Learning English and its implications for Iranians' cultural values and practices

Mehdi Moharami
Monash University, Australia

English language learning has become deeply ingrained in Iranian society, with a rich historical legacy. However, recent concerns voiced by Iranian authorities highlight English as a perceived threat to the preservation of Iranian culture and identity, leading to attempts to limit its presence. This study investigates the beliefs, perceptions, and views of Iranians regarding their culture, practices, and their relationship with English. Employing an open-ended survey, the research examines Western influences on English language learning through a cultural lens, capturing a snapshot of the Iranian language ecology and societal cultural layers. The findings underscore the integration of English within Iranian society, emphasising that language learners actively engage with English as a tool for communication and personal growth, challenging the notion of passive recipients. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the authorities' concerns and sheds light on the evolving relationship between English and the Iranian cultural environment.

Introduction

The popularity of English language learning among Iranians has undergone fluctuations across different eras (refer to Figure 1). It reached its peak during the Pahlavi era but experienced a decline in favour following the Islamic Revolution. However, since the 1990s, there has been a sustained growth in language learning, which has raised concerns among authorities and administrators striving to eradicate Western influences, as manifested through the English language, from Iranian society. The accompanying infographic depicts the presence of English language schools in Iran spanning the past 150 years.

According to Borjian (2013), the historical interactions between Iranians and foreigners date back to the Qajar Dynasty (1836-1925), with the presence of religious minorities. However, the broader history of Iranian cultural exchanges extends further, encompassing significant international and domestic events. Notably, this period coincided with the emergence of global phenomena such as the industrial revolution, European colonialism, and political revolutions (Dahmardeh & Limaee, 2015).

According to Borjian (2013), during the early years, Mohammad Shah Qajar allowed missionaries from various countries to establish educational centres in Iran, aiming to introduce modern education to the nation. This era also witnessed the emergence of Iranian students studying abroad and the establishment of professional and occupation academies. At the turn of the 20th century, some schools such as Moshiriyeh and Dar-al-Fonun were founded but the majority of them still were offering French, as it was one of the most spoken foreign languages in the world and accepted among Iranian scholars. Although French remained the dominant foreign language, American-English missionaries played a role in establishing English schools across different cities in Iran (Mansoori, 1986).
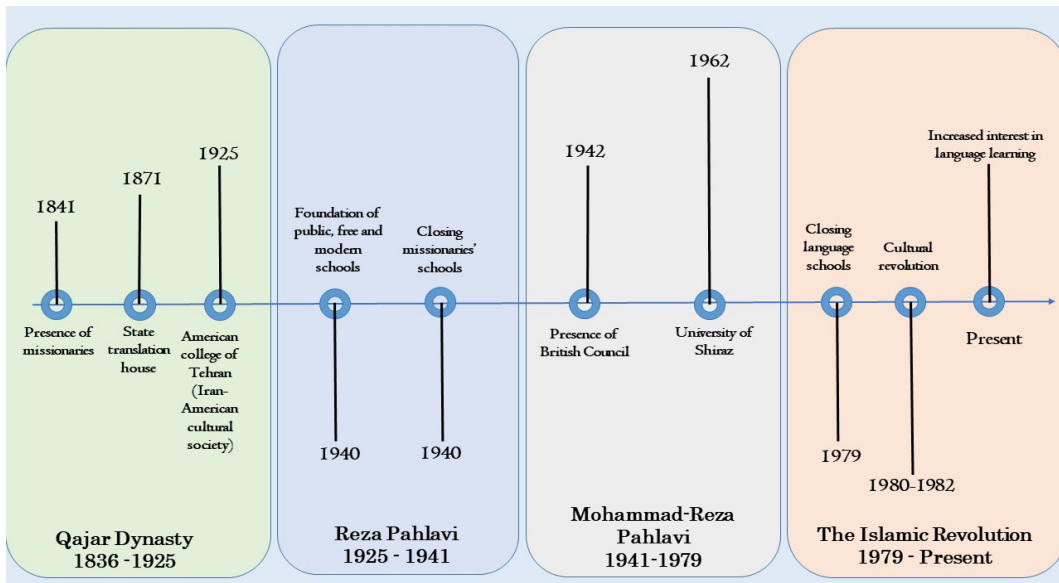
Figure 1: Foreign language teaching and learning fluctuations in Iranian history
(use web or PDF reader 'zoom in' function to facilitate reading)

The Pahlavi era (1925-1979) under Reza Shah brought about significant social, political, and economic transformations. Reza Shah emphasised the modernisation of various sectors including industry, transportation infrastructure, state administration and military forces (Abrahamian, 2008). He also prohibited foreign language schools while promoting a new level of modern school systems. This period saw a growing relationship with the United States, particularly during World War II, as Iran sought to emulate American social, economic, cultural, and educational models (Seikaly, 1991).

By 1948 and Mohammad-Reza Shah's sovereignty, the British Council extended its branches and libraries in the major cities of Isfahan, Tabriz, Rasht, Mashhad and Shiraz as well as Tehran (EIr, 1989). Following the coup against Musadiq in 1953, the British Council temporarily closed its offices in Iran but resumed activities in 1955, coinciding with Iran's expanding relationship with the United States (Borjian, 2013). This relationship led to the signing of agreements between Iran and the United States, with education becoming a major focus area for American technical assistance. The establishment of the Fulbright Commission in 1949 further promoted educational and cultural exchanges between the two nations (Borjian, 2013).

The inflow of American aid and human resources through activities such as military training created a demand for mastery of the English language in the 1950s (Borjian, 2013). This demand increased the publication of textbooks and educational materials, and this was reflected in Iran's educational system. To provide appropriate English textbooks, a collaboration between the Iranian Ministry of Education and American experts took place in the 1950s. The real reform of Pahlavi took place in the 1960s and English became the

preferred foreign language in Iranian schools (Ashraf, 1997). Another significant change was at Shiraz University, in which English replaced Persian as the language of instruction (Borjian, 2013). After this reform in the middle years of schooling, until today all other foreign languages have been marginalised.

