# Language, gender and empowerment: A qualitative study of self-identities of women English teachers in Iran

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As part of a broader investigation into the experiences of women English teachers in Iran, this study delves into how their identities are shaped by English language learning and teaching experiences. Employing qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals the significant role of immersion in the English language and exposure to international cultures on these women's self-perceptions. Despite the Iranian state's prevailing narratives opposing English learning, participants expressed empowerment and positive perceptions stemming from access to diverse knowledge sources. The findings underscore the complex interplay between language, identity, and societal factors, challenging conventional discourses. This study enriches our understanding of the experiences of women English teachers in non-Western contexts and highlights the evolving nature of women's identities, particularly amidst recent feminist uprisings in Iran. It emphasises the transformative potential of linguistic and cultural discourses in empowering marginalised groups and navigating the complexities of societal change.

## Introduction

The status, rights, and identities of women in Iran have long been subjects of heated debate, particularly in light of the ongoing feminist uprisings in the country. Iranian women today demonstrate remarkable courage as they challenge imposed norms through daily acts of discursive deviation despite the severe potential consequences (Castro, 2023). Longstanding misogynistic laws in Iran perpetuate hierarchical gender norms that assign a lower status to women (Rezai-Rashti, 2015; Tohidi, 2016). While Iranian women are educated and socially active, they navigate a complex web of roles, responsibilities, and restrictions deeply embedded in societal discourse, seldom questioned (Karimi, 2009; Mehdizadeh, 2011; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2008).

Nevertheless, resistance is an inherent part of women's daily lives in Iran, with identities constantly evolving and shaped and reshaped by various factors, including access to resources and the power associated with them. These resources can empower women to hold more positive perceptions of themselves and position themselves differently from what the norms would dictate. For instance, factors such as financial independence and education have been extensively studied in relation to women's status and empowerment in Iran (Foomani, 2021; Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011; Shavarini, 2005).

This study explores the role of English language learning and teaching on the identities of women English teachers, particularly how they perceive themselves in the patriarchal society. English as a majority language in Iran, carries attributes of prestige, offering desirable subject positions. In contemporary Iran, proficiency in English is highly regarded, perhaps because it is an international language, is a value-laden skill, and carries Western values (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016).

With the increasing popularity of the English language in Iran, particularly among women (Moharami, 2024), some studies have reported adverse consequences such as loss of home culture or identity change among learners of English (e.g., Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011; Zabetipour & Baghi, 2015), with few studies looking into the complex dynamics of language, gender, and power (Foomani, 2021). The scarcity of research on women English teachers, especially in the Iranian context, underscores the significance of this study. Given the critical role of women in Iran's feminist uprisings and the evolving Iranian identity, this research aims to understand the identity processes experienced by this group of women. The findings shed light on how English, as a language of power, can provide access to discourses leading to empowerment against imposed norms within the sociocultural context of contemporary Iran.

## Research context and related literature

The Iranian discourse perpetuates gender stereotypes, sustaining hierarchical power dynamics that position women below men both legally and culturally. Across various mediums such as mass media, school textbooks, sermons, and legal frameworks, gender norms reinforce this power structure which grants a higher status to men. For instance, in textbooks, women have low visibility, come second to men, and are depicted in traditionally stereotypical roles such as doing household activities and assuming caretaker roles (Amini & Birjandi, 2012). In Ansary and Babaii's (2005) analysis of sexist occupations, activities, and gender stereotypes in locally produced English textbooks, the books were found to be biased in all investigated categories. After nearly two decades since Mehran's (2003) study, significant gender discrimination persists; gender stereotypes, the traditional mentality that assigns appropriate fields of study and occupations for men and women, and messages of inadequacy to women are some of these challenges.

Nevertheless, gender rights in Iran, influenced by Islamic principles, are not fixed or coherent. Rather, they are competing, contradictory, and negotiated within the peculiarities of the times and in response to the lived realities and power relations in the family and society (Mir-Hosseini, 2003). This is true regarding women's conditions in many patriarchal societies. Machira (2013) found that Kenyan women's participation in higher education depended on a few factors: the gender culture, the family, the men in society, and the university. Similarly, in Iran, women negotiate their rights in relation to their access to empowering factors.

