Exploring Gender-based Language Identity Among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is examining the language identity among male and female language learners in Iran. 1268 English language learners from different parts of the country from different ages and Iranian ethnicity and English language proficiency levels participated in this research. Validated and reliable scales of measuring language identity was used. The results of this study revealed that male and female English language learners are significantly different in their language identity and Iranian English language learners are in a moderate level of language identity. Moreover, the majority of the participants in each gender (male: 35.52%, and female: 50.88%) chosen American English as their favorite pronunciation kind, females (41.04) prefer Persian English more than males (20.94), and the lowest percent among male learners is related to Australian English (7.05) and among female learners is related to Canadian (1.54).

Keywords: Language identity; Male English language learners; Female English language learners; Iran

1. Introduction

"The language we use forms an important part of our sense of who we are – of our identity" (Edwards, 2009, p. 1). Khatib & Rezaei (2013) understood "language as an identification badge provides one of the best telling clues for people's identity and where they belong to" (p.690).

Block (2007b), conceived language identity as the expected relationship between one's feeling of individual and a way of contact which might be recognized as a language, accent or a dialect (p. 40). Block (2013) added that we can look at identity with traditional demographic categories such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, sexual, ethnolinguistic identity and national identity which we call them "identity inscriptions". Also, Block (2007) classified language identity into three main categories: L2 identity among the immigrants, L2 identity in second language context, and L2 identity in foreign language context.

Recently history in the social sciences is more about identity and its relationship with other variables such as ethnicity and community, and conflict and it has become the most important topics for investigation. (Dwivedi, 2015). The focus of this study is on gender differences in their L2 identity in foreign language context.

Bugarski (2012) in his study, make a distinction between linguistic identity and language identity, that linguistic identity refers to the language people use in a community with which they are associated, and the language identity refers to the identity of the language itself. In another study, Khatib & Rezaei, & Baleghizadeh (2014) carried out a nationwide survey of language identity among English language learners in Iran and indicated that there were significant differences in the language identity of participants across different age groups and language proficiency levels.

"With the rise of globalization and the importance of English as an international language, the majority of people in the whole world have felt the urge to learn English. This gradual but consistent desire to learn English has raised certain potential sociolinguistic and sociological concerns, one of which is pertinent to the identity of language learners after being exposed to English as a Foreign/Second language" (Khatib & Rezaei, 2012, p.2). In Iran, the native language of people is Persian and with the rise of globalization and technology most people have preferred to learn English as their

second language. So, by acquiring a second language, they are forming another identity in addition to their first language identity. In the area of language English identity, relatively few investigations have been administered in EFL contexts, especially in Iran. In this study, the major focus is given to the category of gender in language identity. Many studies have shown that males and females have much differences in their use of language. But, little studies have focused English language learners' identity including their gender identity. Therefore, the aim of this study is to investigate the difference between male and female Iranian language learners in their language identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Language Identity

Language can be one part of identity and vice versa. Norton (1997) believes that "the relationship between language and identity is an intriguing one, partly because debates on theories of language are as inconclusive and indeterminate as debates on theories of identity" (p. 409). According to Zou (2012), "English learners should enhance their cross-cultural communication skills. In order to achieve this goal, first of all, a thorough understanding of the relations between language, identity and cultural difference becomes necessary" (p.465).

West (1992) argues that identity refers to inclination to awareness, connection, and protection and safety.

According to Dwivedi (2015) "collective existence and experience of the people constitute identity" (p. 14). Also, Sen (2006) argues that a feeling of identity grant us dignity and reliance and strength. In Norton's (2011) word, identity is what some feminist post-structural theorists refer to as subjectivity. According to Block (2013) in the social sciences and applied linguistics "the default position as regards identity is to frame it as a social process as opposed to a determined and fixed product, following the tenets of what has come to be known as poststructuralism" (p. 17).

