

The Impact of EFL Teachers' Years of Experience on Their Cultural Identity

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Abstract—The issue of cultural tension is a problem with which most of Asian countries are faced. In fact, it can be the result of the entrance of western culture into a country's national borders and can stem from both globalization and the use of English language as the international medium of communication. Iran is one of those Asian countries whose people are at risk of an emerging new identity that tries to replace Iranian socio-cultural and religious identity with a new western one. Specially, English language teachers and learners are more in danger of getting into such a foreign identity as they are always directly facing with western culture. Some factors like one's age, socio-cultural and ethnical background, gender, and residency in another country as well as length of exposure to a foreign culture may have impact on one's identity. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of EFL teachers' length of experience in language teaching on their cultural identity. The data was collected through using a questionnaire which was administered to 100 EFL Iranian teachers. The results are discussed and some suggestions for further research are given.

Index Terms—cultural identity, EFL teachers, teaching experience

I. INTRODUCTION

English language as the global lingua franca is a vital means of communication for millions of people around the world. In other words, it is clearly associated with our life. "You hear it on television spoken by politicians from all over the world; wherever you travel, you see English signs and advertisements; whenever you enter a hotel or restaurant in a foreign city, they will understand English, and there will be an English menu" (Crystal, 2003, p. 2). Similarly, Crystal (1997, cited in Coury, 2001) states that the information about the new technological and scientific inventions and academic developments in the world is expressed and stored in English.

The broad spread and use of English in different contexts of life has particularly made Kachru's *Expanding Circle* countries invest so much time, money and energy on providing educational settings for English teaching and learning. *Iran* is no exception to this influence and trend as it is adjusting to the world trend of keeping pace with technological, economic and social advances. Accordingly, many Iranians are attracted to the English language due to personal, academic or occupational interests.

English is neither the first nor the second language in this immense country; it is mainly regarded as a school subject and is not a means of communication within the Iranian families (Pishghadam and Sadeghi, 2011a). However, it plays a significant role in Iran's socio-cultural context. In the past few years, Iranian public opinion has become extremely sensitized to issues of language and the learning of languages as numerous English teaching institutions are opened all over Iran which provide interested learners of English with considerable language learning facilities and teaching methods. The Iranian English learners do really like to be a member of English-conversant Iranians, their imagined community, where they can own and master it as they own their mother tongue (Pishghadam and Sadeghi, 2011a). However, some English learners are likely to have and behave by the foreign language cultural values and norms and acquire a new identity which may lead to loss of their own cultural values, norms and particularly cultural identity (McLeod, 1976; Pishghadam & Navari, 2009; Alptekin & Alptekin, 1984).

Considering the fact that language and culture are deeply related to each other and a language and its culture are two inextricably related entities which should be taught together (Leveridge, 2008; Cakir, 2006; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Byram, 1989; Brown, 2002; Sudartini, 2009), and bearing in mind that language plays a significant role in shaping one's identity (Brown, 2007), and also being mindful of the internal and inter-state conflicts over culture and identity in Asian countries (Croissant & Trinn, 2009), it is worth asking ourselves "How a foreign language can shape our cultural identity?". Moreover, foreign language teachers play a significant role in shaping their students' cultural identity. Students follow their teachers as a model and try to be like them. Keeping this in mind, White, Zion and Kozleski (2005) hold the view that teachers bring their life experiences, personalities, cultures, opinions, assumptions, and beliefs into the classroom. This implies that western culture may unintentionally be inserted in English classrooms by those teachers who admire the foreign language culture, while learners may have been learning them while learning English (Sudartini, 2009). Consequently, it may lead to internalization of western culture in their life which brings about a new cultural

identity. Students need to develop cultural awareness and cultural sensitiveness, and teachers should make students aware of cultural differences (Cakir, 2006).

According to White, et al. (2005, p. 2) “the longer teachers teach, the more their beliefs and knowledge are reorganized and sculpted by experience; experience, culture, and personality are just part of who teachers are, and they go wherever teachers go including their classrooms”. Thus, this study tries to investigate the relationship between EFL teacher’s years of experience and their cultural identity in the context of Iran’s private language schools.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Probably, the first thing that comes to our mind regarding the definition of culture is that culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people who share same values, customs and tradition, religion, social habits and language. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002, p.138) culture is “the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of a nation or a group’s most highly thought of works of literature, art, music, etc”.

Trinovitch (1980, cited in Cakir, 2006) defines culture as “an all-inclusive system which incorporates the biological and technical behavior of human beings with their verbal and non-verbal systems of expressive behavior starting from birth, and this “all-inclusive system” is acquired as the native culture.” (p. 550). In the same vein, Brooks (1969) describes culture as having five components, namely, biological growth, personal refinement, literature and fine arts, patterns for living and a way of life. Summing all these definitions up we find a core definition and that is the fact that “culture is a way of life” (Brown, 2007, p.188).

