English as Capital vs. Language as Cultural: An Autoethnography of an Iranian Writer

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on linguistic imperialism has explained the dominance resulting from structural and cultural inequalities that put English language and culture above any other (Phillipson, 1992). We can enrich the macro-level scholarship on this subject by listening to the voices and complex experiences of individuals who are affected by these histories of linguistic imperialism. To present more nuanced and situated experiences, I narrate and analyze my own English writing journey as an Iranian writer who learned English in Iran and is now a PhD student in Composition and Rhetoric in the U.S., to trace the relationship between the ideologies of English as capital and language as cultural. My autoethnography shows that the spread of English is not inherently good or bad, but how it impacts its users depends on the way it gets appraised against other languages. I consider culturally sustaining pedagogy as an affirmative possibility, but also, my case shows that culturally sustaining pedagogies can be complicated in contexts where there are conflicting cultural values. I hope my multilayered experience in various contexts will induce productive questions that will lead to a more capacious view of language and more effective and inclusive writing pedagogies.

Introduction

Throughout my life, I have had different relationships with English: learner, translator, teacher, researcher, writer. Each of these roles, in conjunction with my being a native Persian speaker, has added to my understanding of the social life of languages, but I have never had a more complicated relationship with the languages and cultures that I know than I have now as a PhD student of Composition and Rhetoric in the U.S. While I have always been proud of my knowledge of English and how it has paved my way to success, learning about raciolinguistics, the co-naturalization of language and race (Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017), and the concept that English has spread through imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) has given me a new perspective on how languages and cultures are valued. Now, through the lens of what I have learned in the U.S., I am reflecting on my experiences with English and writing education in my home country, Iran, and I am trying to demonstrate how languages and cultures get appraised and designated as high or low value in the lives of second language learners of English. Particularly, I aim to complicate the scholarship on linguistic imperialism and culturally sustaining pedagogy by analyzing my own complex relationship with the languages I speak and the varying contexts in which I learned and used them as a transnational writer. While the growing body of scholarship on such theories addresses broader scopes and takes more definite stances, positive or negative, on the concepts of language as capital and/or cultural, my autoethnography shows that the spread of English is not inherently good or bad. Rather, how it impacts its users depends on the way it gets valued against other languages. In addition, my case shows that culturally sustaining pedagogies can be complicated in contexts with conflicting cultural values. I believe autoethnographies like mine and case studies focused on local experiences are critical in enriching existing literature by including the voices and complex experiences of individuals who are affected by the theories and histories of linguistic imperialism.

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Learning English in Iran

It is the year 2000, I am six and excited to go to school to learn to read and write. I am fascinated with the words that my dad puts in his journal every night, and I am greedy to read all the books in his library—less the ones with plants in them that relate to his work and more the ones with stories. He says some of them are from other countries, written first in another language and then translated into Persian. Persian is the language we speak at home, and I am curious about the languages that other people speak at home, especially where these storybooks come from.

He says learning other languages is very important, especially English. He does not speak English, and he regrets it. He has missed so many opportunities because of it. He wanted to attend medical school, but he could not, because he had to know English to pass the entrance exam. That is why he studied plant protection and became a doctor of plants. After graduation, when he could have gone abroad for graduate school, the same burden prevented him. He keeps repeating "Nowadays, you are illiterate if you can't speak English and can't work with a computer." We do not yet have a computer at home, but we have English books.

I am still six. My dad takes my older sister and me to an English Language Institute to enroll us. I am excited. I see a glass cabinet full of colorful books and cassette tapes. The principal, an old man whom my dad seems to know, looks kind. We will only learn English there, twice a week for an hour and a half. He gives me my books, one in color and another in black and white, with a cassette tape. Later, at school, I realize some other classmates go to similar classes, too. One of them mentions that her family wants her to join her aunt in New York when she grows up. I try to find New York on the map when I return home. I need to ask my dad for help. He says I might be able to go too, if I learn English. I must learn English.

It is the year 2005, and I am eleven, finishing elementary school. At the end of the year, I exchange notebooks with classmates to write a few words for each other. I copy what my previous teacher at the English Language Institute wrote in my notebook, change a few parts, and write it for a classmate. A few days later, I see her mom on the street, amazed and impressed by my writing in English. She asks many questions about where I am learning English and when I started. She asks whether I have passed the TOEFL test. She has heard it is important, but I have no idea what it is.