Recently, L2 educators are interested in the negotiation, construction and confliction of nature of identity (Norton, 1997). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in their study have had a sociocultural perspective on identity and language. In another study, Zou (2012) offered definitions of 'language', 'identity' and 'cultural difference 'and discussed the theory of Hall about the relation between those variables and provided an instance from his own living to show those relations

and finally, he evaluated the application of that theory to his individual experience.

Also, Khatib & Rezaei, (2012) have done "a case study exploring an Iranian English language learner's identity within the Iranian EFL context and its potential relation with the success/failure and age of the learner" (p.1).

2.2 Iranian identity

"Iran is a country with diverse languages (multilingualism), ethnicities and cultures (multiculturalism), which makes it a good site for sociolinguistic research" (Khatib & Rezaei, 2013, p.691). According to Beeman (2010) is the national and official language in Iran is Persian descending from the Indo-European languages also labelled as an Indo-Iranian language and it is spoken as the national language in Iran and in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. In the Iranian context, there are three types of cultural identity (Karimifard, 2012) which are 1. National Identity (the Pre-Islamic Iranian civilization), 2. Islamic Identity (the Post-Islamic Iran), and 3. the Modern or western Identity (the entry of modernity into Iran) (Pishghadam et al, 2015). Boroujerdi (1998) argued about two opposing points of view about Iranian identity: Iranian identity based on the religious view which is dominant in the Iran and secular view which is spread by the secular intellectuals. According to Yarshater (1993), the reason of survival of the Persian identity is only liking, acquiring, educating it, and upgrading this language.

2.3 EFL Identity

Pavlenco (2003 as cited in MostafaeiAlaei & Ghamari, 2014) "argued that foreign-language learners may choose to reject the languages imposed on them, while others may instead reject the dominant national identity and create an alternative one through the means of a foreign language" (p.552). Talebi (2000) in his study indicated that there is no meaningful relation between level of study and mode of belonging to national identity. Also, in their study Lotfabadi and Nouroozi (2004) examined how Iranian high school students consider globalization and its influence on religious and national identities and values.

3. Research Questions and Research Hypothesis

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Are there any significant differences between male and female Iranian English language learners in their language identity?

RQ2.What is the degree of male and female Iranian English language learners' language identity measured through the language identity questionnaire?

RQ3. Are there any significant differences between male and female Iranian English language learners' preference on the use of American/ Canadian / British /Australian English, or Persian English?

Based on the research questions, the following null hypothesizes were formulated:

1. H0. There are any significant differences between male and female Iranian English language learners in their language identity.

2. H0. There are any significant differences between the degree of male and female Iranian English language learners' language identity.

3. H0. There are any significant differences between male and female Iranian English language learners' preference on the use of American/ Canadian / British /Australian English, or Persian English.

In this study, language identity is distinguished by the manner individuals recognize each other by the language, dialect or accent they talk (Khatib & Rezaei, 2014). In other words, in this study, language identity comprises six factors: pronunciation attitude, attachment to the Persian language, language and social status, language knowledge, L1 use/exposure in the society and script/alphabet which subsumed under the model in a survey instrument of Khatib and Rezaei (2013b).

4. Methods

4.1 The Context and the Participants

In this study, the participants are 1268 English language learners in Iran. With this aim, they were chosen based on stratified random and cluster sampling. The area/district (i.e. north, south, east, and west of Iran) were chosen as the strata; and the schools, institutes and universities were chosen as the cluster. The participants are different in their education degrees, age, sex, levels of language proficiency, schools and universities, and cities.

4.2 Instrument

Language Identity Questionnaire

This survey questionnaire was developed and validated by Khatib and Rezaei (2013b). It consisted of two parts. Part I, is related to personal characteristics of respondents, such as gender, English Language Proficiency Level, ethnicity and …. Part II has 19 items accompanied by a 6-point scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The validation of the questionnaire have been done through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and its reliability was estimated to be 0.73.

4.3 Procedures

This study aimed at investigating the difference between male and female Iranian language learners in their language identity.

The data collection done through Language Identity Questionnaire started in 5th October, 2016 and ended in 22th October.