Education emerges as a crucial avenue for women's empowerment in Iran. Several qualitative research studies in this context (e.g., Shavarini, 2005; Rezai-Rashti & Moghadam, 2011; Rezai-Rashti, 2015) show that women aspiring for higher education are more likely to access the job market, and obtain a higher social status, empowerment and critical thinking in society. This shows that education brings about access to more discourses (Paasse, 2001) and opportunities, which then translates into options to negotiate their identities in the discourse of patriarchy. As predicted by Mehran (2003), creating a generation of educated women who can bring changes to society and act as role models will bring up a generation that "seek education as a means of equality and empowerment" (p. 19). The active presence of women in all levels of society and in higher

positions where they are visible has encouraged more and more women to seek higher levels of education. The increasing number of educated women have been pushing boundaries and pressuring the leadership to improve women's conditions in Iran.

As in Rostami-Povey's (2007) study of Afghan women living in Afghanistan, Iran and the West, women who have access to more discourses, for example through education, refuse to conform to the norms and resist the social control imposed on them in the family and the community. Rostami-Povey's (2007) empirical study demonstrates that despite their different backgrounds and life histories, they all struggle against the gender norms imposed on them coming from Islamic/cultural traditions, as well as the orientalist representations promoted in the West. Their identities are fluid and embedded in all social relations and institutions. As I will discuss in detail in the next section, there is no essential core to human nature (Butler, 1990, 1995; Weedon, 1987). The studies reviewed above show that these women negotiate their sense of self within the discursive spaces to which they have access, rather than being subjects which are repressed and over-determined by society. Their identities shift within the discourses provided by working, studying, and generally being more active in society.

## Women as English teachers in Iran

As discussed earlier, English is regarded as the language of modernity, technology and advancement (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2011), holding immense potential for people in Iran. English has transformed into a fashionable trend in Iran (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022; Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). The number of *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (TEFL) students has exponentially increased in the past two decades, placing MA programs in TEFL among the most popular postgraduate programs in Iran (Tavakoli & Hasrati, 2015). This trend is particularly notable about women, who pursue more advanced levels of English compared to men (Moharami, 2024). Knowing English brings practical and symbolic sociocultural benefits in the country (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). In Iranian society, English is practical, a marker of social and educational achievement (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016), a capability that conveys symbolic power, and is associated with being internationally oriented (Ardavani & Durrant, 2015; Talabari & Khatib, 2019). English has moved beyond a school subject at schools in Iran and has transformed into a powerful medium for expanding sociocultural horizons; English learners use this tool to freely express themselves and expand their experiences (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2021, 2022; Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). English in Iran is still primarily associated with the United States or Britain by most people in Iran (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016) and represents the Western component of the Iranian identity. By mastering the English language, learners strive to be part of the prestigious English-speaking community in Iran, sharing an imagined identity (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011a) heavily based on and expanding the Western component of Iranian culture.

Access to the English language and the implications that arise from knowing and teaching it, can bring about liberating experiences for women in patriarchal societies. In Iran today, knowledge of the English language is considered trendy, perhaps because it is an international language, is a value-laden skill, and carries Western values (Sadeghi &

Richards, 2016). Moreover, knowing English is considered an academic as well as social achievement—from working with technology to reading manuals and medical tests—knowing English can be very helpful in Iran today (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2011; Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). Teaching is traditionally a respected career as well. All these unique features of knowing English and English teaching make them empowering factors in women's experiences in Iran.

Language and identity are deeply connected entities (Brown, 2007). More recent studies suggest that in addition to communication and representations of the world in our minds, "the expression of the self and emotions is one of the principal functions of the language" (Joseph, 2004, p. 16). In this sense, language and identity are both individual and socially practised. In this study, I understand identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). As Norton elaborated, learners invest in a language in order to access symbolic power and resources which could lead to more social power (Norton, 2000, 2013).

Many studies on English language and identity in Iran warn that those in close contact with the language and associated cultures are susceptible to deculturation and loss of their home culture and identity (e.g., Pishghadam & Kamyabi, 2009; Pishghadam & Navari, 2009). Some caution against the negative consequences of becoming a member of the imagined community of English speakers in Iran, highlighting the risk of inserting Western values and cultures into English classes (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). The Islamic government in Iran perceives the Western component of Iranian identity to be at odds with the Islamic identity it intends to construct. Therefore, English teaching at schools, along with all other sources of Western thought, has been centrally regulated in Iran (Atai & Mazlum, 2013; Gholaminejad & Raeisi-Vanani, 2021).

