

## **Identity Formation and Negotiation of Freedom in Coeducational Language Schools in Iran**

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### **Abstract**

This study seeks to describe the dynamics of identity formation and negotiation of freedom and coeducation in the shadow of dominant discourses of Islamic hijab and segregation, in an English language college in Iran. A brief historical view of the cultural concerns of the Islamic state vis-à-vis the existing economic and socio-political contexts indicates a shift from the original discourses of segregation and Islamic hijab by state agents in the early 1980s (known as the ideals of Imam), arguably negotiated through the post-war period, i.e. since the 1990s. Language learning is viewed as parallel to higher education, legitimising the presence of women in social spheres, and their interaction with men: in the segregated and policed society of Iran, such schools are viewed as mixed spheres both by the students and by the programme designers who develop the businesses. The ethnography of a language school in Mashhad takes the alternative discourses, indicating the learners' giving precedence to the socialising aspect of the classes rather than the educational quality in these classes; the female learners' concern about how empowering the oral production of the foreign language is vis-à-vis their male counterparts, not only in language education but also for their future professional milieus; and how they are prepared, as prospective students in English speaking universities and immigrants for their lives in the 'imaginary world of abroad'. Both teachers and learners participating in this study see the language classes as a liminal space between their present identity, their ideas, entertainments and jobs, and their ideal identity, relationships and ideas, which is imagined in the fancy world created mostly through the English language textbooks. In conclusion, other than the shift of the dominant discourses, this study demonstrates the divergence between the ideals of the Islamic state for the identity and role of the people, and the alternative voices that have negotiated their freedom with such strategies as paying tuitions and language learning in mixed spaces.

### **Keywords**

language classes, coeducation, liminality, identity, negotiation

### **Backdrop**

Right after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and Islamisation of the public spheres, which meant gender segregation in public places as well as the compulsory hijab for women (Mirhosseini 1999: 7), i.e., dark coloured long and loose uniforms, pants, and headscarves, the Islamic state started to eliminate private and international schools, under the title of 'Islamic Cultural Revolution' in 1980. Because women and their bodies continue to be central markers of legitimacy and progress (Kandiyoti 1991: 49), and since the discourses of state and nation building after the Islamic Revolution intended Iranian women to conform with the Islamic role models of modesty, the Iranian women's freedom seemed to face constraints both in sartorial codes and in presence in social mixed spheres in general. However, such

constraining actions as segregation of all schooling and the Cultural Revolution, made education that has long been celebrated in Iranian culture, available for women of religious families. In other words, a large population of women, who were traditionally perceived as wives and mothers, and perceived gender segregation as customary, even when not legally required<sup>1</sup>, were now permitted by their patriarchal religious families to attend the now segregated schools, which were perceived as a social sphere (Mirhosseini 2000: 8). Their presence in educational spaces, I argue, provided them with an opportunity to negotiate further freedom in the years following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. More education was equal to more legitimate opportunity to leave home among the lower class religious families (Rezai Rashti and Moghadam 2011: 421), which brought about freedom for both men and women. This article takes the more liberal choices in sartorial codes and in interactions as instances of freedom negotiated through extra-curricular language classes.

### **Language Classes and Higher Education**

In Iran, besides the regular state sponsored schooling, language schools provide specialised services of teaching and learning foreign languages, including English. In the pre-Revolutionary period, language schools were affiliated with the Ministry of Higher Education, ran a coeducational system and recruited native speakers. After the 1980 Islamic Cultural Revolution, i.e. 'refining the educational systems from cultural imperialism' (Sreberny and Mohammadi, 1994: 11), removing foreign instructors, and re-opening the universities, such language schools resumed their operations under the affiliation of Higher Education Ministry. However, since the language learners attending these schools also included students under the age of 20, the Ministry of Education took charge, and segregated them in the late 1980s. Later on in the 1990s, the country started to experience the post-war relative relaxation with the passport system as well as the capitalism and economic stability during the 'Reconstruction' period of President Hashemi Rafsanjani (Adelkhah 1999: 27). Meanwhile, the advent of Islamic Azad universities as higher education institutions parallel to the existing 'state' universities, brought a tuition paying population to the sphere of higher education, which had previously been free at all levels. Accommodating the tuition paying students, Islamic Azad University negotiated a more liberal atmosphere in comparison to the state universities (Rohani 2015). Language schools started to grow, with those students who were applying as students or immigrants to the English speaking countries as well as owners of the businesses and industries. The high ranking engineers and businessmen also needed English

