Examining the relationship between cultural identity and attitude of high school students of Tehran toward learning English

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ABSTRACT

It is essential for teachers, especially foreign language teachers, to understand the relationship between culture, language, and identity. These three interrelated categories construct both a teacher's attitude and that of a student. This study aims to examine the relationship between cultural identity and attitude of high school students of Tehran toward learning English. This research also intended to examine the sense of cultural identity of high school student boys and girls. To do so, 180 secondary school students (88 girls and 92 boys) of four districts of Tehran (First, Fifth, Twelfth, Eighteenth) were chosen through random cluster sampling. Then, the data was gathered through Gardner's short-form questionnaire of motivation and attitude toward English language learning, and cultural identity questionnaire. The questionnaires distributed online among the students. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that there was a weak negative correlation between the two variables of cultural identity and the attitude of students toward learning foreign language. It means that there was a weak negative relationship between increasing cultural knowledge of the Iranian adolescents (16–18-year-old) toward Iranian cultural identity and their attitude toward English language learning. The results also revealed that there was not any significant difference between the two groups of boys and girls in the sense of cultural identity. The findings of this study would be helpful to everybody in charge of teaching, especially English language teaching, the designers of learning materials, English teachers, and the instructors responsible for training English teachers.

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255

1. Introduction

The concept of foreign language learning is beyond the acquisition of linguistic and communication capabilities, and it includes the transmission of the cultural context of the target language (Tafaroji Yeganeh & Raeesi, 2015). Generally, culture and language are interdependent, and acquisition of language without transferring its cultural elements is impossible (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). Words, terms, and linguistic structures are among the culture representations (Hasanzadeh & Alizadeh, 2018). According to Porto & Byram (2017), culture can be considered as an effective element to determine the behavior, language, and feeling of people (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020). Kim (2020) holds that, for language learners to succeed in language acquisition, acquaintance with the cultural aspects of the target language should be accompanied by learning its linguistic elements, and teachers should not underestimate the function of cultural factors.

Considering the crucial role of the English language in cultural, political, and economic exchanges, trade, and development of science, having a good knowledge of this language can impact on the success of individuals. Regarding the effect of attitude and motivation on foreign language learning, paying proper attention to these variables is essential (Oroujlou & Vahedi, 2011). Since the aspects and norms of learners and target language can impact on the attitude, learners need to adapt themselves to the new cultural and social elements of the target language (Mahmoudi & Haddad Narafshan, 2020). A negative attitude toward the culture of the target language can impede language learning (Dahmardeh & Parsazadeh, 2015).

On the other hand, identity is an influential element in forming the most fundamental aspects of social principles and refers to the various factors of life, such as beliefs, attitudes, values, cultural and social status (Gelisli, 2014). According to Altugan (2015), cultural identity includes experiences, talents, skills, beliefs, values, and knowledge of individuals and generally refers to the nature of individuals. People respond to the questions of " who they are" and " their status in the family and the outer world" through the sense of identity.

The development of the identity is synchronized with the growth and evolution of an individual during their lifetime. Identity has a flexible

nature and is affected during different periods of life by some factors such as internal and environmental elements, age, sex, and cultural patterns. Meanwhile, because of the importance of identity formation in adolescence and its effect on the adulthood, paying attention to the formation and development of identity in adolescence is very important. The construction of a positive identity in adolescence can pave the way for the development of individuals and help them taking advantage of their opportunities (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2011).

Although culture and identity have critical roles in foreign language learning, culture and identity of the first and target language are often entirely different. Consequently, the efforts of the language learners in coordinating with values and aspects of the new language can lead to the sense of confusion and uncertainty (Dumitraskovic, 2015).

Despite the importance of motivating people, especially adolescents, to learn English, and the close relationship among language, cultural identity, and attitude toward foreign language learning, there is a lack of sufficient studies regarding these issues, especially in Iran. As a result, the need for doing further research in these contexts is

justifiable. Accordingly, the present study can be helpful for investigating the effects of identity, culture, and attitude on learning English, especially among adolescents.