This study fills a critical gap by examining the transformative potential of English language learning for women as a marginalised group in Iran, shedding light on the complex interplay between language, identity, and power in the country's evolving socio-cultural landscape. English language learning and teaching can provide access to new discourses, offering this group of women new, desired subject positions. This access to new discourses then significantly influences their sense of self in the patriarchal society. The importance of English in Iran, its role in the Iranian identity flux, and women English teachers' access to it provide an interesting case that could offer insights into the subtle identity processes taking place in contemporary Iran.

## Theoretical framework

I used feminist post-structuralist theories to explore the diverse experiences of the participants. As argued by English (2010), when "employed together, feminism and post-structuralism bring a strong resistance to the sureties of modernity, offering critique and careful examination of taken-for-granted notions of subjectivity and identity for women" (p. 711). Post-structuralist feminists, who commonly draw on Foucault, acknowledge that it is not possible to study relationships of power adopting universal theories (Barrett,

1991; Weedon, 1987). In a post-structuralist approach, power is not static, does not belong to a particular person or group, and is not a possession or commodity; rather, it is dynamic, localised, and relational, and is exercised in action.

This approach works best here, as this is a study of a group of women in Iran. For much of history, women in Iran have been subjected to restrictive, at times oppressive, femininity norms and standards. Within the patriarchal structure of Iran, hierarchical gender norms that assign a lower status to women operate on a subconscious level, leading to internalised negative self-images (Bartky, 1988/2010). Moreover, social psychological research shows that women could internalise the negative images and stereotypes prevalent in patriarchal societies, leading them to have lower confidence in their own abilities (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). Self-esteem is constructed within specific situations and is influenced by both collective and individual representations. Therefore, negative beliefs and stereotypes can become internalised, potentially leading to low self-esteem across various contexts (Crocker, 1999).

Nevertheless, social constructions of gender, identity, and power are deeply embedded within sociocultural contexts. As Foucault argues, just like any other social reality, the meaning attached to women and their roles, as well as their identities, has always been embedded in a sociocultural context and thus ever-changing in a state of flux (Foucault, 1978). In Foucault's understanding, subject positions are not natural givens but are rather discursively constructed, therefore, as Butler (1990) posited, gender is in fact a way of "doing" rather than "being". There is no essential core to human nature (Butler, 1990, 1995) or as Weedon (1987) argued, how we conduct ourselves as "thinking subjects" and the way we ascribe meaning to our various social relations governing our everyday lives, depends on the prevailing discourses, our access to them, and the power associated with them. There is no "authentic self" which is repressed by society; rather, there are subjects that are constructed.

This fluidity in identity construction is particularly prominent in the Iranian context, where cultural values such as "face" play a pivotal role (Hosseini et al., 2018; Khoshsabk & Southcott, 2019). The concept of "face" underscores the interconnectedness of individual and collective identity, with deviations from societal norms risking loss of face and invoking feelings of shame (Hosseini et al., 2018). In Iran, a person's face is closely connected to the face of the group they are associated with (Sharifian, 2007). Therefore, family as the most important group in society will be at the risk of loss of face and shamed, should a member of the family fail to meet the norms. On the positive side, access to sources of power can help improve an individual's and therefore, the associated group's face.

Meanwhile, as feminist and post-structuralist studies of bilingualism pinpoint, language can be "the locus of social organization, power, and individual consciousness" (Pavlenko (2001, p. 120). Moreover, as Pavlenko observed, "Language, or rather discourses within it, is not merely a tool for communication, but the main site of world and identity construction" (p. 121). Through a post-structuralist lens, "bilingual identities are constructed in and by language, whereby different monolingual and bilingual speech

communities may offer a different range of available subject positions" (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 121). I see identity as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (Norton, 2000, p. 5). In the context of this study, English and the discourses that come with it allow English speakers in Iran to construct and claim new subject positions. According to Pavlenko (2001) knowing a second language can be a liberating experience for women or other oppressed "self-states". By providing access to new desired subject positions, a second language can be both liberating and empowering.

Identity comprises self-perceptions and positionings in different contexts and in relation to different people. In this study, I explore these women English teachers' perceptions of themselves.

