

# The Impact of Linguistic Imperialism on Iranian EFL Learners' Home Culture Detachment

Mahshid Hejazi

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, International Campus, Iran

Azar Hosseini Fatemi (Corresponding Author)

Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

**Abstract**—This study attempts to investigate whether studying English as a major on one hand and the learners' gender on the other hand would affect the degree of learners' home culture detachment. To this end, two groups of subjects were chosen: EFL learners and non-EFL learners. A Home Culture Attachment Scale validated in the context of Iran was distributed among 266 participants. The data were analyzed by means of independent sample t-tests. The results revealed that due to familiarity with English language and culture, the EFL learners were more or less detached from their own culture; therefore, the assumption that familiarity with Western culture will diminish the influence of local culture was confirmed. The EFL learners showed some tendency toward the Western culture. The results also indicated that the participants' gender differences played no role in their Home Culture Detachment. The findings of this study can be helpful not only from the English language instruction standpoint, but also valuable from socio-cultural perspectives whose concern is human traits.

**Index Terms**—home culture attachment, home culture detachment, HCAS, EFL/Non-EFL learners, linguistic imperialism

## I. INTRODUCTION

Each individual wherever he lives, is influenced by family, community, country, and language. In fact no culture is made up of groups of people who have been only affected by their environment; nevertheless, each culture is structured by pervading and prevailing principles. The principles can be conscious or subconscious, directly or indirectly stated. Whatever the nationality of the people, most people consider their own culture as "standard" or "right", and the other cultures of the world as a combination of strange behaviors. Once people realize that they are actually the product of their own culture, they become better prepared and more willing to look at the behavior of the people from other cultures and accept them with no bias, if not favorably. Together with the acceptance of people and their behavior, comes the acceptance of their language and a greater willingness to take a step forward in crossing the borders of the native language and culture, and entering, at least to a degree, into what can be the territory of another language and culture (Valdes, J.1986).

By the use of language we interact in the society. When language is used for communication, cultural boundaries affect it in complex ways. The words people use in their speech refer to a stock of shared knowledge of the world and experience that both the speakers and listeners possess. Moreover, words reflect the authors' opinions, ideas, and points of views. In both cases, the language expresses the cultural reality (Kramsch, 1998, p.3).

Many anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists, have defined culture in variety of ways.

According to Matsumoto's (2009) comprehensive definition, "culture is a unique meaning and information system, shared by a group and transmitted across generations, that allows the group to meet basic needs of survival, by coordinating social behavior to achieve a viable existence, to transmit successful social behaviors, to pursue happiness and well-being, and to derive meaning from life" (cited in Keith, 2011, p. 3).

Triandis, Kurowski, Tecktiel, and Chan (1993) believed that culture possesses objective characteristics which are tangible such as food, architecture, manufactured products and subjective characteristics like social, economic, political affairs, and religious practices that are human elements. Culture is shared by language and brings satisfaction for the people who share the same environmental context (cited in Keith, 2011, p.4).

Cultures vary in their complexity (Triandis, 1980); some embody significant diversity with many subcultures (Miller, 2008), and other cultures are much more homogenous, or tight (Triandis, 1977). The Common feature of all the cultures is the notion of a group with shared behaviors, values, and beliefs that are passed from generation to generation (Keith, 2011, p.4). Culture forms the peoples' behavior from child rearing, upbringing, schooling, professional training by the instructions it dictates on people in the form of etiquette, expressions of politeness, dos and don'ts. Culture also shapes and socializes the written language. It describes how and what to write, to whom and by the use of what genre in what circumstance should something be written. In these ways with the use of language, culture imposes the invisible rituals on language users. Consequently, people's written and spoken products will be brought in order and will be predictable

in one culture. Culture both liberates and constrains people. It frees them from oblivion, anonymity, and the randomness of nature, and limits them by imposing on them a structure that has to be chosen and principles based on which selection has to be done (Kramersch, 1998). Matsumoto and Juang (2004) expressed that culture is like a lens, or filter, it distorts, rotates, and colors our view of the world, and leads us inevitably to see it from our own view point. (cited in Keith, 2011, p.22).