The research questions of this study are:

• Is there a meaningful relationship between cultural identity and attitude of secondary high school students in Tehran province?

• Is there a significant difference in the sense of cultural identity between secondary high school girls and boys in Tehran province?

2. Review of the Literature

The phenomenon of globalization, the rapid growth of technological advances, the need for access to scientific information and resources, and the importance of intercultural communication necessitate learning foreign languages (Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020). Teaching and learning a language apart from its cultural elements are impossible (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). On the other hand, identity is also an influential factor that affect different aspects of people's lives, such as their beliefs and attitudes (Gelisli, 2014).

The interrelationship between culture and language, as well as language achievements, have been considered

in many studies (such as Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014; Dahmardeh & Parsazadeh, 2015; Dahmardeh & Kim, 2020; Ebrahimi, Afraz, & Samimi, 1399; Hassanzadeh & Alizadeh, 2018). For example, Tajeddin & Teimournezhad (2014) investigated the cultural representations in dialogues and readings of the international and localized textbooks in Iran. The results showed little attention to promoting knowledge and perception of language learners towards the intercultural elements. Therefore, this study suggests that regarding the close relationship between culture and language, teachers and designers of teaching materials consider the cultural representations of the target language and try to focus on both linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language.

Altugan (2015) examined the relationship between cultural identity and learning. The results revealed a positive relationship between these two variables. He believes that to teach successfully, teachers should be knowledgeable about the characteristics, motivations, and sense of cultural identities of their learners. According to Zare-ee¬ & Asgari Matin (2014), linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of language are related together and affect foreign language learning. As a result, it is essential for anybody in charge of foreign language teaching (teachers, researchers, and policymakers) to take both of these aspects into account. This study also maintains that, apart from having educational functions, these two influential factors can make English learners experience identity duality, or they can even change their identity.

In a study to examine the relationship between motivation and attitude toward foreign language learning and language achievement of high school students in Tehran, Bazoolnejad (1397) concluded that motivation and positive attitude to learning foreign language in adolescents can lead to their language achievements. In addition, this study showed that interest in joining a language community can provide positive motivation for language learning in adolescents.

Research conducted by Ebrahimi, Afraz, Samimi (1399) to investigate the role of multiple intelligence in cultural identity and English language achievements of Iranian language learners indicates a significant medium relationship between cultural awareness and cultural identity, and performance of language learners.

In general, regarding the increasing

trend of studies on identity and culture in Iran, and concerning the importance of paying attention to identity, especially in adolescences (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2011), and the impact of these influential factors on teaching a foreign language (Dumitraskovic, 2015), studies showed that there is short of research regarding examination of the relationship between culture, identity, and individual's attitude, especially students' attitude, toward English language learning in Iran. Therefore, the necessity of further research in this respect seems reasonable. As a result, the current study can take valuable steps to fill this gap and participate in recognizing the effect of the variables mentioned above, on teaching and learning English language, especially regarding adolescents in Iran.

3. Research Method

Participants

180 secondary high school students (88 girls and 92 boys) of four districts of Tehran (First, Fifth, Twelfth, Eighteenth) were chosen through random cluster sampling. Participants were in the 16-18 age range.

Research instrument

Cultural identity questionnaire

To examine participants cultural identity, the cultural identity questionnaire designed by Ebrahimi, Afraz, and Samimi (2019) was used, this questionnaire was used in this study without any change. This questionnaire consists of 30 questions in the 5-point Likert scale, with the options of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree. According to Ebrahimi, Afraz, Samimi (1399), this questionnaire measures four dimensions of religion, culture, nationality, and language. The estimated reliability of the questionnaire was 0.85, which is acceptable.