The Iranian Islamic revolution terminated the 2500-year-old kingship, replacing it with a theocracy, which exists to the present day. The 1979 Islamic revolution brought about significant changes in Iran, transitioning from a secular to an Islamic state. Initially, English was valued and promoted for communication and sharing Islamic ideologies. Khomeini as the first Islamic leader valued learning popular foreign languages, English in particular, and his edict was published on the first page of English textbooks. The current legislative transition regarding English portrays a fading belief concerning the benefits of learning English for Islam and Iranian society. The current perception among Iranian politicians is that learning English poses a threat to Iranian Islamic culture and identity (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022). Overhauling the educational policy in 2011 is an acknowledgment of both changes in Iranian learners' current approach to learning English and social changes in Iran.

To understand the concerns of authorities regarding English language learning and its impact on cultural values and practices, it is crucial to explore the ecology of language learning in Iran from learners' perspectives. Examining the language ecology helps understand the embeddedness of language practices in local, social, and cultural activities, providing insights into the cultural factors influencing language learning (Moharami, 2021). Furthermore, understanding the relationships between English and its environment aids in comprehending the cultural dynamics associated with language learning in Iran.

Theoretical framework

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological systems theory and Pennycook's (2004) language ecology framework, this study situates Iranian language learners within a multifaceted context influenced by various factors that shape their language learning experiences. Within this framework, individuals navigate different contexts or 'fields', such as family, schools, and workplaces, which serve as the operational zones affecting their language learning journeys (Bourdieu, 1984). Throughout the language learning process, learners actively position themselves in situations that facilitate English language practice and foster increased interaction with the foreign language (refer to Figure 1).

Figure 1 illustrates the language learner situated within the language-learning environment, highlighting the interplay between internal and external forces that influence the negotiation and practice of English language learning. The learning process creates a potential for identity change and subsequent shifts in language learning practices as learners immerse themselves in a new linguistic space. Internal factors such as aptitude and motivation are self-driven by the learner, while external factors, including classroom dynamics, familial influence, and cultural environment, are shared among all learners. Additionally, external forces at a national level, such as cultural norms, policies, and literacy, play a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective identities.
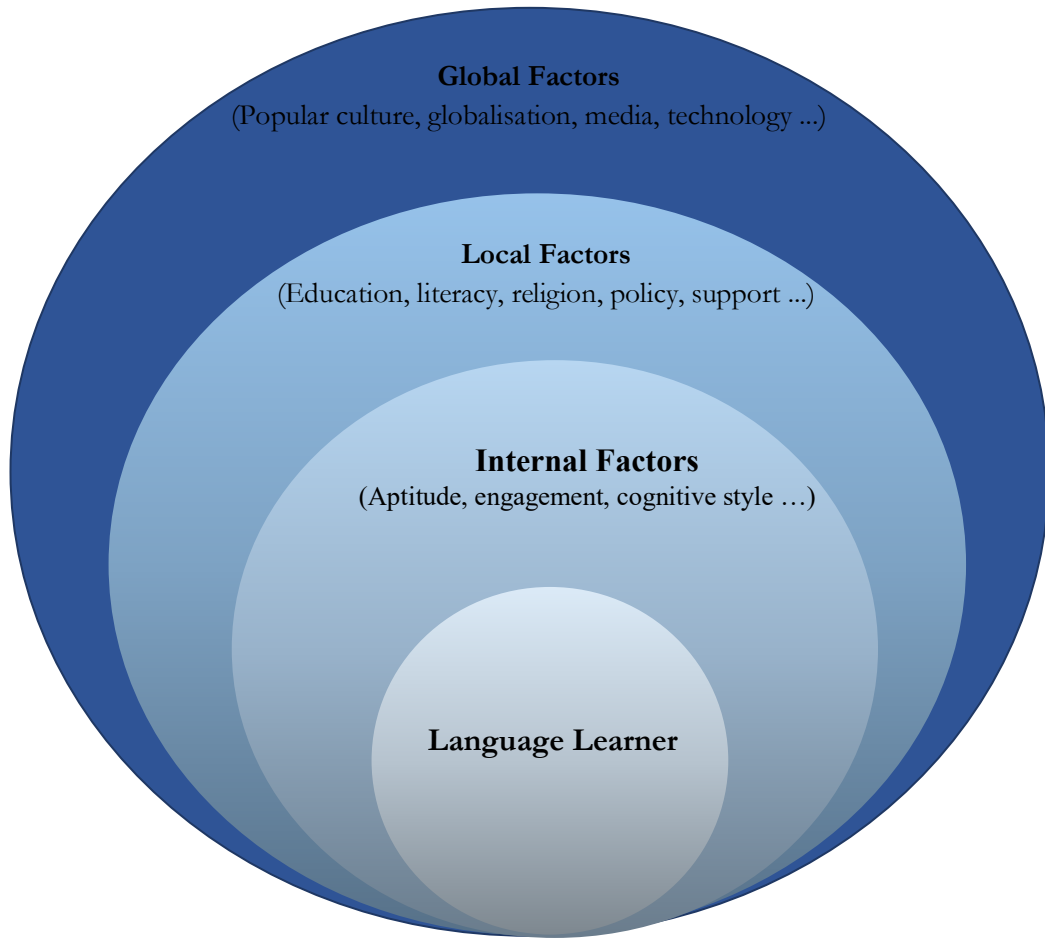
Figure 1: Position of language learners in in relation to social forces

Pennycook's (2004) concept of language ecology delves into the intricate relationship between language and its environment, with a particular emphasis on culture. Language is viewed as an integral component intricately connected across physical, social, mental, and moral realms. This perspective highlights the holistic nature of language and its interconnectedness with various aspects of human experience. Understanding the ecology of the English language in Iranian society offers insights into the constructed values and practices associated with language learning, facilitating a deeper comprehension of the dynamic factors that shape language learners' experiences, cultural practices, and values (Moharami, 2021).