The process of distribution of questionnaires was done by hand to hand method in schools, institutes, or colleges and via email. After gathering the data, they were calculated in SPSS software.

4.4 Design of the Study

The design of this study is experimental with stratified random and cluster sampling. It is implemented based on quantitative approach.

5. Data Analyses

In this study, an attempt was made to answer to the three research questions concerning the difference between male and female Iranian language learners in their language identity. Suitable statistical analyses were done to obtain the answer for those three questions. Also, descriptive statistics for the scale used in this study were reported. Following this, the results of mean and standard deviation and T-test are reported and discussed.

5.1 Results and Discussion

The reliability, or internal consistency, of the questionnaire was measured through Cronbach's alpha. Its reliability of the total questionnaire was estimated to be 0.71.

Research Question one

RQ1. Are there any significant differences between male and female Iranian English language learners in their language identity?

To answer the first research question aiming at examining whether learners' language identity differs significantly between genders an independent-samples t-test was performed. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of males and females' scores in language identity. Results of the independent-samples t-test is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. The Descriptive Statistics of Males and Females' Scores in Language Identity

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Language Identity	M	424	69.6014	9.94662
	F	843	71.7687	10.04573

As the table shows, the mean score of females (71.76) in language identity questionnaire is higher than males (69.60). To find that this difference is significant statistically, t-test was run (see table 2).

Table 2. Results of the independent-samples t-test

	t-test for Equality of Means				
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Language Identity	-3.636	1265	.000	-2.16727	.59613

Levene's test indicated homogeneity of variance on the language identity. As indicated in table 2, there is a significant difference between gender and language identity (*t*= -3.636, *p*=.000). So, male and female English language learners are significantly different in their language identity in general.

The finding in this part can be compared with the results of the study of Khatib & Rezaei (2014). They measured the language identity of English language learners in general. They concluded that English language learners in Iran have moderate language identity. Also, in one part, their findings showed that there are no significant differences between language identity of men and women English learners. Therefore, the findings of this study are contradictory with their findings.

Also, in another study with the title of "language policy and language awareness" done by Davari-Ardakani (2006), his results have been shown that there were no significant relationships among gender, mother tongue, birthplace, stay abroad more than six month, knowing multiple languages, attitude to the Persian language, and length of residence in Tehran.

Research Question two

RQ2.What is the degree of male and female Iranian English language learners' language identity measured through the language identity questionnaire?

In order to answer the second research question, the learners' language identity scores were categorized to the low, moderate and high groups. To do so, the mean and standard deviation were computed. The scores falling one standard deviation above and below the mean were considered as the high and low scores, respectively. And finally, the scores between these two belonged to the moderate zone. The results of the questionnaire administration to 1268 Iranian English language learners across the country indicated that the mean score and the standard deviation obtained were 71.04 and 10.06, respectively.

Subsequently, the scores between 38.9 and 70.5 were considered to be moderate and the scores below 60.98 and above 81.10 showed low and high language identity, respectively. To interpret the scores obtained from the questionnaire, the higher the scores were, the more the participants felt attached to their first language, i.e. in this study Persian language identity.

The results of the survey showed Iranian learners exhibited a moderate level of language identity. More specifically, of all the participants in this study, 14.4% belonged to the high language identity group and 12.9% and 72.7% belonged to the low and moderate language identity groups, respectively.

So, as I mentioned above, Khatib & Rezaei (2014) concluded that English language learners in Iran have moderate language identity. Therefore, the result of this part is similar to their result. In other words, based on these two studies, Iranian learners have been proven that have a moderate level of language identity.

Also, Davari-Ardakani and Mostafa's (2011) in their study which has been done among the Kurd participants of their study showed that the Kurd people have mostly an average attitude toward Persian.

Research Question three

RQ3. What variety of English do Iranian English language learners prefer more in each gender: American/British/Canadian/Australian English, or Persian English?