Motivation and language learning attitude questionnaire

To measure the motivation and attitude of students toward foreign language learning, this study used Gardner's short-form questionnaire of motivation and attitude toward English language learning, this questionnaire is taken from the Persian version article of Ghorban Dordi Nejad (1394). According to Ghorban Dordi Nejad (1394), "This questionnaire is designed to measure four factors: "attitude toward the importance of learning a foreign language", "parent's motivation for their children's foreign language learning ", "motivation of the

tendency to foreign language learning", "attitude toward the origin of the intended language" ". This questionnaire consists of 37 items in the 5-point Likert scale, with the options of Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree.

Procedure

The statistical population of this study consists of 180 secondary high school students (88 girls and 92 boys) in the 16-18 age range. They were from four districts of Tehran (First, Fifth, Twelfth, Eighteenth). Participants were chosen through random cluster sampling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and limitations of virtual classes, online questionnaires were sent for the students through WhatsApp and Email. The questionnaire link was sent for 200 students, 168 students via WhatsApp, and 32 students via email. Among these 200 students, 186 people participated, and among the received responses, the responses of 180 participants were approved and analyzed. The design of the questionnaire required the participants to complete all the questions before sending. In order to deal with moral issues, the object and aim of the study were briefly mentioned at the beginning of the questionnaire. The participants also were assured that the information of

the questionnaire was merely used for the present study and was kept secretly without mentioning the name of participants' schools. After collecting questionnaires, the data was analyzed through SPSS software, version 16.

Design

The present study adopted a descriptive design to investigate the relationship between variables. For this purpose, descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data.

4. Results

The questionnaires of cultural identity, motivation, and attitude toward foreign language learning were distributed among the volunteers. After that, the data were analyzed through SPSS software version 16. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics related to the scores of the cultural identity questionnaire. The data of Table1 indicates that participants have different attitudes towards the components of cultural identity. Lower means indicate participants' disagreement with related items. The means above 3 indicates participants' agreement with the items. According to the responses, it can be said that participants showed their disapproval of the issues raised in the religion

section. In the culture section, participants showed their agreement with the issues such as Iranian lifestyle, the necessity of being polite in front of parents and the elderly, participation in Iranian ceremonies such as Nowruz and Iranian traditions. The participants showed more interest in nationality and language sections, and they express their approval of all the issues raised in these two parts.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the cultural identity variable

Mean   Standard deviation

Religion

1. I prefer going to holy Mecca instead of going on a tour in Europe.   2.71   1.08

2. I believe in fasting as a Muslim.   2.45   1.53

3. I think we should pray regularly as Muslims.   1.94   1.23

4. Attending religious ceremonies should be part of our lifestyle.   2.26   1.75

5. I feel calm when I go to holy places.   2.07   1.24

6. Helping religious charities is a good activity.   2.52   1.10

7. I think we should regularly visit the mosques for various religious activities.   2.67   .945

8. I like to be respectful to the Imams and do less joyful activities on their death anniversaries.   2.76   .893

Culture

9. I like Iranian lifestyle and enjoy it.   3.36   .883

10.   Iranian foods are among the best foods in the world. 1.68   1.30

11.   I think it is not bad to offer Taarof because it shows politeness.   1.79   1.15

12.   Being polite in front of parents and elderlies is necessary.   3.57   1.11

13.   I like participating in such ceremonies like Iranian weddings, Nowruz, Yalda night, etc.   3.95   .867

14.   I prefer wearing regular Iranian clothing (e.g. trousers and shirt, Manto, etc.) rather than those being more common in western countries (short pants, etc.). 2.65   .966