Hofstede’s (2001, cited in Sun, 2008) Onion diagram is a model of culture with relation to society. This diagram explains the differences between societies and culture in terms of four cultural ingredients, namely, symbols, heroes, rituals, and values. It says that socialization happens when a person (1) *understands a culture’s symbols* (i.e. gestures, objects, pictures that have a special meaning only recognized by the members of that culture) (2) *recognizes heroes* (i.e. persons who are real or imaginary, dead or alive, admired in that culture) (3) *partakes the rituals* (e.g. social and religious ceremonies or ways of greeting) and (4) *learns values* (i.e. are connected with moral and ethical codes and they’re common beliefs and attitudes consisting of such binary oppositions as good vs. evil or logical vs. paradoxical) (Sun, 2008). In this model, values form the core of culture and cultural practices encompass the first three features (Sun, 2008).

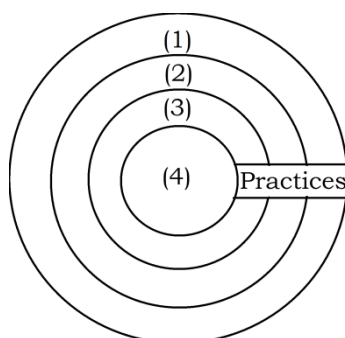


Figure 1. Hofstede’s Onion Diagram

Today, no one can deny the existence of the inseparable link between culture and language. The Linguistic Relativity Theory of Whorf (1956) can be considered as an evidence of this claim. According to linguistic relativity, the structure of a language has impacts on its speakers’ cognitive processes as well as their world view (Whorf 1956). This theory is considered as a pioneer highlighting the relationship between the structure of a language and the cultural world view of its speakers; however, it is mainly concerned with the impacts of first language on culture. In line with the theory of Whorf (1956), and according to Brown (2007) “words shape our lives (p. 208), and “the acquisition of a second language is also the acquisition of a second culture” (pp. 189-190). Similarly, Tang (1999) holds the view that culture is language and language is culture. On the other hand, Saville-Troike (1978) holds the view that by teaching a second culture, sometimes, students ignore parts of their native culture without recognizing comparable parts of the second. This crisis is also true for language teachers; according to Pishghadam and Navari (2009) most of the language teachers have a positive attitude towards western culture. Moreover, Pishghadam and Saboori (2011) found out that the Iranian EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards the American culture.

As mentioned earlier, English language is the global lingua franca and is used as a means of communication by millions of people around the world. On the other hand, and at the same time as English is governing the world, these people are faced with the globalization phenomenon. According to Tomlinson (2003, p.270) “cultural identity is at risk everywhere with the depredations of globalization, but the developing world is particularly at risk”. Similarly, Naz, Khan, Hussain and Daraz (2011) take the stance that “through globalization the entire world is changing into a single place, single culture and single identity” (p. 2).

This fact that language, culture, and identity are closely related to each other has made some teachers to believe that “the language teacher should take the responsibility of explicitly teaching culture as well as language” (McLeod, 1976,

p. 217). Similarly, Gence and Bada (2005) take the stance that “without the study of culture, teaching L2 is inaccurate and incomplete” (p. 73). The positive point of explicit culture teaching is that the learners can then understand and deal with cultural differences better and easier and it also increases their level of tolerance and flexibility when they face with a different cultural value (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011a).

As stated above, language plays a significant role in shaping one’s identity (Brown, 2007); in fact, they’re tied to each other. Each individual has many social identities and cultural identity is one of them (Gudykunst and Nishida, 1999). In order to find the true meaning of cultural identity one should take a deep look into social science research. According to Aboud (1981, cited in Berry, 1999), identity has a sense of attachment in itself; hence, cultural identity refers to one’s attachment to a group or groups who share same cultural values and beliefs. In fact, cultural identity is shaped through the socialization process and is marked by a number of elements such as race, ethnicity and religion. Moreover, Clarke (2008, p.527) takes the stance that “cultural identity is fluid and contingent in relation to historical and cultural circumstances”. Similarly, Rosaldo (1984, cited in Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011a) believes that personhood, identity, culture, and language are inextricably related constructs in the social setting. Given these facts, the issue of cultural identity has occupied a significant position in the realm of foreign language teaching and learning for this reason that while we are teaching a second language, we automatically teach a second culture, too (Cakir, 2006) which consequently leads to the development of a second identity. Accordingly, there’s a rich literature on the influence of L2 on the culture and identity of learners (e.g., Norton 1997, 2000; Peirce, 1995; Kim, 2003; Sumaryono & Ortiz, 2004; Gence & Bada, 2005; White, et al., 2005; Cakir, 2006; Wong, 2009; Brown, 2007). For instance, Brown (2007) holds the view that learning a second language has influential impacts on the identity of learners. Gence and Bada (2005) found out that attending a culture class is to high extent beneficial in raising cultural awareness of students concerning both native and target societies. On the other hand, Pishghadam and Navari (2009) found that when Iranian students are exposed to English culture, they are more likely to abandon their home culture. Additionally, Kim (2003) explored the relationship between language and socio-cultural identities of ESL learners in Malaysia, and noted that in such a multicultural society, identity issues are more complex and become a matter of concern as the people try to shift their identity in search of acceptance and belonging.