## Method

This study is part of a larger qualitative project that researched the experiences of women English teachers in Iran. The methodology I adopted aligns with my theoretical understanding. I view the world as socially constructed (Merriam, 1998) and identities as fluid and negotiated within time and space, therefore, I drew on methodologists such as Merriam (1998) and Stake (1995) who adopt a more holistic and non-deterministic approach. I designed the study as a qualitative case study to provide a thick description of their perceptions and perspectives.

The sample size was selected purposively and consisted of eight participants from four cities of Tehran, Zanjan, Isfahan, and Shiraz in Iran. In selecting the participants, the aim was to select participants who would provide the study with rich data for in-depth analysis. A combination of purposeful random and snowball sampling was used as the method of participant selection; sampling was purposeful since I recruited participants who were prototypes of the phenomenon under study (Morrow, 2005) to suit the aims of this research, and it was mixed with snowball sampling since the first five participants made it possible for us to access the remaining three participants (Bryman, 2016). All participants were women, had studied one of the English majors at tertiary level, and were English teachers in universities or language institutes. I chose universities and language institutes for their use of international ELT material.

Data for the larger research project was collected through online synchronous face-to-face individual interviews, online synchronous focus group discussions, and online asynchronous after-thoughts group discussion. The participants were free to choose to interview in English or Persian languages. All but two interviews were conducted primarily in English. Participants used code switching to refer to specific terms or to express culturally rich ideas. I used semi-structured interviews where the questions varied depending on the interviewee's answers. The semi-structured nature of the interviews gave the interviewees the opportunity to share their perspectives freely within the frame of the discussion (Stake, 1995). The focus group discussions and the asynchronous group

discussions were fairly unstructured to give participants an open space for freely sharing experiences (Bryman, 2016).

To analyse the data, I used a combination of the two major theory- and data-driven approaches. After a manual round of coding, I used *NVivo* to code the data for a more organised and deeper analysis. I started with open coding data segments, elaborated the codes into themes to reduce the number of codes by seeking common elements, and finally created higher order themes (Bryman, 2016). As Stake put it, "The search for meaning often is a search for pattern" (p.78). Stake (1995) argued meaning comes out of the reappearance, over and over. Following this, I evaluated the recurring themes, organised them based on the connections noticed, and prepared an outline for findings and discussions by comparing them to the literature and theory. Following Stake (1995), I was patient in the iterative process of coding, reflecting and triangulating until the final stage of representing the analysis.

I drew on data triangulation in each interview and across all the other interviews. Particularly in researching topics of identity, triangulation is key in capturing the dynamic nature as it helps "identify different realities" (Stake, 2005, p. 454). For data collection, more than one method was used (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 2005) and participant responses were compared across individual interviews, focus groups, and after-thoughts. Ultimately, I used member-checking to establish trustworthiness of data from each individual.

The plan for this project was approved by Monash University's Ethics Committee, and I ensured that all the ethical issues regarding the participants were considered.

## Findings and discussion

Most of my participants consider their close contact with English as a determining factor in their identity. Violet mentioned that, as long as she can remember, she has seen herself as an English teacher and learner: "It has been intertwined with my whole identity and being." She finds her English learning and teaching background as "truly formative" in the person she is at the time of the interview, and she thinks the reason behind it is that "teachers somehow acquire certain features and characteristics, and they unknowingly show part of those characteristics outside of the class too." Saghar pointed out that she speaks English at home with her sisters most of the time: "It's part of my identity now. I use English words when talking Persian. Everybody knows that. Even a few years ago when I was immersed in English, I would dream in English." The majority of my participants, when reflecting on their English learning/teaching journey, noticed that they have been strongly influenced by their English teaching and learning background.

As discussed earlier, in this study I view identity construction as performative and shaped and reshaped over time within the sociocultural contexts; every time learners engage in a conversation, not only are they exchanging information, but they are also engaged in identity construction and negotiation (Norton, 2006). This is evident in how the participants envision the process of their identity construction over the years.

Shadi discussed her personal changes, comparing her perception of her past and present self: "I can say that my major and in general, knowing English has influenced me a lot. And I think English had a really big influence on the way that I think: my acts, my feelings, my perceptions." She compared herself to her past and to her old friends:

> English had a really big influence in a way that I have changed a lot. Sometimes I think I am different from my friends. In particular, my old friends. And the main reason for this difference is my major, and the fact of knowing English better. Because I can say that it's been ten years that I have not read anything in Persian. All I read is in English. So, yeah! They had a big influence on my attitude, I think.