15.   I prefer Iranian way of greeting (e.g. handshaking, kissing, hugging, etc.). 4.26   .998

16.   I like Iranian traditions like Ash Nazri, Sele Rahem (visiting relatives), Khastegari (marriage

proposal), anniversaries, etc. 3.57 .946

Nationality

17. I respect all the Iranians regardless of their ethnicity. 3.24 1.274

18. All the Iranians should have equal rights and have equal opportunities. 4.56 .695

19. I am proud of my national anthem. 4.19 1.16

20. I like to be called an Iranian when I am abroad. 3.93 .767

21. I am proud of my nationality. 3.92 .849

22. Iranians are a great nation. 4.15 .570

23. Iran has great history and achievements. 4.12 .566

Language

24. Farsi is and should be the official language of Iranians. 4.32 1.301

25. I like Farsi, and I am proud of being a Farsi speaker. 4.49 .501

26. Currently, Farsi needs to be further preserved and promoted. 4.45 .499

27. Every Iranian needs to know Farsi regardless of what is their first language. 4.18 1.121

28. I like being a Farsi speaker instead of an English speaker. 4.01 .643

29. Farsi has the capability of being used in various contexts (e.g. academic, social, technical, etc.). 3.82 .702

30. I like to see Farsi as an international language in the future. 3.94 .516

(Resource: Ebrahimi, Afraz, & Samimi, 2019, pp. 134-135)

Descriptive statistics of participants' scores on the examination of students' attitudes toward English language learning are shown in Table 2. As mentioned earlier, the average score above 3 indicates the agreements of the participants with that item.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for motivation and attitude toward foreign language learning

Mean   Standard deviation

31. Learning English is essential because it enables me to meet and talk to many different people. 3.84 1.084

32. I'm waiting for my English class to start. 3.52 1.504

33. I feel comfortable when I have to speak English. 2.96 1.207

34. Learning English is important because it makes communication with English speakers easier. 4.07 .598

35. My parents try to help me with language learning. 3.70 2.389

36. I prefer to spend more time in English class and less time in other courses. 3.58 1.035

37. Learning English is fine. 4.02 .448

38. My parents believe that language learning is very important for me. 4.11 .705

39. Speaking in English does not bother me at all. 2.99 1.003

40. I wish I could read newspapers and magazines in various foreign languages. 4.95 .219

41. English speakers are very kind and friendly. 2.98 .983

42. Learning English is a waste of time. 1.87 .755

43. I like learning English as much as possible. 4.32 .535

44. English speakers have many things to be proud of because they offer a lot of value to the world. 2.86 1.042

45. Learning foreign languages is not important for me. 1.77 .885

46. Studying a language is important because it makes me more knowledgeable. 4.44 .498

47. Learning English is essential because it enables me to have a better understanding of the English lifestyle. 4.14 3.157

48. I'm eager to learn all the aspects of the English language. 4.05 .727

49. I like to know more English speakers. 4.15 .602

50. My parents emphasize the importance of the English language for me after graduation. 3.83 .467

51. I keep reviewing English language every day. 3.24 .863

52. If I am intended to stay in a country, I will try to learn the language of that country. 4.32 1.301

53. My family is very interested in everything I am doing in English class. 2.99 1.003

54. I would like to spend all of my time learning English. 4.45 .499

55. I wish I could speak English fluently. 4.68 .566

56. Most of the English speakers

are kind and friendly. You can get along with them quickly. I'm glad they are my friends.   3.54   .893

57. I enjoy meeting foreign language speakers.   3.56   1.114

58. I really enjoy language learning.   4.25   .624

59. The more I know English speakers, the more I like them. 3.48   1.121

60. I prefer having another language teacher. 3.37   1.337

61. I am eager to learn many foreign languages. 3.35   .918

62. My parents want me to ask my questions from my English teacher.   4.35   .478

63. I like my English class very much. In the future, I will spend more time learning English.   4.71   .715

64. I am trying to understand everything I see or hear in English.   4.29   .990

65. I like learning English.   4.56   .520

66. My parents believe that I'd better continue learning English during my study at the university.   4.11   .705

67. I want to learn English so well that I can understand and speak

English fluently and naturally. 4.37   .485

(Resource: Ghorban Dordi Nejad,1394, pp. 125-128)

To measure the normal distribution of cultural identity and attitudes toward learning English scores, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used. The results of the test are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for cultural identity and attitude toward language learning

Attitude toward foreign language learning	Cultural identity	
180	180	Number
.792	1.485	Z score
.557	.024	Significance level

According to Table 3, the significance level for cultural identity is .024, which is lower than the significance level of .05. So, the distribution of the cultural identity variable is non-normal. The significance level of the attitude toward foreign language learning variable is .557, which is higher than the significance level of .05; therefore, the distribution of this variable is normal.

