

the Relationship between the Cultural Identity of the Iranian EFL Students and their Speaking Proficiency

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Abstract

The present study made an attempt to examine cultural identity as a factor potentially prompting English language speaking production, an area that has only recently begun to receive much attention in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. This study focused on three tasks to analyze the speaking performance of the participants (sixty EFL learners). As the first instrument, a modified Michigan test was used to select sixty male and female learners at the same level of proficiency from among 100 pre-intermediate learners of English language. The findings of the study showed that cultural identity affects speaking; that is, holding a secondary identity and readiness to learn a foreign language affects foreign language speaking of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The findings of the present study can be implied as a warning to both EFL learners and instructors in Iran that language learners do not show any interest in following a native-like accent. Moreover, the learners are not provided with the required facilities to improve their speaking skills.

Keywords: EFL, Cultural identity, Speaking proficiency

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1. Introduction

The growing number of research on cross-cultural studies in language teaching is an indicator of the great level of contact between people, brought about by modern communication, electronic media, and the Internet. However, English as a medium of international communication should resolve cultural and cross-cultural conflicts that may arise in the way. International dimension of English language not only cannot be denied, but also offers English Language Teaching (ELT) a potentially significant role. In the following sections, some key concepts and related points are discussed.

Identity orientations refer to the relative significance that individuals place on various identities or characteristics when constructing their self-definitions (Cheek, 1989). Identity markers and labels offer individuals a way of defining themselves in relation to the world; that is, “social, discursive, and narrative options offered by a particular society in a specific time and place to which individuals and groups of individuals appeal in an attempt to self-name, to self-characterize, and to claim social spaces and social prerogatives” are determining factors in defining identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 19).

According to Holland et al. (1998), “identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (p. 5). Identity not only involves the formation of the self, but also relates to how an individual perceives himself/herself within his/her own community and the wider society. Norton (1997) defines identity as “how people understand their relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410). Hall (1990) suggests that identity should be thought of as a construction that is continuously in progress.

Many EFL teachers argue that there are many factors that can be considered as the possible causes of these problems in developing the speaking skill including lack of grammatical and lexical knowledge, shortage of chances and opportunities for practice as well as shortage of interactive activities through which speaking is practiced in classroom

atmosphere. To fill the gaps in the literature, this study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between cultural identity and speaking ability of Iranian speakers of English as a foreign language?
2. Is there any significant difference between male and female in terms of their speaking proficiency?

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Studies on Aspects of Identity

Lamphere and Leary (1990) stated that personal identity had significantly positive correlations with private self-consciousness and a new endogenic orientation scale whereas social identity had significant positive correlations with public self-consciousness, the self-monitoring scale. In a definition put forward by Holland (1998) “identities are a key means through which people care about and care for what is going on around them which are important bases from which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (p. 5). Hall (1990) suggests that identity should be thought of as a construction that is continuously in progress. Moyer (2007) claims that “accent not only influences communicative fluency but also has a role in judgments of social belonging and identity” (p. 67) and Becker (1995) states that “an accent is the part of a person’s language that serves to identify the speaker’s regional origin or national/ethnic identity no matter what language the person is speaking” (p. 37).

2.2. Cultural Identity

According to Alptekin and Alptekin (1984), EFL instruction in non-speaking countries must be effective and care must be taken in order to pay less attention to teaching models based on native-speaker norms and values, and more to develop culturally neutral and learner-oriented ones. Ellis (2002) stated that "learning is effective when learners are able to construct an identity that enables them to impose their right to be heard..." Different aspects and dimensions of motivation, such as confidence, intellectual curiosity, attribution about past successes/failures, awards, punishments, materials, and atmosphere, have been found out.

Learners are motivated or unmotivated extrinsically or intrinsically, “extrinsically motivated behaviors are the ones that the individual performs to receive some extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment, with intrinsically motivated behaviors the rewards are internal” (Dornyei, 1994, p. 275).

