

International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



Influence of Religious Identity on a Foreign Language Learning: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

[PP: 16-20]

Ismail Zare Behtash

Chabahar Maritime University, Iran

Seyyed Hussein Hashemi

Sajjad Farokhipour

(Corresponding Author)

Shahid Mahalati Higher Education Complex

Iran

ABSTRACT

The way language learners think about foreign language, affects the degree they learn. Cultural, ethnic or group identities are among driving forces which shape the way language learners think. A critical factor that affects attitude of Iranian language learners is their deep religious background. To investigate any possible effect of religious identity on language learning in Iran, the current research is an attempt to shed light on the relationship between religious identity and learning cultural aspects of English as a foreign language among Iranian advanced language learners. Therefore, to this aim, 29 male students, studying English as a foreign language in a language learning institute in Iran, were selected as samples of the study. In order to arrive at intended data, Two main instruments were used in this study. The first instrument was a measure of religious identity developed by Khodayarifard (2003) and the second instrument used in this study was a culture learning test developed by the researchers based on Ward and Deuba's (1999) culture learning scale. In order to investigate the relationship, a Pearson product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between religiosity and culture learning in an advanced level of language learning course. The results of the study showed that there was a strong, negative correlation between these two variables, which was statistically significant ($r = -.760$, $n = 29$, $p = .005$). Also the researchers identified those aspects of foreign language culture which are not learned by language learners due to their religious identity. These findings have implications for syllabus designers, language learners and language teachers.

Keywords: Culture, English, Language Learning, Religious Identity, Teaching

ARTICLE INFO	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
	29/02/2017	25/03/2017	03/05/2017

Suggested citation:

Behtash, I., Hashemi, S. & Farokhipour, S. (2017). Influence of Religious Identity on a Foreign Language Learning: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, 5(2), 16-20.

1. Introduction

In the current world of language learning, identity is receiving increasing attention. In last decade many scholars in the field acknowledged the need for investigating the role of identity in language learning (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000 and Schwartz, 2005). Riley (2007) believes that the way language shapes and is shaped by identity is a key topic within sociolinguistics. Many different factors and elements procreate the identity of people including the social, territorial, linguistic, cultural, political, religious and ethnic-related issues. For the same reason, the relationship between identity and language learning had been of interest to researchers and scholars in the fields of second and foreign language learning, language

education, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics with greater focus on sociological and cultural dimensions of language learning.

Laying emphasis on the importance of this role, Norton (1997) asserted that when language learners speak, in an attempt to construct their identity, they not only exchange information with their interlocutors, but also organize and reorganize a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. To give more weight to the role of identity, he also stated that investment in target language is investment in social identity of language learners. Many other researchers in the field of language learning believe that this role is reciprocal; meaning that identity affects language learning and language plays an

important role in the formation and expression of identity correlatively (Warschauer, 2001). Exploring the effect of identity on second language learning, Ruiz-Vasquez (2000) found that second language learners; in order to achieve greater competence, need to acquire a new identity in the second language. He also found that any reluctance to undergo the process of loss of identity could be a cause for the lack of success in another language.

Many researchers are convinced by the fact that, not unlike motivation which is proved influential in language learning, variable related to identity such as attitudes and set of beliefs, about learning are among the determining factors that can influence the efficiency of the language learners in any context (Crookes and Schmidt 1991, Benson 1991 and Ellis 1997). For the same reason, it is frequently stated that instructors and educators need to deliberate over these issues while teaching. Lennartsson, (2008) believes that students' beliefs might hinder language learning when students believe that they cannot learn the new language successfully.

In spite of the fact that the expression of self and individuals' identity is one of the principal functions of language, it has largely been neglected by linguists especially in the field of foreign language learning. Religious identity, on top of that, is a factor which is failed to provide for in researches on the relationship between identity and language learning. In addition, Islamic identity is a deeply rooted element that has touched different aspects of life of Iranian language learners. Considering the issues stated above, the current research is an attempt to shed light on the effect of religious (Islamic) identity on learning cultural aspects of foreign language (English) among Iranian language learners. Thus, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

- 1- Is there any relationship between religious identity and learning foreign language culture?
- 2- Which aspects of foreign language culture are less acquired by Iranian language learners?

