My Attitude, My Identity: Identity Change in an L2 Setting

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Abstract. Learning a second language involves familiarity with new cultural norms- at times in stark contrast with learners' L1 values, therefore, threatening learners' smooth integration with their own ethnic group. Exploring the relationship between Iranian English and non-English major learners' reported identity change and their attitudes towards English speakers, this study discerned significant correlations.

Keywords: identity change, attitudes, L2 setting.

1. Introduction

For the last decade or so, issues pinpointing learner identities have been thrashed out scrupulously in the field of second language acquisition (e.g., [1] [2][3][4]). Studies so far have essentially verified that language use is a form of self representation which is profoundly associated with one's social identities and values [5]. Therefore, learning an l2 is somewhat more convoluted than it may appear, since it involves the espousal of "new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being" [6]. In other words, developing an L2 competency inevitably encompasses the issue of social identity and formation of an L2 self [7].

Language use, in addition, is a salient marker of ethnic identity and group membership [8]. While learning a second language may open up new academic and professional opportunities to learners, enhancing their socio-economic status, it may also alienate them from their own ethnic group [9][10]. As learning a second language involves familiarity with new social and cultural norms and behaviours which might be in stark contrast with learners' L1 values. Language learners who get interested in the norms of the L2 might sometimes find themselves in an unprivileged and threatened position in interacting and creating social bonds with the members of their own ethnic group. With group membership threatened, learners at some point may decide to learn the target language to a certain degree in order not to lose their old identity or group membership [11].

In addition to their L1 and ethnic group membership, language learners' attitude towards the target community might also affect their social identity construction and development. Corroborating language as a symbol of identity, Baker [12] believed that learners enjoying a good language motivation and a positive attitude towards an L2, could learn it more successfully. In other words, if a person's identity went under change after or while learning an L2, it may result from or lead to motivation and attitude change.

Although empirical studies in the investigation of learner identities have been conducted by numbers of scholars in different contexts and with varieties of participants, such studies are more inclined to concentrate on learners of English as a second language not in an EFL context (e.g [13][5]).

Among EFL communities, the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys a very unique position due to its idiosyncratic socio-political status in the world. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, the country has developed a very strong anti-imperialistic vision, viewing Western countries having colonial purposes aiming at despoiling the cultural and natural treasures of the country. English curriculum developers, in addition, in line with such policies, regard ELT as an imperialistic process promoting the cultural hegemony of the West. They, in fact share views with scholars such as Philipson [14] and Pennycook [15] who consider

policies of language education as both reflecting and producing broader colonial discourses serving purposes relating to power and economics in the centre--periphery relation. Such outlooks led the authorities, in Coetzee-Van Rooy's [16] term, develop a "simplex" view of identity which assumes that learning a second language somehow results in loss of the first language identity and the establishment of a totally new and alienated L2 identity, ignoring the multidimensional definition of identity in postcolonial World English contexts where pluralism (rather than integration) are the norm.

Within this frame of mind, this study is an attempt to address the following question:

- Is there any statistically significant relationship between attitudes of *English* and *non-English* major Iranian undergraduate learners to English speakers and their *reported identity changes* in terms of Additive, Subtractive, Productive, Split and Zero changes?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 180 undergraduate students of Islamic Azad University (Karaj) during the second semester of 2011-2012 with an age range of 18 to 68. The participants were divided into two major groups of English and non-English majors, each of which with 127 and 53 students respectively.

2.2. Instruments

In the present study two questionnaires were utilized to tap into the identity change and attitudes of Iranian English and non-English majors towards English speakers:

(1) **The inventory of self-identity change:** This inventory was originally devised by Yihong et al. [17] to study the relationship between English learning motivation types and self-Identity changes among Chinese students. The inventory, originally contained six categories of *Self-confidence*, *Additive change*, *Subtractive change*, *Productive change*, *Split change*, and *Zero change* each with four items.
(2) **The inventory of attitude towards English speaking countries**: This inventory is adopted from a Motivational L2 System questionnaire developed by Dornyei and colleagues' through a longitudinal study in Hungry (e.g. [18][19][20]). The complete questionnaire consisted of 100 items ranging across 18 motivational variables. Of these, just four variables of International contact ($\alpha = 0.87$), International empathy ($\alpha = 0.74$), Fear of assimilation ($\alpha = 0.67$), and Ethnocentricism ($\alpha = 0.63$) were employed for the present study, since they were more compatible with our concerns.