The growing interest in aspects of identity in social settings over recent years has also been reflected in the small but increasing amount of research work concerning teachers’ identities (e.g., Nabobo-Baba & Teasdale, 1994; Duff & Uchida, 1997; Atay & Ece, 2009; Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011a; Pishghadam & Sadeghi 2011b; Chen & Cheng, 2012). For instance, Atay and Ece (2009) explored the view of Turkish teachers about foreign-language learning and changing identities. The results obtained from this study showed that Turkish English teachers were aware of their multiple identities and regarded their Turkish and Muslim identities as the primary ones. Moreover, these English teachers considered facing with L2’s culture as a good opportunity to increase their awareness concerning the differences between cultures and also to increase their level of flexibility and tolerance. On the other hand, Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011a) investigated the degree of EFL teachers’ home culture attachment; they found out that Iranian EFL teachers do not have a perfect home-culture-maintenance status and that those EFL teachers who have a longer contact to the foreign culture are more attached to their home culture. Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011a) also examined whether some of the demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status and also length of teaching experience have impacts on EFL teachers’ home culture attachment. Examining the role of “Length of Teaching Experience,” Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011a) found no significant relationship between “Home Culture Attachment” and “Length of Teaching Experience”; however, by using t-test, they noticed that “the longer EFL teachers teach English, the more they develop home culture dependency” (p. 158).

Similarly, Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011b) investigated the relationship between teachers’ cultural and social capitals and their home culture attachment. With regard to cultural capital which consists of two components, namely, cultural competence and literacy, Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011b) noticed that those EFL teachers who have more cultural competence possess less home culture attachment; however, they found no significant relationship between home culture attachment and literacy. Additionally, with regard to social capital consisting three components, namely, social competence, social solidarity, and extraversion, Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011b) found out that EFL teachers possessing more social competence and more social solidarity are more strongly attached to their home culture; in contrast they found no significant relationship between home culture attachment and extraversion. On the other hand, Duff and Uchida (1997, cited in Atay & Ece, 2009) investigated the relationship between language and culture and also teachers’ socio cultural identities and teaching practices. The findings of their study showed that teachers’ social, political, cultural and professional identification is associated with some complexities which are also reflected in their classes (Atay & Ece, 2009).

Returning to the research questions posed in this study, EFL teachers themselves are also in danger of becoming the victims of western-American cultural hegemony due to long time exposure to the English language and culture. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of EFL teachers’ length of experience in English language teaching on their cultural identity.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Participants*

One hundred EFL teachers, 53 female and 47 male, aged between 18 to 57, 50 single and 50 married, took part in the study voluntarily. Ninety percent of participants held degrees in English, teaching English (n=51), English translation (n=17), English literature (n=21), Linguistics (n=1), and there were only 10 who had degrees irrelevant to teaching English like engineering and medicine. The participants held academic degrees ranging from High School Diploma to PhD: High School Diploma (n=4); bachelor degree or undergraduate student (n=53); Master degree or master student (n=42), and only one teacher with a PhD degree. They were teaching English books compiled outside Iran (n=71), in Iran (n=11), and both kinds of books (n=18). The levels they were teaching ranged from elementary to advanced: elementary (n=13); elementary and intermediate (n=25); elementary and advanced (n=3); intermediate (n=10); intermediate and advanced (n= 11); advanced (n=11), and finally all levels (n=27). Among these 100 teachers, 9 of them had been living abroad e.g. in Turkey, UAE, USA, Malaysia, and Australia for different lengths of time ranging from 3 months to 11 years. They also had different lengths of teaching experience ranging from 1 year to 25 years.

In addition, all of these teachers were teaching English in private language institutes which was chosen as our context of study, because in such institutes teachers are more familiar with new updated EFL teaching methodologies and also they show their real cultural and social attitudes more openly than those who teach English in public schools.

B. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used in the present study, i.e., a demographic scale and Home culture attachment scale (HCAS).