2. Literature Review

Joseph (2004) argues that studies investigating the role of identity on language learning have always privileged the subjective dimension. Therefore, to study language as a social phenomenon, we need to put right the balance by devoting equal attention to the ways in which identities are ascribed and constructed by

others on the basis of the culture-specific repertoire available. One more line of research on identity has investigated the effect of identity on second language learning particularly. Therefore, there is a developing literature on language and social identity and its relation to second language acquisition in which applied and sociolinguistics make contact. According to Roberts (2001), within this literature, the learner is perceived as a person who has multiple identities among which some might be contradictory. Wigglesworth (2005) too has stated that in the previous decades there has been much debate about the relationship between language and identity as a result of which researchers found that language is a marker of ethnic identity. Advocates of this idea believe that speakers who have strong group identification are likely to consider language as an important symbol of identity.

Studying the effect of identity on language learning Pavlenko (2003) focused on the relationship between national identities and foreign-language education policies and practices. It is found that shifts in national identity images and sociopolitical allegiances have implications for foreign-language education policies and practices.

Also, in a research in 2015, Altugan stated that integrating cultural identity into learning is a challenging task to do because identity formation is a long complicated process and is gradually developed in social surroundings. He also added that cultural backgrounds of learners are significant because ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious or economic differences can cause cultural disconnection leading corruption of motivation to learning. Therefore, he tried to describe the relationship between learning and cultural identity. He employed a deductive approach which was a qualitative study and descriptive and exploratory. He concluded that there is a positive correlations between the two as it draws on approaches that utilizes learners' social and cultural experiences.

In an attempt to identify the effect of ego identity types on the language proficiency of the learners, Tavakoli and his colleagues (2014) conducted a research in the context of Iran. In this study they tried to answer- which identity types achieve higher levels of proficiency in terms of language learning? The results of the study showed that the achieved ego identity types



were better language learners in comparison with foreclosed and diffused types.

In one more study, Anbreen (2015) studied the influence of English second language learning on Pakistani university students' identity. This research aimed to study identity construction of foreign language learners in foreign language learning class rooms. It investigated the influence of English foreign language on Pakistani students' identity. For the same reason, forty students who were studying English as second language in Lahore College for Women University, Pakistan participated in the research. The participants filled questionnaire and were interviewed. Results showed that identity is fluid and changing.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The Participants of this study were 33 male students studying English as a foreign language in a language learning institute in Qom, Iran. They were adult learners enrolled in the highest level of Interchange book series (Passage 2). These students were selected through non-random convenient sampling. In order to reach at a homogenous sample in term of language proficiency a language proficiency test was administered to the subjects and four students were removed as outliers. As a result, 29 students were selected as final samples of the study.

3.2 Instruments

Two main instruments were used in this study. The first instrument was a measure of religious identity developed by Khodayarifard (2003) at Tehran University. This measure comprised of 100 different items investigating different dimensions of religiosity. The measured yielded a score between 0 and 100. The reliability and validity of the instrument were already proved by author for Iranian participants. The second instrument used in this study was a culture learning test developed by the researchers based on Ward and Deuba's (1999) culture learning scale. The test involved all components of the adopted scale and brought forth a score between 0 and 100 in ratio scale. The test was validated by experts in language teaching in English department of Chabahar maritime university. The reliability of this test too was proved in pilot study by 47 M.A students studying English language teaching at Chabahar maritime university with Chronbach alpha of 0.76 as stated in the following table.

Table: 1 Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.076	2

3.3 Procedure

The measure of religious identity was administered to 29 participants of the study. The results obtained from this instrument were collected and entered into SPSS, version 19. Then, the culture learning questionnaire was administered to the subjects and the result entered in the software too. Both tests were administered in one single session. Before conducting Pearson product-moment correlation all four assumptions of the test (continuous variables, linear relationship, investigating outliers, normal distribution) were investigated by the researchers. In the next step the correlation between two sets of data was calculated and the results were reported in respective tables. In addition, based on the answers obtained from the culture learning questionnaire, those areas of foreign language culture which were not learned by subjects were identified and reported in a table.

4. Results

In order to answer the first question of the research, the tests were administered to 29 participants of the study and the relationship between scores obtained was calculated through Pearson product-moment correlation and following results were obtained.

Table: 2 Pearson Correlation of Scores

		Religiosity	Culture learning
Religiosity	Pearson Correlation	1	-.760**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.005
	N	29	29
Culture Learning	Pearson Correlation	-.760**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	
	N	29	29

In sum, A Pearson product-moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between religiosity and culture learning in an advanced level of language learning course. There was a strong, negative correlation between these two variables, which was statistically significant ($r = -.760$, $n = 29$, $p = .005$).