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<sup>1</sup> Initially, the discourse about the need to educate women was tied up with new conceptualisations of the family, childrearing, and household management in a modern society (Najmabadi 1998).

language education, because that was the time of business trips all over the country.

### **Private Language Schools**

The late 1990s and early 2000s brought an atmosphere of economic flourishing for business, privatisation of some sectors, and relative freedom in the public spheres. The presidency of Mohammad Khatami in the 2000s brought freedom of speech and relaxation, especially in the academic atmosphere (Adelkhah 1999:21). Women enjoyed certain freedoms in sartorial codes, i.e. looser ties on the headscarves, shorter uniforms and tighter pants, and lighter colours. In this relaxed atmosphere, cultural activities flourished with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Some language classes<sup>2</sup> started as branches of cultural activities. It seems that this variation in the affiliation of language classes provided the grounds for the language classes to be held on a coeducational basis. Establishment of these classes coincided with a demand for English education as an economic stimulus and the rather liberal atmosphere of President Khatami's time. The resulting success of these classes later caused more language schools to apply for affiliation with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and permission to hold coeducational classes, which the Ministry of Education would not permit. In this process, the dominant discourse of the ideal of Imam regarding segregation and Islamisation of schooling underwent a shift to converge with the needs of the people. This study further considers the voices of the language learners who negotiate freedom in the space of language classes.

### **Language Learners**

The study on identity has a social constructionist position (Spellman et al. 2014: 4). Hence, to study how the participants construct identities and negotiate freedoms in sartorial code and interactions with language learners of opposite sex vis-à-vis the limiting dominant discourses in language colleges is to take a social process into account. To detect the demotic (alternative) discourses, the ethnographic approach allowed this study to describe the complex context (Bauman 1996: 196) in which language learners orient themselves on the one hand to the normative dominant discourses which limit the educational spaces and segregate them, resulting in such corporal and social constraints and on the other hand identifies the learners' own strategies that inform their choices of social practices.

I taught English in a language college in Mashhad for nine months. Other than leading the free discussion classes, where my students would speak

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<sup>2</sup> An example would be the Iranian Academic Centre for Education, Culture and Research (ACECR)

about issues topical to their lives and I was the participant observer, I decided to ask some of the students and my colleagues to participate in semi-structured interviews. A list of topics was used as an aid-memoire, to address concepts of self and identity as well as negotiation for freedom and empowerment based on the paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, with an emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation. As such, the research gained insights into people's motivations and actions. This enriched the study both with the answers I was intending, and the information that I consider as their lived experience.

### **The Divergence**

With the fundamentalists' return and the presidency of Ahmadinejad in the late 2000s and early 2010s, a different atmosphere emerged in which the Ministry of Education designed different textbooks for girls' and boys' schools that would 'prepare them for future men and women roles in Islamic society.' At this time, the increasing number of language schools indicates a divergence between the ideals of the people for themselves and state plans for them as citizens. The policies for English language education in the post-Revolutionary years were aimed at refraining from any type of 'Western' ideas and values as a strategy of cultural defense (Amir Arjmand 2009: 177), hence trying to replace English language as the language of 'Western Cultural Invasion' with Arabic as the 'language of the world of Islam' (ibid.). However, the new discourse of the state indicates a shift in the policy and a tolerance in the methods of language instruction. Last year, an Islamic Fundamentalist newspaper (Serat 2014) commented on the growing 'fashion of language learning':

It is mentionable that learning a language other than the mother tongue is not a flaw, but a plus. Because it helps build an easier connection with the people of other countries and use their experiences. But in case learning a new language leads to changes in social norms and imposing deviations from morality, then it is better not to learn a language at all.

