What do learners perceive? A sociolinguistic survey on Iranian English language learners' attitudes on mainstream ELT versus critical ELT

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Abstract

The growing presence of English especially through English language teaching (ELT) is going to considerably influence any language education policy and planning worldwide. Alongside such an influence, the appearance of critical voices in the field of applied linguistics has resulted in some controversial discussions around English and ELT. While this topic has received considerable attention, reviewing the literature on the topic shows that the survey of learners' attitudes, as one of the most important stakeholders in any language-in-education planning, has been mostly neglected. In this paper, the author attempts to investigate the Iranian English language learners' attitudes towards English and ELT to study their trends. To gain insight into the issue, a mixed-methods approach, including both qualitative and quantitative methods, was designed and conducted. In the first phase, both focus group and one-to-one interviews were conducted. The content analysis along with the rich literature on the topic yielded a twelve-item Likert-scale questionnaire. To survey the learners' attitudes at large, a questionnaire survey was conducted on 548 participants. Presenting and discussing the findings under four categories reveal that Iranian learners mostly tend to the mainstream trend and lack of awareness and sensitivity towards possible influences of English and ELT on their language and culture is tangible.

Keywords: English language teaching, culture, mainstream trend, critical trend, attitude

1.   Introduction

Today English is encircling the world in such a way that its growing importance is observable in virtually all societies. Its increasing status in educational curricula along with its unparalleled worldwide role and presence as an indispensable part of the realms of science, technology, media, diplomacy, etc. have led to the rise of a number of challenging questions and many reactions among those active in the field of applied linguistics as well as politics, sociology, cultural studies and so forth.

Not surprisingly, the huge enthusiasm for learning this language and its increasing growth especially in the educational arena on the one hand, and the growing concerns with respect to its cultural and linguistic influences on the other, have led to discussions and debates on the nature and function of ELT as the most systematic way of spreading English throughout the world. Thus, it is no surprise to see that Mckay (2002) notes that today the teaching and learning of English must be based on an entirely different set of assumptions than the teaching of any other second or foreign language. In this regard, Matsuda (2006) points out that the spread of English and its function have complicated ELT practice because it requires that most basic assumptions in the field be re-evaluated and re-negotiated vis-à-vis the current sociolinguistic landscape of ELT. As a result of this new situation which, as Gray (2002) writes, has been mostly generated by the appearance of an increasing wave of books instrumental in stimulating a considerable degree of soul searching within the ELT profession, a newly emerging critical standpoint in the field of applied linguistics in general and ELT in particular has found the opportunity to challenge the so-called value-free essence of ELT, to question the cultural and social relevance and appropriateness of Centre-produced methods and materials, to focus on the political, cultural, social, economic and ideological aspects of ELT, and to demand critical pedagogy as an alternative approach to mainstream ELT. In this case, according to Kumaravadivelu (2012, p. 15), "for over two decades, we have been hearing critical voices helping us become acutely aware of linguistic imperialism,

discourse of colonialism, native speakerism, the political economy of English language teaching, reclamation of local knowledge... the list here is too long."

In such a situation, there is no doubt that the views and attitudes towards English and ELT undergo changes. Thus in any decision-making and English education policy and planning, the main stakeholders' views and attitudes should be studied and attended to. However, reviewing the available literature on the topic shows that the learners' attitudes towards these important and thought-provoking issues are not surveyed as much as teachers' attitudes. In this respect, the present paper is a significant contribution to the field in revealing the Iranian English language learners' attitudes - as members of one of the most notable anti-imperialistic societies in the world - to issues related to the four categories of a) ELT materials, b) native-speakerism, c) English, ELT and other languages, and d) English, ELT and culture.

This paper is divided into three main sections. First, its theoretical basis is introduced. Then, the methodology of the study, including the participants, data collection procedure and the results, is put forth and, lastly, the findings are discussed and some suggestions and implications for further research and study are provided.

2.   Theoretical Basis

In this section, the theoretical basis of the study including the introduction of two opposing trends in ELT, the rationale for surveying the attitudes of language learners alongside the brief review of literature on the topic are presented.

2.1   Mainstream ELT versus Critical ELT

The increasing ubiquity of English has become one of the most intriguing and controversial issues in the field of applied linguistics such that it has been studied from a number of perspectives (Mesthire &Bhatt, 2008). Naturally, as one of the most systematic and effective means of the spread of English (Brutt-Griffler, 2002), ELT has come into exclusive focus. Beyond any doubt, ELT has been an important industry and big business worldwide for at least the past five decades.