Also, in order to answer the second question of the research, the researchers analyzed all items of culture learning test and the following results were obtained:

Table: 3 Results of Culture Learning Test

Aspects of culture failed by more religious students	Aspects of cultures answered by more Religious students
1. Items related to religious beliefs	1. Items related to clothing
2. Items related to Marriage	2. Items related to food
3. Items related to dating and friendship	3. Items related to general knowledge
4. Items related to recreational activities	4. Items related to pace of life
5. Items related to self-identity	5. Items related to material comfort
6. Items related to family-life	6. Items related to employment activities
7. Items related to values	7. Items related to material comfort
8. Items related to cultural activities	8. Items related to residence
9. Items related to political ideology	9. Items related to language
10. Items related to values	
11. Items related to world view	
12. Items related to social customs	

5. Discussion and Conclusion

According to Tseng, (2002), it is clear that there is a link between learning and identity. The results obtained from the current research showed that more religious language learners are less liable to learn those aspects of foreign language culture which are in sharp contrast with those introduced by Islam such as friendship, marriage, dating, ideology and etc. In other words, due to the fact that Islam is an all inclusive religion and has religious precepts for all aspects of social and individual life, the Muslim language learners show little, if at all, tendency to learn those aspects of foreign language culture which are prohibited in their religion. Since participants of the study were in highest levels of a foreign language learning course, the finding of the research showed that the religious identity formed in Iranian language learners is an essentialist one which according to Virkkula and Nikula (2010) is something that is linked to a person's self and therefore this kind of identity is singular and stable. Rather than avoiding interaction with all aspects of foreign language, Anderson and his colleagues (2009) believe that interaction with foreign language speakers and foreign language peoples is one more important factor which affects construction of language learners' second language identity. Owing to the fact that interaction with foreign language people is minimal for the sake of political and ideological issues, the effect of primary religious identity stands robust among Iranian language learner.

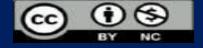
Although acculturation is an integral part of language learning, this effect attenuates in foreign language contexts such as Iran in which leaning different aspects of foreign language culture or even familiarity with these aspects seems enough. This is one more reason which holds Iranian religious language learners to creep in their religious bias while learning a foreign language. In addition, the findings of this research are in line with Peirce (1995) who believes that social identity is multiple and contradictory' and a learner

cannot isolate his/her cultural identity while learning due to continual dependence on their own cultural knowledge and identity.

Therefore, Iranian educational policy makers, syllabus designers, course developers, teaching training centers and language teachers have to consider the religious identity of Iranian language learners. Also, considering the movement that has occurred in the world of language learning, all agents stated above are required to focus on local syllabus which takes into account all these environment-specific issues and not unlike countries such as India and Malaysia move towards a nativised English, even with a more abyssal depth because Islamic identity has gone to the bottom of the heart of every single Iranian language learner.

Reference:

- Altugan, A. (2015). The Relationship between Cultural Identity and Learning. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 186: 1159 – 1162
- Andersen et al.,(2009). *Sociolinguistic Identity* (M.A. Research Project). Available from <http://rudar.ruc.dk/bitstream/1800/4633/1/FINAL%20PROJECT2.pdf>
- Benson, M.J. (1991). Attitudes and motivation towards English: A survey of Japanese freshmen. *RELC Journal*, 22(1), 34-48.
- Crookes, G., & Schmidt R.W. (1991). Motivation: Reopening the research agenda. *Language Learning*, 41(4), 469-512.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
- Joseph, J. E. (2004). *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Khodayarifard, M (2003). Preparing a scale for measuring religiosity of different classes of Iranian society. A research project at Tehran University.
- Lennartsson, F. (2008). Students' motivation and attitudes towards learning a second language: British and Swedish students' points of view. http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:s_e:vxu:diva-2571.
- Norton, B. (1997). Language, identity, and the ownership of English. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 409–429.
- Pavlenko, A., & Lantolf, J., (2000). Second language learning as participation and the (re)construction of selves. In, J. Lantolf (Ed.), *Sociocultural theory and second language learning* (pp. 155–177). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pavlenko, Aneta (2003). 'Language of the Enemy': Foreign Language Education