Shadi notes that sometimes she thinks she is "different from [her] friends". She mentions that for the last ten years she has been reading everything in English rather than Persian. Pari, Katy, and Sam had a similar outlook, that when they look back to the past, they have changed a lot, and for the better. Their comments show that they attribute some of these changes to knowing English and to their access to English resources. In contrast to the destructive effects of English learning and teaching outlined in the local literature, most of my participants found their majors and careers empowering. They talked about their positive perceptions of themselves and attributed them to their English teaching and learning experience. The analyses of the data clearly show the participants' English teaching/learning background had a key role in empowering them as women. Their comments show their positive perceptions of themselves as self-confident and successful. They attributed these feelings to their backgrounds in English teaching/learning.

## Self-confidence

Self-confidence was a recurring theme when my participants were talking about the influences of English teaching and learning. Katy said, for example, that she gained self-confidence after learning and teaching English:

> I think that my experience in teaching really increased my self-confidence. Also, studying English! Before that, before going to English classes, I was a very shy girl, not intending to talk to even my mum's friends. But after joining English classes, I really opened up. And when I became a teacher, it was a really, really, good experience that I could improve my interactions with people. And now, there's no difference whether I'm going to talk to one person, or give a talk to 50 people, or even more than that. I have this self-confidence and I really enjoy it. And I think it is just because of studying English and teaching English. Or even teaching, I could say.

Katy perceives her English teaching and learning as a key factor in how she has developed her self-confidence over the years. Sam had a similar experience in transforming from a reserved quiet girl to an assertive and vocal woman. Like Katy, she attributes these changes to her English learning/teaching background. Samara also agrees that teaching has helped her gain confidence because, as a teacher, she was required to manage a class and, in the class, everyone would be listening to her which provided her with a feeling of power:

> I totally agree. I think that teaching has positive sides and negative sides. The positive side is that you get confident. Because when you are in the class you are the boss. Everybody listens to you and you have a feeling of being important to everyone. This is the good point.

Katy and Sam refer to their English learning and teaching as a source of confidence, Similarly, Samara focuses on teaching as a source of her confidence. A discussion of the sources of these positive perceptions in out of the scope of this study. It is noteworthy to mention here that Katy, Sam, and Samara's sense of confidence concurs with other themes identified in this study. Self-confidence and success are linked concepts. As the literature shows, fear of success, which is a common perception among achievement-oriented women in Iran, is caused by a lack of self-trust and confidence (Motaghi-Pishe, 2008). As discussed earlier, hierarchical gender norms that assign a lower status to women generally lead to lack of self-esteem and self-confidence among women (Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). It appears, most of the participants in this study, constructed a higher level of self-confidence based on their positive experiences in different contexts, experiences associated with being speakers and teachers of English.

## Sense of success

Aligning with the participants' sense of self-confidence, sense of success is another common feeling among these women. As Katy put it "I was really respected very well ... by people, my relatives, my friends", she noted, "maybe it was one of the reasons of increasing my self-confidence." Almost all my participants consider themselves successful and associate this with their English language learning and teaching. This sense of success can be attributed to how other people perceive them in society. Katy, Saghar, and Violet state that they enjoy people's positive perceptions of them. Katy commented that she is perceived as "a really successful person." Katy explains that knowing and becoming a teacher of English has led others to have high regard for her. She says, "English is very hard", so when people see that she is a fluent speaker of English, they respect her knowledge. Knowing English, she also had the chance to start teaching at an early age. Having a teaching job at an early age, she says, contributed to her sense of success.

Most of my participants thought that people generally have a positive attitude towards them, think highly of them, and respect their knowledge. Even though some of my participants were not happy with their pay rate, they were very content with the respect they received in their families and in society. Katy, Saghar, and Violet revealed the sense of contentment they experience with other people's perceptions of them. Saghar mentioned the popularity of English among people in Iran as a reason for their positive attitude towards her as an English teacher.

> These days people in Iran, most of them, are really really into English. Whenever I say that my major is English, I have IELTS, and stuff like that, they are like 'oh really? It's very good news'. They are shocked as if they have seen a doctor. People really really like English. And they have a really positive attitude towards it.

