more research is required to examine closely these two types of educational context in Iran.
References