- and National Identity. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. 6(5): 313-331.
- Peirce, B. N. (1995). Social identity, investment, and language learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29(1), 9-31
- Roberts, C. (2001). 'Language acquisition or language socialization in and through discourse? Towards a redefinition of the domain of SLA' in C. Candlin and N. Mercer (eds.): *English Language Teaching in its Social Context*. London: Routledge.
- Ruiz-Vazques, L. J. (2000). *Teacher training through literature: Building teacher awareness on the process of shift in identity on ESL learners*. (Master's Thesis). West Virginia University, USA
- Schwartz, S. J. (2005). A new identity for identity research: Recommendations for expanding and refocusing the identity literature. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 20, 293-308.
- Tavakoli, Z, Rakhshanderoo, F , Izadpanah, M & Moradi , M (2014). Ego Identity Types and Language Proficiency of Iranian EFL Learners. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 98 : 1885 – 1894
- Tseng, Y. -H. (2002). A lesson in culture. *ELT Journal*, 56(1), 11-21
- Virkkula, T., & Nikula, T. (2010), Identity construction in ELF contexts: a case study of Finnish engineering students working in Germany. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 20 (2), 251-273.
- Ward, C., & Rana-Deuba, R. (1999). Acculturation and adaptation revisited. *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*. 30, 422-442.
- Warschauer, M. (2007). *Language, identity, and the Internet*. New York: Routledge.
- Wigglesworth, G. (2005). 'Current approaches to researching second language learner processes'. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics* 25: 98-111.

Appendix: Religiosity measurement scale (Khodavarifard, 2003)

ردیف	ایتم	بله	خیر
1	مرگ، پایان زندگی نیست، بلکه مرحله ای دیگر از زندگی جاوید است		
2	همة قوانین الهی دارای حکمت و مصلحت است		
3	خداوند از همه آنچه های پنهانی آگاه است		
4	همة آنچه برای سعادت بشر لازم است در قرآن آمده است		
5	به عالم غیب ایمان دارم		
6	از اهانت کنندگان نسبت به پیامبر اسلام (ص) بیزارم		
7	زندگی بدون ارتباط با خدا بی معناست		
8	با ظهور منجی عالم بشریت، جهان پر از عدل و داد خواهد شد		
9	روز قیامت خداوند ممکن است از حق خود بگذرد، ولی از حق مردم گذشت نمی کند		
10	تجربه من نشان داده، در دعاهایی که مستجاب نمیشود، خبری نرفته است		
11	توسل به اولیای الهی از مهم ترین راه های ارتباط با خداست		
12	وجود قیامت برای اجرای عدالت خداوند ضروری است		
13	به وجود فرشتگان الهی اعتقاد دارم		
14	ان خدا می خواهد برای انجام کار به من کمک کند		
15	دین، زندگی فردی و اجتماعی انسان را هدایت می کند		
16	بهرترین تجربه های دینی من وقتی بوده که هنگام عبادت و دعا احساس روحانی خاصی داشته ام		
17	انسان فقط با استغاده از دستورات پیامبران می تواند به سعادت کامل برسد		