At a meeting with the Supreme Board of the Cultural Revolution on Dec. 2013, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stated:

As you know, nowadays learning the English language is very prevalent in the country, and there are many language schools recently established. Well, there are language schools and all the books that are taught over there suggest the Western life-style. The language learners, our teenager and the adult learners study the language and learns the culture. They might even forget the language and remember the culture and the life-style. This is what should not happen in this country (Serat 2014).

As mentioned, until recently, the language schools had to be affiliated with the Ministry of Education, which only allowed segregated buildings with certain distance between boys' and girls' departments. In line with the ideas of Moghaddam (2003) and Moghissi (2005), the growth of capitalist tendencies and free market competitions for coeducational classes in Iran has made the policies of language education in the country to submit licences for coed classes affiliated with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in this decade. Regarding the process in which some language schools boost in a short time, I draw upon my observation as a language teacher besides interviewing other teachers in Mashhad, and language learners who attend one of the recently boosting language schools in the city. Farid, 32, architect and attends 'preparation for IELTS'. He says:

I think the people who establish such a language school in a rather posh area of the city always target certain people, of the girls who come to these classes to find richer boys and some boys who think of better girls here. I do not even call these places schools. These are just for entertainment, and learning could be seen as just a by-product of such schools. The people who establish such schools think business: they create the place in a good area of the city, gather the boys and girls, get the money. If they had any other vision, the condition of education in our country would not be so tragic. I think the Achilles Heel of the education in Iran is here: you come to a place for education, it does not look like an educational complex, it looks like a place you would imagine for virtual sex chatrooms. Boys and girls are all together and chatting, right at entrance. I do not want to say that boys and girls should not get together at a school. But I'm saying just because the society imposes so much pressure in other places, in such a school people are just going to extremes...because these are the places where they can see each other without being policed. Maybe the education is just out of their minds when they are in such a school. I think it is a complicated story...people are not completely aware of what they are really doing...there are not places where people got for education really.

Nasim believes the business considers the demand for coed classes:

Even the 70 year old man gets excited when girls are around in the language class. This is one key motivation for the language learners...even they like the teachers to be opposite sex, they get more motivated...regarding the fact that in Iran we do not have many opportunities to be with each other, especially younger learners look at the classes as a chance to mingle. Here they have the opposite sex sitting right beside them and they can speak to him/her freely.

Many of the interviewees gave precedence to the socialising aspects of the coed language classes when discussing the dynamics of language schools, leaving little space for education quality. To me it seemed as if they consider learning only as a by-product of the whole process of attending a mixed space. Nima sees the language classes as a socialising spot:

It might be a bit of pastime and entertainment, there are certain subjects discussed in those classes just to start speaking...personal experiences...especially because we do not have free discussions or tribunes easily around us. Such classes could be seen as a way to make ones mood better, not just to improve one's language skills...speaking

English is just an alibi, you just say things that do matter but you cannot normally say it in Farsi.

### **Identity and the Imagined Worlds of ‘Target Culture’**

The lived experience (Ellis and Bochner 1992: 3; Miles and Huberman 1994: 9) of Nasim, a 26 year old TEFL graduate in Mashhad who has taught classes in some private language schools, allows us to understand the process and structures of language education in the years after the Revolution:

If you consider the method they apply for teaching at state schools, they are grammar translation or in best cases direct method...the classes are dull and the teachers have no academic training for teaching English. For example, my teacher at high school was my chemistry teacher who also taught English. I never learned a word from my school teacher...no culture is conveyed in those books, all the pictures show Muslim women in hijab.... I remember just one reading comprehension about Mother Teresa and one on global warming that was not particularly about Iran... the practices were all controlled practice, no free activities. The semi-governmental school I experienced was audio lingual...they had some lessons about culture, for example about English breakfast or how the British people love fish and chips...