This study will reveal how familiarity with a culture which is in contrast in some ways with the local culture will cause cultural detachment.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON CULTURE AND LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM

Some educational scholars who have been interested in the diversity of human languages and their meanings devised the concept of linguistic relativity which proposes: different people speak differently because they think in different manners, and the reason why they think differently is because their language presents them with different ways of expressing the world around them. This concept was also proposed by Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and his pupil Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). Whorf's views on the interdependence of language and thought have become under the name of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This hypothesis makes the claim that the language framework one regularly uses affects the way in which one contemplates and behaves. Whorf also declares that different languages can direct people to act in diverse ways because language filters their perception and limits the way they categorize events. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been subject to controversy, because it indirectly made the universal validity of scientific discoveries dependent upon the language in which they are expressed, it encountered the immediate reaction and scorn of the scientific community. Therefore the strong version of Whorf's hypothesis that claims that language determines the way we think could not be taken seriously, but the weak version, supported the findings that there are cultural differences in the semantic associations evoked by seemingly common concepts, is generally accepted nowadays. The manner in which a given language conveys an experience semantically makes aspects of that experience both accessible, and more remarkable for the users of that language. The generic semantic meanings of the code that have been adapted over time within a certain discourse community are subject to the different uses made of them in social contexts. Therefore we are not limited to the cultural meanings that are suggested to us by our language, but can modify, and enrich them in our pragmatic interactions with other people who use the language (Kramersch, 1998, p.14).

Since language forms are relative, different languages convey different views of the world. Not having the desire to acknowledge, and the inability to engage with different ways of seeing the world, were the underlying principles of colonialism. On the contrary, intercultural competence is characterized by the ability and desire to engage with realities other than our own (Piller, I. 2011, p. 53).

Piller (2011) also states that:

Formal linguistic relativity is undergirded by a more fundamental difference of communicative relativity, which means that communication itself is relative. There are differences in what is communicated when and by whom in which way. Communicative inequality is a key aspect of communicative relativity: ways of communicating are not only relative but also have unequal chances of making an impact (p.53).

Scholars consider culture and language as integrated, they cannot be viewed as separate and as two distinct entities; (Shahsavandi, Ghonsooly & Kamyabi, 2010). Brogger (1992), believes that "language and culture are inextricably interwoven and interdependent" (cited in Risager, 2007, p.132). According to him "culture is language and language is culture."

"Language is necessary for us to maintain our identity, it is part of us being a nation and our history and uniqueness is tied to our language and preserved in our language" (Harraldson cited in Hilmansson- Dunn, 2006, p. 296). "One manifests one's identity through one's language and a change of language represents a change of identity the speaker is presenting the world" ( Liddicoat cited in Patron, 2006, p.86). Nikiforova (2007) states that "culture is the bedrock on which peoples build their identity" ( cited in Shahsavandi et al. 2010).

Culture as a process that both includes and excludes, always entails the exercise of power and control (Kramersch, 1998, p.8). The use of English plays an important role in increasing an individual's desire to communicate with the world and at the same time to preserve one's identity (Pham cited in Le Ha, 2005).

Cultural anthropologists moved from an atomistic definition of culture to one which emphasizes pattern and configuration. Kluckohn and Kelly define culture as "all those historically created designs for living explicit and implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behavior of men." The mentioned traits, elements, or patterns of culture are organized into a system which is created gradually and over time, and consequently it is open and subject to constant change (cited in Hoijer, 1953 p.554).

The relation between home culture and second language culture has critically been viewed by some scholars. Asraf (1996) states that "using English is often together with images such as speaking English is the key to employment, speaking English joins you to the international community and speaking English speaks for modernity" (p.10). However, these statements reveal a significant danger associated the native language and culture. The danger is the notion that the learners' native cultures and their languages are practically, presented as backward and incapable of modernity. Consequently "this leads to cultural erosion of belief in the ability of native culture and language to deal with the

modern world” (Asraf, 1996, p.10). Schuman asserts that this cultural erosion, indeed, leaves its victims “at the mercy of culturally imperialistic forces such as English Language Teaching” (cited in Asraf, 1996, p. 10).

Teaching a language involves more than just codes and structures, it is in fact communication. Language and culture are closely connected, and teachers who use authentic materials expose students to delicate and at times obvious cultural messages and values (Rahimi, A. & Sahragard, R., 2007). Thus the dominance of English as an international language of communication has been viewed as a threat to other languages (Pennycook, 1999).

Linguistic imperialism is indicative of “the hegemony of English language” and its function in reinforcing “globalization”. English teachers are agents trying to dominate the culture and the language of the unlucky foreign learner by imposing Western values and beliefs through the medium of English language. Language teaching is impossible without teaching culture and TESL is the teaching of language and culture. (Rahimi, A. & Sahragard, R., 2007, p.31). Rahimi and Sahragard believe that it is linguistic imperialism that leads to cultural imperialism in which a nation loses its culture and accepts the dominating culture of the imperialists.