Especially during the last two decades, with the emergence of a growing critical shift in this field which has significantly challenged mainstream ELT, no one can cast any doubt on its growing position as an activity which has been accompanied by some complex cultural, moral and political implications.

Since the 1990s with the advent of this critical shift in the field of applied linguistics in general and ELT in particular (which according to Anderson (2003), whose symbolic birth dates back to the appearance of Phillipson's *Linguistic Imperialism* in 1992), the carrying and publicising of certain unquestioned tenets in professional and academic discourse through professional associations, academics, publishing companies, etc. by mainstream ELT has encountered some notable and thought-provoking challenges. This trend emphasises that English is a neutral and beneficial tool for global understanding (Crystal, 1997) and ELT in its mainstream version is a purely pedagogical enterprise without being tied to any particular cultural, social, political, economic and religious system (Wardhaugh, 1987; Seaton, 1997). In this regard, Widdowson (1998) states that the English language, in and of itself, does not imply hegemonic control. Reviewing the literature on the topic, Anderson (2003) and Davari (2013) point out that according to this trend, the best teacher of English is a native speaker; the best teaching methods, materials and expertise originate from the Centre; the development and running of English language curricula and programmes should be organised by the Centre's institutions; the spread of English and ELT do not harm other languages and cultures; the use of mother tongue is not allowed i.e. English is best taught monolingually; and any variety of English other than Standard English must be avoided.

Contrary to these tenets, the critical shift in this field the origin of which is mostly related to the work of Phillipson (1992) and his subsequent works along with contributions of other notable figures including Pennycook (1994, 1998, 2001), Holliday (1994, 2005), Canagarajah (1999), Kumaravadivelu (2006) and so on, who have tried theoretically and experimentally to challenge the mainstream's unquestioned tenets and beliefs. Questioning the main mostly taken-for-granted tenets and beliefs which are produced, reproduced and publicised as

the mainstream discourse in the field of ELT, the newly grown critical shift, as Phillipson (1992), Pennycook (1994), Anderson (2003) and Kumaravadivelu (2012) assert, insists on contrary beliefs. According to this trend, Centre-based methods are non-neutral cultural constructs and their validity and appropriateness are under question. Centre-produced materials are not necessarily the best and the most appropriate ones; their development are not the Centre's exclusive rights. Further, the Centre-based cultural competence of English language learning as a desired destination is rejected; the hegemonic expansion of English is a threat to other languages; its teaching monolingually is educationally unsound which installs or reinforces an inequitable language hierarchy; and inherently it is not a better medium of expression of thoughts and emotions and so forth.

2.2   The Rationale of Measuring Language Attitudes

Baker (1992) argues for the validity of conducting attitude surveys, not simply as a means of understanding human behaviour, but also because such studies may decide the success or failure of the implementation of language policy. In his words, language engineering can flourish or fail according to the attitudes of the community. Thus, in describing attitudes to language, it is necessary to consider a complex of different attitudes including attitudes to learning foreign languages generally, attitudes towards bilingualism, attitudes towards learning a specific language in the classroom, attitudes towards the language itself, and attitudes towards the community that speaks a particular language. It is worth noting that within these different categories there are further distinctions in attitudes. For instance, attitudes to learning a particular language will involve attitudes towards the course, materials and methods, attitudes towards the teachers, etc. In addition, attitudes towards a particular language community may include attitudes towards the culture of the community. According to Kumaravadivelu (2008), attitudes are socially grounded, that is, they must be experienced as related to subjects or events in the external world.

In all, in view of the significance of language attitudes in implementing and determining the success of language policy and planning and their importance

in any language learning programme, it is surprising that there has been little reliable and thorough investigation of language attitudes in Iran, as an EFL context in which English is experiencing a unique situation (see, Borjian, 2013; Davari & Aghagolzadeh, 2015).

Principally, learners' attitude towards English and ELT is among the factors which are essentially influential in any language educational policy and planning. Needless to say, if it is to achieve its purpose, language planning needs to take into account attitudes. In this regard, Richards and Schmidt (2010), emphasising on the importance and function of language attitudes, assert that "the measurement of language attitudes provides information which is useful in language teaching and language planning" (p. 314). In Thornbury's (2006) view, learners may have positive or negative attitudes towards language learning in general or towards the target language and its speakers and culture, or towards the teacher and the other learners, or towards the materials, the methodology and the learning situation.