Methodology

This article presents the findings of a larger mixed methods study, employing an explanatory approach that utilises quantitative data to inform and explain qualitative data. I report on part of the quantitative findings obtained through a researcher-designed survey. The use of a survey methodology offers the advantage of collecting data from a large sample size, enabling the exploration of diverse and detailed insights (Terry & Braun, 2017). The survey aimed to investigate the perspectives of individual language learners regarding English language learning in Iran and its potential influence on their cultural values and practices. The online survey, developed using *Qualtrics*, consisted of 10 Likert-style questions that measured respondents' views across a spectrum of strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree, and disagree. Additionally, each question provided an optional open-response section, allowing participants to elaborate on their answers in an expandable space. This optional open response section afforded participants the opportunity to anonymously share their perceptions of culture, language learning, and their potential influences. I have benefited from these comments and notes in interpreting the quantitative data.

The researcher-designed survey

To effectively assess the influence of language learning on learners' perceptions, beliefs, and cultural practices, it was necessary to employ a valid scale. While existing surveys consider cultural aspects in their studies, they often overlook the social impact of English language learning on learners' values and practices. Therefore, this study drew upon established tools, reviewed relevant examples and models, and developed a survey specifically tailored to explore the perceptions, practices, and beliefs of Iranian language learners in relation to English language learning.

The primary objective of this survey was to gain insights into the perspectives, beliefs, and practices of Iranian adult language learners concerning English language learning and its potential impact on their cultural practices. The design of the survey was informed by Raymond Williams' (1961) comprehensive definition of culture. Williams conceptualised culture as a holistic way of life, encompassing various dimensions such as ideals, documents, and social definitions, to capture the true essence of people's lives and practices. Recognising that language is an integral cultural artefact that should not be detached from its environment (Pennycook, 2010), the survey was developed with the intention of examining the ecology of the English language in Iran.

Participants and recruitment

Researchers use snowball sampling to recruit participants with special characteristics (Naderifar et al., 2017). A total of 320 individuals were invited to complete the online survey, resulting in 105 respondents. The participants consisted of adult English language learners and teachers from four distinct private language schools in Iran. These language schools, situated in the capital city of Iran, attract individuals from various provinces, as is common in cosmopolitan areas. The sample included 34 males and 71 females (Table 1).

Table 1: The survey participants' demographics (N=105)

Gender	Age	No. of participants
Male	Younger than 20	10
	20-24	10
	25-29	7
	30-35	5
	Older than 35	2
Female	Younger than 20	37
	20-24	15
	25-29	11
	30-35	13
	Older than 35	5

The over-representation of female respondents in this study reflects a gendered shift in education within Iran. It is notable that a larger number of female language learners are pursuing advanced levels of English compared to their male counterparts.

The use of Likert scale questions was crucial as they provided a concise snapshot of participants' social and language perspectives. For basic descriptive statistics, *Excel* was utilised, while *SPSS* was employed for more advanced inferential statistics. However, this article does not present the findings of correlation and regression analyses between dependent and independent variables. Although a positive coefficient was observed in the regression analysis of language learning experience and other variables, it is important to note that these associations do not imply causation. Numerous confounding variables may influence respondents' practices and values. Moreover, the direction of variables and the reciprocal relationship between language learning and respondents' practices and values cannot be definitively established. To interpret the findings from the Likert scale survey, reliance is placed on the explanations provided by the participants.

Findings and analysis

The primary objective of the survey was to offer a momentary comprehension of language learners' cultural practices, perceptions, and beliefs. Culture encompasses values, beliefs, underlying assumptions, attitudes, and behaviours (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Exploring the ecology of English in Iran aided the researcher in comprehending the cultural affective elements of language learning. These elements are significant as they delineate cultural aspects within the environment and their relationship with the English language. The survey findings depict the factors that shape language learners' beliefs, practices, and perceptions, thereby illustrating how environmental factors influence their preferred values, norms, and cultures.

Personal values "I'm an Iranian and have my own culture"

Examining language learners' perspectives on family can provide insights into socially constructed meanings and their influence on individual language learning processes.

Personal values, defined as "desirable trans-situational goals that vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21), play a crucial role in shaping individual actions within a collective framework. These values are influenced by social interactions and serve as cognitive representations of overarching goals that drive personal practices (Schwartz, 1992).

Family, as an integral part of society, serves as an individual's primary learning environment (Bonci, 2008). In Iranian society, family ties and the associated normative practices hold significant value, considering the family as a sacred institution. Consequently, the Iranian lifestyle tends to be collectivist, contrasting with the Western emphasis on independent living (Angelova-Mladenova, 2017). In Western culture, it is expected that children will leave their parental home and become independent at a certain age (Takamine, 1998, p. 3).

To gain deeper insights into the respondents' perception of the significance of family in their lives, the survey included questions related to living independently after a certain age and the value of living with family. The aim was to understand their views on family versus independent living. The respondents' viewpoints on family are presented in Figure 3.
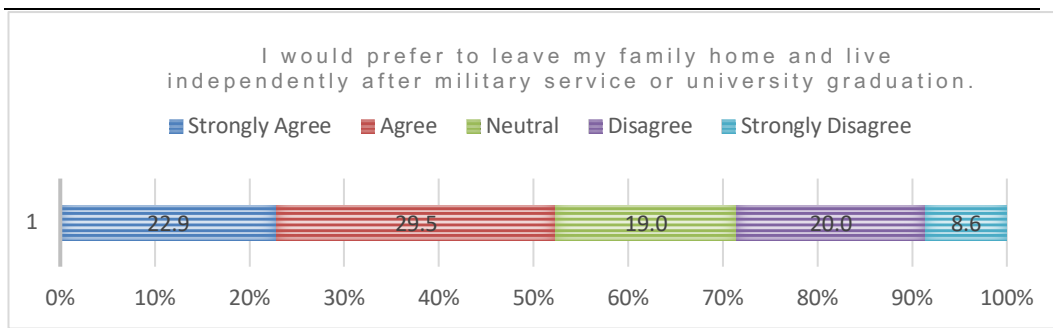

Figure 3: Preference for living independently or within a family

The survey responses from 105 male and female participants indicate a shift in the value placed on independent living, with over 52% strongly agreeing and fewer than 29% disagreeing with the preference for living independently. This suggests a change in language learners' perspectives on family cohabitation.