In order to find out which type of variety of English was used more by Iranian learners, the frequency and percent were computed. Table 3 shows frequency and percent of each option among Iranian male and female English learners.

Table 3. Frequency and Percent of Each Option among Iranian Male and Female English Learners

	Total		Male		Female	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
British	126	10	92	21.64	34	4.03
American	580	45.7	151	35.52	429	50.88
Canadian	76	6.0	63	14.82	13	1.54
Australian	51	4.0	30	7.05	21	2.49
Persian	435	34.3	89	20.94	346	41.04
Total	1268	100.0	425	100	843	100

As the results showed, the majority of the participants in each gender (male: 35.52%, and female: 50.88%) selected American English as their favorite pronunciation type. In addition, the results indicated that females (41.04) prefer Persian English more than males (20.94). Moreover, the lowest percent among male learners is related to Australian English (7.05) and among female learners is related to Canadian (1.54). So, more females prefer American English than males and lower females prefer Canadian English and lower males prefer Australian English pronunciation.

In the case of Khatib & Rezaei's (2014) study, like this study the majority of the participants selected American English as their favorite pronunciation type. In their study, 73.3% selected American English, but in this study, 47%. Also, in both studies, the lowest percent among learners is related to Australian English and Canadian (1.54). In this regard, Khatib & Rezaei's (2014) argued that "the reasons why Australian and Canadian Englishes were not as favorable as Persian English could be related to their being less known in the Iranian context; however, this should not make these two varieties of English as non-acceptable in Iran" (p. 7). Also, the American films and TV series are more accessible for Iranians than the films with the pronunciation of Australian and Canadian. Chaichian (1997) investigated identity in diaspora among Iranian immigrants in Iowa and the findings of our study also confirm the findings of Chaichian's study in that English language learners in Iran still have a strong feeling of connection to their language, as Chaichian found in Iowa. Also, among studies have been done in Iranian context, Modarresi (2001) studied the sociolinguistics of Persian and identity in diaspora. In this perspective, Borjian (2013) investigated English in post-revolutionary Iran and Jamarani (2012a,2012b) considered Iranian women gender identity in diaspora. Moreover, Schumann (cited in Hoffman 1989) described her own experience in Iran and how Iranians tried to speak English before the 1979 Revolution to manifest a high prestige even among their own Persian friends.

6. Conclusion

Identity has been one of the most concerns of language teachers and researchers. In this study the factor of gender has been considered in language identity. In other words, this study has been done with the aim of distinguishing the language identity in male and female language learners in Iran context. According to the result, male and female English language learners are significantly different in their language identity. This result can be because of the differences existed in the kind of attitude in males and females or some other factors. Also, this study has been shown that Iranian learners exhibited a moderate level of language identity. In addition, the majority of the participants in each gender (more by female) selected American English as their favorite pronunciation type. So, we have investigated the gender in language identity in detail.

Results of this study provide teachers and practitioners useful implications. It was indicated the attitudes and the level of identity which Iranian English learners have toward language and the kind of identity between males and females. It was also showed the relations of identity of two languages and their influences on each other. Furthermore, it was showed the situation of Persian and English in Iran and between language learners. In addition, it was indicated that males and females can be also different in their language identity.

Other researchers also have investigated language identity in different dimensions with different tools and methodologies. Norton (2013) in his study if English learners have sense of possession over meaning-making, they will have improved their identities as take part more actively in literacy activities. In another study, Jing & Jianbin (2007) investigated the relationship between identity and language learning in China. They argued that language learning in China context is different from in English speaking countries and in order to promote the learners' identity, the teachers should induce and motivate learners. Pavlenko and Norton (2007) in their investigation presented the concept of "imagined communities" to show the relationship between second language learning and identity and discussed that language learners' membership in "imagined communities" can affect in improving their learning and identity.

This study has its own limitations. For example, level of English learners' identity was calculated with just a questionnaire. Other studies are needed to be implemented by other instruments such as interview and etc. Also, other studies can be considered the relationship between language identity and other variables.

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