Reviewing the literature on the topic reveals that there is a small number of studies carried out on the attitudes of English language learners in the field and most of them are confined to learners' attitudes and preferences towards native and non-native English language teachers in ESL and EFL contexts (see Cheung, 2002; Liang, 2002; Mahboob, 2003; Watson Todd & Rajanapunya, 2009) or the issue of culture (see Stapleton, 2000; Yilmaz & Bayyurt, 2010). Similar works include Buschenhofen (1998), Yang and Lau (2003), Al-Tamimiand Shuib (2009). In the Iranian academic setting, the works of Chalak and Kassaian (2010), Rajaee Nia and Abbaspour (2012) and Mohseni and Karimi (2012) are also partially worth mentioning.

Due to the importance of the attitudes of such significant stakeholders in the Iranian context, in this research, through a mixed-methods approach, the Iranian EFL learners' attitudes towards some important issues surrounding English and ELT were measured.

3. Methodology

The methodology applied in this study was mixed i.e. both qualitative and quantitative. Among the common typological approaches in mixed-methods introduced by Dörnyei (2007), qualitative to QUANTITAIVE was used. Regarding the features as well as the rationale for using this approach, Dörnyei (ibid, 171) points out that a frequently recommended procedure for designing a new questionnaire involves conducting a small-scale exploratory qualitative study first (usually focus group interview, but one-to-one interviews can also serve the purpose) to provide background information on the context, to identify or narrow down the focus of the possible variables and to act as a valuable source of ideas for preparing the item pool for the purpose of questionnaire scale construction. According to him, such a design is effective in improving the content representation of the survey and thus the internal validity of the study. Moreover, it is routinely used when a researcher is building a new instrument. Therefore, following this procedure, firstly two types of qualitative methods including focus group and one-to-one interviews were conducted and in the second phase, to explore and identify the Iranian English language learners' attitudes towards some important issues surrounding English and ELT, a qualitative method, i.e. questionnaire administration was utilised. In the following, both phases are described.

3.1 Qualitative Phase

The strategies of inquiry in the first phase were focus group and one-to-one interviews, both of which are explained in brief as follows:

3.1.1 Focus group interview

Firstly, to enrich the findings and provide insights into the issue, a focus group interview was conducted. According to Dörnyei (2007, p. 144), focus group interview involves a group format whereby an interviewer records the responses of a small group of usually 6-12 members. This format is based on the collective

experience of group brainstorming, that is, participants thinking together, inspiring and challenging each other, and reacting to the emerging issues and points. In his words, because of the flexible and information-rich nature of the method, focus group is often used in mixed-methods research. In this phase the semi-structured type of focus group, including both open- and close-ended questions, was the most common format conducted with procedure as follows:

In line with the principles of focus group composition, creating a list of attributes essential to the study including age range of 20-35 and at least three years of English-learning experience, the researcher sought out non-accidental and purposive participants to match the criteria. The ten selected participants' characteristics were as follows:

Table 1. Focus group's characteristics

Participants	Years of learning English	Age	Gender
A	5	22	male
B	6	27	male
C	8	26	male
D	8	31	male
E	3	21	female
F	6	22	female
G	4	23	female
H	12	28	female
I	11	32	female

After the usual preparation and appointments, the interview was conducted through a semi-structured type of format. Relying on an interview guide rather than giving the participants freedom to discuss broad topics, some main issues on the topic were chosen and related questions were posed by the

researcher as the "moderator" of the interview (see Appendix I). The interview took 120 minutes and its language was Persian. The data gathered in this part were thematically analysed and the emerging issues and points were extracted.

In the second part of the qualitative phase, eight participants took part in a face-to-face semi-structured interview. As Dörnyei (2007, p. 136) reminds, this type, offering a compromise between structured and unstructured approaches, is the most common in applied linguistics research.

In this phase, after preparing for the interview and designing the interview guide, a suitable sampling method i.e. criterion-based selection was chosen. To do so, eight participants were selected purposively according to the criteria, while some appointments were also made. The language of the interviews was Persian and the shortest and the longest interviews took 30 and 60 minutes respectively. The participants' characteristics were as follows:

Table 2. One-to-one interview participants' characteristics

Participants	Years of learning English	Age	Gender
A	10	28	male
B	5	22	female
C	6	24	female
D	16	30	female
E	8	35	male
F	8	24	male
G	6	25	female
H	8	24	female

The findings in this part were mostly used in enriching the questionnaire. In doing so, content analysis was used which yielded relevant items for the questionnaire.

3.2   Quantitative Phase

Based on the findings gathered in the two parts of the first phase of the study as well as reference to the growing literature on the topic, a Likert-scale questionnaire, as the most famous type of close-ended items, was prepared by the researcher which included twelve statements in four categories. Of them, half belonged to the mainstream while the other half belonged to the critical trend (see Appendix II).