2.3. A Typology of Cultural Identity

Identity research in SLA started with Lambert's research with American learners studying French in Montreal. Lambert used the term *anomie* to label feelings of "social uncertainty or dissatisfaction" among these learners in a naturalistic setting. For Lambert, identity was closely linked to attitudes (as cited in Block, 2007, p. 51). The first category is that of social distance, and the relationship between the Second Language Learning Group (SLLG) and the Target Language Group (TLG). This category is related to issues of power dynamics, desire for integration, and SLLG and TLG cohesiveness. The second category is that of psychological distance and is related to questions of individual's motivation and ego (as cited in Block, 2007).

2.3.1. Socio-cultural Identity Factor

In a study conducted by Lee (2002), the relationship between cultural identity and native language maintenance was studied. The participants of the study were 40 second-generation Korean-American university students in the United States. Lee reported that the most important factor for the participants' lack of motivation to preserve their native language was the inadequacy of societal recognition.

2.3.2. Persian Cultural Identity

Razmjoo (2010) conducted a research study about the impact of identity aspects on EFL learners' achievement. However, the results proved no significant relationship between language achievement and the aspects of identity; that is, none of the identity aspects is a predicting variable for language achievement in an Iranian context. Among the demographic factors, only gender can account for two aspects of identity, namely, personal and relational identities.

2.4. Inseparability of Culture and Language

It is commonly acknowledged that language is a part of culture and plays a vital role in it. Some social scientists consider that without language, culture would not be possible. Persian discourse patterns for instance are often not transferable to standard British or American English. Therefore, students need to be taught about target cultures. This does not mean that students should experience an assault on their identity when learning English but they do need to be trained in what Smith (1987, p. 3) terms “the sense of the other”. Today, when the number of ESL and EFL students has grown dramatically world-wide, it is becoming increasingly clear that learning a second culture does not take care of itself. Thus, L2 learners cannot always make the best of their educational, professional, and vocational opportunities unless they become familiar with fundamental L2 cultural concepts and constructs. Most importantly, an ability to recognize and employ culturally appropriate ways of communicating in speech or writing allows learners to make choices with regard to their linguistic, pragmatic, and other kinds of behaviors (Byram & Morgan, 1994; Hinkel, 1999).

2.5. Second Culture Complexity

The complexity of teaching culture lies in the fact that most people engaged in cross-cultural interactions are not aware of the impact of the invisible culture of their own and that of other languages. In language learning, culture does not represent a separate domain of L2 skills such as speaking or writing. Although courses for language teachers ponder on teaching L2 language skills, it may be difficult to separate teaching and learning of English from the culture of its speakers. Teaching language is in essence teaching its culture. Thus, the role of teachers in EFL classrooms is to teach language and its culture, since culture and language cannot be separated. “A language is a part of culture, and a culture is a part of language... so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture” (Brown, 2007, p. 189). Culture never exists without language and even language never exists without culture. Several studies have been conducted exploring the relationship between CI and language acquisition. For instance, Jiang et al. (2009) intended to explore the relationship between acculturation and level of attainment in acquiring a second language, which included an assessment of speaking.

In another study carried out by Rindal (2010), it was reported that there was a high correlation between the English variety the speaker aimed for and produced, but that in some cases, in more formal settings, more BrE aspects were produced, whereas in more informal setting (peer conversations), more AmE aspects of accent were produced. Rindal (2010) concluded that “L2 speakers are likely to choose a variety of English that reflects the attitude and qualities they want to express” (p. 59).

2.6. Oral Communication and Speaking Skills

Native-likeness is still a goal, even though SLA studies have revealed that acquiring native-like pronunciation after the critical period is challenging (Piske et al., 2002). As native-like English use is set as a goal, this leads to non-native English use as substandard. In general, every language system has various components and speaking is considered as one of the main components of each individual linguistic system. The most important skill to be mastered within any language is speaking. To convey their intended message, learners need to master various components of the target language system such as grammar, vocabulary, speaking, etc. In Iran, like in other parts of the globe, English learners measure their level of success in L2 learning process based on their improvement in their oral production. As a lingua franca, English must be learned for a variety of reasons including job opportunities, social purposes, travel, business, and educational purposes.

3. Methodology

Due to the nature of the research questions, cultural identity and attitudes towards foreign language learning were the independent variables and speaking proficiency was the dependent variable of the study. This section describes the steps taken to conduct the current study. Research method and procedures that were employed in this study will be explained in this section.