Demographic Scale:

The demographic scale consisted of four short answer questions and four multiple choice items. While the former dealt with the participants' age, length of teaching experience, degree and field of study, the latter called for the specification of their marital status, books and levels taught, and residence in a foreign country as well as gender.

Home Culture Attachment Scale:

The participants were required to answer a questionnaire (Pishghadam, Hashemi, and Bazri, 2013) consisting of 36 items concerning home culture attachment in 15 minutes. This scale is a four-point Likert scale, ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (4) "strongly agree". The questionnaire consists of both negative and positive statements to make sure the participants fully read the questions and then answer. HCAS was validated through Rasch measurement, and its reliability was reported to be 0.85 utilizing Cronbach alpha.

C. Procedure

To detect home culture attachment, the questionnaire (Pishghadam, Hashemi, and Bazri, 2013) was administered to EFL teachers of six private language institutes of Mashhad, Iran in July 2013. Some answered them in the break time between their classes and some at home. After collecting the data, they were entered into and processed with SPSS 18 program.

IV. RESULTS

As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire consists of 36 items and is a four-point Likert-scale. Therefore, the maximum possible score of the questionnaire could be 144 and the minimum possible score might be 36; (average score of the questionnaire is 90). Thus, the mean acquired by EFL teachers (96.97) is just a bit higher than the average score of the questionnaire (90).

TABLE 1.
STATISTICS; MEAN, MEDIAN, MODE, STANDARD DEVIATION, LOWEST & HIGHEST ACHIEVED SCORES (MIN & MAX) AS WELL AS THOSE OF POSSIBLE SCORES

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Mode	SD	Achieved max & min	Possible max & min
HCA	100	96.97	97.00	99.00	6.86	77 & 111	36 & 144

To measure the relationship between "cultural identity" and years of experience of EFL teachers, Pearson product-moment correlation was ran. The results of the correlational analysis are summarized in Table 2. The findings indicate that years of teaching experience is not associated with HCA: ($r=.112$, $p>.05$).

TABLE 2.
RESULTS OF CORRELATION BETWEEN CULTURAL IDENTITY AND YEARS OF EXPERIENCE

Correlations			
		Years of Experience	Cultural identity
Years of experience	Pearson Correlation	1	-.112
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.265
	N	100	100
Cultural identity	Pearson Correlation	-.112	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.265	
	N	100	100

The correlation between years of Teaching Experience and HCA was not significant ($r=.112$, $p>.05$); however, as Table 3 suggests, there is no significant difference between high and low experienced EFL teachers in their degree of home culture attachment, too ($t=1.193$, $p>.05$). In other words, years of teaching experience plays no significant role in changing EFL teachers' cultural identity.

TABLE 3.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLE T-TEST FOR HCA AMONG EFL TEACHERS WITH YEARS OF EXPERIENCE OVER 5 YEARS & UNDER 6 YEARS

Variable	N	Mean	T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Low (1-5 years)	55	97.70	1.193	98	0.236
High (6-25 years)	45	96.06			

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to measure the relationship between EFL teachers' cultural identity and their length of experience in English language teaching to find out whether years of experience in teaching English would have any impact on the degree of their home culture attachment, and as the results indicated, there's no relationship between these two.

These findings, at first, show that the opinion suggested by Gence and Bada (2005) was correct. Gence and Bada (2005) found out that attending a culture class is to a high extent beneficial in raising cultural awareness of students concerning both native and target societies. In fact, it also shows that when a person becomes more familiar with a foreign culture through explicit learning of it, then, he can deal with the differences between that culture and his. In other words, being familiar with a foreign culture helps you take a deeper look into your own culture, and thus, pay more attention to its values and norms. According to Pishghadam and Sadeghi (2011a) "the older EFL teachers who have experienced longer contact with the foreign culture might have been able to look at their home culture with fresh eyes and might have valued aspects of their home culture they had underevaluated when they were younger" (p. 157).

The findings of this study highlight the significance of teacher training as an important means of promoting and affirming cultural identity through education. In fact, the cultural differences should be illustrated for those teachers who are responsible of teaching language and thus culture. As mentioned earlier, cultural awareness is an important factor in language learning and teaching, and the teachers should enhance their students' cultural awareness and emphasize on differences as students may lose their home culture and acquire the new one. On the other hand, learners should be good at critical thinking and be taught to develop this ability in themselves especially in EFL classes where they learn a new language, a new culture which may bring about a new identity. On the other hand, teaching English and thus culture should not be at expense of losing home culture and identity.

To conclude, although this study showed that there was no significant relationship between EFL teachers' years of experience and cultural identity, the findings cannot support casual claims and must be treated with caution since the study was based on correlational data.

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