Having always studied with the textbooks designed and published in the Ministry of Education, the attendees in language schools would gain the chance to see the books designed for the global reader. The main difference between the Iranian and the global language learning books come in the graphics: according to studies by Lenzner et al. (2013) more than 70 percent of the pictures in a typical language book are decorative, and yet they have a positive effect on learning. A similar study on the books taught in the schools of Iran, however, shows that only 7 out of 260 pictures are decorative<sup>3</sup>. The rest of the pictures are instructional<sup>4</sup>. For the language learners who face them in the language schools, the global books become source of inspiration about the target culture as well as the target language with a ‘multimedia effect’<sup>5</sup>. In other words, the world that is constructed through the language textbooks, is informed by the data they randomly collect from other cultural products, including movies, blogs, posters, etc. Unlike the textbooks of the state schools, the books that are designed for the extra-curricular language schools are printed in colour, with plenty of decorative and educational images that help pick up the English language speakers’ culture (Rohani and Saeedfar 2013: 87), but rarely contribute to learning the language.

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<sup>3</sup> Pictures were considered as instructional, when they were primarily informative, and as decorative, when they were primarily aesthetically appealing. (Ibid.)

<sup>4</sup> A note on instructional pictures indicated that they were mostly used for teaching vocabulary.

Arezoo, a 30-year-old assistant professor of Architecture compares the image she had constructed about the European countries before she had the chance to visit Germany, and her disillusionment:

...what I imagined was constructed according to what I had seen on the internet, the books, what the people who come and go talk about, the movies... Many had such deep impacts on me: for example, one reading was about a country where the university professors would attempt other jobs every 5 years, for a month, to understand the problems of the systems of working in their country. I remember the picture vividly, of a university professor who is carrying a trash bin...while the reality is much simpler and easier to understand...the atmosphere of the countries overseas is presented like a place where they have no problems. But then you go and see they have their own problems, but they are more orderly...some of them!

Nima, a 31 year-old PhD student who plans to transfer to a European country, says:

Now they are censoring the pictures...the pictures draw my attention...for example in the third lesson of the intermediate book, which compares a classroom in the past and in the present, yes. I looked at this photo for a long time. It showed two pictures of the blackboard and old fashioned benches and desks, and the modern classroom with the changes in walls and chairs and technology...the people, the interactions.... I compared our own classrooms as a third picture. Looking at the pictures, I also think of the personalities, the relationships, their society...I always compare the pictures with the very details of them, whenever I find foreign books. I am really curious to see them, to compare myself with them, to see their lifestyle and my own lifestyle...sometimes I think of jobs or entertainments and wonder when I would ever have a chance to have such experiences. For example in a lesson about the entertainments... I think why can't I ride on a kite or a paraglider, or jump on a parachute...and why should we always do only a few of the sports and only watch others doing the exciting stuff.

As an English language teacher who has experienced books and websites as the material, Nasim evaluates her feelings towards the target culture:

The activities I find from the British Council website and bring to my students might make them and myself think of 'the better world' that the English language....but nothing in the books makes me think like, "wow, this is America"....it shows Americans as perfect people, completely disciplined, honest, etc. But we all know that Americans are not that classy, some of them are extremely messy....compared to the British...and this understanding of mine does not just come from the textbooks we teach, but from the other sources I usually read. From the internet, and from the movies I have seen. The books exaggerate the perfection of their culture...for example, the characters that are made in the books comparing an Americana and an Italian, a Spanish, or an Arab, you always see that the American is better....for example, there are two characters in Result Elementary lesson three<sup>6</sup>, one girl has a French accent and says that she speaks many languages, but the American girl says she speaks only some words of Spanish...comes out that the American girl is honest

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<sup>5</sup> English Result Elementary (2008) Oxford: Oxford University Press

at the end and the French girl is just telling lies...it is always that they are the superior....