According to Ansre, (1979):

Linguistic imperialism is a phenomenon in which the minds and the lives of the speakers of a language are dominated by another language to the point where they believe that they can and should use only that foreign language when it comes to transactions dealing with the more advanced aspects of life such as education, philosophy, literature, governments, the administration of justice, etc. ... Linguistic imperialism has a way of warping the minds, attitudes, and aspirations of even the most noble in a society and preventing him from appreciating and realizing the full potentialities of the indigenous languages (cited in Phillipson, 2009, p.3).

According to Phillipson (2009) Linguistic Imperialism is based on the following principles: The ideal way of learning English is by a native speaker who teaches in a monolingual manner; the earlier the process of language learning starts, and the more English is taught the better will be the results; the standards of English will decrease if other languages are used much (p.12).

Phillipson (1992) expresses his concern for centralizing and spreading the English language, and squeezing other languages into less and less central roles. When their functions are weakened they finally get marginalized and eventually lost. (cited in Davis & Elder, 2004, p. 439)

The present study aims at comparing two groups of Iranian university students to see whether studying English as a major has had any impact on their home culture detachment.

In order to achieve the goal of this quasi-experimental study, the following research questions were proposed:

*Q1. Is there a significant difference between Iranian EFL and Non-EFL learners with respect to their Home Culture Detachment?*

*Q2. Is there any difference between male and female participants with respect to their Home Culture Detachment?*

### III. METHOD

#### A. Participants

The subjects of the present study comprised of 266 Junior and Senior, Iranian university students. Both genders were included and were aged between 19 and 43. 129 of the participants were EFL learners who were majoring in TEFL, and 137 of them were Non-EFL learners who were majoring in fields other than English, such as Sociology, Family Studies, Theology, and Physical Education at Azad University Mashhad – a city in North East of Iran-branch.

#### B. Instrumentation

A Home Culture Attachment Scale (HCAS) was implemented in this study. This scale has already been validated in Iranian context by Bazri, Pishghadam, and Hashemi (2013). The questionnaire consisted of 36 items with the reliability of 0.85 Cronbach alpha level (Bazri et al. 2013). It was a four point Likert scale ranging from 1 “strongly disagree” to 4 “strongly agree”.

Using Cronbach alpha, the reliability estimates of the questionnaire for this specific study was calculated. The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was 0.88, showing an acceptable index of reliability coefficient.

#### C. Procedure

##### *Data Collection*

In order to see if there is a difference between the Iranian EFL and Non-EFL learners’ detachment from their Home Culture, a HCAS was distributed among the university students studying at Azad University Mashhad branch, and they were given 15 minutes to answer the questions. Except the questions relating to HCA, the questionnaire also contained demographic information. The students were asked to fill out that part as well. The information on the “gender” part was useful for determining the possibility of gender differences with respect to Home Culture Detachment.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Having collected the required data, the researcher conducted the analysis of the data and tested the hypotheses formulated for the present study.

The first hypothesis investigates the relationship between the learners' major and the degree of Home Culture Attachment.

Although the means in the groups were different by comparing the means we could say that the Non-EFL group outperformed the EFL one, a *t-test* was performed to see if the difference between the groups is significant or not.

TABLE 1:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS; EFL VERSUS NON-EFL GROUPS

G	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
HCA	1	137	131.6934	22.7753	1.94582
	2	129	124.0388	22.62169	1.99173

The descriptive statistics (Table 1) showed that the means of the groups were different, a *t-test* using SPSS version 20 was performed between the mean scores of EFL and Non-EFL groups to see whether the difference regarding home culture detachment is significant or not.

TABLE 2:  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST VARIABILITY DUE TO HOME CULTURE ATTACHMENT, EFL VERSUS NON-EFL GROUPS

		t-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
HCA	Equal variances assumed	2.749	264	0.006	7.654	2.785	2.17	13.138
	Equal variances not assumed	2.749	263.24	0.006	7.654	2.784	2.172	13.137

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the means resulting from the EFL and Non-EFL learners responses to Home Culture Attachment. There was a significant difference in scores for EFL learners (M = 124.03, SD = 22.62 ) and Non-EFL learners (M = 131.69, SD = 22.77; t (264) = 2.74).

According to the results, the Sig (2-tailed) value is .006 which is less than the required cut-off of .05 therefore the null hypothesis of this research will be rejected and we can conclude that there is a significant difference in the mean scores on the Home Culture Attachment (dependent variable) between the groups. The results show that the Non-EFL learners outperformed the EFL learners and this indicates that there is more Attachment to the Home Culture in Non-EFL learners. It can be concluded that the learners' field of study, Major can play a role in the attachment to or the detachment from one's home culture.

The second hypothesis investigates the relation between the learners' gender and the degree of their Home Culture Attachment.