The first research question

Examining the relationship between the sense of cultural identity and attitudes of high school students towards learning English was the first question of this research. To analyze the scores of the data, Spearman correlation coefficient statistics was used. The results show in Table 4. According to Table 4, the results of the Spearman correlation coefficient ($p > 0.05$, rs= -0.073) indicate that there is a weak negative correlation between the two variables of cultural identity and attitude toward foreign language learning. It means that there is a negative relationship between increasing awareness of Iranian adolescents (16-18-year-old) about Iranian cultural identity and their attitude toward foreign language learning, which the strength of this relationship is weak. Moreover, due to the significance level of 0.33, which is higher than 0.05, it can be said that the relationship between the two variables is not significant, and there is not a linear relationship between these two variables.

Table 4: The Spearman correlation coefficient test for cultural identity and attitude variables

Variables	Cultural identity	Attitude
Cultural identity Spearman correlation	1.0	- .073

Significance level .333

N 180 180

Attitude Spearmen correlation	- .073	1.0

Significance level .333

N 180 180

The second research question

The second question of this research aimed to examine the difference between the sense of cultural identity among high school girls and boys. Regarding the non-normal distribution of the cultural identity variable, The Mann – Whitney statistics was used to measure the means of the two populations, which are shown in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5: The Mann – Whitney test for difference between sex and the sense of Iranian cultural identity (Ranks)

	Sex	Number	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Cultural identity	Girl	88	91.93	8089.50
	Boy	92	89.14	8200.50
	Total	180		

According to Table 5, the mean rank of cultural identities of the girls (Mean rank: 91.93) is higher than that of the boys (Mean rank: 89.14).

Table 6: The Mann – Whitney test for difference between sex and sense of Iranian cultural identity (Test Statistics)

	Cultural identity
Mann – Whitney U	3.92
Sig. (2-tailed)	.719

* Independent variable: sex

According to Table 6, the significance level is 0.719, which is more than 0.05 (P> 0.05). Therefore, there is no reason to reject the null hypothesis, and it can be said that, regarding the sense of cultural identity, there is no significant difference between high school girls and boys.

5. Discussion

The present study investigates the relationship between the sense of cultural identity and attitude toward foreign language learning of secondary high school students of Tehran. In addition, the current study aims to investigate the difference between the sense of cultural identity among girls and boys (16-18-years-old). Regarding the first research question, the results showed a negative correlation between the two variables of cultural identity and attitude toward foreign language learning. In other words, increasing cultural awareness of Iranian adolescents (16-18-year-old) about Iranian cultural identity has a weak negative relationship with their attitude toward learning English.

Since no study has been found which specifically addresses the relationship between the sense of cultural identity of language learners and their attitude toward foreign language learning, no evidence has been found to approve or disapprove this result. On the other hand, many studies on culture and education in Iran and other countries have acknowledged the relationship between culture elements and success in language learning. Kim (2020) subscribes to the idea that successfully language acquisition depends on the knowledge of both linguistic and cultural aspects of the target language. Ghahari (1392) contends that, regarding the relationship between culture and language, culture can be considered as a significant factor influencing foreign language acquisition. Mohammad Hossein Poor & Sarbandi Farahani (1398) hold to the idea that the sense of cultural identity can affect language learning through influencing the reaction of people to some factors such as globalization.