18	یاد خدا ارادت ظنی در دلم ایجاد می کند		
19	پس از تضرع به درگاه خداوند احساس می کنم سبک شده ام		
20	به روز قیامت اعتقاد دارم		
21	نوشت دارم حرم پیامبر اعظم (ص) را زیارت کنم		
22	پیامبران هدایت کننده انسان به سوی خداوند هستند		
23	هنگام دعا کردن احساس می کنم خداوند به من توجه ویژه ای دارد		
24	در خوردنی ها و نوشیدنی ها به حائل و حرام بودن آنها توجه می کنم		
25	با دشمنان اولیای خدا احساس دشمنی میکنم		
26	هر نیکی ای که به انسان رسد، از جانب خداست و هر بدی که به او رسد، از خود اوست		
27	اگر قدر شرعی نداشته باشم، در ماه رمضان روزه نمیگیرم		
28	کامل ترین برنامه را برای سعادت انسان دین اسلام ارائه می کند		
29	ارزو می کنم به زیارت حرم امام رضا (ع) نائل شوم		
30	لطف و محبت خدا را در زندگی احساس می کنم		
31	دین اسلام پاسخگوی نیازهای اجتماعی جوامع بشری است		
32	مشاهده تصاویر حرم پیامبر (ص) احساس معنوی در من ایجاد می کند		
33	مطالعه کتاب های دینی را اکتاف وقت نمی دانم		
34	تأثفه دارم به سفر حج بروم		
35	نسبت به افراد باحیا احساس خوبی دارم		
36	در انجام کارها به خدا توکل می کنم		
37	همة امور زندگی به دست خداست		
38	قرآن کریم را بهترین مناسبتی برای زندگی من بوده است		
39	ترک محرمات را ضروری می دانم		
40	ایران ختم علیه ستمگران، و طریقه دینی است		
41	نسبت به مؤمنان تأثفه ویژه ای دارم		
42	دین راهمائی خوشبختی انسان ها در زندگی است		
43	به دلیل نعمت های خداوند شکرگزار او هستم		
44	خدا را به دلیل نعمت های که به من داده است شکر می کنم		
45	امام حسین (ع) الگوی انتمردی و آزادی است		
46	در معاشرت با جنس مخالف، رعایت حدوداسلامی را لازم می دانم		
47	زیارتی را بر سفرهای سیاحتی ترجیح می دهم		
48	با وجود نامهربانی در زندگی، شکرگزار خداوند		
49	سعی می کنم نمازهای واجب خود را به جماعت بخوانم		
50	سعی می کنم برای خواندن نمازهای واجب به مسجد بروم		
51	برای حفظ اعتقادات دینی، خود را به خطر میاندازم		
52	در گوش دادن به آهنگهای مختلف موسیقی احکام شرعی را در نظر نمیگیرم		
53	خود را مقید به پرداخت خمس میدانم		
54	در صورت وجود شرایط امن به معروف و نهی از منکر میکنم		
55	در انجام وظیفه الهی از مال خود میگذارم		
56	سعی می کنم نماز را اول وقت بخوانم		
57	حل مشکلات دیگران را بر حل مشکلات خود ترجیح میدهم		
58	اگر حکم جهاد صادر شود، در آن شرکت میکنم		
59	برای دفاع از اعتقادات دینی حاضریم جان خود را هم فدا کنیم		
60	آگاهی دینی خود را افزایش میدهم		
61	وظایف دینی خود را میگذارم		
62	برای جلب رضای خدا در حل اختلافات خانوادگی کوشش میکنم		
63	اطرافیان خود را به انجام واجبات دینی تشویق میکنم		
64	بر اساس دستورات دین، از افراط و تفریط پرهیز میکنم		
65	برای رضای خدا از خطای دیگران چشم پوشی میکنم		
66	شرکت در امور خیریه را وظیفه خود میدانم		
67	ادای نماز مرا از انجام عمل زشت و گناه باز داشته است		
68	سعی می کنم در کارها مطابق دستورات خداوند عمل کنم		
69	سعی می کنم نمازم فضا نشود		
70	از خطای افرادی که مرا رنجاندند، گذشت میکنم		
71	برای رضای خدا با مردم مدارا میکنم		
72	مقید هستم فضای روزه های که نگرفته ام به جا آورم		
73	شکستن بی دلیل شامه درختان را ناپسند می دانم		
74	خوش رفتاری با حیوانات را وظیفه اخلاقی خود می دانم		
75	من به اقلیت های دینی احترام می گذارم		
76	لوده کردن رونخانه ها را گناه بزرگ می دانم		
77	بهبود رابطه بین افراد را وظیفه خود می دانم		
78	از شنیدن اخبار مربوط به نشت نفت در دریا و آتش سوزی جنگل ناراحت می شوم		
79	حقوق اقلیت های دینی را رعایت می کنم		
80	با دیگران خوش اخلاق		
81	به پدر و مادرم احترام می گذارم		
82	از آلیت شدن حیوانات توسط کودکان جلوگیری می کنم		
83	ریختن زباله در کوچه و خیابان را ناپسند می دانم		
84	بیماری گیاهان و درختان اطراف منزل را دوست دارم		
85	در صورت پناه آوردن پررنده به منزل از آن به خوبی نگهداری می کنم		
86	به مصلحت خود احترام می گذارم		
87	برای حل مشکلات مردم تلاش می کنم		
88	سعی می کنم راست بگویم		
89	سخنی های زندگی را تحمل می کنم		
90	با ناکامی های زندگی کنار می آییم		
91	احساس می کنم خداوند مرا به خواسته هایم می رساند		
92	از آنچه خدا به من داده، رضای و خشنودم		
93	برای برندگان اطراف منزل دانه و غذا می گذارم		
94	به تعهدات خود پایبندم		
95	هنگامی که خیلی صعبانی م بشوم، ناله نمی گویم		
96	از دست دادن مال دنیا مرا آتو هگین نمیکند		
97	خود را فردی صبور م بدانم		
98	اشتغال به کار های دنیا مرا از یاد خدا غافل می کند		
99	به سادگی می توانم بر دستواری های زندگی غلبه کنم		
100	شرکت در امور خیریه را وظیفه خود میدانم		