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were selected from among 60 Iranian EFL students who studied at high school in *Behbahan* city. They were male and female students aged between 16 and 18 years old. All participants were nearly from the same economic and social background. A

convenience non-random sampling procedure was used for participant selection. As a matter of fact, two main reasons promoted the initial choice of these particular groups of participants. First, the intermediate school girls had just passed a few semesters and seemed to have sufficient speaking skills. Second, the age factor was considered as important because at this age, students are ready for learning speaking and having attitudes about learning a foreign language.

3.2. Instruments

In order to obtain measurable data with which the results of the current study could be statistically analyzed, the following instruments were utilized:

3.2.1. Cultural Identity Questionnaire

The first data collection instrument of this study was a 16-item cultural identity questionnaire adopted from Pullen (2011). The questionnaire takes about 15 to 20 minutes to be completed. The items are put in a 5-point Likert scale from 1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree). These items aimed at investigating the participants' self-identity perceptions in relation to their feelings of connectedness to their native culture/country.

Validity

The measurement instrument may be valid for measuring some specific characteristics yet it may not be valid for other features or other populations (Sarmad et al., 2007). Accordingly, the questionnaire validity was confirmed in this study through expert judgement.

Reliability

In the present study, the investigator first conducted a pilot study among 30 participants. For calculating the questionnaire's reliability, the Cronbach's alpha test was reported which is 0.84 indicating a high level of reliability.

3.2.2. IELTS Speaking Proficiency Test

One IELTS speaking topic including personal questions about learners, their family, their work, their education, and their familiar topics was used as a pre-test to evaluate the speaking proficiency of the learners in both control and experimental groups before the treatment. Since the above-mentioned IELTS speaking topics include a lot of questions, some of these questions were used for the pre-test and some of them were used for the post-test to evaluate the relationship between cultural identity and speaking proficiency of the learners. Then, the researcher used an Evaluation Criteria for Speaking Assignments (used effectively in the ARELS Oral Examination or Association of Recognized English Language Schools). Scores were considered between 0-20 for oral participation of the learners.

3.3. Procedures

An experimental design was taken in this study. As the first instrument, a modified Michigan test (version 1997) was used to select 60 male and female learners at the same level of proficiency from among 100 pre-intermediate learners of English language. Then, the participants were asked to complete the hard copies of the questionnaire related to cultural identity either in their free time or in class time, depending on the decision of the professors and if they were willing to cooperate with the researcher while considering the time limitation of the class.

The questionnaires took about 15 to 20 minutes to be completed. Having completed all the items in the questionnaire, the participants were asked to take the second part which was an IELTS-like speaking test. This speaking section actually was used as a means or as a sample of individuals' speaking proficiency that provided the basis to make further judgments on the participants' speaking quality. Since the rating procedure for speaking proficiency was somehow subjective, the researcher decided to have two raters in the process of rating. To make sure that the two raters had approximately the same score for the examinees, they were first asked to rate the speaking of 30 individuals while considering the items of the abovementioned scale, then the inter-rater reliability was calculated.

A Pearson product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between the raters. It was found that there was a strong, positive correlation between the scores of two raters ($r = .92$, $n = 30$, $p < .0005$). To make more accurate decisions about the speaking quality of the participants, the average score of two raters for every single individual score was considered as the final score, in spite of having a high inter-rater reliability index.

3.4. Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the collected data were analyzed using a Pearson Correlation test to find the relationship between cultural identity and speaking quality of Iranian speakers of English.

4. Results and discussion

The detailed statistical analyses were performed in this study to test the hypothesis. First, descriptive statistics of the research population are presented. Then, the data were collected from the questionnaire surveys of 60 participants. Qualitative results from the data are examined and key findings are presented in the related tables and graphs. The results related to the research questions are presented in turn, followed by a discussion with reference to previous research studies. In order to find answers to the research questions mentioned above, the following descriptive statistics and correlational tests were run.

4. 1. The First Research Question

The first research question of the present study (*Is there any significant relationship between cultural identity and speaking ability of Iranian speakers of English as a foreign language?*) deals with the relationship between cultural identity and speaking quality of Iranian speakers of English. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the scores of the questionnaire and speaking quality assessment.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for the Scores of the Cultural Identity Questionnaire and Speaking Quality

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Questionnaire	3.3250	.63401	60
Speaking	4.3250	.73045	60

Table 2 shows the result of the correlation between cultural identity and speaking.