Bazoolnejad (1397) maintained that creating positive motivation and

attitude toward foreign language learning can be considered as a significant step that teachers can take to help learners with language acquisition. Ebrahimi, Afraz, and Samimi (1399) believe that, given the relationship between culture, education, and teaching, second language teachers should try to make their learners aware of the target language culture.

Regarding the second question of the research, in the sense of cultural identity, no significant difference was found between girls and boys students (16-18-year-old). This finding is not in line with the ¬results of Tsang, Hui, & Law's (2011) research, which believe that, at different stages of human life, age, sex, and cultural patterns are influential factors in developing the identity. The research of Wong, Zhang, Kwan, & wright (2019) into the effect of sex on the sense of identity of 20-35-year-old people in China shows that, in comparison with women, men have higher levels of the sense of cultural identity.

Although several studies were carried out on the variables of culture, identity, attitude, and language teaching, we did not manage to find any studies, especially in Iran, regarding the relationship between the sense of cultural identity and

attitude toward English language learning of adolescents. Therefore, given the importance of the English language in the future success of adolescents, and considering the crucial role of identity, culture, and attitude toward language acquisition, the necessity of current research is justifiable.

Like any other research, the present study was suffering from some limitations. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual classes limited our access to the students. Furthermore, since choosing from all the levels of students was impossible, participants of this study were only selected among the secondary high school students. Therefore, given the probable influence of age on the sense of cultural identity and attitude of language learners, it is recommended that future researchers consider different age ranges.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that there exists a weak negative correlation between the two variables of cultural identity and attitude toward foreign language learning. Therefore, one might say that increasing the cultural awareness and the sense of cultural identity of adolescents (16-18-year-old) of

267

Tehran province has a negative relationship with their attitude toward foreign language acquisition, although the strength of the relationship is weak. This study also shows that there is no significant difference regarding the sense of Iranian cultural identity between boys and girls (16-18-year-old).

According to Dahmardeh & Kim (2020), despite the role of coursebooks in transmitting cultural elements, most Iranian English textbooks do not pay sufficient attention to the culture of the target language and international cultures. As stated by Tajeddin & Teimournezhad (2014), lack of enough knowledge about cultural aspects of the target language can result in the cultural gap, and can also impede language acquisition. Insufficient awareness of learners about the realities and cultures of the first and target language, as well as international cultures can prevent them from intercultural communications. This can disable learners to express their own cultural identity and even leads to the loss of self-esteem. Therefore, the study recommends that it is essential for language teachers to raise their awareness about intercultural differences and help language learners to understand their cultural identities, culture of the target language, and international cultures. For these purposes, Teachers can use different instruments such as textbooks, pictures, and video clips. The research also suggests that policymakers hold teacher education workshops to make language teachers aware of the need for empowering language learners in intercultural communications (Tajeddin & Teimournezhad, 2014). These recommendations can be applied to the present study.

In this study, the main variables were discussed. Regarding the various aspects of this research, several studies were mentioned; nevertheless, none of them, especially in Iran, deal with the subject of the present study directly. Therefore, to fill the existing knowledge gap on the issues of culture, identity, and foreign language learning, this study can be considered noteworthy.

The findings can be helpful for policymakers, especially activists in English language teaching, designers of educational materials, language teachers, and educators of language teachers. The results of this article provide more knowledge about the role of identity and culture on attitude toward foreign language learning, especially regarding adolescents. Such awareness can help instructors

and designers of educational materials to be more conscious of the relationship between these variables with regard to different age ranges of language learners. This knowledge also can reveal the necessity of designing proper educational methods and instruments to increase the interest in English language learning.

Given the complex relationship between attitude, culture, and identity, and their effects on teaching and learning English, it would be worthwhile for future researchers to consider the impact of other variables on the sense of cultural identity and attitude toward foreign language learning; for instance, income level, parents' education level, characteristics of learners such as extraversion and introversion. This awareness can lead to more comprehensive knowledge about the influential factors regarding attitude toward foreign language learning.

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271