TABLE 3:  
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS; GENDER IN EFL GROUP

Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	
Sum	female	69	132.77	22.911	2.758
	male	66	130.91	23.03	2.835

The descriptive statistics (Table 3) showed that the means of the groups were different another *t-test* was performed to see if there is a significant difference between the students' gender and their home culture detachment.

TABLE 4:  
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST VARIABILITY DUE TO GENDER

		T-test for Equality of Means						
		t	df	sig.(2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. Error Difference	Interval of the	
							Lower	Upper
Sum	Equal variances assumed	0.47	133	0.639	1.859	3.955	-5.963	9.681
	Equal variances not assumed	0.47	132.669	0.639	1.859	3.955	-5.963	9.682

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the means resulting from the Male and Female learners' responses to HCAS. There was not a significant difference in scores for Female learners (M = 132.77, SD = 22.91) and Male learners (M = 130.91, SD = 23.03).

According to the results, the Sig (2-tailed) value is .639 which is more than the required cut-off of .05 therefore the null hypothesis of this research will be accepted and we can conclude that there is no significant difference between male and female participants with respect to their HCA. It can be concluded that the learners' gender does not play a role in the attachment to or the detachment from one's home culture.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of major and gender on the degree of Home Culture Attachment of Iranian university students. The results of the investigation, primarily suggested that there is a significant difference between the major of the students and the degree of their Home Culture Attachment. In other words, the EFL students are more detached from their Home Culture and this finding is in line with what Phillipson (1992) expresses about the spread of English whose effect is squeezing other languages into less and less central roles. In a similar vein Rahimi and Sahragard (2007) noted that Western values and beliefs are imposed on the learners by the medium of English language.

The second finding of this study suggested that there is no significant difference between the gender and the Home Culture Attachment of the learners. It indicated that the effect of linguistic imperialism in this study was the same on male and female participants.

## V. CONCLUSION

According to the data analyzed through the statistical technique of t-test, a significant relationship between the students' Major and their home culture detachment was revealed. The Non-EFL learners were more attached to their home culture than the EFL learners and consequently, the EFL learners were more detached from their local culture than the non-EFL learners. The results also showed that there is no significant relationship between the students' gender and their home culture detachment. It indicates that both male and female learners had the same degree of home culture detachment.

We can conclude that due to the interwoven relationship between language and culture, language and identity, and because of the imperialistic nature of English language, the students whose major is EFL are more detached from their home culture. The reason for this detachment is their abundant exposure to English language during their academic studies.

Exposure to the language will affect the language learners' identity and ultimately their culture, and since English possesses a dominant nature, the EFL learners quite indirectly get affected by this dominance and show detachment from their own culture that may have more constraints.

The results thus lent support to the assumption that familiarity with Western language and culture will diminish the influence of local culture.

The results of this study can be valuable for both English language teachers, including ESP and EGP instructors, and language learners. The cultural points that are discussed in English classes, the points that exist in the textbooks and the content of the audio/visual supplementary materials used in language classes are very interesting and at the same time may be threatening. They are interesting because they attract peoples' attentions and lead to familiarity with other cultures and the increase of general knowledge of both teachers and learners. The more people are culturally knowledgeable, the more they will understand each other. The sources of many misunderstandings and misjudgments that happen in interpersonal encounters are cultural differences, when people understand each other's culture they will consequently enjoy life more. The cultural points mentioned in language classes may be threatening because they can endanger the language learners' and language teachers' attachment to their local and national cultures. They should know that their culture has a close relation with their identity. As Bazri et al (2013) pointed if the language learners lose respect for and pride in their own heritage, tradition, and culture, they will gradually lose their sense of solidarity with their national identity (p.4). This will lead to having people with not definite and fixed identities who cannot play effective and positive roles in their society. Since this study revealed that EFL learners, both male and female are equally prone to home culture detachment, as Bazri, et al (2013) stated it is recommended that they try to be more conscious of what is presented to them in language classes, while they appreciate the foreign culture, they promote their own culture and national values and consider the language class as a place for developing their identities and lives.

The findings of this paper can also be fruitful for anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists whose concerns are human traits and behaviors.

This study was performed on BA university students. It can be investigated on students at higher or lower educational levels and in different settings like language institutes, and high schools. This study can also be investigated on language teachers who teach at different educational levels and settings and it may also be performed in comparison with teachers who teach fields other than English.

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**Mahshid Hejazi** is a faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Mashhad branch, Iran. She is pursuing PhD program in TEFL at the International branch of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. Her research interests are issues concerning sociology and psychology of language education.

**Azar Hosseini Fatemi** is an associate professor and the head of English language and literature department at letters and humanities faculty of Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran. Her research interests are teaching and learning second language and research in applied linguistics.