Among adult English language learners in Iran, there is a departure from the traditional cultural emphasis on family ties, as reflected in the respondents' explanations. Reasons cited for the preference for independent living include factors such as "marriage", "immigration", "pursuing personal goals", and "the generation gap". Some respondents view independent living as essential for women in Iran to develop their own sense of personality.

In many educational contexts, students often weigh the perceived economic benefits of learning English against other factors when deciding whether to continue their language studies (Ulla, 2018). While economic considerations can be influential, participants comments highlight the importance of recognising the broader value of language learning

beyond just financial gain. English proficiency opens doors to a myriad of opportunities, including enhanced communication skills, expanded cultural understanding, and increased access to global information and resources. However, each individual might have a specific reason to learn the language. By emphasising the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of English language learning, educators can inspire students to persevere in their language studies, recognising the long-term personal and professional advantages that proficiency in English can provide.

Neutral views, accounting for 19% of responses, highlight the financial and social conditions of the country as influencing lifestyle choices. These respondents express the intention to consider independent living when the right time and conditions are met. Complex perspectives are also observed, expressing a desire for both independence and the security and support provided by family.

Conversely, other participants emphasise close family ties and reciprocal relationships, with 28.6% of responses reflecting this sentiment. Some respondents mention taking care of aging parents as a reason for not leaving, while others value the support and assistance they receive from their families.

While dependence and support are integral to Iranian families, respondents recognise the importance of venturing into independent lives. They believe that independent living makes them stronger and contributes to personal success, even if it means leaving the country. English language learning plays a role in broadening their horizons and increasing awareness of different cultures and lifestyles, potentially impacting the traditional structure of the family in Iranian society.

In Iranian culture, parents are highly respected, and addressing them by their first name is considered disrespectful. However, language learners acknowledge that English-speaking countries have different norms, where using parents' first names is acceptable. The purpose of this statement in the survey was to explore the influence of learning English on shifting relationships with parents and the perception of respect for family elders.

By investigating family relationships, this study aimed to enhance understanding of how families are viewed in Iranian society. It is evident that the meaning associated with family relationships is undergoing changes globally. The findings related to respect for parents are provided in Figure 4.

Respecting parents is deeply ingrained in Iranian culture, as evidenced by the strong opposition (85%) among respondents to calling their parents by their first name. Only a small percentage (6%) agreed with this practice, while a neutral stance was held by 8.6% of participants. Despite a desire for some degree of separation from traditional family structures, the findings indicate that the value of respecting parents through traditional naming conventions remains robust.
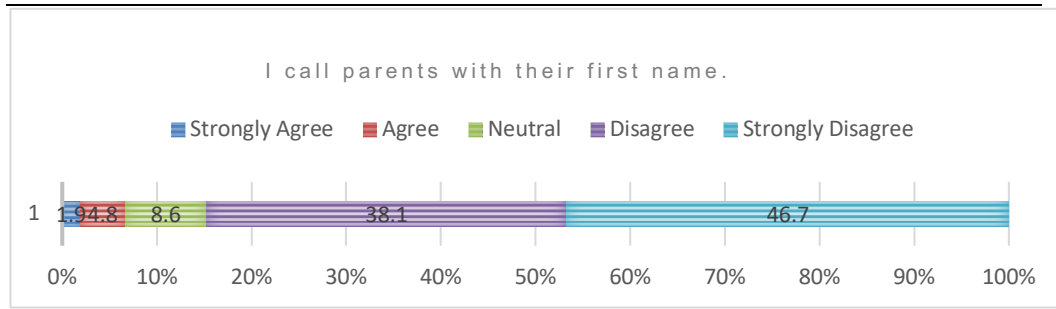
Figure 4: Calling parents with their first names

Respondents who supported calling their parents by their first names (6.7%) expressed the belief that it fosters a sense of friendliness and approachability within the parent-child relationship. They emphasised that using first names helps maintain a sense of friendship and can be beneficial at times.

Parental authority is highly regarded in Iranian culture, with the majority of respondents (85.7%) considering calling parents by their first names as rude, disrespectful, or offensive. They emphasised the importance of showing respect and preserving boundaries in relationships with elders. One respondent stated that calling parents by their first names violates the rules of respecting elders. In Iranian society, the terms "Maman" (Mom) and "Baba" (Dad) are commonly used to refer to parents, and one participant noted that these terms hold a special significance.

Names in Iranian culture are regarded as a significant gift from parents, carrying valuable information about gender, nationality, religion, and sometimes profession, traditions, and social rank. Names serve as an identity that distinguishes individuals from other social groups with different identities (Eslami-Rasekh & Ahmadvand, 2015). Exploring language learners' preferences and sentiments regarding Western names can provide intriguing insights into their orientation and cultural preferences. In certain language schools in Iran, teachers assign Western names to immerse learners in the target language. The survey aimed to gather respondents' perspectives on their preferences for their children's names, and the findings are presented in Figure 5.
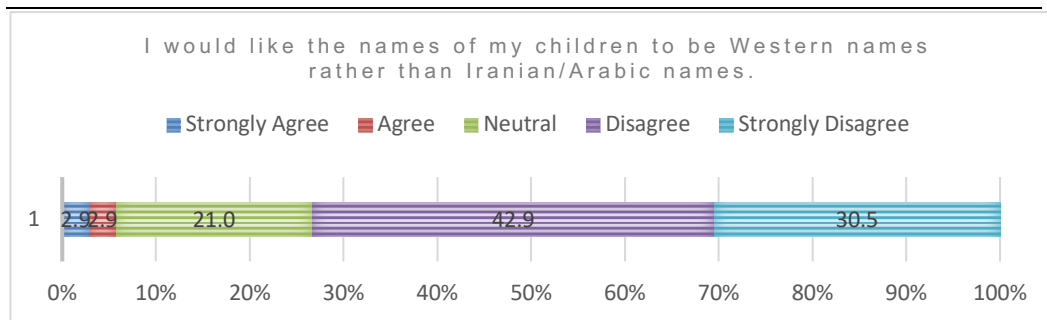

Figure 5: Preference on the names of children

Less than 6% of respondents reported naming their children with Western names, while over 73% expressed a preference for Iranian/Arabic names. Approximately 21% of respondents were uncertain about their naming preferences. The desire to preserve links to Iranian cultural traditions is evident, as names are seen as binding individuals to past and future generations (Rovira, 2008). Names reflect the values and ideals of society and can signify cultural identity or local conditions (Al-Zumor, 2009; Mbarachi & Igwenyi, 2018).