It is the year 2006, and I am twelve. I started middle school this year, and we now have English classes at school. I am disappointed at how basic the lessons are, which I later realize is because English teaching is restricted in Iran's public curriculum due to political reasons that resist the hegemony of English (Kiany, et al., 2011; Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022). Simultaneously, I am proud of my English language proficiency. I do not need to study for the tests at all, but ironically, I am perceived as more hardworking and intelligent. My English teacher favors me, and my classmates come to me to ask for help with things they struggle with, things that I only know because I go to English Language Institutes, a privilege that many of my classmates do not have. For an assignment,

we are to write a passage with the grammatical rules we have recently learned. One of my friends comes to me asking what the equivalent of "راه پله" [staircase] is in English. I do not know, but I tell her I will ask my teacher at the English Language Institute. When I bring her the word "staircase," I find out she has gone through all the words in her pocket English-to-Persian dictionary, the only one she has, and found the word. I ask my dad later how much it costs him to pay for my English classes. Apparently, many people cannot afford it (Haghighi and Norton, 2017).

Gradually, the English we learn at school gets more complicated, but it is still so basic compared to that of my English Language Institute classes. I started early and am advanced now. The English classes at school are uninteresting to me, not because I know the content or because we speak in Persian almost all the time, but because the content seems artificial. I am used to colorful books that teach me English songs and information about other countries, not conversations and passages that seem like a translation of what we do every day in Persian. School textbooks seem to be just "a translation of the Islamic-Iranian culture into English words" (Rassouli & Osam, 2019, p. 10), but in my mind, English is the language of the outside, the world, and Persian the language of our inner, everyday life. Also, English is not as important at schools and in national media as it is to ordinary people in real life (Riazi, 2005; Rassouli & Osam, 2019; Moharami & Daneshfar, 2022). While our families tell us we need English to have more opportunities in the future, at school and on TV, we repeatedly hear about how the western countries are bad and corrupt and how we must not allow their cultures to contaminate our rich, religious one. We get extra credit to go to anti-American protests after the Friday group prayers. Most of my friends and I never go, but one of my religious friends does. She is also my classmate at the English Language Institute.

It is the year 2009. I am fifteen and in my first year of high school. Miss N, our English teacher in a small all-girl class at an English Language Institute, asks us to write an imaginary conversation with a boy on a date. Going on a date is forbidden in our culture without intentions of marriage, but I have seen some in the movies. During the next session, Miss N apologizes for the assignment and the confusion it might have caused. She seems irritated. Apparently, some parents complained to the principal about how this assignment was against their religious beliefs. I do not understand this reaction, as none of our lessons or assignments in the English Language Institute are related to our culture or religion but are mainly references to western countries and native English speakers (Khodadady & Shayesteh, 2016)—the exact opposite of what happens in English classes at school. At the English Language Institute, we learn about western cities, celebrities, and holidays. We learn English from "imported commercial textbooks" (Naghdipour, 2016, p. 84), and it seems natural to me to learn about their culture while learning their language. In fact, learning about their culture is one of the reasons I am learning their language. I want to see what is going on outside of our borders.

It is 2010. I am sixteen and excited to watch a Hollywood movie in class that my teacher at the English Language Institute promised to play us last session. The movie is about an English teacher and her son who go to an Asian country and teach the people of the king's court. While there, she

falls in love with the king. While we are watching, our teacher pauses and writes down some new words and phrases on the board. We cannot watch the whole movie, though, because some parts are against the country's Islamic ideals (*Iran Bans Movies*, 2005), and the institute, as a "culturally hybrid" space that must navigate Iranian and global cultural practices, needs to act accordingly (Haghighi & Norton, 2017, p. 436). However, I download and watch the whole movie when I return home.

I am still sixteen. We have an assignment to write a letter to the president to tell them about the changes our city needs. During the next session, after returning the papers, our teacher, who also teaches at one of the universities in our town, tells us that she has marked one of our pieces as the best she has ever seen among all the students she has had. I check my paper and find out it is mine. She asks me whether my Persian writing is as good. I tell her that it is not; I focus more on writing in English as I plan to seek an international audience in the future. English is the language that sets me apart and will help me grow, while everyone around me knows only Persian. On top of that, Persian is only useful in Iran, but English, as the lingua franca, allows me to communicate with the world.