A point to note is that before its actual administration, the questionnaire was analysed and revised repeatedly. For the purpose of content and linguistic validity as well as reliability, it was piloted by 32 learners having the given criteria. To analyse its reliability, the responses were fed into the SPSS. Employing Cronbach alpha, it turned out that the alpha coefficient of 0.89 was found.

The participants of this phase included 548 Iranian learners of English language throughout the country. Their characteristics were as follows:

Table 3. Quantitative participants' characteristics

Features	N=548	Percentage
Gender		
male	227	41.4%
female	321	58.6%
Age		
20-27	362	66%
28-35	186	34%
Mother tongue		
Persian	412	75.1%
Non-Persian	136	24.9%

3.3   Procedure

Through random sampling, 1068 questionnaires were administered mostly through face-to-face contact (1000) as well as email (68). The response rates were 489 (48.9%) and 59 (86.7%) respectively. The data were collected over a four-month period.

4.   Findings

The results of the second phase, as the main part of the study, have been classified in four categories as follows. It is worth noting that with respect to the selected typological approach of the study, the discussion is mostly structured around the quantitative phase.

4.1   ELT Materials

As Anderson (2003), Gray (2002), Canagarajah (1999) and Kumaravadivelu (2012) point out, one of the mainstream ELT beliefs is related to the notion that the best materials come from the Centre. While the mainstream trend theoretically and practically introduces the development of ELT materials as its mere right mostly under the banner of authenticity, the cultural load of such materials (Gray, 2002; Canagarajah, 1999) as well as their pedagogical aspects (Akbari, 2008; Kumaravadivelu, 2012) are seriously challenged. In this regard, the findings of Gray (2002 and 2008) with respect to the "inclusivity" and "inappropriacy" of the global ELT textbooks seem noteworthy. Regarding the content of ELT textbooks, as one of the most controversial issues in the ELT profession, Gray (2002), Akbari (2008) and Banegas (2010) remind that Centre-produced ELT materials tend to avoid provocative and significant topics and issues of the modern world. Concerning the rationale for inclusion of such topics, Matsuda (2006) notes that there is no doubt that at present due to the role and function of English language globally, learners should become effective users of English in the international context and undoubtedly it implies that the users of this language are aware of global issues and real-life concerns. Hillyard (2005) also writes that when one studies the topics of such textbooks, there is little controversial material. Themes such as the family, sport, hobbies, travel, pop culture, festivals from remote countries which bear no impact on students' lives, fashion and food are among those covered.

In such a situation, there is no doubt that the proponents of critical trend in ELT including Canagarajah (1999), Gray (2008), Akbari (2008), Kumaravadivelu (2012) and so forth maintain that the involvement of the

Periphery ELT professionals in developing ELT materials and textbooks is essential. For instance, in Kumaravadivelu's (2012) words, textbooks used for learning and teaching English in large parts of the world, which are produced and promoted by the Centre-based publishing industry, represent the most visible sign of Centre dominance. In his words, to break the Periphery's dependence on the Centre-based textbook industry, through systematic training, the involvement of local practitioners and professionals would be a practical suggestion.

Thus, to study the attitudes of the Iranian English language learners towards such an important issue, three questions were provided and their findings are shown in the table below:

Table 4. ELT materials: content and development

The best ELT textbooks are necessarily developed in the Centre. (Mainstream)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	101	276	47	105	29
		Agree		Undecided	Disagree	
	N	377		47	134	
M=3.52	%	68.7%		8.5%	24.4%	
The content of ELT textbooks must not be confined to neutral or non-controversial topics and must include global issues and real-life concerns, too. (Critical)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	104	286	44	89	25
		Agree		Undecided	Disagree	
	N	390		44	114	
M=3.64	%	71.1%		8%	20.8%	
In ELT textbooks development, the needs, interests and values of non-English speaking countries should be included. (Critical)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	236	249	21	38	4
		Agree		Undecided	Disagree	
	N	485		21	42	
M=4.23	%	88.5%		3.8%	11.5%	

4.2   Native versus Non-native Teachers and Standards

As a pervasive ideology within ELT, native-speakerism is characterised by the belief that native speaker teachers represent a Western culture from which spring the ideals both of the English language and English language methodology (Holliday, 2005). According to Holliday (2006), use of this concept follows a now established concern about political inequalities within ELT (see Canagarajah, 1999; Kubota, 2001; Pennycook, 1994).