Saghar also notes positive attitudes of people towards English. She compares the status of fluent English speakers like herself to the highly regarded professionals such as "doctors" in Iran. This is in line with previous literature, English is highly regarded and carries attributes of prestige in Iranian society (Sadeghi & Richard, 2016). Violet confirms Katy's and Saghar's remarks:

> Because it is a teacher of a foreign language. Because it's sort of considered and regarded as sort of prestigious in my country. Because if I were a math teacher, I don't think I would have obtained or received that much attention or respect or regard.

As the comments show, most of the participants' positive perceptions of themselves have roots in how others perceive them. For example, Katy has positive perceptions of herself and her career as an English teacher and in explaining this positive perception she refers to many instances where friends, family, and colleagues have a high regard for her and her career:

> I am treated very well, my students, my in-laws, also in university. I am treated very well. And I think it is because of English. Maybe if it was something else, it was not the same as this one. Or my mom's friends, they really enjoy when I talk about my classes. Or especially, for example, when my family members see that I'm speaking English, because they don't know what I really say, they enjoy it.

Katy explains that she is respected by her friends, her students, her family members and specifically her in-laws. This gives her abundant confidence and satisfaction. This is despite the pay rate, which she finds unsatisfactory. The "salary", however, is not of significance in her positive experience because as she states, "we don't talk about salaries." Almost all my participants were confident that their families were proud of them and that generally people looked up to them. As this instance and the other instances above show, for most of the participants, their self-confidence and sense of success seem to come from and add to the positive feedback they get in their families and in society. This can be explained in relation to the concept of face in Iranian culture.

## Self-perception and face

In Iranian culture, "the most valuable commodity a person, or group, can 'possess'" is "face" (Hosseini et al., 2018, p. 22). Iranian families put significant weight on how others perceive them and constantly try to measure up to higher expectations. This is evident in many Persian sayings that encourage keeping up face and appearances: *ba sili soorat sorkh kardan*[1] , *aaberoodaar az aaberoosh mitarse*[2] , are two of many such sayings. In religious sayings alike, saving face and reputation is the central concept, as this saying from Imam Ali[3] shows: *behtarin servat aanast ke maayeye hefze aaberoo shavad*[4].

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[1] A Persian saying, meaning 'to keep face despite having little money.'
[2] A Persian saying meaning 'the biggest fear of the one with face/reputation is to lose it.'
[3] The immediate successor to Muhammad as an Imam by Shia Muslims.
[4] 'The best kind of wealth is one that keeps your face/reputation.'

Similar to what is reported in the literature, for my participants, it seems that face exists in the presence of an "other" and within an "interaction" (Hosseini et al., 2018). In their interactions with their friends, students, and colleagues, the participants report a high level of respect or regard which contribute to their face. The concept of face in Iranian culture is closely associated with that of the groups they are associated with (Hosseini et al., 2018; Sharifian, 2007). Being a young successful English teacher is something people look up to in society and it is reflected in how the participants' families, relatives, and acquaintances perceive them. In other words, having prestigious careers adds to the face of their families and others associated with them. This in turn adds to their perceptions of themselves. Face is closely linked to a person's sense of competence (Hosseini et al., 2018). The concept of face is also related to a person's perceived social status which is defined by their education, rank, institutional power, occupations and gender (Hosseini et al., 2018). In the case of my participants, while their gender restricts them in relation to face, their education, occupation, and knowledge of English as a highly regarded language brings them and their families respect and regard.

There are many reasons why people look up to my participants and consider them as successful. As some of the comments above show and as mentioned earlier, one of the reasons is that people consider English as trendy and modern and generally hold a positive attitude towards the language and the culture. Previous studies on the status of the English language in Iran are in line with this (e.g. Ardavani & Durrant, 2015; Talabari & Khatib, 2019). In addition to that, as observed in the findings, knowing English is now considered a marker of educational as well as social achievement (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). In today's globalised societies, and with English being the international language, knowing English bears more importance than merely signifying an attractive and modern lifestyle. While in Iran as a Middle Eastern country, English is diffusing rapidly due to technological, economic and social advances (Zabetipour & Baghi, 2015), as studies show, it can be very practical to know English (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022), this is seen in the participants' experiences.

While the experiences are diverse, all my participants seemed to agree that, in general, they had been empowered by their English teaching/learning. Whether it be due to their English literacy, general knowledge, or teaching, all have positive perceptions of themselves and their English learning and teaching background. Katy's comment is a reflection of this:

> When it comes to English, I really enjoy it and I feel really energetic communicating in English. I get energy out of this language. And I think that I have something that the others don't. So, I enjoy knowing this. This is a kind of superiority for me.