Table 2

Correlations between CQ and Speaking Quality

		Speaking	CQ
Speaking	Pearson Correlation	1	.952**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
CQ	Pearson Correlation	.952**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As it is shown in Table 2, a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between Iranian English speakers' cultural identity and their speaking quality. There was a positive correlation between the two variables, (The *p*-value, Sig. 000 < .01). Increases in Iranian speakers' cultural identity moderately correlate with increases in their speaking quality.

4.2. The Second Research Question

In addition to examining the possible relationship between cultural identity and speaking ability, their oral performance was also scrutinized in relation to their gender (*Is there any significant difference between male and female learners in terms of their speaking proficiency?*). An Independent-samples t-test was used to analyze female and male students'

speaking scores to examine the impact of gender differences on their speaking proficiency. The results are available in Table 3:

Table 3

Group Statistics for the Oral Performance Scores of Males and Females

		Group Statistics			
		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Grade	Male	60	16.2667	2.15362	.55606
	Female	60	17.8667	1.88478	.48665

Table 3 represented that the mean score of the females' group was 1.60 points greater than that of the males' group. This superiority of females' speaking skill versus males is represented in Figure 1.

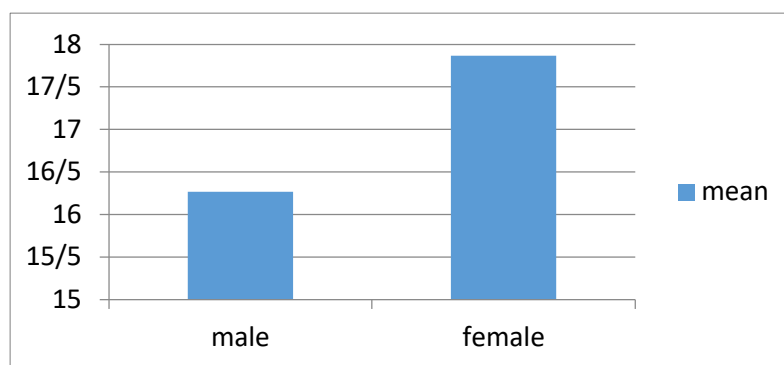


Figure 1

The comparison of Males with Females in terms of their Oral Performance

The results of the t-test for the oral performance in Table 4 reflected the same results which show the superiority of the female group in comparison with the male group.

Table 4

Independent-samples T-test for the Oral Performance Scores of Males and Females

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Grade	Equal variances assumed	0.25	0.61	-2.16	28	0.03	-1.60	0.73	-3.11	-0.08
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.16	27.51	0.03	-1.60	0.73	-3.11	-0.08

The Sig. (2-Tailed) value in table 4 is 0.03. This value is less than .05. Because of this, we can conclude that there is a statistically significant difference between the oral performance ability of males and females. Since the Group Statistics box revealed that the Mean for the female group was greater than the Mean for the male group, we can conclude that the female participants in the speaking skill were able to speak significantly more fluently and accurately than the male participants.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates the role that cultural identity plays in speaking ability of a foreign language learner. As the findings of this study show and as the literature supports (e.g., Gatbonton, Trofimovich, & Magid, 2005; Marx, 2002; Rindal, 2010), there is a positive relationship between cultural identity and EFL learners' speaking ability. That is, the more

the participants identified themselves, the higher their speaking score was. In general, it can be concluded that language and identity are inseparably intertwined, both affect one another and each produces a response from the other. Also, as the findings of the study showed, cultural identity affects learning speaking. Moreover, the findings indicated that there is a statistically significant difference between the oral performance ability of males and females. That is, the female participants were able to speak significantly more fluently and accurately than the male participants.

This study can help instructors to be aware of the speaking goals of their learners, and/or of their learners' desire to express their identity through their accent. If learners' goals include striving for native-like accents, attention needs to be given to ways of achieving these goals. If learners prefer to maintain their cultural identity through their accent, educators need to be sensitive to their learners' identity construction, and adjust speaking goals accordingly.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) certify/certifies that they have no affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in the present research paper

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