Despite its conceptual and definitional ambiguities of the concept of "native speaker" and its benevolent twin, "native speaker competence" (Kumaravadivelu, 2012), as Alsagoff (2012) points out, the hegemonic practices of the TESOL industry purposefully perpetuate the concept of the "native speaker" in which being an English speaker is linked with linguistic inheritance (Rampton, 1990) rather than need, use or expertise. According to Kumaravadivelu (2012) this notion spreads itself largely in terms of the importance given to matters such as native-speaker accent, native-speaker teachers, native-like target competence, teaching methods emanating from Western universities, textbooks published by Western publishing houses, research agenda set by Centre-based scholars, professional journals edited and published from Centre countries... the list is long. Referred to as "native speaker fallacy" by Phillipson (1992), Canagarajah (1999) writes that such a belief monopolises the ELT teaching jobs in the Periphery, and Pennycook (1994) introduces it as one important aspect of the cultural and economic politics of ELT, forming an integral part of the industrialisation of ELT. Respecting the prevalence of such a belief, Mckay (2003) asserts that even though about 80% of English language teaching professionals are bilingual users of English, a so-called "native-speaker fallacy" is privileging Inner-Circle curriculum and teaching methodologies. Contrary to the mainstream trend in ELT, publicising only native varieties of English or Standard English, the critical trend insists on the fact that since present-day communication in English is often carried out between people speaking different varieties of English (Rajagopalan, 2004), the learners must not be provided with exposure to merely Standard English (Hu, 2012).

Overall, with respect to this controversial issue, three questions were provided with such results:

Table 5. Native vs. non-native teachers and standards

The best teacher of English language is the native speaker of this language. (**Mainstream**)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	57	165	101	179	46
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	222		101		225
M=3.01	%	40.5%		18.4%		41%
The standards of American and British English for example in pronunciation must not be the only standards of English teaching. (**Critical**)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	24	117	42	230	135
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	141		42		365
M=2.39	%	25,8%		7.7%		66.6%
Other varieties of English such as Indian, Singaporean, etc. must be respected and known as English. (**Critical**)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	43	125	116	223	41
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	168		116		264
M=2.82	%	30.6		21.1		48.1

4.3   English, ELT and Culture

Culture as one of the most complicated words in the English language has been, especially in the last two decades, the main focus of ELT studies. In this regard, while the scholars belonging to the mainstream trend avoid dealing with the cultural impacts of the spread of English (even Crystal (1997) clearly asserts that

cultures throughout the world can exist along with the global spread of English), critical applied linguists believe that the spread of English is trampling on indigenous cultures (Rapatahana & Bunce, 2012) and ELT is a type of enculturation in which the learner acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new worldview reflecting the target culture and its speakers (Alptekin, 2002). In such a situation, it is not surprising to see that the teaching of only target culture and especially its romantic version (see Akbari, 2008; Banegas, 2010; Gray, 2010) is a dominant discourse in ELT materials. Thus, Pennycook (2007), insisting on the impact of English culture, calls for rethinking the relationship between English, pedagogy and culture in the contemporary world. Kumaravadivelu (2012), also criticising this common belief that developing L2 linguistic competence has also meant developing L2 cultural competence, maintains that due to the fact that the target culture has been used as a source of content for many ELT textbooks, such textbooks play a key role in strengthening and expanding the cultural hegemony of the Centre. But, due to the scope of English application both geographically and communicatively, this language has developed certain features which are not part of Centre and consequently the ELT materials must not be confined to target culture (Akbari, 2008).

All things considered, and especially due to the cultural differences of Iranian society as the main concern of the study with the Centre, three questions were provided as follows:

Table 6. English, ELT and culture

The expansion of English threatens the national and cultural identity of non-English speaking countries including Iran. (Critical)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	72	123	42	208	103
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	195		42		311
M=2.73	%	35.5%		7.7%		56.8%
ELT does not have any significant role in the expansion of cultural influence of English speaking countries. (Mainstream)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	84	217	74	136	37
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	301		74		173
M= 3.31	%	54.9%		13.5%		31.5%
The ideal teaching of English must be accompanied by teaching Western culture. (Mainstream)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	60	219	92	166	11
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	279		92		177
M=3.27	%	50.9%		16.7%		32.2%

4.3   English and other Languages

The spread of English globally and its consequent impacts on other languages have been known to be among the main controversial issues in the field of applied linguistics. The growing prestige of English in various arenas accompanied by the weakening and disappearance of many languages especially in societies in which English is taught at their expense, are signs of the rampant strength of English language hegemony (see Rapatahana & Bunce, 2012). In fact, the advent of some controversial, but thought-provoking concepts as linguistic imperialism, linguicism and linguicide are mostly associated with this detrimental effect of English spread and hegemony. In this regard, it is no surprise to read that the relentless spread of English globally is taking place at the direct expense of local and regional languages (ibid.).