2.3. Procedure

The participants of the current study were students of intact classes; therefore they were not selected randomly. Having been translated into Persian and piloted, the questionnaires were administered to 127 English major and 53 non-English major Iranian undergraduate students. It took about 20 minutes for the participants to complete both questionnaires. Finally, the results obtained from the questionnaires were subjected to meticulous analysis, using SPSS 16.0.

2.4. Analyses, Results, and Discussion

The Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficients calculated between the total results obtained from two questionnaires revealed a positive significant correlation between the total attitude and total reported identity change for both English (r= 0.419, sig=0.000 with 99% of assurance) and non-English majors (r=0.354, sig= 0.01 with 95% of assurance) as brought in Tables 1 and 2, indicating a moderate go-togetherness between attitudes to English speakers and identity change of language learners for the participants of this study, keeping in mind the perfect correlation as 1.00 [21].

Considering the relationship between the total attitude to English speakers and subcategories of the identity change, it was observed that while for non-English majors, significant positive correlations were found just between total attitude and Subtractive (r=0.392, sig=0.17 with 95 % of assurance) and Productive (r=0.281, sig.=0.44 with 95 % of assurance) identity changes, for English majors, significant relationships were obtained for Subtractive (r=0.282, sig.=.001 with 99% of assurance), Productive (r=0.333, sig.= .000 with 99% of assurance), and Split (r= 0378, sig.= .000 with 99% of assurance) identity changes. The results revealed that while for non-English majors, increased total attitude to English speakers contributed to

increased Subtractive and Productive identity changes, for English majors, increased attitude contributed to increased Split identity change as well, meaning that the possibility of identity conflict for English major learners with increased attitude to English speakers of English might be much more.

Table 1: Correlations between the subscales of Identity Change and Attitude for the participants of English major

English Major			International contact	International empathy	Fear of assimilation	Ethnocentricism	Total attitude
additive		Pearson Correlation		.227*			
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.010			
subtract		Pearson Correlation		.192*		.194*	.280**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.031		.029	.001
productive		Pearson Correlation	.253**	.288**			.333**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.004	.001			.000
split		Pearson Correlation			.338**	.302**	.378**
		Sig. (2-tailed)			.000	.001	.000
Total identity Change		Pearson Correlation	.186*	.313**		.254**	.419**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.036	.000		.004	.000
		N	127	127	127	127	127

Table 2: Correlations between of Identity Change and Attitude for the participants of non-English major

Non-English Major			International	International	fear of	Total attitude
subtract		Pearson Correlation				.329*
		Sig. (2-tailed)				.017
productive		Pearson Correlation	.356**			.281*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.010			.044
split		Pearson Correlation			.283*	
		Sig. (2-tailed)			.042	
Total identity change		Pearson Correlation	.374**	.329*		.354*
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.006	.017		.010
		N	52	52	52	52

Taking into account the relationship between the subscales of the questionnaire of Attitude, i.e., Ethnocentricism, Fear of Assimilation, International Sympathy, and International Contact and the total and subcategories of Identity Change, including Additive, Subtractive, Productive, Split, and Zero changes, while no significant relationship was found between Ethnocentrism and any of the constructs of the Identity Change for non-English majors, statistically significant and positive relationships were noticed between Ethnocentricism and Subtractive, Split and total identity change for English major Iranian undergraduate learners. The correlation indices between Ethnocentricism and Subtractive, Split, and total identity changes were respectively 0.194 (Sig= 0.029 with 95% of assurance), 0.302 (Sig= 0.001 with 99% of assurance), and

0.254 (Sig= .004 with 99% of assurance), all indicating weak to modest association between the stated variables. These results suggested that with increased Ethnocentrism, i.e., having a strong national bias to local language and culture and mistrust in L2 community, the possibility of augmented Subtractive, Split, and an overall identity change would be more likely for learners of English major. In other words, the more partial Iranian students of English major to their own national socio-cultural and socio-political norms, the more likely they experience conflicted and overall identity alteration in the process of English learning.