As a liminal world between the imaginary utopia of the target language and the existing everyday life of the language learners, the language class itself, as evaluated by the learners, is more than a chance to learn a language or culture. Nima thinks that the language class brings the imaginary to the real world, saying, "...this is an experience especially in a society where we feel the pressure, it is a great opportunity to have classes where people can interact and start some relationships...it is a good way to experience what one would otherwise imagine only..."

Arezoo also sees the liminality lived in the language schools, saying, "Language schools can prepare people for their future lives which might be in a foreign country." Right opposite to what the Supreme Leader warns the society, the language classes introduce a whole new world which could be seen as a utopia by the learners. They usually see all the barriers as created by the government and imagine that society is a utopia without the intervention of the Islamic republic regime.

As mentioned before, higher education in the post-Revolutionary Iran meant access to co-educational system, and as observed in the interviews by Rezaei-Rashti and Moghadam a higher level of self confidence in the female population vis-à-vis society. Similarly, coeducational language schools are among the legitimate places females could attend as educational sectors. Attending a coeducational language school provides women with empowerment, both as a legitimate reason to be far from home, and at the face of their patriarchal families, when they find the opportunity to speak in the class discussions. Similar to Leila Ahmad's view to all the educational spheres, as a 'legitimate reason for women to be out of domestic sphere' language schools are now used as a 'legitimate reason for women to be in non-segregated spaces'. Hence, now that women have negotiated their presence in the educational and work places (Mirhosseini 2000: 17) they continue the legitimacy of their presence in these educational places even though they are no longer segregated. Interestingly, women attending language schools also get the chance to follow more relaxed sartorial codes, including the newly fashionable manteau without buttons, tights instead of pants, and no ties on the headscarves. An observation of mine on one of my female students ...she would come to college wearing black chador on top of her manteau, pants and black headscarf and go to restroom first. There she would fold her chador and change into tights and coloured headscarf and hide her chador and pants in her book bag, before attending the class. Because she took all the precautions not to let her classmates see her in both types of clothes, I never asked her about this action. I could see, however, how she

travelled through time- from black chador and 'proper Islamic hijab' to more relaxed coloured loose headscarf and fashionable tights.

## **Discussion**

The historical view on the dominant discourses of the state regarding language learning in Iran indicates a shift from extreme elimination of any manifestation of Western culture to avoiding submission. This shift occurs to cope with the inclinations towards capitalism and free market in the post-war period in Iran, which advocate more liberal educational spaces, including coed classes. Even so, there is a divergence between the ideal Muslim man and woman role of the state, and the one known in the alternative discourses, i.e. the voices in the language college.

In the language colleges as educational centres, the overtone of sexuality and the purpose of socialisation rather than education is so strong that almost all the participants mention it as a secret for the success of the business of such language colleges. Though frowned upon by the dominant discourses of segregation and some participants who find it distracting, others believe they can use this space to develop towards the ideal identity that they believe they need for life in the target language society. In terms of Turner (2008) they see the language school as a liminal space between their present identity and their ideal one. Language classes provide the edge of transition from what they are, the ambiguous identity that is often subject to contestation between the dominant and alternative discourse, and what they negotiate to become, after they have experienced transition to the target language society.

The learners' imagination of the target language society is created according to the narratives of the English language textbooks and their pictures. Participants believe this is through class discussions in the atmosphere of freedom to socialise and it is only in the English language that they can approach the identity they imagine for themselves in the target society. The interactions among the participants is also modelled after the imagined interactions in the target society. In this liminal world that moves towards the learners' imagined utopia, women find a platform to dress more liberally and men assert themselves more freely, what the government has warned against as manifestations of Imperial culture. The coed language colleges demonstrate the ongoing process of negotiating freedom of sartorial code and interaction: from strictly Islamic and segregated to more liberal coeducational.

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