In this case, especially Phillipson (1992) maintains that the field of education is especially a realm where the spread of English through it plays a key role in the expansion of the cultural, economic and political influence of the Centre, which can lead to a kind of dependence of the Periphery on it.

In this regard, three questions were also provided and their findings are as follows:

Table 7. English, ELT and other languages

The global spread of English is not a threat to other languages. (Mainstream)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	89	224	75	111	49
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	313		75		160
M=3.16	%	57.1%		13.6%		29.1%
The current teaching of English in both the public and private educational system weakens the position of local languages and dialects. (Critical)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	20	80	117	232	99
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	100		117		231
M=2.43	%	18.2%		21.4%		42.3%
Using English as the medium of instruction at Iranian universities does not threaten Persian. (Mainstream)		*Strongly agree*	*Agree*	*Undecided*	*Disagree*	*Strongly disagree*
	N	66	280	91	93	19
		Agree		Undecided		Disagree
	N	346		91		112
M=3.51	%	63.1%		16,6%		20.4%

5. Discussion

This study, as an attempt to investigate the attitudes of Iranian learners of English language, was conducted to reveal the tendency of this significant group of stakeholders in any language education policy and planning. The findings are presented here and a discussion and survey of the possible causes attempted.

Regarding the first category, namely ELT materials, a glance at the current ELT textbooks taught in Iran might be necessary. Today the majority of the private sector, as the most important player in the arena of English education, uses commercially Centre-produced but pirated textbooks. Keeping an eye open for the latest Centre-produced textbooks, the private sector introduces the latest published textbooks to the learners.

Contrary to this trend, the administration in its attempt to nativise English, has attempted to develop new English textbooks for schools as well as universities and such endeavours are known as the most significant contribution to the localisation of English in the education system (see Borjian, 2013). Comparing such textbooks, with their inflexible and outdated structure, low face validity, and insufficient attention to the learners' needs and interests (which have essentially been challenged by the demand for communicative and market-oriented approaches), with the Centre-produced ones with their dynamic format and eye-catching face validity and supplementary educational aids, there is no doubt that in such a situation, the Iranian learners of English language maintain that the Centre-produced textbooks are better than locally-produced ones (the first question in this category, mean 3.52).

Regarding the other two questions which dealt with the content of ELT textbooks, we can see that the Iranian learners, despite their tendency towards Centre-produced textbooks, maintain that the interests of non-English speaking countries as well as the inclusion of global issues and real-life concerns are essential. Reviewing the current ELT textbooks, both Centre-produced and locally-produced, reveals that thematically they are to some extent far from the learners' interests. Putting the locally-produced ELT textbooks aside, as Banegas (2010) notes, the Centre-produced textbooks are criticised not only for avoiding provoking topics, but also for presenting a romantic view of countries such as Britain and the USA. According to Gray (2000) topics are chosen in a way that seems to uphold values and living standards that are better than those of the students' culture, leading to the perception that the target culture is superior to the students' own. Even if textbooks do contemplate topics such as poverty, hunger,

or even discrimination, they are contextualised in Africa or the Muslim world, creating the idea that poverty or discrimination is nowhere to be found in Europe or the USA. Hillyard (2005) points out that when we study the topics of such textbooks, there is little controversial material. On the contrary, we find themes such as the family, sport, hobbies, travel, pop culture, festivals from remote countries which bear no impact on students' lives, fashion and food, among others.

Concerning the inappropriate themes of such Centre- and locally-produced textbooks, the hints and points provided by Akbari (2008) might be noteworthy. In his words, the problem of commercially produced course books is their disregard for the localness of learning and learning needs. In his terms, resorting to an inspirational language, such books deal with issues which are far removed from the lives of many learners, including Iranians. Thus, such books, which form the backbone of instruction, lack the required sensitivity to be able to address such concerns (for more details, see Akbari, 2008; Banegas, 2010; Canagarajah, 1999; Gray, 2000, 2001, 2010).

Encountering such important points, the main reason for the Iranian learners' attitude to the inclusion of such topics in ELT textbooks might be justified. Needless to say, with regard to the content of the locally-produced textbooks, they suffer even more from such deficiencies.

With respect to the second category, dealing with the notable and controversial issue of Native-speakerism, the results revealed that the Iranian learners tend to follow the mainstream trend. Concerning the tendency of Iranian learners to lean towards the Centre English and its pronunciation standards, as Ghaffar Samar and Davari (2011) point out, such a tendency on the one hand can be partly attributed to the position of English in Iranian society as a foreign language (EFL) and on the other hand, might be related to the fact that some concepts, including World Englishes, English as an international language or Lingua franca (ELF), peripheral varieties, etc., do not have any significant position in the ELT trend in Iran.