Iranians predominantly choose names based on their underlying meanings, considering them as an indispensable part of their identity (Morton, 2001). Respondents expressed a strong attachment to Iranian names, emphasising the beauty of these names and their representation of Iranian identity. Some respondents even disagreed with choosing Arabic or religious names, highlighting the importance of preserving Iranian culture and national identity separate from religious identity. They perceived names as a means to represent their culture and express pride in their nationality. Interconnections between cultures were also appreciated by some respondents, recognising the similarities between names in different languages. English names were deemed pleasing by a few participants (5.8%). The influence of other ecological factors on language learners, such as exposure to Turkish soap operas, was evident in the desire for Turkish names among some individuals.

Traditional clothing serves as an outward expression of cultural practices (Moharami & Daneshfar, 2021). Iran's diverse population exhibits various traditional clothing styles associated with different ethnicities. While some regions embrace traditional attire as part of daily life, others reserve it for special ceremonies and events. Exploring respondents' preferences for traditional clothing and willingness to wear them at traditional events provides insights into their adherence to Iranian tradition and culture. The findings can be seen in Figure 6.
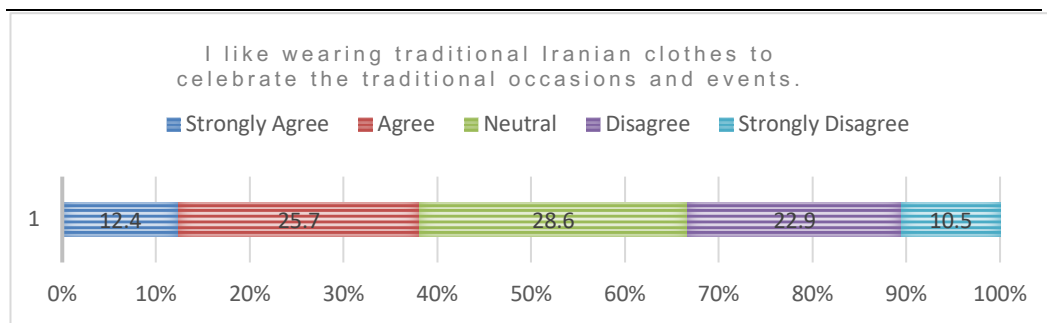

Figure 6: Preference for clothes

Approximately 38% of respondents expressed support for wearing traditional costumes, while over 33% disagreed with wearing traditional clothes on special occasions, and nearly 29% held a neutral stance on the matter. Those who supported wearing traditional attire emphasised their Iranian cultural identity, the beauty of traditional clothes, and the preservation of their cultural heritage. They believed that traditional and Western cultures are incompatible and saw wearing traditional clothes as a means of transferring their culture

to future generations. For them, wearing traditional clothes was a way to respect and revive their cultural traditions.

In contrast, some respondents (33.4%) acknowledged the importance of preserving Iranian culture but stated that wearing traditional clothes was not personally to their liking. They valued individual agency and personal preferences in their fashion choices, opting for fashionable and suitable attire instead. They believed that culture is shaped by personal meanings and choices and that traditional occasions can be celebrated through various elements such as music, food, and rituals. "Agency makes and remakes culture through creating personal meanings about the significance of things and through acts such as choosing particular kinds of friendships, jobs, or consumer products" (Ratner, 2000, p.413).

Exploring the personal values and relationships of Iranian adult English language learners sheds light on their perspectives regarding traditional values and practices. These perspectives reflect their ideological beliefs and inform their everyday practices, providing a deeper understanding of their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviours.

Cultural practices "We are Iranian, and we have to follow our tradition"

Cultural practices reflect cultural norms and values in everyday life, stemming from collective beliefs in society (Frese, 2015). Language learners' cultural awareness influences their cultural preferences and may lead to modifications in their practices (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). Siregar et al., (2023) believed culturally responsive language education enables students to reveal their identities. Culturally competent learners embrace cultural differences, leading to creativity and negotiation between cultures (Bhabha, 1994).

In Iran, the use of the English language is prevalent in various forms such as banners, clothing, and signage, symbolising an international identity (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016). English language presence is observed even in conferences and symposiums without foreign attendees, as welcome notes and posters are often in English. Bilingual signs, combining Persian and English, are common, and English words are frequently used in environmental signage. The use of English in the socio-political context of Iran can be explored through language learners' perspectives, providing insights into the role of English in Iranian society.

The multilingual environment in Iran leads to extensive language combinations and mixed language use. Figure 7 illustrates language learners' viewpoints on bilingual communication in environmental signs, highlighting the complexity and significance of language practices in Iranian society.
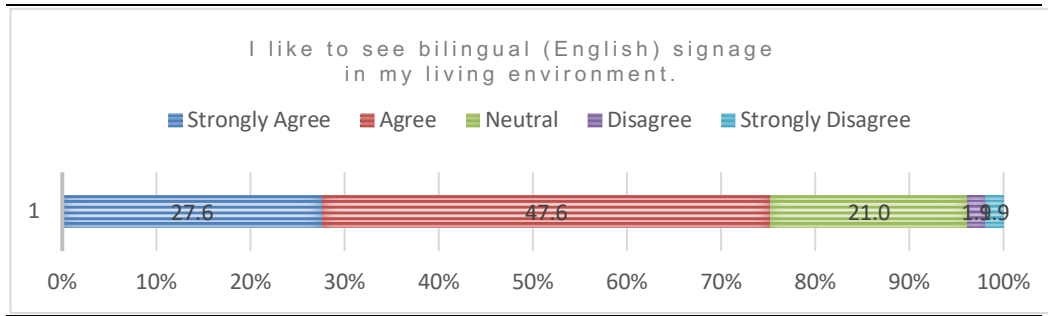
Figure 7: Preference for signposts

More than 75% of respondents expressed a preference for bilingual signage in their environment, while less than 4% disagreed, and 21% were uncertain about its value. Respondents who supported bilingual signs (75.2%) emphasised their importance in aiding tourists with directions and facilitating language practice and cultural learning. Reading English signage also evoked feelings of competence and pride among language learners (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).