Seeking Jobs

It is 2020. I am twenty-six and recently received my master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Iran. While I work remotely as a translator, my uncle, who is a banker, comes to me and tells me about his friend who is making a lot of money trading online with a kind of application. He says he has also been able to get a Visa card, which is impossible for us due to our banking system being isolated from the world because of political sanctions. He says because I know English and can easily read international websites, I would be successful in such jobs, and my knowledge would go to waste if I do not make money with it. It seems like all the trendy and well-paid jobs that people recommend these days need a certain level of English language proficiency, while at the same time, the government is planning to substitute English with other languages, such as Chinese, at schools (*Iranian Students Discouraged*, 2018; Hashemi, 2023).

It is 2021, I am twenty-seven, and the economic situation in Iran is not at all satisfactory. The value of our currency is dropping daily due to the sanctions and no matter how much Iranian Rials you make, it is never enough. Searching for job opportunities, I see an ad on Instagram about a webinar on "Making Dollars in Iran," presented by a startup based in the same university where I received my bachelors. I register. During the webinar, one of the cofounders introduces content writing for websites with an English-speaking audience as the best way to make dollars in Iran. To prove his point and show us how much progress we can make in the future, he mentions that he is now working with a website based in the U.S., supervising American writers even though he is a non-native English speaker. Then he announces that they are hiring. I apply, and after a general English test, an interview, and the submission of my academic article as a writing sample, my one-month internship starts, during which I must take their online courses on English content writing and submit assignments.

Despite having written in English for years and taking multiple Coursera courses, I find the instructions extremely helpful. Focusing on audience and purpose, providing examples, and explicit mapping out of the structure of a website article and the steps I need to take to write help me the most. For the first few articles, I am graded on different criteria and the editor expresses how impressed he is by my progress. After I submit each blog post, usually ranging from 1,000 to 3,500 words and covering different topics, the editor revises it and submits it to the client. I follow his changes in google docs to learn what I need to do differently in my next article. The money is not great compared to the time it takes, but I enjoy the job and feel like I am growing in the process and becoming a more confident writer. Little do I know that this writing practice is paving my future path.

American Graduate School

It is 2023, and I am twenty-nine. After spending a year preparing for the TOEFL test, passing the test with a good score, searching universities all over the world, emailing and talking to different professors, and going abroad to apply for a visa, I am finally a PhD student in the U.S. in a program that a year ago, I had no idea existed: Composition and Rhetoric. I have a very vague idea of what this major consists of, but I know I will be writing and studying writing and writers, and I am absolutely thrilled about it. Writing in English has always been my passion, and I think I am well-equipped for it. My dad is proud of me. So am I.

However, life here does not seem to be as smooth and exciting as I thought it would be. The gist of my first semester is that I am stressed and confused. I need to adjust to so many new things and the beloved English, which I worked so hard to learn, is failing me. I spend so much time studying texts and preparing for classes, but I cannot participate as much as I would like to in discussions. I acknowledge that a significant cause of this might be due to differences in pedagogical strategies: at home, critical thinking is not effectively present (Abednia et al., 2021) compared to graduate school in the U.S., where it is a requirement. Nonetheless, another contributing factor is that English education in Iran emphasizes linguistic conventions and grammar, but in the U.S., the emphasis is on how it's used. Therefore, in the new environment, I sense weaknesses in my English performance, including my listening and speaking skills. I have trouble following academic and non-academic conversations happening in classes, which in turn diminishes my ability to participate. I am always afraid of saying something that does not make sense in relation to what has been said, in case I have missed something, or even worse, it is culturally inappropriate. I also feel a huge gap in my speaking ability in front of a mainly native speaking audience. The urge to imitate their tone and accent and even pace of speaking, and being unable to do so, makes me prefer to keep quiet most of the time so that I am not perceived as incompetent. I am where I have always wanted to be, but I feel displaced. Language barriers and cultural differences that I experience after crossing geographical borders make my long-sought, manifested dream feel bitter-sweet.

Persian, on the other hand, has become so dear to me. Although at home, I neglected Persian because I felt like it would not serve me in reaching my goals of learning about other cultures, having an international audience for my writing, and migrating to a place with better financial prospects, I feel more emotionally tied to Persian in the U.S. While English is still the language that serves my ambitions, speaking in Persian with my Iranian friends feels like a cool breeze on a hot summer afternoon. It is a part of my identity that feels like home, and I am more confident and comfortable in using it. However, the more I speak in Persian, the more difficult it is for me to switch back to English. My languages are wrestling and no matter which one is taking over, I am the one who is facing the consequences.