It is worth noting that with regard to such standards and Iranian learners' tendency, the findings of Aghaei (2009) and especially Pishghadam and Saboori

(2011) verify the findings of this part of the study. In fact, the results of these two statements are indicative of the fact that Standard English is considered much superior to other varieties of English.

The other question of this category dealing with the native versus non-native teachers merits our more close attention. While the results of this statement statistically tend to the mainstream trend, looking at the undecided number as well as the fragile mean of 3.01 reveals that because of the absence of native teachers in the Iranian education system, the learners cannot compare them. In addition, referring to the findings of the qualitative phase shows that since quite a significant number of the participants teach English or see themselves as would-be teachers, some of them see Iranian teachers as better. Moreover, having experienced, fluent and knowledgeable teachers and professors at institutes and universities might be influential in forming such a tendency.

With regard to the third category, as one of the most controversial issues, findings again reveal that the Iranian learners of English language tend mostly to the mainstream trend. Dealing with the probable reasons for such a tendency, referring to the views presented in the first phase of the study might be appropriate. In fact, most of the learners, especially because of their exposure to Centre-produced textbooks, and under the influence of the dominant discourse of "Centre English", justify that, as Akbari (2008) points out, those who want to learn English want to communicate with the users of this language and successful communication would be impossible without familiarity with the cultural norms of the society with whose speakers the learner is trying to forge bonds.

Reviewing the atmosphere of learning English shows that the Iranian society like many other Periphery ones is under the influence of the dominant discourse of Centre-based cultural competence. As Kumaravadivelu (2012) states, for a long time developing L2 linguistic competence has also meant developing L2 cultural competence and consequently cultural assimilation has been the desired destination with integrative motivation as the preferred path to get there. In his words, the belief was based on the notion that languages and cultures are

inextricably linked. The notion though flawed, is still prevalent and popular in certain quarters.

Equally worthy of mention is that, due to the position of English as a foreign language in Iranian society and its limited use in classrooms, its status as an international language and naturally its application both geographically and communicatively are neglected by the learners. Thus while, as Akbari (2008) reminds us, in the international situation most of the communication carried out in English is between people who are themselves the so-called non-native speakers of English and with a distinct cultural identity of their own, there is little need in this context for the Anglo-American culture since neither party is native with whom the other interlocutor is going to identify. The findings reveal that the common belief of English culture as an indispensable part of English language has a very real currency in the discourse of English language learning in Iranian society.

Regarding the fourth category, namely the impact of English language and ELT on other languages including Persian and local languages, the findings reveal that the Iranian learners tend to the mainstream trend. Having a glance at the responses indicates that while the means of the three questions have a tendency towards the mainstream trend, the undecided part is again noticeable. Referring to the responses presented by the participants in the first part of the study shows that the role and function of English in Iranian society as a foreign language are influential in their tendency. More precisely, because of the cultural and political circumstances of Iranian society in which English is only used as a subject in the education system and its use is merely limited to English classes, its presence and effect are not tangible. Thus, it can be asserted that due to its position, at least among the language learners who are interested in learning English and are influenced by this language, there is no obvious sensitivity and awareness towards its probable impacts on other languages including their mother tongue or official language.

Specifically, with respect to the third question dealing with using English as a medium of instruction at universities, the current discourse of introducing

English as the language of science and technology is not deniable. Undoubtedly the views of Altbach (2007), referring to English in the academic setting as an "imperial tongue" is revealing. In his words, the impact of English in most cases increases the influence of the major English-speaking academic systems, particularly in the US and the UK. These countries have many of the world's leading universities, produce a high proportion of scientific discoveries and scholarship, and are the main centres of scientific communication. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the norms, values, methodologies, and orientations of the academic communities of these centres tend to dominate the rest of the world – the peripheries. Certainly, through such a growing atmosphere in favour of the Centre, the status of English as the language of the scientific world increases. In this case, Phillipson (2001) and Tardy (2004) write that in such a situation, work not published in English often tends to be undervalued or even ignored, thereby falling into the domain of lost science. Despite this perspective, referring to the findings of the qualitative phase shows that English is mostly known as the language of science worldwide and the mastery of Iranian students especially at postgraduate level can lead to further progress of Iran. Facing the question that such a situation might lead to weakening of the Persian language, most of the participants in the first phase of the study believed that Persian can be kept alive and continues its presence in other areas.