Those who disagreed or remained neutral did not provide specific reasons or comments regarding bilingual signage. However, it has been noted in the literature that English signs may symbolise foreign influence rather than an English-speaking community (Gorter & Cenoz, 2017).

Iranians rely on various media sources, including newspapers, state TV, radio, blogs, websites, and mobile applications, to obtain information and news. While Persian is the dominant language in Iranian media, some newspapers provide English versions of the news online or in print. Press TV is the sole English-language TV channel in Iran catering to international audiences. Figure 8 presents the preferred language for accessing news among the respondents, highlighting their inclination towards English news rather than national media.
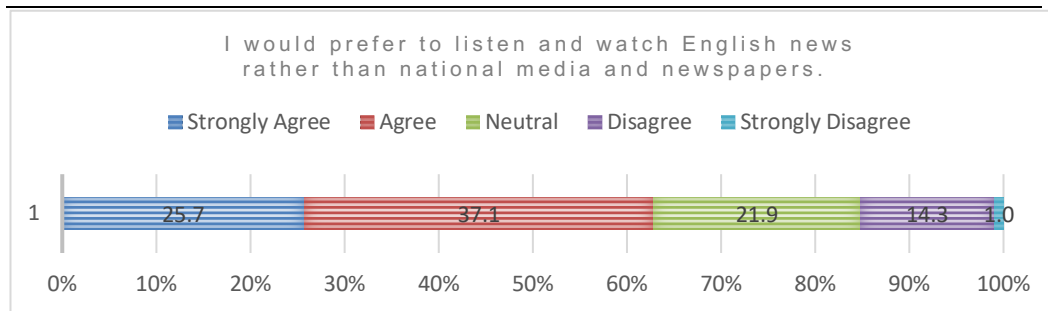

Figure 8: Preference on the language of media

Over 60% of the respondents expressed a preference for following news in the English language, while only around 15% showed interest in national media or newspapers, and

approximately 22% remained neutral. The main reason cited by respondents (62.8%) for their preference for English media was to enhance their English language skills and cultural awareness. Respondents mentioned that the Iranian national media was perceived as untrustworthy and unreliable due to government control and censorship. This reflects a disconnect between Iranian authorities and society (Jalali, 2015).

Some respondents (21.9%) expressed a lack of interest in news, regardless of the language, while others found value in comparing news from both Persian and English sources to form their own judgments. They highlighted the need to access diverse sources of information and mentioned the limitations of Iranian media coverage. A smaller percentage of participants (15.3%) expressed support for national media and newspapers without further elaboration.

Reading Western fiction was identified as a pathway to improve English language competency and cultural knowledge (Khosravi et al., 2014). Such literature serves as a means to transmit social heritage and cultural elements, providing language learners with valuable insights. Figure 9 presents the respondents' preferred language for reading fiction, illustrating their inclination toward English literature.
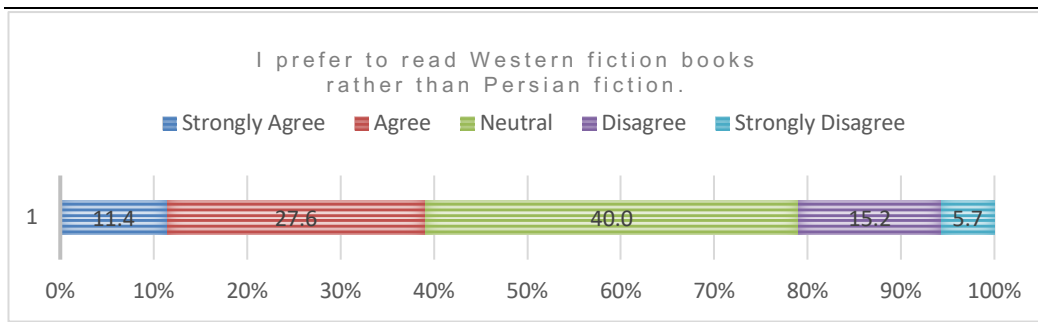

Figure 9: Preference for the language of fiction books

The responses revealed a nearly equal proportion (40%) of undecided respondents and those who preferred reading English fiction, while 20% expressed a preference for Persian fiction (International Publishers Association, 2009). These findings indicate language learners' desire to enhance their English proficiency and explore Western culture (International Publishers Association, 2009).

Various affective factors underlie these choices. Persian literature's historical significance and cultural contributions were evident in respondents' comments. Some participants (20.9%) expressed their love for Persian language and literature, emphasising the richness of Iranian books. In the middle of the continuum (40%) were respondents who appreciated reading in both languages or simply enjoyed reading regardless of language.

The popularity of English fiction among Iranian language learners (39%) reflects social and cultural motives for learning English. The respondents' distrust of authorities and concerns

about censorship and the quality of Iranian books were evident. The perception of English fiction as more imaginative and diverse, along with its association with popular movies, contributed to its appeal.