In my second semester, I learn about transnational literacy and culturally sustaining pedagogy, and am fascinated by the idea that people are on the move and there are no boundaries around the languages that they speak (Leonard, 2018). What sticks in my mind is that people's languages and cultures can be sites for their learning (Meier et al., 2023), and instead of trying to fit everyone into the English language and culture, we can invite them to use their own culture and language to learn new concepts. I think about how this might be possible in my own case in the U.S. While this use of my own language and culture is encouraged in almost all my graduate classes, it seems impractical. How can I use Persian in discussions or in my writing when no one else understands it? Even if I decide to do so, how can my professors support and help me in a class where I am the only one speaking this language and coming from this culture? Using Persian is neither practical nor beneficial to me in this new context. But what histories prevent this and what should change to make graduate schools more inclusive in this sense?

I am also learning that there is some value to more locally driven language and literature curricula. However, when I reflect on my own English education, I see that in the context of my country, there is a question of what locally driven culture means. Leadership, state, local communities, families, etc. have different and sometimes conflicting views on culture, which makes it more complicated to create locally driven curricula and, as a learner, to navigate your way through these different views. As Rassouli and Osam (2019) illustrate, after the Islamic revolution in Iran, an educational reform was put forth by the government which aimed to produce "the 'perfect humankind' being devoted to Islamic lifestyle" (p. 3). To the current authorities, the teaching of foreign languages, such as English, is seen as a threat to "the Islamic and national identity of Iranians," so the Ministry of Education deployed a strategy to teach foreign languages within the framework of Islamic values. Consequently, school textbooks "do not aim at enlarging the cultural repertoire of the Iranian students in the English language and limit productive skills by employing parroting tasks and grammar translation approach toward teaching the English language" (p. 10). However, despite these views and endeavors, "the English language has smoothly found its way to the heart of Iranians" (p. 10) as they believe it helps them with "meeting new people, finding jobs both in Iran and in other countries, as well as pursuing further education" (p. 7) and "locating social status" (p. 10). With such conflicting values around English, adopting locally driven language and literature curricula seems quite challenging.

I also learn about linguistic imperialism and the idea that English language and culture are deemed to be above others due to structural and cultural inequalities (Phillipson, 1992), and I read Donahue's (2009) critique of the export-based approach of U.S. scholars in the internationalization of English language and writing instruction. I learn about language standardization and how Standard English is seen and taught as the dominant variety, diminishing the value of others (Curzan et al., 2023), and I am struck by Flores and Rosa's (2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017) argument about raciolinguistics, or the co-naturalization of language and race. I learn about the historical injustice that has led to discrimination against certain languages and language varieties, and it makes me think about how power imbalances related to the education of English language and writing impact how languages and cultures are valued. All these ideas I am learning about lead me to reflect on the low value my mother tongue, Persian, has had in helping me achieve my educational and professional success. I am now trying to work through the many layers of my experience by understanding the growth of English in terms of capitalism and imperialism while simultaneously acknowledging its positive effects on my life in building my confidence and providing me with numerous opportunities. In light of this, I am trying to work out how to keep the best of my experiences alongside countering those histories of imperialism and capitalism. I want to find a way to use my own culture and language in my scholarship and support others to do the same.

In my experience, problems are not inherent to languages and cultures but to the way they are applied and appraised. While I enjoyed learning English language and culture, I wish that my opportunities were not mainly dependent on mastering the English language and that my mother tongue could be valued globally and present the opportunities that English seems to. Growing up in Iran, I valued English more than my mother tongue because it was associated with higher class and intelligence, and as a lingua franca, it was a means to help me pursue educational and financial success. After migration, I can rarely use Persian in my learning process or academic writing because again, English dominates graduate schools in the U.S., and as an international student, I feel the pressure to use it perfectly, the way its native speakers do. But if such capitalistic and imperialistic views, specifically where English is seen as currency for education, employment, travel, etc., are undone and languages and cultures are not valued hierarchically, local attempts at implementing culturally sustaining pedagogies in teaching English might not turn into defensive ways to erase the English culture altogether, as happens in English text-books published in Iran and taught at local schools. In this way, English can be learned and used to facilitate communication between nations and exchange of cultures, which is what I was genuinely interested in when I started learning English but could not find in school. And maybe in such a context, transnational writers could have an opportunity to use their mother tongue and culture in their academic education in an English-speaking environment, where English proficiency is a means, not an end. This capacious view of language, I believe, is what we need to strive for to support the notion of language as cultural.

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