In addition, in examining the relationship between the second sub-scale of Attitude, i.e., Fear of Assimilation and the total and all subcategories of Identity Change, it was perceived that for both groups of non-English and English majors, Fear of Assimilation was significantly associated just with Split identity change with respective coefficients of 0.283 (Sig=0.042 with 95% of assurance) and 0.338 (Sig= 0.000 with 99% of assurance). These modest correlations signified that there were positive and direct go-togethernesses between Fear of Assimilation and possible identity tension for both non-English and English major Iranian students in the process of learning English. That is the more defensive position Iranian English learners take against integrating into L2 culture, the more conflict they experience in their process of identity development.

Furthermore, investigating the correlation of the third sub-scale of Attitude, namely International Sympathy with the total and all sub-classes of Identity Change (Tables 1&2) it was observed that while for the non-English majors, a significant association was found just for total identity change with International Sympathy with a value of 0.329 (Sig = 0.017 with 95% of assurance), for the English majors, positive, significant correlations were noticed for three constructs of Additive, Subtractive, and Productive changes as well as the total identity change with values of 0.227 (Sig =0.01 with   95% of assurance), 0.192 (Sig =0.03 with   95% of assurance), 0.288 (Sig = 0.001 with 99% of assurance), and 0.313 (Sig = .000 with   99% of assurance) correspondingly. These modest correlations, then, imply that whereas for non-English majors as the willingness to understand and appreciate L2 culture enhances, the possibility of total identity change raises, while for English majors, probably due to more extensive familiarity and contact with L2 culture, in conjunction with amplified International Sympathy, all Additive, Subtractive, Productive, and total identity changes are susceptible to grow.

Finally, in studying the relationship between the last construct of Attitude, that is International Contact with the total identity change and all its subscales, it was found that for both non-English and English majors, International Contact significantly correlated with only Productive and total identity changes. Quite interestingly, the correlation index for the relationship between International Contact and total identity change in non-English major group appeared to be 0.374 (Sig= 0.374   with   99% of assurance), slightly more than that of English major with the value of 0.313 (Sig= .000 with   99% of assurance). An indication of such a modest correlation is that an increased interest in meeting and communicating with English speakers around the world probably yields more overall identity change for students of non-English majors. On the other hand, the correlation index for the relationship between International Contact and Productive identity change, this time for English majors (r = 0.553, Sig = .004 with   99% of assurance) turned out to be somewhat larger than that of non-English majors (r =0.356, Sig = 0.01 with 99% of assurance) meaning that the more willing the participants of English major are to interact with English speakers, the more probable their Productive Identity. In other words, the more English majors demonstrate enthusiasm to mingle with English speakers, the more their L1 and L2 identities reinforce each other.

Keeping in mind that in Applied Linguistics, correlation coefficients as low as 0.3-0.5 can be found meaningful [22], significant correlation coefficients beyond 3.5 observed in this study are subjected to more detailed discussion. For both groups of English (r =.419[**]) and non-English (r = .354[*]), a positive significant relationship was noticed between total attitude to English speakers and total reported identity changes. These figures imply that the more positively language learners are oriented to English speakers, the more their view to themselves in relation to the social world, i.e., their social identity, changes. A further significant correlation in the range of above 0.35 was that of between total attitude and Split identity change (r = .378[**]) for English major learners. Possibly this positive association suggests that increased attitude to English speakers leads language learners to experience more conflicted identity change during learning English, perhaps as a result of additional familiarity with target culture and noticing more discrepancy between local and target norms. In English major group, the highest correlation observed belonged to the relationship

between a subcategory of Attitude, i.e., International Contact and Productive identity change (r = 0.553 [**]) meaning that with fired enthusiasm for interacting with English speakers, language learners are more subjected to Productive identity change and reinforcement of L1 and L2 identities. Finally, an additional meaningful coefficient in the range mentioned pertained to that between International Contact and total identity change for non-English majors (r = 0.374[**]), signifying the fact that an increased willingness to converse with English speakers may yield an overall identity change for non-English majors in the process of learning language, that is a combination of both Split-Subtractive and Productive-Additive changes.

3. References

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