Respondents' habits and hobbies might have influenced their preferences. The impact of watching movies and listening to music on language learning preferences was explored. Figure 10 illustrates the data, providing insights into respondents' engagement with English and the influence of English language learning on their daily practices.
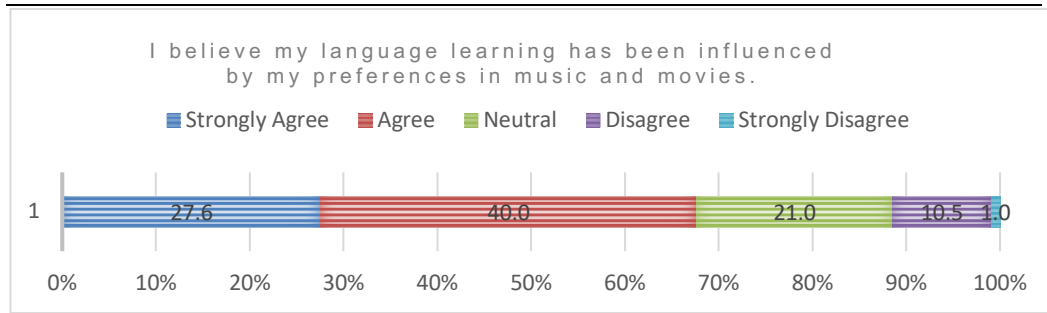

Figure 10: The influence of music and movies on language learning

The majority of language learners (67%) acknowledged that their English language learning practices were influenced by popular culture. Only a small percentage (less than 12%) disagreed with this statement, while 21% remained neutral.

Respondents who agreed (67%) cited movies and music as significant influences on their language choice. They believed that engaging with these forms of entertainment improved their English skills and comprehension. For example, one participant mentioned enjoying American and Spanish movies and music, which motivated them to learn both English and Spanish. Engaging with cultural elements embedded in recreational activities like movies and music can lead to new forms of language practice and expose learners to diverse cultures and practices, prompting personal re-evaluations. Another respondent attributed their increased exposure to English music to the introduction of personal computers in their household, which facilitated access to movies and music.

However, a minority of respondents (11.5%) denied any influence of popular culture on their language learning preferences, suggesting that movies and music were not their sole sources of language exposure. Some respondents (21%) were uncertain about the impact of popular culture on their language learning, expressing a lack of awareness or knowledge.

The views of respondents regarding Western ceremonies indicate a shifting trend. While cultural ceremonies are traditionally transmitted across generations, Western celebrations such as Valentine's Day, Halloween, and Christmas appear to be more appealing to language learners. Figure 11 provides an overview of the respondents' perspectives on Iranian family and religious celebrations compared to Western celebrations.
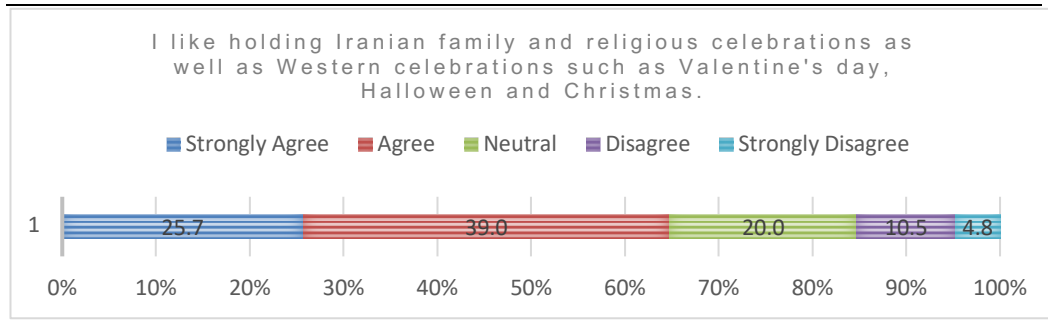
Figure 11: Preference for celebrations

The findings indicated a shift in respondents' perspectives on Iranian cultural and religious ceremonies, with approximately 65% agreeing to participate in both Iranian and Western celebrations. About 15% disagreed while the remaining respondents were neutral.

These responses provided valuable insights into the language ecology of Iran, reflecting the importance of spending time with loved ones during celebrations and embracing happiness regardless of cultural labels. Participants expressed a sociable nature and respect for diverse backgrounds.

However, a minority (15.3%) disagreed, emphasising the significance of preserving Iranian culture and traditions. They expressed a belief that Western celebrations were unrelated to their cultural identity and advocated for upholding Iranian traditions.

Food holds cultural significance, and traditional dishes are passed down through generations in Iran. The country's diverse culinary landscape includes two types of restaurants: traditional establishments serving Iranian cuisine in an authentic setting, often accompanied by *shisha*, and modern restaurants resembling international chains, offering fast food and contemporary dishes. Exploring respondents' restaurant preferences sheds light on cultural practices (Figure 12).
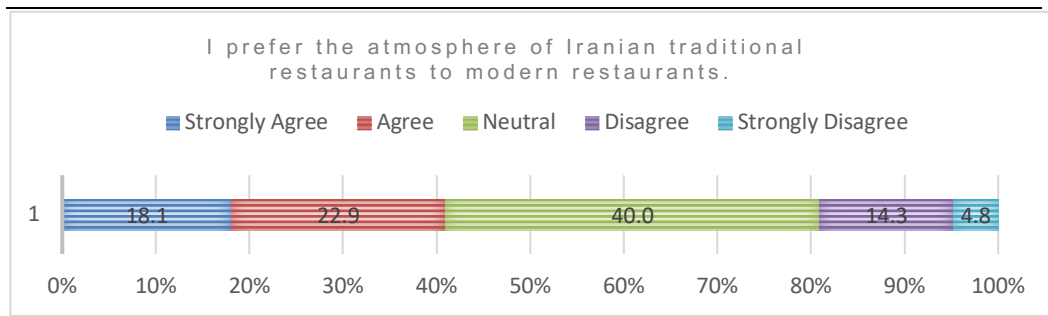

Figure 12: Preference for restaurants

Regarding restaurant preferences, approximately 41% of respondents supported Iranian traditional restaurants, 40% were neutral, and about 19% favoured Western restaurants. Respondents favouring traditional restaurants (41%) expressed appreciation for the compelling mix of Iranian art and a sense of connection to their roots. The traditional atmosphere evoked nostalgia and a sense of national identity. However, concerns were raised about the association of traditional restaurants with smoking, which is viewed negatively, particularly for single women.