In conclusion, the researcher can acknowledge from this study that the Iranian learners of English language, despite significant changes in the discourse of ELT worldwide, are experiencing the traditional mainstream discourse or, in more professional words, borrowing Kumaravadivelu's (2001, 2003 and 2012) idea, they have not stepped into the territory of post-modernism. In this regard, the findings and views of Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008) and Gholami et. al. (2012) verify this claim, too. According to Pishghadam and Mirzaee (2008), the Iranian society has been dominated by ideas of modernism and we witness no vestige of post-modernism in all levels of education including English language teaching and learning in this country. As Kumaravadivelu (2012) points out, despite some theoretically critical voices helping us become aware of such a

hegemonic discourse, there are some dominant epistemes including native-speakerism, Centre-based cultural competence, the Centre-based methods, materials and curriculums as ideal, etc. which have not loosened their grip over theoretical principles and practical aspects of English language teaching and learning. As the findings show, the Iranian society, as the main concern and reference of this study, is not an exception to this rule. The possible reasons for the tendency among Iranian English language learners are worthy of attention.

Among them, the English learners' lack of knowledge about the present situation of English around the world, i.e. its stratification and realisation in different varieties through indigenisation and the fact that, today, the non-native speakers of English far outnumber the native ones (Pishghadam & Saboori, 2011), the Iranian ELT community's marginalisation in the field of applied linguistics in general and ELT in particular (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2012) and facing language policy and planning passively and lack of language awareness (Ghaffar Samar & Davari, 2011) can be introduced as possible reasons for such a trend among Iranian English language learners.

6.   Concluding Remarks

In this paper, the author has attempted to probe into the Iranian learners' attitudes to one of the most important issues in the field of applied linguistics. Since, to date, very few large-scale studies have been carried out in the Iranian context, the findings of this study have several contributions and implications for language policy makers and planners, ELT professionals, curriculum and materials developers, teachers and learners.

As was pointed out, in the modern world, the status and role of English more or less influence the language ecology and cultural atmosphere of different societies. Thus in any language policy and planning, this language and its positive and negative impacts must be particularly paid attention to. Due to the significance of learners' attitudes in any decision making and setting priorities, undoubtedly the findings of this study might be helpful.

Paying attention to the real needs of the learners, increasing the language and cultural awareness of the society, adopting suitable methodology and practices, getting more actively involved in curriculum and materials development, empowering teachers and decision makers, and so forth are among the suggestions put forth here.

Due to the importance of surveying the attitudes, needs and desires of other stakeholders such as teachers, parents, etc. it is thus recommended that further research on the issue be carried out. Without doubt, such findings might lead to the more dynamic and influential presence as well as less marginalisation, deculturation and dependency of the Iranian ELT community. There is no doubt such contribution might result in the betterment of English language teaching and learning in Iran alongside the increase of the society's linguistic and cultural awareness.

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Appendix I

Qualitative Phase (focus group and one-to-one interview)

1- In your opinion, what are the causes of English spread in the world?

2- What is the role of ELT in English spread?

3- It is usually said that the best teaching methods come from native English speaking countries. What is your idea?

4- What is your idea about the in/appropriateness of Center-produced materials?

5- What do you think of the Periphery's involvement in ELT material and curriculum development?

6- It is often said that the best or ideal teacher is a native English speaker? What's your idea?

7- Should we follow only the standard pronunciations including American or British and neglect other varieties?

8- Does English endanger Persian culture or not?

9- What is the relation between English and western culture?

10- Is ELT effective in spreading Center's culture in the world?

11- Do English and ELT threaten other languages such as Persian or minority languages?

12- Is English tied to the western political and economic systems?

13- Is it necessary to see English and ELT politically?

Appendix II

Quantitative Phase (Questionnaire)

Years of learning English: ……

Gender: ……

Age: …….

Mother tongue: Persian / Non-Persian

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1- The best ELT textbooks are necessarily developed in the Center.					
2- The content of ELT textbooks must not be confined to neutral or non-controversial topics and must include global issues and real-life concerns, too.					
3- The best teacher of English language is the native speaker of this language.					
4- The current teaching of English in both in public and private educational system weakens the position of local languages and dialects.					
5- The expansion of English threatens the national and cultural identity of non-English speaking countries including Iran.					
6- Using English as the medium of instruction at Iranian universities does not threaten Persian.					
7- ELT does not have any significant role in the expansion of cultural influence of English speaking countries.					
8- Other varieties of English such as Indian, Singaporean, etc. must be respected and known as English.					
9- The ideal teaching of English must be accompanied by teaching Western culture.					
10- The global spread of English is not a threat against other languages.					
11- In ELT textbooks development, the needs, interests and values of non-English speaking countries should be included.					
12- The standards of American and British English for example in pronunciation must not be the only standards of English teaching.					

About the Author

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