Katy refers to knowing English as "a kind of superiority" and feels energetic in using the language. As noted earlier, the negative self-images internalised by women in patriarchal societies leads to having lower self-confidence and self-esteem (Crocker, 1999; Dickerson & Taylor, 2000). It appears that these women have constructed their self-esteem higher based on their positive collective and individual representations in various contexts. As mentioned earlier, I understand identity as constructed in and through discourse

(Pavlenko, 2001). Identity comprises self-perceptions and positionings in different contexts and in relation to different people. The experiences show that the participants' identities are "multiple, dynamic, and subject to change" (Blackledge & Pavlenko, 2001, p. 249). Depending on a variety of factors, they shaped their identities within the peculiarities of their experiences.

Despite their differing approaches and varying experiences, all of the participants seemed to attribute positive perceptions of themselves to their knowledge of English and their teaching career. Most of them compared their perceptions in the past with the present, and with their peers, to note that their perceptions and positionings have undergone changes and have been shaped and reshaped. According to their experiences, their English teaching and learning was an important variable in their identity construction. Identity comprises self-perceptions and positionings in different contexts and in relation to different people; therefore, it seems the internalised gender norms (Foucault, 1978; Bartky, 1988/2010) that ascribe a lower status to women in the patriarchal society, had transformed in interaction with others and the positive experiences in various contexts.

This questions the common ways of viewing identity as singular as in the current literature in the Iranian context that warns against loss of home culture, deculturation, or loss of identity (e.g., Pishghadam & Kamyabi, 2009; Pishghadam & Navari, 2009; Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011), none of my participants noted losing home culture or identity. Rather, the majority of them had noticed their cultural horizons displaced and new realities constructed in their views.

## Conclusion and implications

This study set to explore the self-perceptions of a group of women English teachers in Iran, aiming to understand the role of English language learning and teaching in shaping their identities. I adopted a post-structuralist lens to view language as discourse through which culture was also constructed. This approach helped me explore how English as the language of power mediated these women's identity construction between the forces of restrictive patriarchal tradition and the seemingly liberating Western discourse.

The findings of this study revealed the profound impact of English language learning and teaching on the participants' self-perceptions, highlighting positive shifts in their confidence and sense of success attributed to their familiarity with English language and associated cultures. These positive self-perceptions were complemented by external validation from others, underscoring the significance of their English teaching in shaping social interactions and perceptions in Iranian society. Identity comprises self-perceptions and positionings in different contexts and in relation to different people; and the findings of this study showed the role of English language and associated cultures in these women's positive perceptions.

Despite the anti-West and anti-imperialist sentiments promoted by the Islamic state, knowing English was a liberating experience for my participants, as it offered them new

prestigious subject positions. While the patriarchal structure encompasses all aspects of women's lives in Iran, assigning them a lower status, the findings of this study confirm that there is no authentic self that is repressed by society or manipulated by cultural imperialism. Rather these women negotiated their sense of self within the discursive spaces to which they had access (Butler, 1990, 1995; Paasse, 2001; Weedon, 1987). Rather than being subjects repressed and over-determined by society, or outside forces, their identities shift within the discourses that being English teachers provides them with. This contributes to understandings of "undoing" gender in the Iranian context, as the findings show, in the same manner that gender is constructed, it can be deconstructed (Butler, 2004).

This study was exploratory in nature and did not intend to generate findings about women English teachers, nor did it seek to represent all women in Iran. Rather, it was an attempt to provide an in-depth insight into the mediating role of English language learning and teaching on the experiences of a group of women English teachers in Iran. While the focus of this study was on perceptions of these women, future studies can explore the role of English language and cultures in women English teachers' positioning in the patriarchal discourse.

Given the findings, this study advocates for the promotion of empowering factors, specifically, learning the English language as a means for empowering women in patriarchal societies, and in this case, in Iran. This is despite the official policies of the state, which find the English language as a means for promoting the Western element of the Iranian identity and against the imposed Islamic ideology. While this study acknowledges that English might be used as a means for cultural imperialism, it advocates the view that how we conduct ourselves as "thinking subjects" and the meanings we ascribe to our social relations depend on our access to the prevailing discourses and the power associated with them (Weedon, 1987).

## Funding

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