Neutral responses (40%) highlighted the situational nature of restaurant choices, emphasising that both traditional and modern restaurants have their own appeal. The quality of food and personal preferences influenced their decisions. These respondents recognised the coexistence of tradition and modernity.

A notable proportion (19.1%) preferred modern restaurants, finding them enjoyable and desirable in Iran. Examining the cultural practices of respondents provides insights into the pragmatics of language and enhances understanding of the language ecology of Iran (Fill, 2007).

Discussion

The comments and notes mentioned by respondents to the questionnaire provides deeper insights into the cultural affective factors that influence language learning in Iran. These factors are crucial in shaping the cultural aspects of the language learning environment and the relationships between individuals and the English language. The participants' responses to the cultural statements revealed various dimensions of the English language ecology in Iranian society. Notably, most responses for each statement varied, indicating a growing awareness among the respondents of the choices available to them within Iranian society. They recognise that their views differ from normative perspectives and those of authority figures, aligning with previous studies on Iranian English learners' attitudes and government policies (Rassouli & Osam, 2019). Together, the participants' responses form a comprehensive map of perceptions and beliefs regarding English language learning in Iranian society.

Cultural awareness is particularly crucial in language education. By integrating cultural components into language learning curricula, students not only develop linguistic proficiency but also gain a deeper understanding of their own cultural heritage and that of others. By promoting cultural awareness in language education, Iranian students equip themselves with the linguistic and intercultural skills necessary for effective communication, fostering unity, tolerance, and mutual understanding among its diverse population (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008).

Regarding personal values and relationships, the responses demonstrate a deviation from prescribed norms while still acknowledging the importance of core traditional views and cultural practices. The preservation and appreciation of culture and traditions reflect Iranians' ability to create their own values and norms, resulting in the emergence of a hybrid culture (Bhabha, 1994). Language learners in Iran merge cultures to engage in novel and

creative forms of cultural identification and engagement. It is evident that respondents highly value Iranian culture, as reflected in their adherence to local factors such as family, parental authority, Iranian names, and marriage. Their commitment to Iranian culture is influenced by both popular and traditional culture, including media, books, and ceremonies. However, it is important to note that English language learning also impacts their cultural practices, as language and culture have a mutual relationship (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). The findings indicate that Western culture, in particular, exerts an influence on the respondents' language and culture.

The dynamics of cultural degradation and preservation alongside personal values play pivotal roles in shaping individuals' language learning experiences. Personal values deeply rooted in Iranian culture, such as respect for elders, familial bonds, and a strong sense of national identity, serve as pillars of resilience against cultural erosion (Yaghoobzadeh et al., 2023). Language learners in Iran navigate a delicate balance between embracing globalised influences and upholding cherished cultural traditions (Rezaeifard & Chalak, 2017). While proficiency in English is increasingly valued for social mobility and economic opportunities, individuals often strive to maintain connections to their cultural roots through language learning (Mirhosseini & Khodakarami, 2016). By embracing both cultural preservation and language learning, Iranians assert their agency in navigating the complexities of a rapidly globalising world while safeguarding their unique cultural heritage.

This study demonstrates that the participants' practices are shaped by their own perceptions and understanding of their environment. While Iranian authorities may view English as a potential threat to the authenticity of Iranian culture, it is important to recognise that learning English is not solely responsible for the claimed cultural erosion in the country. Language learners in Iran create their own unique practices within the language ecology, engaging in a continuous process of decision-making based on various affective factors, their own perceptions, and beliefs. The learning of the English language in Iran is an intentional and dynamic endeavour influenced by the complex interplay between language, culture, and individual agency.

Conclusion

In conclusion, exploring the ecology of English in Iran provides valuable insights into the cultural affective factors influencing language learning. These factors play a crucial role in shaping individuals' beliefs, practices, and perceptions, as they are deeply intertwined with the cultural aspects of the language learning environment. The findings demonstrate that these factors contribute to the construction of language learners' preferred values, norms, and cultures. While some responses indicate a deviation from prescribed norms, they do not completely defy core traditional views and cultural practices. Instead, they reflect the respondents' appreciation and value for Iranian culture. The preservation of culture and traditions illustrates how Iranians establish their own values and norms, resulting in the emergence of a hybrid culture. This blending of cultures in language learners leads to novel and creative forms of cultural engagement and identification. It is suggested that these changing views and practices do not represent a new or different culture but rather a hybrid culture (Bhabha, 1994).

Language learning has the power to shift individuals' perspectives on culture and society, influencing their dreams and desires. Language learners merge cultures to form a novel and creative cultural engagement and identification (Moharami, et al., 2023). Learning a language shifts the views on culture and society and influences people's dreams and desires (Pennycook, 2016). The changing views observed among the participants can be partially attributed to their English language learning experiences and exposure to alternative ways of being. The findings suggest that language learners strive to preserve Iranian culture while also being influenced by globally popular culture, particularly Western culture, which impacts their language and cultural practices.

It is important to note that Iranian authorities express concerns about the impact of learning English on the authenticity of Iranian culture. However, while these concerns are valid to some extent in safeguarding cultural authenticity, they should not solely attribute the claimed cultural erosion to English language learning. The findings indicate that respondents create their own unique practices within the language ecology of Iran, demonstrating a growing awareness of available choices in Iranian society. They recognise that their perspectives differ from normative views and those of authority figures. The participants' responses collectively form a map of perceptions and beliefs regarding English language learning in Iranian society, highlighting their deliberate and conscious decision-making processes.

Overall, language learners in Iran navigate a complex landscape of affective factors and make choices based on their own perceptions, beliefs, and understanding of their cultural context and the current times. Their learning of the English language is an intentional endeavour, shaped by their individual experiences and goals.

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Mehdi Moharami, *PhD* in Education at Monash University, Australia, focuses on the impact of English language learning on identity formation and language learner practices. His research delves into areas such as language policy, cultural influences, TESOL methodologies, and the intersection of language learning with social practices.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6435-8501
Email: mehdi.moharami@monash.edu, mehdi.6788@gmail.com